Chinese international politics agree that the strategic orientation and military posture of the People's Republic of China (PRC) will be a key variable determining regional stability and security in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the PRC’s strategic profile will influence global politics as well, as China increases its national power and becomes more engaged in world affairs. How China behaves will depend, of course, on a host of factors and actors—but certainly the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is a central one.

Domestically, the PLA has long sustained the Chinese Communist Party in power and enforced internal security. In internal policy debates, the PLA is the hypernationalistic guardian of claimed Chinese territorial sovereignty and is the institution charged with enforcing these claims. Economically, until the recent divestiture of most of its financial assets, the PLA operated a far-flung commercial empire. Regionally and internationally, the modernization of China’s military affects the balance of power, serves as a source of concern to many nations, and stimulates defense development in neighboring countries. As others have argued, China’s assertive territorial claims, bellicose nationalist rhetoric, parabellum strategic culture, and accelerating military modernization program have created an intense “security dilemma” in East Asia. If

David Shambaugh is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and Director of the China Policy Program in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, and is a nonresident Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. He is the author of many studies on contemporary China and East Asian affairs.


1. This is discussed in David Shambaugh, “The PLA and PRC at Fifty: Reform at Last,” China Quarterly, No. 159 (September 1999), pp. 660–672.

© 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
these elements combine to produce an assertive and aggressive China, as some hypothesize, the PLA will likely be both a principal catalyst and the institution required to project Chinese power.

The evidence of PLA perceptions presented in this article suggests that the military’s views of the regional and international security environment reveal a considerable amount of ambivalence. While China enjoys an unprecedented period of peace and absence of direct external military pressure, Chinese military commentators nonetheless identify numerous uncertainties and latent security threats. In many instances PLA perceptions also diverge from—and are usually tougher than—those of civilian officials and security specialists, who tend to see a more benign world. The PLA’s view of the world is by no means relaxed. Rather, a deep angst exists about the structure of the international system and disposition of power with which China must contend—particularly the global predominance of the United States.

The article begins with a discussion of the socialization of the current Chinese military leadership, the difficulties of gaining insights into their worldview, and the sources available to illuminate their perceptions. This is followed by a brief discussion of the prominent sense of angst and ambivalence apparent in the PLA’s views of its national security. The heart of the article then assesses the Chinese military’s perceptions of the Yugoslav war of 1999, the United States and its global posture, Northeast Asia, Russia and Central Asia, Southeast Asia and multilateral security, and South Asia. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of the PLA’s ambivalent sense of security, and particularly the policy implications for the United States of managing a long-term “strategic competition” with China.

**Shedding Light on Opaque Perceptions**

Given the importance of the PLA to China’s strategic orientation and the security calculations of other nations, the military’s perceptions of international politics and China’s national security environment are a critical variable. Gaining insights into the *Weltanschauung* and strategic thinking of China’s high command is, however, extremely difficult. Surprisingly little is known about

---

how China’s military leaders and intelligence analysts see the world and the PLA’s role in it. Direct interactions with the PLA elite remain rare and are tightly scripted, while an extremely low level of transparency further obscures the perspectives and capabilities of the PLA. Although they occasionally travel abroad, the seven military members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and their principal deputies in the four “general headquarters” (zong siling bu) rarely meet with foreign visitors in China, and when they do it is almost always with their military counterparts in carefully controlled meetings or visits to military installations. In these sessions PLA generals rarely depart from their “talking points,” often reading them verbatim, and they are known to be uncomfortable in freewheeling strategic dialogue with foreign military leaders. Their lack of assuredness in such dialogue is commensurate with their socialization and professional backgrounds.

