

US Army War College  
**USAWC Press**

---

Monographs

---

4-1-1996

## **China's Strategic View: The Role of the People's Liberation Army**

June Teufel-Dreyer Dr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Teufel-Dreyer, June Dr., "China's Strategic View: The Role of the People's Liberation Army" (1996).  
*Monographs*. 217.  
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/217>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Monographs by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC VIEW:  
THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

June Teufel Dreyer

April 25, 1996

\*\*\*\*\*

The views expressed in this monograph are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This monograph is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

\*\*\*\*\*

Comments pertaining to this monograph are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050. Comments also may be conveyed directly to the Conference Organizer, Dr. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., by calling commercial (717) 245-4086 or DSN 242-4086. Copies of this monograph may be obtained from the Publications and Production Office by calling commercial (717) 245-4133, DSN 242-4133, FAX (717) 245-3820, or via the Internet at rummelr@carlisle-emh2.army.mil.

\*\*\*\*\*

This monograph was originally presented at the U.S. Army War College Seventh Annual Strategy Conference held April 23-25, 1996, with the assistance of the Office of Net Assessment. The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish the paper as part of its Conference Series.

\*\*\*\*\*

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs are loaded on the Strategic Studies Institute Homepage for electronic dissemination. SSI's Homepage address is: <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usassi/>.

## FOREWORD

In April 1996, the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute held its Seventh Annual Strategy Conference. This year's theme was, "China into the 21st Century: Strategic Partner and . . . or Peer Competitor."

Dr. June Tuefel Dreyer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami, on a panel examining "China's Strategic View," argued that the armed forces of China, although large, simply are not capable today of militarily endorsing the kind of truculent actions recently undertaken in the Taiwan Straits. The qualitative advantage possessed by the sum total of Asian nations with interests at stake, not to mention those of the United States, exceeds that of the People's Liberation Army. Professor Dreyer provides a good overview of the current and projected strengths of the PLA's land, sea and air forces.

Pressure is growing throughout the Pacific and around the world for China to attenuate hard line positions of the past. Dr. Dreyer argues that the PRC's actions may be eliciting equal and opposite reactions from states that feel their interests are being threatened. On the other hand, domestic pressures may make it difficult for the Chinese leadership to back away from some of the positions they have taken.

The course China pursues into the 21st century will directly bear on the strategic interests of the United States in a significant way--and vice-versa. For this reason, the Strategic Studies Institute offers Dr. Dreyer's views for your consideration.

RICHARD H. WITHERSPOON  
olonel, U.S. Army  
Director, Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER is Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard and the second edition of her latest book, *China's Political System: Modernization and Tradition*, was recently published by Allyn and Bacon. Dr. Dreyer is a frequent commentator on Chinese military affairs.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC VIEW:  
THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

**China's Strategic View.**

Although the militant rhetoric of past decades has abated, the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is profoundly dissatisfied with the international status quo. The dissolution of the Soviet Union weakened China's ability to wrest concessions from the United States by threatening to move closer to the USSR, and from the USSR by threatening to support the United States. While some leverage can, and is, gained by negotiating with the major successor state to the Soviet Union, this leverage is more limited than in the past. The Russian Republic is significantly weaker than the USSR, and finds aid and investment from capitalist states such as the United States useful to its rebuilding efforts. It is unlikely to jeopardize this aid by becoming too closely associated with Chinese positions that these countries oppose.

Other indications are that the Chinese leadership's goal is to replace the United States as the hegemonic power in the Asian region. It sees the PRC as an ascendant power while America, which has withdrawn from bases in the Philippines, downsized its military personnel, slashed its defense procurement programs, and consigned its navy to a littoral role, is seen as declining. Should China assume the role of hegemon, there are likely to be territorial readjustments in the region. The PRC contests ownership of several different islands and island chains with no less than six other countries, and there are concerns within India that the close relationship that has developed between China and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Burma may have a Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as one of its goals. Though Sino-Indian relations have been quite good in recent years, there are unresolved issues between the two countries, and China's victory over India in a 1962 border war is a painful memory for many Indians.

**The PLA and the Formulation of Chinese Strategy.**

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) plays a dual role in the country's strategic view: it participates in the formulation of strategy at the same time as it is charged with implementing that strategy. The apparent active involvement of higher echelons of the PLA in formulating national policy sets the Chinese military apart from the Western ideal in which politicians decide upon policy and the military implements it. Several caveats are in order here. Mao Zedong formulated a principle that is not very different from the Western ideal of the separation of army and politics: "the party must always

control the gun; the gun must never control the party." And Clausewitz, though saying that "there can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it," also cautioned that political leaders should be careful not to ask the impossible of the military, and advised them to consult with senior commanders in planning and conducting military operations.<sup>1</sup> Finally, virtually all the recent information indicating that the PLA is exerting pressure for a harder line internationally comes from the Hong Kong press and cannot be confirmed through mainland sources. Hence, the dichotomy between the role of the military in the PRC and that in the West may be overdrawn.

Analysts of recent Chinese foreign policy portray it as a struggle between soft liners and hard liners. Those who espouse a soft line believe that the PRC's best interests are served by negotiating settlements to China's territorial disputes with other nations and engaging foreign powers in dialogue on contentious issues such as trade disputes and intellectual property rights. Hard liners assume a more defiant posture. The doctrine of absolute sovereignty, the unilateral right of the PRC to annex territory it considers part of the sacred territory of China, and a skeptical attitude toward the claims of other countries characterize their stance. According to the Hong Kong press, the PLA is definitely in the hard line group.

