

Chinese Views of its Military Modernization

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Deng Xiaoping declared that military modernization was the lowest priority of China's "four modernizations." Nevertheless, China's rapid economic growth over the last twenty years has provided the financial resources and improved technological capabilities to support substantial military modernization efforts. Chinese leaders stress the importance of a peaceful external environment to allow China to focus on economic development. Yet they also see growing threats in the external environment that require improved military capabilities. This paper sketches the main contours of China's military modernization efforts, outlines Chinese views about military force, examines U.S. and Japanese interests, and asks questions about possible responses to China's modernization.

An Overview of China's Military Modernization

Four aspects of China's military modernization deserve particular attention: expanding power projection capabilities, efforts to deny the United States the ability to operate near Taiwan, modernization and expansion of conventional ballistic and cruise missile capabilities, and modernization and potential expansion of strategic nuclear forces. This review highlights developments in each area with the potential to affect the United States and Japan.

- **Power Projection Capabilities:** China's ability to project air and sea power is limited but gradually increasing. China's bomber force mainly consists of obsolete B-5 and B-6 bombers based on 1950s Soviet designs. Chinese air power projection efforts have focused on developing tankers that can refuel its 100 modern Su-27 and Su-30 fighters and building an airstrip at Woody Island to support operations in the South China Sea. The PLA Air Force also has about ten Il-76 transports that can provide strategic airlift. The PLA navy is a brown water fleet with limited ability to operate outside China's territorial waters. China is gradually expanding its surface combatants, with new domestically produced destroyers and frigates incorporating 1980s-vintage Western and Russian weapons systems and electronics. Despite a decade of rumors, China still has not purchased or built an operational aircraft carrier. Acquisition of two Sovremenny-class destroyers (with two more on order) and four 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. Limited air defense, anti-submarine warfare, and logistics capabilities remain significant weaknesses. China has minimal amphibious sealift capabilities, but recent exercises have included experiments using civilian freighters to carry troops and

weapons. China's ballistic missiles are its most effective form of power projection (addressed below).

- **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, Sovremenny destroyers equipped with anti-ship missiles designed to attack US carrier battle groups, and S-300 surface to air missiles will complicate U.S. naval operations in a Taiwan contingency. (However, the United States Navy trained during the Cold War to operate against a Soviet Navy equipped with fleets of Sovremenny destroyers and submarines, so China's limited capabilities should not be exaggerated). China is also working to improve its mine warfare, electronic warfare, anti-ship cruise missile and information warfare capabilities, which could slow or limit U.S. responses to a Taiwan crisis.
- **Cruise and Ballistic Missile Modernization:** China has developed and deployed a series of new conventional ballistic missiles such as the M-9 (DF-15) and M-11 (DF-11) ballistic missiles. Both 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 expanding the numbers. China has developed cruise missiles with ranges of up to 150 km and is working to extend their range and improve their accuracy. Cruise missiles deployed and under development play a variety of roles, including anti-shipping, anti-radiation, ground-attack, and (potentially) nuclear weapons delivery. They are currently not accurate enough for precision-strikes against ground targets.
- **Strategic Nuclear Modernization:** The main trends of China's strategic nuclear modernization are a shift from a nuclear deterrent composed of liquid-fueled, silo/cave-based, relatively inaccurate nuclear-armed missiles to a deterrent consisting of a new generation of solid-fueled, mobile, more accurate missiles with faster launch times. The first of these missiles to be deployed is the DF-21, a 1800 km-range missile expected to replace the older DF-3/3A. China has reduced the size of its nuclear warheads to support its new generation of ICBMs (the DF-31 and DF-41) and possibly to permit deployment of multiple re-entry vehicles (which China has tested but not deployed). China is also developing a second-generation nuclear submarine which would use a new missile derived from the DF-31, although this program is far behind schedule. The ultimate size of China's strategic force buildup is unclear. China has previously been satisfied with a limited capability to target the United States (presently about 18-24 ICBMs). Chinese officials express their desire to limit spending on strategic nuclear forces, but also emphasize their determination to retain a credible strategic deterrent even if the United States deploys missile defenses to protect its homeland, deployed troops, and allies.

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Chinese officials insist their military modernization efforts are restrained and purely defensive. They explain years of double-digit increases in defense budgets as necessary to compensate for inflation, the PLA's loss of its business empire, and China's backwardness in military technology. Defense budget increases in recent years have funded efforts to improve wages and living conditions for troops, increased research and development, and the purchase of modest numbers of advanced Russian weapons. Although China's defense budget has increased significantly in real terms in recent years, it still does not represent a "crash program" to prepare for imminent conflict. A key question is whether China's modernization represents "normal modernization" like other Asian militaries have undertaken or whether the capabilities China is developing are indicators of China's future intentions.

China's improved military capabilities support a number of national security objectives. These include:

- defending Chinese territory, sovereignty, and territorial integrity
- preventing Taiwan's independence
- reinforcing China's territorial claims
- maintaining nuclear deterrence
- helping the Chinese Communist Party stay in power
- ensuring a stable regional security environment for development.

