DEBATING CHINA

THE U.S.-CHINA RELATIONSHIP IN TEN CONVERSATIONS

NINA HACHIGIAN

EDITOR

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MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

CHRISTOPHER P. TWOMEY
U.S. Naval Postgraduate School

XU.HUI
National Defense University, China

Framing questions: Why is China modernizing its military? What are its drawbacks and benefits from the point of view of America and its regional allies? What changes to its military is the United States making, and how do they affect China and others? How does China view America’s military basing and activities, especially near its borders? What are its benefits and drawbacks? What are both countries’ concerns about cyber-security and conflict in space? To what degree are the United States and China caught in the dynamics of the “security dilemma”? How do each side’s decisions about the development of military capabilities influence the other side’s decisions? What are the key security concepts of each country that the other does not adequately understand? To what degree do differing national interests drive China and the United States toward military confrontation? Could a misunderstanding or misperception trigger an armed conflict? What are ways in which China and the United States can seek to avoid military conflict?
Dear Xu Hui,

Since we met at a conference some 15 years ago, there have been great changes in military relations between our two countries. I worry about many of these changes, as I am sure you do.

China is rapidly modernizing its military. Yes, it remains much less powerful than the United States, and it is not increasing its capacities in order to challenge Washington for global leadership. Still, the reasons for China’s military modernization pose challenges to the bilateral relationship. First, there are two central conflicts of interest involving other actors: Taiwan and the competing claims for sovereignty over regional waters and reefs among China and other countries. Second, some spending increases, even if they are not driven by arms race dynamics, may still be worrisome. If they serve as a sop to the military, to ensure its loyalty to the party in a system with weak civilian control over the military, this suggests grounds for concern. Worse than these two specific points, there is a gradual development of a downward spiral in military dynamics that will be hard to escape because it will increasingly become self-perpetuating. Let me lay out these points in the hopes that we might find ways to avoid this dangerous future.

Over the period we’ve known each other, China has modernized its military rather substantially, albeit from a low base (as we see in Figure 8.1). Even after adjusting for inflation, official Chinese military spending has risen by about 11% per year for the last two decades.¹ I believe, as do most analysts outside of China, that the official budget figures are incomplete. Detailed non-governmental analysis suggests that true spending is 40 to 70% higher than China’s official figures.² Based on that assessment, Chinese spending in 2012 was in the range of $148 billion to $180 billion, with comparable U.S. spending at $846 billion.³

Increased funding for the Chinese military is going, in part, to develop a range of new specific capabilities for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) that worry many in my country, and indeed, observers throughout Asia. While the PLA has stopped adding to its large arsenal of short-range ballistic missiles, it continues to build long-range cruise missiles, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and intercontinental ballistic missiles with a mix of conventional and nuclear warheads. China fields multiple variants of quiet diesel submarines and a large number of small missile boats. Its new anti-ship ballistic missile is nearing a usable capability—at least
in theory. China also fields a small "blue water" naval force, such as fleet air-defense destroyers, nuclear-powered attack submarines, heavy attack cruisers, and a small carrier (the latter two both imported from Russia). Many of these are equipped with advanced Russian anti-air or anti-ship missiles. China's "informationalization" of its military aspires to apply technology to command and control (C2) and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) networks that have shown their value in American military campaigns. Trading a large quantity of soldiers for increased quality in soldier training, experience, and education is also enhancing China's capabilities beyond these hardware developments.

Not all of the PLA changes are equally destabilizing, of course. China has also developed a nuclear arsenal that is less vulnerable to preemption; this secure second-strike nuclear capability should reduce dangerous fears in Beijing of a "closing window" in which to strike, were military conflict imminent. This will reduce instability in some crisis scenarios (although it may also embolden China's leadership to take provocative actions that could prompt a crisis in the first place). China's ability to deploy substantial
military force to distant seas remains modest and, in fact, through anti-piracy patrols, has been used to promote freedom of navigation.

Chinese conduct in “new” areas such as cyber and space, however, does raise deep questions about Chinese intentions for many Americans and China’s neighbors. Both private American actors and government officials face constant threats from Chinese network penetrations. Much of this activity is limited to espionage, but that exacerbates the tendency to view China as an enemy.\(^5\) Chinese government-sponsored cyber-theft of commercial intellectual property is particularly egregious\(^6\) and is related to broader Chinese laxity with regard to intellectual property rights (IPR) protections as discussed in Chapter 2 on the economic relationship. Beyond that, some Chinese intrusions have been aimed at penetrating the defenses of critical infrastructure.\(^7\) The information these ventures gather could, in theory, facilitate Chinese attacks against the U.S. homeland.

While this new domain poses new challenges for the two sides, attribution is not the primary one. The official PRC canard that it is impossible to trace the source of such activity has been rebutted convincingly by private sector investigative efforts by Mandiant, McAfee, and Google, among others. Certainly, U.S. government intelligence agencies, with budgets in the scores of billions of dollars (and more legal leeway), have even better information.

There are two aspects of cyber-activity that are especially problematic. First, in the cyber-world it is difficult to differentiate acts aimed at gathering intelligence and those paving the way for subsequent sabotage: both tend to require surreptitiously obtaining “root user” level access to key systems. Intelligence gathering regarding military affairs is, to a degree, acknowledged as a “normal” activity in peacetime; sabotage is an act of war. Second, attacking civilian targets such as critical infrastructure, even with non-kinetic cyber-attacks, would likely be viewed in the United States as a dangerous, unprecedented escalation. The absence of a shared understanding about how provocative such a possible attack would be is disturbing. Reducing these potential challenges is difficult in the face of blithe Chinese denials of its cyber-activities.

