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Andrew Scobell

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# Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?

ANDREW SCOBELL

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In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the People's Republic of China appears intent on becoming a responsible great power. Beijing continues to insist—as it has for several decades—that “peace and development” are the key trends of the times. President Hu Jintao claims that China is focused on building a “harmonious” and “moderately prosperous society” at home and a “harmonious world” abroad. Beijing has taken great pains to stress that its growing power does not threaten any nation, and the world is witnessing China's “peaceful rise” or “peaceful development.”<sup>1</sup> China is increasingly integrated into the global economy and embracing multilateralism in unprecedented ways. Yet, at the same time, observers are alternately alarmed and perplexed by the recurring harsh, threatening rhetoric of senior Chinese military leaders and the intermittent but provocative acts by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as all branches of China's armed forces are collectively identified. Is there a civil-military gap in China's peaceful rise? The author suggests the answer is “yes.”

Perhaps the most infamous bellicose blasts were those uttered by Chinese generals in late 1995 and mid-2005. These remarks concerned bravado about nuclear weapons and the targeting of the United States. The most incendiary military actions were missile tests in 1995 and 1996 in the vicinity of Taiwan; a collision between PLA and US military aircraft in 2001; an incident involving a Chinese submarine and US aircraft carrier in 2006; and an unannounced antisatellite test in 2007. The hawkish verbiage of PLA generals seems part of a deliberate and calculated Chinese deterrence effort, and the periodic provocative

acts by the Chinese armed forces reflect a civil-military relationship in which civilian control is loose and hands-off.

### *Mixed Messages*

What explains the outspokenness of Chinese officers and the audacious actions of China's military? Why does the PLA appear so belligerent? These harsh words and apparent provocations could be counterproductive. Indeed, they seem to contradict the peaceable image Beijing so assiduously tries to cultivate around the world. China insists that it seeks to have good relations with all countries, especially the United States.

Many China analysts assume that Chinese commanders are more hard-line—but not bellicose—toward the United States and the Taiwan issue than are civilian leaders, and that the PLA is tightly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>2</sup> Outspoken officers and belligerent events, however, raise questions about these assumptions. Is there a significant chasm between the thinking of Chinese civilian and military leaders? Is there a worrisome laxity in civilian control of China's military? In other words, are there serious gaps in China's civil-military relations? The answers to these questions require an examination of China's civil-military relations.

### *A Gap in Attitudes and Perspectives?*

The term gap is used in two ways: First, to refer to a possible serious difference or disconnect between the attitudes and perspectives of civilian and military elites based upon different career paths and life experiences and, second, to refer to possible loose civilian control of the military.<sup>3</sup> Members of a nation's armed forces are part of the larger society and hence share key aspects of its culture and values. Nevertheless, due to the nature of their profession they possess their own distinct culture with a set of core values and attitudes that are significantly different from those of the civilian world.<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington's depiction of a conservative, pessimistic, and realistic "military mind" is born out in empirical tests: Military personnel hold different perspectives and mind-

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Andrew Scobell is Associate Professor of International Affairs and Director of the China Certificate Program in the George H. W. Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *China's Use of Military Force* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and co-author (with Andrew Nathan) of *China's Search for Security* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

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sets than civilian elites, especially political leaders who have never served in the armed forces. These differences include how they approach the use of military force.

For example, the work of Richard Betts on US elites reveals that more often than not senior uniformed leaders are significantly more reluctant than their civilian counterparts to advocate the use of force. There appear to be significant differences in this regard between the culture, values, and attitudes of Chinese soldiers and civilians. A study by this author indicates a similar pattern. A gap seems to manifest itself in the policy orientations of Chinese elites in uniform and those in mufti: Chinese soldiers tend to be more intensely nationalistic as well as more hard-line toward the United States and Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>

### *A Gap in Civilian Control?*

There also appears to be a gap in China's civilian control of the military. In the United States, complaints surfaced regarding micro-management by civilian officials, notably former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, into matters such as the planning and execution of the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Just as excessive meddling by civilian leaders into the purview of the uniformed professional military can be problematic, so too can extreme aloofness. In recent years Beijing's civilian CCP leaders seem to have adopted a hands-off approach to the day-to-day affairs of the PLA. The disposition and background of the post-Long March generations of political and military leaders have altered the format of civil-military relations and structure of the mechanisms of control.

A core distinguishing characteristic of the Long March generation was the substantial overlap of political and military elites. Former top leaders Mao Zedong, who dominated the Chinese Communist Party from the mid-1930s until his death in 1976, and Deng Xiaoping, who was the paramount figure from the late 1970s until his death in 1997, were the most prominent members of this famous generation of leaders who had participated in the legendary 1930s trek that ensured the survival of the Communist movement. In fact, most leaders of this generation were both political and military elites.

