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**The People's Republic of China
in Transition: An Assessment of the
People's Liberation Army**

Edward B. Atkeson

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ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**

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by Edward B. Atkeson

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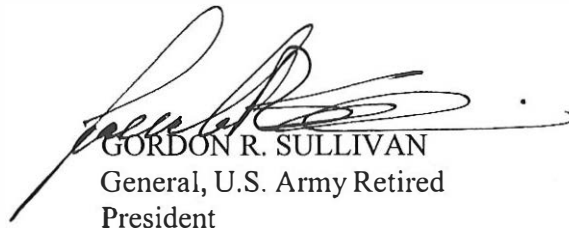
Foreword

This Land Warfare Paper examines the armed forces of the most populous country of the world. This is accomplished in context with the economic and geostrategic factors which afford China much of its power and influence. The author, a professional intelligence officer, draws upon a wide spectrum of views and opinions of prominent officials and scholars in the assembly of the body of the study and subjects them to critical comparison and analysis.

Key to the analysis is an examination of the wide array of U.S. interests in China, to include factors impacting Japan and other important states in the region. These include both the “softer” issues, such as humanitarian concerns, and the “harder” matters of competitive economic and strategic focus. The most important U.S. interests are placed in perspective with a comprehensive review of the country’s strategic background.

The structure, size and evolving doctrine of the People’s Liberation Army (armed forces) are reviewed and assessed in context with the forces’ missions and possible contingency requirements. The most notable contingency, of course, is Taiwan, still in dispute since the movement of the Kuomintang government to the island half a century ago. The author draws succinct conclusions, particularly with respect to the vulnerabilities of Taiwan, but also regarding broader aspects of China’s strategic posture.

This paper is one of those you keep in your file cabinet or in your electronic data base for future reference. Who knows when this well-researched and well-written piece of scholarship will be needed? Keep it handy.



GORDON R. SULLIVAN
General, U.S. Army Retired
President

February 1998

The People's Republic of China in Transition: An Assessment of the People's Liberation Army¹

China's first emperor, Yin Zheng (259-210 BC), is said to have conquered all he wanted on this earth, and then to have prepared a special legion to assault the gates of heaven. How successful that venture might have been, we can only guess, but the army he built for the campaign — more than 6,000 terra-cotta archers, infantry and cavahymen, complete with mounts — stood the test of time. When it was unearthed in Shaanxi Province in 1974 AD, it had been buried for more than 22 centuries.² In eras past, observers might have cited the discovery as an example of Oriental patience and tenacity, which many have accorded greater strength than Western practices of vigor and haste. But times are changing. While the Orient may remain as inscrutable as ever, it seems increasingly these days to be a region in a hurry — and on the make. And China may lead the pack.

Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in August 1995, Nicholas Kristof related how war games staged at the CIA and the Naval War College, depicting conflicts between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the years 2005 and 2010 respectively, concluded with Chinese victories. The first, we should note, dealt with conditions barely seven years from now — not far beyond our current budgeting horizon. We certainly cannot dismiss the matter in that case as too far in the future to be of concern today.

War games, of course, are loaded with assumptions and depict all sorts of scenarios, few of which ever materialize. Nevertheless, they can provide insights regarding the security of the nation in years to come and the saliency of our exercise of the public trust. Some analysts will remember the early RAND Corporation games designed to test concepts for intervention in Vietnam. Conducted in 1963 and '64, *OMEGA I* and *II* depicted U.S. participation in a war in the 1970s. Both exercises concluded with Red forces overrunning Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, in spite of the deployment of a half million U.S. troops. Thunderstruck, many observers were rapidly assembled portfolios full of reasons why it could never happen. General Curtis LeMay's prescription for "bombing [the enemy] back to the stone age" seemed persuasive to key figures in high positions. Historians have since related how all of the above — including the bombing — came to pass. We chose to discount the lessons of *Omega* because they were not convenient to our prevailing policy or strategic concepts. The price of the blunder is anyone's guess.

So what about the PRC? How concerned should we be? Or are there other factors, transcending the games, which would justify discounting these results, too?

Perhaps the most reassuring view was expressed by Admiral Joseph W. Prueher, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, on 6 March 1997. Admiral Prueher told the U.S. Congressional National Security Committee that China will pose no significant threat to

the United States for 15 years. “In our estimate,” he said, “it will be about one and a half decades before China could field a military with a modernized force projection capability.”³

A somewhat less categorical, but still positive, assessment was provided by Rear Admiral Eric McVadon, a former defense attaché in Beijing. Focusing on the most prominent point of contention between the United States and China, the mainland threat to Taiwan, the admiral argued, “The PRC has not built an amphibious and logistic force to carry out an invasion of Taiwan.” To further his point, he cited a humorist who has dismissed a possible alternative scenario featuring a junk-borne army of troops landing on western Taiwan. With tongue in cheek it was suggested that the alternative might enter the history books as the great “million man swim” because of the difficulty in navigating the broad mud flats in the area.⁴ More seriously, China does possess more than 1,700 ships of over 1,000 gross registered tons, but few of them are believed to be suitable for amphibious operations.⁵

Lieutenant General Patrick M. Hughes, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, has signaled a more cautious view and drawn the date of possible reckoning a little closer. “China,” he says, “is one of the few powers with potential — political, economic and military — to emerge as a large-scale threat to U.S. interests within the next 10 to 20 years.”⁶

Peter W. Rodman, a particularly insightful observer at the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, appears to agree with regard to China’s larger capabilities, but he is more apprehensive in the short run. He points out:

China’s economic and military expansion present an inescapable problem. Not since the beginning of this century has the United States even had to imagine the existence of another country with an economy the same size as our own. But this is now likely 10 or 20 years from now.⁷

And then he goes on to say:

China’s military buildup (especially in naval, air and missile forces) poses a near-term challenge. Blowing the U.S. Navy out of the entire Pacific is not the standard the Chinese must meet. Rather, China is aiming at a potent capability in a “limited sphere of strategic action” (i.e., the western Pacific and South China Sea) that will raise the costs and risks to the United States of coming to the aid of allies and friends. This is an attainable mission and one of enormous geopolitical significance.⁸

