



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on March 29, 2010

Being Realistic About the China Threat

Item: In an article entitled “China’s military bluster camouflages toothless bite,” Reuters reported on March 8, “China’s military has far to go before its bite begins to approach its increasingly loud, and for some fearsome, bark.... While China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) looks increasingly fierce on paper, analysts — and even Chinese army officers — say it will be a long time before the country has the means to effectively challenge U.S. power, if ever.”



The Reuters story continued: “There’s no way China can threaten the United States,” Lt. Gen. Li Dianren, a professor at the National Defense University, told Reuters on the sidelines of the annual session of parliament [in Beijing]. “Anyone with even a bit of common sense knows that our capabilities do not come even close to matching those of the U.S. In terms of economics, technology and the military, the gap is huge. How can we threaten them?”

Item: *The New York Times for March 7, in an article entitled “China Blames U.S. for Strained Relations,” reported: “The blame for friction in Chinese-United States relations “does not lie with China,” and it is up to the United States to take steps to repair the frayed ties, China’s foreign minister repeated Sunday. The minister, Yang Jiechi, said at a news conference that the administration of President Obama had seriously disrupted the relationship by announcing the sale of weapons to Taiwan and holding a White House meeting with the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, in a three-week period this year.”*

Item: *“Why Is China Slowing its Military Spending?” asked a headline in Time for March 8. It was an “unexpected surprise,” said the magazine when Beijing announced that its defense budget “would increase by 7.5% for 2010, just over half of last year’s 14.0% rise.”*

Perhaps the “most compelling reason for the slowdown in spending,” said Time, *“is that Chinese officials have become more cautious of the way the development of the People’s Liberation Army is perceived abroad.”*

Correction: Are we to believe that the dictators of more than 1.3 billion people, whose regime has the blood of tens of millions of its own people on its hands, have decided to lie down with the lambs because they are fretting that China’s military displays might offend some sensitive foreigners? Or perhaps the Communist Chinese have just found out that the meek are going to inherit the Earth, and they just want to make sure that they meet the criteria?

If you believe that, you are naïve enough — or deceitful enough — to be employed by a number of major



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Western media outlets.

Virtually all analysts familiar with China's military put little stock in Beijing's declared numbers concerning its defense budget — although even that declared military budget is the second largest in the world — with most estimating its actual expenditures are two or three times as large. "All the evidence suggests," says Ron Huisken, a China defense expert at the Australian National University in Canberra, "that they are on a very powerful trajectory of expansion in substantive terms, and they seem to use this [budget] figure to send signals."

And Communist China is hardly "toothless." The Chinese army has about 1.7 million troops, and has acquired new tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery, and helicopters. Its navy is among the world's largest, having augmented its attack submarine fleet, for example, with dozens of subs since 1995 (the U.S. attack sub force, meanwhile, was virtually cut in half between 1987 and 2009). In addition, China has scores of major surface combatants, some with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, and modern frigates, as well as many scores of coastal patrol craft, fast attack craft and landing ships.

The sub growth has caught the attention of those in China's geographic neighborhood in particular. As noted in the *Naval War College Review*, in a piece by Andrew Erickson and Lyle Goldstein,

In order to grasp the energy that China is now committing to undersea warfare, consider that during 2002-2004 China's navy launched thirteen submarines while simultaneously undertaking the purchase of submarines from Russia on an unprecedented scale. Indeed, China commissioned thirty-one new submarines between 1995 and 2005. Given this rapid evolution, appraisals of China's capability to field competent and lethal diesel submarines in the littorals have slowly changed from ridicule to grudging respect of late. China's potential for complex technological development is finally being taken seriously abroad.

The air force has hundreds of combat aircraft. Some are vintage; others include the newest bombers and fighters. There are also thousands of ballistic missiles on the mainland, of varying ranges — most emplaced on mobile launchers opposite the island of Taiwan — which Beijing claims and continues to threaten to take by force, if necessary.

What China can't develop, it has long been happy to steal. Espionage, on both business and military fronts, is booming. Just a few of China's successful operations were noted not long ago by Bill Gertz in the *Washington Times*: "According to U.S. intelligence officials, data compromised through Chinese spying included the theft of Aegis battle management technology, which is the heart of the U.S. Navy's warships and which already has been copied in at least two Chinese warships. Other losses attributed to Chinese military spies include secrets related to U.S. attack submarines, U.S. bombers and other aircraft and strategic missile and rocket technology."

While China is not in the same league as the United States in space technology, Washington is cutting back and Beijing is moving ahead. There are definitely military implications behind China's "space" effort. The People's Liberation Army, as noted in *Jane's Intelligence Review* for March 2010, "has already been developing and testing space combat capabilities. In 2006, a US Department of Defense source reported that China had used a ground-base laser to dazzle US satellites. On 11 January 2007, the PLA made a successful interception of a FY-IC weather satellite with its SC-19 direct ascent anti-satellite missile."