In space, Chinese activities such as the anti-satellite missile test in 2007 and a satellite that shifted orbits (as a weapon might) in 2010,\(^8\) suggest an active and offensive military space program that is profoundly at odds with Chinese diplomatic rhetoric. New pieces of PLA hardware such as the aircraft carrier, nuclear missile–launching submarines, and a stealth fighter also
create new dynamics. Where does China plan to project power with its aircraft carrier? How will China control its nuclear missiles on the submarines? Does China view the messy destruction of satellites as an effective military tactic? Is China engaged in an arms race with the U.S. Air Force? Because each of these are new capabilities for China and China has not discussed them, they raise questions for Americans and China's neighbors.

Of course, as I have heard you note, it is a natural development for China's military spending to rise with its economy. That said, Chinese military spending has grown somewhat faster than the economy as a whole. A country might do this if it felt less secure over time. But over the past two decades, China has resolved nearly all of its land border disputes. The intense superpower rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union that drew in China in various ways is over. The United States has supported China's economic growth by welcoming it to the world trading community. Political relations across the Taiwan Strait are showing the first signs of improvement in 60 years. All of these developments should lead China to feel much more secure today. So it is hard to understand China's motives for this rate of military spending growth.

The centrality of the Taiwan issue to China's military modernization is well understood in the United States, as you and I have often heard discussed. As part of its broader national strategy of "countering intervention" (反介入) by the United States in a Taiwan conflict, China hopes to deter U.S. intervention if it can, and defeat U.S. forces if they do intervene. The military aspect of China's national strategy is "near-sea active defense" (近海积极防御). You and I both know that China doesn't refer to this basket of capabilities as "anti-access and area denial" forces (A2/AD), still, that is a useful description of what they can do, is it not? They can threaten vessels trying to access coastal waters, and actively deny the use of them. China could use many of the capabilities described above to deter and potentially defeat U.S. intervention in any conflict over Taiwan. Related capabilities, the short-range missiles in particular, are aimed to deter Taiwan from any moves toward de jure independence.

Until recently, it was clear that preventing Taiwan's independence was the primary motivation for China's military modernization. But that is less clear now. Domestic politics certainly plays a role: Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule depends on the military's support. China's leaders learned the importance of the military's loyalty during Tiananmen in 1989, and
President Jiang Zemin's order to the PLA to cease commercial activity created resentments in the military, which felt its livelihood threatened. Increasing the military budget is one way of ensuring fealty of the PLA to the Party. But this also raises questions about civilian control of the military, because if the military needs to be bribed to follow orders, it probably is not the most obedient of actors.

Another narrow, less positive element in Chinese regional interests likely plays a role in shaping China's military policy. American (and other) reconnaissance missions and freedom of navigation patrols near China's borders are long-standing expressions of Western interpretations of proper and legal use of the seas, and the United States conducts them to gain information on opaque Chinese activities. China, however, has claimed expansive and unjustified rights in exclusive economic zones (EEZs) extending 200 nautical miles from its coastline. It is possible that Beijing views its military buildup to protect its rights in the EEZs as defensive. But given that many maritime territorial claims are contested and that Beijing's views of EEZ rights deviate substantially from widely held international views, that "defensive" desire looks quite offensive to others. Coupled with Chinese military capabilities in these areas (including dedicated coastal patrol organizations who exert these claims with armed patrol craft), this raises questions about China's views on freedom of navigation for many.

Beyond Taiwan and disputes related to maritime rights, other factors seem unlikely to be motivating China's military modernization in a major way. Countries might increase military spending if their interests were expanding, and President Xi Jinping seems intent to continue former President Hu Jintao's advocacy for "new historic missions" for the PLA. This, and President Xi's references to a "Chinese dream," suggests to some observers precisely that expansion of interests. However, many of these are not conflictual interests, and they generally do not drive significant budgetary increases. Indeed, some are well aligned with U.S. interests, such as non-traditional security. Others refer to emerging Chinese global interests, such as securing global (energy and other) supply routes in the long term. I think a nuanced reading of Chinese writings on this topic, as well as the underlying geostrategic realities, suggest that unilateral military activity is not the solution.

While a vocal minority in Washington does think these missions, and hidden aspirations to dominate Asia, are important drivers for Beijing's military
modernization, when I look at China's policy making in any arena, I am struck by the multiplicity of views pushed by an expansive range of actors that shape policy. The range of voices expressed on foreign policy is similarly wide. The most notable priority for the CCP over the past 35 years has been economic development, and the reforms in this area are often described, as you know, in former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's phrase "crossing the river by feeling for stones." This same process of Chinese decision makers gradually developing policy as the situation emerges is likely to characterize Chinese security policy making, precluding any "long-term" plan for global leadership (or anything else, for that matter).

The U.S. military has not been static over the past few decades either. It has wound down two wars in the Middle East that sapped the ground forces in particular, although all services were strained. Military spending soared during these wars, primarily to cover their operational costs, but some also went to military-related research and development and broader procurement. This investment and the ending of those two wars have allowed an increased attention to ensuring the military balance in East Asia remains strongly in favor of the United States. This is formally referred to as "rebalancing" toward Asia and emphasizes renewed attention on the existing alliances in the region, and to some extent, situating the U.S. military strategy for the region within a broader political and economic context.

