

FOREWORD

China's dramatic military buildup over the last several decades is perhaps the single most important challenge in strategic affairs today, not only for China's neighbors from Russia and Japan and the Koreans and Taiwan to India and Central Asia, but also for world strategic affairs in places seemingly remote from China, from the Middle East and Europe to Africa and Latin America.

Before choosing policies to deal with this Chinese challenge, however, we must first be sure we know what it is. Richard Fisher's great contribution in this volume is to give us the facts and to do so in a way that is fundamentally empirical and rich in informative descriptions of China's systems and capabilities—all informed by an expertise in military analysis that is serious, original, and illuminating.

Fisher has been doing this sort of work since he discovered a fascination with aviation as a small child. He has followed all available open sources on China's military with great care, supplementing that research with regular visits, numbering in the many dozens by now, to air shows and other venues where he talks shop with the representatives both of China and of countries that provide technology and equipment to China. Fisher draws his broader perspective from an impressive knowledge of military technology in general and aircraft in particular, from World War I to the present. He is, in my opinion, the world's leading authority on the Chinese military not in government service—and probably better than many who have spent decades in the intelligence community. Certainly he is the first person I consult about any report of a new Chinese capability.

For these reasons, this is the book with which to begin if you want to think for yourself about the Chinese military, for it will give you the information you

need. It will also give you interpretation and opinion, but no answers, as is so common in publications of this type, *prêt à penser*. Some, I think, will not be pleased with the facts Fisher presents here, for reasons I will survey briefly below. When they take issue, however, I hope very much that such people will engage Fisher first of all on the facts: is the information he presents sound and accurate? Correction of factual error is always a fundamental contribution. Only after the facts have been thoroughly discussed, disagreements about them flagged, and methods identified for resolving disagreements identified, can the equally important evaluation begin of what is to be inferred from these facts.

Fisher's record on factual accuracy is enviable. In 2004 I was invited by the Aspen Institute in Berlin to make a presentation about China. To provide some starting point for this I distributed copies to the Germans around the table—government officials, journalists, academics, and others—of a few pages Fisher had prepared listing the chief dual-use technologies that Germany and other European countries had provided to China: such things as engines that had civilian uses but could also solve for China some otherwise formidable difficulties with submarine propulsion.

I circulated that list with some trepidation. The Germans reading my hand-out were in some cases people who had been involved in the very sales decisions Fisher documented. But after about five minutes of silence, during which the pages were scrutinized, the signal came: yes, we agree this is an accurate, comprehensive and fair description of what we have sold. What followed then was a remarkable conversation, for it was not with me. Rather it was among the Germans themselves about the wisdom, or lack thereof, of such sales. I sat back and listened with interest, for the reactions of that German group, and the questions they raised are essentially those that should be in the mind of any reader of this important book.

First, the Chinese military buildup has clearly caught the world by surprise and unprepared. This fact is not owing to some extraordinary Chinese success in concealment and deception. Rather it is the result of foreign unwillingness to recognize the intelligence and resourcefulness of the government in Beijing, as well as reluctance to accept that China was seeking not local or regional, but global great power status. Dual-use technologies, for example, were not being procured in an impulsive or unsystematic way. Rather, somewhere in the Chinese military, a plan or set of plans had been drawn up for comprehensive military modernization, to be self-sufficient when possible, based on dual-use purchases from when feasible, and otherwise on direct military purchases from Europe, Israel, Russia, and other countries. Espionage was also extensively employed. By such means China was able to leap over decades of costly internal research and development and move far more rapidly toward state-of-the-art military technology than anyone had expected.

Today China has near top-of-the-line fighter jets in substantial numbers; she possesses a robust nuclear and ballistic missile capability that includes stage separation and multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicle (MIRV) technologies

that have been acquired from the West by irregular means, as well as antisatellite and growing space warfare capabilities. Her submarine fleet is growing, and along with her aircraft, they regularly violate the territorial air and sea space of such neighbors as Korea and Japan. Perhaps half a dozen aircraft carriers are on the drawing boards. Such capabilities are quite different to what received opinion expected perhaps two decades ago, when serious discussion of China's military future got under way.

