

Statement for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission

February 27, 2008

“China’s Views of Sovereignty and Methods of Access Control”

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The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)

In this hearing the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission is considering an important issue for regional stability, namely the ways in which the People’s Republic of China uses its Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) to defend China’s national sovereignty. The Commission has rightly focused its attention on how the PLA both protects and advances China’s sovereignty, and then asks for that implications for the Asia-Pacific region and the United States of these activities be considered.

In short, I will argue that the PRC uses the Peoples’ Liberation Army to protect and advance Chinese sovereignty interests in four ways:

- 1) At a fundamental level, the PLA advances Chinese sovereignty by engaging in an ambitious program of military modernization that contributes to an increase in Comprehensive National Power;
- 2) The PLA enhances China’s international status by acting as a stakeholder in defense and security issues within the existing norms of the international system;
- 3) The PLA occasionally undertakes assertive actions that are intended to enhance China’s ability to bring about outcomes more favorable to China’s sovereignty claims;
- 4) The PLA actively prepares to prevent *de jure* Taiwan independence and to avoid third party interference in its central sovereignty challenge.

Before touching on each of these points, it seems important to begin with how the Chinese Communist Party leadership sees the maintenance of national sovereignty as a regime imperative. Fundamentally, this focus reflects China’s response to more than a century of “humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers. This humiliation included, among other practices, the imposition of unfair treaties and the partitioning of China into spheres of influence by the outside powers. Upon the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the memory of that period of historical humiliation animated the theory and conduct of Chinese foreign policy; China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence are essentially a diplomatic formula to prevent a recurrence of the century of humiliation. And, China’s military – the Peoples Liberation Army – maintains the sacred responsibility to employ military actions, even force, to protect Chinese territory against all challenges.

The PLA works to protect and advance that sovereignty in at least four ways.

**First**, China’s military modernization plays an important role in increasing China’s Comprehensive National Power (CNP), and the increase of CNP is one way in which

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China protects its sovereignty, because it is assessed that weak states are those which see their sovereignty encroached upon.

In Chinese thinking, CNP is comprised of material power, ideational strength, and international influence – and derives contributions from the fields of economics, military affairs, science and technology, and education and resources. These contributions are woven into an interlocking and mutually supporting set of national capabilities that combines to form an intangible strength, the more thoroughly and efficiently to achieve national goals.

Chinese success in increasing its CNP has seen great success in a number of the component dimensions. In the economic realm, China’s well-documented economic transformation has made perhaps the greatest contribution to the building of CNP. China’s political and diplomatic power is likewise contributing to the increase of comprehensive Chinese national power, as China’s status as a member of the UN Security Council P5 and a nuclear power are paired with increasingly adept Chinese diplomacy. Even in the ideational realm, Beijing is harnessing the draw of Chinese culture throughout Asia to actively promote Chinese ends, through efforts such as enhanced aid programs, growing overseas students and scholarship programs, and even the expansion of Chinese language and culture Confucius Centers.<sup>1</sup>

At a fundamental level, China’s military also contributes to increasing CNP by the process of becoming a more capable armed force. The Commission is aware of many of the dimensions that make up China’s military modernization, an integrated and comprehensive effort now in its second decade. It is true that a lack of transparency about the details of this process vexes analysts and policy makers. And this challenge is exacerbated by the apparent absence of an imminent external military threat of the kind that usually motivates such modernization efforts (even though, as we will see, the PLA is modernizing to conduct certain specific military actions, including potentially against the U.S.).

But the end goal for the process of China’s military modernization is much clearer, at least in general terms: Beijing seeks a military commensurate with and befitting China’s

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<sup>1</sup> Roy D. Kamphausen and Justin Liang, "PLA Power Projection: Current Realities and Emerging Trends," in *Assessing the Threat: The Chinese Military and Taiwan's Security*, ed. Michael D. Swaine, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Evan Medeiros, with Oriana Skylar Mastro (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 111-150.

