

## **Northeast Asia Security Environment: Moving Toward a New Reality**

Michael McDevitt

### Introduction

For almost 50 years, northeast Asia's security environment has been stable and relatively predictable. After the 1953 armistice that ended combat in Korea, the region promptly settled into a unique balance of power. The continental powers of the Soviet Union and the PRC were "balanced" by the US-led coalition of the northeast Asian littoral powers of Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Republic of China (ROC). The balance was stable over a long period of time and was unaffected even when Washington's security relationship with the ROC changed from an official to unofficial one in 1982.

There are a number of factors that contributed to stability. But arguably the most important one is that a legitimate military balance existed.<sup>1</sup> The military capability of each side was able to 'trump' any attempt by the other side to intrude in a militarily significant way into its domain. On the continent, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were safe from invasion, thanks to their large armies, vast territories and nuclear weapons. Japan and the ROC (hereafter, Taiwan) were safe from invasion and maritime blockade thanks to US and allied air and sea power.

South Korea was and remains a special case, because its principle threat is literally next door, and not at arms length because of a water barrier. To guard against another North Korean

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<sup>1</sup> During much of this period China was preoccupied by the internal turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and in the support of "revolutionary" movements in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union was decidedly Euro-centric in its focus, and its out of area military operations centered on small-scale deployments to bases in Vietnam.

attempt to invade and eliminate the Republic of Korea as a sovereign entity, the United States had to introduce sizable ground and air forces. For over 50 years, the relative balance on the peninsula in favor of defense has prevented any more attempts by either Pyongyang or Seoul to contemplate reunifying by force.

The geostrategic predictability of the past half-century is drawing to a close. The security environment that marked the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in northeast Asia is in the midst of profound change. The economic development of China, and its concomitant military modernization, is by far the most significant factor in this change. But other changes are also important. The growing economic and military strength of South Korea and its apparent long term ambitions for strategic self-sufficiency is an important factor, as is the disturbing reality that North Korea is a nuclear weapons state armed with ballistic missiles. The reality that Japan's long time stature as the leading power in Asia is under challenge while Tokyo simultaneously becomes more comfortable with the use of its military capability as an instrument of national power in the region and beyond. Furthermore, the relative decline in Taiwan's self-defense capability vis-à-vis the mainland is taking place at the same time Taipei is politically estranged from Washington, its only potential ally. Finally, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly when coupled with concerns about Iran, are having an important indirect impact on the US position.

### Militarily, China is Supreme on the Continent

The dramatic success of Beijing's economic policies of "reform and opening up" have yielded the revenues necessary to underwrite a comprehensive modernization of every aspect of the

PLA. For the first time in over two centuries, China is wealthy enough to finance a systemic and well-conceived modernization that has already made the PLA, because of its size and pockets of excellence, such as its missile forces, the premier Asian military.

China is, and has been, the dominant military power on the continent of Asia since Mao Zedong drove America's Nationalist Chinese allies off the continent. On the other hand, it was the United States and its allies that maintained the overwhelming military advantage on the littoral of East Asia. This is especially true in northeast Asia, where the open ocean and the sustained presence of the US Seventh Fleet effectively checks the ability of China to exercise military influence beyond where its army could walk or drive. However, this could change because Beijing is trying to redress its weakness in the maritime domain.

### *Why China Is Changing the Strategic Balance*

Over the last 15 years China has done a good job of securing its land frontiers by resolving territorial disputes with Russia and other neighbors. However, the strategic outlook off its eastern seaboard and maritime approaches is replete with problems and vulnerabilities. This is not a new issue for China. Weakness along the maritime frontier has historic resonance for Beijing. The Chinese still smart from the so-called "century of humiliation", when China suffered significant losses of sovereignty from European powers, and Japan, that came *from the sea*.

Today, the reality that faces Beijing is that the vast majority of China's outstanding sovereignty and strategic issues are *maritime* in nature:

- Taiwan is an island. It is the combination of Taiwan's air defense and the threat of intervention by the US military (primarily the US Navy) that effectively keeps the

Taiwan Strait a moat rather than a highway open to the PLA.

- Perhaps as strategically significant as Taiwan to a PLA planner is the geostrategic reality that the PRC's economic center of gravity is on its east coast. As a "seaboard," it is extremely vulnerable to attack from the sea—a military task the United States is uniquely suited to execute.
- Territorial disputes with Japan over islands and seabed resources in the East China Sea have become more serious, and represent a potential flash point where Sino-Japanese interests are contested. Each state is emphasizing its claims through the periodic deployment of naval and coast guard vessels. The entire issue is maritime in nature.
- Unsettled territorial disputes and their concomitant resource issues remain with respect to the Spratly Islands and the South China Sea. Again, this problem is maritime in nature.
- China's entire national strategy of reform and opening depends largely upon maritime commerce—i.e., trade. The PRC's economy is driven by the combination of exports and imports which together account for almost 75% on PRC GDP. This trade travels mainly by sea.
- Finally, there is the issue of energy security—or, as one commentator put it, "energy insecurity." It has become commonplace to observe that the PRC will increasingly depend upon foreign sources of oil and natural gas, most of which come by sea.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Blumenthal and Joseph Lin, "Oil Obsession: Energy Appetite Fuels Beijing's Plans to Protect Vital Sea Lines," *Armed Forces Journal*, June 2006. Posted on the AEI website, [http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.24499,filter.all/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.24499,filter.all/pub_detail.asp). pp.3.

