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Chinese Threat Perceptions and their Effect on PLA Activities Abroad

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Thank you, Madame Chairwoman, Mr. Vice Chairman and members of the Commission, for the opportunity to participate in your hearing on China’s military and security activities abroad. As a leader of the Red Team at the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM), my job is to think about things from a non-U.S., or non-“Blue” perspective. Since there are others who are speaking with you today who are more qualified to speak to what the PRC can *do*, I will focus my remarks on the area in which I have more expertise – what the PRC *thinks*. I spent the better part of a year, while I worked for the US Army, reading and talking to whom I call China’s “influential elite” – Chinese scholars, journalists and decision-makers - in hopes of understanding how they perceive their security environment. And I continue to try to see the world as others do, and embody and portray these perceptions in my current job at USPACOM. So I will talk to you today about what I have learned from these efforts. These are my personal interpretations of Chinese perceptions and do not reflect official USPACOM, Army, or U.S. government views. I also do not maintain that these perceptions are necessarily accurate; the point is to understand Chinese perceptions and how they differ from our own. In doing so, our opportunities for action and cooperation increases while the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict decreases. I should also make clear that despite being a less open society with a controlled media, China’s influential elite have very diversified, nuanced and sophisticated views on China’s national security environment. They have hard-liners and soft-liners just as we do. So my remarks should be taken as an attempt to understand *a* Chinese perspective, not *the* Chinese perspective.

I think there are several conclusions from my research that provide context for China’s increasing military and security activities abroad. I will speak to each of them in turn:

First, Chinese have an extremely comprehensive view of their national security environment. The threats they perceive are wide-ranging and are not limited to the threat of military confrontation. China’s national security concept includes not only defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity, but continuing its economic and social development and maintaining its international stature. Thus, anything that stands to impede the country’s steady economic growth, its social and political transformation, or its “national dignity” is considered detrimental to China’s stability and security. With such a broad national security concept, the threats that China faces are not only numerous, they are very difficult to mitigate – and require far more than a strong Army.

The Chinese take a comparative and quantitative approach to the future, as demonstrated by their concept of comprehensive national power, and see China rising in power, the United States declining in power, and a world that is trending towards multi-polarity. This period of time, where China's power is growing and the world is becoming more multi-polar, is limited. It is a time of "strategic opportunity" and China must make the most of it, continuing its economic developments and social transformation while limiting any threats to peace and stability.

In this context, the current global economic crisis is a considerable national security threat. So too are the "mass disturbances" that result from excessive pollution or large-scale lay-offs. Bird flu, energy dependence, social disparities, food and product safety issues, heads of state meeting with the Dalai Lama – all these hold great potential to impede progress during China's period of strategic opportunity and are thus threats to China's national security. This brings me to my second point:

Chinese perceive non-traditional security threats as more challenging than traditional threats. China's elite believe that the likelihood of traditional military conflict has decreased and been successfully managed through military deterrence and diplomatic skill. It is non-traditional threats – those that are unpredictable, non-military in nature, transcend national boundaries and have both internal and external ramifications - that are more worrisome. They are seen as such because they require China's leadership to not only look outward, but to look inward as well.

Mitigating non-traditional threats requires China to communicate and cooperate with its neighbors and the rest of the international community – a big departure from past practice that makes the Communist Party wary, despite their growing comfort level and skill in this arena. Prior to China's opening, the country was removed from the world's geopolitical fluctuations and did not have to consider international opinion when formulating domestic policy. As China continues to open, however, internal issues have increasing international consequences and vice versa.

And if this new role in and consideration for international dynamics isn't challenging enough, significant internal reforms are also required for China to successfully mitigate non-traditional threats. The Central government is very well aware of all that is required to address threats of pollution, social disparities, drug trafficking, terrorism, energy dependence – and they have in fact formulated many policies to do just that. They know that they must enforce penalties for corruption and pollution and strengthen the social safety net, judicial system, and mechanisms for resolving public concerns. But getting local leadership to implement these policies...that may be the biggest challenge of all.