The Defense Department Director of Net Assessment, Andrew Marshall, has sought to probe Chinese intentions through examination of their military writings. A number of his most important findings have been translated and published in a volume entitled *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, edited by Michael Pillsbury. Most remarkable is the breadth and depth of Chinese awareness of the current limitations on their armed forces. The authors of the articles express ambitions for high-technology capabilities in five dimensions: long-range stealth, robotic infantry, radiation, cyber attacks, antisatellite weapons, and other means of controlling the air, land, sea and outer space environments and the interconnecting electromagnetic spectrum. The pieces selected are believed to represent a fair summary of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA’s) requirements and expectations for development of a capability for defeating the forces of an unspecified

superpower. The product may not constitute a “cookbook” or formal plan for the development of the People’s Liberation Army, but it clearly details Beijing’s doctrinal shift from its traditional manpower-intensive, defensive orientation to much greater emphasis on expansive, high-technology, information-intensive warfare in an anticipated wider sphere of operations.⁹

One article which may deserve special attention deals with “America, Russia and the Revolution in Military Affairs.” In it, two officers at the Beijing Academy of Military Science, Messrs. Zhu Xiaoli and Zhao Xiaozhu, argue that the United States will lose its position of leadership because of complacency and overconfidence. They foresee other countries (including China) developing new operational concepts and exploiting information technology, which, they say, is becoming increasingly available and affordable on commercial markets.¹⁰

If other stimuli have not done the job, the Marshall/Pillsbury book, together with Rodman’s analysis, should serve as a wake-up call for U.S. policymakers, most especially for those of the defense establishment. For military officers, the times are ripening for a greater sense of awareness of what is going on, and for a better understanding of the potential dimensions of the problems likely to emerge. This paper is intended to facilitate an understanding of both the issues at stake and the capabilities and aspirations of the PLA at the approach of the millennium. It also seeks to provide an understanding of the sensitivities of the Beijing leadership and the circumstances under which conflict might take place. The discussion addresses the issues through examinations of U.S. interests, the strategic background, the PLA as it stands today, the role of Japan in Chinese calculations, and Chinese foreign military sales and advanced weapons proliferation.

U.S. Interests in China

U.S. interests in China are many and varied, and tend to expand or contract in reaction to both international considerations and internal Chinese and American domestic pressures. The interests may be roughly divided between those of a “soft” social or humanitarian nature, and those of a tougher, more competitive economic or strategic character. The former relate to U.S. perceptions of a broadly based disregard by Beijing officialdom for the civil rights of many of its citizens; the latter to issues impinging upon America’s trade and security posture in the Orient, including both its access to the enormous market represented by the Chinese people themselves and to its ability to shape security conditions in the region. The United States has historical commitments, both explicit and implicit, to a broad range of friendly countries in East Asia and, as the sole surviving superpower, responsibilities for assisting in the maintenance of a nonthreatening environment.

Most pertinent to this analysis has been a desire on the part of the United States to maintain the stability of the region through encouragement of political and social change through peaceful means. In accordance with that interest, the United States has approved of the return of the former crown colony of Hong Kong to Beijing control, and supports the concept of mainland China and Taiwan as components of a single country, recognizing the Beijing regime as the single legitimate government of the two states. On the other hand, it notes the *de facto* existence of an independent administration in Taipei and has

demonstrated a willingness to employ its armed forces to counter attempts from the mainland to destabilize or to change that entity by other than peaceful means.

Another “hard” security interest of the United States is the constraint of Chinese tendencies to market dangerous weapons to third parties, particularly in unstable areas such as the Middle East and South Asia. Long-range missile systems and nuclear technology are of special concern. In the trade area, the United States also seeks to constrain Chinese traffic in “pirated” goods. Mainland Chinese publishers and manufacturers have well-developed skills for counterfeiting Western tangible and intellectual property for marketing domestically and abroad. There is reason to suspect that from time to time this has occurred with Chinese governmental assistance or knowledge.

Not unique to America’s relations to China, but a somewhat quixotic aspect of the relationship, is the issue of most favored nation (MFN) trade status. Competing interest groups in the United States have urged the implementation of this device as either (a) an inducement to spur the Chinese Government to treat its people, and particularly its political dissidents, with greater respect, or (b) a weapon of potential denial with which to punish China for any number of perceived transgressions considered to be in contradiction to U.S. interests. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations of the U.S. government have elected to grant MFN status to China in accordance with a concept of “comprehensive engagement” of the totalitarian regime. Under this advantageous arrangement, Chinese exports to the United States almost quintupled in the period 1990-95, from \$5.3 billion to \$24.9 billion.¹¹

So important have Sino-American interests become in recent years that the U.S. House of Representatives has authorized the establishment of a \$5 million center for the study of Chinese military affairs at the National Defense University, and has mandated a special annual report to Congress by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Chinese intelligence activities affecting the interests of the United States. The rationale for the establishment of the center is that “stated geopolitical ambitions of China will pose challenges that will require careful management in order to preserve peace and protect [U.S. national security].”¹²

The Strategic Background

Many of the most cogent conditions shaping the outlook of the Chinese leadership are as old as the nation’s history. As with the dynasties of centuries past, Beijing oversees a huge mass of people (1.2 billion at last count) on an enormous land mass. Like the United States, China stretches some 3,000 miles from east to west, but even more than that from north to south. It shares borders with 14 other countries — from North Korea in the east to Tajikistan in the west — and has had disputes with virtually all of its neighbors at one time or another. The population is largely Han Chinese, with small minorities of Tibetans and Muslims in the south and west.

