

# Military Dissuasion

## A Framework for Influencing PLA Procurement Trends

By ERIC SAYERS

**T**he United States and its friends and allies maintain serious reservations about the long-term impact the assumptions underpinning the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) will have on America's ability to sustain its military commitments in the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy deserve credit for recognizing and seeking to address the near-term strategic challenges posed by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). As part of the 2009 QDR process, Gates and Flournoy tasked a special High-End Asymmetric Threat (HEAT) team to focus on, among other things, the implications of China's ongoing

military modernization effort to acquire capabilities that can erode America's traditional power projection capacity and limit its freedom of action in the western Pacific.

However, effectively countering the HEAT advantages the PLA is building will take more than the series of operational shifts and procurement decisions the QDR has recommended. The geostrategic consequences of the ongoing redistribution of power in the Asia-Pacific require the United States to think more broadly. Washington must complement its power projection and deterrence capabilities by adopting a military dissuasion framework that seeks to influence the procurement trends underpinning Beijing's military modernization in a direction that is more favorable to U.S. interests. Dissuasion, as opposed to deterrence, aims to raise the perception of costs and/or decrease the perception of likely benefits from either acquiring or expanding a threatening

military capability.<sup>1</sup> Although a dissuasion strategy has its limitations, if properly exploited it can help to undermine the strategic advantage Beijing has sought to gain from pursuing high-end asymmetric capabilities. The congressionally mandated Independent Panel that is set to review the QDR's findings can advance this effort by further developing and operationalizing this concept.

### PLA HEAT Capabilities

While many believe China harbors ambitions to eventually project power on a global scale, Beijing recognizes that even in its own back yard, it cannot expect to match American military strength—"fighter to fighter and ship to ship," as Secretary Gates has said—for the next 10 to 20 years. To overcome this dilemma, the PLA has sought

---

Eric Sayers is a Master of Science Candidate in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.



B-52 arrives at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, to support U.S. Pacific Command's request for rotational bomber force

U.S. Air Force (Bernie J. Davis III)

to increase its military power over the past decade by focusing on the medium-term goal of developing an array of capabilities designed to serve a larger high-end asymmetrical strategy. According to Secretary Gates, this strategy aims “to neutralize our advantages—to deny the U.S. military freedom of movement and action while potentially threatening our primary means of projecting power: our bases, sea and air assets, and the networks that support them.”<sup>2</sup> The end result is a PLA that, despite its present symmetrical inferiority, has a growing capacity to dislocate and disrupt American military advantages. This strategy will give the PLA the ability to deter and, if necessary, deny U.S. forces access to the western Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

The PLA believes America’s ability to project power is heavily reliant on its satellite and electromagnetic network for communications, aircraft carriers and other blue-water Navy platforms, and fighters and long-range

but rather to raise the political costs associated with the decisionmaking and policy implementation cycle in Washington. It therefore draws as much on the teachings of Sun Tzu and Mao Tse-tung as on the lessons China has absorbed from observing U.S. operations against the inferior yet elusive forces that have frustrated American efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 8 years.<sup>5</sup>

As PLA capabilities mature, they stand to erode America’s ability to project power in the region. This will call into question the integrity of America’s regional security commitments and potentially encourage adventurism, miscalculation, or a destabilizing regional arms buildup. America’s relationships with states like Japan, Australia, and Singapore that have chosen to bind their long-term security to the continued presence of American military power may be directly affected, making it gradually more difficult for the United States to maintain its leadership role in the region.

