

TESTIMONY

The J-20 Episode and Civil-Military Relations in China

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CT-357

March 2011

Written testimony submitted to the U.S. China Economic and Security Review
Commission on March 10, 2011

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665

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The J-20 Episode and Civil-Military Relations in China²

Before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission

March 10, 2011

Perhaps the most eye-catching event that occurred during the January 2011 visit to China of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was the test flight of the J-20--the prototype of a new Chinese stealth fighter aircraft. When Secretary Gates asked President Hu Jintao about the flight, the Chinese head of state appeared to be surprised.³

Speculation has centered on whether the test flight was deliberately timed to coincide with the Gates visit and whether Hu Jintao was aware of the J-20's test schedule. Thus, two significant questions are:

- (1) Was the test flight intentionally timed to occur during the Gates visit?
- (2) Was there civil-military coordination behind the scheduling of the flight?

The answers to these two questions have significant implications for how one interprets (1) Chinese intentions toward the United States and (2) the state of civil-military relations in China. If the test flight was deliberately set to take place during the visit of America's top defense official, then it suggests that China was trying to deliver a message to the United States. What would this message have been? It would appear to be along the lines of: "America, take heed--the capabilities of our weaponry are ever-improving and we are not intimidated by your

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT357/>.

³ For some accounts of the episode, see John Pomfret, "Chinese Army Tests Jet During Gates Visit," *Washington Post* January 12, 2011; Elizabeth Bumiller and Michael Wines, "Chinese Army Test Jet as Gates Visits," *New York Times* January 12, 2011.

technologically superior military might.”⁴ If, however, the timing was purely coincidental, then perhaps no message was intended beyond pride in the accomplishment of China’s military industrial complex, which historically has had an abysmal record of indigenously researching, developing, manufacturing and deploying modern high performance aircraft in a timely fashion.⁵

If indeed the timing of the test flight was pure coincidence, then this raises unsettling questions about civil-military relations in China. If President Hu really did not know the exact date of the J-20 flight, then this suggests that the Chinese military is operating with a significant degree of latitude from its civilian masters. At the very least there would seem to be an absence of coordination between China’s civilian and military leaderships.

Using the two variables of intent and coordination one can construct a 2x2 matrix (see Figure 1). There are four possible combinations of these two variables, each of which is depicted in cells A, B, C, and D. Each possibility is discussed below.

Figure 1: Intent to Deliver a Message and Civil-Military Coordination in China’s Test Flight of the J-20 on 11 January 2011

	Coordinated	Uncoordinated
Intentional	A Devious & Well Coordinated	B Roguish PLA
Unintentional	C Parochial & Poorly Coordinated	D Parochial & Roguish PLA

⁴ See, for example, the remarks of Professor Jin Canrong of People’s University cited in Phil Stewart, “Gates: China confirms stealth jet test-flight,” Reuters Beijing, (11 January 2011) available from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/11/us-china-defence-fighter-idUSTRE70A19B20110111?pageNumber=2>

⁵ This appears to be changing. See, for example, Keith Crane, Roger Cliff, Evan Medeiros, James Mulvenon, and William Overholt, *Modernizing China’s Military: Opportunities and Constraints* (Santa Monica, RAND, 2005), chapter 5.

Cell A – Devious and Well Coordinated

The first possibility (Cell A) is that the J-20 test flight was the result of an intentional and well coordinated initiative to deliver a pointed message to the United States. Beijing deliberately timed the test flight to coincide with Secretary Gates' visit to China. If this had been the case, then President Hu's insistence to Secretary Gates that the test flight had nothing whatsoever to do with the American's visit was a falsehood.⁶ The effort was a well coordinated and assertive effort to signal Chinese strength to the United States. This possibility is conceivable but unlikely given Beijing's unimpressive record of civil-military coordination evident in handling complex situations including crises.⁷

Cell B – Roguish PLA

A second possibility (Cell B) was that the J-20 test flight constituted an intentional act on the part of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to deliver a direct message to the U.S. military. The act was deliberately timed to coincide with Secretary Gates' visit but the action was taken without consultation or coordination with China's civilian leaders. This might point to the possibility of a rogue PLA operating independently or at least autonomously from civilian leadership. However, given the close, multiple, and overlapping linkages between China's military and the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this would be an inaccurate characterization of contemporary civil-military relations.⁸ More conceivable is that civilians control the military with a long and loose leash—a 'roguish' PLA.⁹ Hu Jintao is not only China's head of state (President) and supreme leader of the CCP (General Secretary), but he is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces by virtue of his formal position as Chair of both the Party and State Central Military Commissions. It is virtually inconceivable that the PLA is operating completely independent of Hu and civilian leaders. However, it is entirely possible that the military is functioning in a manner whereby Hu is kept informed of all military programs and initiatives but only on a general level with limited detail and degree of information. Thus, it is conceivable that while Hu was aware of the J-20 program

⁶ Later that same day, Secretary Gates told reporters: "I asked President Hu about it directly, and he said that the test had absolutely nothing to do with my visit and had been a pre-planned test." Media Roundtable with Secretary Gates from Beijing, China," U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, January 11, 2011. See <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4751>

⁷ See, for example, Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking under Stress* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2005).