Three quarters of the population lives in the countryside, crowded into the mere 10 percent of the land suitable for farming. China is the world’s largest producer of rice, the national staple, but even with that it must import food from abroad. This problem is likely to increase due to heavy industrial air pollution, soil erosion and steady decline in the

water table. With government emphasis on economic development, and with little regard for the environment, the amount of arable land has decreased by 15 percent since the communists took over in 1949.¹³ Similarly, while China has ample resources of coal and oil for its anticipated requirements, it is deficient in its ability to mine or tap, process and transport the materials to the major centers of consumption, forcing the country to look abroad for fuel. Since 1993 it has been a net importer of oil.¹⁴

China's economy in the 1990s has been one of the wonders of the world. By one measurement, China now possesses the world's second largest economy (behind the United States). China stands 13 percent ahead of Japan, the next contender, and almost double that ahead of Germany, presently in the number four position. Official statistics from Beijing (about which some observers have their doubts¹⁵) place the country in the first rank of expanding producers. Its foreign trade amounts to \$290 billion, with imports at \$139 billion. And it is second only to the United States in annual direct foreign investment.¹⁶

China reported a whopping 12 percent growth rate in 1994, following similar figures in 1992 and '93. Economists characterized the phenomenon in the first half of the decade as "runaway growth," quite beyond the ability of the government to control.¹⁷ Beijing's subsequent attempts to moderate business activity have created expectations of reduced production, but state statistics for May 1997 indicated additional growth of 12 percent in industrial production over the same month a year earlier.¹⁸ And, of course, this was before China recovered Hong Kong, which may raise the country's gross national product (GNP) by as much as 20 percent. Some of the 1997 figures may be due to the government's penchant for proliferous printing of currency. In the early 1990s the government ran inflation rates as high as 27 percent, but that has tended to moderate in more recent years.

More to the point from a national security point of view has been disinclination on the part of the government to privatize many basic state industries. In spite of well-publicized "capitalization" of the economy, government-owned enterprises still constitute about 70 percent of all firms, and these have consistently limped along under the burdens of inefficient but politically correct socialized management. These industries currently produce substantially less than half of the country's goods and services.¹⁹

The principal reason for this hesitancy has been governmental wariness of applying private cost-cutting methods to publicly owned companies for fear of triggering widespread unemployment and possible social instability. The regime firmly believes in industrial growth, but until very recently has feared a political backlash from extensive deregulation. As long as Deng Xiaoping was alive there was little room for maneuver among reformers — or among reactionaries either, for that matter. In the late years of the great old icon's life the state seemed frozen in a condition of unstable politico-economic equilibrium. Deng's death in February 1997 appears to have been the signal for major policy changes. President Jiang Zemin, who had already predicted that China would remain in the "early stages" of socialism for "a very long time," now appears to have essentially abandoned communist economic doctrine in favor of blatant capitalism.²⁰ Nevertheless, by claiming a niche in socialism's early stages, he has legitimized a market economy without necessarily denying Marxist dogma.

At the 15th party congress in Beijing in mid-September 1997, Jiang declared that over three quarters of China's 13,000 large- and medium-size industrial enterprises, together with almost all of its 300,000 smaller companies, will be sold to public investors. Certain strategic industries, such as steel and armaments, will be held under government control, but the remainder will be sold, some, perhaps, internationally.²¹

That economic pronouncement was followed by revelations of new party and governmental appointments, indicating a sharp shift of power in favor of President Jiang. This was a surprise to a number of observers who had considered Jiang to be a "muddle-through artist," unlikely to do more than to keep the ship of state afloat during his five-year tenure in office — not to chart any new course.²²

While military uniforms were not in evidence among the new top seven of the party at the Beijing congress, the PLA does not appear to have lost influence. Two military leaders, favorites of President Jiang — Generals Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian (the defense minister) — were elevated to the 19-member Politburo. And, while Jiang announced a reduction of a half million in the armed forces, no changes in the military budget were reported. The record stands: Defense expenditures have grown commensurate with the growth of the economy. It is true that reliable official figures are elusive, and various Western estimates vary widely, but it is clear that the trend since 1989 (the year of the Tiananmen Square confrontation) has been sharply upward.²³ In several of those years, the rate of growth for defense may have exceeded that of the economy as a whole. However, it is difficult to have confidence in this judgment because of the opaque quality of both Chinese military and economic statistics. We can only estimate that military-related expenditures for each of the past two years may have reached \$30 billion. In 1990 the influential PLA journal, *Military Economic Research*, published an article calling for an increase in the defense budget of 250 percent by the end of the decade, but it now appears that objective may have already been matched, or even exceeded.²⁴

A notable initiative in China's defense industry is a move to seek foreign investment in defense electronics, matching that already in place in the aerospace field. Japanese electronics companies may play the lead role. The objective is to gain both foreign financing and technology. China has the largest defense industry in Asia, employing almost four million persons, but qualitative standards have lagged behind those of most major countries. A Chinese banker identified the motive behind the initiative as "creation of a silicon valley along the Pearl River Delta."²⁵

Finally, with respect to the strategic background, we must recognize two powerful forces at work within Chinese society, both potentially inimical to the interests of the central government. The first is the burgeoning wealth of free market industrial centers. As the cities grow in economic power, concerns arise of concomitant growth in social and political power. The Hong Kong example, if unconstrained, may reinforce these concerns, possibly sharpening competing interests between the cities and the national capital. In the case of Shanghai, the president may have effectively defused the threat. Among the leadership changes announced in September were (by deliberate omission) the retirement of Li Peng, the prime minister, and the retention of his deputy, Zhu Rongji. Zhu, a former mayor of Shanghai, thus becomes the heir apparent to the number two —

and possibly the number one — position in the land.²⁶ Significantly, President Jiang is, himself, a former mayor of Shanghai.

