

“The Pentagon’s 2006 report provides little credible new information to support its suppositions about China’s lack of transparency, undeclared motivations, or ‘military expansion.’”

Rumsfeld’s Take on the Chinese Military: A Dissenting View

DENNIS J. BLASKO

Every year since 1997, Congress has required the secretary of defense to report on China’s military—its technological development, its strategy, and its operational concepts. The series of reports has evolved from short discussions of specific topics to, ostensibly, a comprehensive review of China’s military power. This year’s report, however, is not an impartial and complete assessment of China’s military modernization so much as it is a political document attempting to justify established US policy. Indeed, the report fails to include a large body of open-source information that calls into question both the objectivity and thoroughness of its analysis.

To understand the “Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2006” prepared by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, readers must also understand how it fits into recent administration policy statements. Starting in June 2005, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asked the following three questions in a speech in Singapore: “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment [in defense expenditures]? Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?”

A month later, the 2005 Pentagon report declared China to be facing a “strategic crossroads.” In August, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice observed in an interview with *The New York Times* that “finally, there’s the question of Chinese military power; and yes, to many, including to me, it looks *outsized*. The Chinese military modernization looks *outsized* for its regional interests and

so to comment on that is not to suggest that we believe China is becoming an adversary, but simply to say that that is something that has to be watched, and of course, that *the United States is going to continue to improve its own military capabilities* so that the balance in the Asian Pacific is maintained” (emphasis added).

In February 2006, the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) proclaimed that the choices China makes will be a key factor in “determining the international security environment of the 21st century” (the “strategic crossroads” theme again). It went on to note that, “of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional US military advantages absent US counterstrategies. . . . The outside world has little knowledge of Chinese motivations and decision-making or of key capabilities supporting its modernization. The United States encourages China to make its intentions clear and clarify its military plans.” The QDR then describes the US “hedging strategy.” This includes “further diversifying its basing structure,” which has focused on air and naval deployments to Guam in the Pacific.

In light of these statements, it is no surprise that the executive summary of this year’s annual report concludes by repeating Rumsfeld’s three questions and states, “Absent greater transparency, international reactions to China’s military growth will understandably hedge against these unknowns.” A few pages later it expands on this thesis: “As President Bush declared in the 2006 National Security Strategy, the US ‘seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities.’ This strategy is not unique to the United States; other regional actors, too, will naturally hedge against the unknown.”

DENNIS J. BLASKO, a retired US Army lieutenant colonel, served as a military intelligence officer and foreign area officer specializing in China. He is the author of *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2006).

Ironically, a hedging strategy in Asia may be a prudent policy for the United States to pursue (though not necessarily based on the straw man of Chinese military expansion). Unfortunately, basing even a sound policy on faulty analysis undermines the confidence that the United States seeks to build among its own citizens and its friends throughout the world. In fact, the Pentagon's 2006 report provides little credible new information to support its suppositions about China's lack of transparency, undeclared motivations, or "military expansion."

The 2006 report begins with this dubious logic chain in the executive summary: People's Liberation Army "modernization" = "transformation" = "China's military buildup" = "China's military expansion." These terms are used interchangeably throughout the report with no attempt to distinguish what "modernization" or "transformation" is and what is "buildup" or "expansion." The report then makes a series of unsupported claims, distorts much of the information it presents, and omits aspects of China's military development that do not fit its "modernization = expansion" equation. When ambiguous evidence is encountered, the report assumes the direst interpretation even when other conclusions can be reasonably drawn. The Pentagon implies that *any* Chinese military modernization is unacceptable because it is equivalent to "military expansion."

The report presents only one conclusion ("modernization = expansion") and does not allow for the possibility of alternate analysis of the same information that might result in different policy options. This was the very shortcoming that the 9-11 Commission report pointed out as a principal cause of past intelligence failures, and rectifying it was one of the commission's primary recommendations.