By the mid-1990s, with the passing of the Long March generation, China's civil-military relations had evolved. In subsequent generations, civilian and military leaders became more differentiated and distinct. At the highest echelon, elites such as retired top leader Jiang Zemin and current paramount leader Hu Jintao, while holding the position of head of the PLA

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*Is there a worrisome laxity in civilian control of China's military? Are there serious gaps in China's civil-military relations?*

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in addition to their formal government and party posts, did not exert the same kind of influence in, or engender the same kind of deference from, China's military. In the twenty-first century, China's Communist Party leaders are civilian technocrats with little or no military experience or expertise. Twenty-two of the 25 members elected to the Politburo at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007 have no military experience, and two of the three remaining are PLA generals.

Much has been made of the firm principle of civilian (i.e., "party") control of the military in China. Mao's dictum is invariably invoked: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party." Yet the reality is that this principle was never firmly institutionalized and relied instead on the unassailable authority of key "civilian" elites with extensive military credentials, such as Mao and later Deng. The key entity in the exercise of CCP control of the armed forces was the Central Military Commission (CMC). An examination of the membership of this body in recent decades reveals that the overwhelming majority of seats have been occupied by military officers. The positions of chair and vice chair tend to be held by senior civilians, but the composition of the body is hardly conducive to firm civilian control or oversight of military affairs.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 2009, only one of the 11 members of the CMC is a civilian, Hu Jintao, who serves as chair. The vice chairs—Generals Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong—are China's most senior soldiers who also serve on the CCP Politburo.

But even if gaps exist between soldiers and civilians in China, does it matter? The PLA is considered a key bureaucratic and institutional actor in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy. Recent research concludes that the PLA is not as influential an actor as it once was; the PLA now is only one voice among many.<sup>8</sup> In times of crisis or war, however, soldiers suddenly become more important actors. If there are gaps in terms of perspectives and control, this really could be critical. Perhaps the most plausible scenario for a crisis or conflict is in the Taiwan Strait. China is committed to achieving unification or at least preventing the island from moving toward de jure independence with military force if necessary, while the United States is committed to a peaceful resolution and deterring Chinese military action to change the status quo. Since the mid-1990s, Beijing

has interpreted the calls for “state to state” status from successive political leaders in Taipei as unrelenting efforts to move Taiwan further and further down the road to independence.

### ***Four Explanations***

If one dismisses the stereotype of soldier as warmonger, there are four possible explanations for the pattern of Chinese military words and deeds. The first explanation presumes that there are few if any gaps in Chinese civil-military relations, while the latter three assume that there are significant gaps.

- *What one hears and sees is a carefully scripted and well-acted drama.*

There is no significant “gap,” and the PLA is playing its role in an ongoing and well-orchestrated good cop/bad cop drama. The dialogue and action are carefully scripted and well rehearsed.<sup>9</sup> Under this scheme, the PLA is playing “bad cop” to exert pressure on the United States as a way of putting credibility into Chinese efforts to deter the United States from intervening in any future Taiwan Strait conflict. In one sense, every leader is a hard-liner on the issue of Taiwan because no leader can afford to look soft on Taiwan. Otherwise they would leave themselves vulnerable to attack by political rivals, and the Communist Party would leave itself open to being criticized as impotent in dealing with pro-independence forces and their foreign backers.

- *The differences between soldiers and statesmen are real and unscripted.*

The PLA is far more hard-line toward the United States than its civilian counterparts. There is greater hostility toward and distrust of the United States among Chinese military leaders than civilian leaders. Members of the military are “tougher than . . . civilian officials” and more “hawkish” toward the United States and the international system.<sup>10</sup> The logic behind this explanation is that the principal preoccupation of the PLA is its central role in achieving unification with Taiwan. The United States is viewed as the major obstacle to such plans, and the US military is the PLA’s likely adversary should a military operation result.

- *Soldiers are talking and acting as rogues.*

The PLA is actively pursuing an agenda and defense policy independently from civilian bureaucratic entities in China. Questions have been raised regarding whether the PLA has been acting as “rogue warriors.”<sup>11</sup> This explanation is rooted in the supposition that military men are loose cannons beyond the control of civilian authority not due to any ne-

farious scheming but because they are driven and focused purely on military modernization. PLA leaders are going their own way to pursue power and resources with little regard for civilian leaders or consideration for the larger implications of their activities.

- *Soldiers are talking and acting as saboteurs.*

The PLA is shrewdly trying to undermine the “peaceful rise” strategy of its political masters by exaggerating threats. This is a more sophisticated version of the third explanation where the military is motivated by bureaucratic interests to win additional funding and resources. The PLA is conducting a well-coordinated campaign to sabotage the civilian leadership’s top priority of economic growth and give greater emphasis to military modernization. The logic behind this explanation is that full-blown peace and the absence of tensions are bad for business. Without an immediate threat to China or other pressing mission for the PLA, the military becomes a lower national priority.<sup>12</sup>

These four explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, the best explanation may lie somewhere in between or be some combination. The most plausible is that the verbiage is scripted but sincere (somewhere between the first and second explanations); the acts are those of a roguish PLA but not the doings of a rogue or saboteur (between the third and fourth explanations). Before dismissing some variant of the third and fourth explanations out of hand, consider the following anecdote. In mid-2007, a Chinese general remarked wistfully in front of a US audience, which included the author, that China’s extended period of largely uninterrupted economic growth and peace has been a mixed blessing for the PLA. He explained that this situation allowed significant state funding for military modernization but lamented that it provided no sense of urgency to drive the defense buildup.

