

CHINESE MILITARY MODERNIZATION UNDER XI: HARBINGER OF A NEW GREAT POWERS RIVALRY

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Abstract

Chinese rapid growth in the economy is compelling its investment in enhancing and expanding military modernization. Defensive compulsions amplify Chinese gradual tilt towards complementing technological advancements in the military sphere. For this purpose, China is undergoing a process of robust military modernization. This paper aims to dissect China's military modernization under the leadership of President Xi. It comprises of three portions. The first part theorizes the process of Chinese Military Modernization. Structural Anarchy in International Politics and Security Dilemma helps us in understanding the process of Chinese Military Modernization. The second part of this study explains the process of military modernization of China under the leadership of President Xi. This part explains three dimensions of Chinese military modernization under President Xi; Evolution of Chinese Military Doctrine, Reorganization of People Liberation Army (PLA), and technological advancements in Chinese weaponry. The final part of this study explains the rising challenges to the existing international order in face of the Chinese rise.

Keywords: *Military modernisation, strategic competition, artificial intelligence, warfare, hegemonic approach*

INTRODUCTION

According to World Bank, from 2000 to 2020, the Chinese average annual GDP growth had been around 9%. With the growth in the

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economy, Chinese strategic compulsions, and power projection needs also grew. For these purposes, China is undergoing a process of robust military modernization. The military prowess remained a determinant factor of power in the history of mankind. Great powers always had the strongest of the militaries. Macedonian armies (Lock, 1977), Roman legions (History Extra, 2022), Ottomans janissaries, Napoleonic corps, the British fleet, and American forces are a few examples of the greatest armies which ruled a greater part of the world. Economic power is an essential component of the military power of a nation or an empire.

Generally, it is believed that as one nation's economy grows, it increases its military power and ambition. Every rising power aspires to increase its power projection and its influence so is the case with China. Technological advancements played a major role in shaping the world order. Each technological advancement is accompanied by advancements in weapons. They have been successful in changing the conduct of warfare from time to time. Generally, in history, the nation which utilized advanced technology on the battlefield emerged victoriously. Advanced military equipment, however, increases the power compulsions of a state. China, at this moment in history, is rapidly utilizing advanced military equipment. This is increasing the power compulsion of China and thus a driving force behind Chinese military modernization.

After the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping China saw unprecedented economic growth (Chang, 1996) with a sustained growth in economy, China decided to modernize its military and to increase its power projection. Leadership played an important role in undertaking the decision of military modernization. The coming to power of President Xi Jinping had a determining impact on the future course of Chinese military. Also, Xi's aim to have a strong hold over military and the whim of the affairs of the state was one of the factors behind the decision of reforms in People Liberation Army (PLA) (McFadden, Fassler, & Godby, 2019). Chinese military modernization

is aimed at forming a new strategy, reforming the organization of its military, and developing weapons utilizing emerging technologies. Chinese growing power isn't however taking place in a vacuum but in an international system in which there is already a global hegemon the United States. Chinese military modernization is, thus, having an impact on the existing international system.

This paper aims to dissect the Chinese military modernization and how it is impacting the international system as we know it today. Increasing Chinese power projection is fueling competition already in the Asia-Pacific region. There is talk of a new cold war between the US and China (Turan, 2021). The contours of this new great power rivalry are becoming visible with passing times. New strategies and alliances are being formed that will shape the future of the international system. Whether the Chinese military modernization will lead to a new great powers rivalry or not is a matter that is tried to be understood in this paper.

THEORIZING THE PUZZLE OF CHINESE MILITARY MODERNIZATION

The process of Chinese military modernization is theorized through the lens of Structural Realism. The anarchic character of International Politics compels the states to live in a Hobbesian apparatus (Waltz, 2001). The quest for security and survival compels states to drive them into competition with other states. When one state arms itself it gives rise to a sense of insecurity in the others and thus gives rise to the security dilemma (Schweller, 1996). The impact of Chinese military modernization on international politics can be well explained through these two premises of structural realism; Anarchy at the International system level, and Security dilemma.

