

# Revving Up the China Threat: New Stage in US China Policy

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By Michael T. Klare

Ever since taking office, the Bush Administration has struggled to define its stance on the most critical long-term strategic issue facing the United States: whether to view China as a future military adversary, and plan accordingly, or to see it as a rival player in the global capitalist system. Representatives of both perspectives are nestled in top Administration circles, and there have been periodic swings of the pendulum toward one side or the other. But after a four-year period in which neither outlook appeared dominant, the pendulum has now swung conspicuously toward the anti-Chinese, prepare-for-war position. Three events signal this altered stance.

The first, on February 19, was the adoption of an official declaration calling for enhanced security ties between the United States and Japan. Known officially as the "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee," the declaration was announced at a meeting of top Japanese and US officials, including Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Rice. The very fact that US and Japanese officials were discussing improved security links was deeply troubling to the Chinese, given the continued salience of Japanese World War II militarism in the sixtieth anniversary year of Japan's surrender, and their ongoing anxiety about US plans to construct an anti-Chinese alliance in Asia. But what most angered Beijing was the

declaration's call for linked US-Japanese efforts to "encourage the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue." While sounding relatively innocuous to American ears, this announcement was viewed in Beijing as highly provocative, an example of illicit interference by Washington and Tokyo in China's internal affairs. The official New China News Agency described the joint declaration as "unprecedented" and quoted a senior foreign ministry official as saying that China "resolutely opposes the United States and Japan in issuing any bilateral document concerning China's Taiwan, which meddles in the internal affairs of China and hurts China's sovereignty."

The second key event was a speech Rumsfeld gave June 4 at a strategy conference in Singapore. After reviewing current security issues in Asia, especially the threat posed by a nuclear North Korea, Rumsfeld turned his attention to China. The Chinese can play a constructive role in addressing these issues, he observed. "A candid discussion of China...cannot neglect to mention areas of concern to the region." In particular, China "appears to be expanding its missile forces, allowing them to reach targets in many areas of the world," and is otherwise "improving its ability to project power" in the region. Then, with consummate disingenuousness, he stated, "Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment? Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?"

To Beijing, these comments must have been astonishing. No one threatens China? What

about the US planes and warships that constantly hover off the Chinese coast, and the nuclear-armed US missiles aimed at China? What about the delivery over the past ten years of ever more potent US weapons to Taiwan? What about the US bases that encircle China on all sides? But disingenuousness aside, Rumsfeld's comments exhibited a greater degree of belligerence toward China than had been expressed in any official US statements since 9/11, and were widely portrayed as such in the American and Asian press.

The third notable event was the release, in July, of the Pentagon's report on Chinese combat capabilities, *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China*. According to press reports, publication of this unclassified document was delayed for several weeks in order to remove or soften some of the more pointedly anti-Chinese comments, to avoid further provoking China before George W. Bush's November visit there. In many ways the published version is judicious in tone, stressing the weaknesses as well as the strengths of China's military establishment. Nevertheless, the main thrust of the report is that China is expanding its capacity to fight wars beyond its own territory and that this constitutes a dangerous challenge to global order. "The pace and scope of China's military build-up are, already, such as to put regional military balances at risk," the report states. "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."

This annual report, mandated by Congress in 2000, is intended as a comprehensive analysis, not a policy document. However, the policy implications of the 2005 report are self-evident: If China is acquiring a greater capacity to threaten "modern militaries operating in the region"--presumably including those of the United States and Japan--then urgent action is

needed to offset Chinese military initiatives. For this very reason the document triggered a firestorm of criticism in China. "This report ignores fact in order to do everything it can to disseminate the 'China threat theory,'" a senior foreign ministry official told the American ambassador at a hastily arranged meeting. "It crudely interferes in China's internal affairs and is a provocation against China's relations with other countries."

While much of this was going on, the American public and mass media were preoccupied with another source of tension between the United States and China: the attempted purchase of the California-based Unocal Corporation by the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). This attempt received far greater attention in the media than did the events described above, yet it will have a far less significant impact on US-Chinese relations than will the Pentagon's shift to a more belligerent, anti-Chinese stance--one that greatly increases the likelihood of a debilitating and dangerous military competition between the United States and China.