The PLA high command today largely comprises elder officers in their late sixties and seventies who possess battlefield, command, and lengthy service experience. Many of them commanded forces in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, and some fought in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict and the Korean War. In a departure from past practice, most did not come up through the ranks as political commissars. Relatedly, the current high command no longer comprises soldier-politicians, who are active in the rough-and-tumble world of Chinese elite politics (CMC Vice-Chairman Chi Haotian being the exception). This change signals a potentially very significant development in Chinese politics—the breaking of the “interlocking directorate” and long-standing symbiotic relationship between the Communist Party and the PLA. For the first time since the Red Army was created in 1927 and the Chinese Communist Party rode it to power in 1949, a growing bifurcation of the two institutions is now evident. Corporatism and a more autonomous identity are taking root in

4. The military members of the CMC today are Generals Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian (vice-chairmen), and Generals Fu Quanyou, Wang Ke, Yu Yongbo, Wang Ruilin, and Cao Gangchuan (members). Since 1993, and the removal of General Yang Baibing, the CMC has not had a secretary-general and has been comprised of a civilian chairman (President Jiang Zemin), two vice-chairmen (usually one of whom is the minister of defense), and the heads of the four “general headquarters” (General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department).
6. There are only three political commissars among the top thirty or so members of the PLA elite: Defense Minister Chi Haotian, General Political Department Director Yu Yongbo, and CMC member General Wang Ruilin. Even General Chi is a decorated veteran who saw extensive battlefield experience in Korea.
the armed forces. The PLA today is much more prepared to resist party encroachment into military affairs, including attempts to pull the PLA into domestic politics or domestic security.7

With few exceptions, members of the PLA leadership today have spent their careers largely in regional field commands deep in the interior of China, cut off from interaction with the outside world. They have not traveled extensively or studied abroad, and do not speak foreign languages. Most have a shallow understanding of modernity, much less modern warfare. Their backgrounds as ground-force field commanders make them more comfortable discussing battlefield tactics than global security or political-military issues. Accordingly, they display a distinctly insular worldview. Their nationalism is fierce, sometimes bordering on xenophobia. Many senior PLA officers evince a deep suspicion of the United States and Japan in particular. They have also been socialized in a military institution and political culture that prizes discipline and secrecy—thus they do not appreciate the importance of defense transparency as a security-enhancing measure, and view foreign requests to improve it with suspicion. They refuse to join alliances or participate in joint military exercises with other nations, are reticent to institutionalize military cooperation beyond a superficial level, and are leery of multilateral security cooperation.8 Although they covet high-technology weapons, they have no direct exposure to them on the battlefield, nor do they truly appreciate the complexities of producing and maintaining them.9 Given PLA doctrine and needs—trying to become a high-tech military capable of peripheral defense that emphasizes air and naval power projection, nuclear force modernization, ballistic and cruise missiles, electronic countermeasures, information warfare, antisatellite weapons, laser- and precision-guided munitions, and so on—one is struck by the fact that the PLA today is a military led by senior officers with minimal exposure to these kinds of weapons, technologies, and doctrine.

8. Interviews with U.S., European, and Asian military officers who have interacted with these individuals confirm these impressions. See also David Shambaugh, Enhancing Sino-American Military Ties (Washington, D.C.: Sigur Center for Asian Studies, George Washington University, 1998).
Beneath the current PLA leadership, however, is a large tier of major generals and senior colonels in their forties and fifties who are better educated and trained. A number of these younger officers have spent time abroad, speak foreign languages, and do not evince the same insular tendencies. They display a far better grasp of at least the theoretical practice of modern warfare (although no PLA officer has had any actual combat experience for twenty years). It is this generation who will command the PLA in the early twenty-first century, as the current high command retires within five years.

Opportunities for foreign interaction with the next generation of PLA leaders are increasing, although they remain limited. Constrained by lack of direct access to field commanders and those officers outside of a handful of select PLA institutions in Beijing, as well as the PLA’s broader efforts to limit transparency, foreign analysts and researchers are thus forced to rely on an eclectic assembly of sources. Perhaps the most enticing source is also the least reliable: the Hong Kong media. While one or two magazines, such as Guang jiao jing [Wide angle], have demonstrated a more reliable track record and are known to have established ties to the PLA, the majority of articles published by the Hong Kong press, which are often based on purported special access to high-level military deliberations and debates with Communist Party leaders, are often unreliable exaggerations. Given the dearth of direct access to PLA officers, reading PLA publications is vital to understanding the military’s view. Several hundred books are published by PLA publishers every year, although they are never translated by foreign governments. PLA journals are also numerous (more than two hundred), but with the exception of a handful, the vast majority are classified and restricted in their circulation, and thus are not available to foreigners. Interviews with officers in the PLA General Staff’s Second Department (intelligence) and its affiliated think tanks, military attachés posted abroad, and personnel at the Academy of Military Sciences and the National Defense University provide important supplementary views to the documentary database.

