

## China's Search for Military Power

Over the past decade, China has been engaged in a sustained drive to create a modern and professional military. How much military power does China ultimately desire? Although the answer is unclear, the ambiguity that surrounds China's motivations for the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) generates concern and even anxiety about the future of peace and stability in East Asia. A recent Pentagon report notes, for example, that "much uncertainty surrounds China's future course, in particular in the area of its expanding military power and how that power might be used.... China's leaders have yet to explain in detail the purposes and objectives of the PLA's modernizing military capabilities."<sup>1</sup>

Looking toward the future, several approaches might be used to determine how much military power China seeks to acquire. One option is simply to focus on the worst case and assume that all states, including China, want to develop as much military power as domestic resources and external constraints permit. The study of threat perceptions offers another approach, tracking changes in China's security environment to identify core drivers of military modernization and possible force structures.

This article explores a third method, one grounded in Chinese texts on military doctrine. Analysts have always faced limitations on access to data with which to study China's armed forces. Over the past decade, however, the availability of sources on China's military doctrine, including textbooks on strategy and operations used to train PLA officers, has grown.<sup>2</sup> These sources, which are part of the PLA's "revolution in doctrinal affairs," permit a prelimi-

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nary assessment of China's national strategic goals as well as the capabilities and force structure required to achieve them.<sup>3</sup>

Such an approach naturally risks taking China's declaratory objectives at face value. Nevertheless, it offers several advantages for assessing the implications of China's ongoing military modernization effort. This approach allows analysts to assess the congruence of strategic goals reflected in PLA writings and the military means necessary for achieving them. In this way, progress toward modernization can be tracked and charted. It also provides a baseline with which to identify potential changes in the trajectory of China's military reforms, either through a shift in goals or a change in the capabilities and forces being developed and deployed.

Examination of these writings suggests that China's objectives for the use of military power are more certain than many policy analysts maintain. These sources indicate that China's strategic goals are keyed to the defense of a continental power with growing maritime interests as well as to Taiwan's unification and are largely conservative, not expansionist. China is developing internal control, peripheral denial, and limited force-projection capabilities consistent with these objectives. Yet, as China shifts its force structure, especially its navy, to acquire these capabilities, it may nevertheless spark a new security dilemma in East Asia, increasing regional instability and undermining China's current diplomacy of reassurance.

## **China's Strategic Goals**

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Why is China modernizing its military capabilities? China adopted its current military strategy in 1993. Following the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union and then the demonstration of precision-strike munitions in the Persian Gulf War, China's leaders instructed the PLA to prepare to fight "local wars under modern high technology conditions."<sup>4</sup> The adoption of this military strategy stemmed from paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's judgment that small- and medium-sized local conflicts, not general or total wars, were the most likely threats that China would encounter in a world no longer characterized by intense competition between two superpowers. Chinese military writings portray these local conflicts as sudden, intense, and destructive, thus requiring China to develop new operational capabilities stressing joint operations, rapid response, and offensive strikes to deter such local wars from arising or to win them if they do erupt.<sup>5</sup>

Military analyst David Finkelstein has eloquently argued that China lacks a public document similar to the U.S. National Military Strategy that outlines its national military strategy.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Chinese leaders' speeches, official documents, and PLA texts on military doctrine identify five strategic goals for

which China seeks to develop military power as a tool of statecraft: regime security, territorial integrity, national unification, maritime security, and regional stability.<sup>7</sup>

China's multiple goals for the use of military power reflect the diversity of China's security challenges. Perhaps too crudely, China seeks to ensure the defense of a continental state, governed by an authoritarian political system, with growing maritime interests and several unresolved territorial disputes, especially over Taiwan. Yet, these goals defy simple categorization as status quo or revisionist, defensive or offensive. China's desire to secure its homeland territory from attack is a defensive goal pursued by all states, while its desire to alter the status quo across the strait through unification is clearly revisionist from the region's perspective, but not from China's.

