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9 | HOW STRONG ARE CHINA'S ARMED FORCES?

Andrew S. Erickson

TODAY, China has the world's second-largest economy and defense budget.* It boasts the world's largest conventional missile force, the world's largest coast guard, and virtually the world's only maritime militia charged with advancing sovereignty claims. If not already the world's second most powerful country, with the second-largest blue-water navy, it is on the verge of achieving those ranks; this is thanks in part to the largest, fastest shipbuilding expansion in modern history. Hence, it is only natural for observers to ask: How strong, exactly, are China's armed forces? And how would they compare with those of other nations, particularly those of the United States—undisputably the world's strongest—including in conflict scenarios that one hopes will never materialize but, with respect to which, peacetime perceptions can nevertheless influence geopolitical calculations and, thereby, the regional and global order?

A comprehensive net-assessment, however, requires all elements of complex, multivariate campaign equations, including information unavailable in open sources. Outright comparison of Chinese armed

* The analysis here is derived solely from open sources, which may be found at the suggested reading site hosted on the Fairbank Center website <http://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/china-questions/>. It reflects the views of the author alone. It does not represent the estimates or policies of the US Navy or any other organization of the US government.

forces with American (or any other) counterparts is misleading because their respective force structures differ significantly, and the two sides have very different objectives and missions. Bi-directional analysis is, likewise, essential. China is clearly expanding its inventory of weapons systems capable of targeting US and allied regional bases, platforms, and systems. But this says nothing of the countermeasures that the targeted forces might employ, nor of the ways in which they might successfully target their Chinese counterparts. This essay therefore considers both the most critical dynamics affecting the relevant equations, particularly vis-à-vis China itself, and the authoritative judgments offered by the latest unclassified US government reports.

KEY DYNAMICS

Understanding China's national security policies and power requires consideration of all three major components of China's armed forces: the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the paramilitary People's Armed Police (PAP), and the Militia. The United States is exceptional in its enviable combination of resources, innovation, decentralized governance, peaceful neighbors, oceanic access, and lack of sovereignty disputes. These factors enable expansive external security policies and operations by clearly defined military forces. Chinese national security is far more geographically confined, continuous, complex, and contested. While the PLA is the primary tool for combat operations far from China, elite maritime units within China's militia participate in sovereignty promotion operations vis-à-vis regional features and waters claimed by Beijing, and the PAP underpins domestic and border security.

China's armed forces, and the policies that inform their construction and use, have been shaped by Beijing's evolving hierarchy of national security interests. Having consolidated political, domestic,

and (the vast majority of) is operationalizing its strategy, diminishing "ripples of" and likely for years to come concerns the Near Seas home to all China's other claims.

To this end, Beijing to targeting vulnerable regional allies and security would face in intervening so in part by emphasizing intervention systems that and employ than to defend additional PLA concept goal is to "win without security interests, per East Asian power.

It pursues this end deterring foreign military a combination of dem lethally) in a way that i the prospect of paying achieving incremental "gray zone" coercion and maritime militia.] objectives, President J tral Military Commis forms to strengthen its China's other two arm

and (the vast majority of) border security, at least for now, the CCP is operationalizing its security priorities externally in progressively diminishing "ripples of capability" beyond China's mainland. Now, and likely for years to come, the area of most intense development concerns the Near Seas (Yellow, East China, and South China Seas), home to all China's outstanding island and maritime sovereignty claims.

To this end, Beijing is developing its armed forces with a view to targeting vulnerabilities in the forces of the United States and its regional allies and security partners to radically raise the risk they would face in intervening in Chinese sovereignty disputes. It is doing so in part by emphasizing missiles and other land-based, counter-intervention systems that are considerably cheaper and easier to build and employ than to defend against, bringing new relevance to the traditional PLA concept of "using the land to control the sea." Beijing's goal is to "win without fighting" and achieve deference to its "core" security interests, perhaps in part by becoming the preponderant East Asian power.

It pursues this end in a twofold manner: (1) at the high end, deterring foreign military intervention in the first place through a combination of demonstrating capabilities (ideally not using them lethally) in a way that intimidates the United States and its allies with the prospect of paying unacceptable costs; and (2) at the low end, achieving incremental progress below the threshold of war through "gray zone" coercion of rival claimants using primarily its coast guard and maritime militia. To enhance China's prospects for realizing these objectives, President Xi Jinping, who is also Chairman of the Central Military Commission, has charged the PLA with ambitious reforms to strengthen its ability to wage modern wars, while bolstering China's other two armed forces.