Twenty years ago specialists on the People's Liberation Army began to hold informal, privately funded gatherings under shifting auspices, some of the proceedings of which were published by the American Enterprise Institute, whose then Senior Fellow James Lilley sponsored them. I was among the first participants and remember well how, whenever I suggested that Chinese history indicated an overriding concern with military power, I was met with the most excruciatingly patient of explanations that my concerns had no foundation. China's military was obsolete. She sought to modernize it a bit and reach a threshold of minimal deterrence. But beyond that her government's primary concern was to raise living standards and the welfare of the population. We and our friends had nothing to fear, provided of course we did not somehow "provoke" China, "forcing" her to react by seeking military capabilities she would otherwise not have wanted.

An argument went on for a good decade between a handful of specialists who expected a major Chinese bid for military power, and the consensus of the field, which saw China as having economic and not strategic goals. Now, as Fisher's book makes clear, that argument is over, the then-conventional wisdom has been proven false, and the handful of concerned specialists vindicated. This brings us to a second question, also asked that evening in Berlin: namely, how could (almost) everyone had gotten things so wrong?

The answer to this question has more to do with how one analyzes the Chinese regime than with anything specifically military. It harkens back to complex debates among scholars of the history of Germany, which has also made massive attempts to achieve military leadership over the past little more than a century. Some German scholars explain her military buildups—for example, that of her fleet in the years before World War I—as driven from outside. It was a matter of *Aussenpolitik*—foreign policy—above all, and could have been moderated, whether in the years before World War I or in the period leading up to World War II, by more forthcoming policies on the part of the then great powers. This argument contains truth and it applies, to a degree, to China, which has always conceived of herself as the leading civilization and polity in the world, and seeks to regain it.

Other German scholars, however, stress that military buildups in that country were decided not by foreign but rather by domestic challenges—by *Innenpolitik* or internal politics. One recalls that Bismarck, who launched the wars of German unification in the 1860s, was called to be chancellor only when a deadlock in parliament prevented the passage of the military budget. Bismarck realized that he

could split the liberal bloc by making visible progress toward the universally shared goal of national unity—which he did, defeating Austria, the logical candidate as leader of a united Germany—and then France, in short, low-cost, and decisive wars that culminated with the spectacle of a Prussian king—his power incomparably augmented by the wars, as Emperor of a German empire that was the largest state in Europe—at the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. In less than ten years Bismarck and the great general Moltke had utterly overturned the long-prevailing pattern of European power—and furthermore (perhaps this was the real purpose?) firmly installed the Hohenzollerns of Prussia as rulers of the *Kaiserreich*, at which the former great powers—England, France, Austria and Russia—blinked their eyes in surprise, disbelief, and apprehension.

The idea that domestic political considerations—*Innenpolitik*—might drive China's military development is by and large rejected by students of that country, though widely accepted by Chinese analysts—not necessarily in writing—and by certain scholars such as James Polachek, whose *Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) is a neglected classic, and the present author, who makes such a case for the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989) as well as others. The general concept goes back at least to the Greek Isocrates (436–338 B.C.), who counseled that the fractious city-states of his country could best be unified if a small-scale war was maintained constantly with Persia—big enough to stimulate a sense of national interest greater than regionalism, but not so big as actually to get out of control and pose an existential threat to Greece.

Fisher is concerned above all with documenting the Chinese military buildup; understandably he therefore devotes little attention to considering the fundamental forces driving it; the same can be said of my German audience, for most observers and commentators on the buildup, and even of government officials charged with formulating long-term policy. The fact is that motivation is difficult to explain; more than a century later, historians of Germany are still debating the proportions of inner and outer policy in that country's series of wars since the late nineteenth century. Like the Germany of which Bismarck became chancellor, however, today's China is essentially an autocracy, in which survival of a nonrepresentative and self-perpetuating ruling class (nobles, Junkers, and the military in one case, the Communist Party in the other) counts for more than national interest. In both countries, too, that ruling class was aware of its own obsolescence. Twenty years ago in China the party army essentially sacked its own capital city, Beijing, on the night of June 4, 1989, killing a still unknown number of peaceful democracy demonstrators and sending to prison large numbers of people, who remain there. In the years since, unequal and corrupt economic development, often involving outright confiscation of farmers' land, for example, or misappropriation of public funds and property, has created both a wealthy urban upper class that depends on the state, and an increasingly impoverished rural underclass. Violence against the government has become common.

