

A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 19 March, 2005

A China military threat?

Much has been written recently about China's threat (and opportunities) in the economic and trade sphere. This short essay is intended only to address the reference to possible Chinese militarism implied in Lord Howell's preceding article.

Although China has been modernising its military strength, there is no evidence to suggest that it has a build-up more than necessary to defend a country of its size. Indeed, by any assessment, China's military capabilities are still many years behind those of the leading Western powers. Nor do there seem to be any significant overt or covert manoeuvres or line-ups in surrounding regions or elsewhere.

The exception, of course, is the Taiwan Strait. In this context it is important to understand the internal and external dynamics leading to the recent introduction of the anti-secession law in Beijing. First, with the rise of nationalistic pride concomitant with China's economic ascendancy, the anti-session feeling has become even more entrenched amongst the leadership, particularly in the wake of Chen Shui-bian's creeping gradualism in recent years towards formal 'independence'. After taking over the rein of the Military Commission from Jiang Zemin, President Hu can hardly be seen to go soft on this issue. Moreover, this feeling has widespread support of the people on the Mainland, many sharing the view that Taiwan is and should continue to be part of the one China.

No doubt, a sizeable proportion of the people in Taiwan have different views. But the people of Taiwan have spoken, somewhat surprisingly, in their latest legislative elections. The signals are quite clear that whilst few would opt for immediate unification, most do not wish to push the envelope too far. This reflects the realities where Taiwan's economic elbow room is increasingly intertwined with a stable and expanding relationship with the Mainland. This in part explains why Chen Shui-bian seems to have moderated his tones and actions recently.

But the momentum fanned by Chen Shui-bian over the years cannot be stopped overnight. What is more, in China's eyes, the US is continuing to use the Taiwan issue to curb China's influence. Whilst the US may not wish to see a military flare-up in the Taiwan Strait with its incalculable political and economic fallouts, neither does it want to lose the balance of

power on this part of the international chess-board by Taiwan being effectively absorbed by the Mainland.. The optimal scenario for the US would seem to be the maintenance of the status quo, whereby the US would be able to continue to exercise its best influence. The open alignment with Japan, whose geopolitical considerations are similar, is the latest move of the same strategy.

So, what are China's likely intentions with the anti-secession law? It is clear that China has little military ambitions outside its territories. Its national policy is built on the foundations of a stable and continuing open China. It can ill afford to trigger a major military conflagration at this stage of China's economic and political development. Not only is there no certainty of controlling the military outcome, but it would run the huge risk of undermining its ability to overcome the many pressing economic, social and political challenges facing China today, both internally and externally.

On the other hand, the envelope has already been pushed fairly tight and in spite of recent easing, there is no telling that the secessionist momentum may not revive, with or without outside support. China would need to show preparedness and resolve if the national aim of unification, however defined, is not to be allowed to slip well beyond its grasp. And with its economic advances and military modernisation, China is able to show such resolve. But bearing in mind China's many challenges, it is not unreasonable to believe that a military option would be the very last resort.

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