ESTIMATES AND PROJECTIONS

US government publications draw on comprehensive, robust, carefully vetted data and analysis that is largely unavailable to outside observers until long after their release. They have demonstrated their merit over time by the great degree to which their findings correspond to verifiable facts. Reports by US government-affiliated think tanks and their analysts are less demonstrably authoritative but offer greater diversity and specificity of insights. To these may be added Chinese government and open sources, which rarely provide detailed net-assessments but offer useful context when considered critically.

These sources conclude collectively that, in recent years, the PLA has greatly increased its ability to conduct operations in support of Beijing's objectives vis-à-vis the Near Seas, but that these capabilities diminish sharply beyond that margin. Given China's priorities and capabilities, the two leading Near Seas contingencies commonly analyzed by US government and related sources concern Taiwan and contested Chinese claims in the South China Sea's Spratly Islands. Assessments generally conclude that, over the next fifteen years or so, US forces will retain their ability to prevail over the PLA in a protracted war, but that the PLA might temporarily achieve superiority in specific sea- and air-spaces, and US victory would be far costlier than it would have been years ago.

A Taiwan scenario remains the PLA's leading high-end planning factor. It is widely regarded as able to engage in militarily significant operations, such as seizing a Taiwan-held offshore island or launching missile strikes on Taiwan proper. Such actions would almost certainly be counterproductive politically, however. A more sophisticated blockade would likely fail if opposed forcefully by Washington, making American intervention a decisive factor. An outright amphibious invasion of Taiwan's main island remains unrealistic, given

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both PLA force structure limitations and Taiwan's ability to exploit its formidable natural defenses.

The South China Sea is a far more permissive environment for China's armed forces. At stake is not a sophisticated society of 23.5 million that Beijing claims as Chinese compatriots but, rather, isolated islands and reefs that are sparsely inhabited at most, and sustain few, if any, indigenous people. Given the relative weakness of neighboring countries with whom China has disputed claims, China's coast guard and maritime militia can engage in multifarious "gray zone" operations, to significant effect. Regarding potential major combat operations, the PLA could likely prevail over rival militaries absent American involvement. Were US forces to intervene, for example, to support Washington's Philippine ally in a crisis or conflict with China, both sides could face significant operational challenges. The PLA would have difficulty deploying adequate forces to the highly vulnerable Spratly Islands and resupplying them there. Should it somehow succeed in massing sufficient forces with some element of surprise, however, it might confront Washington with unappealing alternatives.

Further afield, spurred largely by growing overseas interests, as encapsulated in part by Xi's "One Belt, One Road" initiative (which proposes to extend China's economic and political influence along the former Silk Road to Europe, as well as by sea), China is weaving an outer layer of substantive and influential but less intensive capabilities. These are enabling selective forays to protect Chinese citizens and assets abroad, including through evacuations from Libya and Yemen and anti-piracy escorts in the Gulf of Aden. The last, together with growing UN peacekeeping participation, offer welcome examples of growing international security contributions. Chinese developments enabling more formidable maritime power projection—including aircraft carrier operations and enhancing access to overseas facilities, possibly in

part by developing further naval support-points beyond the initial one materializing in Djibouti—are progressing more gradually.

IMPLICATIONS

The aforementioned dynamics are poised to shape the capability of China's armed forces for the foreseeable future. Geography will remain foremost among them, making it imperative to view Chinese national security prospects "through the lens of distance." China has already arrived as a great power with formidable armed forces. Close to home, to the extent that the CCP retains favorable conditions domestically, it will retain and likely build on powerful synergies and advantages vis-à-vis the sovereignty claims that it prioritizes along its contested maritime periphery. Even as China's armed forces advance substantially overall, however, the Party-state that guides and supports them may face an economy with significant downside risks, an overall slowing in the growth rate of all elements of national power, and perhaps mounting challenges from within. The result is almost certain to be more complex national security tradeoffs and policy choices than Beijing has faced since the late 1970s, with the possible exception of domestic instability in 1989. Given the likelihood that national narratives and prioritization concerning unresolved sovereignty claims will persist, external security debates and policy adjustments will probably moderate plans regarding some of the more demanding high-end combat capabilities specific to long-range power projection.