What lies behind this momentous shift? At its root is the continuing influence of conservative strategists who have long championed a policy of permanent US military supremacy. This outlook was first expressed in 1992 in the first Bush administration's Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) for fiscal years 1994-99, a master blueprint for US dominance in the post-cold war era. Prepared under the supervision of then Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and leaked to the press in early 1992, the DPG called for concerted efforts to prevent the rise of a future military competitor. "Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival...that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union," the document stated. Accordingly, "we [must] endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated

control, be sufficient to generate global power." This has remained the guiding principle for US supremacists ever since.

In this new century the injunction to prevent the emergence of a new rival "that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union" can apply only to China, as no other potential adversary possesses a credible capacity to "generate global power." Hence the preservation of American supremacy into "the far realm of the future," as then-Governor George W. Bush put it in a 1999 campaign speech, required the permanent containment of China--and this is what Rice, Rumsfeld and their associates set out to do when they assumed office in early 2001.

This project was well under way when the 9/11 attacks occurred. Those events gave the neoconservatives a green light to implement their ambitious plans to extend US power around the world. However, the shift in emphasis from blocking future rivals to fighting terrorism was troubling to many in the permanent-supremacy crowd who felt that momentum was being lost in the grand campaign to constrain China. Moreover, antiterrorism places a premium on special forces and low-tech infantry, rather than on the costly sophisticated fighters and warships needed for combat against a major military power. For at least some US strategists, not to mention giant military contractors, then, the "war on terror" was seen as a distraction that had to be endured until the time was ripe for a resumption of the anti-Chinese initiatives begun in February 2001. That moment seems to have arrived.

Why now? Several factors explain the timing of this shift. The first, no doubt, is public fatigue with the "war on terror" and a growing sense among the military that the war in Iraq has ground to a stalemate. So long as public attention is focused on the daily setbacks and loss of life in Iraq--and, since late August, on

the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina--support for the President's military policies will decline. And this, it is feared, could translate into an allergy to costly military operations altogether, akin to the dreaded "Vietnam syndrome" of the 1970s and '80s. It is hardly surprising, then, that senior US officers are talking of plans to reduce US troop strength in Iraq over the coming year even though President Bush has explicitly ruled out such a reduction.

At the same time, China's vast economic expansion has finally begun to translate into improvements in its net military capacity. Although most Chinese weapons are hopelessly obsolete--derived, in many cases, from Soviet models of the 1950s and '60s--Beijing has used some of its newfound wealth to purchase relatively modern arms from Russia, including fighter planes, diesel-electric submarines and destroyers. China has also been expanding its arsenal of short-range ballistic missiles, many capable of striking Taiwan and Japan. None of these systems compare to the most advanced ones in the American arsenal, but their much-publicized acquisition has provided fresh ammunition to those in Washington who advocate stepped-up efforts to neutralize Chinese military capabilities.

Under these circumstances, the possibility of a revved-up military competition with China looks unusually promising to some in the military establishment. No American lives are at risk in such a drive. Any bloodletting, should it occur, lies safely in the future. These moves are supported by a recent surge in anti-Chinese popular sentiment, brought about in part by high gasoline prices (which many blame on China's oil thirst), the steady loss of American jobs to low-wage Chinese industry, and the (seemingly) brazen effort by China's leading oil company to acquire Unocal. This appears, then, to be an opportune moment for renewing the drive to constrain China. But the brouhaha over Unocal, together with other Chinese attempts

to secure oil and natural gas, also reveals something deeper at work: a growing recognition that the United States and China are now engaged in a high-stakes competition to gain control of the rest of the world's oil supplies.

Just a decade ago, in 1994, China accounted for less than 5 percent of the world's net petroleum consumption and produced virtually all of the oil it burned. True, China was already number four among the world's top oil consumers, after the United States, Japan and Russia, but its daily usage of 3 million barrels represented less than one-fifth of what the United States consumed on an average day. Since then, however, China has jumped to the number-two position (supplanting Japan in 2003), and its current consumption of about 6 million barrels per day is approximately one-third of America's usage. However, domestic oil output in China has remained relatively flat over this period, so it must now import half of its total supply. And with China's economy roaring ahead, its need for imported petroleum is expected to climb much higher in the years to come: According to the Department of Energy (DOE), Chinese oil consumption is projected to reach 12 million barrels per day in 2020, of which 9 million barrels will have to be obtained abroad. With the United States also needing more imports--as much as 16 million barrels per day in 2020—and with no credible research on alternative energy sources approaching conclusion, the stage is being set for an intense struggle over access to the world's petroleum supplies.