Foreign observers discount the possibility that discontent could destabilize the tightly buttoned-down Communist regime; the regime itself does not. It maintains large military forces devoted exclusively to quelling civil unrest, the People's Armed Police; it regularly arrests and detains whom it pleases, in violation of its own laws; and it engages in pervasive surveillance and censorship, of print and broadcast media (already state-owned), the Internet, cell phone traffic, and so forth. Most importantly, the government actively seeks to use officially inculcated nationalism and xenophobia to rally a population that no longer has much use for Communist doctrine.

China has no obvious enemies, however. Japan and Taiwan seek good relations, as do Russia and India and everyone else. Finding the sort of threat Isocrates identified in the Persians is therefore difficult and tricky. If, for example, official China stirs up demonstrations against French-owned department stores, or against Japanese visitors, or rattles sabers against Taiwan or India, the result is, as will be seen, the gradual ratcheting up of the military capabilities of the countries threatened, a result unfavorable to China's desire for preeminence. If, on the other hand, the Chinese government accepts a peaceful international environment, it destroys the rationale for military buildup and opens the way to the outcry from the people that, with the military threat passed, the time has come for an end to one-party dictatorship.

The debate about the reasons for the German buildup provide, then, a framework for considering the fundamental question of the reason for China's rapid rearmament. Is Beijing chiefly interested, as Bismarck was, in defeating liberalism and uniting his country (in the Chinese case, keeping it united, unless one insists that somehow Taiwan must be forced to submit)? Or is China actually seeking the sort of capability to intervene all over the world without challenge, such as Britain once possessed and the United States still barely maintains? And doing so because she genuinely wishes to rearrange the current distribution of world military power in her favor?

If the former answer is correct: that China's military buildup is primary to strengthen the Party's domestic grip, then the rest of the world can do very little about it. Change will come only if and when China's political system changes. In a free election China would form a parliament dominated by poor farmers. That they would favor ignoring the countryside and pouring tens of billions of dollars a year into nuclear submarines, space exploration, and so forth seems highly unlikely. Confrontation with Russia has by no means ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but what remains is nowhere near so dangerous or on such a scale as what was taken for granted from the 1950s to the 1980s. Why the change? Regime change in Russia; no more, no less. The same could happen in China.

If the latter answer is better, however—that China is genuinely seeking hegemonic military power in Asia and globally—then the world faces potentially serious problems. Bear in mind before plumping for this answer that, throughout their history, Chinese states have been overwhelmingly land-based

and that their wars have chiefly been wars of succession and overland conquest. To be sure, China attempted at various times to intervene in the domestic affairs of so-called tributary states, such as Korea and Vietnam, but usually with unhappy results. So if China has now decided to become a world military power, that is a shift from her historical tradition. It is a shift, moreover, that is fraught with risks.

Military actions elicit reactions. In the past twenty years we have seen India enter the club of thermonuclear powers, largely owing to the threats posed by China and Pakistan. We have seen the Koreans, between them, develop nuclear weapons, a formidable fleet of stealthy conventional submarines capable of cutting off all sea access to north China by closing the narrows between Shandong and the Liaodong peninsula. Japan, responding to constant Chinese provocations and the Korean missile and nuclear program, is upgrading her intelligence and military capabilities—and of course a Japan that turned its attention to things military would quickly become the dominant power in Asia. Russia views with suspicion a Chinese buildup that could threaten the anchor of the Russian Pacific position at Vladivostok. Taiwan has made herself self-sufficient in a range of missiles and warheads that would make any actual military excursion across the Strait well-nigh impossible. Vietnam is developing nuclear capabilities.

On land, China's increasing military presence in the ethnically non-Chinese western territories of Tibet and East Turkestan (Xinjiang), the latter of which was annexed by the non-Chinese Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century, worries large but underpopulated states such as Mongolia, as well as India and others. When one adds the ripples spreading from the recent revelation of China's major submarine base on the island of Hainan (to the east of the Vietnamese coast and worryingly close to the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) and from her bolstering of air power in the Paracel Islands (seized from Vietnam), the area of reaction to Chinese military expansion itself expands to include much of Southeast Asia.