Beijing's primary military competitor in East Asia, the United States, is world's foremost naval power. Over the last 50 years, it has established a significant naval presence in the western Pacific, which is effectively on China's doorstep. The mission of these American forces is to preserve regional stability, which implicitly includes making it certain that China is unable to militarily coerce Asian nations into agreements they would otherwise not be willing to accept. In other words, the goal is to prevent China from brandishing its growing capabilities to settle the Taiwan question or resolve other outstanding maritime claims by *force majeure* alone.

China's is aware that its economic health depends upon unimpeded access to and use of the high seas, and appreciates that the United States and its closest Asian ally are maritime powers that could seriously disrupt its economic development in the case of war.

Because of the maritime nature of all of the PRC's outstanding strategic issues and its dependence upon trade for continued economic development, its "main strategic direction"<sup>3</sup> is eastward from its eastern seaboard toward the Pacific Ocean and southeast toward the South China Sea and the shipping lanes from the Middle East. The 2004 Chinese Defense White Paper explicitly lays out its ambitions for the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery:

While continuing to attach importance to the building of the Army, the PLA gives priority to the building of the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery force to seek balanced

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<sup>3</sup> The PLA Academy of Military Science defines the major strategic direction as "...the focal point of the struggle of contradictions between ourselves and the enemy...in the overall strategic situation, it is the vital point of *greatest importance* (emphasis added)." In other words, the major strategic direction is where China's most important interests are either threatened or unresolved. *The Science of Military Strategy* goes on to say, "The major strategic direction is basically determined according to the national strategic interests and the fundamental international and domestic strategic situation." Peng Guangqian and Yang Youzhi, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, Academy of Military Science of the People's Liberation Army, 2005), 231.

development of the combat force structure, *in order to strengthen the capabilities for winning both command of the sea and command of the air, and conducting strategic counter strikes.*

(Emphasis added.)<sup>4</sup>

*How China is Changing the Strategic Balance: The Implications of Trying to Achieve Command of the Sea*

As long as the main strategic direction for PRC defense planners is toward the sea, command of the sea becomes a military “requirement” that the PLA must aspire to achieve. However, in so doing, the development of the necessary operational capabilities to satisfy this operational prerequisite seems likely to trigger profound strategic consequences for the northeast Asian security.

By gradually improving its military capabilities offshore, albeit largely for strategically defensive purposes, China is beginning to “intrude” into the maritime region that has been the preserve of the United States and its allies for the past half century. This will have the effect of upsetting the five-decade-old balance of power that has been so successful in preserving stability in the region. The efficacy of the U.S. strategic position on the rimland of Asia depends upon America’s ability to use the seas to guarantee the security of our East Asian allies and pursue American national interests. By attempting to achieve security on its maritime frontier, Beijing is creating a dynamic which, as its security situation improves, is making the security environment for Japan, Taiwan and potentially South Korea, worse by making it more difficult for the United States to fulfill its defense obligations in times of conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the PRC. *PRC Defense White Paper*, (Beijing: 2004). <http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2004>

Beijing has long argued that a primary reason it must improve its maritime capabilities is because it needs to deter independence by Taiwan. This is true, but the capabilities necessary to deter Taiwan are the same ones needed to address its other unresolved maritime issues. China is involved in creating a traditional security dilemma for its off shore neighbors. The reality from Tokyo's perspective is that any Chinese maritime strategy that is effective against Taiwan is almost by definition equally as effective against Japan, because a central element of that strategy is to keep U.S. power as far away from East Asia as possible. Furthermore, given the implied U.S. defense obligation to Taiwan, trying to keep the United States at arm's length puts Beijing on a military collision course with Washington. As a result, both the PLA and the U.S. military are aggressively planning how best to defeat the other.

#### Commanding the Sea: Translating the Aspiration into an "Anti-Access" Capability

The PRC's relationship with the Soviets, and now Russia, provides an insight into an obvious operational template for the PLA to adapt. The geostrategic circumstances that the Soviet Union faced in the Cold War in thinking about United States maritime forces are similar to the ones China faces today. They both have to figure out how to keep enemy naval forces at bay. The Soviet template that Beijing has adapted is straightforward: employ a very effective open ocean surveillance system to detect approaching naval forces that can be attacked by land-based aircraft armed with cruise missiles and by submarines with both torpedoes and cruise missiles. Adopting such a template also permitted the PLA to capitalize on Soviet-developed technology and operational concepts and, as the concept evolved, to take advantage of one of the few PLA strengths—its ballistic missile force (provided it can develop maneuverable warheads that can hit

moving warships). This defensive Soviet approach to navy building also fits within the ground force or continental worldview at the highest levels of China's military and party decision-makers.

