

PREFACE

This book is intended to be a resource for students and analysts seeking to measure the current and future dimensions of China's strategic military growth. Its primary focus is on the political and military dimensions of China's strategic growth. Although economic and cultural, or "soft power," dimensions are important, they are not the main focus here. This is an attempt to look at the medium-term future of the People's Liberation Army, but the information limitations dictate that it is not a definitive description, which will require constant reassessment.

It is important to acknowledge that a full understanding of China's political-military strategic development is not possible, because of the nature of military and strategic information in China. Its government denies essential information to Chinese citizens and foreigners, requiring diligent researchers to go to great lengths—literally—to find needed data. In China such information is broadly classified and carefully compartmentalized and protected. There is also a historic and military culture dimension: Chinese leaders reflect and venerate the wisdom of their ancient strategists such as Sun Zi, who, nearly 2,500 years ago, explained, "All war is deception." To its credit the U.S. government, especially under the Bush administration, has sought to impress upon Chinese officials the many reasons why it is in their self-interest to become more transparent militarily. While there has been progress, it has been minuscule and at a glacial pace, which only serves to sustain doubts about China's intentions.

Like other recent academic assessments of China's modern military, this book is largely an examination of open sources, with the addition of unique interview data gathered over the course of a decade. There are a variety of methods to approach

this subject. Some view analysis of China's military doctrine as essential to providing key answers. There is a great deal of Chinese military literature on questions of general or even nuclear doctrine. But there is no access by foreigners to official documents that provide definitive explanations or outline future doctrine or equipment choices. So analysts must devise their best guesstimates based on literature, official statements, actions, interview data, and assessment of modernization decisions.

This analyst acknowledges the need for an examination of all aspects of China's military trajectory but has chosen to put a special emphasis on China's military-technical capabilities. Whereas even a capabilities-based analysis is fraught with uncertainties, technologies and weapons are to some extent easier to define, and their inherent choices can also help form conclusions about China's military strategic direction. In an effort to limit some of these uncertainties, since 1996 this analyst has sought to surface new data about China's military modernization by directly interviewing those involved in this process. Doing so has involved attending twenty-two military exhibitions from 1996 through 2008 in Russia, India, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Japan, and, up until 2004, China's Zhuhai Airshow. In addition to interviews with officials from Chinese military companies or foreign companies doing business with them, there have been numerous opportunities to interview government officials in Taiwan, Japan, India, and Singapore, who have provided additional insights.

This approach has yielded a broad database about the PLA's modernization as well as specific new "stories" to which the author has made decisive or significant contributions. A sample of ten major stores would include

- Zhuhai 1996: First indication that the PLA was developing a terminally guided MRBM
- Moscow 1997: First indication that Russia was selling radar satellite technology to the PLA
- Zhuhai 1998: First indication that China was developing anti-tactical ballistic missiles
- Moscow 2001: China's "theft" of Russian counter-stealth radar technology
- Zhuhai 2002: First indications of a family of Chinese antisatellite missiles
- Zhuhai 2004: China's progress in developing new generation land attack cruise missiles
- IDEX 2005: Ukrainian involvement in China's naval phased array radar program
- Moscow 2005: China's broad interest in Russian aircraft technology for aircraft carriers
- DEFEXPO 2006: New directions in China's effort to build large transport aircraft
- IMDEX 2007: China's intention to develop new helicopter amphibious assault ships

The unfortunate reality of this period is that these are stories that the Chinese government did not want published. For example, Chengdu's J-10 fighter has

been known of since the early 1990s and Internet photos began appearing in 1998, but it was not legally permissible in China to write about this aircraft until its official declassification in January 2007. As of May 2008 the official J-10 performance specifications had not been made public. Reports emerged that some Chinese were jailed for posting early Internet pictures of the J-10, but that has not stopped hundreds of pictures from emerging, from 1998 to the fighter's partial declassification in late 2006.

The penalties to Chinese for disclosing sensitive information was made clear to the author in late 1998, when a Chinese source sought me out to say that the individual who had explained China's development of terminal missile guidance technologies at the 1996 Zhuhai show had been punished. The reason for China's anger became clearer by 2002 to 2003, when additional disclosures started to unveil China's intention to build a revolutionary terminally guided antiship ballistic missile. The United States had no real defense against such a weapon, and the Chinese government clearly preferred that U.S. understanding of this program be delayed as long as possible, to prevent the development of countermeasures.

So it is with much of the subject area covered in this book. The Chinese government would rather there not be a critical focus on their new and future weapon systems and how they increase PLA capabilities versus Taiwan, Japan, India, or even the United States. Various experts and observers started commenting on China's ambitions and actions to acquire aircraft carriers starting in the mid-1980s. But China regularly denied such ambitions, and its officials began issuing (grudging) admissions only in 2006. China's visible efforts to acquire space weapon systems and long-range power projection capabilities also follow decades of denials or obfuscation.

Understanding the sensitivity of these subjects, this analyst decided that engaging officials of the People's Liberation Army was not going to yield the same level of information as engaging engineers and military company officials. In contrast to democracies, top PLA officials do not need to hold regular press conferences with freewheeling questions, issue detailed press briefings on their actions or budgets, or engage a large community of journalists and analysts, in order to attract funding or policy support. Foreign analysts and journalists, much less Chinese, cannot make short-notice visits to key officials or defense companies and inquire about their latest programs, as is often taken for granted in the West.