With its economic boom, China also wants to change its international standing and increase its influence in the international arena (Kimball, 2020). One of the means of this power projection is the hard power or military muscle. The increasing need for Chinese power

projection compelled China to move toward the process of military modernization. However, the increasing power projection of Beijing created a sense of insecurity in its neighboring states, with whom it has a history of rivalry and also territorial conflicts, and the United States which sees that as a challenge to its hegemony. This insecurity is driving these states to compete with Chinese military modernization. Chinese technological breakthrough in form of hypersonic missiles provided with strategic superiority that it can launch offensive attacks and bypass existing defense systems. Chinese rapid expansion of its nuclear inventory and nuclear warheads is a matter of insecurity for its rivals and competitors. This security dilemma is fueling a new arms race across the globe where states are looking for modern and sophisticated weapons that can outmaneuver their adversaries. The United States is also increasing its efforts to develop hypersonic missiles of its own. It is also investing in new defense systems that would be able to counter the threat of hypersonic missiles.

Emerging technologies especially Artificial Intelligence are heralded as a game-changing technology that can alter the very nature of warfare as we know it. There is an increasing importance of these technologies with the advent of Autonomous weapons and killer robots. A plethora of autonomous weapons in the air, naval, and land domain are being developed that are bringing a revolution in military affairs (RMA). Any state that would gain an advantage in these emerging technologies is very much able to offset its enemies and have the potential to lead the world. All major states are investing heavily in these emerging technologies. Chinese military modernization program has Artificial Intelligence at its core as the country aims to become the leader in AI. This also gives rise to security dilemma in other states and thus compels them to race with China for AI weapons and thus for another arms race.

Besides the arms race, another impact of Chinese military modernization is that its rivals are forming new alliances among

themselves. This behavior can be explained in terms of international anarchy. As there is no world government to check one state or the other or to stop the rise of China, its competitors are moving themselves to different alliances. To new security arrangements QUAD and AUKUS are directed towards the rise of China and to counter its growing influence not only in the Asia Pacific but also across the globe. Thus, the puzzle of Chinese military modernization impact on international politics is explained by structural realism that its impact is twofold: One is in the form of a new arms race at the global level because of the security dilemma, and second is in the form of new security alliances that are basically due to anarchy at the international system level.

CHINESE MILITARY MODERNISATION UNDER PRESIDENT XI

China's military has evolved as one of the strongest in the past few decades. After coming to power military reforms and modernization is one of the cornerstones of President Xi's policy. The Chinese defence budget has soared in recent times and is only second to the United States. According to the official Chinese accounts, the defence budget of China was 76.53 billion USD in 2010. The defence budget of China in 2021 stood at a staggering 209.16 billion USD (Shivamurthy & Bommakanti, 2021). The modernisation of the Chinese military involves changes in Chinese military doctrine, changes in the organizational structure of the People Liberation Army (PLA), and improvements in equipment and weapons. China's PLA consists of four types of forces are Land, Naval, Air, and Nuclear-cum-ballistic missile force. To comprehend the process of modernization in the Chinese military we have to reflect on the changes in all three domains: Military doctrine, Organizational Structure, and Weaponry.

Evolution of Chinese Military Doctrine

To understand the evolution of Chinese Military doctrine we first need to briefly outline military doctrine. It is defined by Owen Cote Jr. (1996, p.7) as a 'set of tools, people, and beliefs about how to

employ them in battle that the major organizational elements of the military develop as a guide to fighting wars'. Chinese strategic thought dates back to the times of Sun Tzu when he wrote the famous 'The Art of War' (Sunzi, 1910). However, modern Chinese strategic thought has its roots in the philosophy of Mao Zedong. Chinese military doctrine of Mao is termed 'The Maoist People's War Doctrine'. This doctrine envisaged that if the enemy is superior militarily and technologically it will be lured into guerrilla fighting. This doctrine relied upon the immense manpower China had. The fight according to this doctrine would be predominately in rural areas from where the PLA would draw its strength out of the masses. This doctrine was essentially defensive. There was a modicum of changes in Chinese doctrine, but its defensive nature remained the same. In 1956, China named its new military strategy as 'Defending the Motherland'. The objective of defense was same but there was restructuring of force composition.