The evidence suggests that the hawkish words of PLA generals are part of a deliberate and calculated Chinese deterrence effort directed at the United States. The periodic provocative acts by China’s military reflect loose and hands-off civilian control. First the statements are examined, and then the actions are considered.

### *A Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*

The statements of senior Chinese military leaders may best be understood as scripted but serious and sincere attempts to deter the United States from intervening in a future Taiwan scenario. Here we focus on the two most infamous utterances, both on the topic of nuclear weapons. The first comment by a Chinese general was made in a 1995 private conver-

sation but one that the speaker fully expected would be communicated to US officials. The second provocative set of remarks by a PLA general was made publicly in front of a group of reporters a decade later.

*“Caring More About LA than Taipei”*

The first stark comment occurred in October 1995 at the conclusion of an extended conversation between a Chinese general and a retired US ambassador in the midst of the heightened tensions of the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis. According to Ambassador Chas Freeman, a senior Chinese officer commented, “You [the United States] do not have the strategic leverage that you had in the 1950s when you threatened nuclear strikes on us [China]. You were able to do that because we could not hit back. But if you hit us now, we can hit back. So you will not make those threats. In the end you care more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei.”<sup>13</sup>

The inflammatory remark was first made public three months later by a journalist who revealed the contents of his interview with Freeman.<sup>14</sup> US analysts quickly concluded that the officer was General Xiong Guangkai, then-head of Chinese military intelligence. Five years later, Freeman clarified the specifics of the remarks—although he never revealed the identity of his source—and explained the context in which they were made. While the Chinese general may not have anticipated that his remarks would make headlines in major American newspapers, he would have almost certainly assumed—indeed desired—that they would be relayed to US officials. Freeman interpreted the statement not as a threat but as being made in a “deterrent context”—as a warning that for China, where Taiwan was concerned, no sacrifice would be too great.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, high-level Chinese leaders reportedly told Freeman that Beijing “would sacrifice ‘millions of men’ and ‘entire cities’ to assure the unity of China and . . . opined that the United States would not make comparable sacrifices.”<sup>16</sup>

*“Responding with Nukes”*

The second infamous utterance a decade later, unlike the first, was clearly staged for public consumption. In July 2005, Major General Zhu Chenghu of China’s National Defense University told assembled journalists, “If the Americans draw their missiles and position-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China’s territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons.” Zhu continued: “If the Americans are determined to interfere [in a Taiwan scenario] then we will be determined to respond. We Chinese will prepare ourselves for the destruction of all the cities east



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***There also appears to be a gap in China's  
civilian control of the military.***

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of Xian. Of course, the Americans will have to be prepared that hundreds of cities will be destroyed by the Chinese.”<sup>17</sup>

While the general was reportedly reprimanded for his remarks, the sanction constituted a token gesture that did not prevent his subsequent promotion.<sup>18</sup> Zhu's premeditated statement came on the heels of the passage of China's "Anti-Secession Law" by the National People's Congress in March 2005. Article Eight justifies the use of "non-peaceful means and other necessary measures" in "the event that the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act . . . [in a manner that Beijing construes as harming] China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Such PLA rhetoric reflects scripting; the utterances of Chinese soldiers are prepared and calculated to have impact.<sup>19</sup> PLA figures have aimed even more fiery rhetoric at Taiwan. In November 2003, for example, General Wang Zaixi of the Taiwan Affairs Office declared, "Taiwan independence means war."<sup>20</sup>

The harsh rhetoric and warnings by leaders of China's military appear to be part and parcel of a latter-day calculus of deterrence, a pattern of rhetoric and behavior first identified decades ago.<sup>21</sup> The ominous words of military professionals have become standard operating procedure for a country (China) that faces a severe, daunting asymmetry of power vis-à-vis the most capable and technologically sophisticated military establishment (the United States). In the past, warnings tended to be issued in the context of a particular looming or actual crisis—e.g., Korea (1950), India (1962), and Vietnam (1979). The contemporary cautions are meant as general deterrence aimed at the United States. Taiwan is considered an uncontestable piece of Chinese territory. In the minds of the Chinese, resolving the island's status, by force if necessary, is a purely internal matter. What Beijing really fears is military intervention by Washington.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the enormous imbalance in military capabilities between China and the United States, Beijing has to compensate wherever it can. One way is by highlighting an area in which the Chinese believe they enjoy superiority, the degree of dedication to the principle of national unification and the case of Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to overstate the importance of the island to Beijing. For a variety of reasons—psychological, prestige, and geopolitical—China's claim to Taiwan is considered unassailable and non-negotiable. Since the 1980s, the preferred mode to achieve unification is peaceful, but Beijing has repeatedly stated it will use force if necessary.

For the Chinese military, realizing unification with Taiwan is considered a “sacred duty” and a cause for which “the PLA will fight to the death.”<sup>24</sup> The Taiwan Strait continues to be the most important warfighting scenario for the PLA. Preparing to seize the island is a consuming focus, and the ever-present preoccupation of Chinese generals is how to deal with the US military’s response.

