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Chinese Policy Reactions to Changes in the International Security Environment

Chinese diplomacy has undergone an important evolution over the last decade. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Beijing’s foreign policy began to reflect a more sophisticated, confident, less confrontational, and more proactive approach toward regional and global affairs. These trends are reflected in China’s increased engagement with multilateral and regional security organizations, and Beijing’s growing attention to nontraditional security challenges. These changes are likely to endure over the next several decades.

In recent years and especially after 9/11, some particularly innovative thinking about China’s role in world affairs has emerged. Chinese analysts have argued for the adoption of a “great-power mentality” to replace Beijing’s view of itself as a victim of the international system. In addition, these analysts assert that China needs to more closely associate with the interests of great powers, and that China as a rising power needs to pay attention to its responsibilities as a great power.

China has reacted in numerous specific ways to the recent changes in its international security environment. Beijing has cooperated with the international community in fighting terrorism, combating weapons proliferation, and in stabilizing South Asia. China has led an effort to foster security dialogues with nations in Central and Southeast Asia. In particular, Beijing has increasingly sought opportunities to cooperate with the United States in managing these numerous global security problems. Chinese leaders appear to have decided not to pursue “external balancing” against United States presence in Asia.

China’s Military Priorities

The changes in the international security environment have had a profound impact on the threat perceptions of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and its civilian masters, creating bureaucratic and political support for accelerated military modernization. For the PLA, two of the most important perceived changes were the rise of dominant U.S.

military power, as evidenced in Gulf Wars I & II, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq and the evident desire on the part of the sole remaining superpower to use that military power to pursue a global unilateral agenda.

These changes in PLA perceptions have also significantly shaped the trajectory of its military buildup and rapid acceleration of equipment upgrades and doctrinal revision that had heretofore been relatively gradual. Beginning in the early 1990s and accelerating after 1999, PLA modernization was elevated from a relatively low priority to a core element of national policy.

The goals of this modernization effort are to fill niche capabilities with high-tech acquisitions from Russia while the PLA undergoes massive internal reform in key areas such as education, training, organization, and doctrine. More recently, two decades of wrenching change in the Chinese defense industries have begun to bear fruit, resulting in significant increases in the quality and quantity of production in aviation, aerospace, shipbuilding, ordnance, command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies.

Chinese military modernization efforts are focused on three pillars: developing regional area denial capabilities, building a capability to project and sustain military power into the Asia-Pacific region, and upgrading China's current nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities.

Looking to the future, the pace and robustness of PLA modernization is far from certain, given the monumental challenges faced by the new leadership in fostering continued economic growth, preventing a banking crisis, and maintaining social stability, among other internal challenges. PLA modernization will likely be sustained at current levels, barring any significant downturn in state capacity....

Source: David C. Gompert et al., eds. *China on the Move: A Franco-American Analysis of Emerging Chinese Strategic Policies and their Consequences for Transatlantic Relations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2005.