The Chinese People's Liberation Army: "Shorter Arms and Slower Legs or Longer Arms and Faster Legs"

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Introduction

In September 1999 I wrote a monograph titled "The Chinese People's Liberation Army: "Short Arms and Slow Legs" for the Institute for National Security Studies. "Short Arms-Slow Legs" is an idiom first used by a Chinese general to describe the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) after he analyzed the first Gulf War. It was symbolic of the PLA's military dilemma: They did not have the transportation to get to a fight and even if they got there, they could not hit anybody, unless their opponent had even shorter arms and slower legs than the PLA.

The paper examined the PLA's intentions and ability to threaten its neighbors and the United States. It determined that China had neither the inclination nor ability to threaten the United States militarily. The paper further asserted that the PLA had the means to threaten its neighbors, but with the exception of Taiwan—and only if Taiwan declared independence—would not be inclined to do so. The paper closed with this quote: "The PLA's arms may get longer, and its legs faster, but it will take a long, long, time before China's military rivals the world's only superpower's."

How long a time? One can't be sure, but the question is worth examining in light of four important developments. First, according to a recent Department of Defense report, Beijing believes that the United States poses a significant long-term security challenge. Therefore China is accelerating the development of advanced information technology and long-range precision strike capabilities (longer arms) and is looking for ways to target and exploit weaknesses in technologically superior adversaries such as the United States (faster legs). Second, according to same report, "Beijing has greatly expanded its arsenal of increasingly accurate and lethal ballistic missiles and long-range strike aircraft that are ready for immediate' application." Third, on

October 14, 2003, China became the third country to launch a manned spacecraft. After orbiting the earth 14 times Lieutenant Colonel Yang Liwei's space capsule landed safely in Inner Mongolia. Some China watchers believe this is the precursor to a military space war-fighting strategy. That line of attack calls for quick access to orbit, lofting anti-satellites, and utilizing powerful ground-based lasers to blind spacecraft, all of which are part of a technological tool kit for denying use of the "high ground" of space by an adversary (really long arms).[1] Fourth, Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan are extremely tense. In fact, Beijing's strongest threat of war against Taiwan in several years is the result of a promise by Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, to reform the island's constitution as the centerpiece of his campaign for re-election in March 2004.[2]

Chen is the head of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has traditionally been associated with Taiwanese independence movements. Tension has been simmering since Chen's administration passed a controversial bill in November 2003 allowing referendums, which China sees as a move towards independence. In the past, Beijing has threatened to use force against Taiwan if Taiwan declares statehood or drags its feet on reunification. Chen plans to ask voters two questions in the March 20 "general election": Whether Taiwan should acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons if the mainland refuses to withdraw missiles targeting the island and whether Taiwan should negotiate with the mainland to establish a peaceful and stable framework for interaction. Many fear that if Chen is reelected and his referendum passes, China may act.

While these four factors may stress the U.S.-China security relationship, this paper argues that China may be in a moderately stronger military position vis a vis Taiwan, but it still has neither the inclination nor the ability to threaten the United States militarily. In fact, in relative

military terms, compared to the United States, China's arms may be shorter and legs slower than they were in 1999. Furthermore, other factors, including the global war on terror (GWOT), North Korean nuclear saber rattling, and China's new fondness for "multi-lateralism" have increased the opportunity for cooperation and decreased the possibility of military conflict between the U.S. and China.

This paper is written in three parts. First it will briefly review the findings of the original "Short Arms and Slow Legs." Second, it will present a rationale for determining that China is not stronger in military terms now than it was in 1999. Finally, the paper will argue that opportunities for security cooperation between the U.S. and China reduce the possibility for conflict.

Short Arms and Slow Legs—1999

In 1999 I argued that China's goal of becoming a genuine power and regional hegemon in the twenty-first century seems quite likely, but it remained a goal that would be achieved in 2050, not 2015 as some argued. While China's war-fighting doctrine "limited war under technological conditions," it outlined a methodology that could defeat a superior power, China did not have—nor has it ever had—the wherewithal to carry out the doctrine's intent. China's deficiencies in systems integration, manufacturing propulsion systems, and advanced computer technologies were the most limiting factors in the PLA's ability to field the weapons and equipment necessary to satisfy strategic doctrine requirements. Purchasing military hardware and technology from Russia could accelerate modernization, but dependence on Russia was problematic for many reasons.