This would not be such a worrisome prospect if global petroleum output could expand sufficiently between now and 2020 to satisfy increased demand from both China and the United States--and in fact, the DOE predicts that sufficient oil will be available at that time. But many energy experts believe world oil output, now hovering at about 84 million barrels per day, is nearing its maximum or

"peak" sustainable level, and that there is no way that the world will ever reach the 111 million barrels projected by the DOE for 2020. If this proves to be the case, or even if output continues to rise but still falls significantly short of the DOE projection, the competition between the United States and China for whatever oil remains in ever diminishing foreign reservoirs will become even more fierce and contentious.

The intensifying US-Chinese struggle for oil is seen, for instance, in China's aggressive pursuit of supplies in such countries as Angola, Canada, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Venezuela. Until recently China derived very little of its petroleum from these countries; now it has deals with all of them to secure new supplies. That China is competing so vigorously with the United States for access to foreign oil is worrisome enough to American business leaders and government officials, given the likelihood that this will result in higher energy costs leading to a slowing economy; the fact that it is seeking to siphon off oil from places like Canada, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela--which have long sent a large share of their supplies to America--is the source of even greater concern, holding as it does the potential to result in a permanent shift in the global flow of oil. From a strategic perspective, moreover, US officials worry that China's efforts to acquire more oil from Iran and Sudan have been accompanied by deliveries of arms and military aid, thus altering the balance of power in areas considered vital to Washington's security interests. China, whose reach not long ago seemed to be limited to regions on its immediate borders, has emerged as a significant global player in the energy sweepstakes and beyond.

Initially, discussion of China's intensifying quest for foreign oil was largely confined to the business press. But now, for the first time, it is being viewed as a national security matter--that

is, as a key factor in shaping US military policy. This outlook was first given official expression in the 2005 edition of the Pentagon's report on Chinese military power. "China became the second largest consumer and third largest importer of oil in 2003," the report notes. "As China's energy and resource needs grow, Beijing has concluded that access to these resources requires special economic or foreign policy relationships in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, bringing China closer to problem countries such as Iran, Sudan, and Venezuela." Again, the implications of this are obvious: China's growing ties to "problem states" constitute a threat to strategic initiatives in volatile areas of particular interest to US policymakers and so must be met with countermoves of one sort or another.

Two trends have thus joined to propel this new swing of the pendulum: a drive to refocus attention on the long-term challenge posed by China and fresh concern over China's pursuit of oil supplies in strategic areas of the globe. So long as these two conditions prevail--and there is no repeat of 9/11--the calls for increased US military preparation for an eventual war with China will grow stronger. The fact that Bush has seen his job-approval rating plummet in the wake of Hurricane Katrina might also tempt the Administration to play up the China threat. While none of this is likely to produce an immediate rupture in US-Chinese relations--the forces favoring economic cooperation are too strong to allow that--we can expect vigorous calls for an ambitious US campaign to neutralize China's recent military initiatives.

This campaign will take two forms: first, a drive to offset any future gains in Chinese military strength through permanent US military-technological superiority; and second, what can only be described as the encirclement of China through the further acquisition of military bases and the establishment of American-led, anti-Chinese alliances will continue. None of these efforts are being described as part of an

explicit, coherent strategy of containment, but there is no doubt from the testimony of US officials that such a strategy is being implemented.

Elements of this strategy can be detected, for example, in the March 8 testimony of Adm. William Fallon, Commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It's certainly cause for concern to see this continuing buildup [by China]," he noted. "It seems to be more than might be required for their defense. We're certainly watching it very closely, [and] we're looking at how we match up against these capabilities."