An Ambivalent Sense of Security

A combination of these sources forms the evidentiary basis of the PLA’s worldview presented below. The sampling indicates a deep ambivalence in

---

10. This estimate is based on a survey of the periodical section of the Academy of Military Sciences Library.
11. The two think tanks are the China Institute of International Strategic Studies and the Foundation for International Strategic Studies.
PLA perceptions of the world. At an objective level, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, China seemingly faces no immediate external military threat to its national security. Its borders are peaceful, the Soviet threat has disappeared (relations with Russia are the best they have been in nearly half a century), and China has forged normal diplomatic relations with all of its neighbors for the first time in its modern history. China’s impressive economic growth and steady military modernization should contribute to a sense of assurance and security.

Yet potential problems remain, and China’s military is concerned. North Korea continues to be unstable and unpredictable, impinging directly on Chinese security. Beijing’s former influence over Pyongyang has been greatly reduced. India’s military capabilities and acquisition of nuclear weapons has increased the specter of a new potential threat on China’s southern flank. China’s maritime claims in the East and South China Seas remain as potential conflict zones. Political tensions with Taiwan constantly have the potential to escalate to a military level, as long as China steadfastly refuses to renounce the use of force against the island. Most of all, strained relations with Japan and the United States (and the strengthening of defense ties between them), combined with deep anxieties about American military deployments and willingness to use force around the world, further complicate China’s and the PLA’s security calculus. This essential ambivalence in assessments of China’s security environment is evident in the writings of, and discussions with, Chinese military personnel.

The 1999 war in Yugoslavia further fueled these anxieties. The Chinese government and the PLA were deeply disturbed by the display of military might by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Like the impact of the 1990–91 Gulf War, one demonstrable effect was to further remind PLA leaders and analysts of how poorly equipped and trained the Chinese military was to defend against modern militaries and fight modern wars.

The PLA’s Lessons from Kosovo

PLA analysts paid close attention to the military dimensions of the Yugoslav war, and in particular NATO’s strategy, tactics, and weapons. They also noted that the tactics and firepower used against Yugoslavia were similar to those employed in the Gulf War. These included initial attacks against Yugoslavia’s command and control infrastructure; extensive electronic jamming of both military and public communications; remote targeting by long-range cruise missiles, launched from sea and air; achievement of “information dominance,”
making extensive use of space-based sensors and satellites,12 and air strikes launched from as far away as North America, utilizing in-flight refueling.

PLA analysts were surprised, however, by new features evident in the Yugoslav conflict—for example, the use of several new weapons systems such as improved laser-guided precision munitions that employ a variety of new active homing and direction-finding devices. One of these was the GBU-28/B laser-guided “smart” gravity bomb—five of which were launched from B-2 strategic bombers, mistakenly striking the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Also on display were an array of satellite-guided bombs, delivering 1,000–2,500 pound warheads with accuracy of a few meters. PLA analysts also noted the use, for the first time, of microwave bombs that could sabotage electronic equipment, missile target seekers, computer networks, and data transmission lines.13

The extensive use of cruise missiles and other precision-guided munitions from ranges outside Yugoslav point defenses had a major impact on PLA planners (although they had witnessed similar displays of power during the Gulf War); they were particularly impressed by the increased accuracy of such weapons.14 This prominence of “smart weapons” impressed upon the PLA the fact that wars can be prosecuted from great distances, far over the horizon, without visual range targeting or encountering antiair and ballistic missile defenses, and without even being able to engage enemy forces directly. Even the Gulf War involved ground forces and force-on-force engagements—but not in Yugoslavia. This was a stark realization for PLA commanders whose whole orientation and doctrine to date had been one of fighting adversaries in land battles on China’s soil or in contiguous territory. PLA analysts were profoundly disturbed by the very idea that, in modern warfare, an enemy could penetrate defenses and devastate one’s forces without the defender’s ability to see or hear, much less counterattack, the adversary.15

This perceived vulnerability reportedly prompted a review of the PLA’s strategic air defenses and defensive capabilities for jamming and confusing incoming smart weapons.16 Leaving little to the imagination about potential