**Chinese military writings identify five strategic goals for its military power.**

### **REGIME SECURITY**

China's first goal, maintaining the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) monopoly on political power, distinguishes its armed forces from most other modern militaries in the world. Since becoming general secretary, Hu Jintao has stressed that the military falls under the "absolute leadership of the party."<sup>8</sup> This phrase highlights that internal security and defense of the CCP remains a top priority, as political unrest poses a stark challenge to the continued economic growth that underpins the party's legitimacy. Political Commissar of the Nanjing Army Command College Tian Bingren echoes Hu's view in a recent article, noting that "the armed forces should provide important and powerful guarantees for the consolidation of the party's ruling position."<sup>9</sup> Key sources of instability include ethnic violence, unemployment, income inequality, and cross-border criminal activity. The March 2008 demonstrations and riots in Tibetan areas only reinforce the view of one military scholar that threats to regime security such as ethnic unrest are a "strategic issue" that influences "national unification, social stability ... [and] economic development."<sup>10</sup>

### **TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY**

The second goal is securing China's territory from external threats, a basic mission for any country's armed forces. A study on army building from the PLA's National Defense University (NDU) states that "the safeguarding of a nation's territorial integrity must have a large and powerful armed force. Defending the homeland's territory, territorial waters and airspace ... is our army's duty-

**Chinese military growth, especially its navy, may spark a new regional security dilemma.**

bound responsibility.”<sup>11</sup> The end of the Cold War bolstered China’s external security, as the collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the largest land-based threat to China since 1949. In the 1990s, China further strengthened its border security through demilitarization and boundary agreements with its neighbors that reduced troop levels and resolved outstanding territorial disputes.<sup>12</sup>

Although China’s territory is more secure than at any time since 1949, PLA sources still stress the importance of preparing for potential conflict along China’s continental periphery that might threaten the country’s territorial integrity. These concerns stem from the operational challenges of defending one of the longest land borders in the world, a task that is complicated by harsh environmental conditions and potential ethnic unrest in frontier areas. China also remains involved in one major territorial dispute

on its land border with India. Although efforts to settle the dispute have progressed in recent years, resulting in a 2005 agreement on guiding principles, concerns remain that conflict could still erupt in the future, especially as a “chain reaction” of conflict along China’s borders during a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the PLA’s training guidelines for 2008 stress tasks consistent with maintaining territorial integrity, especially air defense, border defense, and border control.<sup>14</sup>

### **NATIONAL UNIFICATION**

The goal pursued by China that attracts the most concern is the potential use of force over Taiwan, which Chinese writings identify as a goal distinct from maintaining territorial integrity. Today, China’s leaders emphasize preventing the island’s *de jure*, or formal, independence and, through economic interdependence, creating conditions for “peaceful unification.” According to a recent study on military strategy by NDU scholars, China must “contain ‘Taiwan separatist’ activities and safeguard national unity.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, “the Taiwan issue is the most real and prominent threat to our territorial sovereignty.” Although it may just make a virtue out of necessity, the 2005 National Anti-Secession Law reflects an emphasis on deterring independence over compelling unification.

### **MARITIME SECURITY**

A fourth goal that also attracts increasing attention is China’s emphasis on defending its “maritime rights and interests” (*haiyang quan yi*). Today, China

remains involved in maritime sovereignty disputes with many of its neighbors. Although it controls the Paracel islands claimed by Vietnam, it occupies only a minority of the features in the Spratlys in the South China Sea and none of the Senkakus disputed with Japan. With one exception, China has yet to reach maritime delimitation agreements with its neighbors and thus agree on the control of undersea resources, especially petroleum.

Chinese sources also reflect an increased sensitivity to military threats from the sea to China's wealthy coastal provinces, the need to exploit maritime resources for economic development, and, as a trading nation, the economy's dependence on sea lines of communication that could be disrupted in a conflict, especially one near China's coast. The NDU's study of military strategy, for example, notes the growing importance of "the rights and interests of our continental shelf and maritime exclusive economic zones, especially the threats facing strategic resource development and strategic passageways."<sup>16</sup>

### **REGIONAL STABILITY**

A fifth goal is the need to maintain a stable external environment within which to continue economic development. One NDU study describes this goal as "providing the necessary peaceful environment for national development."<sup>17</sup> According to a book from the PLA's Academy of Military Science, because China's economy relies heavily on trade, "regional stability carries important significance for our economic development as well as resisting America's posture against us."<sup>18</sup> In practice, this goal is linked with avoiding or deterring armed conflicts on China's periphery, lest they disrupt or potentially derail China's economic reforms. Another NDU study noted that "[i]f turmoil or local war occurs in hot spots on China's periphery, the flames of war will bring disaster to China, compelling China to be drawn into a local war or be pounded by waves of refugees."<sup>19</sup>

### **China's Military Capabilities and Emerging Force Structure**

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China prepares to achieve its strategic goals by strengthening or developing three general military capabilities: internal control, area denial around its periphery, and limited regional force projection. Reflecting the complexity of China's security challenges and the varied goals that it pursues, these capabilities also defy simple categorization. They support offensive and defensive campaigns, low-intensity and high-intensity operations, and the employment of force across the spectrum of the contemporary battle space on land, in the air, and at sea. To simplify the analysis, the discussion below examines only China's conventional military capabilities.

