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China

**Ideas, Perceptions, and Power:
An Examination of China's Military Strategy**

Oriana Skylar Mastro

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explains how a broad base of national power, the prevalence of perceived maritime threats, and national narratives about the “century of humiliation” and Chinese exceptionalism combine to make regional power projection the most attractive national military strategy to Chinese leaders.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China faces a wide range of internal and external challenges, ranging from maintaining domestic stability and sustainable economic growth to asserting its position in the international system and protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity. China has five potential national military strategies to choose from to mitigate these challenges: internal security, external defense/continental power, regional power projection, regional hegemony, and development of a globally relevant military. Official statements, as well as the nature of training, investment, and structural reform of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), suggest that the current strategy is one of regional power projection. China’s national power has not reached the point at which regional hegemony or a global strategy is a realistic option, nor is the country likely to downgrade its ambitions to an internal stability or external defense strategy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- China’s military strategy is likely to remain one of regional power projection, though the contours of the region are expanding beyond East Asia and the South and East China Seas to Central Asia and South Asia.
- Given that China’s march toward regional power projection is unlikely to decelerate, the U.S. must ensure that its presence and posture in Asia, including in South Asia and Central Asia, keep apace.
- Because significant changes in threat perceptions and ideas will precede a move toward regional hegemony or a global strategy, continued attention to the content of authoritative Chinese sources as well as the exercises, activities, training, and procurement of the PLA should be the priority of the U.S. defense community.

Ideas, Perceptions, and Power: An Examination of China's Military Strategy

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China is a country of contradictions. Capitalist and Communist, it is home to some of the world's richest and poorest populations, with domestic politics characterized by nationalism and dissent.¹ The Chinese leadership wants close positive relations with the United States even as it criticizes and challenges U.S. policy; it strives for a professionalized military while also refusing to allow the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to shed its responsibilities as the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).²

Many of these contradictions are the result of attempts to manage and mitigate key strategic problems, both internal and external, as China seeks to achieve great-power status. Domestically, the party's core motivation

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¹ Ronald Coase and Ning Wang, "How China Became Capitalist," Cato Institute, Cato Policy Report, January/February 2013, <https://www.cato.org/policy-report/januaryfebruary-2013/how-china-became-capitalist>; and Gabriel Wildau and Tom Mitchell, "China Income Inequality among World's Worst," *Financial Times*, January 14, 2016.

² On U.S.-China relations, see "Wang Yi tan Zhongmei guanxi: duguo moheqi, zoushang genghao fazhan daolu" [Wang Yi Talks about China-U.S. Relationships: Get on a Path of Better Development after the Transition Period], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), February 7, 2017. On the party's demand for loyalty from the PLA, see "Cong 'sanda guilü' kan 'dang dui jundui juehui lingdao'" ["The Party's Absolute Leadership" in "Three Laws"], *Qiu Shi*, October 17, 2016, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1017/c40531-28785422.html>; and "Xi Jinping shicha haijun jiguan bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [Xi Jinping Visits Navy Authority and Gives Important Speech], *China Military*, May 24, 2017, http://www.81.cn/theory/2017-05/24/content_7616607.htm.

continues to be to stave off the threat of revolution, which at times leads to repression and propaganda, but also in more recent years has heightened the government's responsiveness to public opinion.³ The source of the party's legitimacy has changed over time from ideology (under Mao Zedong) to performance (under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao) to nationalism (under Xi Jinping).⁴ However, the economic reforms that propelled China into the rising power club have created internal disruptions as well. The Chinese people are now demanding not only continued growth but also development that is environmentally sustainable and equitable.⁵ Meanwhile, separatist movements persist in Tibet and Xinjiang, and Taiwan continues to enjoy *de facto* independence and at times threatens *de jure* independence.⁶

In addition to these internal threats, Chinese leaders are facing mounting external pressures as they seek the “rejuvenation” of the nation from the era of colonial subjugation, a key theme of Xi's “China dream.”⁷ To this end, Xi has launched broad sweeping military reforms to ensure that the PLA “push forward preparations for military struggle through insisting on using the criteria of actual combat...to train them [soldiers] for [real] warfare.”⁸ China has also pushed for a new formulation for U.S.-China relations—a new type of major-power relations—that stresses conflict avoidance but also mutual accommodation of core interests.⁹ At the same time, China has become more assertive in its maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas to, from Beijing's perspective, safeguard Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁰

How has China's national military strategy developed to address these internal and external challenges? Additionally, what factors have been essential drivers of continuity and change in China's approach? To answer these questions, this chapter builds on the past two *Strategic Asia* volumes, which examined the foundation of national power and the impact

³ Simon Denyer, “In China, Communist Party Takes Unprecedented Step: It Is Listening,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2013.

⁴ The author would like to thank Rory Truex for this insight.

⁵ Junjie Zhang, “Delivering Environmentally Sustainable Economic Growth: The Case of China,” Asia Society, September 2012.

⁶ Xue Li, “China's Potential Pitfalls #4: Splittist Forces,” *Diplomat*, November 13, 2015.

⁷ “Xi Jinping's Vision: Chasing the Chinese Dream,” *Economist*, May 4, 2013.

⁸ Willy Lam, “Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping Raises the Bar on PLA ‘Combat Readiness,’” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 18, 2013, 3.

⁹ Michael S. Chase, “China's Search for a ‘New Type of Great Power Relationship,’” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, September 7, 2012.

¹⁰ Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Why Chinese Assertiveness Is Here to Stay,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014): 151–70.

of strategic culture, respectively.¹¹ Specifically, it will assess how ideational factors such as strategic culture and structural factors like national power interact to produce a particular military strategy. By providing a comprehensive and detailed overview of the motivations, and therefore objectives, of China's military strategy, this chapter will contribute to an assessment of the future character of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

To achieve this goal, this chapter first reconstructs the military strategies that Chinese leaders theoretically have at their disposal to deal with this wide range of internal and external challenges and demonstrates that China is currently pursuing a military strategy of power projection. It then follows in the tradition of the previous two *Strategic Asia* volumes to devise the structural and ideational factors that have made regional power projection more attractive than the alternatives. Specifically, I argue that the improving technological base and broad financial resources resulting from China's rising national power permitted such a strategy, while threat perceptions and ideational factors combine to make this strategy preferable to one focused purely on internal security or external defense. However, these same three factors—threat perceptions, national military power, and ideas—currently constrain China from moving beyond regional power projection to pursue regional hegemony or a globally relevant military. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for U.S. policy and the conditions under which China's military strategy may change.

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