

# CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION AND REGIONAL CONCERNS

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## Abstract

*China's increasing military power has been in global focus for more than a decade now. The countries on China's border, especially, Japan, Taiwan, India, and the United States of America consider Chinese military modernization as a threat to the regional security and stability. Besides East Asia and Taiwan which primarily concern the United States, the vast regions of South East Asia, South Asia, South West Asia and Central Asia are crying about the Chinese escalating military power. The West and the countries that borders with China question the Chinese intentions once that country become a big military power. China, however, seeing the ground realities and challenges posed by the U.S. military presence in the region continues to increase its military power.*

## Introduction

The world's fastest growing economy, China, is under enormous criticism nowadays as it is spending huge budget on its military modernization. A consistent high single digit GDP growth would make significant funding available for China's military modernization. China's escalating military power has been in global focus for more than a decade now ever since China resorted to double-digit percentage increases in its annual defense spending. Since the interests of many major powers, such as, the U.S., Japan, and Russia converge in the Asia-Pacific region, this dramatic increase in its national power is even more significant for the

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strategic and economic future of the entire region. Other regional players watch with baited breath, China's march towards its goal of becoming a global power as it reshapes the regional power balance. No one quite knows the likely attitude and behaviour of an economically strong and militarily powerful China.

China's escalating military power is not solely a concern of the United States only. China's accelerated military build-up generates global concerns and regional concerns in regions that strategically border China's peripheries. Besides East Asia and Taiwan which primarily concern the United States, the vast regions of South East Asia, South Asia, South West Asia and Central Asia are impacted.

China's attempt to comprehensively overhaul and modernize its armed forces, its emphasis on access to modern technology and its search for the so called 'magic weapon' indicate that unlike in the past, China's leadership is determined to build a solid, all round military capability to fight not just at the 'gates' but well beyond its immediate periphery along with building its power projection capabilities.

The West and the countries that borders with China question the Chinese intentions once that country become a big military power. In the post-World War II period, most other countries had switched over to the use of the term 'defense' rather than 'war'. China or more correctly Mao's insistence to continue to use the revolutionary term shows his fundamental belief in people's power and axiomatically in 'war' as a policy option. In this sense his thinking was not unlike that of Clausewitz. Mao, in fact, often said that "politics was war without bloodshed and war, politics with bloodshed", indicating thereby his strong belief in the invisibility of politics and war.

Chinese army is already of high morale and potential. China entered the Korean War without worrying too much about the actual state of

the PLA's equipment, but using the skill and power of its troops, successfully stopped the enemy.

China is continuing to modernize its military capabilities. At the Seventeenth Communist Party Congress, in October 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao declared that in keeping with the new trends in world's military affairs and the new requirements of China's development, we must promote innovation in military theory, technology, organization and development.<sup>1</sup>

On January 11, 2007, China successfully tested an anti-satellite missile. This launch was not notified until the U.S. issued a statement of complaint on January 18, 2007. The missile had been assessed as a two-stage solid-launcher and its target was an ageing Chinese weather satellite in an 850 km low earth orbit. The attack was executed on a space craft that was flying as fast – 742 km per second – as an intercontinental ballistic missile re-entering the earth's atmosphere. Further the satellite's destruction involved the deployment of a unitary hit-to-kill warhead. Finally, the satellite intercept occurred along the ascent trajectory of the offensive missile's flight.<sup>2</sup>

When the issue of ASAT test was addressed by Lieutenant General Zhang Qinsheng, deputy chief of the PLA General Staff, at the sixth IISS – *Shangri – La Dialogue* in June 2007, he said that 'the rise of a country's military power is a dynamic process which is difficult to evaluate precisely. Therefore, it takes time to achieve "transparency". Any how, it is obvious to all that China is gradually making progress in "military transparency".<sup>3</sup>

This paper will try to examine the Chinese military modernization and its impact on the regional balance of power. It also will try to analyse the regional reactions and reservations expressed by other countries.