In 1964, a new strategy 'luring the enemy in deep' was adopted. After split with the USSR the target of Sino strategic thinkers changed from the United States. In 1977, China moved from defensive to an active defense approach with the name 'Active Defense, luring the enemy in deep' (Fravel, 2019). The first major change in Chinese military doctrine came in 1993 when China adopted a military doctrine called 'Winning Local Wars under High-Technology Conditions'. This doctrine was offensive in its nature and a major break from the Chinese defensive approach. The major change that was envisaged by this doctrine was striking first instead of people's war concept of striking after the enemy struck. The new doctrine emphasized the role of joint operations, which caused a major overhaul in PLA's organisation.

In 2004, China envisaged a new doctrine called 'Winning Local Wars under Informatized Conditions'. This doctrine did not involve any radical changes from the previous one, but it emphasized the coordinated information flow between services conducting joint

operations. This doctrine was also offensive and was focused on the Chinese capability to assault an island, most likely Taiwan. Another transformation in the military doctrine of China is the 2014 doctrine under President Xi. This doctrine is called ‘Winning Informatized local wars’. This doctrine is an active defense doctrine. This doctrine is also focused on fighting wars in its periphery especially in the South China Sea. China envisaged investing more in its naval capabilities under this doctrine. Also, President Xi has the vision to make PLA a world-class force that can dominate the Asia Pacific and fight and win global wars by 2049 at the 100th Independence anniversary of the People’s Republic of China (Ilhan, 2020). The latest development regarding Chinese military thinking was in 2019 when China’s Central Military Commission adopted a new strategy for the PLA, called the ‘military strategy guidelines for the new era’. There was no breakaway from the previous doctrine but a reorganization of military structure was the main focus (Wuthnow & Fravel, 2022). This evolution of the Chinese Military Doctrine runs parallel to China’s economic growth. As the Chinese economy boomed the ambitions of Chinese strategic thought changed. China has changed its strategy from defensive to offensive and is further looking for extending its power projection.

Table 1: An overview of Chinese Military Doctrines

Year	Name	Operational Target	Orientation
1949	The Maoist People’s War Doctrine	United States	Defensive
1956	Defending the Motherland	United States	Defensive
1964	Luring the Enemy in deep	United States	Defensive
1977	Active Defense, Luring the enemy in deep	Soviet Union	Defensive
1993	Winning local wars under high-technology conditions	Taiwan	Offensive
2004	Winning local wars under informatized conditions	Taiwan (US)	Offensive
2014	Winning informatized local wars	Taiwan (US)	Offensive
2019	Military strategy guidelines for the new era	Taiwan (US)	Offensive

Source: M. Taylor Fravel (2019, p. 34).

PLA's Organizational Reforms

A sweeping reorganization of the People Liberation Army is being undertaken under the leadership of President Xi. These reforms were announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013. The major changes that are being undertaken in PLA are cutting the size of personnel, reorganization of the former seven military regions into five 'theater commands', and reorganization of four General departments into 15 smaller organizations that will report directly to the Central Military Commission (CMC) (Garafola, 2016). China also formed a new Joint Logistic Support Force which provide them with the ability to project force within and beyond China's borders, an ability referred to as 'strategic delivery'. This force was formed in 2016 as part of the reforms and was first made operational during the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in 2020 (Wuthnow, 2021). The major organizational reforms in PLA are:

- The four General Departments (Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armaments) have been abolished and are replaced by smaller organizations directly under the Central Military Commission (CMC) and are redistributed among five services like organizations, a new Army service command, Air Force, Navy, Rocket force, and a new strategic force that encompasses cyber, intelligence, electronic warfare, and space missions.
- The seven peacetimes administrative Military Regions (Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Jinan, Lanzhou, Nanjing, and Shenyang) are replaced by five theater commands (East, South, West, North, and Central).
- The PLA Personnel were also cut. In 1985, PLA consisted of a staggering 13.3 million personnel but in 2020 there is only 3 million Personnel in PLA. This has been done to form a qualitative force instead of a quantitative force.

