

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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**SEEKING FENG SHUI IN US-CHINA RHETORIC – WORDS MATTER**

By

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## **Biography**

Lt Col Brian D. Randolph is assigned to the Air War College, Air University. Lt Col Randolph graduated from the Air Force academy with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Law. He earned a Masters of Business Administration with a focus in Strategic Leadership from TUI University, Cypress, California and a Masters of Arts in Security Studies (Defense Decision-Making) at the Naval Post Graduate School as part of the Air Force's Political Affair Strategist (PAS) program. He served at the squadron, group, wing, COCOM, OSD, and Joint Staff levels. He has completed all levels of Air Force Professional Military Education by correspondence and in-residence as well as being a Distinguished Graduate from Squadron Officer School. He is also a Level 3 Certified Acquisition Program Manager.



## **Abstract**

Public debate about whether China is an aggressive state and the extent it is a direct threat to U.S. interests is pervasive in think-tanks, the media, and growingly within U.S. Defense leader comments. However, U.S. policy toward China is clear, Presidential intent is to cooperate in as many areas as possible. Additionally, both the Intelligence Community's threat assessments and analysis of China's intention and military capabilities indicate China's rise is non-threatening. There is at times an apparent conflation in the understanding of U.S. capabilities planning and resourcing with policy formulation and execution that are inconsistent with the threats China poses. Senior leader rhetoric is misaligned with the U.S. assessment of China's threat and the actual threat posed by China's military, it is also inconsistent with the U.S.' national strategy documents. Analysis of defense leader comments in 2015-2016 reveals that in general, defense leaders inconsistently elevate the threat posed by China's military and are not fully aligned with U.S. policy. Defense leaders should clearly differentiate between defense budget and planning risk China's military creates from the implementation of U.S. policy toward China and its military.

*“Countries change. Situations change. And we have to be realistic enough to see where the real danger lies.” JFK<sup>1</sup>*

Through the end of 2015 and throughout 2016, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) leader rhetoric has increasingly, both in frequency and in severity, articulated China’s military as threatening to the United States (U.S.) and its military. At first glance, senior leader rhetoric seems reasonable as think-tank and media content is also replete with the articulation of the growing China threat. Talk of anti-access aerial denial (A2AD), aircraft carriers and submarines, the South China Sea, and new 5<sup>th</sup> generation fighters modeled from the F-22 and F-35 seem to clearly point to a direct intent to counter and threaten U.S. capabilities and our interests in the Pacific. A more in-depth analysis of U.S. and Chinese national security artifacts, official and unofficial defense leader comments, and observed behavior would confirm or deny this public assessment of the looming threat from China and its military. The reality may be that China’s military capability and the intended use of those capabilities by Chinese Communist Party leadership is a threat to U.S. interests and our military capabilities. If so, then we could expect DoD leader rhetoric, national security planning guidance, and an assessment of observed and articulated Chinese intent and capability to be consistent and reinforcing.

By reviewing stated U.S. policy toward China, assessing the stated and actual threat posed by China’s military, and deconstructing the military budgeting and planning processes that influence senior leader rhetoric, this paper will explain why senior leaders say what they say, and conclude with recommendations on the proper response to China’s military. Analysis will show that DoD leaders’ rhetoric conflates contingency planning threat analysis as U.S.-China policy

and is inconsistent with the threats China poses. Not only is senior leader rhetoric at times misaligned with the U.S. assessment of China's threat and the actual threat posed by China's military, it is also inconsistent with the U.S.' national strategy documents. For this reason, defense leaders should clearly differentiate between defense budget and planning risk China's military creates from the implementation of U.S. policy toward China and its military.

