

CHINA'S MILITARY POWER: SHADOW OVER CENTRAL ASIA

August 2006



1600 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 900
Arlington, VA 22209

Tel : 703.522.5828 Fax : 703.522.5837

www.lexingtoninstitute.org mail@lexingtoninstitute.org

CHINA'S MILITARY POWER: SHADOW OVER CENTRAL ASIA

Executive Summary

China's growing military power is seen already by many observers as a threat to the balance of power in the western Pacific. What has received less attention is China's efforts to transform its air and ground forces. Yet, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is on a path towards the capability to project power throughout Asia and to deny the United States access to Central Asia. The Chinese military also is investing heavily in capabilities to exploit perceived U.S. military vulnerabilities. The net result could be Beijing's ability to dominate Central Asia.

Along with many other nations, China concluded that the 1991 Gulf War presaged a military technical revolution. The key aspects of this revolution were improvements in mobility and information. The PLA adopted the slogan of a 'revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics' as the shorthand definition of its effort to develop a military that is smaller than before but at the same time more flexible, agile and capable. The Chinese military is investing in a range of new weapons systems including short and medium-range ballistic missiles, advanced strike aircraft, airborne surveillance and even unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The PLA land forces are being restructured to increase their mobility, flexibility and combined arms capability. In addition to its power projection capabilities, the PLA is also investing in capabilities intended to exploit potential vulnerabilities in U.S. forces. The Chinese military is developing the means to hold at risk U.S. C4ISR systems, particularly those in space.

The People's Republic of China also is pursuing a political strategy designed to counter what Beijing views as U.S. encirclement. The centerpiece of this strategy is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It normalizes relations with China's neighbors, functions as a major instrument of its diplomacy and defense policy, and as a forum for coordinating economic issues involving it, Russia, and the Central Asian states. The PLA has conducted joint exercises with other SCO members including, for the first time in 30 years, an exercise with Russian forces in August 2005.

How should the United States respond to China's growing ability to project power into Central Asia and deny the United States access to the region in time of war? There are some investments which would support U.S. power projection anywhere in Asia. These include missile defenses, particularly mobile systems such as Patriot, Aegis, Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and potentially the Kinetic Energy Interceptor. Because of the sensor requirements to support mobile defenses, the Department of Defense needs to invest in the Space Tracking and Surveillance System, a set of satellites that will provide global tracking and discrimination of ballistic missiles and their warheads. Clearly stealth aircraft, both current systems such as the B-2, F-22 and F-35, as well as a future strategic bomber, are critical to countering China's improving air defenses. Long-range UAVs such as the Global Hawk will be vital to U.S. C4ISR capabilities and to ensure against successful attacks on space-based systems. Finally, the U.S. military must also consider what force improvements may be required to support power projection missions in Central Asia. Additional C-17s and modernized tankers will be required to support a substantial deployment into Central Asia.

The initial draft of this paper was written by Dr. Stephen J. Blank.

CHINA'S MILITARY POWER: SHADOW OVER CENTRAL ASIA

Introduction

The focus of United States-Chinese security concerns has long been the Taiwan Straits. However, following the events of September 11, 2001 Beijing's perception of its security environment was fundamentally challenged. In order to prosecute the Global War on Terrorism, U.S. forces were deployed to several nations in Central Asia. Suddenly, China must confront the fact of U.S. power near its western borders.

For China, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, which would have been unthinkable a short time ago, created literally a worst-case security scenario. Considered against the background of growing U.S.-Chinese political and military tensions in East Asia, it was only to be expected that China would attempt to undertake everything possible to reverse or at least mitigate this situation.¹

Since that time, China has steadily rethought its policies and improved its position in the military sphere by pursuing a strategy which combines military and economic-political instruments of power to bring about a fundamental transformation of power relationships in China as well as elsewhere in Asia. Despite their priority of leveraging military power to intimidate or capture Taiwan and deter the U.S. military, Chinese officials cannot afford to and do not ignore Central Asia as a potential theater of military operations. Neither should the United States ignore the possibility of Chinese military operations there.

In order to fulfill this strategic agenda, Chinese military forces, doctrine, strategy, and operational concepts have all undergone systematic transformation and reform as the capabilities and requirements needed to maintain a credible military force in a time of revolutionary change have become ever clearer to the Chinese authorities. These efforts are partly driven by the fact that Chinese leaders and commanders have been greatly impressed with U.S. military operations beginning with Operation Desert Storm. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces that would be tasked with operations in Xinjiang and Central Asia are being transformed, not only to meet the many challenges inherent in those theaters, but also in conjunction with larger strategic considerations pertaining to the transformation of world politics and the so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA). According to the U.S. Department of Defense's annual report, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China*:

The PLA's transformation features new doctrine for modern warfare, reform of military institutions and personnel systems, improved exercise and training standards, and the acquisition of advanced foreign (especially Russian) and domestic weapon systems. Several aspects of China's military development have surprised U.S. analysts, including the pace and scope of its strategic forces modernization. China's military expansion is already such as to alter regional

¹Gennady Chufrin, "The Changing Security Model in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Connections*, II, No. 1, March, 2003, p. 4.

military balances. Long-term trends in China's strategic nuclear forces modernization, land- and sea-based access denial capabilities, and emerging precision-strike weapons have the potential to pose credible threats to modern militaries operating in the region.²

China's policies toward Central Asia, particularly the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), exemplifies the process by which China hopes to build a prosperous neighborhood under its auspices and thus shelter its exploding economic development from both internal and foreign threats. The rise of terrorism before September 11, 2001 had already galvanized China to move to create the SCO. This treaty, an example of collective security, represents an unprecedented innovation in Chinese foreign policy for it is the first time China formally pledged to commit forces beyond its border to the other signatories of the treaty should they request assistance against terrorists and/or separatists.³ China has also conducted extensive maneuvers with Kyrgyzstan in 2002 and 2003 and with all the members of the SCO in 2003 and 2004. In the 2003 maneuvers, the scenario was explicitly described as being an anti-terrorist attack, highlighting the threats that both China and the other members anticipate as being likely to occur in or from Central Asia. Also, for the first time, the Chinese and Russian armies conducted joint exercises in August of 2005, allegedly as an anti-terrorist operation.

The combination of political engagement in the region and military modernization by the PLA is intended to counter what Beijing sees as the effort by the United States to encircle China.⁴ U.S. forces are present in a number of Central Asian republics, and Washington and Japan appear to be drawing ever closer. The U.S. is seeking to forge a new strategic relationship with India, Singapore and the Philippines. America has demonstrated the ability to strike deep into the heart of Asia from great distances and to maintain its presence in that area. The PLA must now look West as well as East as it develops its strategic plans.

China's Forces in Central Asia: The Army and Air Force

The 1991 Gulf War proved a rude awakening for the PLA leadership. In one brief encounter the United States and its coalition partners demonstrated both the inadequacy of traditional (often Soviet-style) approaches to the organization and operation of conventional military forces and the presence of a new model of high-intensity combat based on a revolution in C4ISR. In addition, Chinese military analysts noted how the United States was able to manage the scope of the conflict, restricting the battle space to a single theater. The result, in their view, was the creation of a new mode of conflict – so-called “high-tech regional wars.”

When the Cold War ended, high-tech regional wars became an important

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress, 2006, p. 1.

³ “‘Shanghai Five’ Change Turns China in a New Strategic Direction,” *Kyodo*, June 18, 2001, retrieved from Lexis-Nexis; Robert A. Karniol, “Shanghai Five in Major Revamp,” *Jane's Defence Weekly*, June 27, 2001, p. 5; Bates Gill, “Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter US Influence in Asia?” *Newsweek Korea*, May, 2001, available at www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/gill20010504.htm.

⁴ Willy Lam, “Beijing's Alarm Over New ‘US Encirclement Conspiracy’”, *Jamestown China Brief*, V, No. 8, April 12, 2005.

phenomenon. In recent years, the technology used in regional wars has increased. The military strategy focus of the great powers is on long-range deployment and unified systems of “air, ground, and navy forces.” To realize the goal, the armed forces must turn their “mechanization” into “information.” The United States has, in order to realize this great goal, reduced its troop size and defense budget. It has concentrated on high technology in regional wars, on building “digital troops,” “digital battle fields,” and “digital war,” which has become the key goal of the U.S. military. “To make full use of experimental technology” has become a keynote in American force development.⁵

Chinese military research institutes have analyzed each of America’s conflicts since 1991 in great detail and recognized that the United States had developed a capability for extended power projection. The combination of space and airborne surveillance, heavy-lift aircraft and airborne refueling capabilities, long-range bombers and cruise missiles, and long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), provided the U.S. with the ability to project and sustain military power into any region of the world. Moreover, the United States had demonstrated the ability to conduct joint operations with a degree of coherence and precision unmatched by any military in the world.

These same analyses were also intended to identify potential vulnerabilities in U.S. capabilities, operations and organization that could be exploited by the PLA. According to one analyst:

... it is evident that a primary objective of the PLA is to exploit perceived U.S. vulnerabilities. Among those identified are U.S. reliance on space systems for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control, and dependence on foreign-hosted bases and aircraft carrier battle groups for sustained force projection to the West Pacific. China’s progress in long-range precision strike munitions, space-based ISR, anti-satellite capabilities, information warfare, improved surface naval combatants and submarines, and air power are all applicable to PLA operations designed to attack such vulnerabilities.⁶

U.S. Army specialists on China have observed numerous changes in the PLA that are intended to improve its ability to conduct missions anywhere along that nation’s borders, including in Xinjiang or Central Asia. What these changes suggest is that the PLA “has significantly advanced its near-periphery power projection capability.”⁷ China has also developed rapid reaction forces (RRF) and what it calls Resolving Emerging Mobile Combat Forces (REMCF).