Chinese adversaries, one PLA analyst pointedly noted, “In the future, we will be faced mostly with an enemy who uses advanced smart weapons and long-range precision-guided weapons.”17 According to Academy of Military Sciences Senior Colonel Wang Baocun, a leading PLA expert on electronic and information warfare, NATO “decapitated” more than 60 Serbian command and control targets on the first day of the war with attacks from more than 100 Tomahawk missiles and 80 air-launched precision-guided missiles.18

PLA analysts were also surprised by NATO’s sustained strategic bombing campaign. After destroying Serbian C4I nodes (command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence), NATO bombers waged a prolonged strategic campaign against a wide range of other targets. In seventy days of sustained bombing, more than 33,000 sorties were flown, including 12,575 strike sorties, targeting approximately 14,000 bombs and cruise-missile ordnance.19 Many involved planes based far away and utilizing more than 300 in-flight refueling tankers (more than 30 were deployed in Italy alone). The B-2 Stealth strategic bomber, for example, traveled 20,000 kilometers round-trip from the United States on each sortie. Many planes flew 2,500 kilometers from bases in England and northern Europe. The operational tempo of these sorties also impressed PLA analysts; most aircraft would fly daily missions, and some attack fighters flew several sorties per day.20

Some PLA analysts applied the lessons from the Kosovo conflict to China’s own defenses. They particularly noted the importance of air defenses to protect against aerial bombing. Two analysts from the Academy of Military Sciences, the PLA’s top doctrine and operations research center, noted that Yugoslavia had been successful in protecting its antiaircraft defenses by scattering them in mountain caves and along highways and by not activating their radars. This made it difficult, Senior Colonels Yao Yunzhu and Wang Baocun concluded, for NATO planes to quickly attack the surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites with precision-guided munitions.21 The Chinese media and PLA analysts seemed to relish the loss of planes lost by NATO—particularly the one F-117 Stealth

18. Wang, “Information Warfare in the Kosovo Conflict.”
fighter downed by a SAM (apparently when the plane’s bomb doors opened and were silhouetted against a white cloud background). Some PLA analysts noted China’s need to harden and better defend its C4I facilities.22 Senior Colonel Yao also noted the difficulty that NATO attackers had in locating Yugoslav forces—as they were scattered; made good use of mountains, forests, and villages; moved at night; and camouflaged their equipment well. Attacks on ground forces, moreover, required low ground-attack aircraft and helicopters—which were more vulnerable to interdiction. Senior Colonel Wang noted that Yugoslav forces concealed their tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and other equipment in forests, caves, and other locations difficult to identify from the air. He also pointed out that forces used corrugated iron and other methods to deceive heat-seeking missiles and smart weapons.

In general, PLA analysts took consolation in Yugoslavia’s fortitude against NATO’s overwhelming firepower, and they pointed out in interviews that it would be much easier for China to absorb such punishment. China’s geographic expanse was cited as a particular asset against sustained aerial bombing and over-the-horizon cruise missile attacks, because Chinese strategic targets are far more dispersed, hidden, and hardened. China’s antiaircraft, antistealth, and electronic countermeasure capabilities are probably also better than Yugoslavia’s. In a potential conflict against the United States or Japan, given the necessary staging-area needs of the U.S. and Japanese navies in northeast Asia and the western Pacific, the PLA Navy could disrupt—but not defeat—operations as far as 200 nautical miles offshore. Also, in a conflict contingency over Taiwan, the most likely contingency to bring the PLA into combat, China would not likely face a broad coalition of countries, much less an integrated and experienced military command structure like NATO’s. These factors are not lost on PLA strategic planners.

When contemplating China’s own potential coercive military action against Taiwan, PLA planners must have drawn little comfort from the Yugoslav conflict. At current force levels, the PLA Air Force could not gain control of the skies over the Strait or Taiwan island, much less carry out a sustained bombing or ground-attack campaign. Given that the PLA would have to rely heavily on ballistic and naval cruise missile attacks to “soften up” the island for a follow-on amphibious invasion force,23 the example of Yugoslavia having absorbed

---

23. Western analysts estimate that this would require at least a 3:1 advantage in landing forces (approximately 750,000 troops). Today, and for the foreseeable future, the PLA has nowhere near the necessary sea or airlift capabilities to mount such an assault.
an enormous pounding from the air without capitulating does not auger well for PLA planners, given a determined Taiwanese population. For its part, the Yugoslav conflict taught Taiwan to harden its C4I nodes and other potential strategic targets, such as airfields.