### **U.S. Policy Toward China**

Central to understanding what official U.S. Department of Defense senior leader responses to China's military should be is understanding U.S. policy toward China. While official policy guidance is generally classified, official U.S.-China national security policy is well articulated in foundational documents like the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Military Strategy (NMS), and Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Although U.S. and Chinese national strategy documents can be viewed as political documents that may not represent true U.S. intent, both sets of documents still require adherence to, especially in the U.S. where all three strategic documents go through a rigorous staffing and senior leader review process in both the DoD and the administration. The NSS, NMS, and QDR all envision a future with China as a cooperative partner in security, economics, and the international order.

As the President's articulation of vital national interests and the strategy to protect them, the NSS serves as the foundational document for the missions the U.S. military pursues, capabilities needed to protect our interests, and most importantly the conditions when diplomatic, information, economic, and military force may be used. Key U.S. interests remain the protection of U.S. citizens, allies, and partners; economic prosperity; respect for universal values and a rules-based international order. As expected, the NSS states that the U.S. will deter and defeat any adversary that threatens our national security and U.S. interests, specifically threatening U.S.

citizens, their livelihoods, or the security of our allies.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it serves to set the tone for how the administration views risk and threats to U.S. interests. The NSS describes further the positive approach to protecting U.S. interests, through shared spaces, the building of positive regional relationships and investments, and strengthening of security partnerships. In keeping with U.S. liberal values to be an example to the world, supporting rule of law and the liberalizing power of complex interconnectedness through economy, culture, society, and norms, the NSS “welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China,” noting that the U.S. will seek to “develop [a] constructive relationship” that is beneficial and improves security. The NSS acknowledges there will be cooperation and competition in the U.S.-China relationship but “reject[s] the inevitability of confrontation.” Although the NSS states the U.S. will compete from a position of strength, its directive is to seek ways to reduce misunderstanding and miscalculation.<sup>3</sup>

Building upon the cooperative language of the NSS, the NMS restates and expands on the acceptance of China’s rise stating that “we support China’s rise and encourage it to become a partner.” Despite China’s aggregation with the other four bad actors (Iran, Russia, North Korea, and violent extremists), this positive introduction to the China section is starkly different than the others, where Russia is noted as aggressive and in violation of international agreements and norms; Iran is challenging the international community with nuclear weapon development and terrorism; and North Korea is threatening its neighbors and U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons. The NMS goes on to state that while “China’s actions are adding tension to the ... region” and poses security concern, the U.S. military will invest in the relationship and urge peaceful resolution of disputes.<sup>4</sup> The disparity in language for China likely acknowledges

China's destabilizing actions in the South China Sea dispute and the potential for the U.S. to be drawn into a crisis as a result of treaty obligations in the region.

Although a year behind, the 2014 QDR is largely consistent with the neighborly policy outlined in the NSS and NMS but notes that in the Pacific, "there is greater risk that tensions of long-standing sovereignty disputes to natural resources will spur disruptive competition or erupt into conflict."<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the QDR notes that the lack of transparency in China's intentions in combination with their increasing capabilities increase U.S. concern and risk. While China is typically lumped into the five bad actors group, the QDR includes China in the Iran and North Korea section in order to reinforce that in policy implementation, China should be isolated from issues with these two countries in order to maintain stability with China. Said more clearly, the DoD should not blindly include or generalize China as a threat to the U.S. Specifically, the QDR states that "the Department of Defense is building a sustained and substantive dialogue with the People's Liberation Army designed to improve our ability to cooperate in concrete, practical areas such as counter-piracy, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, verbiage is not used for any of the other four adversaries. At the same time, we will manage the competitive aspects of the relationship in ways that improve regional peace and stability consistent with international norms and principles."<sup>6</sup>

### **U.S. Threat Assessment**

Although official U.S. policy may be to engage China cooperatively, understanding whether China's military threatens U.S. interests remains critically important as the national strategy documents also require the protection of the U.S. homeland and vital national interests from threats. The first, simplest, and most authoritative U.S. source for the assessment of the threat China poses to the U.S. and its military is the Director of National Intelligence's (DNI)



annual testimony to Congress of the Intelligence Community's World Wide Threat Assessment (WWTA). The DNI presents an assessment of countries and their capabilities that may or do threaten the U.S. In this assessment, the Intelligence Community, like the DoD, adheres to a doctrinal definition of threat, being the possession of both *capability* and *intent*.

