

Greater China

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Pentagon talks up the China threat

By David Isenberg

WASHINGTON - They just aren't making China threats like they used to when the best the Pentagon's official annual assessment of China's military capabilities can do is to say that the pace and scope of China's military buildup is "potentially destabilizing" in the Pacific.

When it comes to threats, the 84-page report, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011", released last Wednesday, is big on the subjunctive, the Ghost of Chinese Military Threats to Come, to borrow from Charles Dickens, but not so impressive when it comes to actual problems that need to be dealt with now. Consider this language:

However, the pace and scope of China's sustained military investments have allowed China to pursue capabilities that we believe are potentially destabilizing to regional military balances, increase the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, and may contribute to regional tensions and anxieties. Such capabilities could increase Beijing's options for using military force to gain diplomatic advantage, advance its interests or resolve military disputes in its favor.

"Potentially destabilizing," "may contribute", "could increase" is not the language of a clear and present threat.

In fact, during the question and answers part of the press conference for the release of the report that will be given to the US Congress, Michael Schiffer, the deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, confirmed there was nothing destabilizing about China's military developments at present:

Q: You said at the beginning that the Chinese military buildup was destabilizing, and then you went through a whole long list of what the Chinese have done. Can you specifically say which part of that buildup is - you consider destabilizing, which aspects that you referred to?

Michael Schiffer: I think I said that it was potentially destabilizing. And that speaks, again, to the importance of being able to have, not just between the United States and China but between China and the other countries of the region, deep, sustained, continuous and reliable discussions and engagement between our military and security establishments so that we can better understand China's intentions, China's thinking and approach, and so that they can better understand ours.

I think absent that, and given the lack of transparency that - even with the improvements that I cited, that still persists, that's where you have the potential to run into situations where there may be misunderstandings or miscalculations, where you would have the potential for anxiety driving a destabilizing dynamic.

Among other issues, the report cited China's push into weapons technologies where the US has long dominated, such as aircraft carriers and stealth fighters. This says more about US insecurities than it does about Chinese military advances.

Effective aircraft carrier operations take more than the mere existence of a carrier; it will

take decades of training of naval aviators before China would be able to use carriers to project airpower offensively. Indeed, the report itself says, "It will take a number of additional years for an air group to achieve the sort of minimal level of combat capability aboard the carrier that will be necessary for them to start to operate from the carrier itself."

And there is no sign that China intends to build anywhere closer to the 11 carriers the United States currently has. Alarm about China's carrier seems even more farfetched when you consider that its carrier is based on an empty hull bought from Ukraine and doesn't yet have aircraft.

But aircraft carriers are hardly the only area where the bark is greater than the bite. Consider, for example, the section on Chinese military expenditures. The report estimated China's total military-related spending for 2010 was over \$160 billion, using 2010 prices and exchange rates. Considering that is the peak of more than two decades of sustained budgetary growth, according to Schiffer, it hardly seems an inordinate amount.

It is a little difficult to make an exact comparison as the report is using a calendar year, and the United States uses fiscal years. Still, in FY 2010 the official Department of Defense budget was \$697 billion. That excludes other military related spending outside the Department of Defense, which brings the total close to \$1 trillion a year but let's ignore that for the moment.

Instead let's consider the cries of alarm by military hawks in Washington that the recent deficit reduction deal will inflict massive cuts on military spending if the appointed congressional committee can't come to an agreement about what to cut in the future. But as the Center for Defense Information in Washington points out:

If the Pentagon's "base" (non-war) budget were to be cut \$850 billion, or so, over ten years, it would go down to about \$472 billion annually, the approximate level of the base DOD budget in 2007. (This, not coincidentally, is about the same level of a new round of defense budget cutting hysteria circulating in Washington in response to a just released memo from OMB Director Jack Lew.)

Using the Pentagon's "constant" dollars that adjust for the effects of inflation, that \$472 billion level would be more than \$70 billion higher than DOD spending was in 2000, just before the wars. Over ten years, base Defense Department spending would be almost three quarters of a trillion dollars above the levels extant in 2000. And, none of the additional monies to be spent on the wars would be eliminated.

At \$472 billion per year, the Pentagon budget would be almost \$40 billion more than we averaged, in inflation-adjusted "constant" dollars, during the Cold War when we faced an intimidating super-power, the Soviet Union, its Warsaw Pact allies and a hostile, dogmatically communist China.

As Xinhua, China's state news agency, noted in a commentary, "For many in China, it is weird that the Pentagon, whose expenditures reached nearly \$700 billion and accounted for over an appalling 40 percent of the world's total in 2010, routinely points its finger at China."

Generally speaking, the report confirms what has already been said in open source literature. For example, China's People's Liberation Army is on track to achieve its goal

of building a modern, regionally focused force by 2020. The Chinese military remains focused on Taiwan, and it has deployed as many as 1,200 short-range missiles aimed in its direction.

And, just like in previous US reports that focused on what the US military terms China's "anti-access" capabilities, this year's report notes China's efforts to develop antiship ballistic missiles, known as the DF-21D, designed to hit ships at sea, as well as investment in attack submarines, such as the third-generation Type 095.

In terms of China's strategy, the report finds that in pursuing its goals China acts just like any other nation of its size and power:

China's leaders anticipate that a successful expansion of comprehensive national power will serve China's overriding strategic objectives, which include perpetuating CCP rule; sustaining economic growth and development; maintaining domestic political stability; defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and securing China's status as a great power.

Yes, perpetuating the communist role is unfortunate, but hardly a national security threat. Russia, at its peak of military power during the Cold War, was a far more existential threat to the United States but, wisely, the US chose a policy of containment over confrontation.

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