- Also, a Joint Staff Department is formed much-liked one in the United States (Mulvenon, 2016).

First time in the history of modern China, such sweeping reforms are undertaken. This shows the resolve of President Xi to make PLA one of the most efficient forces in the world. These reforms, however, also aim to strengthen the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the PLA. China’s focus on military modernization can also be seen in the trend of induction of college graduates as opposed to high school graduates. In short, these reforms aim to improve the military’s efficiency, war fighting capabilities, and political loyalty to the CCP.

Figure 1. PLA Structure Prior to Reform

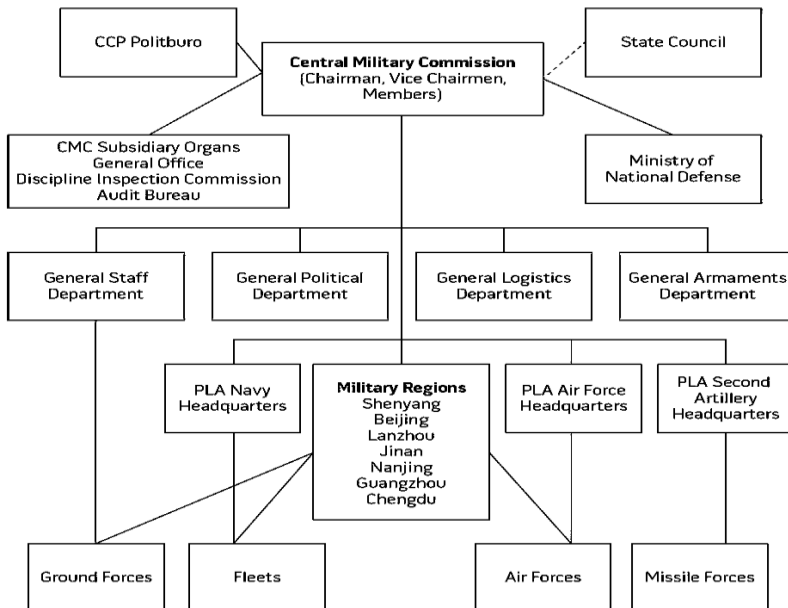
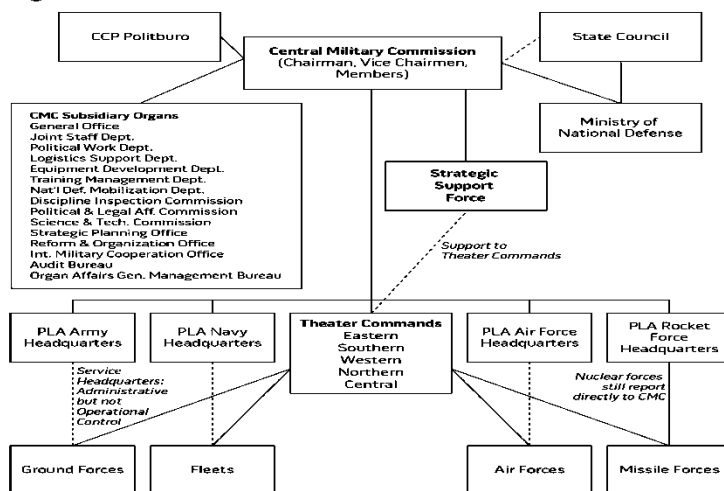


Figure 2. PLA Structure after Reform



Source: Phillip C. Saunders & Wuthnow (n.d). China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms.