Since 2014, the DNI threat assessment of China stands in marked contrast to the public rhetoric of DoD leaders. In 2014, the DNI viewed China's emerging cyber capability and nuclear arsenal as the only Chinese threats to the U.S. However, the DNI went on to note that China's no-first-use policy reduces the direct threat from nuclear weapons. On cyber, the DNI focused more on China's internal stability, noting that "China's cyber operations reflect its leadership's priorities of economic growth, domestic political stability, and military preparedness." He noted that China's restrictive internet actions risk destabilizing the social order in China. The DNI also highlighted China's theft of intellectual property rights in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> In counter-space, the DNI summarized Chinese literature on the planned use and disruption of space in a conflict, articulating China as a potential adversary, given their growing capability and stated intent to use it. Ultimately, the DNI summarized China as growing regional competitor that was dealing with nationalistic identities and historic issues that were creating tension in the region. Militarily, the DNI described neutrally that China is developing a modern military capable of winning a 21<sup>st</sup>-century war, to include strategic strike, increased logistics basing in the Indian Ocean and heavy air transports.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to growing DoD rhetoric, in 2015 the DNI assessment of China remained largely neutral and consistent with 2014. The DNI again noted China as a threat where their capabilities and stated intent existed, that now being cyber, along with space, and nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup> In his overall description of China, the section was

reduced in size from 2014, noting that China will be an active regional member with the continued South China Sea dispute and domestic reforms.

By 2016, the WWTA stood in growing contrast to DoD rhetoric. As expected, Chinese cyber and nuclear capabilities were matter-of-factly viewed as threatening to the U.S., particularly due to active use of cyber attacks and Chinese military strategy codification of their intend use. The DNI noted that “Beijing ... selectively uses cyber attacks against targets it believes threaten Chinese domestic stability or regime legitimacy.”<sup>10</sup> The WWTA softened further its overall assessment verbiage from the past, stating that there will be “competition and cooperation”. In the country summary, terms such as adversary and threat were not used, neither was there a mention of Chinese military capabilities. In fact, there was more discussion of China’s positive international assistance and opening with the International Monetary Fund, Ebola assistance, peacekeeping operations, and infrastructure development while also acknowledging that China seeks influence in their region and globally, which creates opportunities for cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

### **China Threat Analysis**

A second source for gaining understanding of whether or not China’s military poses a threat is through direct analysis of China’s capability and intent as evidenced directly through Chinese documents and systems. As with the U.S., understanding Chinese intent for its military forces begins with understanding and analysis of China’s national interests, supporting national military strategy, and the consistency in which military capability is developed and employed. Consistent with the DNI’s approach, the aggregate analysis offering a threat picture of China based on the intent for their military and an understanding of its capability. Although China continues to develop and modernize its military capabilities in apparent direct opposition to

American military strengths, a closer analysis reveals a consistent path aimed at the protection of their national interests. Larry Wortzel's belief that "within the limitations of technology and resources, a nation's military capacity will grow to secure vital national interests," helps frame the motivation behind the continual growth in Chinese military strength and desire to modernize its forces.

China's vital national interests are made abundantly clear in China's 2015 military strategy, outlining "national unification, territorial integrity and development interests" as critical to Chinese survival.<sup>12</sup> A unified China led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the keystone to all other Chinese vital national interests. The legitimacy of the CCP and social stability rests largely on economic growth that is substantially dependent on trade, foreign investments, access to natural resources, and foreign technology. Unfortunately, these come with notable risk, given their distance from China, which has resulted in China's national security policy and military strategy increasingly focused on securing these economic interests. Many military analysts focus on China's regional territorial issues as the key focus area in their national security agenda. While historical and cultural reasons exist for the CCP to desire territorial reconstitution, the underlying role of China's military is to perpetuate the CCP by securing China's economy and then territorial integrity. The 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China articulated that, "In opening wider to the outside world, we must pay great attention to safeguarding our *national economic security*." Since then, Congressional statements have consistently articulated the need to project power far offshore in order to protect its global interests. Also consistent is the articulation of peaceful development, non-threatening action, and cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