The evolution in the force structure of China's armed forces is roughly consistent with the capabilities required to achieve its strategic goals. As the PLA remains dominated by its ground forces, China already possesses strong internal control and denial capabilities on the Asian continent. By contrast, China has only begun to acquire forces for maritime denial and regional force-projection capabilities. Nevertheless, progress in these latter areas is likely to intensify the security dilemma in the region because they enable China to project power at greater distances than ever before since 1949.

### **INTERNAL CONTROL**

Internal control is the first capability required for China to achieve its strategic goals. It is key to ensuring regime security and contributes to maintaining territorial integrity by limiting domestic vulnerability to external pressure. Internal control enables the CCP to prevent the emergence of any political force that might challenge its rule and to limit any social unrest that might result in regime instability or even collapse by derailing the economic growth key to the CCP's continued legitimacy to govern China. Moreover, as highlighted by the demonstrations and riots in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas in March 2008, the potential for political unrest is likely to persist if not increase as China's authoritarian party-state seeks to cope with the social and institutional challenges of rapid growth in a multiethnic society.

With the largest army in the world, China has already achieved an internal control capability. Nevertheless, as a form of policing and, at times, low-intensity conflict, maintenance of this capability involves a significant number of personnel with the related financial, organizational, and logistical burdens of manpower-intensive military operations. Within China's armed forces, the People's Armed Police (PAP), a paramilitary organization, carries primary responsibility for internal control.

Within the PAP, internal security units, composed mostly of demobilized PLA infantry divisions, are trained to contain events that might upset political stability, including antigovernment demonstrations, riots, and potential rebellions. The PAP's internal security force consists of 660,000 troops deployed throughout the country and comes under the joint control of the State Council and the Central Military Commission. Other PAP units are assigned to secure border areas and checkpoints as well as critical infrastructure such as mines, dams, and forests. The leading role of PAP units in suppressing Tibetan unrest in March 2008 reflects the continued importance for the government of maintaining a robust internal control capability.

Although the PAP's establishment in 1982 reflected an effort to separate internal and external security missions for China's armed forces, internal se-

curity remains an important although secondary task for the PLA. In the early 1990s, for example, the original impetus for creating rapid-reaction units of high-quality troops came from a desire to suppress unrest quickly anywhere in the country.<sup>20</sup> As depicted in figure 1, many of the PLA's main force combat units, including mobile infantry and armored forces, are deployed in or near China's major cities, both to defend key population centers in case of an invasion, however unlikely at the moment, and to serve as a reserve force in case of sustained or severe social unrest that threatens regime security, as the events in Tiananmen Square demonstrated in 1989. Today, for example, the PLA bases four independent divisions in Xinjiang, not coincidentally located in areas, such as Tacheng, that experienced violent ethnic unrest in the 1990s. Similarly, the 27th, 38th, and 65th Group Armies, each with several maneuver divisions and brigades, are sited in and around Beijing to defend the capital from attack and to maintain domestic political stability.<sup>21</sup>

