

The Chinese Military and the “Taiwan Issue”: How China Assesses Its Security Environment

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This article discusses China’s assessment of its security environment by examining the role of the “Taiwan Issue” in China’s military modernization and domestic politics. It sheds light on the strategic outlook of the world’s largest yet most understudied armed forces: China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA). It argues that the remilitarization of the “Taiwan Issue” since 1995–96 has provided the PLA with impetus for acquiring more resources and influence. Although the PLA is a Party army that exists to safeguard the interests of the Chinese Communist Party, interviews and close studies of open-source material reveal interesting differences that result from evolving doctrinal developments, force structures, and broader political considerations. China is not only developing a military option vis-à-vis Taiwan but also building a modern fighting force befitting China’s aspired “great power” status. The PLA’s evolution will thus test China’s “peaceful rise” slogan.

The Might of a Rising Power

China’s leaders (the so-called Fourth Generation)¹ have recently advocated a new, more pragmatic and effective foreign policy.² Dubbed “peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起) or “peaceful development” (*heping fazhan* 和平發展),³ this strategy promotes China’s growing “soft power,”⁴ winning China praises and defusing the “China threat” concerns. Epitomizing this statecraft are China’s active free trade agreement agenda with its Asian neighbors and its pursuit of worldwide energy security.

Yet China has also become more willing to flex its military muscles. In late 2006, China unveiled its biennial defense white paper, which continued to justify the double-digit increases in China’s military expenditures.⁵ In January 2007, China unveiled its advanced homemade fighter, the Jian-10—a cheaper alternative to advanced Western aircraft.⁶ On January 11, 2007, China shocked the world with its anti-satellite technology by destroying one of its aging weather satellites with a medium-range ballistic missile. After failing to confirm the event until almost two weeks later,⁷ senior U.S. officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Robert

Gates, publicly voiced their concerns about China's rapid development of military power and lack of transparency.⁸

Why did China cast away its carefully nurtured new image? Chinese officials sought to reassure the world that China remained committed to its fundamental objectives of pursuing "peaceful development" in a "harmonious world," notwithstanding these recent events, and that China's military modernization befits its rise as a world power.⁹ But soothing rhetoric is unlikely to quell speculation: Are these recent events isolated incidents or signals of a fundamental shift? Into what kind of "great power" will China grow? Only time will answer these questions. But in light of China's rapid economic growth, improved military capabilities, and opaque strategic intentions, a study of how China views the country's security environment—especially the "Taiwan issue," on which the Chinese military rationalizes its buildup—is critically important for not only the Asia-Pacific region but also the world.

This article sheds light on the strategic outlook of a remarkably understudied armed forces that are also the world's largest: China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). With its sheer size, rapidly increasing capabilities, and uncertain intentions, the PLA is a vital pillar for a powerful China. Hence, the PLA's assessment of the country's external security environment, especially regarding the "Taiwan issue," entails profound implications.

Challenges to Understanding China's Intentions

Although important, the study of China's assessment of its external security environment is intellectually challenging. First, given its sheer size alone, China's military warrants scrutiny. With over 2.3 million members (down from 4.0 million in 1980), the PLA is the world's largest armed forces. According to some estimates, China's military spending is the world's second highest after that of the United States.¹⁰ China's sustained and rapid economic growth, averaging 9 percent per annum for the last twenty-five years, provides the resource base for significant upgrades to its military capabilities. Chinese government statistics confirm that, since 1990, China's official defense budget has seen double-digit increases every year, when adjusted for inflation.

Second, the need to study the worldviews of China's military is accentuated when one considers the difficulty of ascertaining the intentions of a government whose decision-making processes are shrouded in secrecy and whose leadership is neither subject to rule of law nor accountable to an electorate. How the few individuals in China's high command view themselves and the outside world (in terms of threats and opportunities) portends enormous implications for regional and global security.

Despite the demonstrated need, efforts to study this powerful yet secretive institution encounter two daunting methodological challenges. The first is *access*. As PLA expert David Shambaugh points out, the top officials of the PLA rarely grant interviews; and discussions with "think tanks" affiliated with the PLA tend to be highly formalistic.¹¹ The top generals' public comments almost always echo or emphasize top Party leaders' statements or well-known state policies. Although the PLA has issued many publications, surprisingly little about the Taiwan issue, or about how the PLA would fare against Taiwan's military, is written or available to the outside.¹² Scholars are unlikely to be able access internal Chinese publications, as sensitive information is strictly protected.

The second challenge is *disaggregation*. How can we disentangle the PLA's worldview from the worldviews of China's civilian leaders? Does the PLA have a "corporate" position that substantially—but not entirely—overlaps with that of the Party? If so, does the PLA speak with one voice, much like what the unitary, rational actor would predict? Or, should we use the insight of bureaucratic politics—"what you see depends on where you stand"¹³—and ask if there are multiple voices within the PLA over tactics, if not over the general goal? This article seeks to make a modest contribution toward these questions and concerns.