XI'S STRATEGIC VISION: STRENGTHENING THE ARMORY

China is focusing on emerging technologies to bolster its military capabilities. It is using this in both conventional and non-conventional weapons. China believes that it can offset US military superiority by building more sophisticated and technologically advanced weaponry. For this purpose, China has focused on a Military-Civil fusion strategy. This strategy will help China to utilize both guns and butter. The essence of such competitive strategies, according to Thomas Mahnken, is all about imposing costs upon a competitor in order to influence his decision-making calculus, and thus affect his strategic behaviour. This effort has been essentially named as anti-access/area denial (A2/AD). These capabilities include ballistic and cruise missile strikes, artillery and rocket barrages, submarine operations, long-range airstrikes, cyber-attacks, and anti-satellite warfare. This has been China's core strategy as it shifts to 'intelligentised warfare'. This type of warfare is defined as the operationalization of Artificial Intelligence and its enabling

technologies such as cloud computing, big data analytics, quantum computing, and autonomous systems, for military applications (Bitzinger, 2021). China aims to become a global innovation superpower through an emphasis on emerging technologies. Potential military applications of some emerging technologies which China are utilizing are AI and Advanced Robotics for enhanced data exploitation, decision support, unmanned system, and C4ISR, biotechnology for precision medicine, biological warfare, and human-machine teaming, semiconductors, and advanced computing for enhanced cyber operations and quantum technologies for secure global communications (Horowitz & Kahn, n.d.).

China is also rapidly expanding its Navy with a million active Navy personnel and is the largest in the world. China has unveiled the DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile which can hit any corner of the globe. China also has the ability to launch submarine-based nuclear-armed missiles. PLAN has 355 ships in its fleet, which include 'major surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers, mine warfare ships, and ocean-going amphibious ships' (Shelbourne, 2021). Although China has only two large aircraft carriers and third is under construction. Chinese Navy is focused on precision striking and using submarine warfare to attack targets. China's focus on the Navy is part of its aim to bolster its strength in its backyard in the South China Sea and to increase pressure on Taiwan (Shelbourne, 2021).

PLA Air force is the third-largest in the world with 2800 aircraft. China has developed a fifth-generation fighter jet in form of the J-20 Mighty Dragon and also has a stealth fighter in form of FC-31. It is also developing medium and long-range fifth-generation stealth fighters that can strike up to the range of 8500km and can also carry nuclear weapons. China is looking to bolster its air force capabilities but lags behind the US in many ways. Its fighter jets are yet not able to match US fifth-generation fighters. However, the development of new stealth aircraft can erode the advantage the US has (Tripak, 2021).

In the field of missiles, China has been able to achieve a landmark that has taken the whole world by surprise. It is in this field China has excelled far beyond other nations of the world. In 2020, China successfully tested a hypersonic missile. This weapon has the capability to outmanoeuvre all the defense systems. This successful test now provides China with the ability to bypass US missile defense systems. This immense development is a demonstration of increasing Chinese military strength (Bloomberg News, 2021). Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile DF-5 has a range of 13,000km which means it can hit any place on the globe. China also has a growing fleet of submarine-based nuclear missiles, which provide it with the ability of second-strike capability (Missiles Threat, n.d.). Chinese missile technology after testing of hypersonic weapons is second to none.

China is also developing not only unmanned aerial vehicles but also unmanned submarines, and unmanned ground vehicles. China is immensely investing in unmanned weapons that can be used for combat purposes but also for surveillance, reconnaissance, and communication. China successfully tested a stealth-armed drone called the sharp sword in 2013. Today China has a large fleet of Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) including CH-3, CH-4, the Wing Loong 1, and Wing Loong 2 (Bergen, Salyk-Virk, & Sterman, 2020).

