



Strategic Insight

The PLA and China's Changing Security Environment

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Military relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China have been at the heart of the debate over America's foreign policy in the Pacific, especially since the EP3-Orion incident in April 2001. As China's growing military capability threatens to upset the status quo in Asia, debate among U.S. policy makers is focused on how to engage this emerging power. Advocates of containment believe that isolating the People's Republic and balancing against China's military strength will help diminish the threat it poses to the region. Supporters of engagement, however, argue that using international institutions to open channels of communication can help teach China how to behave in accordance with international norms, and enhance military transparency while reducing uncertainty in the region. Deciding which strategy to employ depends on a myriad of factors that deal with China's recent policies toward regional security institutions, multilateral approaches to conflict resolution, and peacekeeping operations. Have these international institutions and engagement in multilateral initiatives had an effect on China's security preferences in the last decade? Will military-to-military contacts between the United States and China help moderate Chinese behavior and policy?

Issue

As China's integration into international society continues, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has taken the lead on many regional foreign policy initiatives and has realigned its structure to deal with an uncertain security environment. Since the late 1990s, the MFA's role in determining China's foreign policy has increased dramatically. In contrast to its traditional bilateral approach to foreign affairs, the MFA has taken a keen interest in participating in regional security organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the recent Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO), as well as peacekeeping operations. Multilateral approaches to conflict resolution, collective security issues and participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations have become the guiding principles behind MFA policies. These policies have increased Chinese military transparency.

Many scholars have attributed this transformation within the MFA and other government organizations to a process of socialization and acceptance of international norms. But as the MFA continues to grow and evolve, it raises important questions about the future of another government organization in China, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In other words, how will the PLA adapt its policies and policymaking role within the government to fit with China's current security objectives? The MFA's engagement with multilateral organizations suggests that its members have a relatively progressive outlook towards

Chinese foreign policy, an outlook that has taken years to form. It might take even more time for the PLA to adopt new fighting doctrines, integrate new equipment into its force structure and adapt to a strategic environment that is increasingly influenced by international institutions.

Debate

Safeguarding its national sovereignty has been the cornerstone of China's national security policy since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Responsibility for undertaking this national security objective was placed on the shoulders of the PLA. Since 1949, the People's Liberation Army has been committed to action in eight out of the eleven foreign policy crises that have occurred along China's periphery. During each crisis, the PLA was mobilized quickly and dispatched to where it was needed along the frontier. From the Korean War in 1950, to the invasion of Vietnam in 1979, the PLA has faithfully followed the orders of the Chinese Communist Party. During the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, the PLA was used to suppress violently student demonstrators in the streets, leaving countless wounded and dead. Even during the Cultural Revolution, the PLA was called upon to keep the Red Guards from getting out of control and seizing power throughout the country. In times of internal and external crisis, the PLA has always protected the Party and implemented its policies.

If a belligerent and confrontational policy towards border nations was characteristic of China's foreign policy from 1949 to 1989, then how do we explain the recent dramatic change in policies towards neighboring countries? Within the last decade there have been significant changes in the economic objectives of the Communist Party and China's government. There has been a transition to a market economy, an influx of foreign trade, the establishment of economic zones, and entry into the World Trade Organization. Simultaneously, the foreign policy of China has undergone a striking transformation in its approach to its neighbors, emphasizing peaceful relations and preventative diplomacy versus military coercion.

The PLA has undergone significant change within the last decade by adopting an offensive doctrine, a robust modernization program, and a streamlined force structure. Over this same time period the PLA has transformed its military focus from a "continental" defense to a "peripheral" defense of the coastal and maritime regions of China. To some analysts, these changes indicate China's intent to attain regional military domination. Evidence suggests, however, that the evolution of PLA doctrine, and its military modernization program is a result of a changing and uncertain strategic security environment within Asia, rather than from an internal drive for regional hegemony.

As the PLA continues to transform itself into an efficient and modern military organization, it will become aware of international norms and rules that shape international relations. Traditionally, the PLA has avoided extensive foreign military interaction, while the MFA, by contrast, has made great strides in expanding its participation in international regimes and institutions since the early 1970s. Within the last decade the MFA's place among competing Chinese government organizations has been strengthened. It has gained much leverage and influence in guiding China's modern foreign policy. Recent international events such as the EP3-Orion crisis in April of 2001 reflect a growing rift between the PLA and MFA, especially when the lines between foreign policy and national security become blurred. As China becomes more integrated into the international community, PLA officers are beginning to understand the importance of international cooperation and interaction.

As a strong player in China's foreign policy bureaucracy, it is important to understand how the PLA views these recent non-traditional approaches to security, regional security institutions, and peacekeeping operations. Establishing military cooperation in this multilateral environment is a new and bold step for the PLA. It remains to be seen, however, what level this interaction and cooperation will reach. More importantly, encouraging PLA participation in these multilateral organizations will increase military transparency and reduce military uncertainty within the region. PLA officers and military officials should participate in various forums sponsored by international institutions, participate in military-to-military exchanges with foreign governments that concentrate on operational issues, participate in more foreign language training, and increase their participation in peacekeeping operations. Multilateral approaches to

regional issues have offered China a new venue to resolve peacefully many of its traditional border disputes.

Conclusion

The United States should continue to maintain and enhance military relations with the People's Republic of China. There is evidence that the PLA is beginning to adjust its missions and policies to complement many of the MFA's foreign policy initiatives. According to the many published PLA articles that portray multilateral security organizations in a positive light, PLA officials may in fact be in the process of rethinking multilateralism as a source of strength and security for China. This willingness to consider the possibility that participation in multilateral organizations can enhance Chinese security suggests that PLA officials are reconsidering their view towards international norms and that they might be willing to adopt a more flexible approach to cooperative security in Asia. Continued military contact, from low-level academy exchanges to high-level joint military exchange visits, may be the key to encouraging the PLA to continue along this path.

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