In 1999 China's navy had only limited power-projection capability. Without aircraft carriers it lacked any real ability to deal with the power projected by America's carrier battle groups. China's air force was a collection of old, outdated fighters and bombers that were ready for the junk heap. China did not have the ability to produce an indigenous fighter or bomber and joint production efforts with other countries such as Israel were fruitless. Lack of in-flight refueling capability limited the range and effectiveness of outdated Chinese fighter and bomber aircraft. Purchases of SU27 aircraft from Russia helped, but early maintenance and training problems limited their effectiveness. The weakness of China's airlift capability and the inability of the People's Liberation Army Air Force to provide air cover for ships at sea hindered mobility and power projection. In 1999, all the Chinese services had difficulty working together and derived no synergy from conducting combined arms operations. The Chinese army was an oversized, infantry-heavy force that could not get to where it needed to go, when it needed to get there, or do what it was supposed to do. Simply stated, the PLA had "short arms and slow legs."

Shorter Arms and Slower Legs? The PLA in 2004

According to the Defense Department's *Annual Report on China's Military Power* issued to Congress in July 2003, "China is developing advanced information technology and long-range precision strike capabilities and looking for ways to target and exploit perceived weaknesses of technologically superior forces (read the United States)."[3] The report further states that, "China is embarked upon a force modernization program intended to diversify its options for use of force against potential targets such as Taiwan, the South China Sea and border defense, and to complicate United States intervention in a Taiwan Strait Conflict."[4]

The operative terms in both these statements are “is developing”, “looking for,” and “is embarked.” The truth is that China may have achieved relative gains in force projection capabilities against Taiwan—primarily in numbers of missiles and 4th generation aircraft purchased from Russia—but it is still looking for arms long enough and legs fast enough to engage the United States. And, in my opinion, while China may have embarked on the journey to achieve some form of military parity, there is no evidence that China will be able to challenge the United States, even in the Taiwan Strait. While well written and researched, the *Annual Report on China’s Military Power* depends too much on Chinese open source documents that traditionally confuse “enthusiasm with capability.”

For example, in the forty-two page report, the following terms were used more than seventy times: could, is expected to, is expected to have, reportedly has, may have, may be, may have developed, may have acquired, may choose to develop, is looking to acquire, probably could, probably will, probably has, appears to be, is working to incorporate, has sought to improve, will try to, are believed to have, reportedly will be completed by, is assessed to have, would be capable of if, have incorporated the concept of, and could possibly. Throughout the entire report there is very little indication that the Chinese Army (PLA), Navy (PLAN), or Air Force (PLAAF) has realized many of their stated 1999 modernization goals and objectives. In English terms, there is not much use of the past tense throughout the entire *Annual Report*, indicating to me that not much in the way of military modernization has been accomplished.

A comprehensive review of China’s entire military modernization program, as portrayed in the *Annual Report on China’s Military Power* is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a quick look at modernization efforts in the three services—Navy, Air Force, and Army—is instructive. As was the case in 1999, China’s Navy (PLAN) is still not a significant naval power

and has only limited power-projection capability. With the exception of two Sovermeny Class destroyers purchased from Russia—two more are on order—the majority of China's surface ships, submarines, and aircraft still lack the sophisticated weapons and sensor systems characteristic of modern naval units.[5] One exception is China's agreement to purchase eight more Russian Kilo class submarines—they already have four. This agreement will affect the military balance between China and Taiwan once the submarines are put into operation. The twelve Kilos will significantly boost China's ability to blockade Taiwan and could be a challenge to American naval forces in the region.[6]

However, even with the new Russian-built craft, Chinese naval units will not be up to the standard attained by the navies of the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. Additionally, plans to acquire and put into service one or more aircraft carriers have apparently been scrapped by the PLAN leadership.[7] Without significant modernization in other areas of China's defense establishment, a PLAN aircraft carrier would be militarily useless and would take resources away from other important programs[8]. Addionally, the PLAN would have to have more than one carrier so that one is mission ready at sea at all times. Thus, many experts have concluded that an operational aircraft carrier does not appear to be in China's near future.[9]