China has also successfully tested swarm drone technology in which a large number of drones are operationalized simultaneously for offensive measures. The unmanned ground vehicle (UGV) developed by China is Sharp Claw 2. This vehicle has the capability to carry out battlefield reconnaissance, patrolling, assault, and transport missions in dirty, and hard terrains. China has also showcased its unmanned underwater drones that can destroy enemy submarines with the help of Artificial Intelligence. This will strengthen the Chinese position in the South China Sea where China aims to use them in packs for patrolling and offensive measures. Unmanned vehicles are changing the shape of warfare and China understands its importance very well.

Chinese investment in this high tech is an example of Chinese aims and the development of new weapons demonstrates the capabilities China possesses.

Great Power Rivalry: A new Cold War in Making?

Why Chinese military modernization will shore up a new regional and global arms race is the question we are concerned with. It is a tragedy of great power politics as explained by John Mearsheimer that international politics is a zero-sum game. The benefit of one state is the loss of the other. As China is rising as a global power it is inevitably threatening the interests of the existing global power the United States. This rivalry is inevitable and is deeply rooted in the anarchic structure of world politics. With the rapid modernization of the Chinese military and its aim to build a world-class military that should be capable of fighting and winning wars by 2049, the Chinese power projection will be a challenge not only to its neighbours but also to other global powers.

US RESPONSE TO CHINESE MILITARY MODERNIZATION

The US President Joe Biden while speaking at East Asia Summit said, “We envision an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure—and we are ready to work together with each of you to achieve it” (House, 2022, p.1). The United States strategy for Indo-Pacific is a challenge to growing influence of China in the region. The US strategy bases on the following vision of the Indo-Pacific; Free and Open, Connected, Prosperous, Secure, and Resilient (House, 2022). Basing on this strategy and keeping in view the Chinese military build-up the US is exploring avenues for its policy. China is forcing its strategic competitors to look towards ways through which they can keep up their superiority in case of the United States or they can maintain a balance vis-à-vis China in case of Japan, Australia, and India. Beijing’s rise and its assertive policies in the Asia Pacific have already forced the US, India, Japan, and Australia into a new alliance called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Labelled as Asian

NATO by China this informal alliance took place in 2017. The countries that are part of the QUAD have jointly undertaken Malabar 2020 naval exercise in 2020. The first in-person QUAD summit took place in September 2021 in which the head of the Governments of all four states met. (House, 2021) Alongside QUAD another group was formed called AUKUS comprising of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Wintour, 2021) These groupings are still very new and lack a clear statement of purpose, but they are definitely aimed at countering China and its interests in Asia-Pacific. These groupings are considered similar to attempts made by the US during the cold war to contain USSR influence in form of SEATO and CENTO.

As formal strategic and security partnerships are underway to counter the rise of China, the United States is also engaging in an arms race with China to maintain its military superiority. Chinese testing of the hypersonic missile is believed to be its Sputnik movement. The importance of Chinese hypersonic missile can be estimated by the statement of Top US General Mark Milley who said “I don’t know if it’s quite a Sputnik moment, but I think it’s very close to that,” referring to the Soviet Union’s launch of a satellite in 1957 that signified their substantial lead in the so-called “space race” with the US that defined that era (Staff, 2021). The advantage hypersonic missiles provide is that they travel almost five times faster than the speed of sound same as ICBMs. However, they are also far manoeuvrable as they orbit around the earth and stay within the atmosphere of earth rendering radar and defense systems obsolete. Hypersonic weapon can be used to attack an opponent’s high-value targets at the onset of battle especially its radar systems, fighter bases, and command-and-control facilities.

Nuclear warheads can be deployed on hypersonic missiles making them a potent threat (Klare, 2019). The US radars and defense systems were made to provide it with a shield from missiles and strengthen its defenses and deterrent. However, the hypersonic missile has now

provided China with an advantage by which they can attack the US homeland. This is sure to put the US into a security dilemma as they are now vulnerable to Chinese missile advantage. The United States is also trying to build a hypersonic missile of its own but is yet to successfully test one. The US is rapidly budding up its investments in hypersonic missiles but is also looking forward to making new defense systems that could be capable of detecting and countering hypersonic missiles (Brown, 2021). For this effort, Raytheon, Northrop, and Lockheed won Pentagon awards to compete with one another in building an interceptor seen as agile enough to knock out a hypersonic glider. The defensive weapon is billed as the first of its kind (Sanger & Broad, 2021).