China is very dependent on its involvement in the global economy for its well-being and should be expected to expand its reach in order to protect it. China is keenly aware of its vulnerability and dependence on maritime access for natural resources and trade. The world's fleet of over 4,200 tankers that transport oil worldwide have small crews and are vulnerable to attack via the simplest of means. Adversaries ranging from non-state to state actors including the host nation easily interdict Chinese oil facilities like those in Sudan and loading docks north of Port Sudan. Additionally, between 40 and 45 percent of raw material imports including energy, come from Africa and the Middle East.<sup>14, 15</sup>

China also has a growing expatriate interest around the world as well. In 2016, China had over 35 million workers abroad.<sup>16</sup> Keeping this population secure is crucial to those regional interests and the population's trust in its leadership to protect it. Without its growing naval capability, China would have been unable to send a frigate to Libya to evacuate thousands of Chinese nationals and subsequently to Yemen.<sup>17</sup>

Militarily, China appears to consistently communicate its intent through its military strategy and leaders. According to stated intent by Admiral Sun, the Deputy Chief of the Chinese Joint Staff, "China holds the banner of peace, development, cooperation and mutual profitability high, and has all along pursued a defensive national defense policy. China holds no ambition to proclaim itself hegemon. After being reformed, the army will increase self-defense and defense capability, and make even more and better contributions to regional and international peace and security."<sup>18</sup> China's desire to settle disputes without force is also evidenced in the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation that includes language stating each country should contact the other if they perceive a threat from the other and each will strive to peacefully remove the threat.<sup>19</sup>

As outlined in China's military strategy, the near-abroad is full of uncertainty, risks, and threats. In the surrounding seas, China views neighbors' actions as aggressive as they occupy Chinese islands and conduct military maneuvers near China's borders. "Consequently, China faces more challenges in terms of national security and social stability. With the growth of China's national interests, its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel, and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue."<sup>20</sup> When China considers the possibility of conflict in the Pacific, it surely acknowledges that the Pacific "contains seven of the ten largest standing militaries in the world, five nuclear nations, and five of the U.S.' seven mutual defense treaty alliances."<sup>21</sup> While the intent for unilateral conflict with the U.S. military may be non-existent, the probability for U.S. involvement in such an environment certainly must be planned for.

China's intent for its military capabilities are also focused on those they believe are necessary to deter or defeat an adversary from intervening in a conflict or crisis. Since U.S.-led international intervention in Gulf War I, international sanctions following the Tiananmen Square protests, and military actions to stop ethnic and religious oppression by various regimes throughout the 1990's and into the 2000's, China has been deeply aware of the potential for international intrusion into Chinese affairs if they are heavy handed with separatist populations. The centrality of Taiwan in China's national interests, military strategy, and development of military capabilities is very clear in the military strategy. Taiwan represents a concern to both "reunification and long-term [economic] development."<sup>22</sup> Militarily, the Taiwanese military is viewed as an obstacle to Chinese reunification of the island with the mainland.

Although China's vital national interests and stated military strategy and intent indicate a minimal threat to the U.S., analysis of Chinese military capability is required to complete the threat analysis. China's focus on expanding its global reach and ability to project power throughout the region enables it to coercively enforce its territorial and maritime rights and secure its local and distant economic interests that are heavily reliant on the oceans for their livelihood, and protect its extensive diasporas. Unification of Chinese territory to include reintegration of Taiwan and the likely involvement by the U.S. remains a key driving factor in Chinese military force structure.

