

4 June 2005: Some weeks prior to its publication, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld highlights aspects of the Pentagon's annual assessment of China's military at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.



The Pentagon eyes China's military

Back to threat-based planning?

ON 19 JULY, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) released its long-awaited 2005 report on 'The Military Power of the People's Republic of China'. In 2000, the US Congress obligated the Pentagon to draw up an annual assessment of Chinese military development; with the exception of 2001, when the Bush administration requested more time in which to review the available data on Chinese defence capabilities and goals, this requirement has been met each year. But the publication of the 2005 document was delayed more than four months beyond its scheduled submission to Congress. According to various press reports, the inter-agency review of this year's report was particularly contentious. Initial drafts of the document purportedly included stark characterisations of Chinese strategic goals and military capabilities. Rejoinders by other lead government agencies, notably the National Security Council staff and the State Department, somewhat modified (or at least expanded upon) the content. Some sources also claim that persistent questions posed to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the 4th Annual IISS Asia Security Conference: 'The Shangri-La Dialogue' in Singapore in early June convinced him to revisit this year's assessment. Others assert that the administration deferred release of the report, pending agreement to resume the Six-Party Talks in Beijing on the North Korean nuclear issue.

China in US strategy

The new report underscores the heightened significance of China's political-military rise in Bush administration policy deliberations, especially as seen by the Department of Defense. In comparison to the administration's three previous assessments, the 2005 report devotes far

more attention to China's increased power and international influence. The study acknowledges the development of 'cooperative, candid, and constructive US-China relations' since 2001. It highlights Beijing's growing role on the Korean peninsula, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and with both India and Pakistan. China's burgeoning energy and natural resource requirements also receive ample mention for the first time.

However, as in previous assessments, the report focuses primarily on China's emergent capabilities, military policies, and national strategies. In comparison with the Bush administration's three previous reviews, the 2005 report is replete with numerous figures, tables, and maps, thereby lending it a more comprehensive quality. Taking up terms of reference to be used in the forthcoming Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the report characterises China as a country 'fac[ing] a strategic crossroads'. It is seen as opting either for 'peaceful integration and benign competition'; 'dominant influence in an expanding sphere'; or '[a] less confident and...inward policy [focused] on challenges to national unity and the Chinese Communist Party's claim to legitimacy'. The report concludes that 'the future of a rising China is not yet set immutably on one course or another'.

The study does not offer definitive judgements on how various internal and external factors will shape future Chinese policy goals. However, the report offers a decidedly worrisome assessment of Chinese plans and intentions, voicing particular concern about the scale and breadth of various weapons development programmes. The document makes explicit reference to a highly diverse range of force modernisation goals across the full spectrum of military operations,

including what it deems a major investment in power-projection capabilities. The document also alludes to, but does not expressly endorse, various Intelligence Community assessments that are more cautious in estimating a Chinese capability for sea-control missions beyond China's immediate periphery, and the projected date when Beijing might possess a notional capability 'to defeat a medium-sized adversary'. By reserving judgement on various intelligence findings, the OSD has renewed its determination to arrive at independent intelligence assessments.

Intentions and capabilities

As in the three previous reports, the DoD faults the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for a highly constricted approach to military transparency, including its supposed reliance on strategic deception, a penchant for extreme secrecy, a substantial understatement of the budgetary resources devoted to national defence, and obscurity on how the PLA might employ force in a future crisis. However, these judgements are somewhat belied by information contained in the report – though some of this data presumably derives from classified sources. The study notes that China does not issue a document equivalent to the US *National Military Strategy*, but Chinese strategic writings (including some cited in the report) provide important insights into Chinese threat assessments and military modernisation priorities. The study draws particular attention to how Chinese defence planners are seeking to counteract major advances in US information dominance and deep strike capabilities. The relative absence of operational details in Chinese writings seems unsurprising; with China hedging against longer-term uncertainties, the incentives for full information disclosure

are lacking. This seems especially relevant to Chinese planning for a Taiwan contingency, which the report unambiguously deems the predominant if not exclusive thrust of Beijing's modernisation efforts. The 2005 assessment asserts that 'the cross-Strait balance of power is shifting toward Beijing...[its] sustained military buildup...affects the status quo'. The report also highlights the PLA's extensive acquisitions of sea-denial and related anti-access capabilities, for 'detering, defeating, or delaying foreign intervention' in a Taiwan scenario. All these programmes (for example, purchases of supersonic cruise missiles for naval platforms) have been extensively publicised in open Chinese publications, which the report characterises as an 'attempt to hold at risk US naval forces, including aircraft carriers and logistic forces, approaching the Taiwan Strait'.