The PLA as Party-Army vis-à-vis the Case of Taiwan

Unlike professionalized national armed forces under civilian command (as in the West), the PLA is the protector and defender of China's party-state. Mao Zedong's (1893–1976) dictum, "political power grows out of the barrel of the gun" (*qiang ganzi li chu zhengquan* 槍桿子裏出政權), defined the critical role that the PLA has played in the politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rise to power and the founding of the PRC owed much to the PLA. Without the PLA's continued allegiance and support, the CCP's rule would be in jeopardy.

This symbiotic relationship makes the study of the civil–military relationship in China inherently problematic.¹⁴ Rather than existing as a national army, the PLA is a party-army; it safeguards the interests of the CCP. Since the PLA is a party-army, then, it cannot have a purely military view on the Taiwan issue. Indeed, the role of the PLA reflects its history with the CCP for the following reasons:

- the CCP purports to represent the interests of the state and the people;
- threats to the Party are considered threats to the state;
- the military must be under the strict control of the Party; and
- the military is the defender of the Party's legitimacy and enforcer of its claims.

The PRC Constitution and the CCP Constitution define China as a socialist state, in which the CCP is a “vanguard.” The 2004 white paper on defense reiterated that China’s defense and military building must “maintain the fundamental principle and system of absolute Party leadership over the armed forces.”¹⁵ It asserted that “it is the sacred responsibility of the Chinese armed forces to stop the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces from splitting the country” and warned that “should the Taiwan authorities . . . make a reckless attempt that constitutes a major incident of ‘Taiwan independence,’ the Chinese people and armed forces will resolutely and thoroughly crush it at any cost.”¹⁶ Article 8 of the controversial Anti-Secession Law, passed March 14, 2005, mandates that China’s State Council and Central Military Commission would decide on and execute “the non-peaceful means and other necessary measures” to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the event that “the ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted.”¹⁷

Under its grand strategy for the first two decades of the twenty-first century—concentrating all energy in fully developing the country into a “well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社會), China needs a peaceful international environment for its national development.¹⁸ China aims to improve its relationships with other great powers and to secure stability of its peripheries. The CCP seeks to shore up its tattered legitimacy, weakened by the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and perpetuate its *raison d’être* by promoting economic development and appropriating nationalism. Success in economic development helps transform nationalism, a potentially destabilizing force for the Party, into a positive asset for the CCP. However, a showdown over Taiwan independence would jeopardize both objectives. Such adverse developments affect the PLA particularly, since it is the military that must repel threats to the Party leaders while accomplishing their goals. The military’s special role provides a point of departure for delineating the Party’s and the military’s worldviews and for differentiating the possible multiple voices on the Taiwan issue within the PLA.

The Military as Cautious Hawk?

Despite the agreement on national priorities and common interests between the CCP and the PLA, an interesting question remains: Are military leaders, for institutional reasons and because of the ways they have been socialized, more likely to adopt more “hawkish” foreign and security policies than civilian leaders? That is, would they be more militant and more likely to support quick, aggressive action?

According to the "military-industrial complex" school, the military stands as the beneficiary of a large budget, which they justify on the grounds of tense relationships with the outside world. This theory helps illuminate how the PLA uses the "Taiwan issue" to obtain more resources and influence in Chinese politics. In this regard, 1996 was a turning point for the Taiwan issue. From 1979, when the United States and the PRC established diplomatic relations, until 1996, the Taiwan issue had been managed diplomatically. The PRC replaced its unsuccessful "military liberation" approach with a policy of "peaceful reunification." The new policy was largely a placeholder: Despite its claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, the PRC had neither the capability to enforce its claim nor any realistic military options. But the policy allowed the PRC to relegate defense modernization as the last of Deng Xiaoping's (1904–97) Four Modernizations and, instead, to focus on economic development. China's military received low priority and became a bloated, insular, and obsolescent "people's army." China's military budgets were primarily consumed by the overstaffed ranks, rather than through the acquisition of modern weaponry, and spending increases were slow. The double-digit increases in China's military spending since 1990 should be viewed from the historical perspective of slower growth during the 1980s.

The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis remilitarized the Taiwan issue. After Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui (b. 1923, presiding 1988–2000) visited his alma mater, Cornell University, in June 1995, and leading up to Taiwan's first direct popular presidential elections in March 1996, the PLA conducted war games and missile tests aimed at intimidating Taiwan. To defuse tension, President Bill Clinton dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region. Political scientist Andrew Nathan argued that China's actions indicated that it sought to protect its core security interests by preventing Taiwan from becoming the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" of hostile forces in light of increasing Taiwanese independence, an emerging American containment policy, and possible Japanese rearmament.¹⁹ Security expert Jonathan Pollack argued that "the renewed military activism . . . has provided a focal point and direction for Chinese military planning and defense acquisitions that has been largely absent since the collapse of the Soviet Union."²⁰ Jiang Zemin (b. 1926) was reportedly criticized for being "too soft" on Taiwan by some military leaders. You Ji pointed out that "the PLA generals have gained by the flexing of military muscles in the Strait, through improved opportunities for higher budgetary allocations. . . . For the first time the PLA is able to act as a fairly independent pressure group."²¹

The PLA's new gloomy assessment became a main rationale for its military modernization. As a result:

- budgetary outlays were substantially increased;
- acquisition of advanced foreign weapons (especially from the former Soviet Union) became a priority;

- the PLA's military modernization became driven by the twin goals of deterring Taiwan's independence and dissuading international (U.S.) intervention by developing indigenous arms and purchasing foreign arms; and
- the PLA's strategy became to focus on developing asymmetric warfare capabilities in certain "pockets of excellence"—e.g., ballistic missiles, information operations/warfare, and other "assassin mace" (*sha shou jian* 殺手鐮) weapons.