But these adjustments, while sound, remain mired in a limited “hedging” strategy that is focused on observing the developments of China’s military modernization and making preparations to deal with it in a worst-case scenario. In its current form, this policy has become an incomplete mechanism for contesting PLA modernization. Since the end of the Cold War, defense planning in the United States has rested on the assumption that the emergence of a peer competitor will be identified and accounted for in the budget planning process long before that power is able to pose a credible threat. But the scope of China’s military expansion combined with its focus on developing high-end asymmetric platforms threatens the validity of this traditional assumption. Because the PLA’s high-end asymmetric capabilities are allowing it to increasingly “pose problems without catching up,” as one foresighted China analyst observed almost a decade ago, deterrence alone cannot



U.S. Navy (Tiffini M. Jones)

Chief of Naval Operations ADM Roughead visits People’s Liberation Army Navy headquarters in Beijing

bombers at forward-deployed bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam. In response, its decade-long modernization effort has sought to expand its antisatellite and cyber warfare capabilities to target America’s command and control network; develop antiship ballistic and cruise missiles, and enhance its proficiency in mine warfare and antisubmarine warfare as part of a sea denial strategy; and deploy large numbers of land attack cruise missiles (LACMs) and short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) to target and hold at risk the air bases of America and its allied and partner nations.<sup>4</sup>

Although achieved with military means, the PLA’s strategic intention is not to gain a decisive military advantage on the battlefield

*the PLA’s strategic intention is not to gain a decisive military advantage on the battlefield but rather to raise the political costs associated with the decisionmaking and policy implementation cycle in Washington*

**Insufficient Deterrence Model**

While the United States will continue to engage China diplomatically, economically, and militarily to avoid miscalculation and exploit areas of mutual interest, it will also have to expand efforts to preserve its strategic credibility in the region in the face of China’s rapid development of high-end asymmetrical advantages. Planning for this begins with the QDR. Michèle Flournoy, who is overseeing the QDR, and Shawn Brimley, who is said to have had a strong hand in its development, argued before the review’s release that countering China’s anti-access capabilities “may be more about identifying where new operational concepts and discrete investments are needed than focusing on major shifts in force structure.”<sup>6</sup> The QDR’s final recommendations are consistent with this vision: investing in capabilities that can extend the range of America’s power projection platforms, working to better defend and disperse military assets throughout the region, placing greater emphasis on preserving the survivability and redundancy of space and electromagnetic communication networks, and developing a joint air-sea battle concept.

suffice as the guiding mantra of U.S. defense strategy in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

**Opportunities and Limitations**

Pointing out the inadequacies of the current hedging policy does not imply that the United States should abandon its efforts to engage Beijing or invest in a costly and escalatory effort to contain it. Instead, the United States should adopt new ways of thinking about how it can implement a broader strategic agenda that does not merely observe and adjust to PLA modernization developments in an effort to maintain credible conventional deterrence but that actively seeks to shape them in a direction more conducive to U.S. interests. This could be achieved by adopting a military dissuasion strategy that aims to get inside the PLA’s decisionmaking cycle and attempts to influence its procurement trends.

Although dissuasion was mentioned in the 2002 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews and the 2005 National Defense Strategy, its definition has remained murky. In many instances, this has allowed the term to become synonymous with *deterrence*. Andrew Krepinevich and Robert Martinage have

offered the most comprehensive definition of *dissuasion* to date, drawing a clear conceptual distinction with deterrence: Whereas *deterrence* aims to prevent another state from using or threatening to use a military capability, military *dissuasion* acts as a type of pre-deterrence that aims to prevent a rival from developing a threatening military platform or technology in the first place.<sup>8</sup> This can be achieved by harnessing a number of tools that can raise a target's perception of the anticipated cost and/or decrease its perceptions of the likely benefits from developing or expanding a military platform or technology it deems to be threatening.

A dissuasion framework can offer a range of possibilities to discourage the PLA from acquiring HEAT capabilities by carefully considering the impact Washington's procurement decisions and diplomatic maneuvers can have.

