

The Pentagon's Anxieties about China's Military

By Jacqueline McLaren Miller

More than five months late—and after prompting from some members of Congress—the Pentagon released its annual report on China's military power on August 16th. The report, initially scheduled for release on March 1st, may have been delayed in an attempt by the administration to avoid further antagonizing Beijing. After the United States announced \$6.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan last January, China suspended military-to-military exchanges between the two countries. There's a recent precedent for such delaying tactics: in April, U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner delayed a report to Congress that could have labeled China a currency manipulator ahead of a visit by President Hu Jintao to Washington. But domestic critics of U.S. China policy were quick to charge that in both cases the administration was deferring to China at the expense of larger U.S. interests.

Nonetheless, the delay of the military report did not soften the blow. The report was released while the Chinese government was still smarting from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks at the ASEAN Regional Forum on the South China Sea issue. The reaction from the Chinese government to the Pentagon's report was quick—and predictably negative. All of this fits into a disturbingly familiar pattern. Since the first review was undertaken in 2000, the Pentagon has released its report warning of disturbing military trends in China and the Chinese government has reacted with dismay and concern to the “alarmist” report.

Probably by coincidence, the report was released just days after it was announced that China had surpassed Japan to become the second largest economy in the world (in terms of gross domestic product). The fears that are manifesting themselves in the United States towards China are reminiscent of the fears of Japan in the 1980s—with one very important difference that is further complicating U.S. policy towards China. As the Pentagon's report's very mandate makes clear, concern in the United States is not just focused on China's remarkable economic rise, but also on the modernization and expansion of its military.

There were some differences in this report from previous years. The first obvious change was the title. This year, the report was titled Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China; previously, it had been called Military Power of the People's Republic of China. While some analysts argue that the name change was perhaps designed to obscure the focal point of the report, even a cursory reading of the report makes it clear that there is significant concern in the Pentagon about China's growing military strength and (still distant) force-projection capabilities. The 2010 report also included a chapter on China's broader strategic goals and priorities and U.S. views on relations with China. And it highlighted the growth of Chinese anti-access and area-denial weaponry.

Among the reports main findings that are sparking concern, both in terms of assets and strategy:

- China has the most active land-based ballistic and cruise missile program in the world; of particular concern is the development and testing of a "carrier killer" anti-ship ballistic missile that could potentially threaten U.S. carriers;
- China possesses one of the largest forces of surface-to-air missiles in the world;
- China has the largest force of principal fighting ships, submarines, and amphibious warfare ships in Asia;
- Military thinking has evolved from guarding China's sovereignty to protecting China's interests, including economic ones, that span the globe;
- China is pursuing the goal of becoming a major military power in a secretive manner that "increases the potential for misunderstanding" and conflict with other states;
- Finally, the focus of the PLA's modernization is still Taiwan, and the military balance is clearly tilting towards mainland China.

Not surprisingly, the Pentagon report takes a similar line to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, which viewed China's military modernization as a challenge to U.S. power projection operations abroad. The QDR also focused on the lack of transparency of China's military, arguing that China's unwillingness to share information about the pace, scope and ultimate aims of its modernization programs raises "legitimate questions regarding its long-term intentions."

The just released report reveals that the United States is struggling to understand how China's economic rise paves the way for military modernization – and what this means for the United States. Both the Pentagon report and QDR reflect a U.S. policy that is fundamentally uncertain as to how China's rise—both economic and military—threatens the United States, but certain that it somehow does. U.S. policy seems to welcome certain aspects of increased PLA force-projection capabilities—such as China's increased contributions to international peacekeeping and humanitarian and anti-piracy efforts—and seeks further cooperation and exchanges with China, especially military-to-military exchanges. (See companion article by Piin-Fen Kok.)

The report did try to play down differences in the bilateral relationship, but the unavoidable takeaway is that China's military rise is harmful to U.S. strategic interests. The report follows on recent comments by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the head of the U.S. Pacific Command. Admiral Mike Mullen noted that he has "moved from being curious about what they're doing to being genuinely concerned" about China's military build-up. And in unusually blunt terms, Admiral Robert Willard of the U.S. Pacific Command rejected the assertion of Chinese leaders that their military build-up is defensive, labeling China's recent military efforts as "aggressive."

Building domestic support for greater cooperation is made all the harder when China is still seen as a threat, both among the public and some foreign-policy elites. The report gave skeptics a firm basis to criticize the Obama administration's efforts to promote greater engagement—economic and strategic—with China.

The report will likely have little long-term effect on the bilateral relationship—and when it is issued again next year, we know in broad terms what the findings will be and what the Chinese reaction will be. China's growing economic and military clout is a given; the challenge for U.S. policymakers is to determine how the United States can work strategically with a rising China while advancing its core strategic interests. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The key for the Obama administration will be to convey better to a wary American public that it will be easier for the United States to advance these interests working with, rather than against, China.

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