DUBIOUS LOGIC

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization program has been under way for more than 25 years, with a significant increase in pace and scope since about 1999. Defending a country's sovereignty is a function of any government and the fact that a growing power like China wants to modernize its military is predictable. A primary tenet of PLA modernization is building a quantitatively smaller but technologically more advanced force than its personnel-heavy predecessor. At the same time, the PLA is transforming its force structure, doctrine, and military equipment to bring them into the twenty-first century. In this regard, the first two elements of

the Pentagon report's equation are correct: the PLA's modernization is transformation.

"Modernization" by definition means that capabilities increase, often while numbers of personnel and equipment decrease because of technological advances. Fifteen years ago, the PLA had few or none of many modern military capabilities, such as advanced air defense systems, in-flight refueling, airborne warning and control, long-distance heavy-lift aircraft, fourth-generation fighters, and modern main battle tanks. As it has modernized, the PLA has gradually acquired many of these new systems, giving it a range of capabilities it simply did not have in the past. This has resulted in a "buildup," since zero plus anything is greater than zero.

But at the same time, as new weapons have entered the force, older weapons have been retired—some going to scrap, others going to the reserve force. Many weapon systems have been decommissioned without replacements as the PLA has downsized its force structure since 1997. For example, the Pentagon's 1998 report counted "approximately 70 submarines of all types"; in the 2006 report, the number of submarines is 55. While there are certainly some aspects of buildup in these developments, much of this is also an integral and expected part of modernization.

"Buildup" implies what existed before has increased in number. An example of China's buildup is found on page 5 of the report: "China has 400,000 ground force personnel deployed to the three military regions opposite Taiwan, an increase of 25,000 over the last year." The total number of 400,000 is, in fact, 25,000 more than the 375,000 cited in the 2005 Pentagon report, but no evidence is provided to justify any of these numbers to prove a "buildup." The day the report was issued, I asked the secretary of defense's office of public affairs how it arrived at these numbers. The response? "The report is as specific as the authors wish to be at this point."

The Chinese do not provide this level of detail, and the one reputable publication that does attempt to count numbers, *The Military Balance*, an annual publication of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), has exactly the same count for personnel in these regions from 2003 to 2006. There is no open-source information to account for an increase in major active-duty units in the Nanjing, Guangzhou, or Jinan military regions in the past year (and if classified data existed to support the claims made, it could be sanitized for inclusion in the report). If anything, personnel numbers

have decreased as the PLA finished a 200,000-man reduction in 2005.

Forces that did not exist 15 years ago, particularly in the navy, air force, and strategic missile force, have indeed increased in number. For the most part, however, the ground forces have not undergone a buildup, though they are modernizing large quantities of equipment and modifying their force structure. (A few handfuls of new army missile, special operations, helicopter, and information warfare units are the exception to the general rule, but this growth has taken place over the past decade throughout the entire country, not only opposite Taiwan.)

“Military expansion,” on the other hand, implies an intent to move into areas previously occupied (or unoccupied) by others, in addition to a “buildup” of forces. Here the Defense Department cites a lack of transparency about China’s intentions as a reason to conclude that the PLA is expanding. In fact, however, a number of recent Chinese sources state that China’s military modernization and economic development are not intended to challenge American interests.

While caution in assessing official government statements is sensible, it is inconsistent with the public record to imply that the Chinese government has not stated its intentions about military modernization and “expansion.” For example, in September 2005, the English-language newspaper *People’s Daily* editorialized that “China has no intention of challenging the United States’ position in the world, including its position in East Asia. However, East Asia is the main stage for China, whose role as the country grows is bound to expand.”

In all likelihood, senior Chinese officials have recently passed this same message to their American counterparts. One week after the Pentagon’s 2006 report was released, PLA Air Force General Zheng Shenxia, commandant of the Academy of Military Science, told an international audience at a conference in Hangzhou that “China by no means seeks to replace America’s position in the Asia-Pacific region.” A public statement like this by a senior officer would have to be cleared by the Central Military Commission and would have to be consistent with messages already given to US officials privately.

