



The Pentagon Gets China Right

Robert T. McLean

Colaboraciones n° 1043

June 26, 2006

In late May the Department of Defense issued its annual report to Congress on the "Military Power of the People's Republic of China." While not a perfect document, this assessment of the expanding danger emanating from Beijing displays that the Pentagon not only understands the implications of a Chinese challenge to the American primacy in Asia, but is also bold enough to confront Beijing about Washington's concerns. At face value the Defense Department's document is not unlike those released in previous years; however, a close examination of the report and its surrounding reactions demonstrate that the situation has become all the more serious.

Beijing's expansive aspirations in the economic and political arenas are beginning to pave the way for an equally bold foreign policy. As

this year's report notes, "China's foreign policy is now global." This is a consequential development whose process has been highlighted in previous reports, yet it was deemed premature to label China as a world power until now.

Just as the dawn of the nineteenth century when Thomas Jefferson realized that in order to become an economic power, the United States must trade all over the world, Beijing has reached the conclusion that their economic growth is increasingly dependent on foreign markets and natural resources. In Jefferson's eyes, American commerce would have to be protected and "paid for by frequent war." Beijing has drawn similar conclusions as the Pentagon's report prefigures: "As China's economy expands, so too will its interests and the perceived need to build a military capable of protect-

ing them.” Such parallels may draw some to become empathetic of China’s current course and accept the People’s Republic’s rise to great power status as not only inevitable, but legitimate. This, however, is exceedingly perilous.

A balance of power in Asia and the Pacific is neither to the advantage of the United States nor the region. Prior to his influence in promoting the Monroe Doctrine as Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams deemed that it was imperative for the young American republic to expand across the continent to the Pacific because a North America plagued by a security environment predicated on the power balancing structure that consumed Europe would inevitably lead to an “eternal war” for possessions as insignificant as “a rock or a fish pond.”

Such a state of affairs in the latter half of the twentieth century led to the endless series of proxy wars that defined the Cold War era. Today, as the Defense Department’s report states, “The rapid growth of the PRC’s economy, coupled with its military expansion, has propelled China’s emergence as a regional power.” Therefore, Rumsfeld’s Pentagon has correctly made it a priority to maintain the preservation of America’s relative power in Asia rather than preparing for a stage of balance of power.

Reaction from Beijing to the report has been unusually docile for a regime that throws fits every year after the State Department releases its “Annual Country Reports on Hu-

man Rights.” There are several possible explanations for the PRC’s conspicuously composed response. The most obvious is that the leadership in Beijing wants to avert a rise in tensions with Washington over an issue that is relatively insignificant. Strong denunciations of the Pentagon’s report could have the adverse effect of giving the perceivably hawkish Department of Defense legitimacy in their claims. And whereas human rights reports undermine the regime’s credibility at home, references to an increasingly assertive and powerful China are unlikely to stir such domestic dissent.

There is another reason, however, that the regime’s propaganda machine – the government has virtually absolute control of information flows in China – toned down its customary criticisms of America. On May 22, the day before the Pentagon’s report, the Chinese official news agency *Xinhua* reported that the “U.S. [was] likely to increase hi-tech exports for civilian use to China.” This is something that the regime in Beijing has long strenuously advocated, and it is imperative that Undersecretary of State for Commerce David H. McCormick abides by his words of ensuring that dual-use technologies do not wind up in the hands of the Chinese military establishment.

A chapter on force modernization in the DOD’s report quoted Chinese President Hu Jintao’s statement earlier this year that a comprehensive system of research and development should “create a good structure un-

der which military and civilian high technologies are shared and mutually transferable.” Thus, there is a reason tight export control of dual-use technology has prevailed. Whereas this year’s assessment of the advancement of China’s technological components notes that foreign investment in China’s civilian industrial sector “has increased the prospect for spin-off with military dual-use industries,” the June 2000 report was more dismissive of the dangers of Beijing’s technological improvements. The 2000 report claimed: “Even if the PLA were to acquire the modern weaponry it seeks, integrating those systems and training commanders and troops to employ them will remain a difficult task and will inhibit the PLA’s maturation into a world-class military force.”

