Session II

How Much Military Capability Does China Want to Develop? How Much Will It Succeed?

China's Search for Military Power: Internal Control, Peripheral Denial and Limited Force Projection

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Introduction

Over the past decade, and especially since 1999, China's armed forces have been engaged in a sustained modernization drive to create a modern, professional and capable military. Although these trends are abundantly clear, how much military power China wants is uncertain. In theory, most states would probably prefer unhindered capabilities, if they could be achieved at an acceptable cost. In practice, however, states face numerous constraints to the development of military power. Internally, states confront institutional, societal, financial, organizational and technological obstacles or trade-offs. More generally, national leaders must decide how to allocate scarce resources among competing domestic and foreign policy priorities. Externally, national leaders must consider the consequences of their state's development of military power and how others might react, as dramatic increases in war-fighting capabilities risk sparking arms races or even war with neighboring states and regional powers.

Looking towards the future, several approaches might be used to assess the amount of military power China seeks to obtain. One option is simply to focus on the "worst case," assuming that states will seek to develop as much military power as domestic resources and external constraints permit. The study of threat perceptions offers another approach. I adopt a third method, one which is grounded in an examination of Chinese texts on military strategy and doctrine. With these texts, I identify the strategic goals set by China's leaders for the use of military power as a tool of statecraft and then examine briefly the types of capabilities being developed to achieve these goals.

Although this approach takes China's intentions at "face value," it nevertheless offers several advantages for assessing the implications of China's ongoing military modernization effort. First, it allows analysts to assess the "fit" between national strategic goals and the military means available or necessary for achieving these objectives. In this way, progress towards modernization can be tracked and charted. Second, it provides a baseline with which to identify potential changes in the trajectory of a military modernization program, either

through a shift in goals or a change in the means being developed to achieve declared strategic objectives.

In this brief essay, I argue that China seeks to develop three general types of military capabilities. The first is internal control, which supports China's armed forces' primary mission of maintaining internal stability and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) monopoly on political power. Along with China's paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (PAP), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) maintains sufficient forces for internal control. The second is peripheral denial along its land border and coastal regions. I define denial as the ability to hinder a potential adversary's use of "space, personnel or facilities."[1] Denial not only supports internal control, but also the maintenance of territorial integrity, the unification of Taiwan and the pursuit of maritime rights and interests. It plays a secondary role in maintaining a stable regional security environment for China's rise. China has achieved far more progress towards denial along its land borders and has only started to develop such a capability offshore. The third is limited force projection necessary for managing regional conflicts, especially Taiwan but also other disputes that might arise along China's periphery that could upset regional stability.

Before proceeding, two caveats must be mentioned. First, China's ability to enhance its military might depends on numerous factors, perhaps the most important of which is sustained economic growth. Such growth has increased dramatically the size of China's government expenditure, which in turn has funded large increases in military spending without confronting tough "guns-vs-butter" trade-offs. Although most analysts believe that China's rapid growth will continue for at least another decade, the rate of such growth cannot be taken for granted. Second, I focus only on conventional military capabilities, not China's nuclear forces. Overall, China appears to continue to seek minimum deterrence, a goal described in the most recent white paper on national defense as "self-defensive nuclear strategy" (*ziwei fangyu de he zhanlue*).[2] Current anxiety that surrounds China's rise stems largely from China's conventional military modernization effort and its impact on regional stability.

China's Strategic Goals

Analysts have always faced limitations on the availability of data with which to study China's armed forces. Over the past decade, however, official texts and documents on China's military strategy have increased markedly, including biannual white papers on

[1] *Department of Defense, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms,* Joint Publication 1-02 (2006), p. 154.
[2] *China's National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2006).

national defense as well as textbooks used in professional military education programs for PLA officers on various aspects of strategy and operations, such as *The Science of Military Strategy* and *The Science of Campaigns*.[3] Taken together, these sources which are part of the "revolution in doctrinal affairs" permit a general assessment of China's strategic goals.[4]

China's current military strategy was adopted in 1993. Following the end of the Cold War and the demonstration of advanced precision-strike capabilities in the Gulf War, China's leaders instructed their armed forces to prepare to fight "local wars under modern high technology conditions" (*gao jishu tiaojian xia jubu zhangzheng*). In the most general terms, adoption of this strategy stemmed from the conclusion that small and medium-sized local conflicts, not general or total wars, were the most likely threats that China would encounter in the post-Cold War period. Chinese writings characterized these conflicts as sudden, intense and destructive, features which in turn required China to develop new capabilities stressing joint operations, rapid response and offensive strikes to deter such wars from arising or to win them if they did occur.[5]