China's provocative behavior in 2009 and 2010 accelerated the demand from the region for exactly this "pivot" in U.S. attentions. Not only Singapore, but also the Philippines, Vietnam, and Australia are encouraging a greater U.S. role in Southeast Asia. Beijing's tacit, and at times overt, support for North Korea's provocations in 2010 pushed South Korea to slow any warming of its relations with China and to strengthen relations with the United States. Japan, too, has responded to Chinese and North Korean actions by pushing for a tightening of its alliance with the United States.

A second, distinct element in American policy is a set of military operating concepts known as Air-Sea Battle (ASB). ASB aims to maintain the United States' ability to defend its interest in a changing technologic and military environment, and the most challenging of these is in East Asia. As the heads of the Air Force and Navy describe it:

Our future investment, doctrine development and innovation will be guided by employing tightly integrated, cross-domain operations to defeat
anti-access and area-denial threats and restore our freedom of action. This central idea is embodied in the construct of “Networked, Integrated Attack-in-Depth.” This construct is used to pursue three lines of effort to disrupt, destroy and defeat adversary anti-access and area-denial capabilities. It is tactically offensive, explicitly aimed at anti-access technologies (of which China is the leading purveyor), and requires early attacks on the full range of military infrastructure of an adversary. ASB will be centered on deep strikes at an adversary’s command and control and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. Stealthy long-range bombers, long-range precision munitions, advanced jamming, cyber-attacks, and submarines are all likely to receive added attention. To some, Air-Sea Battle is “a concept in search of a budget;” others argue that it is simply a way to repackaged ongoing programs. Certainly, it would be wrong to view ASB as fully developed in concept, or as solely aimed at China: it will evolve in response to the threat environment and bureaucratic pressures in Washington. Still, declaring a unified, public strategy will help decision makers set priorities. Congress will understand the importance of programs serving to enhance ASB.

These ASB operational concepts would not be viable without tighter relations with an increased number of allies and partners. Thus, the “pivot” has the potential to provide the geostrategic basis that will make Air-Sea Battle more effective. This will be a tricky issue for U.S. decision makers to balance, however. ASB is intended to help the United States to maintain its significant operational advantages against a modernizing China, allowing the United States to reassure its allies about its capabilities. Yet some partners in the region view the tactically offensive nature of it as excessively provocative.

All of this greatly worries me, not because there is a direct, bilateral threat to the United States from China, but rather because these dynamics (spirals, misperceptions, third-party actors, contested norms) can lead to inadvertent conflict. Scholars and analysts tend to shy away from stating that the United States and China are in an arms race. But at the very least, I have to conclude that our two countries are locked in a very interactive pattern of military modernization where each side takes the other as its most likely “demanding security threat” and develops its own responses with the other in mind. So if China’s anti-access, area-denial capabilities were a response to the U.S. deployment of a U.S. aircraft carrier to the Taiwan Strait in the 1995–1996 missile crisis, then the U.S. Air-Sea Battle concept is a reaction...
to that response. And certainly China will react to ASB. That is a classic spiral. (Perhaps as Chinese naval and air assets have increased their ranges, they have had more frequent encounters with pre-existing and long-standing U.S. reconnaissance. If these drove, in part, China’s anti-access and area denial response, then it would be yet another inadvertent spiral.) In other areas, U.S. missile defense—in large part aimed at smaller threats like North Korea—sparks concerns in China, leading to a range of strategic modernization programs that threaten America. Space might be viewed similarly, with (messy) Chinese anti-satellite missile tests being followed by a (cleaner) American shot with a missile defense system and experiments with the advanced X-37B space drone. In these cases, there is a tendency for both sides to assume a continuity of purpose that further solidifies assessments of malign intent. This tightens the hold of such spirals.

Were our two countries’ military relations solely characterized by these “spirals,” one might hope that confidence-building measures and transparency would be sufficient. However, several factors will complicate such efforts. First, some of the spirals are occurring in areas that are new and poorly understood, like cyber-warfare and the militarization of space. These are prone to worst-case analysis, with few sober-minded counterarguments from comparable experience. Further, both these areas are highly “offense-dominant;” defenses can do little to stop attacks. Worse, in space in particular, the use of such offensive weapons by China would destructively pollute that “commons” to the detriment of all actors. Moreover, several interactions involve a third party’s interests as well; in the largest of these cases, Taiwan’s own nationalist identity will complicate the long-term prognosis, despite recent positive political dialogues between Taiwan and the mainland. Our colleagues address Taiwan in Chapter 9.

Finally, while spirals are increasingly playing a role in our countries’ relations, even worse is what I see as fundamental, if narrow, conflicts of interest. Regarding Taiwan and on China’s expansive claims of rights in equally expansive EEZs, I think the two sides have very different interests that are likely to drive conflict even in the absence of misperceptions. These would exist in the absence of any such narrowly military dynamic, but give life to the spirals mentioned above and deepen the sense of inevitable, global rivalry.

I hope you can give me grounds for more optimism.

Regards,

cpt
Dear Chris,

I feel honored that you shared your worries about the changes in military relations between our two countries. I do appreciate the views U.S. scholars commonly express about the Chinese military. However, these opinions also trouble me because they are largely negative and founded on the faulty assumption that China and the U.S. are adversaries.

