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Andy Gudgel Mr.

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Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

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The Heritage Foundation



THE PLA SHAPES THE FUTURE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Compiled by
Mr. Andy Gudel
The Heritage Foundation

Key Points:

- The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has problems attracting technically savvy recruits, owing to competition from China's booming economy.
- The PLA feels the United States will intervene in a conflict over Taiwan, and is training to defend against or defeat the U.S. military.
- Japan and the Korean Peninsula could become issues as troublesome for the PLA as Taiwan.
- China and the PLA are becoming more active in South and Southeast Asia to increase China's influence in the region. India's rise, in particular, concerns China.

Over 50 experts on China and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) gathered at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, from September 23-25, to attend the 2005 PLA Conference, "The PLA Shapes the Future Security Environment," cosponsored by the Heritage Foundation and the U.S. Army War College. The colloquium considered how the PLA shapes the global security environment.

Discussion began with the changing relationship between the PLA and the Chinese people, and its effect on PLA recruiting efforts. While officially the PLA is "the Army of the People," the Army may not be as close to the people as it believes.

Because of China's strong, growing economy, the PLA is concerned with its ability to attract the high-tech recruits it increasingly needs. The PLA's General Staff Department and the General Political Department have developed competing approaches to attracting such recruits. The General Political Department hopes to recruit those already best qualified to serve in the ever-modernizing PLA. The General Staff Department, however, is working on a comprehensive military education system to transform any recruits into high-quality personnel.

China's changing population base has affected the PLA. As China becomes more modern, fewer Han Chinese from affluent coastal areas are willing to join the Army, and it will have to look increasingly to "upriver" (i.e., inland provinces) Chinese and ethnic minorities, such as Uighurs and Mongolians, to meet recruiting goals. The PLA is also hiring civilians to fill certain roles. Interviews with Chinese students show that those who intend to join the PLA do so because it is the "family business" (i.e., their

family has a history of military service). They also say that PLA recruiters raise three themes: Chinese nationalism, the PLA will give them a place to develop marketable skills, and service provides a stable lifestyle.

The PLA knows it needs to change to keep up with a modernizing China. However, the differences in approach between the General Staff Department and the General Political Department highlight that the PLA is still trying to decide how best to do so.

The conference next considered how the PLA assesses the Taiwan situation. The PLA considers itself an army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the people. Since the CCP purportedly represents the interests of all the people, a threat against the CCP is technically also a threat against the nation.

A dichotomy of opinion exists between the PLA and the CCP over Taiwan. The prior concept of “peaceful reunification with Taiwan” was a placeholder for the PLA, as it could not defeat the Taiwanese militarily. This kept PLA budgets low. But that changed in 1996 with the Taiwan missile crisis, when the CCP leadership believed party-characterized “separatist trends” in Taiwan threatened China’s core interests, and that provided impetus to the party hawks.

The PLA has most often fought defensively, and so has a “bunker mentality,” causing the army to view its actions as defending itself against exterior threats. It over-prepares militarily, while not understanding how these actions could appear belligerent to outsiders.

The PLA and the CCP agree that the PLA’s job is to maintain Chinese sovereignty; that the Taiwan issue is key to China’s future success as a world power; and that the island should be taken without violence, if possible. Within the PLA, there are two factions—those who feel that the Army would eventually win; and those younger officers who are more cautious and advocate a Chinese “Revolution in Military Affairs” and asymmetric warfare. The PLA believes the United States will react to an invasion of Taiwan, and it is not ready to face an American intervention. President Hu Jintao stated the CCP’s position on

Taiwan—“Striving for negotiations, preparing for war, not fearing delays.”

The next panel considered PLA assessments of the U.S. military. The PLA views the United States as its biggest potential threat, and is training to defeat the U.S. military. The PLA believes the Chinese mainland will receive long-range strikes from U.S. precision-guided munitions. Chinese militia training focuses on urban air defense and infrastructure repair. On paper, the PLA understands the complexity of modern warfare. “Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics” is the PLA’s version of the U.S. term; it is concerned with upgrading logistics and equipment. The PLA slogan, “three attacks and three defenses,” is geared towards stealth aircraft, cruise missiles, and helicopter gunships – all U.S. capabilities.

The PLA has increased the size, number, communications and firepower of its air defense units. It also has increased the use of obscurants, UAVs, and combined arms training, and has a growing professional NCO corps. However, the training is rudimentary and, in fact, may not be effective. Overall, continued emphasis on armor and mechanized forces and the dearth of close air support, helicopters, and air cushion vehicles calls the PLA’s capabilities into question.