As David Finkelstein has argued recently, China lacks a public document outlining its national military strategy similar to the *National Military Strategy* published by the U.S. government.[6] Nevertheless, the increase in texts on military doctrine, including several works devoted specifically to military strategy, outline the general strategic goals (*zhanlue mudi*) for China's development of military power. One important text from the PLA's Academy of Military Science describes these goals as "maintaining national territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests, and social order, and ensuring a secure and stable internal and external environment for national economic construction and reform and opening."[7] Similarly, each of the national defense white papers published since 1998 has described the goals for which China seeks to develop military power. Based on these and

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[3] Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2001); Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, eds., *Zhanyi xue* [The Science of Military Campaigns] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 2000); Wang Wenrong, ed., *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 1999).

[4] See David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon, eds., *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, 2005).

[5] For an overview, see M. Taylor Fravel, "The Evolution of China's Military Strategy: Comparing the 1987 and 1999 Editions of Zhanlue Xue," in David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon, eds., *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, 2005, pp. 79-100.

[6] David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy Revisited," paper presented at the conference on Exploring the "Right Size" for China's Military: PLA Missions, Functions, and Organization, (Carlisle Barracks, PA, October 6-8, 2006).

[7] Dan Xiufa, ed., *Jiang Zemin guofang he jundui jianshe sixiang yanjiu* [Research on Jiang's Zemin's Thought on National Defense and Army Building] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2004), p. 78.

other sources, they are, in rough order of priority, internal security, territorial integrity, unification, maritime security and regional stability.[8]

Internal security. The first goal for China's armed forces is maintaining the CCP's monopoly on political power, securing the party from internal actors that would seek its overthrow or social unrest that might threaten regime stability. The 2006 national defense white paper, for example, describes this goal as "consolidating the ruling position" of the CCP.[9] Despite a trend towards nationalization (*guojia hua*) of China's armed forces in the past decade, the defense and security of the CCP remains a top priority for both the PLA and the PAP. In recent years, military writings have stressed the need to maintain social stability and the importance of countering the "three forces" of separatism, extremism and terrorism linked with ethnic unrest, especially in Xinjiang. As the 2006 white paper notes, the "stability and development of border areas are the foundation for border and coastal defense."[10] These sources view political instability and unrest as posing a stark challenge to China's continued economic development and thus the basis of the CCP's domestic legitimacy.

Territorial integrity. The *second* goal is securing China's territory from external threats and potential aggression, a basic mission for any armed force. This goal is described in the 2006 white paper as "guarding against and resisting aggression [and] ensuring that the nation's territorial waters, airspace and borders are not violated."[11] The end of the Cold War bolstered China's security from external threats, as the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the largest land-based threat to Chinese territory since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. In the 1990s, China strengthened the security of its borders by reaching demilitarization and boundary agreements to reduce troop levels and resolve outstanding territorial disputes with many neighbors.[12]

Nevertheless, even though the territory of the PRC is perhaps more secure than at any time since 1949, Chinese military texts still stress the importance of border security and preparing for potential conflict along its continental periphery that might threaten territorial integrity. Such concerns stem from the operational challenges of defending one of the

[8] On these goals, see Fravel, "Evolution of China's Military Strategy," pp. 87, 96. and Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy Revisited."
[9] *China's National Defense in 2006.*
[10] *China's National Defense in 2006.*
[11] *China's National Defense in 2006.*
[12] M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 46-83.

longest land borders in the world complicated by harsh environmental conditions and potential ethnic unrest in frontier areas that could receive external support or at least complicate ties with neighboring states. China also remains involved in one major territorial dispute on its land border with India. Although relations have improved greatly, resulting in a 2005 agreement on "guiding principles," Chinese writings nevertheless belie a suspicion that conflict could still erupt here in the future, especially if during a crisis in the Taiwan Strait which leads to a "chain reaction" of conflicts along China's periphery.[13]

Unification. The military goal pursued by China that attracts most attention today is the potential use of force over Taiwan, which Chinese writings identify as a mission distinct from the maintenance of territorial integrity. At the moment, China's leaders emphasize preventing the island's *de jure* independence and, with growing economic interdependence, creating conditions for "peaceful unification" (*heping tongyi*). The deterrent aspect of China's approach to Taiwan is captured in the 2006 white paper, which highlights "opposing and containing the separatist forces for 'Taiwan independence' and their activities" as a key objective.[14] Although this may just make a virtue out of necessity, China's current emphasis on deterrence over compellence is also reflected in the passage of the National Anti-Secession Law during the 2005 National People's Congress (as opposed to a National Unification Law or an emphasis on a timetable for unification).