As was also the case in 1999, the PLAN also has significant training and doctrinal problems. At-sea sustainability is modest, and the PLAN has had difficulty conducting complex coordinated air and surface operations.[10] In training the PLAN is still hampered with problems of inadequate training time, limitations in live-fire exercises, insufficient missile allowances, ineffective unification of command and control, and integration of different weapon systems.[11] In my opinion, these shortfalls will limit the ability of the PLAN to project a significant regional

naval presence for at least ten years, and the Navy is not likely to possess the longer reach associated with major power-projection until well into the 21st century.

The bulk of China's air force (PLAAF) fleet is still obsolete. Presently all but approximately 150 of its 3,000 fighters, 400 ground-attack aircraft, and 120 bombers are based on 1950s and 1960s technology.[12] Many of these obsolete aircraft will reach the end of their service lives during the next 10 years and are slated to be retired with only limited numbers of replacement aircraft likely to enter the air force inventory.[13]

China received its first 4th-generation fighter, the Su-27, in 1992. Training, tactics and operational concepts progressed slowly as China attempted to integrate the new technologies and capabilities of 24 of these aircraft into the PLAFF. Interestingly, during the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait confrontation between the U.S. and China it was reported that available Su 27 aircraft were not flown by the Chinese because of maintenance and training problems.[14] More recent reports confirm that PLAFF personnel have problems maintaining air craft engines and have been forced to send the AL-3 1F engines that power the SU-27 fighters to Russia for repair.[15]Also, the SU-27s do not appear to have in-flight refueling capability, which means that China would not be able to use these fighters to their full power projection potential.

In July 2002 it was reported that China would buy around 30 Su-30MK2 naval fighters from Russia on top of the 80 Su-30MKKs it bought in 1999 and 2001. Present estimates indicate that the Chinese could have as many as 400 4th generation Su-27, Su-30, and Su-33 fighters by the year 2010, just in time to face America's 3,500, 5th generation aircraft due to be in service at about the same time.[16]

There are other considerations than equipment that should be considered when comparing the PLAFF to other air forces. According to some researchers, Chinese pilots spend too few

hours in the cockpit—60-100 hours per year versus 180-200 hours for NATO pilots—and their training does not adequately prepare them for real combat.[17] China's air force has not been tested in combat since the thick of the Vietnam War 30 years ago. During China's 1979 border war with Vietnam, its air force played no combat role and PLAAF fighters stayed well away from hostilities.[18] Unlike their Chinese counterparts, U.S. and NATO pilots have been battle tested on many occasions in the past decade.

China's Army (PLA) remains is the world's largest, at about two million men, but, as one analyst puts it, the PLA remains a, "bloated appendage of the Communist Party."[19] The PLA has insufficient airlift, logistics, engineering, and medical capabilities to project power very far beyond its borders. In fact, says one analyst, "most of the Chinese army is good only for internal security purposes."[20] Selection and advancement of officers is based more on party loyalty than ability. For example, Major General Jia Tingan's recent promotion to China's Central Military Commission (CMC) is a controversial appointment. A personal secretary to Mr Jiang Zemin before heading Jiang's office in the mid-1990s, Mr. Jia has been appointed director of the CMC's general office, the PLA's highest administrative office that runs the day-to-day operations of the elite military policymaking body and carries out its orders.[21] According to one source, he is the first non-military man to be appointed to the post despite the fact that he was given the title of major-general only a few years ago.[22]

For more than eight years the PLA has made unsuccessful efforts to establish an effective noncommissioned officers corps.[23] The Pentagon describes morale in the PLA as "poor." About 80 percent of the force is armed with weapons commonly derided as "museum pieces" that date to the 1950s or 1960s.[24] Clearly the PLA is in the process of updating its military equipment and

has developed “pockets of excellence” in all their services, particularly their ground forces. However, compared to the United States, most of the improvements don’t match what the American army has now, much less what it will have in the future.