China's military modernization after 1996 seemed powerfully driven by the preparation for a Taiwan contingency.

However, an alternative perspective is more persuasive. The dominant (though contested) wisdom among international relations scholars is that military officers tend to be more cautious than their civilian counterparts about initiating the use of force. Sobered by the experience of combat, the theory holds, soldiers are hesitant to recommend military action except under the most favorable circumstances.²² The Powell Doctrine, which asserts that when a nation is engaging in war, every resource and tool should be used to achieve overwhelming force against the enemy, is consistent with this view.

Consequently, one would expect PLA leaders to be more cautious than civilian leaders in resorting to force. Andrew Scobell found that, in general, military leaders are less quick to resort to the use of force and that ground forces are more cautious.²³ Alastair Iain Johnston found that, during much of the Cold War era, although the PRC was more prone to dispute than any other major power except the United States and although it often resorted to higher level of violence, the escalations mostly involved territorial disputes. Otherwise, the increase in China's relative power capabilities has not led to increased war-proneness in recent years, as China has gradually acquired status and prestige.²⁴ These and other scholars argue that, historically, China's use of force has been conservative. China tends to use force only as a supplement to a larger political strategy and usually when the correlates are favorable, notwithstanding its principled rhetoric. The Chinese evidently took Sun Tzu's (544–496 B.C.E.) adage to heart: "The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin."²⁵

China's show of force in the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis represented a form of "calculated belligerence." However, if "military conservatism" becomes excessive, it might cause unintended consequences. Scobell observed the danger of the Chinese military leaders' "cult of defense." A sense of insecurity was deeply rooted in history, due to China's "century of humiliation" and the PLA's history of fighting stronger enemies. This insecurity has led PLA leaders to develop a propensity to view the outside world in an excessively negative light and has led them to rationalize the use of force in

self-proclaimed defensive terms.²⁶ Shambaugh noted that, objectively, China's security environment is the best ever; yet the PLA still feels insecure, and its behavior reflects paranoia.²⁷

On one hand, these Chinese security elites acknowledge that the likelihood of invasion against China is virtually nil; the probabilities for large-scale armed conflicts to break out along China's borders (particularly away from the eastern seaboard) are low; and the great powers, for the time being, prefer cooperation (on North Korea, Iran, terrorism) to confrontation. Yet, on the other hand, they see danger lurking in every bilateral relationship China has with other states, and they advocate for extra margins of security—undoubtedly a manifestation of the "cult of defense," which naturally tends to drag other states into a spiral that further accentuates China's insecurity.

At the Shangri-la defense conference in Singapore in June 2005, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld offered a blunt assessment of the global implications of China's effort to build a state-of-the-art arsenal. He asked: "Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment" in missile forces?²⁸ Although China has reiterated its intentions of peace and development, its exceedingly pessimistic assessment of its security environment and its penchant for securing relative-gain advantages have triggered a regional arms race, typified by the "security dilemma" or "mirror image" theories in international relations.

In short, owing to the PLA's unique responsibility in executing war, PLA leaders can be expected to be more cautious than their civilian counterparts regarding foreign and security policies. However, their excessive conservatism, which is a combined result of a "cult of security," a strategic culture of realism,²⁹ the insular background of the current officials,³⁰ and the penchant to reject transparency as a strategic asset and to extol secrecy, has caused them to appear overly pessimistic. This perverse tendency entails deleterious implications for regional and global security.

How the PLA Has Handled External Security Challenges over Time

Studies of the PLA have recently witnessed a sea change. In the past, Western analysts usually dismissed the PLA as "the world's largest military museum." But in recent years analysts have been surprised by the rapid progress the Chinese military has made. The advanced fighters, anti-satellite weapons, and information warfare are only the most recent examples that reveal the protracted evolution of the PLA's doctrine and force structure since the early years of the "people's war." Four evolutionary stages in the relationship of PLA doctrinal development to force structure, identified in table 1, are as follows: People's War, People's War under Modern Conditions, Local War, and Local War under High-Tech Conditions.³¹