This approach to navy building also fits well with the political message that Beijing has been sending the world: China's rise will be peaceful and non-threatening. Fielding an obviously defense oriented navy provides tangible evidence to regional observers that the PRC is not going to become an expeditionary or power-projection threat. Of course, Japan and the Korean peninsula are within or adjacent to the PLAN's sea control threshold—the area inside the first island chain. From Japan's perspective, the PLAN submarine force in particular is a capability-based threat to its economic lifelines of maritime trade that it cannot, and probably will not, ignore.

For the rest of Asia, an avowedly power-projection PLAN would seem to be counterproductive to China's broader strategic objectives of not alarming its neighbors to the point they would be inclined to contemplate an anti-Chinese containment policy. To illustrate the point, China's focus on diesel rather than nuclear powered submarines reinforces the diplomatic "peaceful development" message, since they have limited range and endurance. They also fit within the regional norm since Australia, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia all have conventional submarines for "defense." In sum, the naval, air and missile capability that China is gradually fielding could satisfy its strategic objectives without triggering a negative response, except as mentioned from Japan and Korea.

In contemporary terminology, the Pentagon has elected to characterize China's approach as an "*anti-access*" operational concept. In other words, a military concept of operations aimed at keeping an approaching naval force from closing to within striking range of the Chinese

mainland and Taiwan Strait. Specifically, China aims to deny the US military access to the region so it could not interfere with a PLA use of force to resolve many of its outstanding maritime strategic issues.

As a continental power that only recently has come to grips with the need to defending its interests from a serious attack from the sea, China has opted for a maritime strategy that is at once affordable, militarily practical, and comprehensive. It is comprehensive in the sense that its combined naval, air force and strategic missile force is well suited to dealing with Beijing's long list of outstanding strategic issues that are maritime in nature. Not only is this approach to strategy sensible from an operational perspective, it is also on its face inherently defensive, which fits perfectly with Beijing's putative grand strategy of "Peaceful Development."

#### The Influence of North Korea's on the Evolving Security Environment

In the late 1990's, the congressionally mandated Perry Initiative (so named because it was led by former Secretary of Defense William Perry) was chartered to determine a course of action for U.S. policy toward North Korea. One finding of his report was that the most dangerous problem for the United States and the regional neighbors of North Korea was the possibility that the North Koreans would be able to combine their research and development tracks of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

Today Secretary Perry's nightmare is very close to reality. In July 2006, North Korea attempted and failed to replicate its long range missile test of 1998. Although this second long range missile reportedly failed, six other shorter range missiles tested on the same day did not. Then, in October 2006, North Korea successfully detonated a nuclear device. Although western

experts judged the test to be only partially successful, the fact remains that a nuclear detonation did take place.

The ongoing Six Party talks aimed at curbing and then rolling back North Korea's nuclear weapons program are apparently making some headway. This however, does not change the strategic reality that North Korea has fundamentally changed the strategic situation in northeast Asia by demonstrating that it is at the point of being able to reach Japan, and perhaps Hawaii or Alaska, with a nuclear weapon. It certainly could reach South Korea, although the weapon would probably not be mounted on a ballistic missile.

Pyongyang's long term intentions with regard to nuclear weapons are uncertain, but the general consensus seems to be that Pyongyang sees the weapon as a deterrent, a crucial hedge against attempts to change its regime by force. Nuclear weapons have become even more important to Pyongyang since the end of the Cold War because without Soviet or PRC military assistance, it is unable to keep pace with the conventional military capabilities fielded by the United States and, increasingly, by Seoul and Tokyo.

In terms of the overall strategic environment of northeast Asia, the rationale behind Pyongyang's 20-plus year quest for nuclear weapons is really not that important. What is relevant is where it goes from here. If the North Korean regime is able to take the next technical step and weaponize a nuclear device that it can be fitted as the payload of a long-range missile, it will be a defacto regional nuclear weapon state that could pose a serious threat to Japan and South Korea. This in turn could create a cascading effect on the decisions of these two countries to continue to forswear nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> The threat from North Korean missiles is already

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<sup>5</sup> The recent most comprehensive discussion of Japan and nuclear weapons is found in: Benjamin L. Self and Jeffery W. Thompson, ed., *Japan's Nuclear Option: Security, Politics, and Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003). The bottom line of the experts who contributed to this volume is that Japan does not currently view the development of nuclear weapons to be in its national interest and is unlikely to do

affecting Japanese defense decisions regarding the necessity for fielding a ballistic missile defense system as well as modifying its command and control doctrine to account for the fact that the time of flight for a missile launched from Korea at Japan is very short, and engagement decisions must be made within a matter of minutes.