⁵ Gao Heng, “Future Military Trends,” in Michael Pillsbury, ed., *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, National Defense University, 1998.

⁶ Paul H.B. Godwin, “The PLA’s Leap into the 21st Century: Implications for the U.S.,” *China Brief*, Volume 4, Issue 9, April 29, 2004, The Jamestown Foundation.

⁷ Colonel Russell D. Howard (USA) and Colonel Albert S. Willner (USA), “China’s Rise and the US Army: Leaning Forward,” in Susan F. Bryant, Colonel Russell D. Howard (USA), Colonel Jay M. Parker (USA), and Colonel Albert S. Willner (USA), *Northeast Asia Regional Security and the United States Military: Context, Presence, and Roles*, Institute for National Security Studies, US Air Force Academy, Boulder, Colorado: Occasional paper No. 47, 2002, pp. 102, 116-117.

During the past decade, China has placed increased emphasis on RRF training, including an expanded capability to attack mountain regions with combined forces as well as a continued emphasis on the ability to conduct amphibious landings. The development of the RRFs has been linked to ensuring the ability to respond to internal and external threats in Tibet, Xinjiang, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. The REMCF, believed to consist of an infantry division in each of China's seven military regions controlled by authorities in Beijing, is designed to meet a host of potential problems. These include border defense, internal flare-ups, and certain disaster relief requirements, all aimed at reestablishing central government control quickly and effectively. --- [Likewise] Since 1995 the PLA has increased the complexity of its exercises by adding long-range and intra-regional rapid deployments into exercise scenarios. For example, rapid reaction force (RRF) units in different military regions (MRs) have conducted long-range and mobile combined exercises in challenging topographical locations such as the Gobi Desert, the Tibetan and Xinjiang highlands, and China's southwestern tropical forests.⁸

As of 2003-04 China was training 40 so-called RRF units which could operate independently or in joint operations – 20 of those units had already been commissioned or redesignated in different regions and units of the PLA. These RRFs will be developed in each of the seven military regions, in each of the 21 Group Armies and the PLA's Service Arms.⁹ And as the number of these regions is subject to change, presumably downward, the concentration of these forces will probably increase.

Many PLA units are receiving training in night operations, joint-force landings, amphibious operations, and exercises in difficult climatic and topographical conditions, like those of Central Asia. There also have been anti-chemical and anti-information warfare and electronic warfare training drills – another sign of the fact that the PLA's modernization efforts focus on conducting joint, informatized, as well as mechanized, and unrelenting offensive operations, even in a context of being on a strategic defensive. These operations will be limited within a context of regional war, but over time the PLA will gain even more capability to conduct power projection operations beyond China's borders. All of these smaller, more flexible RRF forces now have armor and all armored units have mechanized infantry. Accordingly, within a decade one-third of the PLA's ground forces will “be organized and equipped to conduct fully integrated and combined-arms operations.”¹⁰ Within the PLA the high priority units will comprise the smaller, more joint, and mobile forces who possess more technologically advanced weapons and will be duly tasked with conducting rapid power projection operations and be expandable to the size of a combined arms army. They will be able to mobilize infantry, armor, combat engineers, and artillery, not to mention airpower and airborne units. And if China can realize the guidance outlined in its 2004 White Paper, these forces will also possess much more information technology and advanced weaponry.

⁸ Srikanth Kondapalli, “The People's Liberation Army Modernization: An Assessment,” Japan Institute of International Affairs, International Workshop: *External Strategy of the New Chinese Leadership*, Tokyo, February 9-10, 2004, p. 73.

⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Chinese Military Power*, 2003, pp. 24-28, available at www.cfr.org; David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 103-104, 157-158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41-42.

Although the precise capabilities of China's Special Operations Forces (SOF) remain unclear, their training and quality has improved and they will be tasked with important reconnaissance or even direct military operations if necessary (as suggested in both current and past wars in Central Asia and Afghanistan). Beijing is also establishing a new airborne power projection capability. This group of three divisions is apparently to be based in Zhejiang Province, the closest province to Taiwan. It certainly could be used elsewhere within hours if necessary. These forces will be integrated into the overall joint force concept of the PLA Air Force and are being upgraded for power projection operations. The 15th Airborne Army's designation has been elevated to branch status, and its brigades have been upgraded to divisions. It has also received the first Russian IL-76 transport aircraft and is seeking an IL-78 Midas Tanker aircraft for purposes of air-to-air refueling and practiced island landings. Those aircraft are estimated to provide an airlift capacity of 5-7,000 airborne troops.

The PLA has adopted the slogan of a 'revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics' as the shorthand definition of its effort to develop a military that is smaller than before but at the same time more flexible, agile and capable.¹¹ In principle, this involves the addition of mechanization/mobility capabilities and information systems to a selected set of PLA ground capabilities.

