

Pentagon report underscores rising US-China tensions

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Pentagon's annual report on the Chinese military was presented to the US Congress last month. Entitled "Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China", it purports to be an objective assessment. In reality, the paper is a part of the Obama administration's increasingly aggressive campaign to undercut Chinese influence, particularly in Asia.

The 74-page Pentagon paper is aimed at fueling suspicion about China's strategic intentions. Beijing's "lack of transparency", it declared, has increased the danger of "misunderstanding and miscalculation". Reinforcing these fears, it noted: "Current trends in China's military capabilities are a major factor in changing East Asian military balances and could provide China with a force capable of conducting a range of military operations in Asia well beyond Taiwan."

The report came as the Obama administration is seeking to strengthen strategic ties throughout Asia. At an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum in July, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly sided with Vietnam and other South East Asian countries against China's claims in the South China Sea. Over the past two months, the Pentagon has held joint naval exercises with Vietnam and South Korea, and is planning another US-South Korean naval operation in the Yellow Sea despite China's protests.

The Pentagon report deliberately inflated the "China threat" and, deliberately played down the fact that the US military retains undisputed military supremacy including in Asia. According to Pentagon estimates, China's military spending last year was \$150 billion—double Beijing's official figure. Whether accurate or not, China's defence budget is dwarfed by that of the US

which was \$660 billion in 2009.

American allies and strategic partners immediately seized on the Pentagon report to justify their own military expansion. Japan's defence ministry declared it would "keep paying attention to China's military trend as it will have a significant impact on security in the region." In the name of countering Chinese naval expansion, Tokyo announced plans in July to enlarge its submarine fleet from 18 to 20—the first increase since 1976, when Japan set a limit on the size of its submarine fleet.

The Indian media paid particular attention to the Pentagon's claim that, "Beijing remains concerned with persistent disputes along China's shared border with India and the strategic ramifications of India's rising economic, political and military power". The report warned that China had deployed advanced CSS-5 intermediate ballistic missiles and planned to deploy airborne troops to the border region against India. The US report made no mention of Washington's strategic partnership with New Delhi, aimed at counteracting China in South Asia, or India's own rapid military expansion.

Significantly, the report singled out the South China Sea as a key concern, highlighting China's growing naval forces. "Such an increased PLA [People's Liberation Army] presence including surface, sub-surface, and airborne platforms, and possibly one or more of China's future aircraft carriers, would provide the PLA with an enhanced extended range power projection capability and could alter regional balances, disrupting the delicate status quo established by the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in South China Sea [between China and ASEAN countries]," it stated.

This assessment of the Chinese "danger" in the South

China Sea is bound up with US efforts to forge closer military ties in South East Asia. On August 18, two days after the Pentagon report was released, Admiral Robert Willard, head of US Pacific Command chief, declared after talks in the Philippines: “We discussed the assertiveness that we’re experiencing by the Chinese in the South China Sea and the concerns that that has generated within the region.” Encouraging an arms buildup in the region, Willard added: “It’s very important that the governments in the region invest in sufficient militaries and security apparatus to protect their respective territorial waters.”

The Pentagon report also noted that China was extending its military capacity to deny access to a hostile navy in areas adjacent to its coastline. “China has the most active land-based ballistic and cruise missile program in the world”, it stated, focussing on China’s plans for an anti-ship ballistic missile with a range of 1,500 kilometres. The report highlighted the threat with a map showing China’s potential ability to hit naval vessels and bases throughout South East Asia, South Asia, North East Asia and even parts of Middle East.

The Pentagon did not explain why China was developing its navy capacity, which is to counter an obvious US military threat to its vital supplies of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. Since World War II, American military strategists have argued that the US must maintain a stranglehold over the energy supplies of its rivals. In the case of China, that means controlling key shipping “choke points” such as Strait of Malacca, through which more than 80 percent of China’s imported oil passed in 2008.

The report indirectly referred to the US strategy in a section discussing China’s efforts to avoid the sensitive Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) by building pipelines from Kazakhstan, Siberia and Burma. However, it noted: “The sheer volume of oil and liquefied natural gas imports to China from the Middle East will make strategic SLOCs increasingly important to Beijing, and even if all pipeline projects are completed on time and at designed capacity, the effect on China’s hydrocarbon security will be minimal.” In other words, a US naval blockade of China would still be effective.

In a tacit acknowledgement that China’s military is still inferior to that of the US, the Pentagon noted that Beijing

was developing “asymmetrical” war capabilities to compensate—from anti-satellite missile and lasers to cyber warfare techniques. The purpose of inflating these threats is to justify the further expansion of the Pentagon’s own advanced space warfare and computer warfare programs. News reports of Chinese cyber specialists have been accompanied by footage of rows of the Pentagon’s hired hackers.

The Pentagon conceded that China’s nuclear arsenal cannot match American nuclear capacities. “For example, the PLA has only a limited capacity to communicate with submarines at sea, and the PLA Navy has no experience in managing a SSBN [ballistic missile submarine] fleet that performs strategic patrols with live nuclear warheads mated to missiles. Land-based mobile missiles may face similar command and control challenges in wartime, although probably not as extreme as with submarines,” the report stated.

While expanding, China’s nuclear force is still tiny compared to the American arsenal. The Pentagon report noted China has just 20 silo-based CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles and 30 road-mobile DF-31 and DF-31A missiles that can reach the US. The Pentagon has hundreds of land-based and submarine-launched ballistic missiles and bomber-launched cruise missiles that can strike China. Moreover, while China has a “no first use” policy for its nuclear weapons, the US has never ruled out a nuclear first strike.

The Pentagon report is another sign that the Obama administration is making a concerted strategic push to forge alliances and partnerships to encircle China. While the paper highlights the Chinese threat, the US is the most destabilising factor in world politics today as it seeks to exploit its residual military might to counter its relative economic decline. The sharpening rivalry between the US and China raises the real danger of confrontation and conflict in Asia and globally.



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