## **China's Military Modernization**

### **a) Power Projection Capabilities**

China's ability to project air and sea power has remained limited over the years but it is increasing now. Its bomber force is mainly Soviet designed and consists of obsolete B-5 and B-6. Chinese air power projection efforts have focused on developing tankers that can refuel its modern Su-27 and Su-30 fighters and building an airstrip at Woody Island to support operations in the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy also has about 10 Il-76 transports that can provide strategic air lift. Chinese navy is too strong to operate outside Chinese territorial waters but China is gradually expanding its surface combatants, with new domestically produced destroyers and frigates incorporating 1980s-vintage Western and Russian weapons systems and electronics.<sup>5</sup> Kilo-class submarines from Russia and efforts to build more support ships are gradually improving China's ability to deploy naval forces away from its coast. However, there are significant weaknesses in the Chinese power projection capabilities.

### **b) Area Denial Capabilities**

The other side of power projection is denying an adversary the ability to operate near one's own territory. Many of China's military modernization efforts in the 1990s have focused on making it more difficult for the United States' navy to operate in waters near Taiwan. China's acquisition of 100 advanced fighters, kilo-class conventional submarines, supremacy destroyers equipped with anti-ship missiles designed to attack the U.S. carrier battle group, and S-300 surface to air missiles will complicate U.S. naval operations in a Taiwan contingency.<sup>6</sup> However, the U.S. navy in the area is much more superior and beyond China's control.

### **c) Cruise and Ballistic Missile Modernization**

China's developed and deployed conventional ballistic missiles are relatively inaccurate, but China is attempting to develop better terminal guidance systems to improve their accuracy enough to give them precision-strike capabilities. China has deployed 300-350 M-9 and M-11 missiles opposite Taiwan, and is steadily increasing the number.<sup>7</sup> China also has deployed cruise missiles with ranges of up to 150 km and is working to extend their range and improve their accuracy.<sup>8</sup> Cruise missiles deployed and under development play a variety of roles, including anti-shipping, anti-radiation, ground attack, and potentially nuclear weapons delivery.

### **d) Strategic Nuclear Modernization**

China recently is replacing older DF 3/3A missiles with DF-21 which has the range of 1800 km.<sup>9</sup> China also is shifting from its nuclear deterrence composed of liquid-fuelled, silo/cave based, relatively inaccurate nuclear armed missiles to a deterrence consists of a new generation of solid-fuelled, mobile, more accurate missiles with faster launch times.<sup>10</sup> China has reduced the size of its nuclear warheads to support its new generation of ICBMs and possibly to permit deployment of multiple recently vehicles which China have tested but not deployed so far.

China's improved military capabilities support a number of national security objectives including defending Chinese territory, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, preventing Taiwan's independence, reinforcing China's territorial claims, maintaining nuclear deterrence, helping the Chinese Communist Party in power, and ensuring a stable regional security environment for development. Chinese military modernization results serious concerns in the regional countries.

## **Regional Concerns**

China has territorial disputes with Japan, South Korea, India, and Vietnam. Issue of Taiwan is the major flashpoint where China can give tough time to the security and eventually the stability of whole Asia. China's military modernization, therefore, will be, and is seen by its neighbours as a concerning security issue.

Shambaugh mentions that China has expanded its strategic frontiers from continental to regional definitions. He comments that since about 1991 Chinese strategists have been refusing to the strategic value of Southeast Asian shipping lanes and the straits of Malacca for China's foreign trade, in addition to their claims to the South China Sea. India should not become the dominant power of South Asia or the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup> Bitzinger and Gill mention, in particular, the role of Taiwan in China's new emphasis on projecting naval and air power.<sup>12</sup> However, the Chinese consider their military modernization as a requirement for protecting and defending its own national interest.

China and Japan fought against each other in the Second World War and Chinese still seeks an official apology by the Japanese for their war criminal acts before and during the war against Chinese. China demanded a demilitarized Japan with the capability of only defending its borders as is defined in their pacifist constitution drafted in 1952. Japan on the other hand consider Chinese military modernization as a threat to its interests, resources (in the East China Sea), and sovereignty, therefore, considering to revise its traditional defense policy. The debates to revise the security and defense policy already started at the official level since Prime Minister Koizumi was in power. Japan also renamed its Japan Defense Agency (JDA) as Ministry of Defense (MoD) in 2006.