The emphasis here is on the development of rapid reaction units (RRU) which will account for 10-15% of the PLA's strength. The War-zone Campaign requires mobility, which remains a PLA weakness, but steps are being taken to address this. One of these is the loosening of the existing Military Region structure, with the best units from each region being made available for transregional support operations and falling under the military commander of the war zone rather than the regional command. In order to generate this degree of mobility there is a process of adjustment of the basic unit size within the PLA. Some RRU's are divisional in scale but increasingly they are brigade (around 6000) or even battalion size. The aim is to give such units organic self-sufficiency in all the arms they need.¹²

Unconfirmed information provides hints of the make-up of these independent brigades: four tank battalions with 31 tanks each, one mechanized rifle battalion with 40 armored personnel carriers, an artillery battalion with 18 self-propelled guns, and one anti-aircraft battalion, also with 18 self-propelled guns. There also are specialized artillery and anti-air RRU (or RRF) brigades. Another integral part of these reforms is the previously mentioned Airborne Corps, which would be used for disruptive deep strikes. Even if there are still limitations on China's ability to deploy these forces by air, clearly steps are underway to overcome them. These changes fully accord with China's White Paper on Defense of 2002, which explicitly stated the importance of preparing Chinese forces for operations involving new forms of warfare and in

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Dennis Blasko, "Chinese Army Modernization: An Overview," *Military Review*, September-October 2005, p. 71.

¹² John Hill, "China's Military Modernization Takes Shape," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February, 2004, available at www4.janes.com/subscribe/iir/doc.

atypical physical environments, a fact confirmed by Chinese literature on exercises dating back to 2001 and the evidence of the SCO exercises in 2003.¹³

The PLA is restructuring its conventional forces to provide increased flexibility, mobility and deployability. In many ways, the PLA ground force model is similar to that being pursued by the U.S. Army in its modularity program. As one observer points out, “in practice, the PLA is developing an elite core of more modern units to give it the flexibility and experience to act in a range of more likely circumstances.”¹⁴ Much like the U.S. Army, the PLA sees the future as one in which ground forces, particularly special formations, will be projected into contested areas to defeat anti-access strategies and create the potential for full spectrum operations by conventional land, sea and air forces.

PLA Amphibious, Airborne and Special Forces strike capabilities alone may comprise over 80,000 troops. Their mission, of course, would be to secure access for hundreds of thousands of follow on forces in any amphibious operation. The PLA has taken to heart the hard-learned U.S. lesson of the Persian Gulf and the Balkans: airpower can only win wars or compel adversaries if backed by the use of or the credible threat of ground invasion. Expected improvements in sealift and airlift capabilities, along with the increasing mechanization of Airborne and Army and Marine amphibious units will increase the reach and effectiveness of these forces. By the end of the decade, PLA forces may be capable of capturing ports and airfields in neighboring states, from the sea, conceivably leading to a victorious campaign on land.¹⁵

PLA units based in Western China have been active participants in the energetic and sweeping Chinese military modernization now underway.

Military infrastructure in China’s western provinces has been vastly improved, featuring the building of --- “broad and smooth patrol roads stretching to the sky,” a series of new airports, and thousands of kilometers of fiber optic cables. Military units have been largely mechanized and also made air-mobile. These units, moreover, receive special instruction in desert and mountain warfare, and are making efforts to train in the most challenging climatic conditions. Air defense in the western region is also being upgraded. Finally, military exercises are more realistic and increasingly innovative, such as the cross-country transit exercise of one of Beijing’s new rapid reaction units, or the air-dropping of fuel to vehicles in remote locations.¹⁶

And these upgrades do not include the comprehensive reform of the entire logistical system or the exercises conducted with Central Asian militaries in 2003.

¹³ Lyle Goldstein, “China in the New Central Asia: The Fen (RMB) is Mightier than the Sword,” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, XXIX, No. 1, Winter, 2005, p. 29.

¹⁴ John Hill, “China’s Military Modernization Takes Shape,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, February, 2004, available at www4.janes.com/subscribe/iir/doc.

¹⁵ “Top Ten Chinese Military Modernization Developments,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, March 23, 2005, available at www.strategycenter.net.

¹⁶ Timothy Hu, “Country Briefing: China: Ready, Steady, Go,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, April 13, 2005, available at www4.janes.com/subscribe/jdw/doc.

The enhancements to the PLA ground forces have been matched and even exceeded by investments to upgrade China's Air Force (PLAAF). China has learned from recent wars of the importance of joint multiservice exercises and operations combining air and ground forces (and naval ones in theaters like Taiwan) and is promoting "integrated joint operations" along those lines. The increasing reliance on these operations directed from the top and which are now being held all across China shows that Chinese leaders seriously intend to achieve Western standards of joint operations over time. This commitment also underscores the growing role of the PLAAF, which is one of the priority directions of Chinese defense spending in their most recent White Paper, along with the PLAN (naval forces) and the Second Artillery (nuclear forces). While those priorities underscore the centrality of the Taiwan mission in Chinese military planning, the capabilities developed there could, in many cases, be adapted for use in and around Central Asia if necessary.