The PLA’s assessment of the U.S. military at war was discussed. At the beginning of the War in Iraq, the campaign of “shock and awe” and the use of targeted “decapitation strikes” against Iraqi leaders and communications amazed PLA officials. They used the opportunity to analyze the U.S. forces’ strengths and weaknesses, as well as mistakes made by the Iraqi military. Many articles on these issues appeared in Chinese military journals, but surprisingly few linked “People’s War” and insurgency. China and the PLA have used the U.S. involvement in Iraq to strengthen their ties with the Third World, particularly Central Asia.

The conferees then discussed the PLA and its activities in Northeast Asia. The Sino-Japanese relationship is deteriorating at the same time that U.S.-Japanese relations are improving. The presenter posited that the PLA is a drag on

Sino-Japanese relations, adding friction—the sources of which include events in World War II, competition for oil resources, nationalism on both sides, and recent anti-Japanese riots in China.

Both China and Japan have experienced numerous political and economic changes since normalization of relations in 1970. However, interdependent economic interests, the focus in both countries on domestic issues, and the fact that few governments would benefit from increased Sino-Japanese rivalry argue against serious problems, although friction will continue.

The attendees questioned the PLA's role in Sino-Japanese relations. The PLA seems more concerned with sovereignty and oil supply. Oil claims in disputed territories are expected to become a source of trouble, but won't happen until one country tries to develop those resources. Ultimately, the Sino-Japanese relationship may be a bigger problem than the Taiwan issue.

On the colloquium's final morning, conferees discussed the PLA's activities in South Asia. The PLA sees India as a potential rival power in the region, and, therefore it is trying to become more active there. Border issues, the nuclearization of South Asia, the rise of India in the region, and closer U.S./Indian military ties are also concerns. The PLA has been increasing its ties with Pakistan and Bangladesh through military exchanges and exercises, while not doing so with India.

Next the focus was on China and Southeast Asia. The PLA has not been a major actor there, but functions as a "big stick" behind China's political statements. The current major issue of Southeast Asian countries is security, and China has been very active diplomatically in the region. The PLA has only mattered during involvement concerning the Spratleys and Paracel Islands, but it has been active in arms sales and joint production of weapons with various Southeast Asian countries. Coupled with security assistance, this has been the PLA's major role in the region in recent times.

Chinese political scientists have advanced the theory of China's "Peaceful Rise"—that it can become a superpower in a way that will not lead to war. The Chinese see their rise as a world power

as inevitable, and place the onus on the United States not to create tensions by interfering. There is an implied sting in the theory that seems to say "we won't threaten you, but stay out of our way." As an extension of this concept, Chinese political scientists have created a literal "calculus" (with mathematical formulas) that determines a nation's comprehensive national power. The danger is that this plays to China's victim mentality. Slow progress in modernization or economic growth could be considered evidence of "meddling" by other countries.

The closing discussion raised the possibility that China's military buildup has a broader purpose than potential conflict with Taiwan—the military underpinning to China's rise to a regional, and super, power. The turning point came in the early 1990s as China's economy began to surge, the Gulf War showed U.S. military strengths, and advanced weaponry from the crumbling Soviet Union became available. Since 1996, China has been preparing the PLA to prevent Taiwan secession. The "holy grail" for China would be to take Taiwan before the United States could intervene. The lesser preferred outcome would be to prevent the United States from entering the Taiwan theater. This is the PLA's ultimate aim, but not its only goal.

What would happen if both China and Taiwan reached a status quo? The PLA buildup would continue, since, as a rising regional and world power, China feels it has a right to a strong military. Chinese economic slowdown or the pro-development policies of Hu Jintao might reduce military budgets but would only change the pace of modernization, not stop it.

Participants suggested that perhaps it is in the PLA's interest to keep the Taiwan situation in a state of status quo, as it justifies a large military budget without the risk of combat. Also, regional preeminence is perhaps a lesser concern to the Chinese than internal stability, improving the economy, and nationalist issues.

China may feel threatened by U.S. military contacts with Russia, India, and Japan, but the United States would have to disengage from major powers in the region just to soothe China's feelings.

At the close of the colloquium, the participants discussed several issues for further consideration. What is China's perception of the United States and its military? What is the U.S. perception of China's intent in Asia and the world? And while U.S. foreign and military policies are openly and transparently debated; in China, these policies are not.

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