Hypersonic missiles are one domain in which China and the United States are engaged in an arms race. The United States is also concerned about the Chinese increase in nuclear warheads and the US predicts that by 2030 China will have almost 1000 nuclear warheads. Although, the US nuclear stockpile is much bigger the rapid Chinese nuclear build-up is a moment of concern for policymakers in Washington. The competition between the US and China is also going on in the field of emerging technologies. Both states are rapidly looking to develop Artificial Intelligence and to deploy it in their unmanned vehicles.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is also being deployed in radar systems for precision and for surveillance, reconnaissance, and communication purposes. The importance of AI can be understood in the words said by former US secretary of Defense Mark Esper who said “Advances in AI have the potential to change the character of warfare for generations to come. Whichever nation harnesses AI first will have a decisive advantage on the battlefield for many, many years” (Warner & Childress, 2020, p. 269). AI piloted aircraft has immense potential as they can decide and react faster than human pilots it is believed that would be impossible for human-piloted fighters to combat with AI fighters. Both the US and China are spending an almost equal

amount on Artificial Intelligence for military purposes. However, China is leading the way in AI weapons with a focus on using AI for the purposes of intelligent and autonomous vehicles (particularly airborne and underwater vehicles), predictive maintenance and logistics, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), information and electronic warfare, simulation and training, command and control, automated target recognition.

The United States is also heavily investing in Artificial Intelligence understanding the importance of the technology. Under President Biden, the US has showed its efforts to develop AI capabilities, but many believe it to be under par compared to China. China has the competitive edge against the US in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), according to the Pentagon's former chief software officer. Nicholas Chaillan said, "We have no competing fighting chance against China in 15 to 20 years"(Welle, 2021, p. 1). The race between China and the United States for more sophisticated and technologically advanced weaponry is rapidly changing into a new global arms race. Both states are rapidly investing in new technologies and are incorporating them into their militaries. The modernization of the Chinese military has opened up a new challenge to the hegemony of the United States and this challenge is being translated into an arms race. Whoever will come on top is a question that matters time, but one cannot deny that Chinese military modernization has opened up gateways for a new global rivalry that would play out across different domains and an arms race would be central to this rivalry.

CONCLUSION

Chinese military modernization is leading the world into a new great power rivalry. The asymmetric expansion of the Chinese military and its growing power projection is seen as a threat by the United States to its global power status. This threat has forced the United States to form new security arrangements with other states who are also

threatened by increasing Chinese power. The United States is forming new alliances in the Asia-Pacific to counter the ever-increasing presence and influence of China. However, China is yet to enter into a security arrangement with any other nation. This might be evidence of a lack of Chinese global appeal, but it will be too early to build an opinion on it. Also, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a symbol of its declining power. However, it will be too early to say anything that whether China lacks a global appeal or is waiting for the right time, and also whether US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a symbol of the decline of its power or a shift in priorities and strategy. Along with the alliances, there is a new global arms race for more technologically advanced and sophisticated weapons.

This new global arms race is however unchecked as there are no arms control agreements between the United States and China. Also, the existing global arms control regimes like NPT, CTBT, FMCT, and institutions like IEA are not focused on the technologies of our time. There is no agreement on Anti-ballistic missile defense systems, or on the use of Artificial Intelligence in autonomous vehicles. Also with the hypersonic missiles, there is no single talk among world leaders on it. With the increasing rivalry of the global powers, it is a need for time to negotiate new arms control arrangements that could aim to control the ongoing global arms race. The absence of any kind of new arrangements will only further aggravate the situation and will only fuel the great power rivalry which is becoming a reality with every passing day.

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