No one knows Pyongyang's long-term intentions. Has it given up dreams of winning the Korean Civil War? Is it willing to peacefully coexist with the Republic of Korea? Until some accommodation is eventually reached with North Korea, which includes an acknowledgement that it must coexist with and recognize the Republic of Korea, the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea will continue to create region-wide uncertainty.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions are having another, albeit indirect, affect on the northeast Asian security environment. The six-party process has entered its fifth year—the first session was August 26-27, 2003—and has established patterns of dialogue among the five Northeast Asian countries and the United States that, as many have suggested, could morph into a more permanent regional security dialogue. Obviously, a successful conclusion to the North Korea nuclear weapons problem would be a credibility building accomplishment. Whether or not it comes to this, the fact is that a multilateral dialogue on Northeast Asia security issues is a new development in the security environment of this sub-region of Asia – a development that North Korea's bad behavior made possible.

### Japan Place in the Evolving Security Environment

Because of its size, population, distance from the mainland, and enthusiastic adoption of Western

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so in the foreseeable future. It is worth noting that this judgment was reached in December 2003 some 34 months *before* North Korea's test of a nuclear device.

style economic, political and military best practices, Japan for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw China as an opportunity.

Seriously considering Chinese conventional military power as a direct threat to the interests of Japan is a relatively novel situation for defense planners in Tokyo. For the first time in modern history, a rising China and an economically and militarily capable Japan are facing one another. Between the Meiji Restoration in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's weakness and its export of revolution created instability in East Asia. China's current rise has, in particular, affected Japan. After the Western entrance into East Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was Japan that promptly adapted to this shock to the traditional Sinitic order and became the "leading power in Asia."

Following the Sino-Japanese War, Tokyo quickly appointed itself the leader of East Asia. Elements of this conceit live on in part because Japan was the first East Asian economy to "take-off" after World War II, and because Japan emerged as Asia's first real democracy. Today the Japanese are still preoccupied with their place in Asia. Only now they face the reality that most Asian nations and a good many of the major world powers accord primacy to China. Neither Tokyo nor Beijing is content to be number two in Asia. The issue of national self-image, and the concomitant international respect that comes with being considered the most important nation in Asia, will continue to influence relations between Beijing and Tokyo and will sustain the sense of rivalry that already colors their respective policy choices. This sense of rivalry is an important feature of the evolving security dynamic in East Asia.<sup>6</sup>

In 1995, Japanese strategist Ambassador Okazaki wrote that "the Japan-United States alliance will be China's greatest strategic concern in the future. When Japan-United States

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<sup>6</sup> This section is derived from a year long project on the Sino-Japan rivalry. See: INSS, *Sino-Japanese Rivalry: Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, April 2007). [www.ndu.edu](http://www.ndu.edu).

relations are unstable, China has a great many alternatives to choose from. It can pressure a rapprochement with Japan and attempt to curb activities of US forces in Japan. Or, it might approach the United States to curb a rise in Japanese influence. But when the Japan-United States alliance is firm, China's strategic choices are extremely limited.”<sup>7</sup>

His strategic insight was prophetic. Since the Tokyo Declaration of April 1996, both Washington and Tokyo have been engaged in a decade-long process of making the relationship tighter and, in the process, have become increasingly focused on North Korea and China. Japan's 1997 Defense Guidelines committed it to rear area support of the United States “in contingencies in areas surrounding Japan,” thereby highlighting the regional context of the alliance.

The Japanese understand that China's military modernization is overwhelmingly focused on being able to successfully conduct a campaign against Taiwan. However, if Beijing's “anti-access strategy” becomes credible, Japan would also be isolated from the US. The sort of capability that the PLA needs to attack the island of Taiwan is also applicable to attacking any nearby island, including, obviously, Japanese territory.

Japan is particularly sensitive to China's growing submarine force, given its dependence on seaborne commerce and its experience during World War II. Japanese planners are well aware that Japan lies astride China's inner maritime defense perimeter—the so-called first island chain. Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines document is quite explicit when talking about Japan's sea lane vulnerabilities, “...and the sea lanes of communication which are indispensable to the country's prosperity and growth.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hisahiko Okazaki, “China: Function of Japan-US Alliance,” *PACNET* #22 (September 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Government of Japan, *National Defense Program Guide FY-2005--*, (Tokyo: 2004), pp.9.

Despite the strong economic relationship with China, over the past four years Tokyo has become increasingly open in its public statements of concern regarding the capacity of China to exercise military influence near Japanese territory. One example was the specific declarations by Tokyo and Washington that they have a stake in developments in the Taiwan Strait in the February 2005 Security Consultative Committee declaration (popularly called the '2+2', because the Secretaries of State and Defense meet with their Japanese counterparts.) While more circumspect, the October 2005 '2+2' reflects a clear concern about China. The opening section speaks to new and emerging threats as well as "persistent challenges in the Asia-Pacific region that create unpredictability and uncertainty and underscore the need to pay attention to the modernization of military capabilities in the region." It goes on to mention in three different areas the need to be ready to deal contingencies and crises in the areas around Japan.