There is no conclusive evidence that this is the case. Much of the characterization of the PLA as urging a more militant international stance cites rumors.<sup>2</sup> There is no confirmation more convincing than noting that a high-ranking PLA officer, usually the vice-chair of the party's Central Military Commission (CMC) Liu Huaqing, is present when militant policy pronouncements are given. It is, however, equally possible that the leadership would want to have a high-ranking military figure on hand simply to symbolize the country's determination to back up its strong statements. The fact that the officer is physically present does not *necessarily* mean that he had any part in formulating the policies being announced.

When interviewed last year, Western military attaches who have served in China tended to reject the idea of a PLA corporate view on international relations that it is urging on the civilian leadership. One Western officer stated that he had tried to confirm the existence of the numerous joint letters that the Hong Kong press has reported that military leaders send urging the leadership to take a stronger stand on some issue, and has been able to do so with only one of the missives: that circulated just before the attack on demonstrators in 1989. It should be noted that this letter concerned a domestic matter rather than an international one, and also that it urged a *soft* line rather than a hard line: the generals opposed the use of

force against the demonstrators. Moreover, as one Western intelligence operative points out, there is no need for PLA leaders to write letters to the leadership: they have input into the policy process at a variety of levels, and can make their views known long before decisions are made. And, at the very highest level, Liu Huaqing, the senior member of the Central Military Commission, is a member of the Standing Committee of the party Politburo. Recently, Western analysts seem more willing to credit reports that at least certain elements of the military have been in the forefront of the PRC's more aggressive policies.

Two other points should be noted with regard to the PLA's views on China's strategic posture: first, the top echelons of the officer corps do not necessarily share a common point of view. And, second, the advice they give is not necessarily militaristic. With regard to the first point, factionalism has been an ongoing characteristic of the PLA's high command. While the presence of differences of opinion within any sizeable organization is hardly surprising, the communist leadership has adamantly opposed such differences, and frequently warns that any deviations from its model of a unified force marching forward under the party line will simply not be tolerated. Since the official press mentions factionalism within the military from time to time, it must be assumed that such factionalism continues to exist. The last public manifestation thereof occurred from late 1992 through early 1993. Generals Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing and at least several hundred officers associated with them were removed from power, reportedly for trying to make plans for the post-Deng Xiaoping era. The purgees were accused of trying to place their supporters in positions of power, and of discussing how to prevent the outbreak of civil disorder after the death of Deng. Their concerns were therefore centered on personal power and internal problems rather than international security matters.

The weakening of the Yangs cannot be assumed to have ended factionalism in the high command: as one Western intelligence analyst commented at the time, opposition to the Yang clique had been the one issue uniting the other members of the CMC. Recent attention has focussed on an alleged "Shandong clique" and its control of the military. Here there is supportive indirect evidence. Of the 175 top-ranking PLA officers listed in the latest (1994) edition of the Beijing-published reference work *Who's Who in China: Current Leaders*, 46, or 26.3 percent are from Shandong, a province with only 7.2 percent of the PRC's population.<sup>3</sup> Shandong natives also comprise one-third of the Central Military Commission's nine members; the commander and commissar of the navy were born in Shandong, as were four of the fourteen (29 percent) commanders and commissars of the PRC's seven military regions.<sup>4</sup> In describing preparations for the February- March PLA exercises in the southeastern province of



Fujian, the pro-communist newspaper *Wen Wei Po* noted that "large amounts of Shandong cabbage, which southerners do not like to eat, appeared in the market."<sup>5</sup> *Wen Wei Po* made no attempt at interpreting this datum, apparently because it assumed that its readers would understand that where there is a heavy military presence, there will be many natives of Shandong. Observers are agreed that this Shandong clique is a personalistic network rather than one which espouses a policy point of view. This does not necessarily mean that high-ranking officials are comfortable with its continued existence: an article in another Hong Kong paper in February 1996 interpreted several recent personnel changes in the PLA as part of Jiang Zemin's effort to weaken the Shandong group's power by promoting people from his native province of Jiangsu.<sup>6</sup>

It is also entirely likely, though more difficult to verify, that differences of opinion exist within the military leadership on policy toward Taiwan and with regard to specific issues confronting the deployment of the PLA garrison in Hong Kong, as well as broader strategic issues involving the major powers of the world. The December 1995 issue of a Beijing-published magazine on militia work contained a major article emphasizing the need for members of the people's armed forces to "willingly subordinate themselves to the overall situation whenever local interests clash with overall ones," and to do whatever the party orders.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, a Hong Kong publication, citing mainland sources, reported that Fujian leaders were complaining that the PLA's frequent military exercises in their area were hurting the local economy.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to the second point, there is no conclusive evidence to support the assumption that what advice the PLA gives favors an assertive strategic stance. Most officers are patriotic: they are proud of their country, want it to be internationally respected, and support the territorial claims made by China's civilian leadership. However, they are also acutely aware--perhaps more so than most civilian leaders--of the PLA's military deficiencies. The authors of the controversial *Can China Win the Next War*,<sup>9</sup> published in mid-1993, consider the equipment and manpower available to the country in a variety of scenarios, and are not optimistic that they will be victorious in most of them. There is an entire section entitled "The Next War Will Not Be So Easy"; the document is studded with statements such as ". . . the problem of the return of Taiwan is better resolved by peaceful means than by armed force"<sup>10</sup> and "holding on to the Nansha Islands is a big question mark."<sup>11</sup> There are some problems with the document,<sup>12</sup> and the authors are unabashed advocates of a specific vested interest: the PLA navy's need for an aircraft carrier. But it is important to note that the message being delivered is conservative: the authors' message is that it would not be a good idea for the PRC to become involved in a

confrontation unless or until existing military deficiencies are rectified.

