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Asian Military Modernization: Key Areas of Concern

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Introduction

Military modernization can take two basic forms—first, simply replacing old systems/capabilities with a similar but new system, like replacing one's old Honda Accord with a new Honda Accord. More frequently in Asia, modernization combines replacing old with new, while also adding entirely new systems/capabilities—the equivalent of replacing the family sedan with a newer model, while also buying a second car.

Trying to make sense of military modernization and assess the impact modernization might have must start by making judgments about the operational characteristic of the system/capability. Is it an offensive, defensive, or multi-role system?

Military modernization goes on continuously throughout Asia and not every modernization activity by any given country is an area of concern, or presages an arms race. Quite the contrary, as adding systems/capabilities that are clearly defensive in nature, or are carefully bounded in quantity and quality, can actually contribute to stability. In an ideal world, if every country were able to defend itself from aggression by its neighbor, stability would be the result.

Arguably, what is taking place in Southeast Asia can be considered “stability inducing” modernization in that it improves defenses without becoming a threat to its neighbors. Much of the modernization is oriented toward maritime capabilities—especially systems useful for the surveillance and policing of EEZ’s and for the protection of commercial shipping. Maritime patrol aircraft, air defense enhancements—including fighters, small frigate or patrol craft-sized warships -- land based radar surveillance sites and diesel submarines all fit within this category.

Similarly in Northeast Asia, the Republic of Korea’s ongoing introduction of a modest but capable blue-water navy does not threaten any of its larger neighbors; it is evident however, that like much of the rest of Asia, ROK economic health is increasingly dependent on trade, most of which travels by sea. As a result, Seoul has determined it has a requirement to look after its maritime interests without having to depend upon the US Seventh Fleet or its neighbors. This means that ROK decision-makers, who are not experienced in things maritime and are “embedded” in what has been an army-dominated military culture, have been willing to make the not inconsiderable investments necessary to build a modest blue water navy. What this suggests about the ROK’s long term plans or worries raises many interesting questions that are, however, beyond the scope of this essay. The modernization itself should not be considered an area of concern because it is not destabilizing.

Another category of modernization relates to offensive weapons systems; systems unambiguously designed to attack and not to defend. This category of modernization is normally undertaken for two reasons: either to deter a neighbor or potential foe from attacking or harming one’s interests, or to prepare for aggression against a neighboring state.

In Asia, there are a number of situations in which the offensive capability of the weapons system is not in doubt. Cyber warfare is an emerging problem. In the episodes where it has actually been used, either by organized militaries or by non-state sponsored hackers, it should be considered an offensive capability. Accurate conventionally tipped ballistic

missiles and land attack cruise missiles are clearly offensive systems, as are the airwings of attack aircraft carriers, significant amphibious assault capability, long range bombers and certain categories of land based fighter aircraft. Today for instance, China uses the threat of a massive missile attack to deter Taiwan from declaring *de jure* independence. North Korea uses missiles to deter attack by threatening US bases in Japan and throughout South Korea.

The US posture in East Asia is largely offensive in nature, designed to be able to attack in retaliation, and as a result, deter countries that may threaten US allies and friends.

There is but one obvious example of a capability being put in place to attack and seize another “country,” and that is the case of the PLA’s continuing efforts to put in place the systems and capabilities necessary to capture Taiwan. Because China claims that Taiwan is a renegade province and is an internal Chinese sovereignty issue, it naturally rejects arguments that modernization aimed at a successful capture is offensive in nature. But the reality remains that capabilities useful for the Taiwan mission are also useful in any campaign against a Taiwan-sized island.

On the Korean peninsula it is less clear whether the forward postured North Korean Army is in place so it can attack the South, or whether it is in its current posture to defend against an attack from the South. At the June 2008 Shangri-la Dialogue, the new ROK Minister of Defense explicitly offered the judgment that it was an offensive posture. This is a case in which transparency is lacking, and I suspect that Pyongyang prefers this ambiguity since it is a powerful deterrent to any offensive action by the US against its nuclear weapons program.

Military modernization associated with these two situations clearly falls into the category of “areas of concern,” although efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of these modernizations have been going on for some time. In the case of Korea, the South has made adequate defensive preparations, so much so that the US is confident enough in the ROK Army that it is not balking at turning over responsibility for defense against an

invasion; the US role will, over the next few years, transition to backstopping the ROK army with US air and naval power.