Chinese military leaders are absolutely certain that where Taiwan is concerned they enjoy an overwhelming “asymmetry of motivation” vis-à-vis the United States.<sup>25</sup> In other words, they are more willing to fight and die in a conflict over Taiwan than are Americans. General Wang Zaixi, Deputy Director of the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office, underscored this very point in November 2003. He suggested that while China was fully committed to war in the event of Taiwan independence, the island did not constitute a vital national interest for the United States. Therefore, Wang opined that when push came to shove, Washington would “neither protect Taiwan independence nor shed blood for independence.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the crux is not whether the Chinese are persuaded about the “reputational resolve” of the United States in coming to Taiwan’s defense. China’s military leaders assume that in any military operation against Taiwan, the US military will be involved and would be victorious in a conventional force-on-force confrontation. It would be foolhardy for Washington to conclude, however, that in and of themselves these assumptions are likely to be enough to deter Beijing from acting. The fundamental presumption in Beijing’s calculus is that Washington’s strength of resolve is relative compared to China’s commitment on the Taiwan issue and other US commitments.<sup>27</sup> Chinese leaders firmly believe that China enjoys a substantial and favorable asymmetry of interest vis-à-vis Taiwan. The Chinese therefore hope to deter the United States from intervening in any future Taiwan scenario.

### ***Lessons: Deterrence and Asymmetry***

The harsh rhetoric is calibrated and conditioned by the two primary lessons that China’s military has taken from American military operations since the end of the Cold War. First, the US armed forces are the most capable, battle-tested, and technologically sophisticated in the world. The performance of the US military in Operation Desert Storm (1991), Operation Allied Force (1999), Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom has underscored to China’s military the sizeable deficiencies in their forces. This imbalance exists despite a significant and sustained program of military modernization over the past two decades. As

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*But even if gaps exist between soldiers and civilians in China, does it matter?*

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a result, China's military prefers to avoid a force-on-force conflict with the US military. As General Zhu stated in 2005, China doesn't have the "capability to fight a conventional war against the United States. We can't win this kind of war."<sup>28</sup>

The second primary lesson the PLA has garnered is that Washington's resolve and commitment can be uncertain and limited. Commitment to causes that are not central to US national interests can be weak, and tolerance for casualties can be low.<sup>29</sup> This belief continues despite extended US commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq in the face of rising casualties. But it is triumph in a battle of wills that the PLA tells itself is what really matters. On the question of Taiwan, Chinese soldiers believe they hold a clear asymmetrical advantage over their potential adversaries.

To China's leaders the potential for a conventional conflict with the United States is highly unlikely in the near future, with the notable exception of Taiwan. In 2004, Major General Yao Youzhi of the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences remarked to a Hong Kong newspaper that while Taiwan is "China's domestic issue, it has evolved to become an international issue. If a war actually erupted in the Taiwan Strait, it is possible that it will involve the military forces of other countries, creating a complex war situation. However, no matter what way the situation will develop, China has the capability of winning this war."<sup>30</sup> Given the above lessons, the challenge for China is how to win without fighting the United States. The second lesson suggests to China's military that the first lesson can be overcome.

One option is to win quickly before the United States has time to react. In this scenario Beijing would confront Washington with a *fait accompli*. While this would be desirable, the Chinese recognize that this scenario cannot be assumed. Hence, other strategies are being considered. At the operational level, these include so-called "anti-access" strategies to hinder the ability of US military forces to intervene.<sup>31</sup> At the strategic level, China seeks to deter the United States by revealing hints of these anti-access measures—how China, for example, might be able to damage, disable, or sink surface vessels. Beyond this, China seeks to remind the United States of its small but potent nuclear arsenal. Specifically, Beijing is warning Washington that China possesses the capability and motivation to use its strategic nuclear arsenal against the United States.

To interpret these warnings as aggressive threats and conclude that Chinese military leaders are eager for combat with the United States would be a mistake. No nation believes it can defeat the United States in a conventional war. Hence no country desires a confrontation with the US armed forces. The warnings by PLA generals about China's readiness to launch strategic missiles against the United States, despite Washington's overwhelming advantage, is part of a larger concerted effort to convince people that China possesses a massive asymmetric advantage that one ignores at great peril: determination. China attaches a far greater importance to Taiwan than does the United States. As a result, Beijing is more willing to expend vast amounts of blood and treasure to win the island. In short, the Chinese firmly believe they have a far greater "threshold of pain" where Taiwan is concerned than Americans.