A Western intelligence source conjectures that in recent months high-ranking Chinese naval and air force officers may have been more supportive of a militant stance in the Spratly Islands and Taiwan. They, rather than the PRC's ground forces, have received the benefits of increases in the defense budget, and hence are apt to be eager to test their new capabilities. He believes that CMC vice-chair Liu Huaqing, a former PLA navy commander, plays an active role in this scenario.

### **The PLA's Ability to Support Chinese Strategy.**

The PLA has not been regarded as a potent fighting force. Its four million men were poorly trained; weapons technology was 10-20 years behind the state of the art; and logistics support was woefully inadequate. Although this force could have been expected to fight valiantly on the exceedingly unlikely circumstance that an outside power should choose to invade the PRC, the PLA had very limited ability to project power beyond the mainland's borders. Its performance against Vietnam in February 1979 was abysmal, thus giving impetus to those officers and civilian leaders who had argued for years that the PLA could not make a strong showing in combat.<sup>13</sup> Under Deng Xiaoping, who served for many years as head of the PLA's General Staff Department and later headed the party's CMC, ameliorative measures were introduced.

Over the course of 10 years, a demobilization removed more than one million soldiers from the PLA. Its current strength is estimated at just under three million; further reductions are likely. Educational requirements were instituted for officers. Military academies increasingly focussed on military training and academic subjects, while decreasing the attention given to political and ideological courses. The military rank system, which had been abolished in 1964 in a move toward radical egalitarianism that foreshadowed the Cultural Revolution, was reinstated. A large number of elderly officers were induced to retire. In order to perpetuate this rejuvenation of the officer corps, a military service law instituted an "up or out" system, with mandatory retirement for senior officers at age 65.

Doctrine shifted away from the expectation of a massive apocalyptic war involving the superpowers and concentrated on preparing for local and regional conflicts. Command, control, communications and intelligence improved. Training exercises were conducted more frequently and in a more sophisticated fashion. Efforts were made to coordinate air, sea, and land forces. The exercises were conducted under more varied conditions, from the

dry mountainous north to the jungles of the southwest. And their outcome was no longer predetermined: whereas the red team had had to triumph before, the blue team was now allowed to win if its performance was superior. Naval vessels began to venture further from coastal waters, prompting observers to note that the PLAN was moving toward a modest blue-water capability. The country's nuclear program continued to progress. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that the PRC has 17 intercontinental ballistic missiles and more than 70 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Its one nuclear-powered *Xia*-class submarine is equipped with 12 warheads.<sup>14</sup> China's recent nuclear testing program shows a developing capability for miniaturization.

The modernization of non-nuclear weapons proceeded more slowly. There was indecision about what and how much to import from which foreign countries, with a vocal faction opposing imports and advocating self-reliance and indigenous development. Foreign procurement projects were bedeviled by additional problems. There were lengthy negotiations on price and method of payment. For example, while China preferred to settle accounts with Russia through barter, Russia preferred hard currency.<sup>15</sup> The PRC terminated discussions on the procurement of the Su-30, a two-seat, long-duration derivative of the Su-27 after Russia insisted that the barter payment be lowered to 50 percent instead of 75 percent.<sup>16</sup> Cost overruns and political problems with supplier countries caused delays and a few cancellations. Both factors were involved in China's 1990 decision to terminate its Peace Pearl project for upgrading its F-8 fighter plane. With an arms embargo imposed by the United States after the bloody suppression of demonstrations in Beijing in 1989, Russia and Israel have emerged as the PRC's major foreign suppliers of arms and technology.

*Air Force.* Russia has sold 72 Su-27s to China in three separate deals over the past 4 years. Whereas the first 24 were basic models, later shipments are rumored to include improved variants with both attack and multi-role capability. Aviation experts describe the Su-27 as among the most modern, capable fighter planes in the world. It has a state-of-the-art weapon system and can utilize a wide variety of air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance.<sup>17</sup> A second plane being developed is the FC-1 lightweight fighter based on the design for the MiG-33 rejected by the Soviet Air Force. Israel and several European countries are being considered as suppliers for the plane's avionics.<sup>18</sup> A third fighter plane, the J-10 (F-10), multi-role fighter is based on technology developed for the U.S.-financed Lavi fighter program, which was cancelled in 1987. It is unclear what specific technologies and systems Israel has provided. Some experts believe that the Israeli contribution will focus on avionics and radar, with Russia supplying the engines.<sup>19</sup>

There is a tendency to overstate what this means for combat capability. While a reporter for *Jane's Defence Weekly* trumpeted that "China's double-digit economic growth is funding three major combat aircraft development programmes at a time when the whole of Europe can barely afford two,"<sup>20</sup> other sources portray a far different situation. A former Air Force attache in Beijing points out that production of one of the three planes, the FC-1 is a joint project with Pakistan with the plane designed for export. He does not believe that China will be able to afford to procure both J-10s and Soviet planes, and sees the J-10 as the more probable choice since it is more acceptable to the faction that favors indigenous development and production of weapons. However, he cautions, it may be a long time before the J-10 is operational. China's A-2 attack plane was not deployed until 8 years after its initial test flight, and there is no reason to think that the J-10 will enter service any faster. Problems have occurred which hamper production and, in this expert's view, the plane is unlikely to be deployed before 2004.