This same idea, though couched in communist terminology, has been present in all of China’s

defense white papers as far back as 1998. “China does not seek hegemonism, nor does it seek military blocs or military expansion,” the 1998 white paper stated. All white papers also specifically outline China’s national security “goals and tasks.” Unfortunately, even when the Chinese use terminology that Americans should understand (as in the *People’s Daily* opinion), the Pentagon appears to dismiss it, treat it cynically, or question its meaning. Despite having conducted a series of high-level “defense consultative talks,” the Defense Department does not appear to have resolved this issue of strategic intentions. Secretary Rumsfeld’s “three whys” were answered implicitly by the 2006 Pentagon report equating “PLA modernization” with “military expansion.”

Not all US military leaders have expressed the same sentiments reflected in Rumsfeld’s questioning of Chinese intentions. In June 2005, General Peter Pace—now the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—remarked that “you judge military threat in two ways: one, capacity, and two, intent. There are lots of countries in the world that have the capacity to wage war. Very few have the intent to do so. And clearly we have a complex but good relationship

with China. So there’s absolutely no reason for us to believe there’s any intent on their part.”

PLA modernization includes transformation and it does have an important element of military buildup as many capabilities increase. But the evidence for “military expansion” is debatable at the very least and deserves a more complete and nuanced examination than the assertions in the Pentagon report provide.

UNSUPPORTED CLAIMS

The Pentagon report’s executive summary declares that “several aspects of China’s military development have surprised US analysts, including the pace and scope of its strategic forces modernization.” Yet the report provides no details about what in China’s strategic modernization has surprised US analysts and seems unaware of the prediction made in the department’s very first report to Congress in April 1997: “China probably will have the industrial capacity, though not necessarily the intent, to produce a large number, perhaps as many as a thousand, new missiles within the next decade. Most new missiles are likely to be short-

The Pentagon implies that any Chinese military modernization is unacceptable because it is equivalent to “military expansion.”

range or medium-range, road-mobile, and fueled by solid propellants. All of them are expected to have greatly improved accuracy over current systems, and many will be armed with conventional warheads.”

The numbers and types of missiles and their rate of growth described by the current report are completely consistent with the 1997 projection. (The 2006 report fails to mention, and does not try to resolve, discrepancies with the IISS estimate that the DF-31 intercontinental ballistic missile already is deployed or Taiwan’s assertion that land attack cruise missiles have been deployed.) While numerous ballistic and cruise missile systems are reported “in development,” if there is any surprise, it has been in the delay in many of them reaching operational capability (often previously predicted to be around 2005). This is not the implication of the executive summary’s statement.

Another unsupported claim is found in the report’s budget section. There the authors cite the Defense Intelligence Agency in estimating that China’s total defense spending “will amount to between \$70 billion and \$105 billion in 2006—two to three times the announced budget.” The report then lists several “funding streams” that could contribute to these numbers. However, the only specific examples the report gives are an undefined “small commission” that the PLA receives on an annual average of \$600 million in foreign arms sales by China’s defense industrial sector, and deliveries of an estimated \$11 billion in foreign arms over six years. But this totals only about an additional \$2 billion annually. No other estimates or factors are provided, yet they must somehow amount to roughly another \$33 billion to \$68 billion in 2006.

The report also does not mention or explain a discrepancy with its 2002 estimate that “China’s defense spending may be some four times larger than its public announcement.” That the estimated factor has actually been reduced over time (from four to two or three times the stated budget) has never been acknowledged by the Pentagon (or reported by the press). Nor does the Pentagon report refer to a 2005 RAND study, *Modernizing China’s Military: Opportunities and Constraints*, which estimated that spending may be larger by a range of “1.4 to 1.7 times the official number” of China’s announced defense budget for the year 2003. The RAND report provides figures for the extra-budgetary streams to account for its estimate. Ironically, this study, which the Pentagon apparently ignored

in the preparation of its report, was paid for by the US Air Force. Shortly after the Pentagon report was released, the IISS estimated unofficial spending in a range from 1.7 (based on exchange rates) to 3.28 (based on purchasing power parity—which, the IISS advises, should be viewed with caution).