TABLE 1 China's Evolving Military Doctrine

Variable/ Date Range	People's War	People's War under Modern Conditions	Local War	Local War under Modern High-Tech Conditions	Revolution in Military Affairs
Force structure	single-service operations; field armies	joint HQ/ operations; group armies	field units, rapid reaction units	smaller and fewer units; more high tech	selective pockets of excellence?
Force size	4.0 million	4.0 million	reduced to 3.0 million	reduced to 2.5 million	presumably smaller than 2.5 million
Main objective	homeland defense	defend China closer to its borders and fight mobile style of war	win local wars on China's periphery	deter Taiwan from independence; deter U.S. from intervention	employ information warfare by bypassing deficiencies (electromagnetic dominance)
Main threat	U.S.S.R.	U.S.S.R.	regional skirmishes	Taiwan & U.S.A.	U.S.A.
Main limitation	budgetary constraints	budgetary constraints	budgetary constraints	doctrine-capability gap	technology
Main catalyst	modernization in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution	changing threat perception	changing security posture	Persian Gulf War and end of Cold War	information revolution
1978-85	primary doctrine	preliminary doctrine	—	—	—
1985-88	residual doctrine	primary doctrine	preliminary doctrine	—	—
1988-92	—	residual doctrine	primary doctrine	preliminary doctrine	pre-preliminary doctrine
1992-present	—	residual doctrine	—	primary doctrine	preliminary doctrine

SOURCES: Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Force Structure: A 20-Year Retrospective," in *Seeking Truth from Facts: A Retrospective on Chinese Military Studies in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N. D. Yang (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 51-58; and Paul H. B. Godwin, "Compensating for Deficiencies: Doctrinal Evolution in the Chinese People's Liberation Army: 1978-1999," in Mulvenon and Yang, *Seeking Truth from Facts*, 110.

People's War

In the late 1970s, the PLA, over four million strong, was structured using the doctrine of "people's war" to defend the Chinese mainland from such

threats as the Soviet Union. Having recently emerged from the turbulent Cultural Revolution, China's reformist leaders acknowledged the need for military modernization but assigned it last among the Four Modernizations. The low priority for military modernization led to low defense budgets, a situation that had been a key constraint on military modernization into the late 1990s. The PLA's force structure was dominated by the army and had a continental orientation. Its ground forces were organized around infantry corps (called field armies) which generally had three infantry divisions and smaller armor, engineer, artillery, and other combat service-support units. A large militia would complement main force and local force units as they "lured the enemy in deep." Air and naval forces primarily had a defensive mission and, for the most part, operated independently of the ground forces.

People's War under Modern Conditions

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, PLA strategists began considering a doctrinal revision intended to defend China's borders and fight the Soviets in a more mobile style of war with a combined arms and joint force. The use of nuclear weapons was also envisaged. The new doctrine became known as "people's war under modern conditions." It called for a more flexible, professional PLA, which increased the number of modern weapons in its inventory. The emphasis on ground forces shifted more to tanks, self-propelled artillery, and armored personnel carriers. However, the cost of equipping enough of the force with sufficient modern weapons to fight the Soviets was prohibitive to the Chinese budget. Beginning in the 1980s, PLA infantry units began to be issued enough trucks to make them road mobile.

Local War

Between 1985 and 1988, the PLA personnel were reduced to three million. These reductions permitted the integration of ground forces, naval forces, and air forces required to conduct modern warfare. In 1985, Deng Xiaoping reckoned that the threat of a major war was remote; instead, the more likely scenario would be a limited, local war on China's periphery. The formation of small, mobile, "First" or "Rapid Reaction Units" was a major organizational development peculiar to the "local war" doctrine. Despite these dramatic changes in the military, defense budgets remained tight until the end of the 1980s.

The PLA suffered a blow to its prestige after its involvement in the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen massacre. One way to boost its prestige was to increase its budget and purchase new weapons. Meanwhile, the demise of the Soviet Union provided the Chinese government an opportunity to spend some of the new money it now was willing to devote to the military for the purchase of advanced military hardware that the West had denied

China since 1989. The implosion of the U.S.S.R. also forced the PLA to reexamine China's threats.

Local War under Modern High-Technology Conditions & Revolution in Military Affairs

The Gulf War (1990–91) forced a change in the attitudes of many PLA old guards, who had emphasized the role of diplomacy over weaponry. The war was an example of what the PLA theoreticians now call “local war under modern high-technology conditions” (LWUMHTC). By the mid-1990s, LWUMHTC had become the dominant doctrine in the PLA. At the same time, some PLA strategists expanded their study of other concepts of future high-technology warfare, including information warfare, which became known under the rubric of “revolution in military affairs” (RMA). Between 1997 and 2000, another half-million personnel were shed from the ranks. The major focus of PLA operational planning in the late 1990s had become preparation of military options and capabilities to ensure that Taiwan would not seek independence. The possibility that the U.S. military might become involved in the defense of Taiwan was a worst-case scenario that PLA planners also had to consider. Taiwan's location allows for the capabilities applicable to scenarios for LWUMHTC to be applied to it.

For the past two decades, multiple doctrinal concepts have existed or been in development concurrently within the PLA. Even though the size of the PLA and the manner in which its doctrine is expressed have changed over time, differing structures, missions, and doctrinal orientations exist concurrently within the PLA. Even today many ground force units are still best suited for people's war operations to defend the Chinese mainland. Others have been trained for a role in LWUMHTC. Certain units, such as missile and electronic warfare units, are also beginning to develop capabilities suitable for twenty-first-century RMA warfare in addition to being integral to local war scenarios.³² Indeed, China's top military officials also seem quite interested in RMA. They anchor their force and doctrinal development in a broader politico-military context: Developing a modern professional military is indispensable to China's emergence as a preeminent global power that can rival the United States. Such imperatives clearly necessitate better understanding of this crucial force.