Third, the U.S. is carefully scrutinized, as it is believed to have an integral role in many of China's security challenges. But the concern is less about U.S. military capabilities and more about American diplomatic, political and cultural influence and its ability to contain China in all of these spheres. China's influential elite are extremely knowledgeable of American policy, politics, culture and history. The attention to these facets of American politics and society is so great because this is from where the U.S.

threat is perceived to emanate. To be sure, America's overwhelming military superiority is considered a threat, and much of China's military modernization is intended to deter the U.S. from bringing that power to bear. But China's influential elite are less concerned about a direct military confrontation than they are concerned about the possibility of containment. And the threat of containment is less of a military threat and more of a diplomatic, political and economic one. This holistic approach leads the influential elite to see an American containment strategy that is broad based and threatening more to China's continued economic growth and international stature than to its territory or sovereignty. I will explore several of the more worrisome facets of American policy and politics in turn.

But before I do so, let me be clear: while aspects of American policy and politics are a concern, there are many areas in which China's elite see opportunities for cooperation, especially in addressing non-traditional threats we both face. Their frustration is that the U.S. tends to assume China's motivations are malevolent and it is therefore a competitor, not a partner. I focus on the following to demonstrate how, despite our intentions, some of our policies, many of which are not directed at China, and our political process, which is very much not about China, can be construed as threatening to a Chinese audience and detrimental to U.S.-China relations.

First, China's influential elite perceive a threat from America's approach to foreign policy. America's global war on terror, commitment to spreading democracy, and proclivity toward military action are perceived as evidence of U.S.' hegemonic intent. The current strategic balance, and weakening of U.S. stature internationally, provided China the opportunity to grow amidst relative stability and pursue both economic modernization and an increasing role in the international arena. But the perceived long-term goal of U.S. foreign policy is to pursue an American-centric world order that would contain China and destabilize the favorable balance of power on which China's continued growth, stability and rising international stature depend.

Second, America's China-specific policy is perceived as threatening for several reasons. The policy of "hedging," balancing elements of both engagement and containment, is generally accepted. The concern of Chinese influential elite is that the balance will tip toward containment due to American propagation of and belief in the "China threat theory." If the theory gains traction, it will impede China's efforts to define itself as a peaceful, cooperative and constructive international partner and cast China instead as the Cold-War style rival to the United States. Through close examination of American policies, military and diplomatic efforts in Asia, and perceived political interference in the free market, the influential elite see substantial proof that U.S. policy-makers widely accept the "China threat theory." *The Pentagon's Annual Report to Congress* is just such evidence. So too is growing diplomatic engagement with China's neighbors, which is seen as already rising in intensity and effectiveness under the Obama administration.

From the eyes of influential elite, the most troubling aspect of America's China policy is the Congressional actions that limit China's involvement in the world market. Banning U.S. banks from granting loans to companies that build nuclear power plants in China,

preventing the sale of Unocal, imposing trade restrictions, pressuring China to revalue its currency and advocating “Buy American” provisions in the recent stimulus bill – this extent of political involvement in what we call “the free marketplace” is considered hypocritical. Further, such actions signal to China’s influential elite that slowing China’s economic rise is the method by which American policy-makers will pursue containment.

Third, the fluctuations inherent in the American political cycle are considered unpredictable and detrimental to improving Sino-U.S. relations. Developing a long-term, coherent China policy is considered unlikely as political leaders come and go and strive to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. Chinese skepticism and scrutiny of our most recent transition attests to this. While Bush administration policies were initially considered overly unilateral, they were ultimately appreciated for the opportunities they presented, as well as their predictability after eight years. President Obama is still an unknown. What is his policy and approach toward China? Will it reverse the progress made under Bush in Sino-US relations? Where is Asia on his long list of priorities – and why isn’t China afforded greater status and deference? Such uncertainty is discomforting to the Chinese, although Secretary Clinton’s visit was very reassuring. Obama’s campaign and promise of change is in and of itself a concern as it guarantees unpredictability. His reference to authoritarianism being on the “wrong side of history” in his inaugural speech was considered to be a veiled challenge to China. And Mr. Obama’s potential for replenishing international goodwill and American influence is also problematic, as it only enhances the U.S.’ ability to contain and undermine China’s influence, which China was able to expand under a distracted and internationally disliked Bush administration.