Thus new programs, weapons, and operational concepts may enable the PLAAF to play a major role alongside of the Army in the event of a military contingency in either Xinjiang or Central Asia. Its leadership now embraces the idea of joint and offensive operations against enemy forces, not just the traditional defense of China's frontiers that used to dominate its thinking. Already in 1997 the commander in chief of the PLAAF, Liu Sumayo stated that:

We shall focus our efforts on applying new sophisticated technology to raise combat effectiveness of the troops while importing some high-tech weapons which have accuracy in hitting the target --- Over the next few years, the Chinese Air Force will enhance its deterrent force in the air, ability to impose air blockades and launch air strikes as well as its ability to conduct joint operations of ground forces, navy, and the air force.¹⁷

While the PLAAF is undoubtedly behind the U.S. Air Force in quality, it is rapidly being effectively augmented by both Russian acquisitions and the momentum of China's indigenous development. Although he was thinking of operations against India, Indian Air Commodore Ramesh Phadke's observations of 2002 could also apply to wars in Central Asia, either against terrorists or U.S. and allied forces there:

In the case of local border wars airpower will be the preferred tool. This is because it is usually time-consuming and expensive to move and deploy large ground formations. Distance from the border and terrain can further add to these difficulties. In a possible future war between China and India involving mountainous terrain and the need to commit huge forces to ensure a favorable outcome, airpower would likely become the most attractive option even when the overall political objectives are limited. For airpower to be effective against the full spectrum of threats the air force would have to possess some armed/attack helicopters, but these are unlikely to be effective in high-altitude mountainous border terrain. While the armed helicopter will remain the preferred instrument for attacks against specific targets, long-range precision strike aircraft, cruise missiles, and SRBM'S (Short Range Ballistic Missiles)

¹⁷ *Chinese Military Power*, pp. 27-28; and Timothy Hu, "Ready, Steady, Go."

would be needed in a conventional border war. It must be noted that as of now no helicopter in the world is designed for the delivery of weapons such as rockets, bombs, and anti-tank missiles at high altitudes, hence helicopters are more vulnerable to ground fire and quick reaction missiles of the Stinger variety. It would thus become evident that the combat elements of the PLAAF would have to play a major role in such a border conflict. Employment of cruise missiles or SRBM'S would, however require very careful consideration, especially when the adversary possesses nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding these limitations, China might rely on manned aircraft of the J-8 II and Su-27/30 types for offensive action supported by cruise and short-range missiles.¹⁸

Some observers have argued that China's military modernization over the past two decades reflects the natural tendency of a nation with growing regional interests and influence to develop compatible military capabilities. However, the breadth and depth of the PLA's modernization efforts far exceed what is necessitated by the post-Cold War environment, with its reduced threats to China's security.

At the end of the Cold War, China entered a period unique in its modern history in that it does not face a direct threat from another nation. Yet, it continues to invest heavily in its military, particularly in programs designed to improve power projection. The pace and scope of China's military build-up already place regional military balances at risk. Current trends in China's military modernization could provide China with a force capable of prosecuting a range of military operations in Asia – well beyond Taiwan – potentially posing a credible threat to modern militaries operating in the region.¹⁹

Military Policy in Xinjiang

In Xinjiang too we see a distinctive policy involving the military, as well as other arms of the regime in a policy that bears a striking resemblance to other imperial and earlier Chinese colonialist programs. Since September 11, China's severe repression of unrest in Xinjiang has, if anything, become even more draconian, but possibly more ineffectual. Certainly this owes something to the fact that Beijing prevailed upon Washington to declare the East Turkestan Independence Movement a terrorist one, thus allowing Beijing to crack down even harder upon it or other similar groups. Likewise, Beijing has used the forces described above for internal counter-insurgency and to suppress uprisings as well as to reshape them for possible operations abroad.

Beijing readily labels all forms of local unrest as expressions of Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism, even though this unrest goes back at least 20 years and is as much nationalistic as it is anything else. While this is self-serving it also attests to the Chinese leadership's continuing sense of being under siege, i.e. its paranoia about the unity of the state. While the authorities label such unrest as criminal activity, they actually follow the precepts of

¹⁸ Air Commodore Ramesh V. Phadke, "People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF): Shifting Airpower Balance and Challenges to India's Security," Working Paper, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, 2002, p. 14.