**Worried about the Hegemon**

Judging from publications and interviews, the United States is by far the greatest security concern for PLA leaders and analysts—both generally and in the particular contexts of Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. PLA assessments are in general highly critical of U.S. strategic posture, global behavior, and military deployments. Numerous Chinese military analyses portray the United States as hegemonic, expansionist, and bent on global and regional domination. This predominant view is shared by civilian Chinese officials and international relations specialists. It has its origins in the Cold War, but has become a singular theme since the Soviet Union’s collapse and the Gulf War. The view of the United States as an expansionist hegemon has been evident in civilian and PLA journals throughout the 1990s, but the published attacks on the United States gained an unusual intensity and bellicosity in the wake of the 1999 Yugoslav conflict. Some Hong Kong media even asserted that incensed senior PLA generals sought a military confrontation with the United States. One cited Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Zhang Wan-nian as being prepared to wage nuclear war. According to this report, the CMC ordered the Second Artillery to expand its stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons and neutron bombs.

---

24. The stigma of bombing civilian population centers would be a major consequence of ballistic missile strikes.
30. In refuting the Cox Committee report, China officially admitted in July 1999 that it possessed neutron weapons. See “Facts Speak Louder Than Words and Lies Will Collapse by Themselves—Further Refutation of the Cox Report,” Information Office of the State Council, July 19, 1999. The Cox Committee was formally constituted as the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and
PLA analysts have identified the following manifestations of the U.S. quest for global hegemony:

- the domination of international trading and financial systems;
- an ideological crusade to “enlarge” democracies and subvert states that oppose U.S. foreign policy;
- an increase in “humanitarian intervention” and dispatch of U.S. military “peacekeeping” forces overseas;
- the strengthening of old and building of new military alliances and defense partnerships;
- an increased willingness to use military coercion in pursuit of political and economic goals;
- direct military intervention in regional conflicts;
- the pressing of arms control regimes on weaker states; and
- the domination and manipulation of regional multilateral security organizations.

While PLA and civilian analysts in China are critical of U.S. hegemonic behavior, they see it has having long-standing roots in American history. One PLA scholar noted that “the United States has been expansionist since its birth.” But, as another colonel in PLA intelligence put it, “Just because America’s hegemonic behavior is understandable from a historical perspective does not mean it is acceptable.”

Although alarmed by perceived U.S. aggression worldwide and potentially against China itself, PLA analysts continue to voice the standard Chinese optimism that hegemonic nations are constrained by countervailing power and that the era (shidai) of “peace and development” will prevail over “power politics.” They have an innate belief that the history of international relations consists of repetitive cycles of rising and falling hegemons, all of which eventually collapse because of the unjust nature of their aggression and the countervailing balance of power. Opposition to hegemony has been the explicit sine qua non of Chinese Communist foreign policy since the 1950s, but has its origins in traditional Chinese thought dating to the Spring and Autumn Period.

Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China, chaired by Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Calif.). It submitted its full report to Congress on January 3, 1999; a declassified partial version was released to the public on May 25, 1999.

31. These views are expressed in a wide range of PLA articles.
33. Interview with General Staff Department Second Department officer, Beijing, May 4, 1998.
The philosopher Mencius (c. 372–289 B.C.), a disciple of Confucius, is credited with distinguishing the illegitimate rule through force (badao) from legitimate benevolent rule (wangdao). Ever since, those who employed coercive power to maintain their rule domestically or internationally were considered illegitimate hegemons that needed to be opposed.