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status as a regional leader and rising global power.<sup>2</sup> This may seem an altogether natural goal. However, the process itself creates concern because the programs that operationalize the achievement of that goal are in many cases in “catch-up” mode – in part because the military lagged other modernization efforts earlier in the reform period. A swift rate of change and sudden appearance of new programs can create the kinds of intelligence surprises which concern and alarm outside observers.

While concerned about creating the impressions of a “China threat” through this process, Beijing is nonetheless committed to developing a military that can advance national sovereignty goals by, at a minimum, increasing its capacity to perform military missions.

A *second method* by which China’s military supports the enlargement of Chinese sovereignty includes the specific ways in which the PLA enhances China’s status as a stakeholder in the international system. In this case, stakeholder status is both contingent on sovereign status and a means for enhancing sovereignty. Whenever the PLA supports the concept of sovereignty more generally in the international system, it enhances its application to China more specifically.

The concept of China fulfilling a role as an international stakeholder, first promulgated by then Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in a September 2005 speech sponsored by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, and subsequently widely adopted in Chinese foreign policy and economic policy making circles, now appears also to have taken root among defense policy makers as well. As a consequence, in a series of swift changes from several years ago, China’s military is now playing an important role as a stakeholder in the international system, in at least two ways.

First, the PLA are much more active participants in UN Peacekeeping Operations Missions than in the past. As recently as 2004, China was playing a much smaller role in support of UN PKO. In that year’s Defense White Paper, Beijing asserted that China had “consistently supported and actively participated in the peacekeeping operations that are consistent with the spirit of the UN Charter.” By way of evidence, the White Paper cited that China had sent 3,362 military personnel to 13 UN peacekeeping operations.

However, since 2004, PLA contributions to UN PKO have increased dramatically. According to UN statistics from January 2008, China is the largest contributor of troops, police and observers to UN PKO among P5 Security Council members, measured both in

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis Joffe, "The 'Right Size' for China's Military: To What Ends?" in *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 559-571.

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terms of number of troops in the field (1,963) and in mission participation (thirteen). Moreover, for the first time, a PLA general officer commands a UN mission. And China appears willing to endure at least limited casualties in this stake holding role, as eight PLA personnel have died in UN PKO since 1988. Finally, the PLA seems particularly disposed to deploy troops to support UN PKO in Africa.

Second, the PLA also acts to enhance China’s international status through increased support for multilateral exercises. In the past, Chinese policy usually eschewed participation in multilateral military efforts. Now, again reflecting a period of dramatic change, China often seeks to lead these efforts. The scale of China’s current efforts remains modest, certainly as compared with sustained U.S. military engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

In 2007 there were eight combined exercises with foreign militaries, reportedly the most ever. Most prominently, the PLA increasingly conducts combined military exercises with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) partners; these exercises are typically focused on countering terrorist actions. Usually, Russia-China exercises under the SCO have drawn the most attention and China and Russia have certainly increased the scope and intensity of their military exercises since 2005.

But, it may be that a lesser-known bilateral Sino-Tajik exercise, conducted in late September 2006, is a more instructive case for understanding the changes in Chinese thinking. In that exercise, Chinese and Tajik soldiers conducted the two-day mountain warfare operation codenamed “Coordination 2006” in Kulyab, Tajikistan. Nearly five hundred troops participated in the exercise scenario which involved a China-Tajik joint headquarters commanding a combined response to the simulated capture of Chinese and Tajik construction works on a highway road project funded by the Chinese government.<sup>3</sup> This particular exercise showcases a Chinese willingness to forsake long-held self-prohibitions against operating in foreign countries. China’s accommodation appears to have been that Beijing awaited an invitation from Tajikistan to deploy troops before doing so.

