

Pentagon report targets China as a military threat

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21 June 2006

The Pentagon delivered a report to Congress last month characterizing China as a military rival of the United States. The annual Defense Department assessment, entitled “Military Power of the People’s Republic of China,” warns of increasing Chinese military investment and casts the world’s most populous country as a looming threat to US military and geo-strategic interests.

The document states, “Today, China’s ability to sustain military power at a distance is limited. However, as the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report [issued earlier this year]notes, ‘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.’”

The report asserts that China is acquiring cruise missiles that will eventually enable it to threaten ships as far away as the Mariana Islands, as well as medium-range ballistic missiles capable of threatening American Naval bases harboring the 7th Fleet in Japan and Guam. It claims that China has purchased improved fighters, bombers, and logistics systems in an attempt to modernize its military and achieve weapons technology advantages over the US.

While none of these measures individually represents a significant tactical advantage, according to the Pentagon report, the manner in which China is deploying its forces could enable Beijing to deny the US Navy access to large sections of the West Pacific.

The report adopts a more bellicose posture on Sino-American relations than previous assessments. It estimates that Chinese military expenditure is three times the officially declared level, and asks rhetorically: “Why this growing investment? Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?”

Beijing has criticized the report, charging that the Pentagon is exaggerating Chinese military growth and that it has “ulterior motives”—such as increasing US military aid to Taiwan—for doing so. However, the Xinhua state news agency reported on May 25 that China was embarking on an expansive 15-year plan to modernize and expand its military capabilities.

Unlike the bogeymen that the US has created out of small and militarily weak states in Central Asia and the Middle East in order to provide a pretext for American aggression, China represents a more substantial potential threat to US hegemony both in the Pacific and on a world scale.

Generally considered the world’s third largest military power, China is estimated by the Pentagon to devote somewhere between \$70 and \$105 billion to annual military expenditure. The Pentagon report notes that this figure is expected to rise threefold by 2025, barring any change in the ratio of military spending to gross domestic product (GDP) growth. The report also notes that China’s 2006 budget saw a 14.7 percent increase in military expenditure, a rise nearly 50 percent greater than overall economic growth.

It must be noted that America’s gargantuan \$420 billion defense budget easily dwarfs that of China or any other state. But regardless of current

numerical differences, Beijing is intent on using its military in order to establish itself as a dominant regional power, and eventually a world power. These actions bring it into conflict with the striving of US imperialism for global domination.

Since the end of the Cold War, Washington’s foremost strategic objective has been preventing the emergence of any nation or group of nations that could challenge its geo-political hegemony. To this end, the initial draft of the Pentagon’s defense planning guidance for fiscal years 1994-1999 stated: “Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order posed formerly by the Soviet Union... [T]here are other potential nations or coalitions that could, in the further future, develop strategic aims and a defense posture of region-wide or global domination. Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.”

A principal component of the United States’ military supremacy is its maritime dominance, exercised primarily through twelve aircraft carriers and their related battle groups. While China’s economic might is on the rise, the logistical, technological, organizational and structural hurdles involved in constructing a Navy to rival that of the United States are so immense as to make the project impractical. Rather, according to US intelligence and foreign policy commentators such as Stratfor and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China may be seeking to undermine US hegemony in the West Pacific by using the 7th Fleet’s own size against it.

They suggest that, instead of constructing a traditional great-power Navy, China is developing its military forces to take advantage of the weak points in America’s offensive capacity—particularly the fact that Washington must deploy hugely expensive carrier groups in order to organize an intervention or blockade. China has focused on a strategy of denying hostile US fleets access to the West Pacific by acquiring modern surface-launched cruise missiles, anti-aircraft defenses and electronic warfare capabilities.

It should be pointed out that such a strategy is primarily defensive in nature, and has, at least in part, been prompted by a concerted drive by the US to ring the Chinese mainland with US military facilities and joint programs with such countries as Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Mongolia. (See “The implications of Bush’s diplomatic debacle in Asia”).

Stratfor, a private intelligence web site with close ties to American military circles, wrote in an analysis of the Pentagon report published May 31, “Such a [Chinese] strategy presents a huge problem for the United States. The cost of threatening a fleet is lower than the cost of protecting one. The acquisition of high-speed, maneuverable missiles would cost less than purchasing defense systems. The cost of a carrier battle group makes its loss devastating.”

A practical solution to the strategic dilemma facing the American military in the West Pacific is the development of a non-nuclear weapon capable of attacking Chinese defense installations without putting US

military assets in danger. It has become apparent that the US is already moving in this direction. Only five days after the Pentagon delivered its report, the *New York Times* published an article detailing Defense Department plans to outfit submarine-launched Trident II intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with non-nuclear warheads, ostensibly to protect American cities from terrorist attacks.

