

The drumbeat for war against China

Defense Intelligence Agency warns Chinese military is reaching “critical point of confidence”

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The United States Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) published a report this month, “China Military Power,” detailing the strength of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China. The report, which goes into great detail about the location, size, and sophistication of China’s weapon-systems, garrisons, command centers, air force, navy, and other tools of war, aims to stoke fear of “Chinese aggression” among the American public, while also signaling to Beijing the extent of US preparations for war.

The report was released only a few days after Patrick Shanahan, the acting US defense secretary following the resignation of James Mattis, used his first full-day to emphasize “Great Power competition” with China. “Remember: China, China, China,” he was reported to have told Pentagon staff.

DIA director, Lieutenant General Robert Ashley, emphasized that “China Military Power 2019” showed China’s evolution from a domestically oriented force to a global one. He told reporters the PLA was changing “from a defensive, inflexible ground-based force charged with domestic and peripheral security responsibilities to a joint, highly agile, expeditionary, and power-projecting arm of Chinese foreign policy that engages in military diplomacy and operations across the globe.”

The report details a myriad of ways the PLA is increasing, in the jargon of the Pentagon, its ability to “project power”—that is, to have influence beyond its domestic borders. This includes the development of bombers, cruise missiles, aircraft carriers, hospital ships, submarine port calls in foreign harbors, and

more. In particular, the report drew attention to the PLA’s technical and organizational developments, including in hypersonic missiles, where China is allegedly ahead of the US in precision-guided ammunition, defense systems, and 5G technology.

Echoing the changing policy of the US military away from the “war on terror” and towards China and Russia, the report bemoaned that China had taken advantage of “a period of strategic opportunity” early this century, during US entanglements abroad, “wherein [China] presumably would not be involved in a major military conflict before 2020, allowing time for economic and military development.”

A senior defense official, speaking anonymously to Reuters said: “As a lot of these technologies mature, as [China’s] reorganization of their military comes into effect, as they become more proficient with these capabilities, the concern is we’ll reach a point where internally in their decision-making they will decide that using military force for regional conflict is something that is more imminent.”

With specific reference to Taiwan, the defense official continued that “the biggest concern is that they are getting to a point where the PLA leadership may actually tell [President Xi Jinping] they are confident in their capabilities. We know in the past they have considered themselves a developing, weaker power.” Only weeks ago, the Trump administration approved a significant arms deal to the Asia-Pacific region and Taiwan in particular.

While the report seeks to drum up the threat of China, it is also forced to admit that the country lags behind

the US when it comes to its capacity for *foreign* involvement militarily. The report notes: “Today’s PLA is still far from being able to deploy large numbers of conventional forces globally.” It describes China’s defense-industrial complex as “one to two generations behind its main competitors in the global arms industry.”

However, the PLA’s technical relationship to the United States and other imperialist powers is complex. The report notes that “although the total dollar value of China’s defense budget remains significantly below that of the United States, China has benefited from ‘latecomer advantage’... China has been able to focus on expediting its military modernization at a small fraction of the original cost.”

For example, the report notes that “China is the top ship-producing nation in the world,” is “capable of producing ground weapon systems [tanks, armored vehicles] at or near world-class standards,” and has cruise missile systems that are “comparable to those of other international top-tier producers.” However, when it comes to the most advanced parts, such as high-performance jet engines, it observes that China “remains reliant on foreign-sourced components.”

In multiple parts of the report, the authors note that China’s military is disadvantaged by not having been engaged in active conflict for several decades—unlike the United States, whose forces dominate the world. Furthermore, it notes that the organizational structure of the PLA has had to go through significant changes in the past two decades as it shifts from a more “hierarchical” organization, “rife with corruption,” to a segmented professional army with technical specialization and C2 capabilities (command and control capacity to monitor and act on things in real-time through coordinated data collection and information services). China has yet to test this new organizational structure in a time of war.

The report makes the point that elements of China’s nuclear force are “decades old and requires routine observation, maintenance, or refurbishment to maintain effectiveness.” It comments that while China’s forces officially follow a “no first use” policy, “some PLA officers have written publicly of the need to spell out conditions under which China might need to use nuclear weapons first; for example, if an enemy’s conventional attack threatened the survival of China’s

nuclear forces or of the regime itself.”

Such statements underscore the reckless character of the US’s military and economic encirclement of China. Both China and the United States have enough nuclear firepower to destroy the majority of each other’s population and virtually end life on the planet. While other reports on China seek to downplay the threat of a nuclear catastrophe, the confrontational US policies necessarily threaten the survival of “the regime itself.”

“China Military Power” is different from other military reports in that it does not have a classified component and was created for public consumption. In this vein, the Pentagon released the report with a grotesque video aimed at generating a certain kind-of action-movie or video-game-like enthusiasm for war preparations against China.

The report is the continuation of a series of reports titled “Soviet Military Power” which were the first unclassified reports on the Soviet military, launched under Regan in 1981. The Pentagon relaunched the series in 2016, as part of the Pentagon’s larger refocusing towards preparing for war with both China and Russia.



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