### ***Roguish, but Not a Rogue***

In addition to harsh rhetoric, China's armed forces have engaged in behavior that has grabbed headlines and the attention of the US military. These have included missile tests and military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan in mid-1995 and early 1996. Other acts, such as cyber attacks on US Department of Defense Web sites and e-mail networks, have been traced back to China. Because these attacks cannot be conclusively attributed to China's military, the cyber dimension will not be explored further.<sup>32</sup>

These military actions suggest a pattern of hands-off management by top civilians. Civilian commander-in-chief Hu Jintao is President of the People's Republic of China, General Secretary of the CCP, and Chair of the Central Military Commission. As noted earlier, Chinese leaders, including Hu, are civilian technocrats with virtually no military background or expertise. While these civilian leaders have broad knowledge of military programs and defense priorities, they appear to afford the PLA considerable latitude and autonomy as to how programs are implemented. Such a hands-off approach would have been unthinkable in the earlier periods of the Chinese Communist movement. Former top leaders Mao and Deng were both intimately involved in military matters. They had extensive defense experience and vast networks of supporters in uniform, established reputations as military leaders and strategists of considerable stature in the course of their careers, and produced extensive bodies of writings on military issues and grand strategy.

Not that Jiang or Hu completely abrogated their responsibilities as the PLA's commander-in-chief; indeed, both have taken pains to educate

themselves regarding military affairs, have developed an overall direction for military modernization and China's defense policy, and sought to install and promote their supporters in the PLA's hierarchy. Rather, the key point is that, unprecedented in post-1949 China, first Jiang and then Hu have permitted China's military leadership an enormous amount of latitude in how and when they implement defense modernization. This approach was particularly evident in the latter years of the Jiang era and appears to have become even more pronounced under his successor. Significantly less active and engaged with the PLA than Jiang, Hu has yet to undertake a systematic program of visits to military installations, nor has he assiduously promoted generals to the same extent.<sup>33</sup> Huntington suggested that civil-military relations work best under conditions of "objective civilian control" where the armed forces have considerable autonomy over their own affairs. In the case of contemporary China, objective control and oversight appear to be weakly applied.

#### *2001 Hainan Island Incident*

The best known confrontation between the militaries of China and the United States in recent years occurred on 1 April 2001 in the vicinity of Hainan Island. A PLA Air Force F-8 fighter collided with a US Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft in international airspace. The F-8 crashed into the sea and its pilot was killed; the EP-3 was forced to make an emergency landing at a Chinese airbase. The negotiations between the United States and China to secure the release of the crew and airplane revealed a lack of communication and coordination between the PLA, their civilian superiors, and Chinese diplomats. Participants involved in these negotiations contrast the close and constant coordination between the civilian and military spheres on the American side with the clear lack of the same on the Chinese side. Moreover, Washington was concerned that the PLA was not providing timely and accurate information to China's civilian leadership.<sup>34</sup>

The fatal accident was caused by the aerial antics of the Chinese fighter pilot, Lieutenant Commander Wang Wei. Video footage later released by the Pentagon revealed a pattern of risky activity by the same pilot on other occasions. It is doubtful that China's top civilian leaders were aware of this behavior by Chinese pilots. Very likely, military leaders did not provide a complete and accurate account of the collision to Jiang Zemin or other civilian leaders.<sup>35</sup>

## *2006 USS Kitty Hawk Incident*

A second provocative incident occurred in October 2006 in the vicinity of Okinawa. A PLA Navy *Song*-class submarine, which was shadowing the USS *Kitty Hawk*, reportedly surfaced undetected within five miles of the aircraft carrier. The diesel-powered submarine is far less noisy and more difficult to detect than a nuclear-powered one. The event happened only weeks before Admiral Gary Roughead, then-Commander of US Pacific Fleet, was scheduled to visit China. Therefore, it is unlikely that China's top leadership—either civilian or military—knew a submarine was operating so close to a US Navy carrier battle group. Chinese leaders would want to minimize the likelihood of an incident between the two navies during such a high-profile visit so as not to embarrass their guest or create unnecessary tensions. But does this mean that China's leaders did not approve of PLA Navy submarines shadowing US Navy surface vessels? In fact, senior civilian elites are well aware that the PLA is embarked on a determined effort to become a first-class submarine power.<sup>36</sup>

Chinese submarines are engaged in a concerted effort to improve their ability to operate without detection in the vicinity of US vessels, a fact that is probably also known to these leaders. A priority goal of the PLA in a Taiwan scenario is the capability to swiftly locate and incapacitate US aircraft carriers operating in the western Pacific Ocean. To this end, Chinese submarines regularly engage in "stalking" these vessels. PLA Navy "writings leave little doubt that destruction of US aircraft carrier battle groups is the focal point of doctrinal development." The October 2006 incident underscores earlier assessments from both Chinese and US experts that the US Navy's antisubmarine warfare capabilities are far from foolproof.<sup>37</sup>

Why did the Chinese submarine surface? The captain most likely knew that this action would have resulted in discovery. Did he fear that his vessel was about to be detected and was in danger of a potentially hostile confrontation? Did he do it to test the reaction of the US vessels? Or to make a point to his US counterparts? Chinese military officials reportedly told Admiral Roughead that the submarine deliberately surfaced to show it had no hostile intent.<sup>38</sup> Chinese leaders have to assume that the United States is well aware of Chinese submarine activity; moreover, they probably view this knowledge in the hands of a potential opponent as desirable. Chinese military leaders likely hope to alarm their US counterparts, slow the response time to a Taiwan scenario, and perhaps even deter the United States from an intervention strategy.