China's major concerning issue is Taiwan and the U.S. support for any possible Taiwanese independence. The U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan is seen as a threat for Chinese territorial integrity, therefore, China started to make arrangements for any clash on the Taiwan Strait with the sole military super power, the United States of America. The other reactions are expected from India against which China fought a border war in 1962.

## **Japan**

The traditional security concern most consistently raised by Japan in the 1990s was the steep rises in China's military expenditures and their non-transparency.<sup>13</sup> Japanese academic writings did not fail to point out that while the modernization of the military had taken a back seat to the economic development, this changed at the beginning of the 1990s. Without China's startling economic growth and the explicit link to 'comprehensive national power', Japanese concerns about China's rapid and non-transparent military build-up and security policies would have been much less pronounced.<sup>14</sup> According to the Japanese think tanks, the higher priority assigned to military modernization was 'an important change' after the insertion of an article in China's constitution about aiming for 'wealth and strength' which created a link between economic development and military build-up.<sup>15</sup> Japanese observers were particularly concerned about the link between the build-up of navy and China's assertion of its territorial claims in the South China and the East China Sea.<sup>16</sup>

Japanese reactions to the expanding Chinese military power, established a link between China's willingness to increase defense expenditures and the role of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to China which touched on the very foundation of Japan's engagement policy and the political support base.<sup>17</sup>

In March 1991, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary, Sakamoto Misoji, declared that Japan was undecided on whether to curb economic aid to China following Beijing's announcement of a sharp increase in defense expenditures.<sup>18</sup> In 1992, the vice-foreign minister, Kakizowa Koji, warned China about buying a Ukrainian-built aircraft carrier.<sup>19</sup>

The debate to amend the Japanese constitution, which prohibits Japan to maintain regular army, has been started in Japan. The growing Chinese military power, thus, will force Japan to revise its defense policy and go for militarization. East Asia has the tragic experience of instability and chaos of Japanese militarization. The policy makers even in China know quite well that how much dangerous Japan can be once that country goes for militarization.

### **Taiwan**

In October 1975, Deng Xioping told a visiting, American foreign affairs delegation that China could 'wait one hundred years' but would never give up Taiwan.<sup>20</sup> China also passed an Anti-Secession Law in 2005 to prevent any independence call by Taiwan. Taiwan condemned it and urged international community to put pressure on China.

Taiwan sees Chinese military modernization as a destabilizing factor in East Asia and approved more packages for purchasing sophisticated weapons by the United States for its security.

### **India**

China and India fought a war in 1962 and the border dispute between the two countries remains unsettled. There may not be an all out war between the two countries given the improved relations, and a network of political and economic interactions. However, India is bound to feel the effects of Chinese military confidence. Already, the Chinese are enhancing their military capabilities near



the Sino-Indian border by constructing roads and helipads.<sup>21</sup> Once completed, the Qinghai-Tibet Railways will enhance China's strategic depth. According to an Indian writer China is fast developing the capacity to exercise strategic coercion and strategic denial in the Indian Ocean. The decision to exclude India from the proposed East Asian Community (EAC) meeting in December at the alleged behest of China is testimony to this fact.<sup>22</sup> In the future, increased Chinese naval confidence may bring it to the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

Chinese acts on Indian border also results in Indian counteracts which disturbs the balance of power, and deterrence not only in East Asia but also in South Asia where India has mobilized huge number of forces on the border of Pakistan.

The Chinese PLA is at a strategic crossroad. It is capable of deterring and inflicting heavy damage on any country, should China choose to become hostile to it. This is a vital part of China's dream of 'comprehensive national power' (CNP) to emerge as a powerful country in the future. However, given India's own strategic ambitions in Asia, China's military power seems defensive rather than offensive. India itself has vast military modernization programme and it is more active than the Chinese in increasing its military power.

The two countries, by considering each other a threat, can put South and East Asian security under higher risk. Both countries can force massive arms race in Asia. India already forced South Asia in an arms race without realizing its repercussions.