Despite Western journalists' description of sales of Soviet weapons to China as "a fire sale," the Su-27 purchase was no bargain: at a cost of \$1 billion for 26 planes, this works out to nearly \$40 million per plane, the fact that 35 percent of the cost was in barter notwithstanding. Disagreements over price meant that the second batch of planes was sitting out in harsh Russian weather for more than 2 years, suffering significant deterioration. Metal fatigue has been a problem. The final batch will have suffered even more. Chinese maintenance procedures are poor: of 24 Sikorsky helicopters purchased from the United States 12 years ago, only 3 or 4 are still in service. PLA air force (PLAAF) pilots train only about 80 hours a year on the average. They almost never practice over water--surely a major deficiency in preparing for the type of missions they are likely to have in a confrontation involving disputed islands. The PRC's pilots are, moreover, reluctant to push an aircraft to the edge of its capabilities. The former attache predicts that after the first Su-27 crashes, pilots will be still more reluctant to push the envelope. While Russian trainers complain about Chinese pilots, the Chinese note that the planes arrived without training manuals. They are also causing damage to Chinese runways, which were constructed for lighter planes than the Su-27.<sup>21</sup>

Taiwan sources independently confirm these points, with one officer describing the planes as having "a very low operational readiness capability due to poor logistics and maintenance. The number of takeoffs and flights is not frequent." He was skeptical that the licensing agreement allowing the PRC to produce Su-27s would result in mass production of the plane, predicting that the mainlanders would encounter real difficulties in providing the necessary logistical support and maintenance to ensure an

acceptable operational readiness capability for the final product.<sup>22</sup> And a former *New York Times* correspondent reported that, even after lengthy training in Russia, the Chinese pilots designated to take over the Su-27s were so unskilled that Russian pilots had to deliver the planes to Chinese bases.<sup>23</sup> Yet another observer of the Chinese military, noting the difficulties that PRC pilots were having with Su-27s, predicted that the planes would "leak into the PLAAF's inventory rather than pour in."<sup>24</sup>

Navy. Naval capabilities have been upgraded with more success. Until about 15 years ago, PLAN lacked surface-to-air missile (SAM) protection for its ships, which were equipped solely with guns and had no surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs). It had very little anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability. Western analysts doubted that the Chinese navy would be effective, even against smaller navies, once its ships left the mainland's coast. This has changed significantly: PLAN is now better able to defend itself, even in the absence of air cover, in contested waters such as the South China Sea.<sup>25</sup> By the early 1990s, PLAN had a line-of-sight air defense capability out to 13 kilometers and up to 8,000 meters in altitude. Its missiles are judged effective against aircraft as well as sea skimming surface-to-surface or air-to-surface anti-ship missiles. The PL-8 missile, believed to have been derived from the Israeli Python, is infrared guided, can detect a target from any angle, and can be mounted on a ship along with anti-aircraft guns. More sophisticated radars reach to the horizon and allow the identification of targets for anti-ship SSMs. Electronic countermeasures have also improved.

China's destroyers have been equipped with both SAM and SSM systems. Anti-submarine warfare has improved to what one Western analyst describes as good to fair depending on the size, nature, and location of conflict. Given a concentrated effort of ASW resources in a limited and shallow zone such as the East China Sea, he believes that the PLAN could perform credibly. Dauphin helicopters, produced under license with France, have enhanced the PLAN's ASW capability. Since the best submarine killer is probably another submarine, China's purchase of Kilo-class diesel electric boats from Russia represents a significant addition to the PRC's ASW capabilities. Two of these have already been delivered;<sup>26</sup> two more are expected in the near future. The latter group will be fitted with upgraded sonars which will allow better detection of enemy vessels. Kilos carry twelve 21-inch torpedoes and constitute a significant upgrade from China's elderly Whisky and Romeo class boats.

Submarines and surface combatants have been fitted with a reverse-engineered version of France's Exocet missile; frigates and destroyers are equipped with surface-to-air (SAM) missiles giving them protection against air and missile attacks at sea.

Some ships carry indigenously manufactured SAMS; others have French-made Crotales. Ships without integral SAM capability may carry short-range, shoulder-fired SAMS derived from the SA-7.

SSMs include the Ying Ji, derived from the Exocet. With a relatively short 40 kilometer range, it is active radar homing and carries a 165 kilogram warhead. The radar homing and infrared homing HY-2 anti-ship Sea Eagle has a longer effective range of approximately 80 kilometers. The Sea Eagle carries a 513 kilogram warhead, and is believed nuclear-capable. The C-802 may have a range of 120 kilometers.

These advances notwithstanding, efforts to enhance naval capabilities have experienced problems similar to those faced by the air force. Systems integration continues to pose difficulties. American-made General Electric LM 2500 gas turbine engines were purchased to power China's newest class of destroyers, the Luhu. However, the Chinese naval architects responsible for designing the Luhu's hull and engine space seem to have disregarded the engines' size specifications. The hull had to be returned to the shipyard for redesign after at least one ship had already been built.<sup>27</sup> The navy has over-the-horizon missiles, but not the targeting techniques to make them effective. And, after more than a decade of efforts to improve educational standards, difficulties remain. A 1995 story reported in the Chinese press described a junior-high school educated radarman assigned to submarine duty who could not maintain the equipment he was responsible for.<sup>28</sup>

*Ground Forces.* As might be expected, the world's largest country has the world's largest army, comprising about 2.2 million people. Ground forces include 24 group armies, equivalent to Western corps, composed of 73 infantry divisions, 9 main force divisions with a rapid-reaction role, 11 tank divisions, and 5 artillery divisions. This does not include garrison forces, border and coastal guards, People's Armed Police, or reservists. The last category is estimated at about 900,000 men, the majority of them demobilized veterans of the regular armed forces.<sup>29</sup>

They are equipped with large numbers of weapons--for example, an estimated 7,500 to 8,000 medium battle tanks. Most are copies of older Soviet models, though Israeli technology has upgraded the turrets and fire control systems of a number of these. Ground force modernization has received a lower priority than that of the navy and air force, and neither troops nor their equipment are believed to be of high quality. Since Deng's economic reforms provided opportunities to become wealthy through entrepreneurial activities, the best and the brightest young men generally do not wish to join the PLA. The fact that the military is expected to raise much of its own meat and vegetables detracts from training.