As a result, defense planners in Tokyo are presented with a dilemma. Since the Armitage-Nye Report of 2000, Japan has been urged to play a more "normal" global security role in keeping with its own global interests. As a result, Japanese operations in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks have been focused on the Northern Arabian Sea and support for operations in Iraq. Meanwhile, Japan's security situation in its "near abroad" has become far worse. North Korea is an immediate threat, while the long-term challenge posed by China's improving military capabilities cannot be overlooked.<sup>9</sup> Unless Japan is willing to raise its defense budget above 1% of its GDP, it seems likely that it will have to choose between being more of a global security player and dealing with security issues closer to home. In many ways, China's military modernization is confronting Japan with the same sort of security challenges it

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, "Japanese Military Modernization: In Search of a Normal Security Role," in *Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty, Strategic Asia 2005-06*. eds. Ashley Tellis and Michael Willis. (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, 2005), 109.

faced from the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

### The Reality of Taiwan's Circumstances—Bad, But not Hopeless

Since 1949, Taiwan has been just far enough from the mainland to be free of the immediate grasp of the PLA, but close enough that the PLA could contemplate a successful military campaign as its capabilities improved. The reality for Taiwan is that it will always be just 100 miles from China and will always have a population about one-fiftieth the size of China. It will always be hugely disadvantaged in the size of its military establishment, long-term military potential, and the resources available for defense. Finally, as an island nation like Japan, Taiwan has few natural resources, except the energy of its people, and will always depend on imports that come via the sea.

The 1997 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, which involved a show of US naval power in the wake of Beijing's attempt to intimidate Taiwan through ballistic missile tests, was a wake-up call for both the PLA and the US military. For the PLA, it was a mind-focusing demonstration that if China was compelled to use force to either halt a Taiwan declaration of independence or to coerce reunification, they would have to plan for the likelihood of U.S. military intervention. It also illustrated to them the potential coercive power of ballistic missiles, especially if they could be made more accurate and were fielded in huge quantity because of the relatively small size of the conventional warheads.

For the United States, the crisis was a stark reminder that a military confrontation between China and the U.S. over Taiwan was a definite possibility. It was no longer sufficient to assume that as long as Taipei was kept well armed, they could defend themselves. Assumptions

about contingency responses needed to be updated to reflect direct US involvement.

Happily for Taiwan, it is able to capitalize on the advantage that a large expanse of water has over the application of ground force military power. Taiwan has not been swallowed up since 1949 because of the barrier that the Taiwan Strait presents to the power of the PLA. This international waterway has been a formidable impediment to the application of Chinese military power. The result has been a rough military balance that has preserved stability across the Taiwan Strait for decades. But now, that stability is eroding. The advantage of China's geographic proximity, coupled with its military modernization and growing economic strength, are gradually making the advantages of Taiwan's water barrier less significant.

The PLA's single-minded focus on Taiwan has resulted in weapons and military capabilities that allow the PLA to "reach out and touch" Taiwan in a way that was not possible in earlier decades. The PLA is also able to credibly begin to match Taiwan's qualitatively better capabilities with Russian systems that are as good, or nearly as good, as those of Taiwan. As the December 2004 PRC Defense White paper makes clear, the PLA has recognized its deficiencies and is investing more in naval and air forces for the express purpose of establishing air and sea control over the seaward approaches to the PRC. As the PLA translates this aspiration into real military capabilities, it will adversely change the defense equation for both Taiwan and the United States.

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Over the last seven years, from Taiwan's perspective, China's military modernization has really taken off. This is especially true in the case of ballistic missiles and land attack cruise missiles. When President Chen Shui-bian was inaugurated in 2000, China had an "anti-Taiwan" ballistic missile force of around 200. Now, seven years later, that force is almost 1000-strong.

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<sup>10</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, *PRC Defense White Paper*, (Beijing: 2004). <http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2004>.

Meanwhile China's growing submarine force (31 new submarines over the last decade) is an acute security issue for an island country with virtually no natural resources and continues to grow and modernize.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile a political deadlock on Taiwan has made it difficult for Taiwan to get on with implementing a military modernization program that could address some of Taiwan's growing vulnerabilities. While the PLA has inexorably become more militarily effective as it executes its well-conceived modernization program, Taiwan for the last eight years has made only modest progress. However, the reality for Taiwan is that the PLA can "punish" it through missile attack, something that Taiwan can only try to mitigate through hardened defenses, but not prevent. Taiwan also has two great advantages. One is that it has an implied defense commitment from Washington that the US would intervene if China attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force. The US military posture in the Western Pacific and East Asia is intended, among other missions, to present a deterrent to Beijing that is so credible it would have a difficult time convincing itself a military campaign against Taipei would be successful.

Taiwan's other great advantage has already been mentioned. It is an island. The PLA cannot capture Taiwan unless it can cross the 100 miles of open water that constitutes the Taiwan Strait and seize the island. To make certain that this could never happen, Taipei must ensure it never loses air superiority over the strait. Without air superiority, an amphibious operation of the magnitude necessary to seize Taiwan is not possible. Maintaining air superiority over the Taiwan Strait will ensure that waterway remains a defensive "moat."