⁸ For elaboration, see Andrew Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?" *Parameters* Vol. XXXIX, no. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 4-22. For more analysis of nuances of civil-military relations in China, see Andrew Scobell, "China's Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua," *Armed Forces & Society* Vol. 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 227-243.

and plans for a series of test flights, he was not informed of the specific dates of each flight. Uniformed PLA leaders perhaps did not think to consult or inform civilian leaders of the precise timing because they saw no need and/or did not anticipate any negative fallout from the timing.

Cell C — Parochial and Poorly Coordinated

A third possibility (Cell C) is that the J-20 test flight was not intended to send a message to the United States. In this case, the timing of the test flight was actually the result of poor civil-military coordination, and China's leaders did not anticipate any downside to the timing. Indeed, the scheduling of the test flight might have been done completely without reference to the visit of Secretary Gates. On the surface, this may seem highly implausible but given the serious problem of stove piping in Chinese bureaucracies this possibility should not be discounted. Moreover, it is worth recalling that the trip by Secretary Gates was rather hastily arranged to occur prior to President Hu's visit to Washington later in January. The test flight itself was staged for public and media attention with the presumption being that perhaps this would be a concrete example of Chinese efforts at increased military transparency.¹⁰ Finally, what should not be overlooked is that the prime criterion for the timing of the test may very well have been the auspiciousness of the date. In Chinese, January 11, 2011 can be abbreviated to "yao yao, yao, yao yao ('one one, one, one, one' or [Year] 11, [Month] 1, [Day] 11)."¹¹

Cell D — Parochial and Roguish PLA

A final possibility (Cell D) was that the J-20 test represents a decision on the part of PLA leaders largely independent of civilian leaders and without any intentional maliciousness. In this case, much of the discussion for Cell C would also hold true for Cell D.

Conclusions

While none of these four possibilities can be conclusively ruled out, each of them contains disconcerting implications for the United States. Perhaps the most worrisome possibility for the United States is if Cell A or Cell B (i.e. a message to the U.S. was intended) most accurately depicts the circumstances of the January 2011 J-20 test flight. Cell A would suggest that China is engaged in a concerted and extremely well coordinated campaign of signaling and deception

⁹ For more on this term, see Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?" pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Indeed, this is one interpretation voiced by a Chinese scholar. See Stewart, "Gates: China confirms stealth jet test-flight."

¹¹ I would like to thank my RAND colleague Roger Cliff for making this point.

aimed at the United States. Cell B would suggest that this campaign is being spearheaded by the PLA with limited civilian oversight. Both are alarming to ponder but the latter possibility would be the most alarming because it depicts a military that is no longer tightly controlled by civilian leaders. The implication of both cells would be that Beijing views Washington as a major (potential) adversary.

Less alarming but still worrisome would be if Cell C or Cell D (i.e. no message to the U.S. was intended) most accurately depicted the circumstances surrounding the test flight of the J-20. Cell C would suggest that different bureaucracies of the Chinese government perform poorly when coordinating military activities. Cell D would suggest that there is essentially no effort at coordination between different bureaucracies and that the PLA functions relatively autonomously of other structures. In fact, these cells seem to be most consistent with the pattern of hawkish military rhetoric and provocative actions evident during the past two decades.¹²

None of this analysis is reassuring. But whatever possibility best reflects reality, none of them is fully consistent with Beijing's putative narrative of a China *rising* or *developing* "peacefully." More significantly, analysis of Chinese handling of the J-20 test flight raises serious doubts about Beijing's capacity to manage successfully its ascendance as a great power and raises a serious question as to whether a civil-military 'gap' exists in China's peaceful rise.¹³

Fundamentally, the J-20 episode underscores the fact that civilian control of the military is under-institutionalized in 21st Century China. The key mechanism of this control is not the formal organ of the Central Military Commission but rather the informal position of the paramount leader.¹⁴ In the history of the PRC, only a handful of individuals have held this unofficial "quasi-institutionalized" post currently held by Hu Jintao. While earlier incumbents, such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, enjoyed high status among soldiers and could claim considerable military experience and expertise, their successors, have had far less stature and background. As a consequence, China's most recent paramount leaders—Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao—have been less intimately involved in defense matters.

¹² Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?"

¹³ Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?"

¹⁴ Scobell, "China's Evolving Civil-Military Relations," pp. 228-229. I refer to the post of paramount leader as being "quasi-institutionalized." Ibid. The Central Military Commission (sometimes translated as 'Military Affairs Commission') is frequently identified as the key mechanism of CCP control. See, for example, Kenneth W. Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform 2nd* ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 229-230.