For example, “the PLA has begun a program to upgrade the main gun on its mainstay Type 59 main battle tanks, as well as maintain over 1,000 tanks already equipped with the 105-mm gun.”[25] However, compared the Chinese, the U.S. has almost 8,000 M1 Abrams tanks that have a 120 mm gun and have been battle tested in two wars (actually, nearly 3,000 Abrams have been retired and are in mothballs).

Perhaps the most significant improvements in Chinese military capabilities are in missile and space development. China probably has 450 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) deployed opposite Taiwan and is expected to increase the number by 75 missiles per year.[26] The question, of course, is how effective the Chinese missiles will be once Taiwan deploys the “Patriot” Advanced Capability (PAC-3) anti-missile missile that its military has recently decided to purchase from the United States.[27]

On March 16, 2003, China capped a decade’s long effort to put a man in space. Lieutenant Colonel Yang Liwei, China's first astronaut in space, orbited the earth eleven times at a distance of 300 kilometers from earth. Some believe sending men into space, and eventually to the moon, is a part of a much grander Chinese military strategy. China's all-purpose space schedule not only entails increasing use of satellites for weather watching, resource monitoring, and communications purposes. Some China-watchers also claim that a military space war-fighting strategy is also being put in place. That would call for quick access to orbit, lofting anti-satellites, and utilizing powerful ground-based lasers to blind spacecraft—all part of a

technological tool kit for denying use of the "high ground" of space by an adversary.[28] While I don't want to diminish China's space achievement—they are after all now in a very small club—I do recall listening to John Glenn orbit the earth in my high school classroom almost forty one years ago. Of course Colonel Glenn only orbited the earth three times.

The bottom line is that China [29] has no military forces capable of power projection beyond its frontiers. "It has a large army that one could call irresistible in defense, incapable of offense, and overall, an expensive liability, unless someone is so unwise as to invade China." China is a nuclear power, but not a nuclear threat. Right now the Chinese have approximately 20 nuclear missiles capable of reaching the United States and absolutely no second-strike capacity. They have no rational reason for attacking the United States except in retaliation for an American attack on China.[30]

Which raises an interesting question: Under what circumstances would the United States attack China? Possible fallout from the global war on terror? Heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula? Fallout from the March 2004 elections on Taiwan? Let's review the bidding.

The Global War on Terror

Interestingly, the immediate post-September 11 Chinese behavior with regard to the campaign against terrorism emphasized cooperation instead of confrontation. For example, China was instrumental in delivering Pakistan to Washington's war effort by assuring Islamabad that Chinese support would continue if Mr. Musharraf cooperated with the United States.[31] For its part, China gave Pakistan $1.2 million in emergency assistance in 2001 and in 2003 signed a trade deal giving Pakistan preferential treatment.[32] Also, China agreed to share intelligence with the U.S. in an effort to help combat terrorism.[33] The agreement adds to the evidence that China—

and a shared fear of terrorism—can overcome international relations strained by disagreements such as those over Taiwan.[34]Or, as Jiang Zemin, China's former president, put it in a speech delivered in Houston, "In the war against terror, the Chinese and Americans have stood together and carried out effective cooperation. China will continue to step up its consultation and cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism and join the rest of the world in the concerted fight against this common scourge."[35]

Presently, Islamic extremism is the common threat facing both countries. In reaction to the September 11 attacks the U.S. defeated the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and is pursuing them and other Islamic terrorists in Yemen and the Philippines. Other states harboring bin Laden operatives could be next. China's Muslim Fundamentalist problems are in the Xinjiang province, where ethnic Uighur Muslims have tried to avoid Chinese rule since 138 B.C.[36] Uighurs want no part of the People's Republic. "They are, after all, Chinese only in the sense that they have been incorporated into a country called "China."[37]

Most analysts believe China's quiet support for US military operations in Afghanistan stems from a perception that the dismantling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan will help it control its own Uighur problems. The Uighur uprising has gathered momentum in recent years thanks to the provision of funds, training, and sanctuary to extremist Uighur youth by the Taliban.[38] For its part, the US, erstwhile champion of China's Uighurs, lost interest in championing their causes after 9/11. Currently the Bush administration seems disinterested in differentiating between those who are seeking to liberate themselves from the yolk of communist colonial rule and terrorist groups.[39]

In my view, the U.S. and China should, and will, take advantage of this new rationale in security cooperation to work through thorny problems such as Chinese missile proliferation and the Cross-Strait issue.