To counter China's latest initiatives, Fallon called for improvements in US antimissile and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, along with a deepening of military ties with America's old and new allies in the region. With respect to missile defense, for example, he stated that "an effective, integrated and tiered system against ballistic missiles" should be "a top priority for development." Such a system, in all likelihood, would be aimed at China's short-range missiles. He also called for establishment of a "robust and integrated ASW architecture" to "counter the proliferation of submarines in the Pacific."

Note that Fallon is not talking about a conflict that might occur in the central or eastern Pacific, within reach of America's shores; rather, he is talking about defeating Chinese forces in their home waters, on the western rim of the Pacific. That US strategy is aimed at containing China to its home territory is further evident from the plans he described for enhanced military cooperation with US allies in the region. These plans, encapsulated in the Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP), were described by Fallon as "one of the primary means through which we extend US influence, develop access and promote competence among potential coalition

partners."

Typically, the cooperation will include the delivery of arms and military assistance, joint military maneuvers, regular consultation among senior military officials and, in some cases, expansion (or establishment) of US military bases. In Japan, for example, PACOM is cooperating in the joint development of a regional ballistic missile defense system; in the Philippines it is assisting in the reorganization and modernization of national forces; in Singapore--which already plays host to visiting US aircraft carriers--"we are exploring opportunities for expanded access to Singaporean facilities." And this is not the full extent of US efforts to establish an anti-Chinese coalition in the region. In his March testimony Fallon also described efforts to woo India into the American orbit. "Our relationship with the Indian Integrated Defense Staff and the Indian Armed Services continues to grow," he noted. "US and Indian security interests continue to converge as our military cooperation leads to a stronger strategic partnership." Central Asia.

All this and much more is described as an essentially defensive reaction to China's pursuit of forces considered in excess of its legitimate self-defense requirements--"outsized," as Secretary Rice described the Chinese military in a recent interview. One can argue, of course, about what constitutes an appropriate defense capacity for the world's most populous nation, but that's not the point--what matters is that any rational observer in Beijing can interpret Fallon's testimony (and the other developments described above) as part of a concerted US campaign to contain China and neutralize its military capabilities.

Chinese leaders are fully aware of their glaring military inferiority vis-à-vis the United States, and so can be expected to avoid a risky confrontation with Washington. But any nation, when confronted with a major military buildup by a potential adversary off its shores, is bound

to feel threatened and will respond accordingly. For China, which has been repeatedly invaded and occupied by foreign powers over the past few centuries, and which clashed with US forces in Korea and Vietnam, the US buildup on its doorstep must appear especially threatening. It is hardly surprising, then, that Beijing has sought modern weapons and capabilities to offset America's growing advantage. Nor is it surprising that China has sought to buttress its military ties with Russia--the two countries held joint military exercises in August, the first significant demonstration of military cooperation since the Korean War--and to discourage neighboring countries from harboring American bases. (Uzbekistan asked the United States to shut down its base at Karshi-Khanabad after a meeting of the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July.) But even if defensive in nature, these moves will provide additional ammunition for those in Washington who see a Chinese drive for regional hegemony and so seek an even greater US capacity to overpower Chinese forces.

This is all bound to add momentum to the pendulum's swing toward a more hostile US stance on China. But that outcome is not foreordained: Future economic conditions--a sharp rise in US interest rates, for example--could strengthen the hand of those in Washington who seek to prevent a breach in US-Chinese relations. These figures argue, for example, that Beijing helps keep US interest rates low by using part of its enormous trade surplus to buy large quantities of US Treasury bonds and that China represents an expanding market for US cars, aircraft and other manufactured goods. But the pursuit of ever more potent weapons on each side could prove to be a self-sustaining phenomenon, undermining efforts to improve relations.

The debate over China's military power and the purported need for a major US buildup to counter China's recent arms acquisitions will

become increasingly heated in the months and years to come. As always, it will be fueled by claims of this or that Chinese military advance, often employing pseudo-technical language intended to exaggerate Chinese capabilities and discourage close scrutiny by ordinary citizens. If this trend persists, we will become locked into an ever expanding arms race that can only have harmful consequences for both countries--even if it doesn't lead to war. Questioning inflated Pentagon claims of Chinese strength and resisting the trend

toward a harsher anti-Chinese military stance are essential, therefore, if we are to avert a costly and dangerous course.

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