### **The United States of America**

The United States consistently cried on the modernization of Chinese military. At the recent opening of China's parliamentary session,

Premier Wen Jiabao said the funding increase will help speed up the transformation of China's armed forces into a high-technology fighting force. "We must to continue to increase the troops' ability to fight a defensive, high-technology war,"<sup>23</sup> the U.S. retaliated by Defense Secretary's expressed concerns on the following day. The U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said expressed concern at what he called China's lack of openness about its military expenditures and intentions. "I think that greater transparency would help, from the standpoint of the Chinese, in terms of both what they're doing and what their strategies are, their intent, in modernizing these forces, greater openness about the purposes," the U.S. Defense Secretary further argued.<sup>24</sup>

At the start of the George W. Bush Administration, the outlook for Sino- American relations seemed highly problematic, with senior U.S. officials determined to revisit the U.S. policies of the Clinton Administration, including military to military relations with Beijing and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Though the worst fears of a sharp deterioration in relations did not materialize, major uncertainties and potential divergence persist in national security interactions between Washington and Beijing. Indeed, some analysts argue that September 11 constituted only a momentary hiatus in what is destined to emerge as the defining interstate rivalry of the 21st century. Longer-term wariness and suspicion within both systems about the "strategic intentions" of the other is now a commonplace feature in policy debate and in the comments of senior officials on both sides.

U.S. officials complain China is unwilling to share information about its military decision-making. The U.S. Defense Department says China has aimed at least 710 short-range ballistic missiles at Taiwan, which Beijing regards as its own territory. China has not specified how many missiles it has deployed, nor has it given a breakdown of

its military budget.<sup>25</sup> The Pentagon estimates that China's official defense budget understates its real military expenditures by two to three times.<sup>26</sup>

The U.S. considers People's Liberation Army as a threat to the U.S. interests in the region as well as a threat to the regional countries, therefore, strengthening its alliances with East Asian countries. The revising parameters in U.S. Japanese alliance in 2005, and Washington's decision to continue its arms sales to Taipei is indication to this fact. The U.S. will take measures to contain China through its Asian allies. The recent Indo-U.S. nuclear deal is seen as a measure to make India a counterweight to China.

## **Conclusion**

The countries on China's border, especially, Japan, Taiwan, India, and the United States of America consider Chinese military modernization as a threat to the regional security and stability. China, however, realizing the requirements of the present world security scenario, continued the modernization of People's Liberation Army despite cries by the United States and other countries.

The massive U.S. presence in the region forces China to maintain minimum credible deterrence. China also has to ensure its territorial integrity. China has to prevent the independence of Taiwan, therefore, Chinese military modernization will continue until it regards itself as secure.

China's escalating military power is not solely a concern of the United States only. China's accelerated military build-up generates global concerns and regional concerns in regions that strategically border China's peripheries. Besides East Asia and Taiwan which primarily concern the United States, the vast regions of South Asia,

and Central Asia are impacted.

China has to recognize the strategic reality that in its move upwards to “military superpower” status it not only has to contend with the United States but also with a number of competing regional powers for the same power status and complicating it are its territorial disputes with them and which could complicate China’s military rise. Such regional powers could be induced to gravitate towards the United States if China continues to exploit border disputes as strategic pressure points.

## References

<sup>1</sup> *The Military Balance 2008*, p.360

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.359

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.360

<sup>4</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, “Chinese Views of its Military Modernization”, <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/dc/track2/1st/saunders.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Reinhard Drifte, *Japan’s Security Relations with China Since 1989: From Balancing to Bandwagiong?*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2003, pp.40-41

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Reinhard Drifte, *Japan's Security Relations with China Since 1989: From Balancing to Bandwagiong?*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2003, p.43

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Reinhard Drifte, *Japan's Security Relations with China Since 1989: From Balancing to Bandwagiong?*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2003, p.43

<sup>18</sup> *Japan Times*, March 28, 1991

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Reinhard Drifte, *Japan's Security Relations with China Since 1989: From Balancing to Bandwagiong?*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2003, p.44

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ramesh Phadke, *China's Power Projection*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2005, pp.76-77

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-03/2007-03-15-voa42.cfm>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2007*, U.S. Department of Defense, Washington