Today, most military and civilian analysts in China see the rise of multipolarity (duojihua) as the greatest check on the perceived U.S. quest for global hegemony (biquanzhuyi). They argue that the post–Cold War balance of power has become “one superpower, many strong powers” (yi chao duo qiang) or “one pole, many powers” (yi ji duo qiang), with the latter able to check the former.35 Like other analysts, Colonel Li Qinggong, director of the Comprehensive Security Research Division of the Second Department of the PLA’s General Staff Department (intelligence), identifies U.S. “hegemonism and power politics” as the major security problem in Asia and the world. In addition, Li predicts that multipolarity will check U.S. hegemony, a confrontation will emerge between Japan and the United States (beginning with economic conflict and then extending into other spheres), and Russo-Japanese animosity will deepen.36 The view that the United States and its allies will inevitably come into conflict, given the perceived overbearing nature of U.S. hegemony, is a frequent theme in Chinese writings. Like the theory of multipolarity, however, it is much more wishful thinking than objective analysis. Many in the PLA mistakenly believe that the United States had to force all the NATO allies (which, after the outbreak of the 1999 Yugoslav conflict, was regularly referred to in the Chinese media as the “U.S.-led NATO”) to go along with the attacks on Serbia during the conflict, and that the war strained the alliance to the breaking point.37 Ding Shichuan of the PLA Institute of International Relations similarly argues that unspecified “contradictions” (maodun) between the United States and other powers are accelerating and that a new form of “big power relations” will emerge in which American power is weakened.38

34. For further discussion of the philosophical origins and history of the concept of hegemony in Chinese thought, see Shambaugh, Beautiful Imperialist, pp. 78–83.
It is in the context of assessing the United States’ perceived quest for global domination that PLA analysts perceive U.S. policies toward China. They are unequivocal about the alleged desire of the United States to contain the PRC both strategically and militarily, a position they have held throughout the 1990s. This perspective is apparent in numerous articles and interviews. In 1996 and 1997, however, some analysts interpreted the new Clinton administration policy of “engagement” as evidence of the failure of the policy of containment. The majority, though, perceived “engagement” to be but a tactical adjustment—one that still amounts to “soft containment.” According to one PLA analyst, commenting in the aftermath of the Clinton administration’s announcement of the “engagement” policy, “The United States will still try to exert maximum influence on China.” “The U.S. desire to ‘shape’ China, as is clear [in the Defense Department’s 1998 East Asia Strategy Report],” said one PLA general, “is doomed to futility.”

In addition to seeing a U.S. policy of strategic containment, many PLA officers argue privately that the United States seeks the permanent separation of Taiwan from Chinese sovereignty. A PLA general stated bluntly: “The U.S. is opposed to China’s reunification and seeks to keep separation permanent.” In the wake of Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui’s July 1999 statement that the island and the mainland should negotiate with each other on a state-to-state basis (guojia yu guojia), the Hong Kong media were filled with articles alleging that Chinese leaders believed that Lee was emboldened to make such a “separatist” statement only because of U.S. support and military supplies, and that the PLA was actively arguing the need to teach Lee and Washington another “lesson” (as Beijing believed it had done with the missile “tests” in 1995 and 1996).

Given the central importance of Taiwan in PLA calculations, it is interesting to note that little discussion of Taiwan is evident in those Chinese military journals and books available to foreigners (no doubt this is a subject that the PLA wishes to keep secret). One exception is the journal Junshi Wenzhai (Mili-

42. Interview, Beijing, December 8, 1998.
44. Interview, Beijing, December 8, 1998.
China’s Military Views the World | 65

tary digest), which carries a regular feature assessing Taiwan’s military and defenses. These articles offer valuable insights into PLA thinking and planning about how to penetrate Taiwan’s air and naval defenses. One special issue devoted to Taiwan’s defenses provided surprisingly detailed assessments of how to electronically “blind” Taiwan’s command and intelligence systems, how to sink its surface ships with submarines, how to neutralize Taiwan’s superiority in fighters, and how to utilize ballistic missile strikes, as well as other potential offensive actions that could be employed in a conflict with Taiwan. Another issue analyzed the capabilities of new weapons the United States sold to Taiwan. Although discussion of the Taiwan military is limited in PLA journals available to foreigners, it certainly is a subject of study in PLA institutions. Not surprisingly, a considerable amount of war gaming for potential conflict with Taiwan takes place at the war-game centers of the National Defense University, the Academy of Military Sciences, Nanjing Military Region Headquarters, and other PLA units.

PLA analysts also pay particular attention to U.S. alliances and deployments overseas. Some analysts argue that U.S. military forces are overextended and undersupported logistically and financially to achieve dominance in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Persian Gulf, European, and Latin American theaters simultaneously. Further, they do not believe that the United States will be able to wage and win two wars at the same time. Other analysts, such as Academy of Military Sciences strategist General Wang Zhenxi, argue that the U.S. alliance structure and nonalliance defense relationships give the United States greater flexibility and strategic reach, and have significantly extended U.S. “global dominance.”

