CHAPTER 12

THE “RIGHT SIZE” FOR CHINA’S MILITARY: TO WHAT ENDS?

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Any attempt to discuss the “right size” for China’s military immediately raises an integrally connected question: The “right size” for what purpose? “Size,” it should be emphasized, refers not necessarily to the quantity of men and weapons, but to the overall capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—its force structure, technological levels, and organization. And “right” refers to the appropriate size of the PLA as determined by the Chinese alone, in accordance with their interests.

Most analysts of Chinese military affairs agree that the purpose of China’s military buildup during the past decade or so has been to acquire a capability that would enable China to coerce Taiwan into accepting a “one-China” solution to the Taiwan problem, or at least to prevent it from moving toward formal independent status. In fact, the title of the wrap-up chapter in the volume preceding this one was “China’s Military Buildup: Beyond Taiwan?” Its main point was that although China’s post-Mao military modernization was driven by several factors, the chief reason for the accelerated buildup that began in the mid-1990s and increased after 1999 was the emergence of the Taiwan issue in a form that threatened the “one China” solution and was thus unacceptable to the Chinese.

This issue provided the impetus for the acceleration of military modernization. Its purpose was to give
the Chinese leadership the military clout needed to prevent the separation of Taiwan—preferably by intimidating the Taiwanese or, failing that, by military moves that could culminate in an invasion of the island. Since the Chinese believed that in this latter event the United States would intervene militarily, an integral purpose of the buildup was to deter or delay American intervention by raising its costs and, in the worst-case possibility, to increase China’s chances of overcoming it. This buildup provided the Chinese with collateral capabilities that raised questions about their intentions “beyond Taiwan,” but these questions have been peripheral to the central issue of Taiwan itself.

By 2007 the overwhelming significance of the Taiwan issue has diminished dramatically, primarily because the specter of a major war no longer hovers over the Taiwan Strait, even if it has not disappeared entirely. This has been due to a combination of factors—the readiness of China’s leaders to acquiesce in the status quo rather than to push for unification as long as Taiwan refrains from declaring formal independence; their belief that economic and other ties will advance the chances for peaceful reunification; the political difficulties of independence-seeking Taiwan President Chen Shuibian and China’s expectation that he will not be reelected; and the new determination of the United States to restrain Taiwan from provocative actions.¹

The more relaxed attitude of the Chinese presumably derives from an additional reason: confidence in their increased capability to coerce or conquer Taiwan, while making it more difficult for the United States to intervene. At the same time, the Chinese have no illusions about narrowing the gap between their overall military strength and that of the United States, nor about their chances of defeating the United States
in an all-out war over Taiwan. These assessments must have raised questions among China’s leaders about the future objectives of military modernization and the right size for their armed forces. Now, then, is an appropriate time to take a closer look at the objectives—beside Taiwan—which will shape the PLA in the next stage of its development.

**TO MAKE CHINA A GREAT POWER**

The purpose of building up the Chinese armed forces is, of course, to provide military backing for the foreign policy objectives of the leadership. However, these objectives differ in the priority attached to them by the leadership and in the time frame for their attainment. They also differ in the capability of the military to support them. Therefore, their influence on the development of the armed forces varies in accordance with the importance of the objective and the connection between its attainment and military force.

The most basic long-range and unalterable objective of the Chinese leadership has been to obtain recognition for China as a great power and to gain the appropriate respect and standing in the eyes of the international community, especially of other great powers, that come with this status. However, although the objective has remained constant, the strategies for attaining it have changed radically over the years—from revolutionary strategies aimed against the great powers and designed to destabilize the international system, to diplomatic strategies aimed at cooperating with the great powers and working within the system.

The Chinese have never publicly articulated in print their vision of this objective, and it is not at all certain
that they themselves have thought out the specifics. Nonetheless, inferences from pronouncements and actions make it clear that they have been motivated by two fundamental principles: the preservation of China’s independent position in global politics and the upholding of its national honor; and membership in the exclusive group of major powers that make the key decisions defining the workings of the international system. However, if the specifics are vague, the powerful forces driving the objective are not.