Maintaining air superiority is something that is within the military and monetary grasp of Taiwan if it focuses on it and is not distracted by spurious strategic sidelines. Taipei has taken an

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<sup>11</sup> Roundtable discussion with Chen Shui-bian. (Conference, ROC Ministry of Defense, Jan. 2007).

important step in this direction by indicating it wants to purchase another 66 F-16's. Ironically, Washington, which should have been overjoyed at this sensible decision, is being coy about approving this request. Some have argued that Washington is too beholden to Beijing for help in solving the North Korean nuclear problem, and that they do not want to irritate Beijing with a large F-16 sale. Another more plausible rationale is that the Bush administration is very upset with President Chen's insistence that the citizens of Taiwan vote in a referendum conducted at the same time as vote for president on whether Taiwan should be admitted to the United Nations (UN) under the name of Taiwan. Washington has been extremely blunt with Taipei on this issue, considering it needlessly provocative. Beijing will not be happy about such a sale, no matter what the circumstances. But approving it while President Chen is still in office would imply tacit American support for his tactics, and would almost certainly be used by the pan-green political coalition in Taiwan to suggest Washington was favoring the DPP candidate in Taiwan's March 2008 presidential election.<sup>12</sup>

From a military balance point of view, it is disappointing that the political relations between the Bush administration and President Chen have deteriorated to the point that it has had a negative impact on even the sensible actions that Taipei wants to pursue in its own defense. The fact is the smartest thing Taipei can do to bolster its own defenses is to improve air defense. The smartest thing that Washington can do is to help Taiwan do so.

### South Korea's Emergence as a Regional Player with a "Blue-water Navy"

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<sup>12</sup> The most comprehensive statement of US policy on the Taiwan UN issue is found in: Thomas Christensen. "A Strong and Moderate Taiwan" (speech, U.S.-Taiwan Business Council, Maryland, 11 September 2005). For an excellent summary of the downward trend of Washington-Taipei relations see: *Comparative Connections: A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, edited by Brad Glosserman and Carl Baker, Pacific Forum/CSIS, [www.csis.org/pacfor/ceejournal.html](http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ceejournal.html). The sections written by David G. Brown, cover the topic very well.

Seoul has apparently reached the conclusion that Pyongyang is ready to acknowledge that it cannot reunite Korea on its terms and is willing to happily coexist with Seoul. Whether or not this is merely wishful thinking or an accurate assessment of the situation, it is resulting in a shift of focus in ROK defense policy to one that combines deterrence at the DMZ with off-peninsula issues, especially territorial disputes with Japan, sea line of communication issues and energy security. The Republic of Korea's strategic focus has become far more maritime in nature.

The government of South Korea has come to appreciate that in the era of globalized economies, the ROK is a virtual island country. Today, the ROK is the world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy and 10<sup>th</sup> largest trading nation. Foreign trade represents approximately 70% of its 2006 GDP, and a whopping 99.7% of South Korea's trade was conducted via sea routes. Some 100% of its crude oil, 90% of its raw steel and 73% of its food comes via ship. This reality is one reason why Seoul is engaged in developing a blue-water navy, which is one the elements of significant change in northeast Asian security.

The strategic vision for a new regional ROK Navy was outlined in March 2001 when then ROK President Kim Dae-jung said that South Korea would create a new "strategic mobile fleet" consisting of destroyers, submarines and anti-submarine aircraft. In a speech before graduating midshipmen at the Korea Naval Academy in the southeastern port city of Chinhae, President Kim said, "We will soon have a strategic mobile fleet that protects state interests in the five big oceans and play a role of keeping peace in the world."<sup>13</sup> This is clearly a vision one would associate with a regional naval force; one that could address issues of strategic concern

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<sup>13</sup> GlobalSecurity.org. "Navy – South Korea," 2008, <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ROK/navy.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ROK/navy.htm)>.

that range beyond self defense against the North—primarily defense of sea-lanes for an increasingly export dependent economy.

All the “pieces” of this mobile force are programmed to be in place by around 2020. The centerpiece will be the recently launched amphibious ship, provocatively named “Dokto,” after the disputed islets located between Japan and Korea. This 14,000-ton ship is capable of carrying some 750 Korean marines, landing craft and upwards of 10 helicopters.

Because building and sustaining a modern blue water navy capable of operating throughout the region is a very expensive proposition, understanding the reasons that the leadership of the ROK is obviously willing to commit the necessary resources to “navy building” is central to understanding South Korea’s long term appreciation of the strategic situation in northeast Asia.

The fact that the ROK Navy has grown through the introduction of more capable ships, submarines and aircraft over the past 15 years means that a compelling strategic case has convinced a leadership in Seoul, not schooled in things maritime, to dedicate the resources necessary for naval development beyond defense against the North. This suggests the obvious: the ROK leadership believes that the long term strategic interests of the state can only be secured with a robust blue water naval force, which in itself is a historic departure from the strategic traditions of Korea.

There are several interrelated motivations behind the development of the ROK Navy:

- **Defense against North Korea.** The 1998 and 2002 West Sea battles, where the ROKN destroyed several DPRK navy ships, was a reminder that while a North Korean invasion may not seem likely, that does not mean that smaller engagements cannot take

place. It is important for deterrence, for national morale and service prestige that the ROK Navy be able to deal with any North Korean provocations in the maritime domain, and win these engagements if they result in combat.