In contrast to support for UN PKO – an activity more frequently conducted farther from China and especially in Africa – joining multi-lateral military exercises appears to be activity which China undertakes closer to its borders. While the chief focus of the activities – countering terrorism – serves important regional and global goals, defeating terrorists is first and foremost a national sovereignty question for China because of how the linkage Beijing has made between “terrorists” and “separatists”. Thus Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> See “Sino-Tajik exercises promote partnership,” *China Daily*, September 24, 2006, [http://english.people.com.cn/200609/25/eng20060925\\_306138.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200609/25/eng20060925_306138.html)

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leadership in a multi-lateral exercises serves to enhance Chinese sovereignty even as it facilitates a broader policy outcome.

However, this activity also begs obvious questions, most prominently whether these multi-lateral military exercises are precursors to an evolving collective security structure in Asia, which China might purport to lead. While a tantalizing potential development, there is simply not enough evidence on which to make that judgment, particularly as China’s leaders say they would not undertake such actions.

The *third way* in which China’s military enhances national sovereignty claims is through a much more active program of military engagement in Asia.<sup>4</sup> These activities usually occur in areas close to China – the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, and South China Sea. At one end of the spectrum are “presence” missions whereby the Chinese military shapes regional security conditions more favorably to itself, a process which the U.S. has used ably in the region. At the other extreme, PLA activity is assertive and appears to be the employment of the military instrument of China’s comprehensive power to imply or conduct coercive or counter-coercive actions to influence the national decision-making of other countries. The following is a brief consideration of these activities.

Presence. In part, Chinese capabilities are showcased in the region through increased naval cruises throughout the Asia-Pacific. Usually conducted in two-three ship formations, these visits serve to “fly the flag” and create a regional impression that China’s military is playing a more active regional role in support of Chinese interests. The December 2007 PLA Navy port call to Japan – the first time that PLA Navy ships have entered Tokyo Bay – is just the most recent example of a growing number of naval presence missions.

Air Surveillance. Not only have Chinese military aircraft increasingly entered Japanese air space for surveillance purposes in recent years, PLA fighters and other air assets have increasingly crossed the “center line” of the Taiwan Strait since the mid-1990s. Before 1996, few Chinese aircraft crossed the center line, but by 2005 center line crossings were occurring on average nearly five times a day.

Submarine Patrols. China’s sub-surface deterrent actions are potentially even more significant. The increasingly stealthy aspects of submarine operations, combined with the cruise missile and ballistic missile capabilities on board China’s subs, present current regional and strategic deterrents to those who would act contrary to Beijing’s goals. Two recent and well-publicized incidents are illustrative: one in November 2004 and another more recently in October 2006. The November 2004 reported incursion of a Han class

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<sup>4</sup> This section is largely derived from Kamphausen and Liang, pp. 129-131.

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submarine into Japanese territorial waters and the reported surfacing of a Chinese Song-class submarine within five miles of the USS Kitty Hawk battle group near Guam in October 2006 are two examples.

Surface. The PLA also asserts itself through surface naval patrols to contested waters. The most transparent example of this category is in the East China Sea, where China and Japan have overlapping claims, made more pressing by the prospect of off-shore oil and natural gas deposits. On September 9, 2005, China deployed five warships – a Sovremenny-class guided-missile destroyer; two Jianghu I-class missile frigates; a replenishment vessel; and a missile observation support ship – near the Chunxiao oil field.

The activities are increasingly supported by a small, but growing network of regional “access points” which are PLA-run facilities or friendly foreign locations that provide logistical support to transiting forces. These points are scattered widely across South and Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Pacific Islands and include runways, potential port access, with the possibility of refuel and logistical resupply support.

None of these actions are unique to China and they are certainly not forbidden. Indeed, these military activities are sanctioned by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and customary international law, provided they comply with restrictions on activities within the twelve-mile territorial seas and airspace of other countries.<sup>5</sup>

However, two points are noteworthy. First, the PLA has very rapidly adopted to this much more activist posture, and it is the rate of change itself that raises concerns in many cases. Second, and more importantly, it appears that the actions are taken as part of an integrated political-military effort to bring about policy resolution on terms more favorable to China. In most cases, even when the PLA is most assertive, the risk of accidental conflict is not overwhelmingly high. Nonetheless, or perhaps because Chinese leaders may share this judgment, it seems clear that the PLA is intentionally acting in ways that shape an outcome that furthers Chinese sovereignty goals.