Debunking the Monolithic Military

Sovereignty & Territorial Integrity: Nationalism, Realism & Taiwan

The methodological problems identified at the outset of this piece present significant challenges for understanding the subtle yet important differences within the PLA. The conventional wisdom—and the image the Chinese present to the outside world—is that the PLA is a monolithic en-

tity, absolutely obeying the Party and unflinchingly protecting China's territory and the Party's legitimacy. However, although little dissent is apparent in official texts or interviews, when questions about specific corollaries or strategies arise, discernible differences within the PLA emerge. Research of open-source Chinese and English materials and interviews I conducted in Taiwan in July 2005 and in China in July 2006 reveal important similarities and interesting differences regarding the PLA's broad assessments of the Taiwan situation.

First, main PLA constituents share the view that the PLA's primary mission is to maintain China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this context, two strands of thinking converge on the Taiwan issue: nationalism and realism. The nationalist strand provides Chinese policies vis-à-vis Taiwan with moral justification and is the most frequently invoked answer. It views the Taiwan issue as a vestige of the "century of humiliation" China suffered at the hands of the imperialist powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, asserting that resolution of the Taiwan issue, regardless of what Taiwanese people may think, is an "internal affair" that calls for no outside intervention.

Second, a corollary is that the Taiwan issue lies at the core of China's interests and is a non-negotiable issue: If Taiwan were permitted to separate from China, the Party would lose the mandate to rule and the country would disintegrate, since Xinjiang, Tibet, and possibly Inner Mongolia would also seek to secede (despite the obvious differences between these areas—under direct PRC control—and Taiwan, which the PRC has never ruled).

These principled stances belie at least two glaring exceptions. First, to maintain a peaceful external environment (including stability on its peripheries) and to allay international concerns about its economic and military ascent, China has assiduously improved its relations with many of the fourteen countries that border it by forging "strategic partnerships" with them, establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and settling long-standing boundary disputes. One analyst estimated that the total size of areas previously claimed by China that were formally ceded by these border delineation treaties was 340 times the size of Taiwan.³³ Pragmatism had prevailed over principle. Second, rather than rejecting all foreign intervention, starting in 2003, China often asked the United States to help rein in Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian (b. 1950, presiding since 2000). In other words, outside intervention is fine, provided it advances Beijing's agenda.

Geopolitics & the Position of Taiwan

The examples above show that pragmatism can guide China's foreign and security policies, if circumstances dictate. Nonetheless, nationalism provides China with a moralistic cover for China's real interest in Taiwan. It offers a *raison d'être* for the Party and the army, and it also fortifies the

“defensive” nature of the PLA’s actions. But the more convincing reason for China’s intense interest in Taiwan—and one that is less openly discussed—is geopolitics. For the past four centuries, the main threats to China’s security have come from China’s Eastern seaboard. Many contemporary Chinese analysts conclude that the United States is the main threat to China. Control of Taiwan not only eliminates the possibility of Taiwan being used as an instrument to subvert China by hostile forces but also provides China with an indispensable strategic springboard for projecting its power into the Western Pacific region.

To become a preeminent regional or global power, China must develop power-projection capabilities, such as a blue-water navy. Taiwan occupies a crucial link for China’s geopolitical ambitions.³⁴ The Pentagon’s 2006 PLA report concluded that the objectives of the PRC’s military modernization had moved beyond the Taiwan issue; its progress had surprised U.S. defense officials; and its success had altered the regional balance of power.³⁵ The defensive argument based on nationalism thus provides a moralistic pretext for a masked, potentially offensive rationale based on geopolitics.

Second, China’s approach toward Taiwan exemplifies its new grand strategy, which Lin Chong-pin, a former deputy defense minister of Taiwan, characterizes as “dominating the region without fighting.” Through a combined strategy of diplomatic isolation, political division, economic integration, and military coercion, Beijing seeks not to destroy Taiwan but to take Taiwan intact. As Lin points out, Beijing is determined to acquire credible military capabilities as: (1) deterrents against U.S. intervention in the Taiwan Strait; (2) coercive instruments against Taiwanese independence; and (3) crucial tools for seizing Taiwan largely unharmed, if extra-military approaches to achieve unification fail.³⁶ As part of the dialectic thinking prevalent among Chinese strategists, Beijing prefers not to resort to these military options in battles but rather to shore up the credibility of its threat of non-peaceful means. This approach reflects a long tradition in Chinese strategic thinking inspired by Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*: “The highest form of generalship is to attack the enemy’s plans. The next best is to prevent the junction of enemies’ forces. The next in order is to attack the enemy’s army in the field. And the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities.”³⁷

On Taiwan & Unification

Peaceful unification is thus preferable to forceful unification. But, in dialectic reasoning, preparation for the latter makes the former more credible. In a systematic cataloguing effort, PLA Colonel Wang Weixing published an article in 2004 that summarized the CCP’s five-decade policy of peaceful unification toward Taiwan, covering such issues as the method for unification, Taiwan’s status, government agencies, and external relations.³⁸ Wang’s impressive list clearly illustrated, *prima facie*, China’s preference or

even eagerness for resolving the Taiwan issue through peaceful unification. His article enumerated the "generous" benefits for Taiwan after unification but defended the refusal to renounce the use of force: "A thorough study of history will show that any country's task of unification is almost always accomplished through war," according to his reading of world history.³⁹