Unfortunately, it seems that the Chinese were underestimated. Just six years later the Pentagon notes not only the technological improvements by the PLA, but also the number of highly trained Chinese citizens capable of developing, maintaining, and operating the country’s increasingly modern defense capabilities. For instance, the report notes that a growing number of Chinese nationals are being trained abroad in the sciences and engineering, including the nearly 36,000 that were granted student or exchange visas in the United States in 2004. The Defense Department understands the dangers here and has no intention of permitting the PRC to challenge for future technological dominance.

That is not how many see it, however. To some, the Pentagon’s report represents a deceitful exaggeration in order to justify future defense spending. The Chinese Communist Party’s *Renmin Ribao* wrote on May 26: “The American society has become one big interest group since World War II ... Just imagine, if there is not one bit of tension, if there is no ‘opponent,’ how could the Defense Department attain more budget from Congress.” These sentiments were largely echoed by Fred Kaplan in *Slate* when he imprudently stated: “Every day and night, hundreds of Air Force generals and Navy admirals must thank their lucky stars for China.”

Adding that the Pentagon’s report “adds up to diddly,” Kaplan stipulates that the Chinese are no threat at all. Perhaps, these China doves should ask Beijing’s neighbors how they feel about that dictatorship’s increasing military power and regional muscle flexing. Assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs Peter Rodman noted that one of the biggest changes articulated in this year’s report is that “China is beginning to develop the capacity to project power.” Just one year earlier, the 2005 report assessed that “China’s ability to project conventional military power beyond its periphery remains limited.” Thus, it is clear that within the last year Beijing has made considerable strides towards constituting a military threat to the United States, its allies, and its interests far beyond a conflict over Taiwan.

Further evidence of this development - although regrettably not mentioned or adequately addressed in the report - are several instruments of force projection that have and will enable Beijing to increase its global influence. Chinese intelligence agents are active at both points of entry of the Panama Canal as the country's corporations control much of vital sectors of the canals management. China is also assisting their allies in Pakistan to develop the Gwadar Port giving them access to the Gulf of Oman and the potential ability to project power in the Persia Gulf. The report also glossed over the Beijing and Moscow led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO is an increasingly powerful military alliance that frequently works to counter American interests. This organization delivers both allies and natural recourses to the Chinese in Russia and Central Asia.

Thus, the Defense Department is hardly guilty of overstating the threat posed by a rising China. One reason for this is that Beijing is not only increasing its military capacity and global influence, but gauging their intentions remains a fretful affair. A noteworthy element in the 2006 report is the Pentagon's accurate assessment of the PRC's dangerously unpredictable strategy. Sighting former paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's words from the early 1990's, Rodman noted: "The phrase that strikes me, of course is 'hide our capacities and bide our time.'" The assistant secretary added, "I think this encapsulates what China's strategy is. They

are very patient." What many fail to understand, and something the Defense Department understands well, is that just like the al-Qaeda forces we are battling now, the Chinese think beyond the immediate and plan for the long-term.

The United States' use of force in first Kosovo and then Iraq was greatly troubling to the Chinese leadership because these instances not only displayed that that the United States had the ability to effectively project power anywhere in the world, but that the will was there as well. Thus, whereas the Pentagon's original report to Congress in 2000 stated that the Chinese military force structure planning was a principal concern as it seemed to be designed for a cross-strait conflict with Taiwan, and perhaps the United States; the 2006 report highlights the increasing capabilities of the Chinese forces as the "PLA Second Artillery is fielding mobile, more survivable missiles capable of targeting the United States, Japan, India, Russia, and other targets in Asia and the rest of the world" with nuclear weapons.

The Soviet Union had this capability, and combined with their concurrent efforts - much like the Chinese - to counter the United States around the world, the result was half a decade of Cold War with conflicts springing up the world over to satisfy the relative balance of power that no corner of the Earth was able to escape. Tens of thousands of Americans died fighting in Soviet initiated and facilitated struggles. This is not something the generals

and admirals are wishing every day and night will reemerge. The Pentagon has got it right on China, and

unlike its many critics, the Defense Department is working tirelessly to ensure that will not happen again.