China, like the rest of the world's powerful militaries, understands that future conflict and security concerns will originate over disagreements about sea access and its resources. A strong, flexible, and mobile navy along with an air force capable of power projection will be the primary forces to provide security in these situations. The Chinese navy and air force are developing and improving their weapons and systems along with the command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) needed to use them effectively in order to secure their national interests that are reliant on the maritime domain. These improvements support national economic and political interests both at home, to include the Taiwan issue, and the near abroad. Aircraft carriers, new destroyers, more submarines, anti-ship systems as well as long-range aerial refueling provide the Chinese with forces that are able to project power and influence into regions like the Straits of Malacca, Indian Ocean, and China Seas, which contain their interests. The Chinese navy is growing in its ability to project naval forces into Pacific blue water and throughout the region. China's focus on conventionally-powered submarines, destroyers, and agile patrol boat forces also provide it with the means to prosecute local (like the South China Sea) disputes and conflicts with a graduated response.

Furthermore, these capabilities support China's defensive stance as they are not an inherently offensive force. These dual-use (local war and strategic deterrent) forces also act as both a direct counter to other dominant militaries as well as negatively impacting the perception of smaller countries relying on the intervention of the U.S. forces to support their disadvantaged position during a dispute or in response to a defense treaty obligation.

The increase in Chinese naval capability is expected and reasonable given that 85% of China's trade is carried on ships and through the South China Sea. Additionally, if China wants to be viewed as an influential player on the world scene, then they must provide benefit to the world elite. For the navy, this means providing protection to the world's merchant ships.

Without its growing naval capability, China would have been unable to send a frigate to Libya to evacuate thousands of Chinese nationals.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the anti-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden allow the PLAN to gain experience in a hostile environment, conduct long distance logistics and support activities, and exercise command and control from afar.<sup>24</sup> The development and initial production of systems like the DF-21D, DF-26D, and hypersonic anti-ship missiles support the Academy of Military Science theorists' statements like that of Jiang Yamin who state that the People's Liberation Army must be able to counter attacks at long distances in the Pacific and defend distant lines of communication.<sup>25</sup> This means possessing capabilities that can deter or counterattack if needed, naval forces from adversarial navies like the U.S. and India.

### **Origination of the Threat**

While both methods of threat analysis indicate that China is only a threat in limited areas, particularly cyber and nuclear weapons, the origin of the perspective that China's military poses a threat to the U.S. remains unresolved. Additionally, the above analysis does not fully explain

the dissonance in U.S. policy and strategy documents not senior leader rhetoric that includes China with stated adversaries like North Korea and Iran. A more likely source for the perception of China as a military threat lies at the center of the DoD bureaucracy, one area where China is a confirmed threat, in DoD contingency plans. More accurately speaking and consistent with military planning doctrine, China's military capabilities create risk to the executability of military contingency plans.

Under Title 10 Chapter 5 Section 153 of the U.S. Code, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is directed to examine the executability of the National Military Strategy and report risk associated with its execution. This process is known as the Chairman's Risk Assessment (CRA) and is nested within the Department's Joint Strategic Planning System, thus linking it directly to strategy formation, strategic planning, and importantly, defense programming and budgeting. Within the CRA, Combatant Commands (COCOM) assess the strategic and military risk associated with successfully executing the twelve NMS missions and achieving the three military objectives within their area of responsibility. For Pacific Command, this means determining the risk associated with the primary three missions and objectives - deterring, denying, and defeating state adversaries; defeat an adversary; and deny an adversary's objectives. To accomplish the risk assessment, PACOM planners develop "most likely" and "worst case" hypothetical planning scenarios where the U.S. military could have to accomplish these missions vis a vis China, e.g. protecting Taiwan from Chinese invasion. Planners consider the level of effort, resources required, and capability shortfalls in both planning scenarios. Importantly, planners also consider the adversary's threats to DoD capabilities. Threats being an applicable term in this usage because planners assume Chinese *intent* will be to use their military capabilities against the U.S. in the envisioned scenario. In the case of China, the majority of Chinese military systems



are counter-force systems, not counter-population – meaning that the threat is directed at U.S. forces and their capabilities, not the U.S. population or territory. New Chinese capabilities like anti-ship cruise missiles, DF-21, DF-26D and other A2AD systems directly increase the risk associated with U.S. military forces achieving the NMS missions under a hypothetical scenario involving China. To complete the CRA process and its linkage to JSPS and the defense budget, the Secretary of Defense and DoD then develop risk mitigation actions such as the procurement of new weapon systems and/or force structure changes that are inserted into the following year's defense budget.

