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Chinese Military Modernization: The Future Is Arriving Much Sooner Than Expected

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As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates prepares to go to China and President Obama prepares to host Chinese leader Hu Jintao, it is important that they recognize that the Chinese leadership has an increasingly capable military at its disposal. Worse, the factors shaping that military remain opaque.

The Growing Chinese Military. A number of items concerning the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were in the news this past week. The most high profile was the comment by Admiral Robert Willard, chief of U.S. Pacific Command, that China's anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) system had reached initial operational capability (IOC). This means that the Chinese DF-21D, which is believed to have been developed specifically to target U.S. carrier strike groups (CSGs), has now been distributed to at least some PLA units for actual operational use in the event of conflict.

The DF-21D is not a new program; its development has been mentioned in various official and academic publications, including this year's Department of Defense report on China, released in August. What is striking is that the system has reached IOC much earlier than had been expected. The annual Pentagon report on Chinese military capabilities, for example, gave no indication that the system was going to reach IOC this year.

At almost the same time, Chinese Internet sites revealed pictures of a possible Chinese stealth-type fighter aircraft.¹ The pictures are grainy and may not bear any resemblance to any actual Chinese aircraft in development, although it is apparently

referred to as the J-20. The larger point is that such photos reached the Chinese portion of the Internet about the same time as Admiral Willard raised the subject of the DF-21D again.

Meanwhile, there are reports that the Chinese carrier *Shi Lang* (formerly the *Varyag*) may be ready for launch in 2011.² This, too, would appear to be far in advance of prior estimates of when the ex-Soviet aircraft carrier might be refurbished—and make a mockery of those who had claimed that the Chinese were either not interested in or not capable of developing and operating an aircraft carrier.

All of these news items serve to underscore that China's military development has proceeded more rapidly than many had expected. Nor is this accelerating pace limited to equipment items. The Chinese military in 2001 were only beginning to incorporate concepts of jointness into their doctrine and were focused on the "juntuan" level of group armies and military region air forces. By 2010, there was much more discussion of jointness at the operational level, including joint operations between ground brigades and air regiments. While this is not quite the same as American joint operations, it is notable, since China is making such changes without the pressure of or experience from two ongoing

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wars. Indeed, all of these military efforts are occurring without *any* pressing military threat to China's borders or interests.

It remains to be seen, though, what the 2010 Chinese defense white paper will reveal about Chinese military policies and emphases. Few Western analysts, however, expect it to be significantly more revealing about Chinese decision making than the previous editions.

At Cross-Purposes? For all the purported interest in sustaining military-to-military exchanges, there is little indication that Beijing sees them as much more than an opportunity to gain information and press their political and diplomatic agenda. Where the U.S. has tried to use military-to-military meetings to propose operational steps for minimizing the potential for incidents or misunderstanding, China uses these meetings to demand alterations in fundamental U.S. policy.

At meetings held under the Military Maritime Cooperation Arrangement (MMCA), for example, the U.S. has called for adoption of rules of the road and safer behavior between Chinese and U.S. ships, consistent with its interest in freedom of the seas. For the Chinese, on the other hand, the MMCA seems to be an opportunity to reiterate their massive sovereignty claims to seas far beyond their shores. Indeed, the Chinese see “creating a safer maritime environment” almost as justifying the American presence and therefore do not welcome it.

Recommendations. As the U.S. and China engage each other in 2011, Congress and the Administration should:

- *Hedge against Chinese breakout capabilities.* In and of itself, China's military modernization is not necessarily a threat. China is now the world's second largest economy and has a global footprint. It is only natural that China would create a military capable of defending those interests.
- *Maintain U.S. capabilities in the Western Pacific.* One of the essential elements of U.S. deterrence is the ability to engage in escalation dominance—that is, no matter what Chinese military capabilities arise, the U.S. will always be able to meet and overmatch them. This is the cornerstone of both U.S. security and its security guarantees to its alliance partners and friends in the region. This can be achieved only through sustained investments not only in current force structure but in R&D as well. Reductions in current American forces, by contrast, can only raise questions about both the credibility and reliability of the American commitment—and increase the risk of miscalculation and conflict.
- *Enhance intelligence and analytical capabilities.* The Chinese government in general, but especially the PLA, does not place much faith in transparency. While it has improved some aspects of its public face, fundamental aspects of Chinese security decision making remains unknown. Before expanding its engagement with the Chinese, the U.S. should have a better sense of whom it is dealing with and how their system of military management actually works. This can be achieved only through a sustained commitment to developing familiarity and

1. Bill Sweetman, “China's Stealth Striker,” *Aviation Week*, December 27, 2010, at <http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/blogs/defense/index.jsp?plckController=Blog&plckScript=blogScript&plckElementId=blogDest&plckBlogPage=BlogViewPost&plckPostId=Blog%3A27ec4a53-dcc8-42d0-bd3a-01329aef79a7Post%3Acaf36660-d425-4fbc-a284-008017b2b444> (December 29, 2010).
2. Reuters, “Factbox: China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions,” December 23, 2010, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6BM0YG20101223> (December 29, 2010); Benjamin Lang Kim, “China Speeds Plans to Launch Aircraft Carrier: Sources,” *Reuters*, December 23, 2010, at http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20101223/wl_nm/us_china_defence (December 29, 2010).

expertise. Those responsible for developing the next several budgets need to keep this in mind.

Eagles and Dragons in the Year of the Rabbit.

There is little question that the U.S. and the People's Republic of China will be steadily engaged with each other in 2011, continuing a post-Cold War trend. The U.S. should never be afraid to engage the PRC, but neither should it give the Chinese the

impression that Washington is dealing with them out of fear. Only a consistent national security policy, including a sustained U.S. presence in the region, can do that.

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