The power that is afforded to interest groups through our political process is also a concern to Chinese elite. Businesses that advocate protectionist policies, a military-industrial complex that pursues profit and budget allocations, and human rights, democracy and labor lobbyists – who are believed to have greater influence under a Democratic administration – are all perceived to have an interest in propagating the China threat theory and promoting containment and protectionist policies that threaten China’s economic growth and international prestige.

So how does all this matter to China’s expanding military role and influence abroad? It tells us several things about the intent, scope and intended audience for these activities.

Because China is facing a panoply of national security threats that emanate from both inside and outside its borders, and the most challenging threats are those that are non-traditional, a strong military alone isn’t enough. The Chinese military can secure the country’s borders and deter aggression, but it doesn’t have much of a role in helping the Central government implement its policies to curb corruption, address disparities, control pandemics or fight pollution.

The one non-traditional threat the PLA can address is China’s energy insecurity. China’s dependence on foreign oil and inability to secure its sea lanes is considered a huge vulnerability. These “reliance problems” – of both supply and security - are so troubling

because of the lack of military and diplomatic means to overcome them. So expanding the Navy's capability to provide sea lanes of communication (SLOC) security, and prevent opportunities for the U.S. or others to impose "energy containment" will do much to allay Chinese fears. Expanded military presence in Africa also addresses this threat. China's economic and political engagement there has proven insufficient to protect the energy resources in which it is investing. Contributing to peacekeeping and stability in Africa helps secure China's growing financial, personnel and energy assets there in the long term, without appearing overly opportunistic or threatening.

A second area where the Chinese military can assist in mitigating non-traditional threats is by facilitating the international cooperation that is required to successfully address these threats. The most recent Defense White Paper makes clear that Beijing sees Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) as a new and promising avenue for international engagement. So deploying peacekeepers, conducting bilateral counterterrorism exercises and sending ships to the Gulf of Aden not only provides opportunities for greater cooperation, it also burnishes China's image and reputation as a seeker of a "harmonious world" and offers proof that China's intent is peaceful (allaying regional and international concerns in the process).

Third, the PLA can enhance its capabilities to deal with the many crises within China's borders that are perceived to threaten national security. As we have seen in just the last year, China is plagued by drought, earthquakes and massive snowstorms. Any experience the PLA can gain in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief pays huge dividends at home. Enhanced search-and-rescue and riot-control capabilities and emergency command system coordination are valuable skills, because if the government is incapable of responding effectively to frequent crises at home, the Party's legitimacy is challenged – a sure threat to stability and continued economic growth.

Fourth, the PLA's overseas activities are thus not just about the U.S. Certainly some of the activity is meant to demonstrate China's increasing military capabilities and reach and deter the U.S. from intervening in a Taiwan Strait conflict. But the demonstration of increased capability is intended for Japan, India and Russia as well – other countries also considered able and willing to endanger China's sovereignty, economic growth and international prestige.

While the PLA's overseas activities are not about the U.S., they do nonetheless serve a useful purpose in responding to our diplomatic appeals and countering our perceived efforts to contain and define China. We have called on China to be a "responsible stakeholder." China's elite are loathe to accept constructs that we have set for them (especially when it is we who determine what "responsible" is) and perceives that the "responsibility theory" is just the latest theory propagated by the West that China must debunk. Contributing to anti-piracy efforts and peacekeeping prevents the U.S. from being able to cast China as a threatening, irresponsible international pariah and provides a useful counter when we admonish them for other, less "responsible" behavior.

In conclusion, I think it is worth noting that how to pursue this more active, international approach by the PLA is still very much up for debate. While the most recent White Paper touts this expanding mission and purview, there is still reluctance in a growing overseas presence as it runs counter to China's long-standing "non-interference" mantra and aversion to anything that could be considered "imperialistic" or "hegemonic" – forces deemed responsible for China's century of humiliation. This will likely have a limiting effect on the size, pace and scope of their international activities, as will their very careful efforts not to alarm its neighbors or lend credence to the "China threat theory." Further, as I hope I've demonstrated, China perceives that many of its most challenging national security problems are at home, so there is little desire to become the world's policeman. China's increasing military presence abroad is meant to provide some worthwhile operational experience for its military while increasing its opportunities for influence, securing its resources, and demonstrating it is a cooperative, constructive contributor and global player.

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