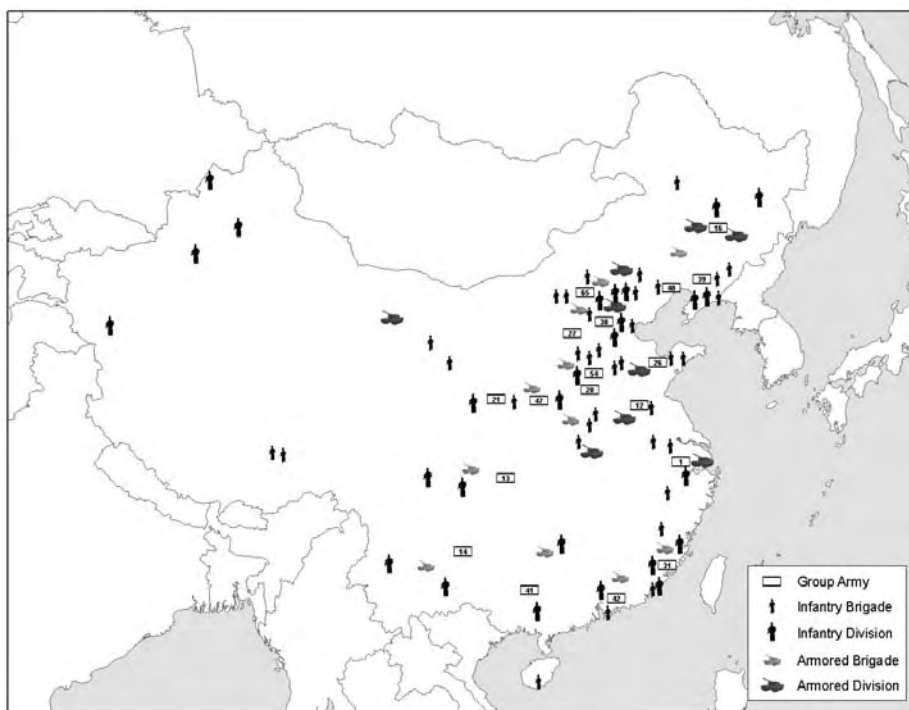
**The goal that attracts the most concern is the potential use of force over Taiwan.**

#### **AREA DENIAL AROUND THE PERIPHERY**

The second capability that China seeks to help achieve its military goals is area denial around its periphery. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, area denial is the “ability to hinder an adversary’s use of space or facilities.”<sup>22</sup> It is distinguished from area control or the domination of a defined area by one military. Through the development of an area denial capability, China hopes to create a buffer around its continental and maritime periphery that will increase the cost for other states to conduct military operations against targets on the mainland.

Area denial supports the achievement of several strategic goals. On land, efforts to secure territorial integrity from attack are best achieved when a potential adversary must think twice about conducting military operations near China’s borders under any set of circumstances. At sea, China’s military preparations for potential conflict over Taiwan have focused on delaying or slowing the deployment of U.S. forces to the theater and potentially frustrating U.S. military operations around the island if a conflict erupts. Maritime denial also enhances the security of China’s wealthiest provinces and cities such as Guangdong and Shanghai, which could become military targets in a conflict over Taiwan. Finally, it strengthens China’s ability to counter efforts to blockade its ports or adjacent sea lanes that link China with its trading partners.

**Figure I. PLA Ground Forces Order of Battle (2005)**



China has achieved considerable progress in creating an area denial capability on the Asian continent around its land borders. China arguably first demonstrated such a capability in the mid-1960s, when concerns about potential Chinese involvement in the Vietnam War limited U.S. ground operations to areas below the 17th parallel. A key factor in China’s continental denial capability is the strategic depth that large but sparsely populated frontiers within China create. This geography allows China to secure its population and economic centers from land-based threats by leveraging “defense-in-depth” against any attack, depth that raises significantly the costs for any potential adversary to coerce China through attacks on its homeland territory. The PLA’s large ground force of more than 1.6 million troops complements this favorable geography, especially as it continues to modernize its weaponry and increase its mobility within the country. Taken together, the cost for any regional power to attack China on land would be high even if it were able to breach the border.

The number of troops within China’s armed forces devoted to this mission reflects the continued importance of continental denial for China’s military planners. Approximately 224,500 PLA and PAP troops are tasked with guard-



ing China's land borders and maintaining internal security around ports of entry and adjacent areas. In wartime, these units also form the first line of defense in any attack against China's borders. In addition, almost one-half of the PLA's main force infantry and armored units are based in provinces with an international boundary and are responsible in part for repelling any assault against Chinese territory or deterring an adversary from deploying large forces near its borders. This force structure, composed of light infantry units on the border and maneuver units in the interior, sustains a strong area-denial capability on its continental periphery.<sup>23</sup>