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the US began retrofitting a section of its Pacific Trident ballistic submarine fleet with stealth cruise missiles in 2005 in order to counter China's increasing defensive capacity. The current drive to outfit Trident II ICBMs with non-nuclear warheads can be seen as the natural extension of this process. A barrage of non-nuclear ICBMs could theoretically reduce China's area-denial capabilities, thereby giving US aircraft and naval vessels a chance to move in at significantly reduced risk.

As with every action taken by the US military, these new weapons have been justified as a defense mechanism required by the "war on terrorism." However, the development of non-nuclear ICBMs is a purely offensive measure designed to shore up American military hegemony throughout the world in response to the increased defensive capabilities of its rivals.

The incorporation of ICBMs (which fly much higher and farther than cruise missiles) into traditional combat roles is a major development. In fifty years of military deployment, ICBMs have never once been used in combat, serving rather as platforms for deterrent nuclear weapons. The use of ICBMs as vehicles for non-nuclear weapons carries with it the threat of misidentification and possible nuclear counterattack. The Pentagon has done little to address these problems; not only would nuclear and non-nuclear Trident launch systems appear nearly identical, they would even be carried on the same submarines.

For its part, China has been seeking access to Pacific energy reserves and has been forming closer alliances with nations controlling key communications routes, such as Malaysia and Singapore. Seeking to pressure Taiwan into reunification on favorable terms, China maintains over 700 cruise missiles opposite the Taiwan Strait, with the number growing by 100 annually. China also maintains a long-range SAM net over the island's airspace and has conducted eleven amphibious war exercises based on a Taiwan scenario over the past six years.

The Pentagon report notes that "Some Chinese analysts have expressed the view that control of Taiwan would enable the PLA [People's Liberation Army] Navy to move its maritime 'defensive' perimeter farther seaward and improve Beijing's ability to influence regional sea lines of communication. For example, General Wen Zongren, then-political commissar of the elite PLA Academy of Military Science, stated in March 2005 that resolving the Taiwan issue is of 'far-reaching significance to breaking international forces' blockade against China's maritime security. Only when we break this blockade shall we be able to talk about China's rise.'"

The general's statement hits on an essential factor driving Chinese military policy—the need to counter a potential US economic blockade. China's continuing growth has been based largely on its booming export market and the continued ability to import raw materials and fuel.

As Stratfor notes, "[China] imports massive amounts of raw materials and exports huge amounts of manufactured goods, particularly to the United States. China certainly wants to continue this trade; in fact, it urgently needs to. At the same time, China is acutely aware that its economy depends on maritime trade—and that its maritime trade must pass through waters controlled entirely by the US Navy."

As the world's second-largest oil consumer, China requires a continued inflow of fossil fuels to sustain its rapid economic growth. To this end, it has become increasingly involved in worldwide geopolitics. As the Pentagon report notes, "[Of] concern are China's economic and political links with states such as Iran, Sudan, Burma, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and Venezuela, which are objects of international efforts to influence in the

direction of nuclear non-proliferation, political reform, stability, and/or human rights."

To translate from the report's bureaucratic doubletalk: China has been seeking economic partnerships with states targeted by "International Forces" (i.e., Washington) for sanctions and regime change. Beijing's ties to Iran are of particular importance, as China is the world's largest importer of Iranian oil. These circumstances underscore the fact that conflicts over access to oil lie at the heart of the international dispute regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities.

In its 2006 National Security Strategy, the Bush administration summed up its position as follows: "The US seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities." In other words, even as the US engages China economically, in line with the desire of US-based transnational corporations to exploit the country's vast pool of cheap labor and gain access to its immense internal market and raw materials, Washington prepares for eventual military conflict.

Along similar lines, the executive summary of last month's Pentagon report states: "US policy encourages China to participate as a responsible international stakeholder by taking on a greater share of responsibility for the health and success of the global system from which China has derived great benefit."

This formulation embodies a fundamental contradiction within US-China relations. As the Chinese economy has developed, it has become an essential component of the world capitalist economy. The US is particularly dependent on China as a principal purchaser of US currency and treasury notes. However, China's continuing growth brings it into ever-greater conflict with American imperialist interests and hegemonic aims.

As demonstrated by its latest round of diplomatically veiled saber-rattling, US imperialism will not tolerate the rise of another power capable of establishing regional, let alone global, dominance. The American ruling elite seeks to defend its global interests at all costs, and the logic of this striving for world hegemony inexorably leads toward military confrontation with existing or potential strategic competitors, such as China, raising once again the specter of world war.



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