Thus, within the context of DoD's planning and budgeting processes, China's military possess the capability to risk achievement of NMS missions and national military objectives through its threat to our military systems in envisioned hypothetical scenarios. The point being that within the DoD, the planning system inherently reflects the worst-case behavior of a country in order to drive development of the right forces and capabilities to respond should the scenario come to fruition in reality.

While the above may seem pedantic or irrelevant to the assessment of whether China's military is a threat, DoD force structure, budget, and most relevantly, DoD senior leader budget testimony to Congress and public statements throughout the year must reflect the foundational hypothetical threat analysis of contingency planning that budget requests and system acquisition requirements are founded upon. Although U.S. policy and values seek peaceful coexistence unless directly threatened, defense leaders must prepare materiel hedges against an uncertain future represented in defense contingency plans.

### **Deconstructing the Rhetoric**

It is then within U.S. defense leader public comments where adherence to cooperation-focused U.S. policy, a minimal to moderate threat assessment, and a high-risk defense planning calculus converge to create bipolar rhetoric. Analysis of defense leader comments from 2015-2016 reveals that in general, defense leaders inconsistently elevate the threat posed by China's military and are not fully aligned with U.S. policy. Given the above discussion on U.S. policy and defense planning and budgeting process, the logic for the bipolar nature of defense leader comments becomes clearer. Leaders in joint positions like the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and geographic combatant commanders, and who are primary implementers of U.S. policy and have secondary roles as supporters of military service budget requests, are more likely to be more closely aligned with U.S. policy and moderate their threat verbiage unless defending or outlining service budget requests. For example, budget testimony by any of these defense leaders will certainly lean toward China-threat verbiage in order to explain causal threats that drove the budget request. Service chiefs and those more closely related to service budgets most frequently conflate defense planning and budget justification as representative of current U.S. policy. Furthermore, analysis also indicates that the greater the distance both bureaucratically and geographically from Washington D.C. and formulation of the budget justification, the greater the alignment of rhetoric with stated policy, strategy, and the actual limited threat posed by China. However, as time passes, DoD leaders trend toward greater articulation of China as a threat as they coningle budget justification verbiage and planning analysis with real-world actions from China, and overlook and at worst undermine China policy objectives.

Between fiscal years 2013 and 2015, China was not referenced in DoD budget priorities in a manner that drove budget consideration in senior leader testimony. In Secretary Carter's

fiscal year 2016 testimony (calendar year 2015), China, along with Russia, Iran, and North Korea, were mentioned once in noting that there are global actors that are modernizing their militaries. By fiscal year 2017 budget testimony, all U.S. defense leaders markedly increased the articulation of state-level threats and concerns that drove the defense budget for fiscal year 2017. The explanation for the shift is not a change in capability from China that made it suddenly more threatening. China's A2AD capability, for example, an oft-touted example of a threat to the U.S. military, has been present and growing since before 2013. The details contained in defense leader official comments regarding defense budget and planning changes indicates a change in planner consideration of China induced risk to military contingency plans.