The first of those forces consists of China’s physical attributes—territory, population, and geographic location—that together endow it with an overwhelming presence and provide an underpinning for the claim of its leaders that China is entitled to a prominent global status. More important is the political and emotional significance of modern Chinese nationalism that has its roots in the grandeur of the ancient Chinese empire, and its power in the determination of Chinese leaders to avenge past imperialist-inflicted humiliations by restoring China to a position of international prominence. Most important is China’s economic surge that has catapulted it to the front rank of the global economy and to a position of major political influence. It has also provided China with the economic strength that constitutes one of the two essential pillars of great power status.

The other pillar—military force—is nowhere near a level commensurate with great power status. Although there are no mandatory international criteria that qualify a country for such status, it seems axiomatic that there are at least three conditions: a large population and territory; a credible nuclear capability; and sizable advanced conventional forces that enable it to project military power for long periods far from its borders.
At a minimum, such forces would presumably need to include aircraft carriers; long-range combat and combat support aircraft; transport aircraft and ships for moving large numbers of troops and supplies; air and sea refueling capabilities; global communications systems; and bases in friendly countries. Although China is working on developing some of these capabilities, it still lacks most of them.

Because such capabilities will be out of China’s reach for generations, its leaders have never set their attainment as a realistic objective. And for good reasons. First, their global aspirations are a political and emotional goal, not a strategic one, and the absence of these capabilities does not put China’s security at risk. Second, this is a long-range goal and the Chinese can move toward it without the urgency that would require an immense and draining military effort. And third, the military effort required to bring China closer to great power levels is so immense that movement toward it has to be incremental in any case, and can begin by focusing on China’s short-term objectives.

For these reasons, China’s global aspirations have not until now determined the pace and scope of China’s military modernization. From the start of post-Mao modernization, the military component of China’s great power aspirations remained dormant while Beijing focused on realistic near-term objectives—first, an upgrading of its backward armed forces, and then a rapid buildup after the Taiwan issue burst on the scene. This focus has greatly increased China’s military power and has vastly enhanced its regional and international standing—to say nothing of generating at times exaggerated fears and concerns—but it has not moved China much closer to the level of great power capabilities.
How to move China toward such capabilities has by 2007 likely become a subject of discussion, if not debate, among China’s leaders, perhaps in connection with a review of the PLA’s future direction. A new phrase, reflecting either a consensus among the leaders or a line of argument in a debate, has appeared in an Army newspaper article: “It is a matter of great importance to strive to construct a military force that is commensurate with China’s status . . . so as to entrench China’s international status.” A similar view was expressed by PLA Navy Rear Admiral Yang Yi, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University: “As a responsible power, China needs to establish a military force that is commensurate with its international position and this is needed . . . to safeguard world peace.” Admiral Yang emphasized, however, that “because of insufficient investments over a long period of time . . . the gap between China and the developed counties in the military realm has not shrunk, but rather is continuing to grow.”

From the logic of the situation and from fragments of data, it is reasonable to conclude that China’s global aspirations will continue to drive PLA modernization into the future. However, because of the PLA’s relative backwardness and the gap between it and advanced armies, these aspirations alone will not determine the speed of modernization and the resources that will be allocated to it. It does not make sense for the Chinese leadership to devote resources needed elsewhere for an objective that is both remote and only partially attainable at best in the far-off future. It makes much more sense to focus on more relevant near-term objectives which, over the long haul, will also advance its global aspirations.
SEEKING A PARAMOUNT REGIONAL POSITION

Although the Chinese leadership has been explicit regarding its desires or demands on specific regional issues, its broad objectives have been just as vague as its global aims. However, from inferential evidence it is possible to identify these objectives. The primary one is to gain a paramount position in the East Asian region—a position from which China will have the final say about what does or does not go on in its extended neighborhood. The most important example of what, from China’s standpoint, should not be permitted to go on is the conclusion of strategic alliances between countries in the region and the United States.