In early 2005 I was able to ask a Chinese aerospace company official what it would take for a foreign reporter to gain permission to visit their fighter assembly line. The chuckled reply, which I took to be serious, was, "A Politburo decision," or the top leadership level of the ruling Communist Party. This would be like waiting for a U.S. Cabinet-level decision, an indication of the level of protection China accords such information. Only in 2006 and 2007 did the PLA begin to allow top U.S. military leaders to get close to new Chinese weapon systems, although PLA officers had been visiting U.S. aircraft carriers and many other modern systems for almost three decades.

Instead, the PLA maintains a large number of officials and scholars who “handle” visiting foreigners, but their job is largely to limit information and to shape perceptions. Nevertheless, there are many U.S. and other scholars and analysts who have benefited greatly from this community, and they are to be credited for having devoted professional energy to sustaining relationships that continue to yield insights. My single formal encounter with the PLA was to accept an invitation to attend the 2004 Sun Zi Conference in Guangzhou. While the academic treatment of Sun Zi Bingfa by PLA officers varied widely, the principal reason for attending was that this was one of the only “sanctioned” events in which foreign experts could interact with PLA officers.

While this invitation is gratefully acknowledged, it followed a period in which this author, in addition to several others, had been increasingly lumped into the Chinese propaganda bureaucracy’s creation of the “China Threat Theory.” This is a classic propaganda ploy of autocratic states: to demonize the critics rather than engage them or refute the substance of their claims by revealing a greater truth. This effort sometimes borders on comical, but the goal is most serious: to destroy the credibility of the target and to delegitimize him in his field. It is a form of “soft assassination” employed by China, which, Ralph Sawyer has aptly noted, draws from a long and harsher history. My reporting on the specific details of China’s military modernization, combined with its increasing propensity to threaten democratic Taiwan, Japan, India, and U.S. forces qualified me for inclusion in the “China Threat School.”

Consequently it was not surprising when in 2004 the Chinese Foreign Ministry sought to deny my visa to visit the 2004 Zhuhai Airshow, but it was dissuaded by the timely intercession of U.S. government officials and, perhaps, by my existing invitation to the Sun Zi conference. The Zhuhai show, while a tightly controlled exercise in releasing information, constitutes one of the most generous Chinese exercises in “transparency,” in which one can ask real questions and sometimes get straight answers. In 2006 the Chinese Foreign Ministry did deny my visa necessary to attend the Zhuhai show. No explanation was offered other than a cryptic comment by a Consular official: “I think you know why.”

This analyst is not alone; China has long used such denials of access to chasten and control the work of foreign journalists and academics critical of its actions. But in 2006 and 2007 the PLA has opened slightly, allowing top U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy commanders access to units with new equipment as well as access to some key leaders. In August 2007 a delegation from the House Armed Services Committee visited a Second Artillery missile base, an unprecedented gesture. But this does not begin to equate the access the PLA has had to the U.S. side since the 1980s. The Chinese understand, however, that democracies rely on facts to fuel vital debates, which they can try to manipulate even with such crude tactics as access denial. In time, one can only hope that the Chinese government will embrace a level of transparency that truly enables other countries to seek assurance, a process those countries must accomplish for themselves, for which the words of officials or experts chosen by China’s government cannot be substituted. But until the Chinese government embraces

transparency, refusing to allow it to control, manipulate, or designate those who describe the People's Liberation Army becomes a matter of self-defense.

Other sources have also figured prominently in this volume. The governments of the United States and Taiwan provide regular public assessments of China's military capabilities and intent. In 1997, in part as a reaction to the alleged timidity of the Administration of President Bill Clinton, the Republican Party-controlled Congress mandated an annual Department of Defense report on China's military power. Although it has not risen to the detail level of the former *Soviet Military Power* series initiated by President Ronald Reagan, the vigorous interagency process that results in this document has ensured that it is the world's most credible statement by any government on China's military direction—a statement that the Chinese government would be loath to produce itself. However, this document is also conspicuous by what it does not address, to include potential rapid PLA progress in the areas of multiple-warhead missiles, missile defense, and fifth-generation fighters, which are explored in this volume.

In addition, the Internet, which the PLA and China's security services have long fashioned into a weapon against other countries and against their own people, has in turn yielded amazing insights into China's military modernization. Despite a gauntlet of Internet censors, patriotic Chinese Web posters are often the first to make available new images of PLA naval ships under construction or of new, previously unknown weapon systems. But the Internet is also a playground for Chinese government deceptions, and the knowledge of Chinese netizens is often wrong or incomplete.

A late source that has contributed to this volume has been the partial access to Chinese data bases that offer cross references to a vast collection of Chinese military-technical literature. Partial access to the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) is available (though expensive) at the Library of Congress, but the number of articles that can be obtained are far smaller than identified in the data base. However, Web-based access to CNKI (<http://www.cnki.com.cn/>) and to competitors such as "Wanfang Data" (<http://www.wanfangdata.com.cn/>), "ilib" (<http://www.ilib.cn/>), and "VIP" (<http://www.cqvip.com/>) can yield a large number of abstracts of relevant journal articles. Also impressive is the large body of Western military-technical research included in these data bases that is aiding Chinese engineers. On the other hand, not having access to whole articles is one weakness of these data bases; another is that Chinese censorship rarely allows Chinese authors to relate their work to specific Chinese weapons programs. There is also the danger that these data bases are manipulated for deception purposes. In the main, citation of these articles is meant to offer partial proof or to offer a useful indications of potential PLA technical developments. The former Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), now called the World News Connection, a U.S. government service responsible for foreign media translations, used to feature this critical Chinese military-technical literature heavily, but the flow has fallen to a trickle, much to the detriment of the open source-dependent analytical community.