In Secretary Carter's March 2017 budget testimony, he clearly reflects both U.S. government policy toward China and the risk China's military injects into DoD planning. At the outset, the Secretary identified China as a "challenge", noting them as a focus area of the DoD budget and planning. He specifically notes the relationship of the CRA, defense plans and the budget in stating that China does have the military capability to counter U.S. capabilities during a future crisis or conflict. In line with policy, he further notes that a rising prosperous China is welcomed while an "aggressive" China is not. The importance of word selection being made clear through his differentiation of North Korea and Iran as "threats" to the U.S.<sup>26</sup>

Secretary Carter further expands the distinction of China as less than a threat by tangentially noting that Russia and China, although possessing similar military systems that can threaten some DoD systems, are "very different nations and situations". The Secretary's point being the distinction between intent and capability, with Russia being the more threatening state given both their demonstrated intent and possessed capability. He further aligns with U.S. China policy by delineating spending priorities for threats articulated as ISIL, Iran, North Korea, and an

aggressive Russia. In speaking about the operationalization of the rebalance to the Pacific and in direct alignment with U.S. policy, he unambiguously states that the U.S. wants China to grow and prosper, and that Asia-Pacific activity is not focused on any one country, “that includes China.”<sup>27</sup>

Based on his distance from Washington and Secretary Carter’s position as a key policy implementer, during his May trip to Shangri La he expectedly adhered directly to U.S. policy and not defense budget verbiage. He stated that the U.S. and DoD sought cooperation, unity, and jointness with China, never noting them as an adversary, threat, or even competitor. Moreover, on the South China Sea issue, he repeatedly noted that U.S. involvement in the South China Sea dispute was not in support of any claimant, but in support of the principle of freedom of navigation and international norms and rules.<sup>28</sup>

Consistent with the above finding, Chairman Dunford’s budget testimony is closely aligned with national policy while also reflective of the impact of Chinese military capabilities on military contingency plans. Evidence of the importance of the contingency planning process and CRA on rhetoric, he clearly articulated the difference between risk and threat while also noting that consistent with the defense department’s strategic risk assessment, China is described as a challenge, specifically stating that their increased capabilities and presence could lead to “misunderstanding and miscalculation.” The chairman also clarifies that China’s new capabilities decrease the effectiveness of our forces, and *not* directly threatening to U.S. interests. Only in the expected area of nuclear weapons and cyber (areas of articulated or demonstrated intent and capability), is China articulated as a threat to the U.S., whereas Russia, North Korea, Iran, and terrorism were viewed as threats to our national interests.<sup>29</sup> By September 2016, the Chairman Dunford’s statements in Washington were solely focused on the threat China poses to

the military in the future, again consistent with the passage of time from when planning was done and importance of getting a budget passed by Congress prior to the start of the new fiscal year.<sup>30</sup>

Given the similar timing of service chief budget testimony with that of the SecDef Carter and Chairman Dunford, the service chiefs' testimonies were generally consistent, describing China as a general challenge or a competitor. Given the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) service responsibilities and his greater involvement in implementing U.S.-China policy through inter-service cooperation, he expectedly impartially described China's capabilities that will pressure the U.S. Navy in the future while also articulating desire to improve relationships in the Pacific. The Air Force chief, whose service faces the greatest contingency planning risk vis a vis China's military in a Pacific conflict and the least involvement with policy implementation, described China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorism as challenges, specifically stating the need to deter and defeat them all. He narrowly adhered to policy by stating these adversaries' capabilities are "closing dangerously fast."<sup>31</sup> As the year progressed and the linked justification of defense budget to defense planning and policy blurred, the Air Force chief expectedly increased his threat rhetoric as he focused more on contingency plan analysis. As expected, the CNO stayed neutral in his comments as a result of his continued involvement in policy implementation through numerous visits to the Pacific and engagements with Chinese military officers.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the AF chief, the CNO's involvement in policy forced him to distinguish his comments between policy guidance and service budget justification.