The other force is a growing tendency toward lawlessness throughout the country. Petty crime has expanded with the expanding economy to encompass operations by well-armed “mafia-type” gangs engaging in narcotics and weapons trade, large-scale theft, prostitution and banditry in rural areas. In April 1996, the central government mobilized hundreds of thousands of police and paramilitary troops for an extended effort to curb the problem. By August, hundreds of citizens had been executed after summary trials, and in Xinjiang province, some 5,000 Muslim separatist suspects had been rounded up. The size of organized crime is believed by some to be much larger than the government has thus far admitted.²⁷

The PLA Today

The PLA is the servant of the Chinese Communist Party in the classic model of Marxist-Leninist armed forces. The principal mechanism of control is the Central Military Commission of the People’s Republic of China, headed by Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the Party. Other members include the defense minister, the chief of the General Staff and the directors of the military political and logistical departments. Notably, neither the navy nor the air force is represented, in spite of the growing prominence of these services.²⁸

In quantitative terms the Chinese military establishment has been on a diminishing course for almost fifteen years. From a peak of some 4.7 million men in 1981, the combined branches of the PLA (land, sea and air) have gradually decreased to about 2.8 million today. According to President Jiang, the forces will diminish by another 500,000 over the next three years. These reductions have been driven largely by a radical shift from Mao Zedong’s classical concept of “people’s war,” designed to cope with foreign invasions, to a force being tailored to deal with challenges to Beijing’s interests beyond its borders. In 1985, with vastly improved relations with the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping officially declared the threat of war extinct, and sharply reduced the defense budget. Subsequently — and most notably since the Tiananmen Square incident — the funding has grown while the total numbers of men under arms have continued to fall.

Beijing’s new concept for conflict in the closing years of the millennium, and beyond, encompasses much smaller, better equipped and trained forces, possibly with volunteer ranks. These, Deng saw as much better suited for a broad array of missions, possibly at considerable distances from the homeland. The emerging competition for control of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, with its suspected oil reserves, and the strategic Senkaku Shoto Islands, northeast of Taiwan — in addition to consideration of Taiwan itself — gave impetus to the notion. The Spratly archipelago suffers from a poverty of hard ground above sea level and a surfeit of claimants. Besides China, Taiwan and Vietnam claim the entire area, while the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei have partial claims. Few analysts expect a significant military clash in the area in the near future, but many believe that a serious initiative by any of the parties to secure its claim by permanent occupation or fortification could lead to war.

The emerging Chinese interest in strengthening their naval forces is a cause of increasing anxiety for the other claimants — and for Japan and South Korea as well. The latter two remain heavily dependent upon sea lanes transiting the area to sources of petroleum from Indonesia and the Middle East. The closure of these lanes could have far-reaching economic and security ramifications for the entire western Pacific rim. In the case of the Senkaku Shoto group, the competition is between China — both the communist and noncommunist governments — on the one hand and Japan, on the other. (A confrontation between Chinese demonstrators and Japanese coast guard units in 1996 resulted in the death of a resident of Hong Kong.²⁹) But the islands' location in proximity to Taiwan folds them into the more immediate potential crisis between Beijing and Taipei.

China is an overt nuclear power with its Strategic Missile Forces (SMF) roughly equivalent to those of France. The Chinese SMF, with about 125,000 troops, has some 17 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), designated (Chinese surface-to-surface) CSS-3 and CSS-4. The former has a maximum range of 4,750 kilometers, the latter of 11,000 kilometers, giving them a capability for striking virtually anywhere in Japan or the Philippines, and in the case of the CSS-4, Australia as well. Moreover, a number of the missiles are equipped with multiple independently-targeted reentry vehicle (MIRV) warheads. A new ICBM is expected to be fielded by the end of the decade.³⁰

The SMF also has somewhat over 46 intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), dubbed CSS-2 and CSS-5. These have ranges of 2,800 and 1,800 kilometers respectively.³¹ Recently, the U.S. National Air Intelligence Center revealed that the older, liquid-fuel CSS-2s are being replaced by the more mobile, solid-propellant CSS-5s. An advanced version of the CSS-5, designated “Mod-2,” is said to be roughly the equivalent of the U.S. Pershing II IRBM, which was destroyed in accordance with the 1987 INF Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union. Analysts speculate that all of the CSS-2s may be removed from service by 2002, with some, perhaps, being sold abroad.³²

China is believed to possess between 400 and 450 nuclear warheads, 150 of which may be adapted for tactical employment (in spite of the fact that Beijing does not admit to having any tactical nuclear weapons). The remainder are deployed on what one analyst has referred to as “a lop-sided triad of land-based ballistic missiles, bombers and one nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN).”³³

The bulk of the PLA — 2.1 million troops — are assigned to the ground forces, including strategic rocket units (not to be confused with the longer-range Strategic Missile Forces). The ground forces are organized into “integrated group armies,” roughly equivalent to Western corps. A typical army will have three infantry divisions, a tank division, and separate tank, artillery and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) brigades. There are 24 such armies, distributed over seven military regions. There is also an airborne corps of three divisions, manned by the air force. Conventional equipment, mostly in the armies, includes some 10,000 tanks largely of old design, but with some upgrades, and close to 20,000 pieces of artillery, similarly dated. Exceptions to the norm among the ground forces are at least six high-quality, mobile formations, commonly referred to as “fist” divisions. These are designed for rapid response to either domestic disturbances or external threats.³⁴

Anticipated new equipment acquisitions for the ground forces are 100 self-propelled (wheeled) 120mm 2S23 Nona-SVK gun-mortar systems and an undisclosed number of 300mm multiple rocket launchers. The gun-mortar package is expected to include a large quantity of Kitolov 2 laser-guided artillery projectiles. Anonymous Pentagon officials have speculated that the equipment is intended to bring selected Chinese artillery units up to the class of their U.S. counterparts, hence the initiative is interpreted by some as fundamentally anti-United States in nature. However, the secrecy surrounding most of Beijing's foreign arms acquisition programs undermines the reliability of many such judgments.³⁵

