



The Pentagon's view of China: a worried assessment

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Despite occasional conciliatory language, the overall tone of the Pentagon's just-released annual report to the US Congress regarding China's military power seems more worried and confrontational than its predecessors, with the exception of the extremely hawkish version released in 2006 during the Bush administration's most militant phase. While American commentators generally have not interpreted the tone in that fashion, scholars and journalists in East Asian countries, especially Japan, certainly are doing so, and they express concern about a further deterioration in relations between Washington and Beijing. Such a prospect understandably agitates nations in East Asia, since it would inevitably raise tensions throughout their region.

In terms of substance, most of the major observations and complaints contained in the report are familiar ones. Washington once again objects to lack of "transparency," both with respect to the level of China's military spending and the nature of China's security doctrine.

The point about spending is entirely warranted. Beijing habitually understates the amount of its military budget. No credible Western analyst takes the official figure (some \$71 billion in 2009) seriously. Numerous items, including research and development costs for major weapon systems—normal features in nearly every other country's defense budget—are not included in China's. Most independent estimates of Beijing's military spending conclude that the actual level is anywhere from 20 percent to 100 percent higher. The Pentagon's own estimate is that spending was approximately \$142 billion in 2009, and will be "over \$150 billion" in 2010. Interestingly, previous reports included both "low end" and "high end" estimates. In the current document, the low-end figure seems to have disappeared.

The complaints about the lack of transparency in China's defense doctrine are less legitimate. China does not give much detail about its military's goals and purposes, but that reticence is not all that different from most other major countries. Indeed, the same allegation could be directed at the United States, which Chinese officials and policy analysts have done from time to time.

Even less justifiable are the concerns expressed that China's overall military expenditures, and the development of certain weapon systems, seem to be more than necessary for the country's legitimate defense needs. That objection is especially in bad taste coming from the United States. Even if one accepts the Pentagon's estimate of PRC military outlays, they are still dwarfed by the more than \$700 billion US military budget. China has a stronger case that it is Washington's spending and capabilities

that are wildly out of proportion to America's legitimate defense needs.

With regard to China's apparent strategic objectives, the new assessment intensifies the warning in last year's report that while Taiwan remains the core issue for Beijing, China's ambitions now seem significantly broader. Specifically, the Pentagon notes the growing efforts to project power farther out into the Pacific and, increasingly, into the Indian Ocean. Perhaps the greatest worry expressed in the document concerns China's development of a new anti-ship ballistic missile with a projected range of nearly 1,000 kilometers. Such a weapon could put the US naval fleet, including the vaunted aircraft carriers, in the Western Pacific within striking distance.

That development would, at a minimum, complicate Washington's implicit commitment to intervene on Taiwan's behalf if Beijing sought to use force to compel the island's reunification with the mainland. Such a potent weapon, combined with the rest of China's military modernization program, could even raise the probable cost of any US intervention so high that no rational American president would incur the risk.

It is unsurprising that China would seek to expand its reach out from its homeland. Historically, that is what rising great powers do, and China is clearly a rising great power. It is also unsurprising that Beijing appears intent on developing the military wherewithal to settle the Taiwan issue on terms favorable to China. Both the Chinese people and the regime regard Taiwan as rightfully Chinese territory, and they view the return of the island to China's possession as the last remaining major piece of unfinished business from their country's long period of humiliation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although Beijing clearly prefers to use economic incentives and other peaceful measures to entice Taiwan into accepting eventual reunification, the threat of force lurks in the background if a conciliatory strategy proves unsuccessful. Washington must face that reality, and US leaders must ask themselves whether preserving Taiwan's de facto independence is ultimately worth the risk of a nasty confrontation with China.

The new Pentagon report merely confirms that China is a rising great power with ambitions to match. That is an uncomfortable development for the United States as the incumbent hegemon in East Asia. And perhaps that accounts for the somewhat grumpy tone of the latest document. But China does not appear to be a malignantly expansionist power akin to Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, or the Soviet Union. Instead, it seems to be a conventional great power seeking to shape the international system in a prudent way to its own advantage. Although that understandably creates some anxiety for the United States—and for China's neighbors in East Asia—it is an anxiety that can and should be managed. Unfortunately, the Pentagon report does little to advance such a goal.

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