The *fourth and final* way in which PLA acts to support Chinese sovereignty is by undertaking the deterrent actions that constitute the military component of a national strategy to prevent *de jure* Taiwan independence. These actions include the preparations for actual military operations against Taiwan, including the historical amphibious training exercises on Dongshan Island and the ongoing and accelerating development of China’s

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<sup>5</sup> UN Convention on the Law of the Sea,

[http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf)

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ballistic missile forces, which could administer punishing strikes on Taiwan on very short notice. This capability has already achieved a degree of military deterrent effect in Taipei and complicated security planning elsewhere, including in the U.S.

But beyond simply acting to prevent Taiwan independence, the PLA has also put in place a series of capabilities that would deny or delay the arrival of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific in the event of a Taiwan crisis. These capabilities include: an anti-satellite capability (potentially putting at risk at least part of the constellation of U.S. communications satellites); an increasingly quiet and more lethal conventional submarine force; and the process toward a capability that would place maneuverable warheads on Chinese ballistic missiles, thus also potentially putting at risk the large deck capital ships, including aircraft carriers, of the U.S. forces responding to a Taiwan crisis.

#### Implications

- China continues to strongly support the concept of sovereignty in the international system and still holds closely to the partnering principle of non-interference in the affairs of other states. Indeed, by reinforcing the concept principle internationally, China sees a reduction in risk for the cases it holds most dear, especially Taiwan and Tibet. The inviolateness of Chinese borders thus remains a high priority. And even in those cases in which some cross-border military activity might take place, for example SCO exercises in trans-border regions, China appears focused on creating an effective mechanism for coordination across borders, with the intent that, in the end, each sovereign power can more effectively reinforce its own borders.
- As China grows the sets of military capabilities that will allow it to operate with greater ease in the region in ways which contribute to enhanced sovereignty, Beijing must reconcile its long-held and principled opposition to U.S. operations intended to achieve the same effect. U.S. operations – including reconnaissance and hydrographic survey – in the international airspace and high seas off China’s coast are especially galling to China. However, China’s national interests increasingly require it to conduct these same types of operations. Therefore, we might expect to see a continued period of policy adjustment as Chinese leaders modify how China employs its military in the face of evolving Chinese strategic interests, international law, and historical Chinese imperatives.
- Actually using military force brings costs that Beijing may be unwilling to bear. Consequently, China is also engaging in activities that foster regional stability by showing the reassuring side of Chinese military power to its

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neighbors – including combined military training against common threats, especially terrorism. In this category, Beijing’s activities have increased most quickly and in the most unusual ways. Beijing is also conducting much larger numbers of bilateral and multilateral military exercises with neighboring countries, primarily under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Together, these actions have helped socialize the region to a more militarily-involved PLA. The exercises have also revealed China’s intent to intervene using military force, even in other countries, if China’s interests are at risk.

- Finally, more robust Chinese military activity in the Asia-Pacific region to enhance Chinese sovereignty may lead to two somewhat opposing outcomes. Insofar as China’s growing military power is deftly wielded and its strategy of pragmatism, noninterference, and increased participation in international fora sustained, Beijing may enhance regional security as its neighbors recognize the stabilizing value of burgeoning Chinese CNP. At the same time, however, China’s military activism is inherently risky, containing the potential to further isolate and marginalize Taiwan, among others, and thus further harden opposition to a military solution to Taiwan’s status. Consequently, a chief goal of China’s military program to advance sovereignty could be put at risk by the very means that are employed to accomplish it.

This concludes my statement and I am very happy to take questions.