- **Strategic independence.** There is no doubt in South Korea about which side will eventually prevail in the Korean civil war. There is a belief that it is only a matter of time before Pyongyang begins to economically and politically evolve in a way that will lead to peaceful reunification with Seoul as the capital of a reunited Korean state. Without such a belief, the “engagement” policy toward North Korea, pursued since the late 1990’s, would make no sense. When the time comes and Korea is reunified, or at least is peacefully coexisting, with its “Northern cousins”, Koreans will want to be in charge of their own strategic destiny. Korea will want to be strategically independent in the sense that it is not coerced by any neighbor, or dependent upon another country to look after its own national interests. That means it does not want to have to depend on the US Seventh Fleet as its surrogate fleet. Nor does it want to be dependent on Japan working in harness with the US for its maritime security. Finally, it does not want to be under the growing and increasingly able PLA Navy’s thumb.

- **Desire for the ROK to be perceived as a responsible stakeholder.** In June 2006 at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, ROK MINDEF Yoon delivered a presentation entitled “Deploying Forces for International Security: ROK’s Perspective.” In this presentation, he made clear that over the past 10 years, the ROK has actively participated in international peacekeeping as well humanitarian relief, and that it is

actively procuring new capabilities to be able to do more in this regard. He also made clear that legislation in Korea was being changed to make it easier to undertake these missions, and that the ROK government was working with the UN to be a participant in the Stand-by Arrangement. Clearly, the appointment of ROK foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon as UN Secretary General will further enhance the ROK's growing reputation for being a "responsible stakeholder." Having the naval and military capabilities that enable a global humanitarian role is important to a government anxious to illustrate that the ROK has a vision of its place and standing in the world that goes beyond the peninsula and NE Asia.<sup>14</sup>

- **Maritime disputes with Japan.** Territorial and maritime disputes with Japan constitute a minor threat to ROK sovereignty, but they are a constant reminder that the ROK does have maritime interests, and that it does need to be able to protect those interests.
- **Maritime trade, globalization and protection of sea-lanes.** As indicated earlier, the ROK is for all practical purposes a maritime nation increasingly dependent upon seaborne commerce for its economic life. Its economy is also dependent on energy that comes mainly by sea. Over the next 20 years, ROK dependence on Middle Eastern oil is going to increase, making the maritime portion of the concept of "energy security" even more important. In this regard, the ROK, Japan, and China are all facing the same issues. Historically, justification for national naval power has been linked directly with national

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<sup>14</sup> Yoon Kwang Ung. "Speech by MINDEF Yoon". (speech, Singapore, June 2006). Author attended the conference.

economic power. Clearly, the ROK's dramatic economic growth over the past quarter-century and its increasing dependence on overseas sources of energy heightens the importance of the maritime arena as a national security interest

Because navy building takes time, it is probable that developing a blue-water navy is the most tangible indication that Seoul envisions a very different role for Korea in the future than it has had in the past. Whether this will translate into a strategic orientation of non-alignment or not remains to be seen, but Seoul is putting in place a maritime capability that will permit it to become a strategic "free-agent" should it elect to do so.

#### Washington Has Been Distracted

Conflict in the Middle East has been the primary strategic focus of Washington since 2001. This is not surprising; conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, waging a global campaign against terrorists, deterring Iran, and attempting to resolve the Israel- Palestine conflict is a daunting agenda. However, as a result, for nearly a decade the United States has failed to articulate a strategy to deal with Asia in general, and with the just discussed changes in particular. Instead of a comprehensive strategic vision, U.S.-East Asian strategy and policy has only been revealed in fits and starts through a combination of the National Security Strategy, the Quadrennial Defense Reviews, Congressional testimonies by officials from the State and Defense Departments, press conferences and statements after bilateral meetings, and speeches by serving officials.

This is not to say that the evolving security environment of the region was ignored. Piecing all of these threads of information together confirms that the Bush administration has not

strayed from the path of more or less traditional/bipartisan US security strategy toward East Asia. As Victor Cha has recently written in *Foreign Affairs*, the Administration has maintaining stability in the region—North Korea is a glaring exception to this assessment--and advancing U.S. interests.

US policy reactions to the evolving strategic landscape of Northeast Asia have been clear, practical and transparent. There has been no shortage of official statements in the form of Congressional testimony by responsible officials, official documents approved by the White House such as the March 2006 National Security Strategy, the Defense Department Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of 2006, DoD's Annual Reports to Congress on the Military Power of the Peoples Republic of China and a series of Congressional Research Service reports to Congress of China's Naval Modernization that indicate that the across the US government officials are keeping a close eye on the growth of Chinese military capabilities—especially those that could change the Eastern Asian strategic balance in a way that could disadvantage the United States and its allies.