¹⁹ Department of Defense Annual Report, p. 15.

the 2002 White Paper on Defense that listed a top domestic priority as being “to stop armed subversion and safeguard social stability.” This outlook lets Beijing conflate terrorism with separatism as it also does regarding the SCO. Thus Liu Yaohua, Deputy Director of Public Security in Xinjiang, charges that for Uighurs who advocate independence, “ethnic separatism is their goal, religious extremism is their garb, and terrorist acts are their means.”²⁰

Chinese foreign policy has also been enlisted in this task of labeling any and all manifestations of opposition as being terrorist conspiracies. China has used its superior power vis-a-vis neighboring Central Asian regimes, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to persuade Central Asian governments to repress Uighur nationalists in those countries, send back several suspects to China, and maintain official silence about events transpiring in Xinjiang, if they wish to have friendly relations with China. It may also have even gained the right of “hot pursuit” of guerrillas working for Xinjiang’s independence or autonomy. Thus, China’s overall interests in Central Asia are clearly tied to Xinjiang’s internal developments. Indeed, it can easily be said that China’s policies there represent an outward projection of its own fears for its internal security.

The linkages between Central Asia and Xinjiang are evident to the Chinese establishment. As a Chinese analyst told journalist Willem Van Kemenade, if Central Asia disintegrates, the chaos will reach Xinjiang. On the other hand, he observed that if those countries stabilize and succeed, that will invariably stimulate deeper drives for self-rule in Xinjiang.²¹ In other words, whatever Beijing does or whatever happens in Central Asia, unrest in Xinjiang will continue. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars explicitly articulate the connection between Xinjiang and Central Asia, arguing that China’s policy to expand economic cooperation with Central Asia is undertaken, to a large extent, because the stability and prosperity of Northwest China is closely tied to that of Central Asia.²²

Because Xinjiang, like Taiwan, is a border province which has historically been the scene of numerous struggles and wars over territory, the question of Xinjiang’s future course goes to the most basic issues of what constitutes the Chinese state both territorially and politically, i.e. what will be its territorial boundaries and how political power in that state will be constituted. Given the enduring sense of the Chinese state’s intrinsic fragility, any sign of movement towards real democracy or federalism in Xinjiang, as in the case of Taiwan or Tibet, are excluded a priori. In fact, any demand for democracy or even for a devolution of powers appears to be a threat to China’s integrity, sovereignty and security. This rejection of democratic reforms is tied to the deeply held view of sovereignty because any derogation of the latter in the name of the former is considered to be an invitation to disorder, chaos, and weakness. Needless to say, this is a classically imperial view of the state, but also one that reflects a sense of being perpetually embattled by such potential or actual threats. In other words, the security of Xinjiang, like Tibet and Taiwan, is a neuralgic issue that, when raised, brings out what scholars discern as Beijing’s siege mentality or paranoia about foreign intervention.

²⁰ Andrew Scobell, “Terrorism and Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang, eds., pp. 305-311.

²¹ Willem Van Kemenade, *China, Hong Kong, Taiwan Inc.: The Dynamics of a New Empire*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, p. 345.

²² Guancheng Xing, “China and Central Asia: Towards a New Relationship,” p. 35.

But as the Xinjiang issue has been internationalized, China has had to respond to charges of its repression by publishing a White Paper on Xinjiang in 2003 which is a comprehensive effort to justify Beijing's imperial rule there and answer its critics. But in fact it only confirms the validity or legitimacy of internationalization of the problem and with unconscious irony, overtly spells out the continuing imperial tradition in Chinese statecraft towards Xinjiang. Moreover, it lays out in explicit fashion the military-colonialist program, which combines the regular armed forces with specialized units of military colonists and military control of much of the local economy. Thus it states that:

China has a centuries-old tradition of developing and protecting its border areas by stationing troops to cultivate and guard the frontier areas. According to historical records, all the dynasties in Chinese history adopted the practice of stationing troops to cultivate and guard the frontier areas as an important state policy for developing border areas and consolidating frontier defense. The beginning of this practice by the central authorities on a massive scale in Xinjiang can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty, to be subsequently carried on from generation to generation. This policy had played an important part in uniting the nation, consolidating frontier defense, and promoting social and economic development in Xinjiang.²³

However, the agency responsible for such consolidation, the Bingtuan -- or the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) -- is in fact a major factor, if not the main force in the regional Gulag in Xinjiang. The White Paper states that:

As an important force for stability in Xinjiang and for consolidating frontier defense, the XPCC and the ordinary people are attaching equal importance to production and militia duties. It has set up in frontier areas a 'four-in-one' system of joint defense that links the PLA, the Armed Police, the XPCC, and the ordinary people, playing an irreplaceable special role in the past five decades in smashing and resisting internal and external separatists' attempts at sabotage and infiltration and in maintaining the stability and safety of the borders of the motherland.²⁴

No matter what policies China adopts, it is likely to face continuing and long-term unrest, including violent, even terrorist operations, in Xinjiang and even in Beijing itself. While this problem has not reached the level seen in other such wars like Kashmir or Palestine, it is real enough and growing. Worse, Chinese experts concede that there is no way out. Besides the challenge of sustaining economic development, meeting the calls for domestic reform, and of dealing with Taiwan and North Korea, Xinjiang can be added to the list of major challenges that already confront the Chinese government and which will make its future a decidedly interesting one. In the case of Xinjiang, the regime has evidently already admitted that it has no answer to the problem. This posture will, if anything, make whatever resolution of

²³ Government of the People's Republic of China, *History and Development of Xinjiang*, May 26, 2003, available at http://service.china.org.cn/link/wem/Show_Text?info_od=65428&p_qry=xinjiang.

