

STATE OF THE ART

A SURVEY OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY, BY THE EDITORS

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The Assassin's Mace

China's Growing Military Might

China's massive campaign to modernize its military forces is moving forward at a quick and steady pace, according to a recent U.S. Defense Department report on Chinese military-technological development. In recent years, this buildup has yielded some significant new capabilities, all of them serving China's larger strategic and political designs in the Asian-Pacific. As America wages the war on terror, the Pentagon report warns, China is aggressively pursuing the military capabilities necessary to wage and win a "short-duration, high-intensity" conflict with Taiwan—and with the United States, should we ever intervene on the island democracy's behalf.

China's leaders have long employed the tactics of "strategic ambiguity" to conceal the true purposes behind their military modernization project and to advance their ambitions in the Asian-Pacific. In the 1990s, as China amassed and occasionally fired ballistic missiles across the Taiwan Strait to intimidate Taiwan's pro-independence movement, Beijing assured the world that its military build-up served only benevolent ends, and that it sought "peaceful reunification" with the island democracy. This strategy has proved remarkably successful. Today, much of the world—including the United States, the sole military guarantor of Asian-Pacific security—has not recognized Taiwan's sovereignty, and thus

has tacitly acquiesced to Beijing's "One China" policy. Taiwan is diplomatically cut off from other nations, with few allies to help defend it against China's ongoing bullying.

But China's leaders have come to believe that much more than deception and ruse will be required to accomplish their future strategic goals. As a militarily-weak power, China has historically relied on its massive population and geography to deter and defend itself against foreign invasion. But through the 1990s, the country's robust and sustained economic growth has allowed Beijing to invest heavily in defense. At upwards of \$65 billion, China's annual defense budget is now the second largest in the world. And although it is still dwarfed by American defense spending, China's budget is expected to expand three- to four-fold in the next two decades.

China's investment in defense has been guided by a new set of strategic objectives—most importantly, according to the Pentagon report, by the need to acquire the means to project a credible military force beyond its borders "to deter moves by Taiwan toward permanent separation or, if required, to compel by force the integration of Taiwan under mainland authority." So far, China's pursuit of such force-projection capabilities has been well-rounded. They've been developing submarine and "blue water" naval abilities; procuring new kinds of combat and support aircraft; and improving the expeditionary capacities of the People's Liberation Army.

In Beijing's ideological lens, every military-technological advance that increases China's "comprehensive national power" is touted as the progress of Chinese socialism. But unlike China's ill-conceived socialist projects in the past, China's military modernization campaign has been sharply focused by its careful study of America's military operations during the 1990s. The Gulf War in 1991 demonstrated that a large military like China's built entirely around Soviet war-fighting techniques could be roundly decimated by superior American firepower, made possible in part by America's technologically-driven "revolution in military affairs." Thus, a key priority of China's military planners is force "informationization"—the development of the same kind of C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) platforms that enable America's military to coordinate and execute complex joint operations with precision, accuracy, and deadly speed.

The architects of China's military transformation have also placed high priority on the acquisition of so-called *shashoujian*, or "assassin's mace" technologies. While the exact meaning of the term remains elusive, the Pentagon report says "assassin's mace" is used to designate a wide array of technologies that might afford an inferior military an advantage in a conflict with a superior military power. To this end, China has been beefing up its ballistic missile arsenal, which now totals over 500 and

is growing at the startlingly high rate of 75 new missiles a year.

Beijing knows, too, that the Achilles' heel of the modern American military is in outer space, and there is no doubt that China is developing and seeking to employ a variety of anti-satellite weapons. Presently, the only means China is known to possess to disable America's intelligence and communications satellites is a nuclear warhead. But such weapons are impractical, since the electromagnetic field they create would also damage Chinese satellites. But press reports indicate that China has developed lasers that can disable low-orbiting satellites. China has also developed an array of miniature satellite technologies, and is reportedly experimenting with "parasitic microsattellites" that could potentially latch onto an American satellite and disable it or hijack the information gathered by it.

Despite heavy investment, China's defense industry is poorly organized, and for the foreseeable future, China will continue to rely on foreign sources of military technology. Russia is currently China's biggest supplier—from fighter aircraft to naval destroyers and attack submarines equipped with advanced anti-ship weapons systems. Beijing has also made a concerted effort to persuade the European Union to overturn its arms embargo on China. Enacted in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre, China has ridiculed the embargo as a holdover from the Cold War—and so, too, has France's Jacques Chirac, who described the law as "anachronistic."

Both France and Germany lobbied to overturn the arms restriction, seeking an opportunity to peddle their fighter planes and submarines. In April 2004, the European Union decided to uphold the sanctions, thanks largely to the Scandinavian countries, as well as pressure from the United States and international human rights groups. But China's thirst for Western technology is growing, and the commercial appeal to Europe of breaking into the world's largest emerging defense market could potentially overpower good sense. As the Chinese foreign minister put it, "all good things take time."

In the immediate future, the Pentagon doesn't believe China will close the military gap between itself and America. In the long-term, self-sufficiency in the production of military technology is a strategic imperative for China, but the Pentagon thinks it is unlikely that China will achieve this goal in the next decade. Still, China's leapfrogging military modernization has produced some noteworthy advances, including a new class of attack submarine which has come as a "technical surprise" to American defense analysts and officials, according to the *Washington Times*.

As China's military power grows, so, too, does the danger that Beijing will make a horrible miscalculation of America's commitment and capability to defend its interests and the security of East Asia. The Pentagon analysis describes an increased level of discussion in China's military and political

ranks about the “strategic window of opportunity” opened in East Asia with the U.S. military’s commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and, for the foreseeable future, with the war on terrorism. And this past May, Beijing delivered one of its most explicit threats so far to Taipei’s pro-independence leaders: Either abandon your “dangerous lurch toward independence” and submit to Chinese sovereignty, or the “Chinese people will crush (your) schemes firmly and thoroughly at any cost.”

Clearly, the Chinese dragon is crouching in “strategic ambiguity” no longer. With China’s rise as a military power looming over the Asian-Pacific, and Beijing stifling the voices of dissent everywhere under its immediate control, the window of opportunity for

democracy in East Asia is shrinking fast. To date, Taiwan’s commitment to its own defense has been inadequate and unfocused, in part because of its fear of Chinese retribution, but also because of its strategic reliance on the U.S. to repel any Chinese aggression. Ultimately, however, if Taiwan is to become and remain a fully sovereign democracy, it will have to acquire the means to defend itself. The United States has been reluctant to impress that point upon Taipei, and only modest in its efforts to arm Taiwan, out of concern for upsetting the already fragile military balance in the region. But the time has come for a serious consideration of the consequences and potential perils of *American* “strategic ambiguity” in the Taiwan Strait.