Maritime security. Another goal that has also attracted increasing attention in the U.S. and around the Asia Pacific is China's emphasis on defending "maritime rights and interests." For China's leaders, maritime security involves several different but related challenges. First, China disputes the sovereignty of three groups of offshore islands. Although it controls all of the Paracels disputed with Vietnam, it holds only a minority of the features in the Spratlys and none of the Senkakus. Second, China has yet to reach delimitation agreements with its maritime neighbors (except for Vietnam) and thus agree upon the control of undersea resources, especially petroleum. Third, as its economy has developed, Chinese sources reflect an increased sensitivity to military threats from the sea to China's wealthy costal provinces, the need to exploit maritime resources for economic development and, more generally, the vulnerability of China's economy to its dependence of sea lines of communication that can be disrupted or blockaded in a conflict.

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[13] Chen Ligong, ed., *'Liansuo fanying' beijing xia gaohan shandi bianjing fangyu zuozhan yanjiu* [Research on High and Cold Mountainous Area Border Defense Operations Under the Background of a 'Chain Reaction'] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2005).
[14] *China's National Defense in 2006.*

External stability. A fifth goal is the need to maintain a stable external environment within which to continue economic development. The 2006 white paper describes this goal as "fostering a security environment conducive to China's peaceful development."[15] In practice, this goal is linked with the avoidance or deterrence of armed conflicts on China's periphery, lest they disrupt or potentially derail China's domestic reform drive.

China's Evolving Military Capabilities

To achieve these strategic goals, China is developing three military capabilities – internal control, peripheral denial and limited force projection.

Internal Control

As discussed above, the need to maintain internal security remains a key mission for China's armed forces, even today. China has the means to achieve this goal, but as a form of policing and low-intensity conflict, the maintenance of internal stability involves a significant number of personnel with the attendant organizational challenges and logistical burdens. Moreover, given the authoritarian nature of China's political system, the challenges of rapid economic growth and growing interactions with neighboring states, the potential for unrest is likely to persist if not increase in the future. Indeed, in contrast to recent years, the 2006 defense white paper stresses problems associated with internal unrest and domestic terrorism.

The primary responsibility for internal security falls on the shoulders of China's paramilitary force, the PAP. The PAP's internal security force (*neiwei budui*) is composed mostly of demobilized light infantry units from the PLA and is trained and equipped to manage "sudden incidents" (*tufa shijian*) that may arise, including anti-government demonstrations, riots and rebellions, especially in the minority-dominated frontiers but also in China's poorer interior provinces and industrial "rust-belt" in the northeast. The PAP's internal security force maintains contingents (*zongdui*) in each provincial-level administrative region along with 14 divisions (*shi* or *zhidui*), deployed in areas viewed as being at high risk for unrest, such as Xinjiang. According to the 2006 white paper, this force consists of 660,000 troops who fall under the joint control of the State Council and Central Military Commission (CMC). Additional PAP units are assigned to secure critical infrastructure such as mines, dams and borders. It is unclear whether (and perhaps unlikely) that these forces are included in the figure released in the current white paper.

The establishment of the PAP reflected an effort to separate internal and external

[15] *China's National Defense in 2006.*

missions for China's armed forces. The goal was to strengthen efforts to professionalize the PLA by focusing its training and modernization on external operations. Nevertheless, internal security remains an important, though secondary task, for the PLA today. Many of its main force combat units, including mobile infantry and armored forces, are deployed in or near China's major cities, both to defend key population centers in case of a large-scale invasion (however unlikely at this moment) and, as Tiananmen demonstrated, to serve as a reserve force in the case of sustained or severe social unrest that threatens regime stability. Today, for example, the PLA maintains four independent divisions in Xinjiang, not coincidentally located in areas such as Tacheng that experienced violent ethnic unrest in the 1990s. Similarly, the 27th, 38th and 65th group armies, each with several maneuver divisions and brigades, are based in and around Beijing, in part to defend the capital from attack and in part to maintain internal security.[16]

Peripheral Denial

Many of China's strategic goals can be supported or achieved through the creation of a robust denial capability along its periphery. In military terminology, this is commonly referred to as "area denial" or the ability to increase an adversary's cost for conducting military operations in areas near China's borders or coastal regions. Denial is defined in contrast to "area control" or the ability to dominate a space and prevent an adversary from conducting military operations in that battlespace.