²⁴ Ibid.

Xinjiang's future that does take place even more interesting than the outcome of these other major challenges to China's stability and future.

Moreover, if there is no answer other than reform to the problems caused by the insurgency in Xinjiang, how can China reliably hope to suppress for good the unrest in Central Asia that assumes military forms and carries over to Xinjiang or other countries in Central Asia and the SCO? Despite China's undoubted gains in Central Asia and enhanced military capabilities there, a cloud remains over these policies' ultimate effectiveness. While it is clear that military programs underway clearly recognize that it may be necessary to use force in Central Asia, that question cannot be answered until the Chinese government comes to terms with the need for greater democracy in China. And given the crackdown on Hong Kong and continuing threats to Taiwan, that outcome is not likely anytime soon. So while China has developed an energy and economic strategy for Xinjiang and Central Asia, its overall security strategy is still untested and its overall policy in Central Asia is very much colored by its problems with Xinjiang. Since it appears that those problems cannot be satisfactorily answered under the status quo, the overall security policy may also be unable to produce resolution of China's problems. But in the military sphere at least, that potential failure will not be due to a lack of effort to devise suitable instruments to meet the threats in this region that will not go away.

China's Forces in Central Asia: From Xinjiang to the SCO

The SCO unites almost all the strands of Chinese policy in and towards Central Asia. It normalizes relations with China's neighbors, functions as a major instrument of its diplomacy, defense policy, and as a forum for coordinating economic issues involving it, Russia, and the Central Asian states. China has also long argued that the SCO represents a model for interstate relations in Asia, in distinction from the U.S. alliance system. Thus, it serves as a model for China's larger foreign policy goals in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. The SCO originated in the treaty negotiations over Soviet-Chinese borders that became multilateralized when the USSR collapsed. As Sino-American rivalry intensified in the late 1990s, Beijing increasingly depicted it as a model for collective security in Asia vs. the American alliance system with Japan, South Korea, etc.

The SCO condemned U.S. efforts to build missile defenses and the intervention in Kosovo without United Nations approval. SCO communiqués increasingly emphasize the virtues of untrammelled sovereignty, while also criticizing "hegemonic" tendencies to bypass the United Nations and denigrate the sovereignty of the state or to cite human rights violations in member states.²⁵ This trend represented Moscow's and Beijing's broader program to circumscribe U.S. power in Asia and globally, by creating organizations and either bilateral or multilateral linkages and networks based on shared principles that were inimical to American policy. Arguably, this remains a fundamental goal of Chinese foreign policy even if it is now pursued much more quietly. Its founding communiqué and pact of June, 2001 referred to joint military exercises which would introduce Chinese troops to foreign exercises for the first time in its history and beyond that, the collective security element commits Beijing to the defense of the

²⁵ Stephen Blank, "Towards Alliance?: The Strategic Implications of Russo-Chinese Relations," *National Security Studies Quarterly*, VII, No. 3, Summer, 2001, pp. 1-30.

other signatories from such attacks and them to defend China.²⁶ The key development here was other states' approval of the expansion of China's capability to project power abroad.

Thus, even before September 11, but certainly since then, the SCO has become an all-purpose foreign policy meeting with communiqués on all matters of issues unrelated to Central Asia and Beijing's continuing drive to institutionalize it and make it a truly effective player and model for others. Since 2002 it has set up mechanisms for regular consultations of all members' ministers of foreign affairs and defense, a Secretariat in Beijing and a Regional Anti-Terrorism Secretariat (RATS) to coordinate the members' joint activities against terrorism. The SCO is also organizing annual exercises involving all the members, even as they also can organize exercises among themselves. Thus, in 2003 all the members took part in extensive anti-terrorism exercises in both China and Central Asia while in 2002 the Chinese military exercised with the Kyrgyz armed forces.