The strength of China's continental denial capability weakens, however, as the distance from its borders grows. At the same time, Chinese territory has become increasingly vulnerable to long-range precision strikes. As a result, China strives to extend the range of its continental denial capability beyond its borders. Two key platforms are advanced tactical multirole fighters, such as the Russian Su-27 or China's J-10 that entered into serial production in 2006, as well as short-range ballistic missiles and land-attack cruise missiles, all of which can be used to destroy targets beyond China's borders. Similarly, to defend against long-range strikes, China has been enhancing its air defense network through the acquisition of advanced surface-to-air missile systems such as the Russian S-300PMU.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, China began to pursue a maritime denial capability in the mid-1980s and has only recently acquired limited forces consistent with this capability. At sea, China lacks the strategic depth that it enjoys on the Asian continent, increasing the vulnerability of its wealthy coastal provinces to attack from the sea. As the 2006 white paper on national defense notes, China seeks to "gradually extend the strategic depth for coastal defense [*jinhai fangyu*]." <sup>25</sup> In the short to medium term, this effort will continue to focus on area denial in the waters around Taiwan for a blockade or attacks in any coercive campaign against the island in addition to coastal defense.<sup>26</sup>

China's evolving force structure for maritime denial builds on several components. The first is the steady modernization of the PLA Navy's submarine force, perhaps the classic maritime denial platform. Since 1995, China has commissioned 28 new submarines, including 12 advanced Kilo-class Russian vessels as well as several classes of domestically developed diesel and nuclear-powered attack boats.<sup>27</sup> The second component is advanced surface combatants, especially domestically produced air-defense guided missile destroyers, including the Luyang-II and Luzhou-class vessels. These ships carry limited area-wide air-defense systems that can provide protection for a small task force or flotilla. The third component is a variety of anti-ship missiles, which can be launched from submarines, surface ships, and airplanes, such as the Sunburn and Sizzler systems recently purchased from Russia.<sup>28</sup> China has also embarked

on a program to use medium-range ballistic missiles to target surface ships at standoff distances, especially aircraft carriers.<sup>29</sup> A final component is antisatellite systems such as the SC-19 missile that was successfully tested in January 2007 that could be employed to deny the United States unfettered use of its space-based assets during conflict.

### LIMITED REGIONAL FORCE PROJECTION

Limited regional force projection is the third capability that China pursues. Force projection is the ability to deploy and sustain military forces beyond a country's borders, especially to conduct offensive operations. The capability that China pursues, however, is limited in the sense of projecting force in a well-defined area for a specific duration of time as opposed to all along China's coast and over all disputed areas.<sup>30</sup>

**China has only begun to acquire forces for maritime denial and regional force projection.**

Regional force projection facilitates China's achievement of several of its strategic goals. It is required to achieve national unification, as any coercive campaign against Taiwan to deter or prevent its formal independence would almost certainly require offensive operations against the island. It also plays a key role in maintaining regional stability, enabling China to deploy troops abroad to deter the spread of armed conflict or prevent a conflict from arising. Force projection

also allows China to maintain regional stability by playing a greater role in humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, and stability operations in East Asia.

China has achieved even less progress toward acquiring capabilities to deploy and sustain forces far from its borders. Indeed, China's small role in regional disaster relief in the past several years demonstrates the limits of its ability to project military power. Following the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, for example, China lacked the ability to deliver aid rapidly to the region, a task completed by the aircraft carrier and expeditionary strike groups deployed to Indonesia by the U.S. Navy.

China has acquired some platforms consistent with a limited force projection capability. Although the PLA possesses several expeditionary units, including a few airborne and amphibious assault divisions as well as marine brigades, it lacks the means to deploy these troops rapidly or at great distances. China ordered 34 heavy-duty Il-76 transport aircraft from Russia in 2005, but production of the line has yet to begin, and the contract may be cancelled. Even if these aircraft are eventually delivered, bringing China's total number of heavy transports to almost 50, China will still have just a small fraction

of the strategic airlift capacity of other major militaries and be able to airlift quickly only one fully equipped light mechanized infantry brigade. China will possess only 14 percent and 6 percent of the heavy strategic airlift capacity that Russia and the United States possess, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, although China possesses more than 12 large landing ships that would be used in an amphibious assault across the Taiwan Strait, its strategic sealift capability beyond the Taiwan Strait is likewise limited. China recently commissioned two landing platform dock (LPD) ships, each capable of transporting one battalion of marines and their vehicles. Although several more LPDs may be built in the coming years, the total number of troops and equipment that China would be able to transport for force projection remains constrained.

