

Chinese security circles debate growing US war threat

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A recent policy forum in Beijing highlighted the intense debate within China's security and foreign policy circles over how to respond to the mounting US military build-up against China, and Washington's encouragement of Japan to remilitarise.

The annual event, hosted by the state-run nationalistic tabloid, the *Global Times*, began on December 7 as tensions rose with the US and Japan. The US responded aggressively to China's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea on November 23 by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers through the zone.

The debate revealed divisions within the Chinese ruling elite. On one side are the so-called hawks, who argue for a hard-line stance to defend China's regional influence, which has been seriously undermined by the US "pivot to Asia" to isolate and undermine China. On the other side, those who represent sections of business heavily dependent on Western trade and investment are more cautious. They warn that increasing Chinese nationalism could push China into a catastrophic war. Both sides, however, agree that the greatest threat to the regime is from within: a social revolt by the working class.

About 70 academics and officials, Chinese and foreign, attended the forum, entitled "China's Strong Push for Reform and Growing Uncertainties in Asia-Pacific." Of the five subjects listed for discussion, two were "The global power shift" and "The possibility of full-scale war over East China Sea."

Zhang Li, former deputy director of the Chinese military's General Staff Department, gave the keynote speech.

Zhang identified three types of national security threats. "One is external in origin," he declared. "The rise of a great power will inevitably encounter

containment and suppression from the dominant power," i.e., the US. Despite China's quest for "peaceful development," he asserted, "the inherent exclusionism within hegemonic and great power politics" meant that "our country's security threats have escalated dramatically."

Zhang listed steps taken by the US to encircle China militarily. With US encouragement, he said, "militarists and insane politicians in countries such as Japan have ambitiously taken our maritime territories, occupied our islands, increasing the chances of accidental clashes and regional conflagration."

Zhang accused "people like the Rand Corporation" of drawing up "strategic designs to cut off our maritime shipping routes through the means of military assaults, posing a serious potential threat to our country's economic development." In a recent report, the Rand Corporation, a US think tank, advised the Pentagon and its Asian allies to deploy shore-to-ship missiles around key sea channels, such as Indonesia's, to attack Chinese ships in the event of war.

Zhang secondly pointed to the threat of "social unrest" in China. He said pro-market reforms had entered a period of "prominent antagonisms," because the "unbalanced" economy, based on low-cost labour, was "lagging behind in innovation and core competitiveness" and had to be restructured. Any mishandling "will cause economic free falls, escalating unemployment, sharpening conflicts of interest groups, and even social unrest." He articulated the fears of an isolated oligarchic elite spawned by the restoration of capitalism over the past three decades, pointing to "rising discontent among the masses" and the danger of "large-scale social conflicts."

Zhang identified the third threat as a combination of the first two. "Hostile foreign powers," he declared,

were seeking to exploit the social and ethnic tensions within China, giving rise to “separatism” and “terrorism,” especially among Muslim Uighur in Xinjiang. He accused Western powers of cultivating “cadres and agents,” especially among young party officials and military personnel, to push for regime change in China.

Zhang’s answer was to vastly expand the state security apparatus, creating security units throughout strategic industries, both to police the workforce and prepare for wartime mobilisation. He called for the establishment of a centralised National Security Committee and Rand Corporation-style think tanks to provide security advice to the regime.

The *Global Times* forum openly promoted Chinese nationalism, centred on chauvinist, anti-Japanese appeals. Three hawkish generals turned media pundits—Luo Yuan, Dai Xu and Peng Guangqian—were invited to attack a Japanese vice ambassador who was at the meeting, denouncing “Japanese militarism” for forcing China to create the air defence zone.

Peng, in particular, warned that China is no longer the same country as 120 years ago during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. He declared that Japan’s “narrow strategic space, and extreme lack of strategic resources” made it “vulnerable” in the event of war. He added that Japan’s military power, restricted by its current constitution, was no match for China’s “powerful strategic counter-offensive capabilities,” i.e., nuclear weapons.

The First Sino-Japanese War, which ended with the Qing Dynasty’s humiliating defeat and disrupted China’s first attempt to modernise, is increasingly invoked by the ruling elite to stir up a climate of “revenge” against Japan. The aim is to divert growing domestic discontent and prevent a unified struggle of the Chinese and Japanese working class against the real cause of militarism and war—the imperialist profit system.

Others at the forum, fearful of the economic and social consequences of war with the US and Japan, warned against what former UN deputy secretary-general Sha Zukang called “narrow-minded nationalism.” Sha urged Beijing to “resolutely” oppose nationalism that is “arrogant and contemptuous of the legitimate interests of other countries and nations.” He called for the “utmost efforts to avoid a national clash

between China and Japan,” as neither country wanted a conflict that would exceed the scale of World War II. Sha argued against claims that China would eventually become a new “power centre” in a multi-polar world. He said America’s political and military power was still far greater than China’s, and it remained questionable whether China could surpass the US within 20 years.

Wang Fang, a China Foreign Affairs University professor, also opposed “narrow nationalism,” especially the “psychology of revenge” toward Japan, warning it could lead to “adventurist” actions and “no country in the world will accept or welcome us.” He said that because China relies heavily on the world’s resources for its economic development, efforts must be made to encourage other countries to accept China. Wang warned that while “no power historically chose war as the means for its rise,” some failed to manage their diplomatic relations.

Hawkish generals are generally associated with protectionist factions of the business elite that want to establish “national brands” and “national enterprise.” Wang and Sha represent sections of Chinese business acutely aware of their dependence on Western and Japanese capital. A Chinese Academy of Social Sciences report released on December 10 underscored this relationship: despite being the world’s largest computer and television producer, 90 percent of China’s computer chips are imported, costing more than oil imports each year. China remains a cheap labour platform in a globalised production chain dominated by major transnationals. Despite the size of its economy, China is highly vulnerable to any protectionist measures, let alone any disruption due to war.



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