So does the PLA's multi-faceted business empire and the corruption it has engendered. Durability of equipment is a recurrent problem. Artillery tubes deteriorate quickly in heavy firing, degrading accuracy and posing hazards to gun crews. Tires on Chinese vehicles are substandard; drive trains and transmissions break down far too frequently.<sup>30</sup> The Thai military, which bought a number of Chinese tanks at bargain prices, complains that treads wear out prematurely and fire control systems need excessive maintenance.<sup>31</sup> There are exceptions: the 23rd and 54th armies are described as highly disciplined and motivated, with good equipment maintenance procedures. The 1st and 31st armies are also well regarded, as are the 15th Airborne Army and the marines (naval infantry).<sup>32</sup> These are the troops that would have to be relied on in any confrontation with China's neighbors.

### **Recent Demarches.**

China's present ability to project power, though still quite limited, has improved significantly over the past two decades. More importantly, if the leadership were to decide to pursue aggressively the PRC's claims in disputed areas including the Spratly Islands, the Senkakus, and Taiwan, China will have the advantage of size. For example, its navy is, at 260,000 men, larger than those of the seven members of ASEAN plus Taiwan combined.<sup>33</sup> Another advantage is that its neighbors are not united against China, and are highly unlikely ever to be so. A number of the ASEAN countries, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei, claim parts of the Spratly Islands, and in some cases contest ownership with each other as well as with the PRC.

There are minor disagreements among them on other matters as well. For example, in early 1996, Thailand voiced its displeasure over a wall built by Malaysia on the border between the two countries, as well as to reports that Malaysia had equipped its coastal patrol boats with weapons to attack foreign vessels that entered its waters for fishing.<sup>34</sup> And the Vietnamese government recently demanded that Thailand cease violating its territorial waters.<sup>35</sup> In addition to its differences with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, Japan contests ownership of Takeshima Island with Korea; the island is known to Koreans as Tokto.<sup>36</sup> While these are fairly mild irritants, they illustrate a more important point: there is not necessarily an "us versus them" view of China.

Several navies, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, have a qualitative advantage over China in terms of more modern ships equipped with Harpoon and Exocet anti-ship missiles. But it

is difficult to imagine the circumstances under which these or other ASEAN countries could combine, much less that they could be joined by Taiwan--with whom none of them has formal diplomatic relations--to resist a PRC bent on expansion.

Japan presents a different picture. Its highly competent navy has modern ships equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry and staffed by well-educated officers and men. The Japanese navy has twice the underway replenishment capacity of China. However, article nine of the Japanese constitution forbids the use of force to solve international disputes and there is a well-organized, articulate anti-defense sector within the country's population. However, just as with the ASEAN states, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances under which Japan would wish to challenge the PRC militarily.

Until fairly recently, Asian-Pacific states tended to take a rather detached view of "the Chinese threat," believing that disputes with the PRC would be settled in due course through peaceful negotiations. For example, in mid-1993, then-Australian defense minister Robert Ray pointed out that there would be at least several years' warning time before any major threat actually materialized.<sup>37</sup> That period of warning appears to have begun even before Ray spoke.

Military budgets had been rising steadily since the late 1980s, and China was conducting extensive negotiations with Russia over the purchase of military equipment. Some Soviet weapons experts whose talents were no longer needed in their own country found employment in the PRC. China had already become the chief, and perhaps only, external source of support for Burma's pariah government. Its assistance in the construction of three highways from the border of China's Yunnan province into Burma caused concerns that Beijing's real motive might be to use the roads as invasion routes to take over the country. The PRC's upgrading of naval bases at Mergui and the Cocos Islands, including the installation of radars in the latter, was interpreted as facilitating surveillance of the area by China's intelligence personnel. India became concerned that the Burmese government had provided the PRC with an outlet to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, where India's own navy had hitherto held sway. Japanese diplomats were particularly uneasy about a Chinese military presence in Mergui, near the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, which connects the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. In addition to being strategically important in its own right, this channel is as well a crucial transit point for Middle Eastern oil shipments to Japan.

In February 1992, China's National People's Congress passed a law asserting ownership of all contested islands: the Spratlys, the Paracels, the Senkakus, and Taiwan. It further claimed the



right to "adopt all necessary measures to prevent and stop the harmful passage of vessels through its territorial waters" and for "PRC warships or military aircraft to expel the intruders."<sup>38</sup> This caused anxiety not only among the other claimants to the islands but also among neutral nations who feared interference with established transportation routes in and around the area.