### *January 2007 Antisatellite Test*

A third provocative incident occurred on 11 January 2007 when a medium-range ballistic missile was launched from the Xichang space complex in Sichuan Province and destroyed an aging Chinese meteorological satellite in orbit approximately 600 miles above the Earth. The test was a success, and the satellite broke into thousands of fragments. According to experts, the explosion produced more space debris than any other single human event.<sup>39</sup> There was no warning of the test. Indeed, Chinese confirmation of the event did not come for two weeks.

China is engaged in a vigorous military space program that includes a significant antisatellite component. China's civilian leaders have approved and sanctioned the program. This is not the first antisatellite test the PLA has conducted, but it is the first fully successful one. While some observers have suggested the test reveals a rogue military operating completely outside the control of China's top leaders, that scenario is simply not plausible.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the evidence suggests that senior Chinese leaders did not know the test details or schedule, consistent with the idea of a roguish PLA operating on a loose leash.<sup>41</sup> Speaking ten days after the test, China's top diplomat, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, insisted that he had "not received any confirmed information" on the matter.<sup>42</sup>

In any case, the event was poorly handled by Beijing. After-the-fact spin control was disjointed and even contradictory. Explanations for the test appeared to make a farce of China's claim that it opposed the militarization of space. Two months later, Premier Wen Jiabao insisted to reporters that the test was an "experiment" and declared, "China's position on the peaceful utilization of outer space remains unchanged."<sup>43</sup> Of course, it is only logical that the PLA would pursue such options given US policies on space.<sup>44</sup> This approach is consistent with the remarks of Senior Colonel Yao Yunzhu of the Academy of Military Sciences, made in late January 2007. She said that while she "wished" to "keep space as a peaceful place," Yao was, nevertheless, "personally . . . pessimistic about it . . . [and her] prediction [was that] . . . outer space [would] . . . be weaponized in our lifetime."<sup>45</sup>

It is possible the PLA assumed that a successful antisatellite test would not elicit much reaction. It is also possible that the test was handled without fanfare because of the possibility of failure. In the case of failure, an announcement ahead of the launch would have embarrassed China. Even so, one would expect that when the test proved successful, Beijing would have made some public announcement. Most conceivable is that the test was a prime example of roguish PLA behavior. Also possible is that

the test was intended as a warning to the United States—a signal that US satellites are no longer beyond the reach of China. Indeed, PLA writings stress the importance of attacking the satellites of adversaries.<sup>46</sup> Some Chinese military researchers have claimed the test was an act of deterrence.<sup>47</sup> Of course, this could simply be an opportunistic ex-post facto rationale, but such rhetoric is consistent with recent PLA doctrinal writings that state the importance of “employing deterrence” in space that will create “great . . . shock and awe effects” on “an enemy.” Such capabilities are likely to be present in the near future, according to the text.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it still underscores an important Chinese effort to deter US intervention in a Taiwan scenario.

The three incidents reveal a PLA on a loose leash. The pattern of behavior and timing of the incidents strongly suggest that civilian leaders were not aware of the specific activities and timetables, and had poor oversight. The armed forces are not completely separate and apart from China’s civilian leadership strata, however. It is important to note that all senior military officers are members of the CCP, and the PLA has significant representation on the CCP Politburo and Central Committee. Soldiers comprised eight percent of the people elected to the Politburo (two of 25) and 20 percent of those elected to the Central Committee (42 of 204) at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007. Therefore, to label the PLA a “rogue military” would be quite misleading, suggesting that the armed forces were operating completely separate from or independent of China’s civilian establishment. This is not the case. A more appropriate term would be “roguish.” In this formulation, all major defense policies, programs, and objectives are formulated, approved, and implemented with the full knowledge of China’s senior leaders. The specifics of how, when, and where these policies, programs, and objectives are implemented, however, are decided and determined within the armed forces without civilian oversight and approval. Thus, the details, timelines, and other operational particulars seem to be decided and implemented by military leaders without any consultation with or approval by their civilian superiors. In short, the PLA is not totally out of civilian control, but neither is China’s military establishment completely under civilian control in every facet of its activities.

### ***Conclusion***

Chinese military personnel have been quoted in what seem to be threatening remarks toward the United States and also engaged in provocative acts. Are these particular situations evidence of gaps between civil-



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***The evidence suggests that the hawkish words of PLA generals are part of a deliberate and calculated Chinese deterrence effort directed at the United States.***

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ian and military elites in China? The answer suggested by the preceding analysis is affirmative. The gaps are of two kinds, one explaining the pronouncements and the other explaining the actions. The verbiage is evidence of a split in thinking and attitudes between China's more hawkish military leaders and more moderate civilians, but not necessarily an indicator of military bellicosity. These scripted but sincere words are not intended as aggressive threats but rather as stern declarations of deterrence in order to underscore what China believes to be an asymmetry of resolve.

