

## CHAPTER 3

### CHINA'S MILITARY POWER AND AMERICA'S INTERESTS

#### INTRODUCTION

China's methodical and accelerating military modernization presents a growing threat to U.S. security interests in the Pacific. While Taiwan remains a key potential flashpoint, China's aggressive pursuit of territorial claims in the East and South China Seas points to ambitions that go beyond a Taiwan scenario and poses a growing threat to neighbors, including U.S. alliance partners, on China's periphery. Recent and planned military acquisitions by Beijing—mobile ballistic missiles, improved air and naval forces capable of extended range operations—provide China with the capability to conduct offensive strikes and military operations throughout the region. Citing uncertainties about how China will use its power, the Administration has called on China to “openly explain its defense spending, intentions, doctrine and military exercises to ease concerns about its rapid military buildup.”<sup>1</sup> China's “continuing large and expanding arms purchases” have prompted the U.S. Secretary of Defense to publicly question the ultimate purpose of this military buildup.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Taiwan*

For a variety of reasons, unification with Taiwan remains one of the most important priorities for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the near term this means preventing Taiwan from becoming legally recognized as independent by other nations. In the longer term, China is resolute in its ambition to unify with Taiwan under the rubric of “one China.” This objective is of such significance that the Chinese government threatens to achieve it—and prevent any substantial contrary movement—by force if that is necessary. China's very public and frequently stated commitment to this goal has left little room for negotiation or trade-offs in the event of an emerging crisis over Taiwan. For China, Taiwan is an issue that involves territorial sovereignty and regime legitimacy. In March of 2005, China promulgated the Anti-Secession Law (ASL), a legal document that codified the authority to use force to counter Taiwan moves further toward separation, and, as a consequence, placed additional pressure on Chinese leaders to take forceful actions in a time of crisis with Taiwan.

The failure of the two sides to agree on a formula for negotiating a solution to their differences has led Beijing to heighten its discussion of and preparations for possible military options to achieve unification. Rather than persuading Taiwan to move toward unification, the growing threat posed by China's military deployments

directed at Taiwan has added to fears on the island. In a wider context, the growing volume and credibility of Beijing's threats against Taiwan constitute a serious challenge to long-established U.S. security and political interests in the Pacific as those are set forth in the U.S. National Security Strategy of 2002:

*The war against terrorism has proven that America's alliances in Asia not only underpin regional peace and stability, but are flexible and ready to deal with new challenges. To enhance our Asian alliances and friendships, we will:*

- *look to Japan to continue forging a leading role in regional and global affairs based on our common interests, our common values, and our close defense and diplomatic cooperation;*
- *work with South Korea to maintain vigilance towards the North while preparing our alliance to make contributions to the broader stability of the region over the longer term;*
- *build on 50 years of U.S.-Australian alliance cooperation as we continue working together to resolve regional and global problems—as we have so many times from the Battle of the Coral Sea to Tora Bora;*
- *maintain forces in the region that reflect our commitments to our allies, our requirements, our technological advances, and the strategic environment; and*
- *build on stability provided by these alliances, as well as with institutions such as ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, to develop a mix of regional and bilateral strategies to manage change in this dynamic region.*<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the early 1990s, as increasingly open discussions of independence in Taiwan heightened Beijing's concerns, China stepped up efforts to develop viable military options to complement the political, diplomatic, and economic gestures and coercion it was directing toward Taiwan in an effort to bring about unification. China began a military transformation that abandoned its reliance on massive forces and outdated weapons in favor of a modern military armed to compete and win in a high-tech battlefield environment.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 1992, the PRC acquired a number of advanced Sukhoi-27 jet fighters from Russia and China's indigenous defense plants embarked on efforts to design and manufacture more capable air and naval platforms. In turn, Taiwan requested and received F-16 jet fighters from the United States and Mirage 2000 fighters and Lafayette frigates from France, equipment that helped redress the imbalance resulting from the capabilities of new Chinese weapons. In subsequent years, however, a booming economy and generous government funding have permitted China to take long strides toward modernizing its air, naval, and missile forces. Today, China has accumulated a formidable force of ballistic and cruise missiles, advanced strike aircraft, and modern naval combatants with long-range and truly lethal combat power. Since Taiwan has not adequately responded, the military balance across the Strait is shifting strongly in China's favor and poses a growing

challenge to U.S. security forces and political interests in the Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

The complex and evolving set of relations among the United States, China, and Taiwan requires careful diplomacy, a strong U.S. military presence in the region, and continued U.S. monitoring of the military balance across the Taiwan Strait. The United States seeks a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia-Pacific region, and U.S. officials repeatedly have expressed their opposition to actions by either China or Taiwan that would jeopardize the peace by unilaterally altering the status quo.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key Findings**

- China is in the midst of an extensive military modernization program. The equipment China is acquiring is aimed at building its force projection capabilities to confront U.S. and allied forces in the region. A major goal is to be able to deter, delay, or complicate a timely U.S. and allied intervention in an armed conflict over Taiwan so China can overwhelm Taiwan and force a quick capitulation by Taiwan's government.
- The combination of a U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity and Taiwan's hesitation in responding to China's aggressive military buildup sends signals of weakness and ambivalence to China, undermines U.S. deterrence efforts, leaves Taiwan vulnerable if attacked, and increases the risk that U.S. forces may be called upon to act.
- The U.S. government has not laid adequate groundwork to allow a rapid response to a provocation in the Taiwan Strait. Almost any possible scenario involving U.S. military support to Taiwan would require extensive political and military coordination with the Taiwan government and regional allies, but the foundations for such coordination have not been laid. For example, self-imposed restrictions against visits to Taiwan by senior U.S. military officers and other government officials undermine efforts to conduct advance planning for contingencies. Additionally, failure to gain advance approvals for access by U.S. forces to foreign airfields and ports in the Western Pacific might jeopardize execution of U.S. contingency plans.
- The lack of adequate and effective confidence building measures between the United States and China increases the risk of misjudgment and miscalculation, especially in crisis situations, and therefore increases the risk that a misunderstanding or minor disagreement will lead to a serious armed conflict.
- The increasing frequency of Chinese military incursions into Japanese territory sets a dangerous course and unnecessarily increases the potential for a military clash in Northeast Asia that could engulf the United States.