45. Junshi Wenzhai is published by the Second Research Institute of China Aerospace and the Chinese Military Scientists Association. While the journal is available in some Chinese libraries, foreigners must acquire this restricted-circulation publication from street vendors in China.
46. See the nine articles published in the section “Taiwan Teji” [Taiwan Special Focus], Junshi Wenzhai, Nos. 16–17 (August 1993), pp. 3–45.
47. Ai Hongren, “Taiwan de Junshi fangxiang” [The direction of Taiwan’s military], Junshi Wenzhai No. 50 (December 1998), pp. 10–12.
48. For example, a visit to the National Defense University in December 1998 revealed a course being taught to the current class of commanding officers on “Taiwan’s Weaponry and Military.”
49. Interviews with knowledgeable PLA officers, Beijing, May 1998 and April 1999.
Most PLA analysts still voice opposition to U.S. alliances, even if they have moderated their critical tone since 1997 (when they explicitly called for their abrogation). PLA analysts have certainly taken note of the strengthening and expansion of American alliances and security partnerships worldwide since the end of the Cold War and argue that these moves are part of a master plan to achieve global dominance. They believe that the United States is seeking to create an “international security order” under its control, in which NATO will assume a “global mission” and other U.S. allies will be junior partners in this quest for “security dominance.”53 PLA writers believe that the extension of NATO into Central Europe, the precedent set for “humanitarian intervention” by NATO in the 1999 Yugoslav crisis, which they describe as “Clintonism,” and the use of the alliance for “out-of-area crisis response” all foreshadow a dangerous escalation in military alliances and U.S. attempts to dominate the world.54 Other analysts argue that U.S. aggression constitutes a new style of “gunboat diplomacy” that will aggravate international tensions and lead to a global arms race.55

PLA and civilian Chinese analysts tend to take a zero-sum view of alliances, in which such mutual security pacts must have an explicitly identified enemy—or they should have no reason to exist. The positive-sum notion that alliances can exist to preserve stability and deter aggression, without singling out specific enemies, is alien to Chinese realpolitik security thinking. Moreover, Chinese analysts strongly suspect that these alliances (at least those in the Asia-Pacific region) are aimed at China. This is certainly true of Chinese perceptions of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the extension of Partnership for Peace to Central Asia, the reactivation of the Five-Power Defense Pact, as well as the recently enhanced U.S. security ties with Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore.

Although I have never read of or heard of a PLA officer endorse U.S. alliances overseas as conducive to stability, peace, security, and economic development, some do take a slightly more sanguine and less-threatened view. One analysis of the 1998 U.S. Defense Department East Asia Strategy Report56

offered a straightforward and uncritical report on the strengthening of U.S. alliances and security partnerships. A senior colonel at the National Defense University observed that “we do not mind U.S. alliances per se, [but] only if they are used to destabilize the region. We understand that they are ‘left over from history’ and that the United States has security interests in the region. But they should not be used to interfere in others’ internal affairs, such as China’s Taiwan.” Another colonel affiliated with the General Staff’s Second Department observed, “In the long-term the U.S. [military] presence in East Asia should decrease step by step; a rapid pullout would cause concerns. U.S. alliances [in the region] are not opposed to China ipso facto, but they should not be used to interfere in our internal affairs—Taiwan.”

Of course, Chinese officials and PLA leaders have, in recent years, put forward an alternative vision for international relations devoid of alliances, which they consider to be “remnants of the Cold War and power politics.” The new Chinese vision is known as the “new security concept.” First put forward by former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) in 1997, it was echoed by Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian in speeches in Japan, Australia, and Singapore in 1998 and 1999. The new security concept was formulated in direct response to the expansion of NATO and efforts by the United States to strengthen its alliances and security ties worldwide. Despite its Pollyannaish prescription for peace and harmony among nations, the new security concept does represent the most systematic and official exposition of China’s prescriptive view, to date, of how international relations should be conducted and security maintained.