In August 2005, Russia and China conducted their first joint exercise in more than 40 years. Although billed as an anti-terrorism exercise, it had all the hallmarks of a combined arms defense against a powerful conventionally-armed adversary. There is little doubt that this exercise was intended to send a message that both countries would engage in military cooperation to counter the perception – possibly even the reality – of U.S. military involvement on the Asian mainland.²⁷ One Chinese analyst went so far as to suggest that in the event of a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, Russian forces might be able to tie down other U.S. forces and prevent their entry into the main conflict.²⁸

Although the Chinese government, many Chinese analysts, and even some Russian analysts extol the successes of the SCO, it nevertheless evidently remains “a talking shop,” albeit a useful one. American officials even state that they have had no reason to take it seriously as a mechanism for consultation in their work. While torn by dissension underneath the surface of its outward consensus, it provides a stable mechanism for regular consultations among members. It also provides a forum for coordination with Russia. Certainly it proved to be unable to do anything for or about the tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March, 2005, a fact that clearly disturbed China. Perhaps that is why China has now appeared to embrace the long-held Russian idea of a strategic triangle with India, probably with direct reference to coordination in Central Asia. Nevertheless, as it remains little more than an organization looking for a mission, it is unlikely that the SCO will become an effective alternative rather than a complement to China's ever deeper relations with individual states, particularly as it seeks greater economic penetration and energy access in those states.

²⁶ Bates Gill, “Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter US Influence in Asia?”

²⁷ Dr. Marcel de Haas, *Russian-Chinese Military Exercises and Their Wider Perspective: Power Play in Central Asia*, Conflict Studies Research Center, October 2005, pp. 1-17.

²⁸ Zhou Liang, “Deep-seated Strategic Considerations Behind the China-Russia Joint Exercises,” *New Beijing Post* (Beijing), June 26, 2005.

Meeting the Chinese Challenge in Central Asia

America's attention has been focused, almost exclusively, on the growth of China's military power in the Western Pacific. Without much notice, China has been improving the military infrastructure in its Western provinces and restructuring its Army and Air Force for high technology major combat operations. These changes reflect, in part, their growing interest in the ability to project power into contiguous land areas, particularly Central Asia. It also is an acknowledgement of the growing strategic importance of Central Asia, both as a source of resources and as a base from which power can be projected, either westward in defense of China's interests or eastward against it.

China's concerns about its western flank are also a reflection of its growing awareness of U.S. power projection capabilities. Where once the PLA had only to concern itself with defending the eastern approaches to the mainland, now it must cast an uneasy glance westward. The PLA recognizes that China must contend with the global reach of U.S. land and air power.

The PLA is investing in both transformational offensive and defensive capabilities. Offensively, the PLA is pursuing capabilities that would allow it to engage the U.S. military as, in effect, a regional peer. These capabilities include advanced ISR, both manned and unmanned, long-range precision strike munitions, more mobile ground formations, enhanced communications, and expanded logistics. The PLA's heavy investment in short- and theater-range ballistic missiles suggests that one aspect of its strategy to counter U.S. power projection capabilities is to use long-range fires to attack forward operating bases and supply lines. The PLA is also concerned about the potential impact on its forces of U.S. air and theater missile defense systems such as the Patriot, Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System and the Theater High-Altitude Area Defense. In response, they are researching a variety of countermeasures, including maneuvering warheads, decoys and hypersonic missiles.

Defensively, the PLA program is intended to exploit critical vulnerabilities in U.S. systems, capabilities and ways of operating. Like the U.S. military, the PLA recognizes that information and networks are the keys to future high-intensity combat. Therefore, one objective of the PLA modernization program is to develop means for taking down U.S. C4ISR capabilities. American intelligence has identified a number of different programs China is pursuing to degrade U.S. C4ISR. Foremost among these is expanded and improved air defenses. Another program is to counter U.S. space-based ISR and communications by means of anti-satellite weapons and jamming devices. Because they recognize the value of U.S. precision strike capabilities, countering GPS is a high priority for the PLA.

How should the United States respond to China's growing ability to project power into Central Asia and deny the U.S. access to the region in time of war? American force planners, particularly in the Navy, have focused on the capabilities needed to counter the PLA's modernization efforts as they impact the balance of military power in the Western Pacific. There are some investments which would support U.S. power projection anywhere in Asia. These include missile defenses, particularly mobile systems such as Patriot, Aegis, THAAD and potentially the Kinetic Energy Interceptor. Because of the sensor requirements to support mobile defenses, the Department of Defense needs to invest in the Space Tracking and Surveillance System, a set of satellites that will provide global tracking and discrimination of

ballistic missiles and their warheads. Clearly stealth aircraft, both existing systems such as the B-2, F-22 and F-35, as well as a future strategic bomber, are critical to countering China's improving air defenses. Long-range unmanned aerial vehicles such as the Global Hawk or a new stealthy, long-endurance UAV will be vital to U.S. C4ISR capabilities.

Finally, the U.S. must also consider what force improvements may be required to support possible future power projection missions in Central Asia. One such improvement would be the addition of more C-17s and modernized tankers to the Air Force's transport and tanker fleet, which is already stretched thin. This would enable the fleet to meet a range of commitments; including the possibility of a larger deployment of U.S. forces to Central Asia.