Although both China's civilian and military leaders prefer incorporating Taiwan peacefully and retaining Taiwan's physical and human resources, notable differences on how to achieve the unshakable goal of unification exist, if the strategy of peaceful unification should fail. Chinese military writings are almost uniformly negative in their assessments of Taiwan's political evolution. Prevalent are frustration that past policies toward Taiwan have not succeeded, fear that Chen Shui-bian or others will accelerate steps toward Taiwan's de jure independence, and a sense of urgency that the PLA must accelerate the final preparation for a military showdown. General Zhang Wannian, China's most powerful general during the Jiang era (1989–2002), betrayed his frustration with the central government's handling of the cross-strait impasse when he warned in 2000 that war was certain to break out in the Taiwan Strait in the next five years. In 1999, he led more than five hundred Chinese generals who signed a petition calling for tougher action against Taiwan after Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's controversial description of cross-strait ties as "special state-to-state relations."⁴⁰ In the Chinese context, Zhang's bravado was unusual.

Curiously, more Chinese analysts believe that time is on the Chinese side. Professor Shen Dingli of Fudan University exemplifies this confidence. He argued that the threat posed to the PRC by the Taiwan independence movement will diminish as China progressively strengthens its military capabilities.⁴¹ His optimism contrasts with other pessimistic and alarmist evaluations of political trends in Taiwan.

Taiwan & the Use of Force

Although most Chinese writers maintain that the PLA will have no choice but to use force against Taiwan to squelch its attempts at independence (and few analysts outside China question that premise), Chinese discussions reveal important divergences on key issues concerning the forceful option. The divergences have arisen partly as a result of the coexistence of several schools in the doctrinal development of China's military.

The first question focuses on certainty. The "people's war" school cares more about objectives and determination than about the political consequences of using force. Confidence has been derived from the myth that the PLA has always fought and prevailed over stronger enemies through asymmetric war, exemplified by Mao's dictum, "You fight your way, [and] I fight my way" (*ni da ni de, wo da wo de* 你打你的，我打我的).⁴² Differences in intensities and approaches ensure that the PLA will eventually prevail. The

willingness for the PRC to suffer the associated costs is simply asserted, rather than analyzed. It is unclear whether those who believe that China is willing to sacrifice its economic development for a war over Taiwan truly understand the magnitude of that scenario.

In contrast, the “revolution in military affairs” school is likely to be more cautious. Adherents of RMA understand that military modernization cannot be achieved through great leaps forward. Success in battle requires mechanization and communication. Success also requires “active defense”—the ability to sustain an initial strike and survive. Interestingly, even this school (exemplified by the Second Artillery, China’s strategic missile force) actively seeks opportunities to wage asymmetric warfare in order to close the technology gap. Here, open-source discussions tend to focus more on the utility of offense for the weaker party and less on China’s own vulnerabilities.⁴³

Preparedness for & the Potential Results of War

Although virtually all Chinese military writings acknowledge that one huge obstacle to the PLA’s military options would be possible U.S. intervention, important internal debates exist within the PLA on the broader issue of preparedness. Some within the PLA admit that, given the stringent requirements of “annexing Taiwan without fighting” and “detering the United States,” the PLA is not yet ready, despite the considerable progress it has made in recent years toward possessing “credible options” to intimidate or actually attack Taiwan.

Still, although many Chinese military writings have reached the gloomy conclusion that there will inevitably be a war over Taiwan, many issues remain unresolved: what follows the initial onslaught, what constitutes the end state, and—more fundamentally—what constitutes “victory.” Missile strikes aimed at decapitating Taiwan’s leadership and command and control centers may cause initial damage; but they alone will not cause the Taiwanese to capitulate. A bloody conquest is politically infeasible, as resistance from the Taiwanese will make the island ungovernable. For an army whose reputation was tarnished in the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the PLA remains concerned about any detrimental long-term political fallout for its military actions.⁴⁴

Beijing could take several courses of action against Taiwan, including persuasion and coercion or limited-force options—such as employing information operations, special operation forces, and short-range ballistic missiles or air strikes on key military or political sites in Taiwan—to try to break the will of Taiwan’s leadership and population. Beijing could also consider air and missile campaigns, a blockade, or an amphibious invasion.⁴⁵ The lower-intensity actions are most feasible from the standpoint of military preparedness; however, they are also the least likely to defeat Taiwan. The higher-intensity actions are more likely to cause Taiwan to ca-

pitulate; however, they are also the least feasible options from the standpoints of military preparation and international politics. These escalatory actions largely correspond inversely with Sun Tzu's best, second best, third best, and worst military strategies. In short, unless Taiwan is willing to come to terms with Beijing, China does not currently appear to have feasible military options for solving the "Taiwan issue."