As a continental power with growing maritime interests that is at the same time becoming integrated into the global economy, achievement of such an area denial capability, especially offshore, is no easy task for an armed force with as many strategic goals as China's. Nevertheless, denial is the primary means by which the PLA seeks to maintain territorial integrity, achieve unification, secure maritime interests and uphold external stability for development.

China has achieved considerable progress in achieving area denial along its land border, a capability primarily aimed at deterring or repelling a limited attack or invasion. Part of this success stems not just from the current modernization effort, but also from changes in China's external security environment. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China for perhaps the first time in hundreds of years does not face a land-based threat to its borders and territorial integrity. Russia and India remain key military powers abutting China, and possess the size, resources, population and other attributes to strengthen their own capabilities in the future, but

[16] Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 78.

they do not present a major threat to China today.

Two additional factors underpin China's area denial capability on its continental periphery. The first is geography, namely the strategic depth that China's sparsely populated vast frontier regions creates. This geography allows China to secure its population and economic centers from land-based threats by leveraging "defense-in-depth" against any attack. The second factor is China's army, the largest and most capable in the region, which is continuing to enhance its weaponry, mobility and ground-support air operations. Taken together, the cost for any regional power to attack China on land would be high to say the least even if it were able to breach to border.

The strength of China's land denial capability is reflected in the number of troops devoted to sustaining this capability. Approximately 226,000 troops are deployed in China's border areas, with 126,000 PLA frontier defense troops (*bianfang budui*) guarding China's borders and 100,000 PAP frontier defense troops (*gongan bianfang budui*) maintaining internal security in adjacent areas. In addition, almost half of China's infantry and armored divisions and brigades are based in provinces with an international boundary and tasked in part with responding to any assault on Chinese territory. This force structure – light infantry units on the border and maneuver combat units in the interior – sustains a strong area denial capability on its continental periphery.[17]

Nevertheless, China has yet to extend the range of land denial beyond its borders nor does this appear to be a high priority, at the moment. The largest obstacle to this regional capability in addition to the combined forces of Russia and India is China's land-based air power, whose combat range is presently limited to just a few hundred kilometers from China's borders at most. Without a tanker fleet to support air-to-air refueling for large numbers of aircraft, China will not be able to extend this range further and thus any ground forces operating far beyond China's borders would lack air support. At the same time, China relies heavily on road and rail networks to transport troops and lacks a strategic air-lift capability for long-distance force mobility. Even when combined with its conventional ballistic missile force, China will have difficulty achieving denial beyond its borders against all but the smallest countries who do not threaten China in the first place. At the same time, China does remain vulnerable to long-range precision strikes, especially from the U.S., which explains the recent emphasis on "people's air defense" and the 2006 white paper's reference to "speeding

[17] For a discussion of China's approach to defending its borders, see M. Taylor Fravel, "Secure Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2007 forthcoming). Overtime, Chinese planners would like to reduce the reliance on China's strategic depth and limit any attack to the border itself. As described in the 2006 white paper, "The Army aims at moving from regional defense to trans-regional mobility" (*lujun zhubu tuijin you quyu fanwei xing xiang quanyu jidong xing zhuanbian).*

up [the air force's] transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations."[18]

By contrast, China is only starting to develop a maritime denial capability. Here, however, China faces a much more complicated security environment. Many of China's outstanding territorial desputes concern offshore islands or maritime demarcation conflicts such as in the East China Sea, not to mention Taiwan. The combined Japanese and U.S. navies present a formidable constraint, especially over disputed areas. At the same time, China lacks at sea the "defense-in-depth" that it enjoys on land, an acute vulnerability because China's most prosperous regions lie along its coast. Thus, China cannot easily project power at sea nor can it easily prevent other navies from operating in the waters or air space adjacent to China's coast.[19]

A key focus of China's current modernization effort over the coming decades is to create maritime area denial capabilities. This is described in the last two defense white papers as "gradually extending the strategic depth for coastal defense" (*zhubu zengda jinhai fangyu de zhanlue zongshen*). As Michael Swaine has argued, this denial capability will be "limited" in the sense of achieving denial of a well-defined area for a specific duration of time as opposed to all along China's coast and over all disputed areas.[20] In the short to medium term, this effort will continue to focus on the waters around Taiwan, as maritime denial is key to either blockade or precision-strike attacks in a coercive campaign against the island. Amphibious assault itself would require both sea and air control, which is as unlikely in the face of combined regional navies.