Farther afield, Chinese military progress—beyond the emerging basic capabilities of presence and non-traditional security operations—toward growing ability to contest other capable militaries will come with a steep price. Increasing convergence will bring China the same rising costs and diminishing returns that notoriously plague established

Western militaries amid competing national interests. The structural and organizational changes of China's armed forces will be a long process. Structural and organizational changes will be a long process. Structural and organizational changes will be a long process. Structural and organizational changes will be a long process. Structural and organizational changes will be a long process.

As China's military modernization progresses, it will face particular attendant challenges, the more expensive or even to retain cutting-edge innovations. China has long plagued by infrastructure will and maintain than decrease as militarily advanced material technology-intensive. China derives from and the less cost at them. Additional systems-of-systems apex technologies they defy China's indigenous technologies.

Nevertheless, its Near Seas objects

Western militaries as they struggle to maintain their relative standing amid competing national priorities and evolving competitors. All three of China's armed forces will face escalating personnel-related costs. Structural and organizational reform will require intensified investment and impose associated demobilization costs. As with Western militaries, rising salaries and benefits to attract, educate, train, and retain capable professionals will consume an increasing portion of the budget. Growing entitlements will likewise impose a mounting burden, particularly as more retirees draw benefits that are already quite generous in some respects.

As China's most sophisticated armed force, the PLA will additionally face particularly significant technological requirements and attendant challenges. The closer it approaches leading-edge capabilities, the more expensive and difficult it will be to advance further, or even to retain a stable position vis-à-vis foreign competitors. Cutting-edge innovation is difficult and expensive—a burden that has long plagued the United States. Weapons systems and associated infrastructure will become progressively costlier to build, operate, and maintain than their simpler predecessors. China's cost advantages decrease as military equipment centers less on labor and more on advanced materials and technology. The more sophisticated and technology-intensive PLA systems become, the less relative benefit China derives from acquiring and indigenizing foreign technologies, and the less cost advantage it will have in producing and maintaining them. Additionally, propulsion, electronics, and other complex systems-of-systems hinging on the precise interaction of demanding apex technologies remain a key Chinese weakness—in part because they defy China's preferred approach of combining domestic and foreign technologies piecemeal.

Nevertheless, Beijing already enjoys formidable means to promote its Near Seas objectives without approaching American technological

sophistication; such leading-edge accomplishment is far more essential to long-distance warfare. Again, geography matters.

Such are the unrelenting undercurrents of China's meteoric military-security development, which faces meaningful constraints from the prospect of US opposition as well as long-range challenges, just as surely as it enjoys short-range opportunities and is working hard to exploit them.

10 | WHAT OF CH UNITE

Robert S. L

THE RISE OF China poses a significant foreign policy challenge for the United States. The United States faces a strategic and military challenge from China. China is also the first major US maritime superpower. China's rise to global power and national security in a region of the world since World War II and the Cold War era of power that assured

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CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO A
RISING POWER

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND

www.hup.harvard.edu

Jacket design: Graciela Galup

"*The China Questions* is packed with erudite yet accessible commentaries on issues ranging from literature to ethnic diversity. The topical reach is impressive; readers will come away with information concerning novel ways of thinking about everything from early philosophical traditions to modern visions of utopia and dystopia, from international relations to struggles for political legitimacy."

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CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO
A RISING POWER

Edited by

Jennifer Rudolph
Michael Szonyi



Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2018

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rudolph, Jennifer M., editor. | Szonyi, Michael, editor. | Fairbank
Center for East Asian Research.

Title: The China questions : critical insights into a rising power / edited
by Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2018. | Includes
index. | "In celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Fairbank Center for
Chinese Studies at Harvard University"—Title page verso.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017023762 | ISBN 9780674979406 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: China—Forecasting. | China—Politics and government—2002—
China—Foreign relations—21st century. | China—Economic conditions—
2000— | Environmental policy—China. | China—Social conditions—2000—
China—Civilization—2002—

Classification: LCC DS779.4 .C463 2018 | DDC 951.06—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017023762>

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