But none of these figures relate to what appears to be the PLA's activity of first priority: business. For decades, the army has been deeply enmeshed in vegetable farming, coal mining and light manufacturing. Now military enterprises produce pharmaceuticals, fiber optics, luxury housing complexes and hotels. One artillery brigade was cited by a senior general for successfully marketing 10,000 pigs in 1996, earning a profit of over \$40,000. Others are engaged in a wide variety of money-making schemes, including the pirating of compact disks. With such rewards in the economic realm, it is often difficult for commanders to stimulate the warrior ethic or to focus the troops' attention on combat readiness.³⁶

An exception to the rule appears to be the new 10,000-man garrison in Hong Kong. In late 1996 the National People's Congress approved special rules for that command forbidding all commercial activities. The force is intended to be a showpiece for the PLA, but some observers are skeptical. One commented, "They realize they are going to be under intense scrutiny from the outset, from the world and from Hong Kong people. It will take a while before they start to abuse their positions."³⁷

The strategic rocket units of the PLA are organized as the "Second Artillery Corps" (SAC) and equipped with operational and tactical range weapons, specifically, the 600km range M-9 (CSS-6/DF-15) and 150km range M-11 (CSS-7/DF-11) missiles. The Chinese call the weapons *Dong Feng* (East Wind), hence the designation "DF." (The "CSS" designations are NATO terminology, while "M" is a Chinese designation for weapons intended for sale abroad.) The M-9s (DF-15s) were the rockets used to intimidate Nationalist forces on Taiwan in July 1995 and March 1996, discussed below.

Along with the SAC, and for the foreseeable future, China's air and naval forces are of greater pertinence to U.S. interests than are the conventional ground forces. These include most of the forces with capabilities for greater operational ranges, especially for attacking Taiwan.

Altogether, the air force has about 3,700 combat aircraft, but many are of old design and the vast majority are air defense fighters with limited range. There are also about 420 light (H-5) and medium (H-6) bombers. Some of the latter are probably nuclear capable. Notable exceptions to the rule of obsolescence and limited value are some 48 Soviet-built, high performance Sukhoi Su-27 "Flankers" (roughly equivalent to the U.S. F-15 Eagle) and 100 domestically-built F-8II "Finback Bs" (MiG-23 upgrade). Beijing has signed an agreement with Moscow for 24 additional Su-27s, including provisions for establishment of a production line in China. Analysts anticipate that the Chinese may begin with a production rate of 10 to 20 aircraft per year, perhaps building to a much higher production flow as they gain experience. A report by the U.S. Office of Naval

Intelligence places the total at 250 by 2005. The aircraft will be equipped with AA-11 radar-guided air-to-air missiles.³⁸ The Su-27s have appeared on Chinese videotapes operating in groups of five, engaging in ground attack missions. Twenty-six of those on hand are believed to be based with the Third Aircraft Division at Wuhu, west of Shanghai, with the remaining 22 in the south at Suixi, not far from the Vietnamese border. It would not be surprising to see some of them in Fukien Province, opposite Taiwan, in the future.³⁹

There are also unconfirmed reports that China may purchase 24 MiG-31 fighter aircraft from Russia. As with the Su-27s, this deal may include a production licensing agreement as well, beginning in the year 2000. Russian sources tout the MiG-31 as an early-warning platform as well as a fighter, but analysts doubt that China could afford as expensive an aircraft for that purpose.⁴⁰

Another significant development may be the upgrading of China's 500 F-7 aircraft (MiG-21 lookalike) fleet. At the 1996 Farnborough International Air Show the Chinese distributed documents offering an "F-7MG" with GEC-Marconi Super Skyranger radar. Reportedly, the avionics package permits full look-down-shoot-down operations.⁴¹

An entirely new, domestically assembled aircraft (using Russian engines and Israeli design and electronics) — the multirole F-10 — may have begun prototype flying tests. This aircraft is said to have been developed with considerable assistance from Israel in its technology, design and engineering. As in other cases, this aircraft raises the troublesome controversy of Israeli application of U.S. source data in their Chinese military sales programs. Avionics, control-configured vehicle (CCV) technology, flight control systems, composites and other advanced materials are probably all involved, with significant information of U.S. origin.⁴² But, as in other cases, the Israelis deny any violation of agreements with the United States.

Observers have been led to expect Chinese construction of up to six aerial refueling tanker aircraft to support the F-8II fleet, but some remain skeptical. A RAND Corporation official pointed out that it took China eight years from first flight of the F-8II in 1984 to reach deployment in 1992, and expressed doubt that the Chinese had progressed far enough to begin full-scale production of more advanced systems in less time today.⁴³

Also germane to a China-vs.-Taiwan scenario is China's air defense capability. While many aspects are not available in the open press, the best thing that might be said for it is that it is the air force's first priority mission. What is known is that it is large — and largely antiquated. Organized in 60 regiments, it includes some 2,700 aircraft, including 700 of the more capable J-7 and J-8 models and about 40 Su-27s. There are 16 air defense artillery divisions (1,000 weapons per division) deployed around the country and 100 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) units. The AAA guns range in caliber from 35 to 100mm. Most of the SAMs are copies of early Soviet models.⁴⁴

Prior to the area's reversion to Chinese control, Hong Kong intelligence sources reported that China expected to receive a number of Russian S-300 (SA-10 "Grumble") surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems for deployment around the capital city and the airfields where Su-27s are based. At least three batteries are now known to be deployed, and as many as 12 more may be on order.⁴⁵ The system, which includes a phased array

radar, is highly capable, generally comparable to the U.S. MIM-104 Patriot (the earliest, analog configuration of the missile). It has a maximum range of either 28 or 56 miles, depending upon the model, and a maximum altitude of 88,500 feet. It can intercept low-flying aircraft, cruise missiles or Scud ballistic missiles during their reentry phase.⁴⁶

The PLA navy is also a large organization, with over a quarter million personnel. This includes the coastal regional defense forces (29,000), the naval air force (25,000) and Marines (5,000). The major fleet units are 61 submarines and 54 surface combatants (destroyers and frigates). There are also 830 small patrol and coastal combatants and 121 mine warfare vessels. The amphibious fleet, with 71 ships, is actually larger than that of the United States, but far less capable. Its total lift capacity is about 11,000 men and 400 armored vehicles, compared to the U.S. capability for delivering 35,000 troops and 1,400 tanks in a single movement. China has about half as many landing craft as the United States, and their capacity is a small fraction of the American counterpart.⁴⁷