The verbiage is seen as a key element of China's calculus of deterrence against the United States (and Taiwan). In Beijing's eyes, China is handicapped by a substantial capabilities deficit vis-à-vis the armed forces of the United States. To make deterrent threats credible, China has to play up its level of commitment. In Beijing's view, it has the clear edge in an "asymmetry of motivation." According to an authoritative Chinese military text on strategy, to be effective, strategic deterrence requires three conditions: (1) "adequate deterrent force," (2) clear "determination . . . [to employ] the deterrent force," and (3) an "opponent . . . [who must] perceive and believe" the first and second conditions. According to the textbook, "Determination is the soul of strategic deterrence, and information transmission is the necessary condition for creating [the] deterrent impact of strength and determination."<sup>49</sup> The PLA's warnings and certain actions, such as the antisatellite test, seem designed specifically to transmit Chinese credibility to the United States.

The actions suggest a lack of civilian control, although after the fact they have been explained as acts of deterrence. The reins of civilian control over the PLA seem to be quite loose. At the very least there is poor communication and coordination with key civilian entities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The result appears to be a roguish PLA that makes crisis management all the more difficult and heightens the potential for worrisome misunderstandings and misperceptions.

While these explanations may help one to make sense of the words and deeds of the Chinese military, they do not provide much relief or reassurance. First, the risk of miscalculation between the United States and China may be higher than many assume. It is dangerous for American pol-

icymakers and analysts to consider US resolve in isolation. This strategy presumes that China's perception of the strength of US resolve in and of itself will be enough to deter Beijing from military action.<sup>50</sup> The logic is flawed. For China, US resolve on the question of Taiwan is viewed as limited, especially in comparison to other issues, and smaller than China's own unshakeable resolve. For Chinese analysts, accurately assessing US resolve is tricky. While Beijing can have a high degree of confidence in its own degree of resolve, it is much harder to judge Washington's.

Second, once a crisis or confrontation develops, the potential for unintended escalation is significant. The militaries of the United States and China continue to think about and plan for a possible conflict over Taiwan. This does not mean that a war is inevitable, but it does mean that in a crisis, escalation might be rapid and difficult to control.<sup>51</sup> At least there is improved communication between the two militaries; a hotline linking the Pentagon with the Central Military Commission was established in early 2008.

Third, civil-military relations present an ongoing challenge to China's political development and peaceful rise. Hands-off civilian control is symptomatic of the larger problem of the under-institutionalization of civilian control mechanisms. Without firmer civilian oversight, the kinds of hawkish PLA pronouncements and activities highlighted are likely to persist with the attendant risks. Indicators of enhanced civilian oversight and control would include a revamping of the CMC to have greater civilian representation, an end to active-duty general officers serving as the Minister of National Defense, a reconstituted Defense Ministry with more than mere ceremonial functions, and a vigorous initiative to develop a cadre of civilian defense specialists in China's national legislature, as well as in think tanks and universities. Such developments are unlikely to occur in the near future.

To conclude, there are civil-military gaps in China's peaceful rise strategy. Military members being permitted or even encouraged to express warlike bravado and engage in overzealous actions seem to demonstrate the point. If Beijing expects other nations to accept Chinese claims about desiring a peaceful rise and yearns to be treated as a responsible great power, then the words and deeds of soldiers ought to be more consistent with those proclaimed policies and aspirations.

#### NOTES

1. "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress," *Xinhua*, 24 October 2007, [http://news.xinhua-net.com/english/2007-10/24/content\\_6938749.htm](http://news.xinhua-net.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749.htm).

2. On the PLA's disposition, see, for example, David Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security," *International Security*, 24 (Winter 1999-2000), 52-79. On firm CCP control, see Tai Ming Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun: China's Central Military Commission and Its Relationship with the Mili-

tary, Party, and State Decision-making Systems,” in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978-2000* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), 61-90.

3. The term “gap” was originally used by Richard Kohn and Peter Feaver to characterize the condition of civil-military relations in the United States. See Feaver and Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

4. This assumption constitutes a blending of the approaches of Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz. See respectively, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1957) and *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (2d ed.; New York: Free Press, 1971).

5. On the United States, see Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (rev. ed.; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991); and Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004). On China, see Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003); and Shambaugh.

6. Michael Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” *Foreign Affairs*, 86 (May/June 2007), 97-108.

7. This paragraph draws from Andrew Scobell, “China’s Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 31 (Winter 2005), 228-29.

8. See, for example, Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2006).

9. On the scripted nature of the verbiage, see You Ji, “Making Sense of War Games in the Taiwan Strait,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 6 (July 1997), 287-305; and Andrew Scobell, “Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (Summer 2000), 227-46.

10. Shambaugh, 53; Scobell, “Show of Force,” 228.

11. James Mulvenon, “Rogue Warriors? A Puzzled Look at the Chinese ASAT Test,” *China Leadership Monitor*, 20 (Winter 2007); Bates Gill and Martin Kleiber, “China’s Space Odyssey: What the Anti-Satellite Test Reveals about Decision-Making in Beijing,” *Foreign Affairs*, 86 (May/June 2007), 2-3.