The PLA & the Taiwan Issue in the Post–Anti-Secession Law Era

Because of its lack of good options for dealing with Taiwan, China will realistically view the peaceful absorption of Taiwan as a long-term goal, focusing its short-run emphasis on preventing Taiwan's de jure independence. The nine-word adage given by Hu Jintao in September 2004, "*zhengqu tan, zhunbei da, bupa tuo*" 爭取談, 準備打, 不怕拖 (strive for negotiations, prepare for war, [and] not fear delays), sums up China's current strategic approach vis-à-vis Taiwan. The adage still serves as the PLA's wisest course of action.

According to one analyst, "striving for negotiations" means that the Hu leadership will reach out to the people of Taiwan and continue creating all possibilities for peaceful negotiations between the two sides. "Preparing for war" means completing all preparations for a military struggle. If war is unavoidable, the PLA should safeguard the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity at all cost. "Not fearing delays" means that, under the precondition that Taiwan does not split from China, China seeks to cultivate a twenty-year peaceful development environment and to maintain the cross-strait status quo.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the PLA will continue mixing the strategies of concealing weaknesses (*cangxu* 藏虛) and concealing strengths (*cangshi* 藏實) to maximize its strategic advantage vis-à-vis Taiwan and the United States by creating deception and sowing confusion. Resembling the "empty fortress strategy" (*kongcheng ji* 空城計) of the *Thirty-Six Strategies*, a collection of classic proverbs related to military strategy and tactics, concealing weaknesses induces the enemy to overestimate one's capabilities and thus achieves deterrence through deception. Concealing strengths tempts the enemy to underestimate one's capabilities and thus achieves compellence through surprise.

Cross-strait relations entered a new era with the passage of the Anti-Secession Law (ASL) in March 2005. However, the law did not alter the strategic fundamentals. In one sense, the ASL put additional pressure on the PLA to accelerate its military preparedness for dealing with the conditions, enumerated in Article 8, which call for "non-peaceful means." On the other hand, by more clearly hinting at Beijing's "red lines," the ASL may slow down the momentum of Taiwan's independence movement and thus help relieve the pressure on the PLA. The Party and the military thus share common interests in maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

One remaining question is the impact of the PLA's professionalization on the Taiwan issue. Will professionalization cause the PLA gradually to differentiate its purely military goals from those of the Party? Will a professionalized PLA be more likely to see the Taiwan issue strictly from a military angle and thus become more or less hawkish? Nobody knows. But despite all the well-recognized problems in studying it, the PLA is too important to be relegated to the realm of the educated guess.

Many have justifiably criticized that military-to-military engagements with the PRC have brought few positive results. The alternative would be an insular, secretive, and powerful military that is not subject to effective civilian control and that takes actions based on "cult-of-defense" or worst-case scenarios. Limited evidence indicates, however, that China's military is capable of learning and making adjustments. In this sense, changes in how the Chinese military views and deals with the country's security environment will be a litmus test for China's stated national objective of "peaceful rise."

Notes

¹"Fourth Generation" leadership refers to such leaders as Hu Jintao (b. 1942), Wen Jiabao (b. 1942), and Zeng Qinghong (b. 1939), who were elevated to top positions after the Chinese Communist Party's Sixteenth National Congress in November 2002.

²Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2003): 22–35.

³See Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 18–24; Zheng Bijian, *Lun zhongguo heping jueqi fazhan xin daolu* 論中國和平崛起發展新道路 [*Peaceful Rise: China's Road to Development* (original English title)] (Beijing: Central Party School Publishing House, CPC, 2005); and Zheng Bijian, "'He ping jueqi' buzai, bei 'fazhan' qudai: Mianlin gefang fandui, yidu liuxing de kouhao turan xiaoshi" "和平崛起"不再,被"發展"取代:面臨各方反對,一度流行的口號突然消失 [Peaceful "rise" no more, replaced by "development": Facing opposition from various sides, the once popular slogan suddenly disappeared], *World Journal Online* (August 25, 2004), http://www.worldjournal.com/wj-ch-news.php?nt_seq_id=1037880 (accessed August 25, 2004).

⁴Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). For a Western critique of China's successful use of soft power, see Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁵Andrew Yeh, "China Sees 15% Rise in Military Spending," *Financial Times*, December 30, 2006. For the full English text of *China's National Defense in 2006*, see http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-12/29/content_771191.htm (accessed July 11, 2007).

⁶Chua Chin Hon, "First, China Unveils This Fighter Jet . . . Now, It Says It Can Build an Aircraft Carrier," *Straits Times* (Singapore), January 10, 2007.

⁷Rowan Callick, "Three Reasons for Beijing's Shot into Space," *Weekend Australian* (Sydney), January 20, 2007.

⁸"Cheney Wary of China's Military and North Korea's Credibility," *New York Times*, February 24, 2007; and "US Defense Chief: China Military Capabilities Worrisome," *Agence France-Presse*, February 24, 2007.

⁹Tracy Quek, "China Admits Missile Test, but Says There Is No Threat; Beijing Breaks Week-Long Silence, but Comments Fail to Mute World Criticism," *Straits Times* (Singapore), January 24, 2007.