To date, the pursuit of sea denial has been centered on two platforms. The first and arguably most important is submarines. China's growing capabilities include imported Russian Kilo-class submarines as well as domestically-developed Yuan-class diesel submarine and 093 SSNs. The second component is land-based air power to provide support for surface combatants at sea. With these two platforms, limited maritime denial could perhaps be achieved within 300-400 kilometers from China's coastline, in specific areas for specific periods of time.

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[18] *China's National Defense in 2006.*

[19] For a recent discussion of China's denial strategy, see Bernard D. Cole, "China's Strategy of Sea Denial," *China Brief*, Vol. 6, No. 23 (2006). For a review of China's naval modernization, see Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities — Background and Issues for Congress*, RL33153 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2006).

[20] Michael D. Swaine, "China's Regional Military Posture," in David Shambaugh, ed., *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), p. 283.

Limited Regional Force Projection

A final capability that China seeks to develop to achieve its strategic goals is limited regional force projection along its periphery. I define force projection as the ability to deploy and sustain forces beyond China's borders to conduct military or other types of operations, such as humanitarian assistance.[21] Force projection operations are complex, requiring close coordination among all service branches and corresponding logistics support.

The most direct application for the development of this capability would be in a conflict over Taiwan, China's most important territorial dispute and the one conflict where it has committed to using military means if necessary, even if it lacks the ability to compel unification. The size and amount of force that China would need to project depends on factors too numerous to be mentioned in this short essay, but they would include the goals of the military operation, projected duration of the campaign and the role of other states, especially the U.S.

Beyond Taiwan, however, China's development of a limited force projection capability serves other strategic goals. One such goal is maintaining regional stability. In the event of a crisis in a neighboring state, China might seek to intervene, especially if it believes spill-over into Chinese territory is likely or that regional stability would be threatened. China might also pursue limited force projection to pre-empt an attack on its borders. Finally, limited force projection would enable China to play an independent and perhaps leading role in peacekeeping operations or humanitarian relief operations in the region, roles it views in part as a reflection of its new great power status.

How much, how far and when are clearly questions that are difficult to answer at this point, but several constraints can be identified. One constraint is the nature of the opponent against whom China seeks to project power and use force. A second constraint is whether China seeks to project power overland, by air, or by sea, since its ability to transport large numbers of troops at significant distances is poor and unlikely to improve suddenly. A third constraint is whether such action would it require sustained air support, which would limit the distance at which China can project force overland without a large tanker fleet or at sea without aircraft carriers.

Conclusion

China's five strategic goals of internal security, territorial integrity, unification, maritime security and regional stability drive the development of three major types of military

[21] For the U.S. definition, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, p. 211.

capabilities. The first is internal control, which is key to regime security and also contributes to the maintenance of territorial integrity. The second is area denial on land and at sea, which supports territorial integrity, unification, maritime security and external stability. The third is limited regional force projection, which underpins unification, maritime security and external stability while playing a secondary role in territorial integrity.

Overall, there is substantial consistency between the strategic goals China pursues and the military means being developed to achieve them. Progress towards developing these capabilities, however, has been uneven. To date, China has achieved substantial progress towards internal control and continental denial. Only in the past two decades, and especially the past ten years, has China sought to develop maritime denial and limited regional force projection capabilities. In the coming decade, these two areas will remain the focus of PLA modernization efforts, not just because of the importance of prevailing in a conflict over Taiwan, but also because of the lack of strategic depth offshore that China enjoys along its long land border. Nevertheless, internal control and continental denial have been and will continue to be key capabilities for the PLA to maintain and strengthen.

Finally, as China continues its rise, its strategic goals may shift, which in turn could require the development of new capabilities. The most recent national defense white paper referred broadly to the role of the military in "ensuring the interests of national development" (*baozhang guojia fazhan liyi*), a phrase which suggests the start of an evolution towards a sixth strategic goal of defending and securing Chinese economic interests.[22] This would include interests beyond its borders and even beyond the Asia-Pacific region, such as the security of sea lines but also the protection of Chinese investments and citizens overseas.[23] If this is the case, then long-range force projection could become a fourth capability that China pursues, requiring further increases in defense spending as a proportion of central government expenditure beyond its current levels and creating even deeper anxiety about Chinese intentions as it continues to rise in power. China's ability to create such a capability, however, remains an open question.

[22] *China's National Defense in 2006.*
[23] For an example of such goals from a scholarly perspective, see Wang Yizhou, "Heping fazhan jieduan de Zhongguo guojia anquan: yi xiang xin de yicheng [The Peaceful Development Phase of China's National Security: A New Agenda]," *Shijie jingji pinglun*, No. 9-10 (2006), pp. 1-12.