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PLA Views on Asia Pacific Security in the 21st Century

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Summary

Discussions between analysts from the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University and China's Institute of Strategic Studies of the National Defense University of the Chinese People's Liberation Army convened in Beijing during March, 1997. During discussions PLA analysts:

- described a relatively peaceful region;
- criticized the U.S./Japan Security Treaty;
- showed no flexibility on Taiwan or the South China Sea;
- argued against alliances as outmoded and upheld Beijing's ties with Moscow as a model for a different form of regional security architecture;
- evidenced a desire for a more multilateral approach to regional security issues; and,
- indicated an interest in coordinating policies on North Korea and possibly on South Asia.

Introduction

PLA analysts are focused on maritime and littoral security issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and relations with Japan. They expressed particular satisfaction with Beijing's ties with Russia and the CIS, and with South and Southeast Asia, suggesting that the consolidation of these sets of relations frees the PLA to look towards the significant challenges located to the east and south. Discussion of South Asia and the Korean peninsula revealed a confluence of U.S. and Chinese interests. Like Washington, Beijing has a strong interest in controlling proliferation in South Asia as well as in avoiding conflict on the Korean peninsula. Military analysts noted the desirability of coordinated policies with respect to these regions and issues.

On a different, and at times more contentious note, PLA interlocutors also presented an assessment of the forces and trends that define the region; sketched the broad outlines of what they referred to as a new concept of security better suited to the needs and desires of regional states; and, most notably, delivered an intense critique of the efforts by the United States and Japan to refocus their security alliance away from the defense of Japan and towards maintaining regional security.

PLA Views

The Regional Security Assessment. Chinese military analysts describe the present regional security environment as more promising than at any time since end of World War II. With the possible exception of North Korea, and unlike Europe or the Third World, failed or failing states do not challenge regional stability. Moreover, they note that the interests of regional states are converging. Focused as they are on economic development, regional actors wish to maintain the political stability necessary for continued economic growth. Indeed, in the PLA view, the desire to avoid conflict and settle disputes peacefully has almost reached the status of a regional norm.

As a result, apart from the Taiwan Strait, which remains volatile and on which they indicated no flexibility, PLA analysts think it unlikely that any of the well-known regional hotspots will erupt into conflict. Border disputes, and competing maritime claims are considered to be under control, or nearly so. Regional concerns engendered by conflicting signals of Chinese intentions in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea are dismissed summarily as the result of misperception and bad faith. Even on the Korean peninsula, PLA analysts believe the parties concerned would rather find political solutions than resort to military force. In sum, China's military analysts describe an environment in which, except for Taiwan, there is little chance of major conflict. More significantly, they hold that the time has come to build a new regional security architecture. They assert that bilateral security alliances such as the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty are rapidly outliving their usefulness.

Towards a New Regional Security Architecture: the PLA Vision. PLA interlocutors argue that the future security structure should embrace an entirely new concept of security based on three overlapping principles:

- **Common Security.** The structure should promise security for all of the nations of the region and not one nation or group of nations at the expense of another nation or group of nations. In this light, military alliances lack utility, and are not suitable. The present structure is based on alliances; this, in the PLA view, breeds mistrust and could eventually lead to new arms races and instability.
- **Cooperative Security.** Negotiation and compromise are key elements of regional security. PLA analysts believe it is necessary to respect the diversity of the region; to refrain from trying to impose any particular set of values; and, to build consensus through a step-by-step approach that recognizes the equality of all of the regional powers. Although the great powers (China, Japan, the United States, and eventually Russia) have special responsibilities, no one nation or group of nations should aspire to play the role of regional policeman.
- **Comprehensive Security.** Security includes both economic and military components. It is necessary to account for interdependence.

PLA analysts promote Beijing's relations with Moscow and the Central Asian Republics (established in Shanghai in 1996) as the model for the future. They claim that China and Russia have built and wish to maintain a coordinated strategic partnership that enables each to feel secure. Although Sino/Russian ties amount to a strategic partnership, the nations are not allied against any other party: the region needs a network of similar relationships. Also, in a new departure, PLA analysts advocated initiating a series of supplementary dialogues on relevant strategic issues and the slow building of multilateral structures and regimes.