In the case of Taiwan, the Chinese threat to use force has been a feature of the Asian security scene for over 50 years. What is different today is that Beijing's threat is actually credible. It is credible in the sense that it can militarily "punish" Taiwan. It can "bombard" Taiwan with hundreds of missiles, but is not yet able to capture Taiwan. In this situation, it is the combination of the willingness of the people of Taiwan to endure a bombardment, with efforts being taken by the Taiwan authorities to "harden" key facilities against bombardment, and the threat of US intervention in the defense of Taiwan that has sustained stability. Obviously, it is the state of the cross-strait political relationship that will determine whether in the future Beijing would actually be willing to "pull the trigger." Today, for the first time this decade, the political situation could be characterized as hopeful.

While categorizing these systems/capabilities is relatively straightforward, more and more modern weapons systems are designed to be multi-role. In these cases, they can be used to either attack or defend—they are not purely offensive or purely defensive. Multi-role aircraft are perhaps the best example. The aircraft's role is determined by what weapons they are fitted to employ, what avionics software package is installed and what training regimen the aircrew has received.

In cases where the nature of certain potentially threatening weapons systems is unclear, officials charged with defense responsibilities have to weigh the trade-off between a country's military capability versus its intentions. That is why issues of transparency are intimately linked with assessments of modernization.

This brings me to a third way in which modernization can have an impact on stability. This is the circumstance created when a country fields defensive capabilities to assure its defenses but in so doing puts the security of its near neighbors in jeopardy. Political scientists call this a security dilemma. Arguably this is what is going on today between

China, the United States and its Northeast Asian neighbors and US allies—Japan, the ROK and Taiwan. This is an area of great concern.

Alliance-Based Security Architecture Has Worked Well

For almost 50 years, Asia's security environment has been stable and relatively predictable. After the 1953 armistice that ended combat in Korea, Asia's security environment quickly settled into a unique balance of power, in which the continental powers of the Soviet Union and the PRC were "balanced" by the US-led coalition of Asian littoral powers.

There are a number of reasons why stability persisted, but arguably the most important one is that a real military balance existed.¹ The military capability of each side was effectively limited to its domain—the continent or the oceans. Each side was able to militarily "trump" any attempt by the other side to intrude in a militarily significant way into its domain. The USSR and the PRC were safe from invasion, thanks to their large armies, vast territories and nuclear weapons. US friends and allies were safe from invasion and maritime blockade thanks to US air and sea power which was constantly "in play" because of alliance obligations.

Modernizing China Is Changing the Continental-Maritime Strategic Balance

Throughout China's long history, its strategic orientation could be categorized as continental and hence its strategic tradition—its way of thinking about and framing strategic issues—has been largely focused on land war.

Today, however, the risk of cross-border aggression is no longer a serious security concern for Beijing. The combination of adroit Chinese diplomacy within a contextual framework of globalization, international norms of behavior that eschew cross-frontier aggression and the deterrent value of nuclear weapons have substantially lowered the

likelihood of cross-boarder aggression. The threat of invasion, the primary worry of Chinese or indeed most Eurasian strategists for many centuries, has all but disappeared.

As globalization proceeds economic growth is increasingly dependent on trade, most of which is carried in containers loaded on ships. As a result, security on the high seas is becoming a growing preoccupation for countries that historically were not strategically focused on the maritime domain. The ROK has already been mentioned; the PRC is also in the midst of this evolving strategic *zeitgeist*.

While its land frontiers are secure, Beijing faces a host of outstanding sovereignty claims and unresolved strategic issues that are *maritime* in nature. Specifically:

- Taiwan is an island. It is the combination of Taiwan's air defense and the threat of intervention by the US military (primarily the US navy) that effectively keeps the Taiwan Strait a moat rather than a highway open to the PLA.
- Perhaps as strategically significant as Taiwan to a PLA planner is the geostrategic reality that the PRC's economic center of gravity is on its east coast, which, because it is a "seaboard," is extremely vulnerable to attack from the sea—a military task the United States is uniquely suited to execute.
- Territorial disputes with Japan over islands and seabed resources in the East China Sea remain unresolved and with price of oil continuing to soar, the economic stakes become more serious, and represent a potential flash point where Sino-Japanese interests are contested. (Although the recent Sino-Japanese summit may lead to fair compromise.) The point here is that the entire issue is maritime in nature.
- Unsettled territorial disputes, and their concomitant resource issues, remain with respect to the Spratly Islands and the South China Sea. Again, this problem is maritime in nature.
- China's entire national strategy of reform and opening depends largely upon maritime commerce—i.e., trade. The PRC's economy is driven by the

combination of exports and imports which together account for almost 75% of PRC GDP. This trade travels mainly by sea.