I believe this is very dangerous. As constructivists argue, international relations are, in large part, mentally constructed. Therefore, if one defines Sino-American relations as adversarial from the outset, one will tend to interpret the other nation’s actions in a negative light and make it out to be an enemy, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. For this reason, we urgently need China and the United States to view each other as objectively as possible.

You mentioned Taiwan and divergent views of China’s rights in its off-shore regions as two central conflicts of interest that are likely to breed Sino-American security spirals and escalate into global rivalry. I would like to take this opportunity to put various events in their correct historical perspective.

First, as commonly acknowledged by the international community, the issue of Taiwan’s separation from the Chinese mainland was mainly created and still persists due to U.S. support of Taiwan, and could easily be resolved if the United States were to take the initiative. As Jia Qingguo points out in Chapter 9, the Taiwan issue would not have existed if the U.S. government had not interfered in China’s domestic affairs by sending the its Navy’s Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait in 1950 during the Korean War. In December 1978, the U.S. government agreed to sever its diplomatic relations with Taiwan, withdraw its military forces, and establish diplomatic relations with China. However, to China’s despair, after only three months, the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act and vowed to continue arms sales to Taiwan. To resolve the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, the Chinese and U.S. governments held negotiations for nearly ten months and reached an agreement on August 17, 1982. In a joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of these talks, the U.S. government stated that it

does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and
that it intends gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution.\textsuperscript{11}

However, the United States backtracked shortly afterwards, and instead of decreasing arms sales, it substantially increased military cooperation with Taiwan and even interfered militarily in the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996 arousing many suspicions about U.S. intentions toward China.

Going by simple logic, there should not be a fundamental conflict of interest between the United States and China, as there is no territorial dispute between the two nations nor do they feel national hatred toward each other. In fact, many Chinese even show some degree of admiration for Americans. However, U.S. policies toward Taiwan have been and are the fundamental cause of some anti-American sentiment among the Chinese public. It may be prudent for the United States to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of the Taiwan issue in the context of its overall national interests. I assure you that a posture change of the U.S. policy on Taiwan will remove the major obstacle for our military-to-military relations and also strengthen Sino-American cooperation by winning the hearts and minds of 1.3 billion Chinese people.

Second, you mentioned that the U.S. reconnaissance missions and patrols near China's borders are legal based on American interpretations of maritime law and freedom of navigation. However, a majority of countries have a different interpretation. From a Chinese perspective, these actions may indicate unfriendly, even hostile, intentions and increase the possibility of crises and clashes. Even from a legal point of view, these actions violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This treaty provides for the right of freedom of navigation and overflights in EEZs (exclusive economic zones) to all countries, but the right is not without conditions. As Article 58 reads, "In exercising their rights and performing their duties under the Convention in the EEZs, states shall have due regard to the rights and duties of the coastal state and shall comply with the laws and regulations adopted by the coastal state."\textsuperscript{12} U.S. reconnaissance and patrols near China's borders certainly go against established diplomatic norms between friendly nations and pose a threat to China's security by going well beyond the right of free navigation and overflights.

Third, you mentioned your concerns over China's military spending. You argue that official Chinese military spending has increased by about 11\% per year for the last two decades, but it wouldn't be fair to object to the increase
while ignoring the decrease. You may have forgotten that Chinese military spending went through a period of tolerance for almost 20 years, when former Chairman Deng Xiaoping made economic development the absolute priority in national development. During that period, national defense received a very low share of the budget and could barely sustain itself. According to China's National Statistics Bureau, from 1979 to 1989, defense expenditures decreased over 6% annually after adjusting for inflation. Although defense expenditures increased during later years, it was to a limited degree. For example, from 1990 to 1997, it increased only by 6.1% annually after inflation adjustments. Given this background, it is quite easy to understand why the Chinese government has increased its military spending. You have admitted yourself that China's defense budget is still much lower than that of the United States.

In fact, the Chinese have learned a very bitter lesson from history: that economic development alone cannot guarantee national security. Britain defeated China in the Opium War of 1840 even though China was a prominent economic power and accounted for about 33% of the world's GDP at the time. It did not end there. China continued to suffer from foreign invasions in the 19th and early 20th centuries primarily due to the weakness and backwardness of its military.

Even now, compared to other major countries, China's defense expenditures are relatively low. In 2011, China's total defense expenditures were almost one-eighth of those of the United States, while its per-capita defense expenditures were only 4.5% of those of the United States. In 2010, China's military spending as a percentage of GDP was 1.3%, which is lower than many countries including the United States (4.7%), the United Kingdom (2.5%), Russia (2.8%), India (2.5%), and Brazil (1.7%).

What confuses Chinese is why China can't modernize its military when all countries are seeking to modernize their militaries? Why does the U.S. Department of Defense annually publish a Report of Military Development targeting China, a practice once used by the United States to monitor the Soviet Union, a peer enemy during the Cold War?

I remember you once told me that it was not necessary for China to modernize its military since its security environment was improving significantly. If this logic stands, then I am afraid to say that the United States should have given up its military transformation a long time ago. After all, America has continued to enjoy superior military power for decades while
having an advantageous geographic position with no strong neighboring countries to threaten it. If China’s motives for military modernization are to be questioned, then what explains America’s motivation to seek absolute military superiority?

China’s security environment has truly been improving, but it remains the only country among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that has not been territorially united. It faces numerous non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. It also needs to secure its shipments of energy and resources. Besides, a strong military is a prerequisite for China to shoulder increasing international responsibilities. You would appreciate that by December 2010, China had dispatched 17,390 military personnel to 19 UN peacekeeping missions, far exceeding America’s contributions to these missions. China has also actively participated in anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden as a responsible member of the world community.

