

### The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power 1996–2017

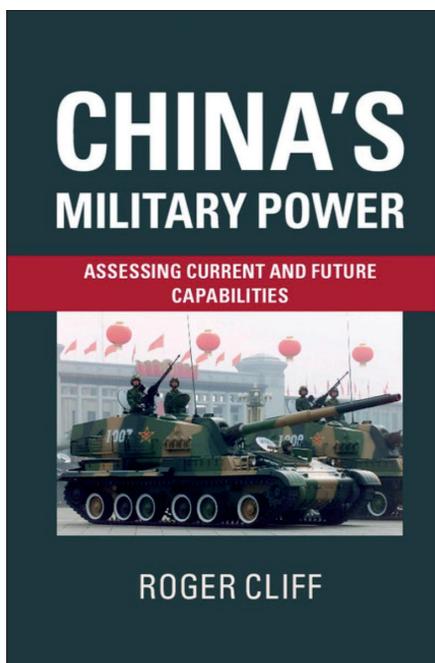
By Eric Heginbotham et al.  
 RAND Corporation, 2015  
 430 pp. \$61.00  
 ISBN: 978-0833082190

and

### China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities

By Roger Cliff  
 Cambridge University Press, 2015  
 362 pp. \$32.99  
 ISBN: 978-1107103542

Reviewed by Thomas McNaugher



Over the past 20 years China's military spending, a low priority in the 1980s, has grown, in real terms, at roughly 11 percent per year. At the same time, the focus of China's military strategy has pivoted sharply from an army-centric "people's war under modern conditions" aimed to blunt a Soviet attack from the northwest to an air and naval force-centric emphasis on "local wars under informationized conditions" along the country's long coast, with the United States as the principal adversary. It has been a prodigious transformation, modeled after—and surely provoked by—the U.S. military's own transformation.

And from a distance, China seems to be doing remarkably well. A largely obsolete inventory of 1950s Soviet weaponry—"the world's largest military museum," as one wag put it—has been replaced by an array of far more sophisticated weapons: a prototype "fifth generation" fighter, an aircraft carrier (with one or two more on order), diesel and nuclear submarines, air defense and surface-to-surface missiles of ever-increasing range and accuracy including the notorious DF-21C, and an antiship ballistic missile meant to keep U.S. carriers outside the so-called First Island Chain. On the personnel front, a shrinking People's Liberation Army (PLA) has

become more professional, better educated, and more highly trained.

But how are they doing, really? Both of these excellent books document, in convincing detail, the growth of an increasingly formidable Chinese force posture. Neither concludes that China has caught up with, much less surpassed, U.S. military capabilities that can be brought to bear around Taiwan or the South China Sea, the two scenarios at the core of each book's assessment. They make clear, however, that the days when the United States could cavalierly sail two aircraft carriers into the seas around Taiwan, as it did in 1996, confident that the PLA was virtually helpless to do anything about them, are long gone.

In keeping with its title, the RAND report rates the U.S.-China military balance over time (1996, 2003, 2010, 2017) and across 10 mission areas: Chinese attacks on air bases; relative air superiority; U.S. airspace penetration; U.S. attacks on air bases; Chinese anti-surface warfare; U.S. anti-surface warfare; U.S. counter-space; Chinese counter-space; cyberwar; and nuclear stability. RAND's analysts use an array of models to assess the outcome of conflict in each mission area, highlighting the changing balance over time in "stoplight" charts that convey U.S. or Chinese advantage.

U.S. readers will be pleased at the total absence of "red stoplights" (major Chinese advantage) on these charts, even in 2017. Indeed, RAND finds that the U.S. military's ability to attack Chinese air bases (should the President choose to do so) has actually improved since 1996, due in large part to the purchase of stealth aircraft and a number of standoff missiles. Still, in the Taiwan scenario, all major U.S. advantages disappear after 2003. The authors estimate that in today's environment, "a war for Taiwan would be a short, sharp, and probably desperate affair with significant losses on both sides" (p. 332). Even more alarming, they see "a series of tipping points" in China's favor that might, in the Taiwan scenario, "come as early as 2020" (p. 342).