These objectives are driven by the same powerful forces—physical presence, nationalism, and economic power—that motivate China on the global scene. However, additional considerations are at work in the region which make the attainment of China’s objectives more imperative. The first and most important is security. Whereas China’s global aspirations are relevant to its prestige and political standing, its regional objectives are directly connected to the defense of the homeland. The Chinese undoubtedly want Asian countries to acknowledge China’s paramount position by virtue of its economic strength and political influence, and to act accordingly. This is probably the main reason why they have in recent years pursued policies designed to make friends of influential leaders in Asia. However, there are exceptions—Japan’s tougher stance toward China and its closer strategic relations with the United States are one outstanding instance. Whereas China can presumably use its new economic leverage to put pressure on Asian countries, in the end it is only military strength that can protect
its interests and ensure its national security. Moreover, unlike the global situation, building a military force for limited regional objectives is within China’s reach.

Nonetheless, for more than a decade after the start of modernization, the Chinese felt no urgency about building such a force. During that period, military modernization was limited primarily to the nontechnological aspects of the Army’s capabilities and, with a few exceptions, was marked by upgrading old weapons rather than acquiring new ones. The Chinese had good reasons to adopt this policy.

First, the United States did not loom as a military threat, and whatever danger they still perceived from the Soviet Union was remote and required no rapid improvements beyond the progress made by upgrading weapons and other reforms. Moreover, the cost of buying new weapons in large quantities was prohibitive and compounded by the difficulties of assimilation and the reluctance of the Chinese to become dependent on foreign suppliers. From its neighbors, the Chinese faced no military threat and were presumably confident they could carry out limited military actions beyond China’s borders after the adoption of the “local, limited wars” doctrine in the latter 1980s. Although modernization was stepped up in the early 1990s, primarily due to the availability of advanced weapons from the former Soviet Union, it was still relatively slow because it lacked the impetus of a strategic focus and sense of urgency.

The emergence of the Taiwan issue and the need to cope with a U.S. military intervention (which the Chinese believed was inevitable if they decided to take military action) provided this impetus. What followed was a decade of intensive preparations marked by the procurement of new weapons and the adoption of new
doctrines. These preparations completely transformed China’s regional capabilities, which began to arouse serious concerns among American policymakers and defense officials regarding China’s military capabilities and regional intentions, which seemed increasingly ominous. Numerous statements reflecting these concerns were forthcoming, best exemplified by the remarks of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a famous 2005 news conference in Singapore. He first observed that China was “improving its ability to project power” in the Asia-Pacific region. Then he added: “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment? Why these continuing and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?”

Why indeed? What the Chinese viewed as defensive moves designed to counter a strongly presumed U.S. intervention over Taiwan, which the Chinese still consider an internal civil war-related issue, the George W. Bush administration has interpreted as an aggressive buildup that not only challenges American interests with respect to Taiwan, but also poses a long-term threat to the U.S. presence in the western Pacific. The Report on China’s Military Power submitted to Congress by the Department of Defense in 2005 warned that China’s “attempt to hold at risk U.S. naval forces … approaching the Taiwan Strait” potentially poses “a credible threat to modern militaries operating in the region.” The Defense Department’s 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review said that China had “the greatest potential to compete militarily” with the United States, and that its buildup “already puts regional militaries at risk.” A top defense official stated that “China’s military acquisitions … go beyond a Taiwan scenario and are intended to address other potential regional contingencies, such as conflict
over resources or territory.” And a former official wrote in the Washington Post that “China has already changed Asia’s balance of power. It is past time for America to get serious about deterring the potentially worst sorts of Chinese behavior and to provide allies in the region with reason for renewed confidence in the U.S. security umbrella.”

It is not clear as to what specific evidence such assessments are based on. It is particularly questionable whether China has “already changed Asia’s balance of power,” since without a U.S. presence, the balance remains in China’s favor, while with a U.S. presence China remains plainly inferior militarily. Whatever its wider regional objectives, the Chinese buildup has so far been oriented toward capturing Taiwan and interdicting U.S. naval intervention. They have pursued a denial strategy for the maritime areas close to Taiwan and their borders, but they have not demonstrated an intention of maintaining a dominant presence in the western Pacific. The capabilities they are acquiring may have a marginal “dual use” purpose—such as sending signals to Japan, an American strategic ally, by penetrating Japanese waters with Chinese submarines or Japanese airspace with spy planes. But it is difficult to see how these capabilities can be used to advance broad Chinese interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, if they induce Japan to discard the restraints on its present defense-only armed forces, the Chinese signals to Japan would be positively counterproductive.