In the introduction to the 2006 NSS, President Bush made a classic statement about U.S. strategy that highlights the importance Washington has long placed on keeping U.S. military power deployed abroad. He stated, “We fight our enemies abroad instead of waiting for them to arrive in our country. We seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it; to influence events for the better instead of being at their mercy.”<sup>15</sup>

The Defense department has been is quite specific about the importance of maintaining U.S. military presence in East Asia. In the 2006 QDR, specific reference is made to the rotational deployments of Air Force bombers to Guam, in order to provide, “...Pacific Command a

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<sup>15</sup> Government of the United States. *National Security Strategy*, (Washington, D.C., 2006), introduction.

continuous bomber presence in the Asia-Pacific region”<sup>16</sup> The QDR also announces that the Navy will adjust its force posture so that at least six operationally ready and logistically sustainable carriers are available for deployment. It also indicates that the Navy needs to ensure that 60% of its submarine force is home ported in the Pacific.<sup>17</sup> The reason given for these shifts is to enable the Pacific Fleet to improve its engagement, presence and deterrent posture.

It seems clear that the United States is intent on not losing ground as China’s military modernization improves PLA capabilities. As the PLA’s capabilities improve, so too are U.S. capabilities in the region. DoD seems intent on maintaining America’s current advantages that allow it to shape and deter.<sup>18</sup> While some might characterize this as an arms race, what is actually taking place *is a capability competition* between the PLA and DoD. As the QDR states, “The aim is to possess sufficient capability to convince any potential adversary that it cannot prevail in a conflict . . . .” Quite simply, that means that the United States intends to rise on the same capabilities tide as China to prevent the loss of any strategic leverage that its predominate military presence off the East Asia littoral has provided since 1945.

In sum, these efforts aim at preserving, or in some cases restoring, the strategic balance that has existed for the last half century. At issue is whether preserving the current security architecture will be an adequate way to come to grips with the evolving security environment in the region.

## Conclusion

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<sup>16</sup> Government of the United States. *The Report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington, D.C., 2006), p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> QDR, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> QDR, p. 4.

For reasons that are logical if one is a strategic planner living in Beijing, China is in the midst of addressing longstanding vulnerabilities or weaknesses associated with its seaward approaches. In the process of dealing with this problem, China has determined a course of action that combines naval, air and missile capabilities as a way to defeat approaching naval forces or successfully engage approaching air forces before they can fly over Chinese territory. The United States has characterized the approach as anti-access, because, if successfully executed, it could deny the U.S. the ability to operate its naval and air forces as it pleases along the littoral of East Asia. It is not clear if China set out to create this sort of military strategy. The precipitating issue was Taiwan. During much of the Cold war, when China's military potential was focused on a threat from the Soviet Union, or was consumed by the Cultural Revolution and remained wedded to a doctrine of "people's war", the PLA really did not have the means to surmount the barrier the Taiwan Strait presented to the application of PLA power to Taiwan. During this time, when it came to threatening Taiwan with military punishment, it was a paper tiger.

For the PLA, and especially the PLA Navy and Air Force, this did not matter much since the political leaders on both sides of the strait sought the same end—eventual reunification of the island and mainland. The argument was over what party would be in charge of the "uniting." This changed during the early 1990s, when the advent of democracy and notions of a *de jure* independent Taiwanese state began to politically resonate in Taiwan.

Nonetheless, the combination of Taiwan and the growing awareness that China, for the first time in its long history, was dependent on trade and maritime commerce for economic growth, has created a "demand signal" for a military capability able command the maritime approaches to China.

This in turn creates a fundamental problem for the United States since its strategic concept for East Asia has, since the outbreak of the Korean War, been to command the maritime and aerial commons of East Asia in order to pursue its own interests which have always included economic access to the region, as well as to protect its friends and allies that are found along the periphery of the Asian continent. In effect, China and the United States for good and sensible strategic reasons are pursuing two mutually contradictory approaches.

Today the United States still has the advantage in this competition since much of China's approach remains on the drawing board, and not in the field. Nonetheless, it is not hard to discern the direction it is heading, and there is very little the United States can do to change that vector. As a result, the security situation in East Asia will be in a constant state of evolution as the United States and its allies work to stay ahead of Chinese capabilities that will continue to enter their operational forces. As a result, military to military engagement between the US and the PLA, while necessary and appropriate, will always be colored by elements of suspicion, especially because Taiwan will remain a potential cause of conflict.

Because Beijing has persuaded itself that it cannot afford to "take its finger off the trigger" when it comes to Taiwan lest Taipei declare independence, the problems associated with mutually contradictory strategic concepts will be exacerbated by the problems associated with each side trying to deter the other when it comes to the use of force over Taiwan.

The China factor in the evolving northeast Asian security environment has presented Taipei, Tokyo and, as a matter of fact, Washington, with a similar strategic problem. The economic relationship that each nation has with Beijing is central to the economic well being of all three parties. Yet, at the same time, Beijing's military modernization presents a security challenge to all three. Taipei is in the most difficult position, since it is the PLA's cross-hairs

and faces a direct and credible threat that is far more immediate than either Tokyo or Washington.

If the United States expects to play a role in East Asia during the next 50 years similar to the role it has played during the last 50 years, it must be able to maintain maritime superiority on the littoral of Asia, and must carefully determine whether the security architecture that has served so well since the 1950s is appropriate for the future.