However, the report also asserts that 'the PLA is generating military capabilities that go beyond a Taiwan scenario'. This characterisation greatly modifies the depiction of Chinese capabilities in earlier assessments. The Pentagon contends that Chinese short- and medium-range missiles will provide the PLA with a 'regional targeting capability'; similarly, airborne early-warning and control and aerial refuelling acquisitions will purportedly enable 'extended operations into the South China Sea', which (in conjunction with longer-term developments in C4ISR) 'could enable Beijing to identify, target, and track foreign military activities deep into the western Pacific and provide, potentially, hemispheric coverage'.

Although the assessment is replete with conditional language, the conclusions are unambiguous: 'China...continues to invest heavily...in programs designed to improve power projection. The pace and scope of China's military build-up are, already, such as to put regional military balances at risk...potentially posing a credible threat to modern militaries operating in the region'. Thus, even as the Executive Summary states that 'China's ability to project conventional military power beyond its periphery remains limited', the report depicts Chinese capabilities in far more expansive and worrisome terms. Indeed, the study warns that a decision by the EU to lift its arms embargo would result in 'an acceleration of China's military modernization...[with] direct implications for stability in the Taiwan Strait and the safety of U.S. personnel; it would also accelerate a shift in the regional balance

of power, affecting the security of many countries'.

Modernisation balance sheet

Although the report suggests a comprehensive process of military development, not all the evidence cited in the document points to rapid or fully successful modernisation. The study asserts that China within the past year has voiced increased worries about a growing technological gap between its own capabilities and those of advanced foreign militaries, necessitating reliance on asymmetric approaches to warfare whose effectiveness have yet to be fully tested. It also notes the PLA's major shortcomings in interservice coordination and its lack of experience in joint operations. In addition, the study asserts that China remains highly dependent on 'importing solutions' for its critical military needs, with a particular dependence on Russia. As the report concludes, 'China has not yet demonstrated the ability or innovation to go through a research, development, and acquisition process for a sophisticated weapon system without foreign assistance'. And, although the report continues to anticipate a larger, more survivable strategic nuclear force, the growth in the size of these forces projected in earlier versions of the Pentagon report has yet to be substantiated.

But the overall assessment remains disturbing. China is deemed increasingly capable of simultaneous, coordinated pursuit of defence and development goals, including the introduction of growing numbers of fourth-generation aircraft for maritime strike and related combat roles, and a major enhancement of Beijing's surface and subsurface navy; the PLA is seen as a prospective threat to major regional militaries 'if current trends persist'; the PLA further 'envisions the use of precision strikes to hold at risk...Western Pacific airbases, ports, surface combatants, land-based C4ISR and integrated air defense systems, and command facilities'. The report further asserts that 'China is working on, and plans to field, ASAT [anti-satellite weapons] systems'. None of these projected capabilities posit that China would constitute a 'near peer competitor' to the United States; rather, China has presumably identified potential vulnerabilities that can be exploited both in peacetime and in wartime, thereby shaping the future strategic environment to China's pronounced advantage.

Pentagon planning

The 2005 report constitutes a major milestone in US assessments of Chinese military capabilities. For the first time since the Bush administration assumed office, Washington has explicitly characterised China's military power not only as a threat to Taiwan, but in a larger regional context as well. All the while, the report asserts that 'China does not now face a direct threat from another nation', thereby paraphrasing Rumsfeld's assertion at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue that 'no country threatens China'. Although the report asserts that 'the United States welcomes the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China', its tenor points in far more pessimistic directions. These judgements have immediate implications for current deliberations in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) process. In the 2001 QDR, the Pentagon asserted that it would no longer rely on a threat-based approach to defence planning, opting for a capability-based approach that identified a spectrum of conceivable threats, but not identifying a specific state as the source of a particular threat. At the time, many observers believed that this was a distinction without a difference: the report identified a prospective threat in Asia from 'a military competitor with a formidable resource base' that was China in all but name. In the forthcoming QDR, four major 'focus areas' have been identified as primary topics for strategic assessment, with the fourth area ('shaping the choices of countries at a strategic crossroads') having immediate relevance to China. Although other states have been identified as fitting under this rubric, attention to date has focused predominantly on China. With the publication of the new report, China stands apart from all other major powers, with an explicit threat-driven rationale underlying the Pentagon's new assessment.

However, a report skewed heavily to China's future military capabilities (and to worst-case judgements about many of these capabilities) necessarily diminishes attention to areas of Sino-American political collaboration; the ever-increasing trade and investment ties between the United States and China; Beijing's ever-growing stakeholder role in multilateral institutions; and its apparent political-security accommodation with nearly all neighbouring states, save Japan. In this sense, the report fails fully to capture the totality of American interests in a sustainable long-term US strategy for the Asia-Pacific region, and for Sino-US relations in particular.

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