- Finally, there is the issue of energy security—or, as President Hu Jintao characterized it, China’s “Malacca dilemma.” It has become commonplace to observe that the PRC will increasingly depend upon foreign sources of oil and natural gas, most of which come by sea, and must pass through the Indonesian straits to reach China.

Finally, Beijing’s primary military competitor is the United States, which is the world’s foremost naval power and which, as it has for the past 50 years, maintains a significant naval presence on “China’s doorstep.” Should the PRC elect to use force to resolve either reunification with Taiwan or outstanding maritime claims, the US is the one country that could militarily deny success.

All of these factors, plus China’s historic experience since the 1840’s, have generated a “demand signal” that has caused China to field weapons systems and capabilities that can protect its maritime approaches. This in turn means that China is introducing an element of military competition into the maritime region that has been the preserve of the United States and its allies for the past half-century because it is beginning to have the effect of upsetting the five-decade-old balance of power between continental and maritime powers that has been so successful in preserving stability in the region.

What is China Doing?

Specifically, China is putting in place a credible way to deny access to US forces by knitting together broad area ocean surveillance systems, a large number of submarines, land based aircraft with cruise missiles, and ballistic missile systems that can target ships on the high seas. The operational objective is to keep US naval power as far away from China as possible in case of conflict. It closely resembles the operational concept that the Soviet Union, another continental power attempting to protect its maritime approaches, had in place by the end of the Cold War. According to the latest US Defense Department

report to the US Congress on military power, key elements of China's capability are still apparently in the testing stage. If however, they succeed in introducing a credible anti-ship ballistic missile and an associated surveillance and targeting system that are coupled with other proven conventional capabilities such as quiet, conventionally powered submarines, China will introduce a destabilizing element into the regional military balance.

By working to achieve security on its maritime frontier, Beijing is creating a dynamic that, as its maritime security situation improves, will make the security environment for Japan, Taiwan and potentially South Korea, worse because a central element of its strategy is to keep US power as far away from East Asia as possible.

The US interests and obligations depend on sustained access to East Asia, whereas China's off-shore strategy is increasingly aimed at denying that access. The United States has characterized China's approach as "anti-access," because if successfully executed, it could deny the US the ability to operate its naval and air forces as it pleases along the littoral of East Asia.

In effect, for good and sensible strategic reasons, China and the United States are pursuing two mutually contradictory approaches: access denial versus assured access. This is a serious issue.

Concluding Thoughts

This suggests the military balance and concomitant modernization of forces in East Asia will be in a constant state of evolution as the US and its allies work to preserve existing advantages as new Chinese capabilities enter the PLA—rising on the same tide as it were. As a result, military to military engagement between the US military and the PLA, while necessary and appropriate, will tend to be colored with elements of suspicion or concern as each side participates in what could be termed a "capabilities competition."

Even with the prospect of a much less tense cross-strait relationship, Beijing has not yet persuaded itself that it can afford to “take its finger off the trigger” when it comes to Taiwan. Until the threat of military force is removed from the table, each side will work to deter the other when it comes to the use of force over Taiwan. This will fuel the capabilities competition.

Beyond the direct issue of Taiwan, the competition also is a factor in whether the rest of the region views the US as a credible ally or as a credible off-shore balancer. Credibility is normally discussed in terms of Washington’s political will to act; this stems from the assumption that the US has the *ability* to act if it so chooses. That assumption could change if the region comes to believe that Beijing’s access denial concept is a viable operational capability. This concern will continue to provide a strong incentive for Washington’s Asia-Pacific modernization efforts to receive a high priority.

¹ During much of this period China was preoccupied by the internal turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and in the support of “revolutionary” movements in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union was decidedly Euro-centric in its focus, and its out-of-area military operations centered on small-scale deployments to bases in Vietnam.