Korea

In contrast to the Korean War, when China supported North Korea and confronted the United States in protracted and deadly warfare, China is now cooperating with the U.S. in order to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In March 2003 China warned North Korea that Beijing would support economic sanctions if Pyongyang continues to engage in nuclear provocation.[40] To make its point, China cut off oil supplies to North Korea for three days in an apparent warning that Pyongyang should stop threatening its neighbors.[41] China, at the request of the U.S., was instrumental in facilitating a round of "Six-Party" (China, U.S. Japan, Russia, North and South Korea) talks to reduce tensions. More recently, in late November 2003, China and the U.S. agreed to prepare for a second round of Six-Party talks in hopes of achieving substantive progress on the nuclear standoff forced by North Korea.[42]

Warfare on the Korean Peninsula would force a million North Korean refugees to enter China and cause economic turbulence that would create domestic political problems the Chinese leadership does not want to face. China has every incentive to cooperate with the U.S. to reduce tensions. The U.S., stretched thin while prosecuting the war on terrorism, also has every incentive to cooperate.

Taiwan

President Bush has been very clear regarding his position on Chen Shui-bian's push to reform the Taiwan's constitution as part of presidential elections in March 2004. In fact, President Bush issued a measured warning to Mr. Chen earlier this month when he said, "The comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally, to change the status quo, which we oppose."[43] Furthermore, President Bush has also been clear about the "one China policy" that is so important to Beijing. President Bush, appearing in a photo opportunity with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on December 9, 2003, said that the United States remains committed to a one-China policy and opposes, "any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. The United States government's policy is one China, based upon the three communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act."[44] Bush's clarity, versus the ambiguity of previous administrations, should reduce misunderstandings between China and the U.S. and thus reduce the opportunity for conflict.

Multilateralism

Historically, China has little experience with multilateralism, particularly with international organizations dealing with security issues. From the days of the "tribute system" that governed China's international relations, China has preferred "bilateral" versus "multilateral" relations.[45] However, China's success in bringing North Korea to the Six-Party talks is indicative of a shift in thinking. That shift, according to Yan Xuetong director of the Institute of International Studies at Tsinghua University, began in the mid-1990s and has been marked by a gradual warming of relations with Europe and Russia and a tendency to work more closely with Japan.[46] More recently, Chinese leaders have emphasized that China is in desperate

need of a stable and peaceful international environment, particularly in Northeast Asia, in order to continue its robust modernization program.

> In this light, the motivation and reasoning behind China's aggressive initiative to arrange the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear standoff were its national interests, drawing on its successful experience with founding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and its pursuit of the "10+1" scheme with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations since 2002, not to mention its role in ARF, ASEAN+3, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). With ever rising confidence in multilateral cooperative organization, China may have perceived the viability and feasibility of such measures in solving the current North Korean nuclear standoff.[47]

To China, multilateral dialogue is a significant change in the way security issues are handled. Multilateralism ensures the game of international relations is played on a more egalitarian basis. It gives China a seat at the table and an equal voice, something China has coveted since “rising up” in 1949.

Summing Up

China’s arms are bit longer and its legs are a bit faster in relation to potential regional adversaries. However, when compared to the United States, it will still be a long, long time before the Chinese military can seriously confront the world’s remaining superpower unless that superpower were to attack the Chinese Mainland but the likelihood of that happening is about zero. True, the Chinese could make things difficult for the U.S. if there were military confrontation over Taiwan—at least for awhile. However, China’s military has neither the arms nor legs to stay in the game very long.

Fortunately, the prospect of confrontation between China and the United States has decreased since 9/11. The global war on terror and the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula have created opportunities for cooperation, not confrontation. China’s success in bringing North Korea to the Six-Party talks coupled with its consistent commitment and support for the U.S.

efforts against terrorism have greatly amended the Sino-U.S. relationship from what it was immediately after President Bush's inauguration.[48] For his part, President Bush's reconfirmation of the "One China" policy and warning to Taiwan about upsetting the status quo are indicative of a more cooperative atmosphere.

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