In December 1996 Beijing agreed to purchase two Russian *Sovremenny*-class guided-missile destroyers. The new ships are each expected to be equipped with at least eight SS-N-22 "Sunburn" antiship missiles. Analysts believe that the missiles are optimized for attacking U.S. Aegis-equipped air and missile defense ships.⁴⁸

The principal significance of the Chinese fleet from a Western point of view is its potential for extending China's power eastward, either to isolate Taiwan or to bring pressure to bear on disputed islands. Except as noted by Peter Rodman, above, these capabilities are not of great concern today, but they could assume more serious proportions in the new millennium. Taiwanese analysts have identified three distinct strategic maritime objectives which they believe mainland planners have set for themselves. The first and most immediate aims at development of a capability for conducting naval operations within the area defined by the "first island chain": the seas to the west of Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines, and the South China Sea. This is to be achieved in the early years of the next decade. The second objective, which will carry them to the "second island chain" (the western Aleutians, the Marianas, Papua New Guinea and the east coast of Australia) may take the better part of the next two decades. The final objective, achievement of full, "blue water" seakeeping capabilities, may take until the next mid-century.⁴⁹

A high visibility effort by Beijing has been the search for aircraft carriers capable of carrying Su-27K, the naval version of the aircraft currently being provided by Russia. Chinese naval planners envision as many as three carriers after 2005, one for each of the principal fleets. Some training exercises for carrier operations have been underway since the late 1980s.⁵⁰ The acquisition by China of carriers would likely be intimidating to many of China's maritime neighbors, but especially to Taiwan. The American use of an aircraft carrier for troop lift during the intervention in Haiti in 1994 demonstrated how such ships might have important secondary roles in amphibious operations.

The Chinese submarine acquisition program has been another effort meriting close scrutiny by officers charged with responsibilities in the Western Pacific. The late U.S. chief of naval operations, Admiral Jeremy Boorda, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1995 that China had agreed to purchase 10 *Kilo*-class diesel-

electric submarines from Russia, with options for 10 more. The *Kilo* is considered a high capability boat with very quiet operational characteristics. Some sources in Beijing doubt Admiral Boorda's figures, asserting that the actual number may be closer to four or six.⁵¹ There has been no official statement by the Chinese government.

Since the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, in which as many as 1,300 people may have lost their lives,⁵² the PLA — especially the Second Army Corps — has figured in a series of hostile maneuvers and missile “test” firings aimed at intimidating the Taiwanese people and their leaders. Beginning in 1994, with large combined arms exercises on Choushan Island off the mainland coast, the incidents escalated in 1995 and 1996 to include DF-15 missile firings, one of them into a normal shipping lane south of Taiwan and another barely 25 nautical miles northeast of the island. The apparent intent in one instance was to influence a Taiwanese national election; in another, simply to express Beijing's displeasure with the visit by the Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui, to the United States.

However trifling the Taiwanese “provocation” for the missile firings may seem to Western observers, Beijing apparently interpreted Lee's visit as a move to promote the independence of the island state — a move the Chinese leadership cannot countenance. In March 1996 *The New York Times* reported that U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Charles Freeman had passed an alert that the PLA “had prepared plans for a missile attack against Taiwan consisting of one conventional missile strike a day for 30 days.” Rumors abounded of a 400,000-man PLA mobilization. Tensions were running high. The United States responded with the deployment of two aircraft carrier battle groups (with the lead ships USS *Independence* and USS *Nimitz*) to the area to deter further aggression.⁵³ The reality of the action proved to be less than some of the warnings suggested, but the disproportionate Chinese reaction to the Taiwanese initiative sowed seeds of doubt regarding the stability and self-control of the Beijing regime.

The Strategic Triangle

For half a century Japan has figured prominently in U.S. planning as the keystone of its strategy in the Western Pacific. Many historians believe that the United States intervened in the Korean War primarily to protect Japan. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned that the peninsula could become “a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan” if it were to fall into the hands of the communists.⁵⁴ However that may be, few analysts would argue that U.S. bases in Japan were not essential to the prosecution of that conflict, and for the support of operations in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s as well. Hence, Japan has importance to the United States transcending its own value, as a support base for U.S. security operations throughout the region. This has become more acute since the closure of bases in the Philippines. And now that China appears to be undergoing a major strategic transfiguration, the Japanese-American bilateral relationship is impacted profoundly. But as in most complex situations, analysts detect both good news and bad news.

Writing in *Asian Survey* in April 1997, Banning Garrett and Bonnie Glaser argued the point this way: The good news, they said, is that China does not necessarily view the close U.S.-Japan relationship as inimical to its own security. While the authors recognized factions with varying views, the mainstream of thought in Beijing, they said,

accepts the U.S.-Japan bond as a stabilizing factor for the region. The Chinese, they noted, have an unhappy history with Japan, but are aware that since World War II, with the American occupation of Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance, there has been no reason to fear a resurgence of Japanese power — not even when Chinese “volunteers” were fighting American troops in Korea. The U.S.-Japan security treaty has served as a strategic shelter, protecting the islands, on the one hand, but simultaneously discouraging any tendency on the part of the Japanese to mount any great effort toward rebuilding an indigenous military capability, on the other.⁵⁵ In general, the Chinese would probably agree with U.S. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen when he said:

No nation has benefited more from the regional stability provided by America’s engagement in Asia and the Pacific than has China. As a result, none should have a greater interest in the U.S. sustaining and revitalizing those security structures that are the basis for the stability that underlies the region’s dynamism.⁵⁶

Garrett and Glaser believe that the Chinese understand what an economic powerhouse Japan has become, and fear the rapidity with which such an economy could be redirected towards attainment of a high-tech military capability. This fundamental understanding has been at the root of Sino-American relations since President Richard Nixon’s “opening to China” in 1973.