**Military Procurement and Investment Decisions.** America's military modernization (research and development and procurement) decisions offer a number of ways for influencing the PLA's own investment and procurement choices. For instance, the U.S.

military's reliance on satellites has created a vulnerability that the PLA has sought to exploit by developing kinetic and nonkinetic antisatellite (ASAT) weapons. A dissuasion framework would suggest dealing with this problem by reducing the PLA's perceived effectiveness of investing in these weapons. This would mean developing miniaturized

---

*pointing out the inadequacies of the current hedging policy does not imply that the United States should abandon its efforts to engage Beijing or invest in a costly and escalatory effort to contain it*

---

and fractional (a series of miniature satellite subsystems that exist independently as part of a network) satellites that can be dispersed in larger constellations in space or put on standby on the ground to surge capacity in the event of an emergency. This would both enhance their survivability and diminish the value accrued by targeting them. Construct-

ing a more resilient network by complementing its space-based assets with air-breathing or terrestrial alternatives, as Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz has recently suggested, would also be a means to diminishing the utility of ASAT weapons in the eyes of the PLA.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the United States could reduce the anticipated advantage SRBMs and LACMs offer for holding its fighters and bombers at risk by investing in passive and active defensive measures at its bases in the region. This would require hardening bunkers and runways to protect and preserve the operational capability of U.S. and allied aircraft, the hardening of other mission-critical facilities like fuel depots, maintaining the capacity to promptly repair damaged runway surfaces, and deploying air and missile defense systems.<sup>10</sup> It would also be prudent to consider expanding the number of access points that America has in the Pacific, preferably with less obtrusive forward operating sites or cooperative security locations, to places such as Tinian, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Johnston, Midway, Wake, and the Kwajalein islands to help diffuse its air assets.<sup>11</sup>



Under Secretary Michèle Flournoy, Secretary Gates, and Gen Cartwright meet with deputy prime minister and defense minister of Singapore



The development of carrier-based long-range strike platforms that would allow carrier strike groups to operate farther out to sea could also reduce the perceived operational and psychological advantages offered by Beijing's growing antiship ballistic and cruise missile capabilities. This would help to lower potential political costs in Washington while preserving a greater range of freedom for decisionmakers to effectively harness the utility of coercive naval diplomacy, as it was able to do effectively during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis.<sup>12</sup> The development of a long-range strike platform might have the added benefit of compelling the PLA to expend its limited resources to upgrade and expand expensive, nonthreatening air defense systems.

**Diplomatic Tools.** A host of options to influence PLA procurement decisions are available in the diplomatic realm as well. As Beijing remains sensitive to external criticism and keen to broaden the legitimacy of its “peaceful development” narrative, Washington could continue to challenge China on a number of fronts. These challenges could range from continuing to publicly question the underlying intentions of Beijing's military modernization, to more directly inquiring about its development of threatening capabilities such as ASAT weapons, cyber warfare capabilities, and the large number of SRBMs and LACMs aimed at Taiwan. Washington could augment these diplomatic efforts by outsourcing them to allies and neighboring states that share its concerns and are willing to speak forthrightly about them. These initiatives, while likely to be limited in their capacity to effect serious change, could nevertheless serve to increase the political costs related to both testing and deploying specific military systems. This is especially true with regard to those capabilities that Beijing may not consider critical enablers of its broader military doctrine.

Washington could also consider decisions concerning foreign military sales with its friends and allies in a more strategic manner by situating them within a larger dissuasion framework. What effect will selling military components that increase the effectiveness of the army and air force capabilities of a continental power like India have on investments in the PLA's border defense forces and the People's Armed Police, which compete for budget dollars with the PLA's Taiwan deterrence mission? How is Beijing

likely to react if Washington moves to further enhance the ballistic missile defense capabilities of states like Japan, South Korea, and India? More specifically, how will PLA Navy (PLAN) and Air Force investment decisions respond to India's planned procurement of Boeing's advanced P-8 Poseidon multimission maritime aircraft? These decisions, while disconnected and arguably likely to occur regardless of whether a dissuasion framework is institutionalized and applied, could nevertheless be managed more efficiently if their implications on the complex security environment of the Asia-Pacific were considered in a more multidimensional manner.