Japanese diplomats, aware of long-standing concern within the Chinese leadership that Japan may re-militarize, quietly suggested that this action had strengthened right-wing forces within their country. They also hinted that a visit from the Japanese imperial couple which the Chinese leadership greatly desired--anticipating an apology for Japan's actions against China in World War II--might have to be postponed. This caused a slight softening of the mainland's position: the Chinese foreign ministry issued a statement saying that the law was part of a normal domestic legislative process, did not represent a change in Chinese policy, and would not affect the joint development of the islands with countries involved in the dispute.<sup>39</sup> The foreign ministry did not, however, address the question of why it was felt necessary to pass the law. And, since the foreign ministry's explanation could not have had the effect of changing the legislation, the law could be advanced again in support of Chinese actions in the future. Moreover, a few months later, China granted oil exploration rights in a disputed area of the Spratlys to an American company, the Crestone Energy Corporation.

In 1995, a series of Chinese actions indicated that the pace of assertiveness had been stepped up. In the spring, the Philippine government announced that the PRC had built concrete structures, including radar installations, in a contested area known as Mischief Reef; it had also placed boundary markers meant to demarcate China's territorial waters only 50 miles away from the Philippines' Palawan Island. The PRC argued that the structures had no military significance, and were solely for the convenience of its fisherfolk. This prompted Filipino President Fidel Ramos, a former military leader, to arrange a tour of the installations for the media which indicated that the facilities were more sophisticated than Chinese fishermen would normally need or expect. Pictures were produced of PLAN vessels nearby. Ramos also ordered the destruction of the boundary markers. Beijing accused Manila of bullying China and warned that the PRC's previous restraint over the Spratlys could not be permanent. Another media tour might be resisted with armed force. It also warned the Philippines not to involve the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the matter: the two countries could discuss the issue bilaterally in due course.

In January 1996 Filipino anxieties were again raised by a confrontation near Zambales between their navy and two Chinese ships. Manila subsequently decided to downplay the issue with the

not very convincing explanation that the "pirate ships" were not owned by the Chinese military but by the Chinese militia.<sup>40</sup> The Chinese militia does possess some boats, but they typically stay very close to the mainland's coastline. In March, Manila revealed that the PRC had mounted electronic equipment on its installations on Mischief Reef, with a Filipino general describing the new upgrades were "certainly a cause for worry."<sup>41</sup>

Only weeks after the publicity about PRC installations on Mischief Reef, the Indonesian government made public a Chinese map showing the Natuna Islands as part of China's exclusive economic zone. Since the islands were not hitherto regarded as disputed territory, and because they contain rich gas deposits, there was immediate concern in Jakarta. Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas quickly departed for Beijing where, he announced, his Chinese counterpart had assured him that the PRC does not claim the islands and regards them as under Indonesia's jurisdiction.<sup>42</sup> As with the passage of the 1992 law, however, there remained questions as to the motivation for creating and circulating the map.

The PRC's intention to enforce its claims in the Spratlys and elsewhere cannot be doubted. In November 1995, a naval expedition sent to pour more than a thousand tons of stone and concrete onto a submerged reef in order to bolster the PRC's claims of sovereignty in that area persevered in its task despite hurricane-force winds and freezing temperatures. Half of its hundred-man crew returned with pneumonia and assorted injuries.<sup>43</sup> In the closing days of 1995, Japan revealed that the PRC had for several months been conducting oil exploration in an area of the Senkaku Islands, known to the Chinese as the Diaoyutai, and claimed by Japan. One of Japan's leading dailies interpreted China's activities in the area as "a highly political move aimed at testing Japan."<sup>44</sup>

Yet another indication that the PRC might be in the midst of the several years warning period envisioned by Robert Ray was the series of nuclear tests conducted since 1994. Protests by several nations were ignored; when Japan announced that it would suspend its grant aid to the PRC until the tests ceased, the reaction was belligerent: China described Japan's decision as "unwise . . . totally unreasonable [and] harmful to Sino-Japanese relations."<sup>45</sup> Japanese sources privately speculated that the PRC's decision to begin oil exploration in the Senkakus had been taken in retaliation for Japan's suspension of grants.<sup>46</sup>

The most recent manifestation of the PRC's commitment to its territorial claims has been a series of missile tests that had the effect of imposing a blockade of Taiwan. While China explained that these were undertaken to deter Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui from declaring the island's independence and to

discourage his drive to seek greater international recognition for his nation's separate existence, skeptics pointed out that Chinese actions amounted to describing the victim as the perpetrator: unlike his major parliamentary opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, Lee and his fellow Kuomintang party members had steadfastly advocated unification--albeit on an indefinite and extended timetable. The more likely explanation, they argued, was the PRC's desire to disrupt the island's first direct presidential election.

### **The PLA and the Execution of Strategy.**

As noted above, the People's Liberation Army's ability to support an aggressive strategy is limited. This, however, assumes that those who feel their interests have been adversely affected are willing to resist. So far, PLA shows of strength--what some have seen as a strategy of bluff--have been relatively successful in intimidating its neighbors. There have been few indications that the neighbors are disposed to fight back. Vietnamese and Chinese gunboats exchanged fire briefly in 1984 and 1988; the Taiwan military is put on a state of high alert when war games or missile tests are carried out near its territory; and, when the PRC announced that a series of tests would be conducted with live ammunition, the United States ordered two carrier battle groups into the area.

Non-military responses have been taken: Japan's suspension of grant aid in response to the PRC's refusal to cease nuclear testing is one example. Another is the founding in July 1994 of a new organization, the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), to provide a forum for the resolution of disputes between member countries. Although China has joined, it has refused to discuss these disputes except on a bilateral basis with the countries involved. Presumably this is because the PRC's leaders fear that the image costs of being perceived as intransigent in multilateral negotiations are much higher than those involved in a one-on-one bargaining situation. The sheer size of the PRC relative to most of its neighbors also confers advantages in bilateral negotiations. In any case, the ARF has created no dispute resolution mechanisms, and has so far functioned only as a venue for general discussion of issues.