Finally, Admiral Harris, the Pacific Command (PACOM) commander and primary implementer of DoD China policy (although possessing service loyalty and needing naval capabilities to execute PACOM contingency plans) represented the expected blend of

explanation of threats and risks in military contingency planning analysis with policy and national strategy in his annual Congressional Posture Hearing testimony. He outlined the importance of understanding the intent for the use of China's military capability in order to discern whether they are a threat, avoiding the use of any label like threat, adversary, or even concern. He neutrally enumerated the new military capabilities China is developing and their operational posture. Consistent with the NSS and NMS, Admiral Harris concluded by noting the opportunities for collaboration with China, stating "my goal is to convince China that the best way ahead is through peaceful cooperation, participation."<sup>33</sup>

### **Recommendations**

Although the public debate about whether China is a threatening state and the extent it is a direct threat to U.S. interests will continue, U.S. defense leaders must continue to implement U.S.-China policy while planning and preparing for an uncertain future. In doing so, U.S. defense leaders must mitigate the risks China's military poses to the achievement of National Military Strategy missions and objectives in future contingency planning scenarios. Militarily, defense leaders should and must continue to develop U.S. capabilities to dominate potential adversaries, whether friend or foe today. However, U.S. defense leaders should not equate nor misconstrue risks to planning scenarios as actual Chinese intent to threaten U.S. military forces for reasons beyond the mere fact that it runs counter to US policy. There are numerous allies that have the capability to threaten the U.S. if their intent were to change, yet the U.S. does not publicly describe them as potential adversaries. Misstating hypothetical or potential future threats as current Chinese intent skews reality and dooms policy toward worst case outcomes. U.S. values and the American public, while historically isolationist or reluctant interventionist, have a deep-seated trust of military leaders and desire the protection of the United States, which

when combined, could lead to aggressive U.S. policy and actions consistent with threat rhetoric despite facts to the contrary. Such protectionist policy would be contrary to overarching U.S. values represented in the NSS. Moreover, conflating plans as reality in defense leader rhetoric weakens the U.S. liberal values that position the U.S. as exemplarist, instead pushing the U.S. down an interventionist path, a path inconsistent with our current NSS and NMS.

Defense leaders should also articulate future capability needs in terms of shortfalls to NMS missions and objectives and not as mitigations to potential Chinese threats, lest articulation of future planning scenarios (which are purposefully worst case) inaccurately represent the U.S. government policy toward China and misrepresent DoD's desired future relationship with China's military. For example, although the U.S. National Space Security Strategy references China's 2007 anti-satellite shoot-down, which per the strategy, created the potential for future contestation of space, it does not then articulate China as a threat to the U.S. To the point, it states the U.S. will deter the contestation of space, not China, through preventative measures, such as establishment of international norms and laws, self-protection through redundancy, reliability both through systems and allies.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, public discussion of Chinese threatening action should be limited to demonstrated intent and capability, the two components of a threat, lest leaders perpetuate the false conclusion that military capability by itself is inherently threatening to the U.S. As the DNI noted, China has clearly shown threatening behavior in cyberspace. In addition to defense spending for future potentialities, Congress and the public must be aware of and act on materialized threats in order to protect U.S. national interests.

## **Conclusion**

As long as China's intent for its military capabilities remains uncertain and confrontational in regional issues and cyberspace, think-tanks, defense industry advocates, and most importantly DoD leaders and planners will continue to view and overstate China's military capabilities as a direct threat to the U.S. and its military despite U.S. national policy objectives. Defense leader overgeneralization and/or conflation of planning threat assumptions as current Chinese intent exacerbates and perpetuates conflated statements. U.S. policy toward China is clear, Presidential intent is to cooperate in as many areas as possible. Additionally, both continued DNI threat assessments and the above analysis of China's intention (represented by national interests) and military capabilities indicate China's rise is generally non-threatening. However, the U.S. military's mission is to be prepared to fight future wars and win, which requires continued planning to predict conflict so we can be prepared. Articulation of capability needs and associated planning scenario causal relationships must be within this future wars/threats construct. Whether a nation state or natural disaster, military planners must assess their resource needs and the risks to achieving the mission. Defense leaders then should remain vigilant in differentiating between defense budget and planning risk China's military creates from the implementation of U.S. policy toward China and its military.

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