Chinese Strategy and Military Developments

The U.S. Department of Defense has recently released its annual report to Congress on Chinese military developments over the last year.¹ There are a number of important highlights to discuss. The first major change is a set of sweeping organizational reforms that collectively strengthen the Chinese Communist Party’s control over the military, increase the People’s Liberation Army’s ability to conduct joint operations, and improve the military’s ability to fight “short duration, high intensity regional conflicts at greater distances from the Chinese mainland.”² The second major area of note is China’s continued assertion of its sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas. In the East China Sea, China continues to use its ships and aircraft patrol near the Senkaku Islands, a direct challenge to Japan’s claims over the islands. In the South China Sea, China paused its land reclamation efforts in the Spratly Islands in late 2015 after adding 3,200 acres of land to the seven sites it claims there in the archipelago. Despite this recent pause in infrastructural expansion, China appears poised to use these bases to continue and perhaps expand its long-term presence in the South China Sea.

It seems clear that China continues to prefer to avoid direct conflict with the United States, as it is well aware of the massive economic disruptions a direct conflict would bring. Having said that, China continues to develop a broad spectrum of military capabilities necessary to defeat an enemy’s power projection capabilities in East Asia. This set of capabilities directly targets the United States and is designed to counter specific U.S. power projection capabilities. In other words, both China and the United States are continuing to plan for the possibility of war with each other.

Chinese defense spending continues to grow, with China’s official military budget having grown an average of 9.8% per year from 2006 through 2015, with no sign of letup.³ While China continues to prepare for a future military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, preparations for conflicts in the East and South China Seas and in Korea seem to be increasingly important. The Chinese military is also beginning to invest in the infrastructure and capabilities needed to support a broader range of missions outside of China’s immediate area than they have to date, including investing in its own long-range power projection capabilities, protecting sea lines of communication, counter-piracy operations, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. Specific capabilities that China continues to develop for use in military conflicts include cruise missiles; short, medium, and intermediate range ballistic missiles; advanced aircraft; new integrated air defense networks; amphibious and airborne assault units; and information operations capabilities, including electronic warfare and offensive cyber warfare capabilities. China is not developing a symmetrical military to the United States, but rather a much broader

² Ibid., i.
³ Ibid., ii.
set of capabilities than it has enjoyed to date, with a particular focus on growing its ability to operate for longer periods and across a broader range of missions outside its home waters.

Chinese military developments over the course of the last year did not appear to represent any catastrophic changes, but represent steadily increasing investments in power projection capabilities and anti-access/area denial capabilities (A2/AD). China’s overall strategic objectives appear to remain constant, including: perpetuating the rule of the Chinese Communist Party inside China and maintaining domestic stability and economic growth; safeguarding China’s interests abroad, i.e., outside of East Asia; and securing China’s status as a great power with an eye toward ultimately acquiring regional preeminence. It remains to be seen the extent to which the pursuit of the strategic objectives will bring China into direct conflict with its neighbors and the United States, though it is clear that China’s ambitious two decade-long military modernization program is a key piece of China’s ability to pursue these strategic objectives.

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