You have also expressed your worries over China’s development of some offensive platforms like aircraft carriers, nuclear missile-launching submarines, and a stealth fighter, among others. These concerns arise mainly when people misunderstand China’s active defense policy. Self-defense is at the core of the policy, based on the principle of not firing the first shot while maintaining the capability to strike back in a fitting manner. Therefore, development of these weapon systems is essential for national defense. At the same time, China does not envisage any preemptive strikes on other countries and has declared a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons as a responsible state.

Foreign countries have invaded China many times throughout history. As Confucius said more than 2,000 years ago, do not do to others what you don’t want to be done to you. Deng Xiaoping declared in the 1970s that China neither pursues hegemony nor will it pursue hegemony even when it becomes stronger. In the new century, China’s leaders have also repeatedly declared that China is taking a route of peaceful development, which is different from historical models. But some observers still tend to interpret China’s development based on their own country’s development experiences, holding that a country will inevitably pursue hegemony when it is strong enough. Contrary to American ambitions of global leadership, China’s fundamental purpose for military modernization is to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity.
To be frank, China’s peaceful development model is an unprecedented experiment in the world, which does not only require China’s own efforts but also requires other countries’ understanding and support. New thinking patterns are needed in the new century. As the only superpower in the world, the United States needs to take a fresh look at China’s military modernization and accommodate it as a partner rather than a rival.

You also mentioned that private American actors and government officials “face constant threats from Chinese network penetrations.” I am afraid this accusation needs to be reconsidered for the simple reason that it is technologically not yet possible to locate the real source of attacks. In this context, it would not be responsible to attribute cyber-attacks to China’s government without actual evidence. China is also the victim of cyber-attacks, but China has never accused any other country subjectively. In fact, cyber-space and space are both public domains in which cooperation is the only solution to safeguarding security rather than making accusations.

You mentioned that China’s military development worries the international community and Asia, but that is not so. Rather, based on our unpublished interviews at China’s National Defense University with senior-ranking officers from more than 100 countries, most countries, except a few that have disputes with China, believe China’s military modernization is a natural outcome of its economic development. They expressed their appreciation for China’s long-enduring peaceful foreign policy, describing it to be a cornerstone for stability and development of the Asia-Pacific region over the last 30 years.

I believe the main obstacle in constructive development of Sino-American military relations is not so-called “spirals” but American security conceptions and strategic intentions toward China. After all, the Chinese and U.S. militaries experienced successful cooperation in the 1980s when their relationship attained the level of quasi-alliance. But American strategic intentions toward China seem to have changed after the end of the Cold War. The DeLay amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY 2000, which placed limits on military to military contacts and limited high-tech transfers to China, as well as U.S. efforts to prevent the European Union from lifting its arms embargo to China, were viewed by the Chinese as expressions of hostile U.S. intentions.

President Obama’s strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, especially during the financial crisis of 2008 and political riots in Northern
Africa, makes China even more suspicious of U.S. strategic intentions. Although you opined that the pivot was aimed at strategic rebalancing and not focused on China, many analysts believe that it was intended to contain China's rise.

To make matters worse, some countries that have disputes with China have exploited the strategic pivot. Recent provocative acts by Japan and the Philippines are examples of ramifications of the U.S. strategic shift toward China. The U.S. media utilized these events to malign China rather than highlighting the truly destabilizing acts of Japan and the Philippines.

Some scholarly works do provide a rationale for the U.S. hostile attitude toward China. A well-known American scholar, Charles Krauthammer, stated in the 1980s that "A country needs an enemy; when one enemy disappears, it will find another one," whereas Samuel Huntington believed that the ideal enemy should be a country that is ideologically, racially, and culturally different and militarily strong enough to pose threats. If these scholars are right, America will make the U.S.–China rivalry a self-fulfilling prophecy.

All in all, I appreciate that you expressed your views rather bluntly in your letter. And I don't anticipate your total agreement with my views. Anyway, it's not the end of our discussion. I am looking forward to your reply.

Regards,
Xu Hui

Xu Hui,

Thank you for the thoughtful reply. You raise many issues, and unfortunately we don't have the space to address each of them. Thankfully, our colleagues are addressing a few in more detail.

Still, let me say a word here about your views on Taiwan. I agree this is an important source of contention between our two countries and recognize that the United States' involvement goes back to the waning days of your civil war when the Soviet Union armed and supported the CCP's Red Army. But rather than debate the merits of the Cold War antagonists' involvement on opposite sides of that war, I will turn to the contemporary issue of arms sales to Taiwan.

I think it is important for our Chinese friends to recognize that the United States reads the 1982 Joint Communiqué in its entirety and does not isolate the passage you highlight from its broader context. Specifically, the American
intention to reduce arms sales was explicitly predicated on “the Chinese policy of striving for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question.” As Chinese military capabilities optimized for attack have grown dramatically over time, the aspiration for a peaceful resolution increasingly carries a coercive edge. China has repeatedly reserved the right to use “non-peaceful means” in pursuit of reunification. Given that reality, and deep American ties to Taiwan, I suspect arms sales will continue through our lifetimes. However, because of China’s extensive military buildup, such sales will not be able to achieve “balance” across the Straits, nor effectively defend Taiwan from attack by the PLA Air Force and China’s missile force in the Second Artillery.