China’s military development in both quality and quantity—submarines and not aircraft carriers, diesel rather than nuclear submarines, for example—has not been directed toward mounting a challenge to the U.S. presence in the western Pacific. Its capabilities are far from adequate for that purpose. And, it should be
noted, even China’s limited interdiction capabilities have never been tested in battle—they are enveloped in a fog of no-war. As much as the Chinese would presumably like to evict the United States from the region, they know this is an unattainable goal. They will have to settle for less—a defensive strategy designed to protect the maritime approaches to China.

Such a strategy is dictated not only by security calculations, but also by China’s political aspirations. If China cannot defend its own neighborhood, the same one in which the traditional Chinese empire held sway, it can hardly expect recognition as a paramount power in the region, to say nothing of its great power aspirations. China also needs to strengthen its maritime forces in order to secure its position on issues and areas in dispute with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, and Brunei. Given their growing dependence on imported oil, natural gas, and other resources, the Chinese likewise need to protect their sea lines of communication, especially those from the Middle East, but the Chinese Navy at present is unable to accomplish this mission. And looking further ahead, the Chinese are probably thinking of strategic challenges that might arise from the reappearance of Japanese militarism and the emergence of Japan as a regional military power or from the growing military power of India.

All these are reasons for sustaining long-term military modernization, but they do not provide a motive for an intense, rapid military buildup since they do not pose a strategic threat to China in the short term. Such a threat can come only from the United States, as it does over Taiwan. However, even though the possibility of war over Taiwan has receded, China’s perception of a U.S. threat is not likely to recede significantly as well.
This is because U.S. apprehensions about China’s buildup have already prompted it to adopt a “hedging” strategy against possible aggressive Chinese actions in the future by strengthening American forces in the western Pacific. These measures include adding at least one aircraft carrier and at least five nuclear submarines to the Pacific fleet over the next decade, which would place half the U.S. Navy’s carriers and 60 percent of its submarines in the Pacific. Other measures include upgrading the U.S. missile defense system, transferring long-range bombers and attack submarines to Guam, stationing stealth bombers in South Korea, redeploying troops to Japan, and establishing new combat headquarters in Honolulu. They also include efforts to strengthen ties and alliances with nations such as Japan, India, and Australia. And to make sure the Chinese get the message, in June 2006 the United States carried out a massive exercise near Guam in which three aircraft carriers, more than 40 surface vessels, and 160 aircraft participated, watched by an official delegation from the PLA.

The Chinese undoubtedly got the message—the United States is engaged in a major long-range military buildup aimed at China. As the Chinese government’s 2004 White Paper on Defense put it, “Complicated security factors in the Asia-Pacific region are on the increase. The United States is realigning and reinforcing its military presence in this region by buttressing military alliances and accelerating deployment of missile defense systems.” They see the United States as building up its forces and strengthening strategic alliances in East and Central Asia in order to block China’s rise to great power status in the region and beyond. Since the Chinese view their rise as rightful, they are probably echoing Secretary Rumsfeld’s own question: “Since no
nation threatens the U.S., why these continuing robust deployments?” In a proverbial case of self-fulfilling prophecy, the Chinese will presumably continue to build up their own forces—especially air and naval—as a “hedging” strategy aimed at countering U.S. military might in the western Pacific. Although the speed and scope of China’s buildup may change in accordance with internal needs, political factors, and economic considerations, its direction most probably will not.

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1. For one account of the new situation, see Washington Post, June 15, 2006.

2. For hints of these assessments, see the Central News Agency report citing the Hong Kong Ta Kung Pao, June 5, 2006; Jiefangjun Bao, WWW-Text in English, April 28, 2006; Hong Kong Zhongguo Tongxun, June 9, 2006.

3. Ibid.


