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Thoughts about the military balance between the PRC and the USA

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Here in Washington the Quadrennial Defense Review was just released and its non-classified parts a lot could be read about asymmetrical warfare and the necessary means to be strengthened and acquired to win the Long War of the 21st century. The other part, that got almost more media attention, dealt with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the force posture of the USA vis-à-vis her potential conventional long term adversary. The military balance between them is of concern to the US because she is the world's hegemon. Realist international relations theory suggests that the likelihood for major war increases when a challenger to a hegemon arises. The military balance between the current superpower USA and the rising great power China is therefore closely observed.

One could now say that in the age of globalization and economic interdependence such realist thinking in terms of power, security and adversary relations is outdated and irrelevant. However, one should keep in mind that the World saw already once a time of such economic interdependence and the domination of liberal market economies. Many especially in Britain believed that the international financial and trade systems with its centre in the City of London would make a great power war if not completely impossible but at least highly unlikely. Economic rationality would bring every economic power to the conclusion that it had more to lose than it could possible win from a war – war was simply believed to be unprofitable. The famous book *The Great Illusion* by Sir Norman Angell is probably the most famous publication putting forward this notion.

So why then care for the military balance between the PRC and the USA? Well, because the era just described above were the decades before the August of 1914. That does not mean that Liberalism and the ideas about economic interdependence as a facilitating factor in international relations should be regarded as wrong. It just means that it was once wrong and could be wrong again. The notion of the impossibility of war between major powers because they are economically interdependent is just not proved right. More pessimistically one could agree with John Mearsheimer who noted that a form of interdependence did not prevent war in 1914, and it will not do so today. One has then to conclude that a major war between the USA and the PRC is possible. Therefore, to look at the military balance between those two powers is not futile.

A look at economic trends and existing and developing military capabilities can shed a first light on the situation. In 2005 Chinese GDP was \$8.15 trillions and growing at 9.2%, while the US GDP was \$12.37 trillions and growing at 3.5%. Even if these growth rates are not extrapolated indefinitely China will have caught up with the United States economy within 15 to 30 years, depending on the real growth rates. In 2004 Chinese military spending was estimated at \$67.49 billion while the US had a defense budget of \$370.7 billion. Both countries are increasing their defense spending and the Chinese are believed to spend more than the official figure by showing the funds in different budget entries. The US budget, however, has also to be adjusted for some R&D costs mainly in the nuclear field, and more importantly, for costs of the Iraq engagement. Not all funds provided in the applicable supplements to the defense budget are spent for the costs of the occupation and counterinsurgency operations. For some of the money the US armed forces actually procure equipment. An advantage the American military does have and might enjoy for some time even when the Chinese GDP figures will have surpassed the ones of the US is its lead in defense high technology. Only the US is

currently able to develop and field such weapon systems as the projected destroyer DD (X), the Virginia Class SSNs, F-22 Raptor or very advanced space related weapon systems such as the envisioned FALCON.

However, the Chinese military is developing, procuring, and fielding various new weapon systems and can probably achieve considerable capability gains in areas it decides to specialize. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is enhancing its fleet with modern Russian Kilo class SSKs as well as indigenous SSKs and SSNs, Russian Sovremenniy II destroyers and modern indigenous surface combatants equipped with modern anti ship missiles. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), although, largely operating obsolete aircraft compared with the USAF increasingly introduces new aircrafts, including AWACS and EW types. Further, China constantly develops and fields different types of ballistic and cruise missiles. At the moment the 2nd Artillery Corps is beginning to be equipped with mobile nuclear armed DongFeng 31 ICBMs with MIRVs and a range of 10,000km. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) ground forces are restructuring towards fewer men, more and better equipment, higher mobility, better combined arms operations, development of special operations forces, computer networks, and "digitized" forces – the Chinese equivalent of network centric warfare. Finally, what has to be taken into account is China's space flight capability and technology. It is the third nation to independently conduct manned space missions and has modern communication and imaging satellites in orbit.

Generally, the US armed forces are half to one generation ahead in weapons technology and equipment. Probably even more so in the field of C4ISR due to the pay offs of the transformation towards network centric warfare which began in the 1980s but picked up speed after the 1st Iraq War. But a military balance is not just an exercise in comparing quantity and quality of weapon systems. It is also a function of politics and policy towards each other and third parties. Further the military balance is affected by the political aims of either side.

The United States has security as well as economic interests in East Asia. As far as security is concerned, to which this essay will be limited, the US wants to prevent any other country of reaching a position of power from which it could try to successfully challenge the US in a major war. China can be seen as having the potential to reach such a position. The US has not yet finally decided if it will accommodate the rising power, or if it should contain China. Until either policy is national consensus, the position towards China depends on the particular administration in Washington.

The US is the final guarantor of the national security of Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC). Obviously, the national security of the ROC is jeopardized by China. While the Communist Party of China does most likely not want to imperil China's successful economic development, it would not tolerate the de jure independence of the ROC. Declared goal of the Chinese government is furthermore the termination of the de facto independence of the ROC. This is in short the conflict that could lead to a major regional war between the US and China.

To analyze the military balance between the US and China more on should look at the actual battle order, doctrine, and strategy thinking of the opponents. While the USA has forces forward deployed at several bases surrounding China and could quickly transfer more air assets to them, the PRC knows of this factor and its inferiority vis-à-vis American forces. For a testimony the RAND Corporation has collected the thoughts that are available from open sources of Chinese strategist on how to win against a superior opponent. According to this the PLA is supposed to seize the initiative in a conflict by surprise attack and if necessary by preemption. The PLA shall thereby achieve limited strategic objectives and inflict such costs,

i.e. losses that an opponent is deterred from counterattacking. Avoiding direct confrontation the PLA conducts concentrated strikes to overwhelm the defense at key points, i.e. assets that are either very costly and/or of strategic importance, such as aircraft carriers, C4ISR, logistics, and transportation. Securing the limited strategic aims shall result in a *fait accompli*. Whose reversal would be seen by the opponent as being not worth its price.

This Chinese strategy is a mixture of German General Staff ideas prior to the 1st World War, Japanese strategic thoughts leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor, ideas from Sun Tzu, and Clausewitz. Both, The Imperial German General Staff and the Japanese Imperial Forces saw themselves as the inferior compared to their opponents. In both cases the inferiority was to be compensated by seizing the initiative. As Germany, China wants to prevent the build up of superior enemy forces and thereby letting the initiative slip away. To win the initiative the attack has to be initiated fast and decisive. The war would also have to be concluded quickly to prevent economic repercussions and shortages of energy resources due to blockade. Japan employed preemption and surprise to seize the initiative; both notions highlighted in Sun Tzu's work. The modern Chinese strategists follow Sun Tzu also in another way. By attacking C4ISR and logistics they disrupt American strategic doctrine, and by preemptively attacking the US in case of conflict with the ROC, they go after the alliance of their main target. Imperial Japan also wanted to discourage the US from striking back, by imposing prohibitive costs on them. Finally, the idea of politically defined limited strategic goals, i.e. political leadership and control of the military, is Clausewitzian.

Although, the Chinese military power does not yet match and will probably not catch up to US power within the first half of the 21st century, still it could sooner challenge the US' "command of the commons" in its vicinity. If a bid on Taiwan would be successful depends largely on the determination of the United States to stand up to its rhetoric commitments and shoulder the economic and social burden. This willingness is likely to be negatively related to efforts and the lack of progress in other conflicts.

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