As you agree, the issue of the legality of naval activities in China’s EEZ is another important subject. While the definition of what constitutes “marine scientific research” is really an issue for lawyers to address, I will align my views with the 176 nations who agree with the United States’ position rather than the 15 that side with China’s. Indeed, I will side with the Chinese Navy, which uses the same justifications as the United States when patrolling uncontested Japanese EEZs outside of territorial waters.

Reconnaissance and espionage are facts of life between our two countries. Let’s not pretend that China does not spy on the United States. Today, China does not do so with naval vessels; that may change. But cyber-espionage is unambiguously an important technique—again, for both sides.

I have to take issue with your assertion that it is “technologically not yet possible to locate the real source of cyber-attacks.” There is plenty of evidence of Chinese involvement in many cyber-activities. U.S. commercial actors, government offices, and several European entities have all come to this conclusion. Large commercial Internet security firms have uncovered major operations. Google pulled out of China because the situation got so bad, and the Politburo is said to have approved those operations. The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence labeled China a “persistent collector” in its annual report on industrial espionage. European Union officials and the German Chancellor have had their systems hacked by groups based in Shanghai and affiliated with the PLA. The evidence of PRC state-sponsored cyber-activity is pervasive.

Of course, the United States also engages in espionage over the Internet, and, in some cases, even more disruptive cyber-activities. In contrast
to China, however, the U.S. government does not engage in commercial espionage. My larger concern here is that hacking, cyber-espionage, cyber-sabotage, and cyber-attacks are all new areas where red lines are unclear. This raises the prospect that misperceptions may occur and, as you noted in your letter, constructivists would state that such activities enhance perceptions of rivalry. I, like many Americans who work on China policy or travel to China, have to spend an inordinate amount of time reducing my exposure to your government’s endeavors in this regard. Undoubtedly, this has had an effect on my views of China. Hopefully, unofficial dialogues as well as initial government-to-government conversations on this topic can expand into serious discussions in official channels.

You make some good points on the issue of China’s military budget. Indeed, China has started modernizing its military from a modest capacity, and China’s history does paint vividly the dangers of military weakness. That said, China’s low “defense spending per capita” neither reassures nor enhances analytic clarity. What matters is how large militaries are relative to each other since military power is relative power (i.e., total budgets) and how much effort countries are putting into defense relative to other priorities (i.e., budgets as a percent of GDP).

Part of what is problematic about the PRC’s military growth is China’s lack of transparency. Again, this is not just an American concern. It is no longer a legitimate defense (if it ever was) to claim that China, as the weaker side, should be permitted a degree of opacity about its military modernization plans. That rings hollow to countries like the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea, all of whom are much more transparent about their militaries, and all of whom spend less.

There is some truth to the claim that China is not acting “hegemonic,” at least not yet. However, there are some concerning signs. Chinese claims to islands in the South and East Chinese Seas are increasingly being made in strident terms and at times defended with paramilitary or military forces. This is different from prior Chinese behavior in the first decade of this century when such claims were advocated more gently, and “peaceful development” remained at the fore. Chinese diplomacy toward its South China Sea seems increasingly bellicose, causing southern neighbors to increase their ties with the United States. Your foreign minister’s public scolding of Singapore in 2010 is one such (un)diplomatic example: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”
China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal with the involvement of paramilitary forces—consistent with its long-standing claims, I understand, but in violation of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct agreed to with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—is another example. Further, Xi Jinping's call for a "new model of major power relations" presumes an accommodation of Chinese interests and pushes the United States to view its regional relationships through the lens of bilateral Sino-American relations.

Perhaps you are right, "people misunderstand China's active defense policy." I would be interested in reading your "interviews ... with senior-ranking officers ... from more than 100 countries." My reading of international perceptions comes from the Pew Foundation's president who summarized the 2011 Global Attitudes Survey: "Outside the Muslim countries, however, there is a general consensus that it would be bad if China were to rival the U.S. militarily." In any event, I would certainly welcome a more detailed discussion of China's active defense policy.

For many, both history and current force capabilities raise questions about the sincerity of China's rhetoric. One source of doubt comes from the PLA deploying weapons that seem optimized for first strikes:

- Short-range missiles arrayed against Taiwan to seize air superiority;
- High speed "Sunburn" and "Sizzler" cruise missiles to sink U.S. carriers (launched from ships that are vulnerable to air strike, so they must be used at the outset of any conflict); and
- The DF-21D, the anti-ship ballistic missiles (whose command and control systems would be targeted in a conflict, and thus are most potent in the opening hours of a conflict).

Similarly, increased discussion of distant seas (远海) operations suggests that the PLA Navy has other interests beyond its traditional focus on "local wars under informationalized conditions." Aircraft carriers, blue water naval squadrons, air-to-air refueling capabilities, and nuclear-powered attack submarines are all assets being developed to project China's power. These are reasons for some skepticism about Chinese "defensive" policy. More discussion about how these weapons combat the "three evils" of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism" or counter-interference in a Taiwan scenario would be welcome.
You also state that "China does not envisage any preemptive strikes on other countries." That is a welcome assertion, but the last 60 years of PRC security policy can be interpreted to show such strikes are common, and there is a large amount of Chinese literature emphasizing the value of "seizing the initiative." Vietnam has suffered at least two "first strikes" from China (and South Vietnam suffered a third). Taiwan did not brandish military force first in 1995; China did. The United States did not cross China's border in 1950. Perhaps those past cases of the PRC military attacking first are no longer relevant under the current CCP leadership and in the current international environment. I hope that to be true.