China's force structure for long-distance air and naval operations is also consistent with a limited regional force projection capability. The modernization of China's air force over the past decade has focused on short-range fighters, not long-range bombers. Although China has developed aerial refueling technology for some of its domestically produced fighters, it has yet to invest in a large tanker fleet that would allow the PLA Air Force to conduct long-distance strikes or sustained combat patrols beyond China's borders. China's most advanced multirole fighter, the Russian Su-30MMK, has an aerial refueling capability, but it cannot mate with the tankers that China has converted from its old H-6 bombers. Even if China ever takes delivery of four IL-78/MIDAS tankers ordered from Russia, they would be able to support at most only a squadron of Su-30s in combat operations. Likewise, China possesses only a modest ability to replenish ships required for long-distance patrols. Although China has several oilers to refuel ships, it has recently commissioned two large, multiproduct replenishment ships that carry fuel, water, ammunition, and other supplies. Without overseas naval bases, however, the number of long-range naval patrols will be constrained by the number of large replenishment ships that China commissions in the future.

## **A New Security Dilemma?**

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When viewed through the lens of the security dilemma, China's military modernization in pursuit of conservative and nonexpansionist goals may nevertheless increase instability in East Asia. According to this theory, the dilemma exists because one state's efforts to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states.<sup>32</sup> Given the uncertainty created by anarchy in the international system, even if one state enhances its military power for what it sees as defensive reasons, other states are likely to see the same actions as offensive and threatening, resulting in security competition characterized by

mistrust, suspicion, and spirals of tension. Such spirals are especially likely when a state increases its defense spending significantly and acquires force projection capabilities, two features of China's current military modernization effort.<sup>33</sup>

Signs of mistrust and suspicion consistent with the presence of a security dilemma are not difficult to find within the U.S. and Chinese militaries. The 2006 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review, for example, concluded that China's growing military capabilities, the size of the East Asian theater, and China's continental depth (normally viewed as a defensive advantage) "place a premium on forces capable of sustained operations at great distances into denied areas"—on offensive capabilities to offset China's modernization. More recently, during a March 2008 press conference, one Pentagon official concisely reflected the logic of the security dilemma: "[W]e don't have that kind of strategic understanding of these Chinese intentions, and that leads to uncertainty, that leads to a readiness to hedge against the possibility that China's development will go in ways that the Chinese right now say it won't."<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, China sees its own military posture as defensive and nonthreatening. According to a key book on strategy from the PLA's Academy of Military Science, "the nature of our military strategy is defensive."<sup>35</sup> At the same time, many military scholars are suspicious of U.S. intentions toward China. One Chinese source, for example, notes that "the United States resolutely believes that China may become its global strategic opponent around 2015."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, reflecting these suspicions, Chinese texts on military operations stress ways of defeating stronger opponents, highlighting concerns about dominant U.S. military power.<sup>37</sup>

Security dilemma dynamics could become most acute in maritime East Asia, where China's naval modernization enables it to project power at the greatest distance from its coastline since 1949. It also gives China the ability to project power into waters in which other navies already operate. For the United States, China's evolving maritime denial capability could be seen as challenging its command of the seas. Although China has only conducted a few submarine patrols in recent years, mostly in its coastal waters, the number increased to seven in 2007.<sup>38</sup> Chinese submarines have also become more visible, transiting unannounced through Japanese territorial waters in November 2004 and surfacing unexpectedly near a U.S. aircraft carrier in October 2006.<sup>39</sup> When combined with the deployment of advanced anti-ship missiles, the trajectory of China's naval modernization might create incentives for the United States to deploy more forces in the region, thus fueling a potential spiral.

China's naval modernization is also likely to appear threatening to other states in the region, especially those involved in disputes with China over maritime sovereignty. As China continues to commission advanced surface

combatants and submarines, the frequency of naval patrols will increase in coastal areas, as well as in the South China Sea, the same waters in which the sovereignty of islands and maritime rights are contested. Even if China does not vigorously press its claims through diplomatic channels, an increased military presence will almost surely be viewed as assertive and provocative. As a result, Japan may invest more heavily in its own naval capabilities and increase its own presence in disputed waters, whereas other states may seek improved security ties with the United States, again further feeding the potential for increased security competition in the region.

Should these security dilemma dynamics intensify, they could have profound consequences for regional stability. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. forward military presence enhanced stability by dampening the potential for spirals of hostility between states in the region, especially China and Japan. In the future, however, U.S. efforts to maintain its naval power could paradoxically undermine stability if it increases security competition with China. Moreover, it will be more difficult for the United States to act as an outside arbiter in other regional conflicts involving China. Increased security competition could also subvert China's grand strategy of reassurance. Many states in the region may come to see China's continued double-digit growth in defense spending and deployment of power projection platforms as increasingly at odds with the stated Chinese objective of "peaceful development," raising, not reducing, suspicions about China's long-term intentions.