Within these broad national security objectives, three of China's goals have particular importance for U.S. and Japanese security interests:

- **Preventing Taiwan Independence.** China has refused to renounce the use of force against Taiwan and has used ballistic missile tests and military exercises as tools to intimidate Taiwan's leaders. Chinese officials insist their goal is to deter Taiwan from declaring independence, not to coerce Taiwan into accepting reunification. The United States argues that a stable military balance across the Taiwan Strait will give Taiwan's political leaders the confidence to negotiate with China, but Chinese officials and analysts argue that military balance is destabilizing because it gives Taiwan the freedom to move toward independence. China opposes all arms sales to Taiwan and regards U.S. efforts to strengthen unofficial ties with Taiwan and to clarify U.S. security commitments as interference in China's internal affairs that encourages Taiwan separatism. Many of the military modernization efforts described above are intended to deter the United States from possible intervention in the event of Chinese military action against Taiwan. China seeks peaceful reunification with Taiwan (and regards growing economic ties as a factor binding Taiwan to the mainland). But China also regards military superiority over Taiwan as a factor encouraging peaceful reunification, and has continued to build up its ballistic missile forces opposite Taiwan. The United States and Japan have a stake in not allowing

Taiwan's democracy to be ended by force; the United States also has concerns about the credibility of its security commitments in Asia if it allows China to use military threats to intimidate Taiwan into reunification.

- **Reinforcing Territorial Claims.** Taiwan is the most important territorial issue, but China is involved in a number of other territorial disputes (including the Senkaku Islands, the Spratley Islands, and other parts of the South and East China Seas). The PLA Navy has used these territorial claims and China's need for energy and ocean resources to support future economic development to argue for improved naval power projection capabilities. China has offered to shelve sovereignty issues and to jointly develop resources in many cases, but has refused to renounce or settle most of its maritime claims. (This contrasts markedly with China's willingness to settle its land territorial issues with Russia). Chinese efforts to develop power projection capabilities to reinforce its territorial claims raise security concerns for both the United States and Japan. Growing Chinese air and sea power is a potential threat to the U.S. position in Asia. The United States worries that its friends and allies in Asia may come under increasing pressure as China's power projection capabilities increase. The United States is also concerned about freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (especially following the EP-3 incident, where China claimed expanded rights to control military access to its exclusive economic zone). Japan has direct territorial conflicts with China (the Senkaku Islands and in the East China Sea) as well as broader concerns about Chinese regional influence and freedom of navigation.
- **Maintaining Nuclear Deterrence.** China's possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that can target the United States and Japan has not only created mutual deterrence, but has also served to limit U.S. and Japanese freedom of action in Asia. China maintains a "no first use" doctrine, but its nuclear forces impose a degree of strategic restraint on other countries and ensure that China is not vulnerable to nuclear blackmail. This restraint is particularly important today, when China sees the United States as a hegemon that actively seeks to promote its values and strategic interests by intervening throughout the world. Up to now China has not had a genuine credible strategic deterrent against the United States, but the strategic nuclear modernization program described above would eventually give China a survivable second-strike capability. China's historical fears of Japanese militarism have been tempered by Japanese constitutional constraints, the restraining effects of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and its ability to strike Japan with nuclear missiles. However Chinese officials and analysts worry that U.S. and Japanese efforts to develop and deploy ballistic missile defenses may weaken or remove existing constraints on actions against Chinese interests. They also see the upgrading of the security alliance and loosening of constitutional restraints on Japanese military actions as dangerous trends aimed against China.

Questions for Discussion

The United States and Japan should regularly exchange views on Chinese military modernization to see if our assessments of Chinese capabilities, actions, and intentions are similar and to discuss the potential impact of Chinese military modernization on our mutual security interests.

Three questions about China's military modernization are worth discussing to draw out similarities and differences in American and Japanese views:

- Which aspects of China's military modernization are of greatest concern to U.S. and Japanese interests?
- Does China's modernization represent “normal modernization” like other Asian militaries, or are the capabilities China is developing an indicator of China's future hostile intentions?
- Will continued involvement in the world economy eventually slow China's military modernization, or will it simply provide the resources for increased military power?

The critical policy question is how the United States and Japan should respond to China's military modernization. The questions below probe assumptions behind possible responses, with the goal of stimulating a useful discussion and revealing differences of opinion:

- Will continued U.S. and Japanese vulnerability to Chinese nuclear missiles stabilize relations with China, or will it allow China to take offensive actions contrary to U.S. and Japanese interests?
- Can missile defenses reduce or remove U.S. and Japanese vulnerability to Chinese attacks, or will China simply deploy countermeasures and increase its missile forces to overwhelm defenses?
- What impact would a Chinese nuclear buildup in response to missile defense deployments have on the broader international arms control regime?
- Can strategic assurances reduce Chinese concerns about U.S. and Japanese intentions and moderate China's military buildup? Or will efforts to reassure China simply become a way for China to demand concessions from the United States and Japan to prove their good intentions?
- How can the United States and Japan coordinate their policies more effectively?