12. See, for example, “Speculation 1” in Mulvenon, “Rogue Warriors?” 3.

13. Quoted in Joseph Cirincione, “Did China Threaten to Bomb Los Angeles?” *Proliferation Brief*, 4 (22 March 2001).

14. Patrick E. Tyler, “As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure the U.S. Listens,” *The New York Times*, 24 January 1996, A3.

15. Cirincione.

16. Tyler.

17. Joseph Kahn, “Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bombs if U.S. Intrudes,” *The New York Times*, 15 July 2005, A8.

18. Interviews by author, Beijing, spring 2006; “China Punishes General for Talk of Strike at U.S.,” *New York Times.com*, 22 December 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/22/world/asia/22iht-general.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/22/world/asia/22iht-general.html?_r=1).

19. Danny Gittings, “General Zhu Goes Ballistic,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 18 July 2005.

20. For this and other examples of fiery rhetoric, see James Mulvenon, “The PLA, Chen Shui-Bian, and the Referenda: The War Dogs that Didn’t Bark,” *China Leadership Monitor*, 10 (Spring 2004), 2-4.

21. Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1975).

22. See, for example, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006).

23. This is also noted by Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *A War Like No Other: The Truth about China's Challenge to America* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), 109.

24. Senior Colonel Luo Yuan, quoted in Huang Hai and Yang Liu, “Military Experts on War to Counter ‘Taiwan Independence,’” *Renmin Ribao* [People’s Daily] online edition, 3 December 2003, translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS-CHI-2003-1203).

25. See Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 187.

26. Mulvenon, “The PLA, Chen Shui-Bian, and the Referenda,” 2.

27. Xia Liping, “Crisis Management in China and the United States: A Comparative Study,” in Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng with Danielle F. S. Cohen, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 166; Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael S. Chase, Derek Eaton, and Kevin L. Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2007), 41-42.

28. Kahn, "Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bombs if U.S. Intrudes." See also Cliff, Burles, Chase, Eaton, and Pollpeter, 28.
29. On US resolve and commitment, see Cliff, Burles, Chase, Eaton, and Pollpeter, 41-43.
30. Wu Yongqiang and Liu Cheng, "Great Powers Should Bear International Responsibilities," *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong), 9 December 2004.
31. Cliff, Burles, Chase, Eaton, and Pollpeter.
32. Similar attacks have been launched against government ministries in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan. See Julian E. Barnes, "Chinese Hacking Worries Pentagon," *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2008, A9. While the source of such cyber attacks is usually impossible to identify with complete certainty, many of the strikes appear to originate either from within Chinese military entities or from hackers associated with such entities. What is certain is that the PLA attaches great importance to cyber warfare and has been actively developing its cyber capabilities.
33. On the Jiang era, see Cheung.
34. Interviews by the author with US participants, fall 2001, and Paul H. B. Godwin, "Decisionmaking under Stress: The Unintentional Bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy and the EP-3 Collision," in Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking under Stress* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), 171-85.
35. Dennis C. Blair and David V. Bonfili, "The April 2001 EP-3 Incident: The U.S. Point of View," in Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, 381.
36. See, for example, Lyle Goldstein and William Murray, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force," *International Security*, 28 (Spring 2004), 161-96.
37. *Ibid.*, 191-92.
38. Bill Gertz, "U.S. Presses China on Armed Submarine Encounter," *The Washington Times*, 11 January 2007, A3.
39. See, for example, Ashley J. Tellis, "China's Military Space Strategy," *Survival*, 49 (Autumn 2007), 41.
40. Tellis, 41-72; Gill and Kleiber, 3.
41. Mulvenon, "Rogue Warriors?" 3-5; Gill and Kleiber, 3-4.
42. Gill and Kleiber, 3-4.
43. Joseph Kahn, "Despite Buildup, China Insists Its Goals Are Domestic," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2007, A3.
44. Tellis, 44.
45. Edith M. Lederer, "Senior Chinese Officer Predicts Weapons Will be Deployed in Space," *Associated Press*, 27 January 2007.
46. Cliff, Burles, Chase, Eaton, and Pollpeter, 57-60.
47. Bao Shixiu, "Deterrence Revisited: Outer Space," *China Security*, 5 (Winter 2007), 2-11; interviews by the author with Chinese military researchers, fall 2007.
48. Yao Youzhi and Peng Guangqian, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Sciences Publishing House, 2005), 220.
49. *Ibid.*, 213-15.
50. See, for example, Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, 27 (Fall 2002), 63-66.
51. To appreciate the challenge in controlling escalation, it is helpful to recall a crisis with North Korea from 15 years ago. In June 1994, Washington was "on the brink of war" with Pyongyang, according to key members of the Clinton Administration. But this did not mean that President Bill Clinton's order to launch an actual military strike on the nuclear facility at Yongbyon was imminent; rather, it meant that Clinton was about to approve raising the readiness of US units on the Korean Peninsula and dispatching additional forces. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry and others soberly recognized that once such a course of action was under way it would inevitably be detected by Pyongyang and was "certain to be considered provocative." North Korea's military would have responded with its own heightened state of readiness and alert. Thus, the danger was not one of imminent conflict but of a path that once embarked upon would result in escalating tensions and easily could have led to war. See Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 130-31.