There are indications that the PRC is willing to back down, at least temporarily, under pressure. The foreign ministry's softening the interpretation of the 1992 law unilaterally annexing many disputed territories after Japan threatened suspension of the imperial couple's visit is a case in point. So, as well, is the PRC's distancing itself from what appeared to be a claim to the Natuna Islands after the Indonesian government protested. Other bilateral and unilateral moves by concerned

countries indicate that the PRC's actions may be calling forth equal and opposite reactions from the states who feel their interests being threatened. Immediately after the Philippine government asked the United States to relinquish its bases in that country, Singapore offered to allow the United States to use its facilities. Both Singapore and Malaysia undertook expensive military modernization programs as well as reactivating the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA) with Britain, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>47</sup> In 1993, India and Indonesia began holding joint naval exercises, and in December 1995, Indonesia and Australia signed a mutual security agreement.<sup>48</sup> Only a few months after discovering Chinese activities on Mischief Reef, the Philippine legislature agreed to fund a large increase in military spending, earmarking most of it for combat ships and sophisticated fighter planes.<sup>49</sup> Japanese foreign ministry officials have discussed growing perceptions of a China threat with their opposite numbers in China, suggesting that the PRC heighten transparency on defense issues and hold regular discussions with its counterparts.<sup>50</sup>

The sum total of these reactions may persuade the PRC to soften its positions on a number of security issues. Yet domestic pressures may make it difficult for the Chinese leadership to back away from some of the stands they have taken. Jiang Zemin is an untested leader with no power base of his own, no military experience, and several rivals for power. On the other side of the argument, for the PRC to court military confrontation while armed only with forces as deficient as the PLA carries even greater strategic risks for Jiang as well as for China.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *Two Letters on Strategy*, trans. and ed., Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1984, p. 9.

2. For example, an unsigned editorial in the Hong Kong daily *South China Morning Post* (February 18, 1996, p. 18) that described Chinese President Jiang Zemin as cautioning his senior generals that their desire to invade Taiwan could wreck the Hong Kong economy and kill all hope of a smooth transition. "Unfortunately, it is far from clear this warning will be heeded." If true, this implies that the PLA does not take orders from its commander-in-chief--an implication fraught with danger not only for the PRC but for regional security. No source is cited.

3. *Who's Who In China: Current Leaders, 1994*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994. Author's calculation based on a PRC population of 1.2 billion and Shandong provincial population of 86,700,000 (1990 census).

4. *Ibid.*, and Defense Liaison Office, United States Consulate General, Hong Kong, *Directory of PRC Military Personalities: 1995*, Hong Kong, October 1995.

5. Fujian-based reporter (no name specified), "Special Dispatch: Fujian People Talk About Military Exercise During Spring Festival," *Wen Wei Po* (Hong Kong), February 26, 1996, p. 2, in *FBIS-CHI*, February 22, 1996, p. 41.

6. Yen Hua, "Jiangsu, Shandong Factions Carve Up Military Power--Inside Story of Unusual PLA Top-Level Changes," *Chien Shao*, February 1, 1996, pp. 38-40, in *FBIS-CHI*, February 22, 1996, pp. 25-28.

7. Commentator, "Better Vertical Leadership by the Military of the Militia," *Zhongguo minbing*, December 9, 1995, p. 1, in *FBIS-CHI*, February 8, 1996, pp. 29-30. *Zhongguo minbing* is published by the PLA's General Political Department.

8. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "Coastal Leaders Express 'Reservations' About PLA Exercise," *South China Morning Post*, February 8, 1996, p. 8.

9. Xiao Bing and Qing Bo, *Zhongguojun nengfou dabai xia yizhang zhanzheng* (Can the Chinese Military Win the Next War), Chongqing: Southwestern Normal University Publishing House, June 1993. The document, stamped *neibu*, or for internal circulation only, was placed on a bookshelf in Beijing, presumably accidentally, where a Western diplomat discovered and purchased it. An English translation was published by United States Technical Information Services, *Joint Publication Research Service Report 94-024-L*, May 5, 1994, marked For Official Use Only. For a summary and analysis of the main points, see Ross H. Munro, "Eavesdropping on the Chinese Military: Where It Expects War--and Where It Doesn't," *Orbis*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Summer 1994, pp. 355-372.

10. *Zhongguojun*, p. 32.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

12. For example, the authors state that China has 8 military regions; there are actually only 7.

13. A publication that appeared in 1982 quotes Deng Xiaoping as having said in January 1975 that ". . . the army has become bloated and is not a crack outfit that will make a good showing in combat." Deng Xiaoping, "Army Needs Consolidation," January 25, 1975, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (1982), trans. in U.S. Department of Commerce, Joint Publications Research Service, *China Political and Sociological Report*, No.

468, July 1, 1983, pp. 2-3. Deng's speech was not reported in the Chinese press at the time it was supposedly made.

14. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1995-1996*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 176.

15. A Russian diplomat once asked his American friends, only partly in jest, if they had any idea how difficult it was to decide how many Chinese thermos bottles and sets of long winter underwear it took to equal the cost of a fighter plane.

16. Bates Gill, "Russia, Israel Help Force Modernization," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, January 31, 1996, p. 54.