Such spirals of tension, however, are far from inevitable. Although China's absolute levels of defense spending have increased over the past decade, several points bear noting. First, China's defense spending as a proportion of overall government spending has remained relatively constant at roughly 8 percent over the past 15 years.<sup>40</sup> China is not favoring defense spending over other government priorities such as education and welfare. Second, China faces real limits on what it can spend for maritime denial and regional force projection capabilities that would most likely intensify the security dilemma. Even when using the highest estimate from the Pentagon, China's total defense spending in 2007 (\$139 billion) was slightly less than just the budget for the U.S. Navy (\$147 billion).<sup>41</sup> Third, the U.S. presence in maritime East Asia remains strong. The United States now bases 29 nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) around the Pacific, just more than one-half of all SSNs in the fleet and six times more than those in the PLA Navy.<sup>42</sup> As a reflection of U.S. strength, the USS *Kitty Hawk* carrier strike group transited through the Taiwan Strait in

**China sees its own military posture as defensive and nonthreatening.**

November 2007 after a dispute with China arose over a cancelled port call in Hong Kong.<sup>43</sup>

To mitigate the potential for severe spirals, both sides can take concrete action. China should continue its efforts to increase its military transparency, especially in the areas of defense spending and military doctrine, which started with the publication of white papers on national defense in 1998. In the past, China was reluctant to increase transparency lest it reveal any weaknesses to the outside. Today, however, with growing concerns about its military

**A lack of further transparency will only confirm worst-case assumptions.**

modernization, a lack of further transparency will only confirm worst-case assumptions about China's ambitions. Importantly, China recognizes the salutary effects of such efforts. Senior Colonel Chen Zhou noted in a recent interview that "more openness leads to greater trust."<sup>44</sup> The United States and China should continue efforts to deepen military-to-military ties, especially exchanges among senior officers, including not just the chiefs of staff but

all relevant commanders in the Pacific theater. The Pentagon might follow the Departments of State and the Treasury to establish a formal senior dialogue for the military aspect of the U.S.-Chinese relationship. Increased joint exercises in areas where interests overlap would be another way to reduce mistrust, perhaps following the model of the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum in which member countries, including China and the United States, have engaged in substantial joint operations.<sup>45</sup>

## **The Future of Stability in East Asia**

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The strategic goals guiding China's military modernization are more certain than they might appear. Overall, the changes in China's force structure over the past decade are consistent with capabilities required for regime security, territorial integrity, national unification, maritime security, and regional stability. China is not pursuing broadly expansionist goals, nor is it investing heavily in forces that are inconsistent with its strategic goals.

Over time, of course, China's goals could change in ways that require new capabilities other than those outlined in this article. One possibility is that Chinese leaders could stress the need to protect China's economic interests not just in the region but around the world. Whether China will seek to move toward long-range force projection remains unknown. Nevertheless, changes in force structure and a substantial increase in the share of government spending on defense would provide a range of useful indicators to chart this type of shift. Po-

tential indicators of such a shift include a significant expansion in the numbers of China's attack submarines for sustained patrols in distant waters; an increase in the number of large, multiproduct replenishment ships to support long-range patrols; the development of a robust, space-based ocean surveillance system; investments in large fleets of tanker and transport aircraft; and the development of a new type of bomber to replace China's aging H-6 fleet. The acquisition of multiple aircraft carriers would be another indicator of a move toward long-range force projection, but building just one such ship is likely to be pursued for the status that it conveys rather than the capability it generates.

Whether China can or even wants to pursue a long-range force projection capability remains an open question. For now, China's strategic goals, military capabilities, and force structure are relatively conservative. Yet, given concerns about its military ambitions and the nature of the security dilemma, China's search for military power could nevertheless create increased tension and instability without efforts to increase transparency, build trust, and reduce misunderstanding.

## Notes

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008," p. 1, [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China\\_Military\\_Report\\_08.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Report_08.pdf) (hereinafter 2008 annual Defense Department report on China's military power).
2. See Fan Zhenjiang and Ma Baoan, eds., *Junshi zhanlue lun* [On Military Strategy] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 2007); Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2001); Wang Wenrong, ed., *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 1999).
3. See David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon, eds., *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, 2005).
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