Coping with an Expanding U.S./Japan Security Relationship. For the PLA the redefinition of the U.S./Japan Alliance away from the defense of Japan and towards maintaining regional stability is a disturbing development. They voiced three major criticisms.

First, they argued that the alliance is being redefined and expanded in order to better contain China. U.S. and Japanese reassurances notwithstanding, PLA analysts take the position that even if the redefined alliance is not aimed entirely at China at this time, it could serve as a tool of containment in the future. PLA interlocutors articulate a certainty that the redefined alliance has an anti-China component.

Second, PLA analysts were skeptical that the redefined alliance will continue to discourage Japan from developing new military capabilities. Indeed, they express concern that Japan will assume an (unspecified) larger share of its defense burden, that Japan will have a new and expanded role in policing the region, with obvious implications for a Japanese role in any Taiwan Strait contingency, and that Japanese participation in sophisticated joint defense research programs such as Theater Missile Defense (TMD) will actually lead to an overall and destabilizing--increase in Japanese military capabilities. In a rhetorical flourish one analyst noted: "Tokyo may shed its traditional role of shield to the U.S. sword and develop a sword of its own."

Finally, PLA analysts stated that the U.S. alliance with Japan, like all alliances, does not provide a basis for security in a region in which interdependence and cooperation are now the dominant trends. For all of these reasons, according to the PLA, the negative aspects of the alliance outweigh its benefits. The time has come, they say, for all of the regional powers, including the United States, to create the conditions under which alliances can eventually disappear.

Analysis

Do PLA Views Represent a New Consensus in Beijing? It is worth noting that the views presented by the PLA resonate directly with similar assertions and arguments made by military and civilian authors in Chinese scholarly journals as well as with China's official English language press. Clearly, Chinese academic and government circles are beginning to rethink their positions on such questions as the benefit to China of the U.S./Japan security alliance and the place of multilateralism in the future regional security structure.

Whether this is a tactical gambit or whether Chinese analysts are in the process of building a case for a different regional security architecture remains to be seen. However, Beijing's actions in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) suggest that ideas articulated by the PLA are at least being tested. If the Chinese were to strongly promote their anti-alliance views, it would challenge the U.S. position in Asia.

Multilateralism in the Chinese Security Calculus. The apparent upgrading of multilateralism in Beijing's approach probably does not signal a sea change in Chinese strategic thinking. Multilateralism, although very much in vogue at this time, is antithetical to the main thrust of China's *realpolitik* strategic culture which emphasizes state sovereignty and bilateral relations. Rather, the highlighting of multilateral approaches is best seen as a tactic designed to enhance China's leverage, particularly in South China Sea-related issues where China has proposed multilateral discussions on developing natural resources--but not on the issue of sovereignty where they are pursuing a series of bilateral efforts. Such proposals are probably designed to tap into the increasingly significant body of U.S. opinion favoring such approaches. Beijing has probably decided that the ARF and CSCAP venues cannot be ignored and

that continued stone-walling would not be useful.

Is there a Desire for a Near-term End to the U.S Military Presence and the U.S./Japan Security Alliance? Strategically, China is ill-positioned to mount such an effort. Following such a course would put Beijing directly at odds with Washington and threaten China's economic development priorities. Taking on the alliance directly would also raise regional concerns about Chinese hegemonic intentions, separate China from the other regional powers who clearly value the U.S. presence as a counter to rising Chinese power, and threaten the political stability that China values so highly. A roll back of U.S. regional military deployments and a dramatic diminution of the alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea in the near term would not serve China's strategic interests.

Rather, it is far more likely that the views articulated by the PLA and other sectors are part of a tactical effort to influence the evolving U.S./Japan security tie. Powerless as it is to arrest the overall trajectory of that tie, Beijing probably hopes to shape its development in ways that reduce any perceived threat to its regional interests.