17. Kenneth W. Allen, Glenn Krumel, and Jonathan D. Pollack, *China's Air Force Enters the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1995, p. 156.

18. Nick Cook, "Lifting the Veil on China's Fighters," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, January 31, 1996. p. 52.

19. Allen, et. al., p. 155.

20. Cook, p. 52.

21. Author's interview with Major Kenneth W. Allen, March 7, 1996. Mr. Allen, now retired from the military, served as assistant Air Force attache in Beijing and is the author of several scholarly studies on the Chinese air force.

22. Anonymous officer interviewed in "Officer Assesses PRC's Su-27 Fighter Production," *Chung-kuo shih-pao (China Times, Taipei)*, February 4, 1996, p. 3, in *FBIS-CHI*, February 8, 1996, p. 75.

23. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle For the Soul of a Rising Power*, New York: Vintage, 1995, p. 382.

24. Author's conversation, March 17, 1996. The informant requested that his name not be used.

25. Larry M. Wortzel, "China Pursues Traditional Great-Power Status," *Orbis*, Spring 1994, p. 164.

26. Wortzel, pp. 163-164.

27. "Tight Fit," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 1, 1993, p. 9.

28. The story has a happy ending: with the help of a book, a female engineer who took pity on him, and great diligence, the young person succeeded and "became a famous radar man." *Xinhua* (New China News Agency), February 14, 1995, in *FBIS-CHI*, February 16, 1995, p. 43.

29. IISS, p. 176.

30. Wortzel, p. 171.

31. See, e.g., *Naeo Na* (Bangkok), April 21, 1989, in *FBIS East Asia (FBIS-EAS)*, April 24, 1989, pp. 68-69; *Nation* (Bangkok), April 23, 1989, in *FBIS-EAS*, April 28, 1989, p. 75. The Thais also purchased fighter planes from China; after similar complaints about the planes, it decided against additional purchases.

32. Wortzel, p. 171.

33. Indonesia, 40,500; Singapore, 2,900; Thailand, 66,000; Mayasia, 12,000; Philippines, 23,000; Brunei, 7,000; Vietnam, 42,000; Taiwan, 68,000 equal 200,200. All figures from *The Military Balance, 1995/1996*.

34. "A Question We Must Ask Malaysia," *Krungthep Thurakit* (Bangkok), February 17, 1996, p. 2, in *FBIS-EAS*, February 20, 1996, pp. 74-75.

35. Vietnamese News Agency (Hanoi), February 23, 1996, in *FBIS-EAS*, February 26, 1996, pp. 76-77.

36. *Kyodo* (Tokyo), January 27, 1996, in *FBIS-CHI*, January 29, 1996, pp. 11-12.

37. "Interview With Robert Ray," *Defense News*, June 21-27, 1993, p. 30.

38. The text of the law was promulgated by *Xinhua* on February 25, 1992; see *FBIS-CHI*, February 28, 1992, pp. 2-3.

39. Ma Baolin, "Legislation Doesn't Mean Policy Change," *Beijing Review*, March 30-April 5, 1992, pp. 10-11.

40. GMA-7 Radio-Television Arts Network (Quezon City), January 30, 1996, in *FBIS-EAS*, February 1, 1996, pp. 61-62.

41. *Kyodo*, March 1, 1996, in *FBIS-EAS*, March 1, 1996, p. 56.

42. Antara (Jakarta), July 21, 1995, in *FBIS-EAS*, July 24, 1995, p. 75.

43. (no author), "Concrete Claims," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 21, 1995, p. 14.

44. Hiroyuki Sugiyama, "PRC Likely To Increase Activity in Japanese Waters," *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo), January 4, 1996, p. 3, in *FBIS-EAS*, January 23, 1996, p. 7.

45. Gu Ping, "An Unwise Move," *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), September 9, 1995, p. 3.

46. See, e.g., Hiroyuki Sugiyama, "PRC Likely To Increase Activity in Japanese Waters," *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo), January 4, 1996, p. 3, in *FBIS-EAS*, January 23, 1996, pp. 7-8.

47. (no author), "Bilateral Fora are Important for Promoting Mutual Trust," *Kompas* (Jakarta), January 12, 1996, (received via Internet).

48. According to the agreement, Australia and Indonesia undertake to consult at ministerial level on a regular basis about matters affecting their common security and to cooperate to benefit their own security and that of the region. They undertake to consult each other in case of adverse challenges to either party or to their common security interests and, if appropriate, consider individual or joint measures. See Ferdinandus Sius, "The Significance of the Republic of Indonesia- Australia Security Agreement," *Suara Pembaruan*, January 10, 1996, pp. 2-3, in *FBIS-EAS*, January 24, 1996, pp. 79-82.

49. *Kyodo*, August 13, 1995, in *FBIS-EAS*, August 14, 1995, p. 79.

50. (no author), "Japan-People's Republic of China Security Dialogue," Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 19, 1996, via Internet, in *FBIS-EAS*, January 19, 1996, p. 7.



U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

Major General Richard A. Chilcoat  
Commandant

\*\*\*\*\*

STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE

Director  
Colonel Richard H. Witherspoon

Director of Research  
and Conference Organizer  
Dr. Earl H. Tilford, Jr.

Author  
Dr. June Teufel Dreyer

Director of Publications and Production  
Mrs. Marianne P. Cowling

Secretaries  
Mrs. Devona A. Peck  
Ms. Rita A. Rummel

\*\*\*\*\*

Composition  
Mrs. Mary Jane Semple

Cover Artist  
Mr. James E. Kistler