Well, as you noted, we disagree about much. I do find some grounds for optimism in some areas. On issues of EEZ rights, I sense the beginnings of a shift in the Chinese party line. Elsewhere, I agree China has played a constructive role in its participation in anti-piracy patrols. I am pleased that a long-postponed joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise between our two countries is back on track. These "non-traditional" security areas will be important for China as it becomes more of a global player, and in many of these our national interests are actually quite compatible. As China's role in the global security environment grows, perhaps certain Chinese and U.S. interests will converge more. It is my hope that cooperation in these non-traditional areas might mitigate the pressures for conflict that stem from the points raised above.

I hope you, too, can find some grounds for optimism. Otherwise, we make for a very depressing pair.

Best,
cpt

Dear Chris,

I really appreciate the concerns expressed in your letter about the People's Liberation Army. For the past 15 years, you have remained consistent in your suspicions and doubts about the PLA. For me, this is of great concern. After all, as an influential scholar, your opinions will surely exert a certain influence on the U.S. government and populace. I feel obligated to clarify some of the points you raised in order to provide a less-biased impression of the PLA.
To begin with, your letter contains a great deal of research and numerous citations and references. But we should review the data you have cited, since some of the sources may be very misleading. Given the limits of this short paper, I will clarify just some of them. For example, you refer to the Pew Research Center's poll when discussing international society's responses to the PLA. This poll was conducted in only 22 countries, and most of those countries are U.S. allies. How can we expect this poll to reflect the general attitude of the international community, which has more than 200 member countries?

Additionally, when talking about the legality of naval activities in EEZs (exclusive economic zones), you refer to data suggesting that 176 countries side with the United States, while only 15 countries side with China. But when, at an international conference, my colleague, Ms. Zhang Haiwen, questioned Mr. Dutton, the editor of the book in which this data is included, he failed to prove the validity of the data. Actually, contrary to that essay's conclusion, most countries actually do take China's side on this issue, according to my rich experience participating in international seminars with foreign officers. My views on this topic are also quite logical if you consider that most countries have neither the capability nor the intention to send military surveillance or reconnaissance ships to patrol other countries' EEZs.

As to cyber-space, I have to let you know that the assertion I made that "it is technologically not yet possible to locate the real source of cyber-attacks" is not a Chinese notion, but rather the view of Professor Gil Duvall of your National Defense University, a responsible leading expert on cyber-security. As to the "evidence" you cited from secondary sources, they were refuted by Sr. Col. Geng Yansheng, the spokesman for China's Ministry of Defense, as groundless. He said, as is known to all, that it is common for hacking attacks on the Internet to take place by masking the actual originating IP addresses. Allegations of cyber-espionage that only catalogue some routine cyber-activities lack a legal basis, since cyber-attacks are transnational, anonymous, and deceptive; their source is often extremely difficult to identify. Mr. Hong Lei, Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said, in 2012, about 73,000 overseas IP addresses controlled more than 14 million computers in China and 32,000 foreign IP addresses remotely controlled 38,000 Chinese websites.

Statistics show that attacks originating from the United States rank first among foreign hackings of Chinese targets, and the Chinese military in particular. But we do not point fingers at the United States based on the above-mentioned findings. Why does the United States? The People's Daily,
a leading publication in China, said that American allegations about cyber-attacks serve as an excuse for Washington to expand its cyber-security forces and levy more technology restrictions on China as a containing measure.\textsuperscript{38} Professor Jin Canrong, an American studies expert with Renmin University, said the real motive behind the U.S. hacking accusations is to seek an upper hand in Sino-American relations against the backdrop of the U.S. fiscal constraints.\textsuperscript{39}

Given this, I am afraid that lodging one-sided media accusations will not help solve problems, but only jeopardize existing cooperation. Cooperation rather than confrontation is the only right approach in dealing with this new transnational security issue. For this purpose, China not only bans all cyber-sabotage activities, including hackings, and in fact always resolutely fights them,\textsuperscript{40} but has established bilateral law enforcement cooperation with over 30 nations and regions, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Russia.

You mentioned that the PLA's Navy also patrolled uncontested Japanese EEZs beyond their territorial waters, but this is not the case. The PLA Navy patrolled high seas, not EEZs as suggested by Japan. According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Chong zhi niao jiao/Okinotorishima reef is a reef rather than an island, and thus Japan is not in the legal position to claim EEZs in this area. I suggest our U.S. friends take a fairer position consistent with international norms and rules even when dealing with issues involving their allies.

The United States has declared that the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty covers the jurisdiction of the Diaoyu Islands (the Japanese call them Senkakus). This declaration is contrary to international norms and rules, has escalated tensions, and has shifted the status quo of Sino-American relations. Many Chinese, including myself, are wondering what the United States' intentions are in this case. The Diaoyu Islands were first discovered, named, and used by the Chinese and have long been part of Chinese territory. Only in 1894 did Japan take them, during a war. On December 1, 1943, the Cairo Declaration jointly issued by China, the United States, and the United Kingdom stipulated that "All the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese shall be restored to the Republic of China." This point was further confirmed in the Potsdam Proclamation in 1945. However, the United States soon violated international law by transferring the jurisdiction of the Diaoyu Islands to Japan, declaring that their administration was covered by the U.S.-Japan
Security Treaty. Not only did these acts initiate conflict between China and Japan, but they also helped Japan challenge and even overthrow the international order established by the United States after the Second World War.