But there is also some bad news. Chinese perceptions of the U.S.-Japan treaty and relationship, Garrett and Glaser say, are changing. As China is becoming more outward oriented and focused on recovering its “lost” possessions (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and, perhaps, more distant islands), it appears to be growing more wary of the U.S.-Japan tie — in some respects interpreting it as a device for “checking” or containing China.

Shortly before his visit to the United States in October 1997, President Jiang expressed just such concern. “To be frank,” he said, “we are on very high alert regarding this Japan-U.S. military treaty. And we hope that this treaty is not directed at China.” He tempered his remark, however, with the comment, “I believe Japan’s prime minister, who told me . . . that Taiwan is a province of the People’s Republic of China.”⁵⁷

Two other American analysts, Michael J. Green and Benjamin L. Self, have identified a significant share of the blame for the growing estrangement on the Chinese side. The Japanese, they write, have been deeply concerned over China’s nuclear weapons tests, its threats against Taiwan and its nationalistic territorial claims over distant islands. While there is still a strong consensus among the Japanese people for maintaining friendly ties with the PRC, increasingly voices are being heard among Japan’s governing elite, academia and business leaders, apparently preparing the country for dealing with a more threatening China. In March 1996 Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto cut through some of the diplomatic niceties with his remark that Chinese policies in the region “might be heading in the wrong direction.”⁵⁸ And in July 1997, sensing the sea change in political thinking, the Japanese military leadership, for the first time, asked the national legislature to grant new powers to respond to military crises and to play a greater role in the region.⁵⁹

From Beijing’s point of view, a worst-case scenario would feature a combined U.S.-Japanese military effort to counter a Chinese campaign aimed at recovering Taiwan. But the Chinese probably do not expect the U.S.-Japan alliance to be an enduring one. Sooner

or later, they expect that frictions will develop between the two capitalist countries, leading to a breakdown. But that, Beijing recognizes, might be no better, from its perspective. That could lead to a new era of Japanese nationalism, once again, as in the 1930s, unconstrained by American influence.

As for the Chinese side, Garrett and Glaser claim to see a new focus of concern in the context of the historic triangle. These authors point out that the United States and Japan have been in close consultation over the emergence of a possible nuclear missile threat from North Korea. This has brought the allies to the point of discussing the need for development of a theater anti-ballistic missile defense (TMD). One of the principal systems being discussed is the U.S. Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. Chinese scientists have reportedly calculated that such a system could defend Japan against as much as 80 percent of China's "strategic" nuclear missiles. Further, the Chinese fear, the system might be upgraded in the future to completely negate the effectiveness of all of its weapons based on the mainland. In their view, this would completely neutralize the Chinese deterrent. Garrett and Glaser quote one Chinese nuclear scientist who remarked, "We don't need to attack *Japan* with nuclear weapons, but we need to be able to attack U.S. forces *in Japan* . . . if we need to retaliate with nuclear weapons."⁶⁰

Other Japanese programs troubling to the Chinese are expanded air- and sea-lift for the Self Defense Force and improved levels of operational support for U.S. forces in a Korean contingency. These factors have now been broadened and codified in a new U.S.-Japan agreement covering a wider range of circumstances. The new guidelines call for Japanese contributions, not only to many humanitarian efforts, but to minesweeping, operational logistics and intelligence gathering as well.⁶¹ Their potential applicability to a Taiwan scenario has not escaped Beijing.

Thus, the Chinese evidence a growing concern that U.S. and Japanese programs, engendered chiefly in the context of a Northeast Asian threat, may now be assuming a very different character in the overall scheme of things. In a fitful reaction, they stunned the Japanese when they very undiplomatically warned that they might be prompted to equip more of their missiles with multiple warheads (MIRV) if Japan went ahead with a TMD system. The public implication that Beijing was contemplating nuclear attacks on Japan, a nonnuclear state, was shocking. Garrett and Glaser went further to suggest that these growing concerns on both sides may begin to drive the Chinese to build a capability for striking directly at the United States.

It is evident that the Chinese are having difficulty determining whether their overall security is improving or deteriorating. They suspect that the Japanese have developed a new respect for them, but they are concerned that the respect may be tinged with a sense of threat. Garrett and Glaser quote an official in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as saying, "The Japanese used to view China as weak so Japan did not feel a threat from China. [The situation] is different now."⁶² And it is different. The big concern is that it may be becoming less stable than it has been for the last half century.

And there may be a difference of perception of what is happening between the partners in the U.S.-Japan alliance. We have noted how most American observers (with the notable exception of Peter Rodman) see little in the nature of a military threat in the near time

frame. For the Japanese, the picture may be quite different. The former chairman of the Nomura Research Institute, Kiichi Saeki, recently warned, "For the United States, only in another twenty years or more might China pose a serious military threat . . . Japan, however, given its limited defense capabilities, will feel the military threat much sooner."⁶³

China's Foreign Military Sales and Advanced Weapons Proliferation

China's growing weight in her adjacent seas is not the only area of potential military threat from the Dragon Empire. While she currently possesses limited military reach beyond her own neighborhood, her influence is more robust. This stems largely from Beijing's propensity for doing business in dangerous commodities in unsettled areas of the world. Most troublesome are those related to nuclear weapons technology. Notable in this category are the sale of two nuclear reactors and assistance in nuclear weapons development to Iran. Reportedly, in 1995, the *London Sunday Telegraph* obtained copies of a secret message to then President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani detailing work being accomplished by the Chinese to assist Iran in its bomb project. There were also reports of Chinese nuclear experts delivering and installing a calutron system at Karaj, 100 miles northwest of Tehran, designed for enriching uranium to weapons grade material.⁶⁴ These reports trailed earlier information that the Iranians had a major research and development program for production of a 1,000 kilometer range version of the Chinese M-11 intermediate range missile, named "Tondar 68."⁶⁵