In November of 2009, a former Chinese army general told the *South China Morning Post*: "The PLA is



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studying two technologies to jam spy satellites: ground-based high-energy laser and electromagnetic wave.... The electromagnetic wave systems have been tested in military exercises but the laser technology is still under development.”

Taiwan is in China’s direct line of fire. Because of that, the U.S. Congress in 1979 made it the law of the land to sell Free China the means to defend itself. While Free China and Communist China are terms hardly used in politically correct conversations in Washington these days, it is still the law that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”

Beijing has gotten particularly up in arms over the idea that the United States would fulfill a longstanding request to an ally as required by law. The possibility that F-16 fighters might finally be sold to Taipei inflames the Communist Chinese government even more. China meanwhile is arming day and night, with a hungry eye on the island of Taiwan.

Even if the sale of F-16s goes through, writes Richard Fisher for the International Assessment and Security Center,

its deterrent effect may be temporary. By the end of the decade the PLAAF [People’s Liberation Army Air Force] may be taking delivery of Chinese-built first 5th-generation fighters expected to outclass the F-16.

The advent of a PLA 5th-generation fighter is but one element of a larger Chinese military buildup which is now challenging the viability of Washington’s policy of calibrated arms sales to Taiwan.... A calibrated approach, such as continuing to sell Taipei even more advanced aircraft, like the 5th-generation Lockheed-Martin F-35, may not be enough to sustain deterrence. Future PLA space warfare capabilities, a growing nuclear arsenal, anti-ship ballistic missiles, increasing numbers of advanced submarines and a growing amphibious invasion capability pose a far greater threat to Taiwan and to the future ability of U.S. forces to provide a sufficient additional deterrent.

There are also dangerous games going on in cyberspace — of much more significance than Google’s disputes with China over censorship. Dennis Blair, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, has warned, “We cannot be certain that our cyberspace infrastructure will remain available during a time of crisis.” Although not well publicized, there are efforts to keep tabs on China’s efforts against such U.S. cyberspace infrastructure.

U.S. security interests are being directly and repeatedly targeted by Beijing. “As a means of enhancing its military modernization and economic development,” reads the latest report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “China has been heavily involved in conducting human and cyber espionage against the United States. U.S. counterintelligence officials have concluded that Chinese intelligence collection efforts are growing in scale, intensity, and sophistication. In addition, there has been a marked increase in cyber intrusions originating in China and targeting U.S. government and defense-related computer systems. This malicious activity has the potential to destroy critical infrastructure, disrupt commerce and banking systems, and compromise sensitive defense and military data.”

Simultaneously, China is growling that it is the United States that is being provocative by defying its commands not to sell weapons to Taiwan. Beijing uses both retired and active-duty military officers to send certain messages, which are decidedly not all hearts and flowers. A new book by People’s Liberation Army Navy Colonel Dai Xu, for example, cautions: “If the U.S. can light a fire in China’s



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backyard, we can also light a fire in their backyard.” He’s not talking about playing with matches.

A report issued by the above security commission goes into detail on some of these efforts. As summarized in the report, “Capability of the People’s Republic of China to Conduct Cyber Warfare and Computer Network Exploitation,” the Communist Chinese government “is a decade into a sweeping military modernization program that has fundamentally transformed its ability to fight high-tech wars. The Chinese military, using increasingly networked forces capable of communicating across service arms and among all echelons of command, is pushing beyond its traditional missions focused on Taiwan and toward a more regional defense posture. This modernization effort, known as informationization, is guided by the doctrine of fighting ‘Local War Under Informationized Conditions,’ which refers to the PLA’s ongoing effort to develop a fully networked architecture capable of coordinating military operations on land, in air, at sea, in space and across the electromagnetic spectrum.”

The focus of this effort by Beijing, continues the report,

is providing the impetus for the development of an advanced IW [information warfare] capability, the stated goal of which is to establish control of an adversary’s information flow and maintain dominance in the battlespace. Increasingly, Chinese military strategists have come to view information dominance as the precursor for overall success in a conflict. The growing importance of IW to China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is also driving it to develop more comprehensive computer network exploitation (CNE) techniques to support strategic intelligence collection objectives and to lay the foundation for success in potential future conflicts.

One of the chief strategies driving the process of informatization in the PLA is the coordinated use of CNO [computer network operations], electronic warfare (EW), and kinetic strikes designed to strike an enemy’s networked information systems, creating “blind spots” ... with an array of increasingly sophisticated jamming systems and anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons.

What was that observation by Sun Tzu, whose sixth century B.C. *Art of War* also caught the attention of Mao Tse-tung? Oh, yes: “All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away.”

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