You also questioned my statement that China will not act in a hegemonic manner or launch preemptive strikes, citing several examples from history. Again, both your position and examples need to be “rebalanced,” to use a term from U.S. policy. I would like to share the other side of the story that readers deserve to know. China did not enter the Korean War until after the U.S. Air Force bombed its borders and many Chinese civilians had been killed. The Sino-India border clash in 1962 was caused by India’s “nibbling” of China’s territory through its “Forward-Policy.” Similarly, it was Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and systematic persecution of Chinese residents in Vietnam that inflamed the Sino-Vietnam border clash in 1979. This is why China justifies her actions as counterattacks in self-defense, rather than invasions, as the Western media inevitably describe them. The important but often ignored fact is that China did not seize even an inch of the other countries’ territories in these operations. Moreover, while China did not initiate war with these countries, it did initiate ceasefires, and its soldiers retreated to their original places even though they had absolute military advantages. I do not think you can find any parallel in world military history.

Similarly, I believe you need to reexamine the facts before concluding that China has become more aggressive and assertive in the South and East China Seas in recent years. The tensions in these two regions have been caused by other countries’ provocative acts, along with a shift in U.S. policy, namely the “pivot” to Asia. If you followed the development of the Sino-Philippine clash on Huangyan Island and the Sino-Japan clash on Diaoyu Island in 2012, you know that China did not provoke the clashes. The former clash was triggered by the Philippines using military ships to arrest Chinese fishermen, while the latter by the Japanese government’s illegal purchase of the Diaoyu Islands. Thus, it is not China that destroyed the consensus nor attempted to change the status quo of the region.

Rather than say China lacks military transparency, it is better to say that China lacks the luxury to pursue transparency in the manner demanded by the United States. As a developing country, China has made genuine efforts to increase military transparency at a suitable pace. China issues defense white papers on a regular basis, established the position of “spokesman” for the Ministry of Defense, and developed a military program on China’s
Central Television channel. According to American scholars Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, China is at the same level of transparency as other Southeast Asian countries. It is widely accepted that military transparency has been used as a tool by the United States to maintain military dominance and primacy. Surely, American's unclear intentions and some unfriendly behavior toward China have negatively influenced China's willingness to be more transparent about its military.

It is easy to understand the strong suspicions about China's active defense policy you expressed in your letter, because this policy is closely linked to Chinese culture and ways of thinking, which happen to be different from American policy and culture. It takes time to fully understand this concept, so I will elaborate.

The first point to note is that China's defense policy is defensive in nature and is characterized by China's strategic restraint. The security concepts proposed by China, such as non-interference in others' internal affairs, shelving territorial disputes and pursuing joint development, and the pursuit of mutual security illustrate well China's doctrinal restraint in the use of force. Second, China's restraint is exemplified by the limits of China's strategic aims. China aims to defend her sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic development rather than pursue expansion and aggression. China also wants to guard and reform the current international order rather than revolutionize or topple it. Third, it is common sense that an active defense policy does not exclude the necessity for developing offensive weapons. There is ample evidence in world military history to prove that defensive actions cannot be realized without having offensive weapons for deterrence. It is not wise to jump to the conclusion that China's defense policy has changed simply because of the development of a few offensive capabilities. This conclusion would be comparable to adopting the view that the U.S. government is encouraging people to kill rather than pursue self-defense by allowing them the right to bear arms. I am afraid to say that the United States would be perceived as the most dangerous country in the world if you simply conclude that a country is aggressive because it has offensive weapons. The key to understanding China's active defense policy is to put it into the framework of China's history and culture, and the focus should be on the ends rather than means.

Misperceptions abound in your interpretations of China's policy statements. For example, you refer to Mr. Yang Jiechi's statement as a public scolding of Singapore, although what he means is that a big country should
not bully the small ones, but the small countries should not bully the big one either. Your understanding of Xi Jinping's call for a "new model of major power relations" also needs to be clarified. What he is really asking is for people to stop looking at Sino-American relations through the traditional lens of power politics. He wants to promote a new type of major power relationship that is different from the geopolitical rivalries of history, given the uniqueness and complexity of this relationship and the changing nature of the time.

With these views clarified, I suggest that our colleagues who care about Sino-American relations and military relations move away from the assumption that a clash is inevitable, and instead focus on working toward the development of a new Sino-American military relationship. In order to build a new type of relationship, we will need to follow some general guidelines. The first is mutual respect. Each side needs to respect the other's core and legal interests. The Pacific and the world are large enough for both countries to grow and develop. The second is to promote cooperation. The Chinese and U.S. militaries have already cooperated in non-traditional security areas, which will gradually facilitate cooperation in traditional security areas, such as jointly maintaining regional stability. The third is managing our differences for mutual gain. We need to establish new and different channels of communication between our two governments and militaries to manage differences and crises, preventing them from escalating and hampering our cooperation on common interests. Last but not least, it is important to build mutual trust. As both sides understand each other better and cooperate more, it will be possible to build the mutual trust that is needed right now. I believe we can still expect the smooth development of Sino-American military relations in the future if these guidelines are implemented fully.

All in all, our exchange clearly illustrates that differences and misunderstandings between our two countries still exist. This is precisely the reason why exchanges and dialogues for promoting mutual understanding and mutual trust should be continued into the future.

Best,

Xu Hui