To the Pentagon’s credit, in congressional testimony nearly a month after the release of the report, Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman noted these other budget estimates; nevertheless, the report itself does not contain this nuance. A fair rendering of the PLA budget debate requires a more complete examination than contained in this year’s, or any previous, Pentagon report. Without more thorough information, it is no wonder that many press reports focus only on budget increases and the top-line guesstimate (over \$100 billion) and fail to give any context to that figure. At the same time, the PLA constantly writes about the need to use available funds more efficiently to save money. Despite a decade of double-digit defense budget increases, the theme of saving money is a recurring topic of discussion. Even if actual funds available to the PLA were at the top of the estimate range, at its current size, it would still be a resource-constrained organization.

DISTORTIONS

The Defense Department report contains numerous instances that take ideas out of context or omit relevant information. Perhaps the most egregious example is the use of excerpts from an interview with PLA Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou to support, “in a more abstract form,” the report’s claim that, “as China’s economy expands, so too will its interests and the perceived need to build a military capable of protecting them.” The report quotes Liu as saying, “when a nation grows strong enough, it practices hegemony. The sole purpose of power is to pursue even greater power. . . . Geography is destiny. . . . [W]hen a country begins to rise, it should first set itself in an invincible position.” This passage obviously is intended to imply that Liu is talking about China. However, the full text of these quotes (traced by Harvard’s Iain Johnston to the January 2005 *Heartland Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*) reveals a very different context:

The United States has been pursuing some kind of “New Empire” since the end of the cold war. This means that the US dominated the world with its political, military, cultural, and religious power.

THREATENING TAIWAN?

THE 2006 DEFENSE DEPARTMENT report on China's military claims that 400,000 ground troops are arrayed in the regions opposite Taiwan, an increase of 25,000 over the year before. The report provides no information about exactly what personnel are included in that number, with the implication being that all are combat troops. In fact, 400,000 probably *understates* the total number of ground force personnel in these regions. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that about 620,000 personnel are posted there. In addition to combat forces, a complete count would include most personnel in:

- headquarters and communications units for military regions, military districts, military subdistricts, and people's armed forces departments;
- logistics subdepartments, including hospitals and supply/repair depots;
- coastal and border defense units;

- garrison units not included in the categories above; and
- a variety of military schools with thousands of staff, faculty, and students.

The report notes that “200 tanks and 2,300 artillery pieces” have been added opposite Taiwan in the last year, but does not mention the new light amphibious tanks, main battle tanks, and artillery (which includes anti-aircraft artillery) that are replacing older weapons, mostly on a one-for-one basis (with many anti-aircraft guns going into the reserves). Indeed, there have been several new *reserve* anti-aircraft and artillery units formed in this area in the past year, but these units would not be among the “new” 25,000 troops mentioned in the Pentagon report. (If reserves were added into the mix, the number would be well over the 620,000 that the IISS cites.)

In short, the report fails to describe accurately the status of army (or reserve) forces opposite Taiwan. More to the point, assertions of a “buildup” in ground forces—that is, an expansion over previous years—remain unproved. D. J. B.

When a nation grows strong enough, it practices hegemony. The sole purpose of power is to pursue even greater power. . . . The Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt recently referred to the US as a “very dangerous superpower.” The world became dangerous because of the US threat. That leads up to the third meaning I wanted to discuss: geopolitics. *Geography is destiny.* That has been a constant truth since ancient times. Generally *when a powerful country begins to rise, it should first set itself in an invincible position.* (emphasis added)

Clearly, Liu is talking about the United States, not China. By referring to their “more abstract form,” the Pentagon report misrepresents Liu's words to make them appear to support its argument.