Finally, China's search for energy and strategic depth has drawn her deep into Islamic Central Asia. One may wonder how robust the current alliance will prove between the "godless Chinese" (as some other Asians call them), who swill alcohol and eat pork—deeply offensive to Muslims—and such states as Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and others.

As China takes stakes in more and more places, she may appear to be gaining strength, but she is also becoming overextended, creating hostages to fortune and putting in place the makings of a two-front or multifront war that would be difficult to handle.

Fisher documents the Chinese military advances that have prompted these countervailing developments around China's periphery, but he does not survey what the various countries affected are doing. That is an important topic, however, one that demands its own book.

The reader who takes aboard the information Fisher provides will be forced to ask what, if anything, the United States should do. This is a question that is

only now beginning to come into prominence. For decades the United States has systematically ignored the Chinese developments Fisher documents, or has rationalized them away as either a matter of routine force modernization or a narrow program targeted on Taiwan, but has never considered them as a single entity having many aspects and manifestations.

At present the United States is the security guarantor for South Korea and Japan explicitly, and implicitly for Taiwan. American forces, however, have proved incapable of coping with the relatively minor military challenge of Iraq; our numbers of combatants and platforms are steadily moving downward, and one suspects that after Iraq, overseas military operations will be so unpopular that undertaking them—even those required by binding treaty—will be politically impracticable. I find it inconceivable, for example, that Washington would go into a major war, let alone a nuclear war, to defend Japan against China.

By the same token, the United States is singularly unenthusiastic about genuine military self-sufficiency on the part of her allies. Washington has prevented Seoul from developing nuclear weapons, while China has acquiesced and most likely aided Pyongyang in the same pursuit. Washington has twice prevented Taiwan from developing nuclear weapons, though the island state now has sufficient nuclear know-how to become operational within six months. If and when Japan develops nuclear weapons, as she must unless she is willing to be coerced by the nuclear states around her, Washington is likely to exert powerful negative pressure (as in the Korean and Taiwanese cases) even though the United States is no longer capable of ensuring the security of those states.

The United States navy and air force will continue to be decisive weights in Asian security. So too will American strategic and intelligence cooperation with countries such as India, Australia, Taiwan, the Koreans, and Japan. But the United States by itself cannot and should not attempt to take on the task of deterring China single-handed.

Ultimately such deterrence can be accomplished only by states who will clearly take whatever measures are necessary for their own defense. Japan or Taiwan would use weapons of mass destruction, if necessary, to defeat a Chinese attack, as would Vietnam or India. But the United States would not, whatever the treaties may say. And short of that sort of robust and credible capability China will not be deterred. The United States, then, has a largely offshore and cooperative role in the maintenance of peace in Asia. The danger, ironically enough, is that she will become so convinced that China can be controlled absent military deterrent that she will undermine the attempts of her own allies to become strong—as in the Korean and Taiwanese cases mentioned.

Time was when major wars began in Europe and spread to Asia. The failure to deter Japan in the 1930s led to the first all-out Pacific War. Today the danger is that failure to deter China may have the same effect. But if so, the result will be far worse, for Japan attacked a weak China and even weaker colonial Southeast Asia. Only her ill-conceived attempt to bring the United States to the bargaining table by destroying the fleet at Pearl Harbor led to massive escalation. Today

massive escalation can be achieved without American involvement. A war that pitted China against Japan, either of the Koreas, India, or even Taiwan would be massive and destructive to a degree difficult to imagine.

Avoiding such a war is an imperative. To carry out that imperative requires, as Sun Zi teaches, precise knowledge of all circumstances—above all, of the capabilities of one's possible adversary. Richard Fisher does a great service by making available in this volume authoritative knowledge about today's Chinese military. This is a book that should be pondered by all. The next step, deciding on how to respond (or not), will then be made in an informed and deliberate way. Proceeding thus is the best way to be sure that none of the formidable Chinese order of battle is ever used in combat.

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