¹⁰The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that China's total military-related spending could be \$85 to \$125 billion—two to three times the Chinese government's announced figure of \$45 billion in 2007. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2007*, 25. The huge disparity between official Chinese figures and Western estimates results partially from China's lack of accounting transparency and failure to comply with international standards for reporting military funding and spending.

¹¹David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and David Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (1999): 53–79. For a survey of the major Chinese think tanks that are responsible for foreign policy and defense issues, see *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, appendix 2, <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/pills2/part14.htm> (accessed July 11, 2007).

¹²Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*; and Shambaugh, "China's Military Views." This impression was confirmed by my visits to bookstores owned by the PLA and the Academy of Military Science in Beijing in July 2006.

¹³A classic on decision-making processes in international relations is Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

¹⁴On the civil–military relationship in China, see Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*, chap. 2; and Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *Civil–Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas after the 16th Party Congress* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 2004).

¹⁵*China's 2004 Defense White Paper*. A complete English translation is available at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/natdef2004.html> (accessed July 11, 2007).

¹⁶"*Baipishu: Zhizhi 'Taidu' shili fenlie guojia shi zhongguo wuzhuangliang de shensheng zhize*" 白皮書：制止“台獨”勢力分裂國家是中國武裝力量的神聖職責 [White paper: Preventing "Taiwan independence" forces from splitting the country is a sacred responsibility of the Chinese armed forces], http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/misc/2004-12/27/content_97720.htm (accessed July 11, 2007).

¹⁷*Fan fenlieguojia fa* 反分裂國家法 [Anti-secession law], March 14, 2005. English text is available at http://english.people.com.cn/200503/14/eng20050314_176746.html (accessed July 11, 2007).

¹⁸Zheng, "China's 'Peaceful Rise,'" 20.

¹⁹Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Goals in the Taiwan Strait," *China Journal* 36 (July 1996): 87–93.

²⁰Jonathan D. Pollack, "China's Taiwan Strategy: A Point of No Return?" *China Journal* 36 (July 1996): 111–16, 113.

²¹You Ji, "Taiwan in the Political Calculations of the Chinese Leadership," *China Journal* 36 (July 1996): 119–25, 121.

²²Todd S. Sechser, "Are Soldiers Less War-Prone Than Statesmen?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (2004), 746–74.

²³Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁴Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behavior, 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data," *China Quarterly* 153 (March 1998), 1–30.

²⁵Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

²⁶Scobell, *China's Use of Force*.

²⁷Shambaugh, "China's Military Views." This ambivalence was confirmed by my research interviews with two dozen Chinese professors of international relations and analysts who work for Chinese think tanks in July 2006—as well as by most of the open-source books I procured in Beijing and Shanghai that summer.

²⁸"Chinese Arms Threaten Asia, Rumsfeld Says; Defense Chief Questions Need for a Fast-Growing Military Budget and an Arsenal Aimed at Taiwan," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 2005.

²⁹Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

³⁰Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*; and Shambaugh, "China's Military Views."

³¹Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Force Structure: A 20-Year Retrospective," in *Seeking Truth from Facts: A Retrospective on Chinese Military Studies in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N. D. Yang (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 51–58.

³²Paul H. B. Godwin, "Compensating for Deficiencies: Doctrinal Evolution in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, 1978–1999," in *Seeking Truth from Facts*, 110.

³³Interview with a colonel, National Defense University, Taipei, July 13, 2005.

³⁴For a cogent analysis, see Alan Wachman, *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³⁵Office of the [U.S.] Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2006*, available online at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China%20Report%202006.pdf> (accessed September 19, 2007).

³⁶Lin Chong-pin, "Beijing's New Grand Strategy: Dominating the Region without Fighting," in *Win with Wisdom: When Wrestling with a Giant* (Taipei: Quanqiu fangwei zazhishe, 2005), v–xi.

³⁷Sun Tzu, *Art of War*.

³⁸Wang Weixing, "Peaceful Unification of Taiwan Is the CCP's Consistent Goal: A Review of Our Policy of Peaceful Unification toward Taiwan for the Past Fifty Years" (in Chinese), *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* (July 26, 2004): 11–20.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁰Mary Kwang, "PLA Warning Hints at Weak Influence," *Straits Times* (Singapore), November 25, 2000.

⁴¹Shen Dingli, personal interview, Shanghai, July 4, 2006.

⁴²For a theoretical and empirical examination of the typologies of asymmetric warfare, see Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 93–128.

⁴³See Vincent Wei-cheng Wang, "China's Information Warfare Discourse: Implications for Asymmetric Conflict in the Taiwan Strait," *Issues and Studies: An International Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2003): 107–43.

⁴⁴Personal interviews with an Institute of International Relations scholar, Taipei, July 12, 2005; and personal interviews with a think-tank president, Taipei, July 15, 2005.

⁴⁵Office of the [U.S.] Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2005*, available online at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jul2005/d20050719china.pdf> (accessed September 19, 2007), 39–42; Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report, 2006*, 38–41; and Shambaugh, "China's Military Views."

⁴⁶Li Huaqiu, "Interpreting Beijing's Taiwan Strategy" (in Chinese), *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), October 9, 2004, available at <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/taiwan/pages7/taiwan091004b.html> (accessed July 11, 2007).