An understanding of military dissuasion and efforts to manipulate PLA procurement trends can also offer U.S. defense planners a more pragmatic perspective on long-term PLA modernization developments. Foremost among these is the PLAN's ambition to construct an aircraft carrier in the coming decade. The reality remains that in the near term an aircraft carrier is not only a vulnerable target for U.S. forces, but also an extraordinary undertaking requiring significant investments to design, construct, maintain,

tary dissuasion lens offers an alternate and more advantageous perspective. Instead of directing its attention toward the construction of a carrier, the United States might instead look to gently encourage this largely nonthreatening development—or at the very least not overreact to it—while expending its diplomatic capital elsewhere.

**Dissuasion and Its Limits.** Although a dissuasion framework offers a number of promising ways to influence PLA procurement decisions, its implementation is by no means a scientific enterprise. Even if dissuasion is successful, a new dilemma arises: what would China do with the resources that would be freed up by not pursuing the platforms and technologies it may have otherwise invested in? Furthermore, even if China's perception of benefits from expanding a capability is decreased, it may still determine that the capability the United States is attempting to dissuade the PLA from acquiring or expanding is essential to their military planning. This could very well be the case with antisatellite or antiship ballistic missiles, for example.

Another consequence that the United States must be aware of is the prospect that

---

*Washington could consider decisions concerning foreign military sales with its friends and allies in a more strategic manner by situating them within a larger dissuasion framework*

---

and sustain while also training and managing its crew. Additionally, as the U.S. Navy's own experience with carriers has demonstrated, to keep a permanent carrier presence at sea, the PLAN will have to possess at least two carriers along with the necessary aircraft and support ships. Nan Li and Christopher Weuve recently estimated that developing and deploying two carrier strike groups would cost China roughly \$20 billion plus another \$400 million annually in operational costs.<sup>13</sup> While the PLA has continued to trim costs by reducing the size of its armed forces, a carrier program is still likely to force the PLA to redirect resources from more threatening and less costly access-denial platforms. While these budgeting tensions may only be temporary, they are likely to be most pronounced in the coming decade when the United States will still be struggling to adjust to the PLA's HEAT advantages.

Therefore, while the development of a PLA carrier is often discussed with alarm, viewing this type of decision through a mili-

China may be equally motivated to harness the tools of dissuasion against it. For example, neither China nor Russia wants to see the United States extend its dominance to space because of costs and technological hurdles. In response, they have sought to raise diplomatic pressure on Washington through vocal criticism of “space weaponization” and their support for an international ban on related technologies. Although difficult to quantify, the international consensus that stands behind the Chinese and Russian stated desire to keep space free of military competition has no doubt raised the political costs for the United States of developing, testing, and deploying space-based missile defense systems and kinetic antisatellite weapons.

The difficulties associated with implementing a dissuasion strategy, and attempting to avoid being the target of dissuasion while developing counterdissuasion strategies, are only magnified as actors operate iteratively inside one another's decisionmaking cycles. Thus, it will be vital to develop

methods to measure the limits of America's own dissuasion efforts so that decisionmakers can weigh the impact of their policies against the potential costs. Timely and accurate intelligence will play a crucial role in this process. Understanding China's strategic culture and PLA service culture will also be essential.

### Operationalizing a Concept

Despite being mentioned in numerous military and national security planning documents over the past decade, the concept of military dissuasion remains misunderstood and underdeveloped. At present, it is also in no way an institutional component of America's broader national security strategy. Although the QDR has brought greater attention to the PLA's HEAT challenge, it gives only passing reference to dissuasion. Fortunately, an opportunity exists to develop and operationalize the concept as part of the 2010 Independent Panel established by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010. The panel's primary responsibility will be to "conduct an assessment of the assumptions, strategy, findings, and risks in the report of the Secretary of Defense on the QDR." But as was the case during the first National Defense Panel in 1997, the 2010 panel will be a vehicle to not just assess the QDR's findings but also to propose innovative ideas that may not have been given their due in the extended and often burdensome enterprise that is the QDR process. This may also generate a broader discussion of dissuasion that could grant it more serious consideration as part of the President's forthcoming National Security Strategy.