Another distortion occurs regarding aircraft carrier developments. The report describes the status of the former Soviet carrier *Varyag* and presents four possibilities for its eventual use. The report notes that the ship was purchased “only 70 percent complete” and highlights “maintenance and repair on the hull and deck.” What the report fails to mention is that the 70 percent does not include engines, rudders, or armament. The report also fails to provide any evidence that engines, rudders, or armament are being added to the vessel, presumably required for the ship to become opera-

tional—which is the outcome outlined in three of the four possible uses that the Pentagon believes China may have in mind regarding the ship's future. “Maintenance and repair on the hull and deck” would, however, be consistent with option four: a theme park casino.

OMISSIONS

The report identifies the threat that international terrorism poses to China. However, the amount of antiterrorist training that the PLA, reserves, militia, People's Armed Police, and civilian police undertake is not examined except for passing mention in the context of special operations forces missions. Yet countering terrorism is a national interest shared by both the United States and China, and the Chinese government is expending a great deal of effort to deal with this potential threat. In a major change from previous policy, since 2003 the PLA has engaged in antiterrorist exercises with militaries from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Pakistan.

While Americans debate the status of their own border security, the Pentagon report might have included the fact that an unknown number of PLA troops and People's Armed Police undertake border defense responsibilities in conjunction with the civilian Ministry of Public Security. The Chi-

nese have never quantified the number of troops dedicated to this task, but with some 14,000 miles of land borders with 14 countries, 200,000 or more personnel may be assigned this permanent mission. The report also does not explain the extent of ground force training in China's interior regions, nor does it mention the emphasis on air defense throughout China, not only opposite Taiwan and in the navy. Taking these roles into account may help to explain partially why China's military force appears "outsized" to some.

A text box in the report describes reserve and militia unit roles in information warfare, particularly in amphibious assault operations. To be sure, the militia especially has been reported to have established numerous high-technology information warfare units since 1998 and this mission certainly is among the tasks of the reserve forces. The report, however, fails to put this one mission into the context of other missions of the reserve force, which include local air defense, nuclear, biological, and chemical defense, rear-area security, traffic control, logistics support, and infrastructure repair after enemy strikes on mainland targets.

Another text box on "Legal Warfare" notes "Chinese military strategists are taking an increasing interest in international law as an instrument of policy in a conflict." Yet the report does not discuss the numerous Chinese military newspaper reports describing tactical "legal war" training on the "law of armed conflicts," the United Nations charter, treatment of prisoners of war, reporting of war crimes, and the handling of cultural artifacts and foreigners on the battlefield. While "legal war" techniques may be used strategically to justify China's position internationally, the concept also has important battlefield components that increase the possibility the PLA will behave as a professional military in future conflicts.

One omission reveals something about the bureaucracy involved in preparing these reports. China is said to be "considering committing troops to peacekeeping operations in Sudan." This was indeed true *in the summer of 2005*, when the first two Chinese peacekeepers deployed to the country. Over the remainder of 2005 and the first half of 2006, the number of Chinese peacekeepers grew to over 200 by the time the report was released (with more to follow).

SCANT CREDIT

The 2006 report notes the possibility of "twin misperceptions"—first, that other countries might underestimate PLA capabilities and, second, that Chinese leaders might overestimate the proficiency of their own forces, either of which could lead to "miscalculation or crisis." These options are certainly possible, but it is also possible that other countries could overestimate PLA potentials. Furthermore, the Chinese military literature reveals many realistic leadership evaluations of PLA improvements and shortfalls in capabilities. Shortcomings frequently mentioned by the Chinese themselves include a shortage of properly trained commanders, staff, and technicians; a lack of joint operations capability; weaknesses in headquarters and night training; and inadequate training on new equipment entering the force. Although the Pentagon report does contain a few references to limitations in training, transportation capacities, and combat experience, these can

easily be eclipsed by the emphasis on "military expansion."