In the near-term Beijing probably wishes to:

- limit the scope and scale of security cooperation between Washington and Tokyo and thereby raise the cost to the United States of maintaining what the Chinese define as American regional hegemony;
- nip in the bud any Japanese intention to extend Tokyo's influence into the Taiwan Strait;
- limit the expansion of Japanese regional political influence; and,
- discourage Tokyo from enhancing its military capabilities, as they believe would be the case if Tokyo were to join Washington in developing and fielding TMD systems.

The Chinese probably judge that direct opposition to a developing U.S./Japan security tie would only increase Beijing's current strategic liabilities and set it in opposition to the thinking of most regional states. On the other hand, a softer, more indirect approach, which is in any case the only practical option, might pay some future strategic dividend.

What are China's Long-Term Intentions? Beijing is well aware that the United States regards unhindered access to the Asia-Pacific region as a vital national interest. The Chinese must also be well aware that any effort to assume the U.S. role would inevitably involve great political, economic, and strategic/military costs. Therefore, Chinese interests would be better served through cooperation or accommodation rather than by attempting to exclude Washington altogether.

Owing to nationalism and a *realpolitik* concept of national security, Beijing will remain dissatisfied with a regional security structure based on a military presence and military alliances as long as it perceives them to be directed at least in part against China. Accordingly, the Chinese would view their interests as being well-served by the gradual evolution of a security order in which the roles and relations of the United States, China, and Japan differ significantly from those present today. Beijing believes that China should exert an influence that is superior to that of Japan and equal to that of the United States.

The Evolution of Bilateral Relations. Except in the event of a challenge to its core interests in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, Beijing will avoid confrontation and the use of force. At least a

decade, and probably longer, will pass before the PLA has the capability to prevail over Taiwan or to seize and hold islands in the South China Sea.

However, PLA views suggest a belief that the forces and trends for shaping the new order have already emerged and that they will gain momentum. Because Beijing correctly perceives itself to be strategically disadvantaged relative to Washington, the Chinese will align themselves with these trends and encourage their development by a mix of soft and hard tactics. These will include:

- increasing the rhetorical pressure against the alliance system;
fostering regional multipolarity by encouraging regional players to become more independent from Washington; and,
- promoting an alternative model for regional security which highlights multilateral security mechanisms and strategic bilateral relations similar to the ARF and the Beijing/Moscow/Central Asian tie.

At the same time Beijing will, as the March 1996 Taiwan Strait missile test demonstrated, not abjure the use of hard instruments should it judge them necessary to secure core interests with respect to Taiwan or in the South China Sea. Overall, Beijing's perceived need to develop strategic leverage means that unless the two sides seek to prevent it, U.S. relations with China will become more competitive with the passage of time.

Beijing's perception of Washington's intentions with respect to defining the future roles of the three great powers will be a major factor determining the rhythms of U.S./China relations. The tone and context of Washington's approach to China and its specific policies on Taiwan, World Trade Organization accession, WMD proliferation, human rights, and particularly the alliance with Japan will be taken by China as indicators of U.S. preferences and desires for China's regional role and position.

Implications for U.S. Policy: Recommendations

- There is a need for a greater coordination of U.S. policies with respect to China and Japan. Initiatives that might have high utility for purposes of alliance management may also have negative implications for relations with China. It is necessary to identify such issues and map proactive strategies for dealing with them.
- Washington and Beijing should consider creating a high-level consultative mechanism to establish a new set of strategic understandings to guide bilateral relations. Such a mechanism might produce a "Charter" for U.S./China relations in the 21st Century. Establishing such a mechanism would require the support of the highest levels of political leadership.
- A broad inter-agency review of China policy should be undertaken. Such a review should consider priorities, points of leverage, and potential tradeoffs as well as so-called redlines and benchmarks for evaluating Chinese behavior in light of U.S. interests. The goal should be to produce broader consensus on an interest-based China policy.

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