More recently, U.S. State Department officials have expressed dismay at reports of Chinese sales of some dozen M-11 missiles and 5,000 ring magnets for the production of fissionable material to Pakistan, and chemical weapons components to Iran. Further, on 10 April 1997, Mr. Robert J. Einhorn, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation, told the Senate Governmental Affairs subpanel that China had become the number one supplier of conventional weapons to Iran, outpacing Russia. Of particular concern was the delivery of C-802 antiship cruise missiles capable of attacking U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁶ Also notable has been the supply of C-801K air-to-surface missiles which the Iranians test-fired from F-4 Phantom jets against barges in the Persian Gulf on 3 and 6 June 1997. A senior U.S. military officer accompanying Defense Secretary William Cohen on a trip to the region described Iran's maritime strike capabilities as "a 360 degree threat," thanks to its missile acquisitions from China.⁶⁷ On several occasions senior U.S. officials have raised these issues with Chinese counterparts, but policy considerations have usually overruled initiatives which would impose severe penalties for the transgressions of agreements.

Conclusions

In the foregoing discussion we have seen that the leadership of the People's Liberation Army appears to understand the changes which have occurred, both in the technological revolution in military affairs and in China's strategic position. For over a decade, but more particularly in the last half-dozen years, it has been redirecting the forces from their former focus on large landmass "people's war" in favor of capabilities for operations beyond the nation's borders and shores, to the south and to the east. Inherent in this sea change has been an assumption that conflict with Russia is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

More important today is the shaping of the PLA to support the national objectives regarding the recovery of territories to which China lays claim but which are currently in dispute with other states (including Taiwan). This is manifest in efforts aimed at the modernization of the air forces and the navy and in the development of rapid reaction units in the ground forces. A not unlikely development would be a shift in the composition of the Central Military Commission to bring in the commanders of the air and sea forces. This said, however, the bulk of the PLA remains sand-bagged by commercial involvements which are profitable to the organization (and quite probably to the leadership, as well), but which impose heavy burdens on the institution, and most particularly on its prospects for rapid attainment of greater military capabilities.

Further, both the political and military leadership have been encumbered by a lack of clear ideological direction under which the forces might be fine-tuned. The passage of Deng Xiaoping appears to have removed much of that blockage, probably to the benefit of a greater nationalist orientation, with less concern for socialist doctrine. And yet, the leadership has not demonstrated a high degree of self-confidence. The firing of missiles into areas of normal commercial maritime traffic to vent political objections to current events evidences a volatility more reflective of a Tiananmen Square mindset than that of a mature government, confident of its strategy for achieving its goals. While the aberrance of the actions may be due in part to extraordinary stress related to the change of leadership, they do not bode well for the long-term stability of the region. Beijing's fears of Taiwanese tendencies toward total independence appear to border on psychosis.

In this regard, three of the judgments provided by Garrett and Glaser are particularly useful. These may be summarized as follows:

- ◆ A military confrontation between Taiwan and the mainland is the greatest foreseeable threat to peace among the triangular powers (China, Japan and the United States). A conflict in the area could stem from either a bilateral China-Taiwan confrontation or from one involving Japan at the outset.
- ◆ For the time being, Beijing accepts the U.S.-Japan alliance, but that acceptance is not immutable. Should Beijing come to view the pact as an anti-Chinese device, its attitude could change drastically, with ramifications in many arena, both political and military.
- ◆ If the United States did not intervene in a Taiwan conflict, it would be discredited in Japanese eyes. (The authors actually extend this point to include the eyes of all East Asian countries, but our examination has been more closely drawn.)⁶⁸

The Garrett/Glaser conclusions are especially valuable for their emphasis on the larger strategic context in which they apply — paralleling, to a degree, former Secretary Dean Rusk's comment on the likely consequences of losing South Korea in 1950. The subjugation of Taiwan by mainland forces would be highly injurious to U.S. prestige, and could be prejudicial to the U.S. security posture throughout the region. However, one should note the following:

- ◆ The PLA does not appear to have the wherewithal for overrunning Taiwan at the present time, and may not achieve that capability for five to ten years. This does not

rule out the possibility of a blockade or campaign of intimidation to cow the Taipei government into closer cooperation or compliance with Beijing's wishes.

- ◆ Beijing has probably established goals encompassing regional superpower status at some definable point — possibly in as little as ten to fifteen years. If and when it achieves that degree of political and military maturity, China could dominate the Far East, controlling the principal trade routes and enjoying either self-sufficiency or full access to global energy resources. It would also be likely to possess credible means for deterring interference by either Japan, the United States, or both, in its sphere of interest and control.
- ◆ The Chinese leadership appears to have selected economic development as the primary engine for underpinning its reach for regional superpower status. Were it not for demonstrated tendencies toward volatile reactions under stress by the group, the region might be considered essentially stable for the time being.
- ◆ There appear to be heavy pressures upon Chinese leaders to frustrate Taiwan's ambitions for independence — or even the appearance of independence. Should the Taipei government declare its independence from China, war would be a likely outcome, regardless of the state of readiness of the PLA. In this respect, it would be prudent for U.S. policymakers, military commanders and intelligence officers to be alert for indications of Beijing's perceptions of Taiwanese "provocations" (read: initiatives toward independence, either substantive or symbolic) even when the state of readiness or deployments of PLA forces might not reflect an intent or immediate capability for undertaking operations on short notice.

China's first emperor, Yin Zheng, might have been proud of the achievements of his modern successors. Clearly, they have restored much of the power he had accumulated as he prepared to do battle in the Afterworld. Suppression of political dissent, à la Tiananmen Square, would seem natural, as might the launching of missiles to express displeasure with opposition in the field. We can only guess at what he might have thought about Beijing's intense drive for economic development. But if modern power grows out of the assembly lines of industry, as well as from the barrel of a gun, as Mao had it, Yin might have been satisfied. Perhaps he is watching the process, betting that the prospects for the Central Kingdom have never been better.

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