The report uses half a sentence to credit China's defense white papers with "improvements in the quality of reporting,"

but then immediately notes a "selective approach to transparency restricted to secondary areas of military activity such as military exchanges, joint exercises, and confidence-building measures involving visits to previously secret facilities." The Pentagon report itself would have been more complete had it mentioned specifically, among other exchanges, that US observers were invited to and attended PLA exercises in Inner Mongolia in 2003 and 2005 (which included armored units and airborne drops); that US allies attended exercises and demonstrations of a light mechanized division in field training, a marine amphibious landing exercise, and special operations force capabilities in 2004; and that US officers and military academy cadets now routinely visit and attend courses at PLA academies. The Chinese press, once again, has reported on all of these events in some detail, yet there has been little, if any, official US reaction to any of these efforts at transparency. The report itself contains no information attributed to US participation in these activities.

A final irony is found in the report's reference to Zhanluexue (*The Science of Military Strategy*),

The Defense Department report contains numerous instances that take ideas out of context or omit relevant information.

which is said to give English-readers a “better understanding into official Chinese views of modern warfare.” Then nothing more of it is mentioned. In fact, an entire chapter of that book discusses Chinese views of strategic deterrence and offers an alternate explanation for the same body of information available to the Pentagon report’s authors. According to *The Science of Military Strategy*, “strategic deterrence is also a means for attaining the political objective. . . . Strategic deterrence is based on war fighting. . . . The more powerful the war fighting capability, the more effective the deterrence.” To guarantee deterrence, China must build a capable force, demonstrate its determination to use that force if necessary, and ensure that potential opponents understand China’s capability and determination.

Coupled with recent changes in China’s policy that focus on preventing Taiwan’s separation rather than forcing reunification, it can be argued that at its current stage of development, the PLA sees itself more as a deterrent force than a warfighting force. Following the outline in *The Science of Military Strategy*, China is building a capable force; it displays determination through military demonstrations, exercises, diplomacy, and propaganda; and it constantly checks to confirm that those it seeks to deter have received Beijing’s messages.

The Pentagon report quotes intelligence community estimates that “China will take until the end of this decade or later for its military modernization program to produce a modern force capable of defeating a moderate-size enemy.” Yet numerous Chinese writings set 2020 as the date for accomplishing its personnel improvement program and equipment modernization goals. In the meantime, China will also pursue a hedging strategy, focusing on deterrence, but preparing for the worst if deterrence fails.

MISSING EVIDENCE

Within the past year and a half, the Bush administration has unilaterally declared that no nation threatens China. It has pronounced China’s military to be “outsized.” It has implicitly suggested that China’s military modernization amounts to expansion, and further emphasized its own hedging strategy in the region. Yet no one in the US government has explicitly stated what size force with what specific capabilities is appropriate for a permanent member of the UN Security Council sharing borders with 14 countries and becoming increasingly involved in international commerce and peacekeeping operations. Nor has the Bush administration defined what amount, if any, of Chinese military modernization is acceptable. Declared US policy, especially regarding technology transfer to China, can easily be interpreted to conclude that all Chinese military modernization is to be opposed.

If the US Congress seeks to acquire a full picture of the state of the Chinese military for the concerned American public, it should relieve the Defense Department of this annual requirement. It should give the intelligence community the task of providing a complete assessment of emerging PLA capabilities and intentions in the context of other aspects of PLA modernization and civil-military relations, as might be found in an unclassified National Intelligence Estimate.

It is unclear if such a comprehensive review would support existing US policy or if it would reveal a more complex situation than is portrayed by this year’s Pentagon report, or both. But a fair presentation of all the evidence one way or the other is the least the US government can do. The answer that “the report is as specific as the authors wish to be at this point” is insufficient if a true debate is to take place on a topic of supreme importance to the United States, Asia, and the rest of the world. ■