U.S. forces fare better in the scenario involving the Spratly Islands, according

to the authors, because “the PLA’s ability to control military events diminishes rapidly beyond the unrefueled range of jet fighters and diesel submarines” (p. 322), and U.S. platforms have more room to maneuver around these islands than they do around Taiwan. Neither China’s “Great Wall of Sand” that it is building in the South China Sea nor its new carrier make much difference against U.S. forces. Their value, one assumes, lies mainly in pressuring the local states.

Roger Cliff reaches a roughly similar view of the U.S.-China military balance, albeit from a different angle and using mostly different evidence. Unsatisfied with the longstanding tendency to assess adversaries by counting systems and people, Cliff wants to know if the PLA can actually use its new and more modern systems to their full capacity. He adapts the U.S. military’s DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities) framework and adds organizational culture. Devoting one chapter to assessing each factor as it has evolved since the 1990s, Cliff concludes that so far, at least, China’s aspirations to field a modern, high-tech force have outrun its organizational capabilities. The PLA’s organizational structure and culture discourage the flexibility and independence needed to run the kind of “disjointed, non-linear operations” U.S. forces demonstrated in 1991 and 2003.

Cliff’s approach is a necessary corrective to the desire of military analysts to count things, and he brings to it a remarkable command of the literature on military effectiveness generally and China’s military specifically. Where data are available, his chapters yield important insights; the education levels of China’s soldiers, for example, have been rising, and by 2020 the PLA overall will be better educated than American soldiers (p. 119). In addition, the PLA’s training has become more realistic, even incorporating the use of “opposing forces” for ground, air, and air defense units (p. 194), although it scarcely emphasizes jointness (p. 133). Above all, however, the PLA lacks any serious combat

experience since the decidedly unmemorable invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

Where data are not readily available, Cliff gets creative. Unable to survey Chinese soldiers about their military culture, for example, he instead gathers the views of former U.S. military attachés to Beijing. The results are internally consistent and plausible, but not quite the real thing. It is no wonder that we so often settle for counting hardware and things, despite the obvious limitations.

Like RAND’s authors, Cliff runs through hypothetical “wars” over Taiwan and the Spratly Islands, deducting 20 percent from China’s presumed quantitative effectiveness to account for its organizational shortcomings. It is perhaps for this reason that his conclusion is slightly rosier than RAND’s: The United States and Taiwan together can stymie a Chinese attack on Taiwan without striking bases on the Chinese mainland. (In fairness, although the RAND team models attacks on Chinese air bases, they make clear that the decision to strike inside China “would be made at the highest political level” and would be based partly on political considerations.)

Although the United States “wins” in these models, there is little comfort in these “victories” for U.S. military analysts. Cliff and RAND’s authors agree: China is performing impressively as it works to catch up to the United States militarily. Cliff identifies no “tipping point,” but it is clear that warfare around Taiwan is destined to become even more unpredictable in the years ahead. That fact inevitably brings nuclear weapons into the picture. The United States has gone from near nonchalance about its ability to defend Taiwan conventionally to concerns about a scenario in which the United States and China would inevitably have to manage strategic risk in the fight. That change, one suspects, has done more to raise questions about U.S. “extended deterrence” in East Asia than modest changes in China’s nuclear forces.

More broadly, by charting the evolution of China’s military capability over time, both books highlight the seemingly relentless nature of China’s military development. Beijing has invested heavily

and wisely in a broad range of capabilities aimed at handling “local wars under informationized conditions,” leaving little out of its investment portfolio. (Moreover, it helps to be behind as the second mover; the U.S. military has charted the course here fairly well.) While the Chinese are moving forward, they “aren’t there yet.” Recently announced military reforms will facilitate further development by creating what amounts to combatant commanders in five military theaters, each with the power to train and plan jointly for serious contingencies.

Changes in China’s military forces, its more aggressive behavior (especially in the South China Sea), and Asia’s economic dynamism have all encouraged a needed U.S. “rebalance” toward Asia. Such a rebalance is hard to afford, however, when U.S. defense spending continues to emerge, almost as an afterthought, from a squeeze between tax cutters and entitlement defenders. While both books are aimed at defense experts and will make richly rewarding reading for that audience, one hopes they realize a much wider readership as well. JFQ

---

Dr. Thomas McNaugher is Senior Visiting Professor and Director of Studies at the Georgetown University Security Studies Program.