To exploit the benefits dissuasion can offer, the panel will have to recognize the interagency and intergovernmental demands that will challenge the ability of the White House, Congress, State Department, and Pentagon to coordinate. This may be why—despite the suggestion of some that the Pentagon would be best suited to oversee the implementation of a dissuasion strategy—this effort should be organized out of the National Security Council. Whether this would be the responsibility of a new Senior Director for Dissuasion or part of the portfolio of the Deputy National Security Advisor or even National Security Advisor will be a critical question for the panel to address.

### Toward a Framework

The United States has long been tempted by the notion that it has the power to shape the international system and the actions of the states that reside within it. Often, this has proven to be an illusion generated by a misjudgment of its own power. Although dissuasion is far from a Newtonian enterprise whose implementation can be scientifically predicted, its narrow focus offers a realistic way for civilian and military leaders to attempt to influence Beijing's military procurement trends in advantageous directions. More importantly, although many of the decisions made as part of a dissuasion strategy are likely to have been made anyway, a dissuasion framework allows defense planners and policymakers to conceptualize how seemingly independent military, economic, and diplomatic variables can interact as part of a multidimensional hedging policy.

China's emerging asymmetric power stands as a direct challenge to the credibility of America's military commitments in the region over the next two decades. The QDR should be applauded for bringing a greater focus to some of the investments and operational shifts required in the midterm. But if the United States is to be expected to sustain its ability to project power throughout the Asia-Pacific, it will also benefit from adopting a military dissuasion strategy that seeks to utilize the Nation's vast material and diplomatic resources to help identify and manipulate procurement trends in the PLA's ongoing modernization effort. **JFQ**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author owes a considerable debt to Andrew Krepinevich and Robert Martinage for their previous research on this topic. See Krepinevich and Martinage, *Dissuasion Strategy*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 2008, available at <[www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/R.20080506.Dissuasion\\_Strateg/R.20080506.Dissuasion\\_Strateg.pdf](http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/R.20080506.Dissuasion_Strateg/R.20080506.Dissuasion_Strateg.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Gates, remarks at the Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 17, 2009, available at <[www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1346](http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1346)>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Anti-access Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009), available at

<[www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> On the implications of the PLA's ballistic and cruise missile development see, for example, David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); on PLA antisatellite developments, see Ian Easton, "The Great Game in Space: China's Evolving ASAT Weapons Programs and Their Implications for Future U.S. Strategy," *Project 2049 Institute*, 2009; on PLA mine warfare developments, see Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and William S. Murray, *Chinese Mine Warfare: A PLA Navy 'Assassin's Mace' Capability*, China Maritime Studies Institute, China Maritime Study no. 3 (2009); on PLA anti-ship ballistic missile developments, see Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile," *Naval War College Review* (Autumn 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Robert D. Kaplan, "China's Two Ocean Strategy," in *China's Arrival: A Strategic Framework for a Global Relationship*, ed. Abraham Denmark and Nirav Patel (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, September 2009), 43–58, available at <[www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20China's%20Arrival\\_Final%20Report.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20China's%20Arrival_Final%20Report.pdf)>; and Robert D. Kaplan, "America's Elegant Decline," *The Atlantic* (November 2007), available at <[www.theatlantic.com/doc/200711/america-decline](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200711/america-decline)>.

<sup>6</sup> Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, "The Contested Commons," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 135 (July 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Krepinevich and Martinage.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hoffman, "Schwartz Warns Against Dependence on GPS," *Air Force Times*, January 25, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Michael O'Hanlon, "Unfinished Business: U.S. Overseas Military Presence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Center for a New American Security, June 2008, 42, available at <[www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2008/06\\_military\\_ohanlon/06\\_military\\_ohanlon.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2008/06_military_ohanlon/06_military_ohanlon.pdf)>.

<sup>12</sup> See Edward Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Seapower* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Nan Li and Christopher Weuve, "China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: An Update," *Naval War College Review* (Winter 2010).