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Commentary & Reply

From *Parameters*, Summer 2002, pp. 113-14.

CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS AND POLICIES

To the Editor:

In his thoughtful article, "China's Strategic Modernization: The Russian Connection" (*Parameters*, Winter 2001-02), Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Barron makes one problematic inference about the Chinese leadership's threat perceptions and one wrong statement about the leadership's policy preferences.

First, Colonel Barron states that the growth in China's military power is occurring in the absence of a threat to China's territory. This is not how the leadership sees it. Taiwan—rightly or wrongly—is considered by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership as part of Chinese territory. The possibility of some kind of de jure independent Taiwan protected by US military power is considered as much as a threat to Chinese territorial integrity as a Xinjiang separatist movement or as Vietnamese claims to parts of the South China Sea. Robust empirical findings in international relations research suggest that territory—particularly the fear of losing it, more so than the desire to gain it—is one of the main sources of interstate military conflicts. To the extent that Chinese leadership views de jure Taiwanese independence as a loss of territory, we should expect it to take relatively high risks to prevent this outcome.

Second, Barron accepts uncritically the Cox Report's description of the relative priority of military versus civilian parts of the economy. He states, "This 'guns before butter' approach is contained in what is called the 'Sixteen Character Policy.'" He then quotes the Cox Report: "The CCP's main aim for the modernization and expansion of the civilian economy is to support the building of modern military weapon systems and to support the aims of the PLA."

Unfortunately, the Cox Report is wrong on both counts. Internally circulated and open Chinese language sources make it clear that the Sixteen Character policy refers to the development of civilian product lines in military-owned equipment factories. Under this policy, profits from civilian products would be plowed back into these factories so as to ensure these lines can improve their levels of technology and stay open should they be needed for wartime mobilization. PLA-owned military equipment factories are a small part of the overall economy, however. In short, the Sixteen Character policy does not refer to the overall subordination of the civilian to the military economy. A careful reading of the sources that the Cox Report cites to make this case in fact does not support the report's claims. There is also no documentary evidence that the CCP sees the growth in the civilian economy as primarily designed to serve the PLA's interests. This statement in the Cox Report is undocumented. In fact the PLA has consistently complained that the civilian leadership has not devoted enough resources to the military. To be sure, the CCP's pocketbook is more open now for the PLA than ever since the economic reforms began in the late 1970s (probably mostly due to the salience of the Taiwan issue), but it is not the case that PLA preferences have generally prevailed in civilian economic decisionmaking in the reform period. Rather, most observers inside and outside China believe that the

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main aim of developing the civilian economy is to ensure the longevity of CCP rule by improving living standards and enhancing the fragile legitimacy of the regime.

Dr. Iain Johnston

The Noe Laine Professor of China in World Affairs, Harvard University

The Author Replies:

I greatly appreciate Dr. Johnston's thoughts and comments on my article. With China's most recent announcement in March of this year to further increase military spending by 17 percent, the PRC will have increased defense spending by a full one-third over the past two years. Dr. Johnston suggests this increase is due to the Chinese leadership's fear of a de jure independent Taiwan protected by US military power. I disagree for a couple of reasons. First, the increase in Chinese defense spending more accurately reflects Beijing's ambition to build a powerful military to complement its robust economy and to underpin its strategic position in Asia rather than in answer to a perceived threat to Chinese territory. Second, for the United States to establish separate relations with and provide support to a de jure independent Taiwan would be in total contradiction of the official US policy toward China since relations were restored in 1971. Every administration since then, Democrat or Republican, has asserted that it supports a one China policy, and this policy continues under the Bush Administration. The Chinese understand this and operate strategically within this established bilateral framework.

I also disagree with Dr. Johnston's interpretation of the Chinese leadership's policy intentions for strategic modernization. China's intent is expressed clearly through Jiang Zemin's "Super 863 Program" and the "Sixteen Character Policy." The critical analysis reflected in the bipartisan congressional Cox Report rightly asserts that military modernization is the chief object of the modernization of the overall economy and that no effort will be spared to modernize China's weaponry and to eventually provide the PLA with a modern regional power projection capability. China's efforts are focused on turning the People's Liberation Army from an army of farmers into a contemporary, streamlined fighting force. The goal with the support of this improved force, according to many sources, is for China to become a "regional hegemon," able to project power into any corner of Asia, protect the South China sea lanes for Chinese oil, replace the United States as the preeminent power in the region, and use its power to guarantee eventual peaceful reunification with Taiwan. To do so, in its hunt for modern technology China has gone on a shopping spree for weapons and enabling technology—mostly from Russia, but also from Israel and South Africa. China was in fact the world's largest arms importer in 2000 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Most analysts believe it will also be the largest for 2001 and 2002.

As I indicated in my article, as China rises from the introverted crouch of the Maoist period and becomes more powerful, it is defining a wider role and a new identity for itself in international security. China's emergence is the most portentous geostrategic development in America's westward vista, as important as, to the east, Russia's search for a post-Cold War security concept.

The United States cannot steer China's course, but, as with Russia, it can exercise influence, especially in the post-9/11 world.

Lieutenant Colonel (P) Michael J. Barron

Reviewed 14 May 2002. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil