



WASHINGTON CONTEMPLATES THE CHINESE MILITARY

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After enduring much criticism for its tepid reaction to China's assertive behavior, there are signs that Washington is considering a stronger stance. For several decades, U.S. official publications had repeated what was, in essence, a mantra: the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is progressively improving its weapons and training, although it is decades behind the United States military. Implicit in the mantra was the assumption that the PLA likely always would be decades behind the US. This view also conveniently overlooked the reality that the Chinese military was unlikely to challenge the

US globally, where the U.S. does possess a preponderance of power, rather than regionally, where it is stretched thinly.

One indicator of the change in tone occurred in April, when the Office of Naval Intelligence released its first unclassified report on the Chinese navy since 2009.[1] ONI predicted that, by the end of the decade, the PLA Navy (PLAN) will have completed its transition from a coastal force to one capable of multiple missions around the world, adding that PLAN had launched more ships than any other country in 2013 and 2014 with comparable increases planned for 2015 and 2016.

A major revelation of the ONI report was the first public acknowledgment that the ships of China's newest destroyers, the Kunming, or Luyang III (052D) class, are outfitted with new generation indigenous supersonic, vertically launched YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missiles. With a reported cruise range of as much as 180 kilometers and a terminal sprint range of 40 km at Mach 2.5-.3.0 speeds as well as a sea-skimming flight capability and a command data link, the YJ-18 is extremely difficult to defend against.

The submarine fleet, ONI reported, has also been augmented, and is expected to number at least 70 by 2020. More capable models are being phased in: eight conventionally-powered Yuan class boats are being added to the existing twelve. Like the older Song class, the Yuan are capable of launching YJ-18 missiles, but have the added advantage of air independent power systems which enable them to increase the time they can stay submerged and hence render them harder to detect. In terms of nuclear submarines, Shang-class boats are replacing older Han-class SSNs, and the expected deployment of Jin-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines will provide the PRC with its first credible at-sea second strike nuclear capability. The JL-2 ballistic missile that the Jin is equipped with has a range of approximately 4,598 miles. According to the U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission, this gives the PRC the ability to conduct nuclear strikes against Alaska if launched from waters near China, against Alaska and Hawaii if launched from waters south of Japan; against Alaska, Hawaii and the western portion of the continental United States if launched from waters west of Hawaii; and against all 50 U.S. states if launched from waters east of Hawaii.[2] The Chinese air force is developing two stealthy fighters, the J-20 and J-31 which,

[1] http://news.usni.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015_PLA_NAVY_PUB_Print.pdf

[2] http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report/Chapters/Chapter%20202%3B%20Section%2020China%E2%80%99s%20Military%20Modernization.pdf, p. 320

however, are not expected to become operational for several years. If, as expected, existing issues can be resolved, the planes could present a serious challenge to fifth-generation U.S. fighters.[3]

Moreover, the ONI report noted, China's coast guard and maritime law enforcement fleets, which back up PLAN's missions, are larger than those of other claimants to disputed territories in the East China and South China seas---Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines ---combined. China commissioned its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, in 2013, and a second carrier, to be entirely indigenously produced, is under construction. Advances are also being made in unmanned aerial vehicles and in cyberspying. In the latter, two separate breaches of U.S. government databases holding personnel records and security-clearance files exposed sensitive information about at least 22.1 million people, including not only federal employees and contractors but their families and friends.

In May, a month after the release of the ONI report, a second meaningful event occurred. Commander of the Pacific Fleet Admiral Samuel Locklear, who had been a leading candidate to succeed General Martin Dempsey as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was passed over in favor of General Joseph Dunford. Locklear's 2013 comment that he considered climate change to be the major security threat to the Asian-Pacific region had aroused widespread criticism. Locklear was believed to be echoing the Obama administration's views at the time so as to position himself for promotion. Presumably, those views had changed. Locklear, who had been lobbying for the Joint Chiefs job for some time, had applied for a delay in retirement so that he could be considered. Subordinates, requesting anonymity, described the admiral as "accepting the administration's near-mythical China narrative no matter how towering the evidence against it" and currying favor with Washington to the detriment of what, in their opinion, constituted prudent security policy.[4] Locklear's April 2015 testimony to a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program supports this opinion. Although the admiral did not repeat the climate change theory, his testimony did not dwell on Chinese aggression but rather advocated "continuous dialogue" and advised that "the U.S. will need more transparency and understanding of Chinese intentions in order to minimize friction and avoid miscalculation or conflict in the future." [5]

Also in May, a U.S. P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance plane accompanied by a CNN news crew flew over a disputed area which China has been expanding and broadcast to television audiences worldwide the warnings issued by PLAN to leave immediately.[6] Shortly thereafter, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, speaking at the inauguration of Admiral Harry Harris as new PACOM, stated bluntly, "There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do all around the world." [7] In his keynote address to the annual Shangri-La Dialogue a few days later, Carter singled out China for criticism and again asserted the U.S. right of transit according to international law.[8] Adding substance to his words, newly appointed Commander of the Pacific Fleet Admiral Scott Swift joined another surveillance flight in July.[9]

In August, in a third indication of Washington's increased willingness to admit the security threat posed by Beijing the U.S. Defense Department issued an Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy. It noted that, despite claiming indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters and that it held "sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof," the Chinese government had left unclear the precise nature of its claims, including whether the PRC claims all the maritime area located within the line as well as all the land features therein. It had also unilaterally established an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) overlapping those of Japan and South Korea, and with more stringent regulations than other ADIZ. Whereas other claimants had sought to reclaim portions of what they consider to be their territories, China had as of June 2015 reclaimed more than 2,900 acres, amounting to 17 times more land in 20 months than all other claimants had for the past 40 years.[10] These assertive claims had led to a proliferation of dangerous incidents, including, in August 2014, a Chinese J-11 fighter crossing directly under and doing a barrel roll over an American P-8A Poseidon approximately 117 nautical miles east of Hainan Island---i.e., in international waters.

A subtext of the Defense Department document appears to be an administration effort to counter domestic criticism that there has been little substantive progress to implement what President Barack Obama, in a speech to the Australian parliament

[3] <http://aviationweek.com/zhuhai-2014/j-20-stealth-fighter-design-balances-speed-and-agility>

[4] Private conversation with the author, 9 May 2015.

[5] http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Locklear_04-16-15.pdf, pp. 16-17.

[6] <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/politics/south-china-sea-navy-flight/>

[7] <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Article/607051>, May 27, 2015.

[8] <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/budget/2015/05/29/carter-china-out-of-step-pacific-islands-sovereign-reclamation-shangri-la/28146053/>

[9] <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/07/19/us-pacific-fleet-chief-joins-surveillance--south-china-sea/30378383/>

[10] www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P_Maritime_Security_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORM, p. 16.

in November 2001, termed the pivot to Asia. The United States, the strategy document stated, has 368,000 military personnel in the Asia-Pacific region, more than a quarter of whom are west of the international date line. Over the next five years, the navy is to increase the number of Pacific Fleet ships outside U.S. territory by 50 percent; by 2020, 60 percent of naval and overseas air assets will be home ported in the Pacific. The Marine Corps presence will also be enhanced. Freedom of Navigation exercises have proceeded at an increased tempo, as have training and exercises with allies and partners. The 2014 iteration of the annual RIMPAC exercise was the largest on record, with 22 nations participating, including to a limited degree, China. U.S. marines have trained Japanese Ground Self Defense Force (SDF) units in such activities as retaking islands. New guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation will enable the US military and the SDF to work more closely together. In Indonesia, the April 2015 SEASURVEX exercise included a flight portion over the South China Sea for the first time. The annual joint U.S.-Philippine Balikatan exercise was the largest and most sophisticated to date and, significantly, involved a territorial defense scenario in the Sulu Sea, with SDF personnel observing. High-level visits between U.S. and Indian leaders, the latter having territorial issues with China as well, have established the basis for closer defense ties. India and the U.S. conduct annual MALABAR exercises.

