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Is the PLA Really on the March? Critiquing the Pentagon's Latest Report on Chinese Military Power

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The release of the U.S. Defence Department's latest report Chinese military power (CMP) raises concerns not so much as to Chinese military developments but as to how the U.S. military perceives these developments. The decided disconnect between perception and reality is potentially worrisome in that it could leave policymakers ill-advised to how to deal with a rising China.

The U.S. Defence Department's latest annual report to Congress on Chinese military power (CMP) couldn't have come at a more opportune time: the day after the report came out, Beijing announced that it was increasing its defence budget by 17.6 percent, to US\$58.8 billion, solidifying China's position as the world's second-highest military spender. At the same time, a senior Chinese official described the situation in the Taiwan Strait as "grim and complex."

All of this is simply grist for the "China-threat" mill, and the problem is not that China isn't a growing military force in the Asia-Pacific – which it is – that threatens to upset the security calculus of the region – which it does. Rather, reports like CMP are so hackneyed and ham-fisted that they actually do a disservice to the policymakers who are supposed to be informed by it.

What's New? What's Different? What's Missing?

In the first place, one problem with the CMP being an annual report is the expectation of something new and different with every new edition. In fact, however, much of the 2008 CMP is basically a regurgitation of the 2007 report, right down to whole paragraphs being lifted and reused from the earlier report. When one reads over and over again, the same hoary chestnuts keep reappearing: the Chinese are continuing to deploy around 100 short- and medium-range missiles a year opposite Taiwan; they have acquired *Sovremenny*-class destroyers from Russia outfitted with supersonic antiship cruise missiles (the first of which were ordered more than ten years ago); and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is committed to transforming itself into a force capable of fighting "informatized" wars. Well, we get it, let's move on.

Just as important, it is interesting to see what the 2008 CMP *left out*, compared to the 2007 report. For one thing, all the talk in the earlier report about China possibly developing a pre-emptive strike strategy has been watered down to an “offensive-defence” strategy. Similarly, systems intended to overwhelm a superior adversary such as the new J-10 fighter aircraft, a Chinese aircraft carrier, and the PLA’s so-called “Assassin’s Mace” (*shashoujian*) weapons receive nary a mention in the 2008 edition, and presumably these issues have lost their salience.

Where’s the Transformation?

Secondly, it is misleading when the CMP asserts that “the pace and scope of China's military transformation have increased in recent years” (p. i). For one, what does the Pentagon mean by “transformation”? The Defense Department, especially under Donald Rumsfeld, had its own conceptualization of transformation and it was called “network-centric warfare” (NCW). NCW is a highly complex system of sensors, computers, communications equipment, etc., intended to reach down and empower the lowliest soldier on the battlefield and give him the tools and weapons he would need to defeat the enemy. Surely this is not the kind of “transformation” that the Pentagon must be referring to when talking about China – the PLA has barely computer connectivity at the *divisional* level, let alone at the company or platoon stage.

So if “Chinese military transformation” means something else, what then is it? From reading the CMP, “transformation” looks mundane. For example, this includes mostly the buying of new platforms such as fighter jets, warships, submarines, missile systems, and tanks. Additionally, many of these weapons systems, such as the J-10 fighter jet, the *Song*-class submarine, and the *Luyang II*-class destroyer, while advanced for the PLA, are basically 1980s-era weaponry, technologically speaking. Even the equipment that the Chinese have acquired from Russia – Su-27 fighters, *Sovremennyy*-class destroyers, *Kilo*-class submarines, and S-300 surface-to-air missiles – arguably the sharpest edges in the pointy end of the PLA spear – is hardly cutting-edge transformational weapons systems.

In other words, when we look at the PLA, we are talking more about *modernization* – a steady-state upgrading, which is a pretty common occurrence among militaries – rather than any dramatic transformative process that skips generations and achieves exponential increases in military capabilities. Forget transformation or leap-frogging – the Chinese are simply engaged in a frantic game of “catch-up.”

In addition, there seems to be nothing “accelerating” about these recent modernization efforts. If anything, over the past couple of years, the pace of PLA arms acquisitions has actually declined in some areas. For example, the Chinese haven’t laid down a new destroyer in more than three years. More importantly, Chinese arms purchases from Russia have fallen in recent years (a point conceded by the CMP but buried in the report): In 2006 and 2007, Chinese overseas arms purchases were, respectively, US\$100 million and US\$150 million. This is a far cry from the US\$2.8 billion worth of foreign weapon systems it bought in 2005.

Finally with regards to military modernization, the CMP constantly reminds one that China still has “a long ways to go.” For instance, there is a good chart (p. 34) that shows the PLA’s progress in incorporating “modern” weapons systems into its forces, but it also shows that, as of 2007, 70 percent of its surface combatants, 60 percent of its submarine force and 80 percent of its fighter jets are still considered to be “old.” PLA modernization is certainly making progress and it certainly deserves constant watchfulness, but it hardly demands immediate distress.

So What Is China Up To?

Ultimately, what is wrong with the CMP is not that it argues that a rising China poses a military,

economic, and political challenge to the United States. Instead, the problem with the CMP is that it does a botched job of assessment by clouding the issue with factoids, data dumps, unsupported worse-case arguments (such as contending that the Chinese are likely spending up to three times on defence as their official budget avows), and ominous but unsubstantiated assertions like the PLA is prone to “misperceptions that could lead to miscalculation or crisis” (p. 22). It is critical to note that the PLA takes a decidedly long view when it comes to its current modernization efforts, and its 2006 defence white paper does not see it as becoming fully capable of fighting a modern war under “informatized” conditions until the middle of the 21st century – in other words, until around 2050. We should take the long view, as well, and avoid alarm or hyperbole.

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