A semi-formal partnership among the United States, Australia, and Japan has existed for some time; in November 2014, President Obama, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, and Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott held their first trilateral meeting, agreeing to expand cooperation. Naval cooperation with Vietnam has been expanded; Singapore is to become the center of a regional maritime domain awareness network.

So far, these manifestations of increased concern fall into a category that might be called signaling. China has it turn signaled back, and the message is defiant. A defense white paper issued just before the Shangri-La dialogue began vowed a strong defense of China's sovereignty, security and development interests. Separately, a sweeping new national security law was passed, aimed as much at suppressing domestic dissent as external threats. Other new laws have extended the regulations on adapting civilian ships for military use, and the government began laying the diplomatic and legal foundations for establishing a base in strategically-located Obock, on the northern coast of Djibouti. A Chinese admiral warned that, if confronted with a threat in the South China Sea, his government would not hesitate to establish another ADIZ covering that area,[11] something Washington has been attempting to head off since Beijing's announcement of an East China Sea ADIZ two years ago. A contra-indication of the administration's resolve on China was the decision not to publicly blame Beijing for the hacking of Office of Personnel Management data,[12] as was its inclusion of China in RIMPAC 2015 despite strong congressional opposition.

It is not clear what actions Washington would take if, for example, the PLA should fire on an American surveillance plane flying within the area China insists is within its territorial waters. It is also unclear how much United States' actions in defense of freedom of navigation in the area are backed by neighboring states, even those who have expressed the most anxiety about the PRC's encroachment on what regard they regard as their territories. Countries both large and small are reluctant to take actions that might anger China. Many of these countries also hold military drills with China.[13] Corruption and mismanagement in some countries mean that aid given for the improvement their militaries is wasted.[14] And there is domestic opposition to joining with the United States to protect their islands. For example, one day after Philippine Foreign Ministry Voltaire Guzman requested American help to protect resupply boats to disputed territories, currently being interdicted by Chinese ships, Xinhua quoted former Filipino president Joseph Estrada as accusing the United States of interfering in the internal affairs of his country and opposing its military deployment in the South China Sea.[15] When, in 2007, Beijing as well as the Indian left wing registered dissatisfaction with the presence of Japan at the MALABAR exercises, India subsequently declined to invite Japan, although it has been invited to the 2015 iteration. And, despite Indonesian defense officials' complaints that China claims part of Indonesia's Riau Islands Province, the country's foreign ministry has stated that there is no territorial issue between the two countries.[16]

Given the ambivalence among many of its allies and partners in the region about protecting their claims, it would be unwise for the United States to do more than insist, as it has since at least 2010, that that all disputes be settled through peaceful

[11] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/01/world/asia/china-says-it-could-set-up-air-defense-zone-in-south-china-sea.html?_r=0

[12] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-avoids-blaming-china-in-data-theft-seen-as-fair-game-in-espionage/2015/07/21/03779096-2eee-11e5-8353-1215475949f4_story.html

[13] For example, Malaysia http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-08/27/content_6652804.htm Xinhua August 27, 2015 and India, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/India-China-to-hold-joint-military-exercise-in-2015-decision-ahead-of-Modi-visit/articleshow/46880799.cms>, among others.

[14] In this case, the Philippines. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/philippines-military-upgrade-stalls-1437280810>

[15] http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2015-08/28/content_6654753.htm Xinhua 2015-08-28

[16] No author, "Indonesia's Military Flexes Muscles as South China Sea Dispute Looms," Jakarta Globe, March 14, 2014; Panca Hari Prabowo, "Natalegawa Denies Territorial Dispute with China over Natuna Islands," Antara, March 19, 2014.

negotiation. At the same time, to protect its own interests as well as those of allies and partners, Washington must continue to forcefully back its assertions that it will not countenance the interdiction of freedom of navigation.

Whereas a decade ago U.S. policy aspired to draw China in as a responsible member of the international community, it now seems to have decided on a more minimal goal: to prevent China from disrupting the security of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. There are no easy solutions. Should the deceleration of the PRC's economic growth impede its aggressive activities, that may do more than any actions by Washington to mitigate current tensions.