PLA perceptions of U.S. alliances often parallel views of U.S. force deployments abroad. Many PLA writers are skeptical that the United States is committed to maintaining 100,000 troops in both the European and Asian theaters. Further, they argue that U.S. forces will increasingly face small and limited conflicts—such as Bosnia and Haiti—that are not conducive to using the U.S. military’s overwhelming firepower and technological prowess.

58. Interview, National Defense University Institute of Strategic Studies, Beijing, April 7, 1999.
Northeast Asia

PLA analysts uniformly express deep suspicions about Japan’s “militarist” tendencies, potential for an expanded regional security role, possible intervention in Korean and Taiwan contingencies, and strengthened defense ties with the United States. They see Japanese defense policy as shifting from being locally to regionally oriented, and changing from passive to active defense. Japan’s new geographic strategic thrust is said to have shifted from the north (Russia and Korea) to the west (China) and south (ASEAN). Some articles are very alarmist about Japan’s military capabilities, including its latent nuclear capabilities. They view the redefined U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty (1996) and Defense Guidelines (1997), and the Four-Year National Defense Buildup Program (1995), as key manifestations of Japan’s new assertiveness and strategic ambitions. Most PLA analysts consider these initiatives as part and parcel of Japan playing the junior partner in the United States’ attempt to contain China. Said one PLA National Defense University specialist, “The common strategic goal of the U.S.-Japan relationship is to contain the ‘China threat’—the newly strengthened alliance allows the United States to use Japan to restrain the growth of China.” Another analyst, however, cautioned that while Japan did indeed have ambitions to become a symmetrical (economic, political, military) great power, serious constraints (domestic and international) would limit its ability to realize these ambitions. PLA analyses concentrate
on changes in Japanese defense doctrine from “exclusive defense” of the home islands to enlarged “surrounding areas”,69 redeployment of forces from Hokkaido to western Japan (opposite China and Korea) and streamlining of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces; procurement of new force projection air and naval weapons platforms; and increasingly close integration of intelligence, training, and planning with U.S. forces.70 Japan’s participation in the U.S. theater missile defense (TMD) research and development program is particularly alarming to PLA strategists and Chinese officials, and they are vigorous in their criticisms of it.71 However, they seem more disturbed by the political and strategic implications of U.S.-Japan cooperation in this area, than by the purely military dimensions of TMD.

The anti-Japanese sentiment one encounters among the PLA at all levels is palpable. Distrust of Japan runs deep, transcends generations, and is virulent among the generation of PLA officers in their forties and fifties. Japan stimulates an emotional reaction not even evident in anti-American diatribes. In conversations with PLA personnel, Americans are regularly subjected to the view that the United States is naïve to consider Japan as an ally or a partner, and they often counsel the United States to be wary of Japanese intentions and military modernization. One leading specialist at the National Defense University’s Institute of Strategic Studies argues that instead of cooperating with Japan, the United States should join forces with China “to keep Japan down!”72

In contrast to their concerns about Japan, PLA analysts seem strangely relaxed about, if sometimes frustrated with, North Korea. They often reflect a view of the security and humanitarian situation in North Korea profoundly different from that found in Washington or Tokyo. While many PLA interlocutors generally support U.S. goals of a nonnuclear North Korea, the Four-Party Talks, and peace and stability on the peninsula, they privately voice frustration with Pyongyang and emphasize Beijing’s limited influence over North Korea. They advocate marketization and international opening of North Korea’s economy, and caution against the potentially dangerous effects of pressuring Pyongyang. For China and the PLA, the maintenance of North Korea as a

71. Numerous interviews, Beijing, October and December 1998.
72. Interview, National Defense University Institute of Strategic Studies, Beijing, April 6, 1999.
sovereign state and security buffer is the highest priority.\textsuperscript{73} Several military writings and interviews have criticized South Korea and the United States for exacerbating tensions and continuing the Cold War on the Korean peninsula.\textsuperscript{74} One PLA general attacked joint exercises and the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula as "provocative," calling for their eventual removal.\textsuperscript{75} Chinese officials and analysts, civilian and military alike, are strongly critical of what they describe as U.S. "pressure tactics" against Pyongyang. One PLA general asks, "What is the purpose of U.S. pressure? To force North Korea into collapse or into changing and developing?"\textsuperscript{76} "The tougher the U.S. response and pressure, the closer to the brink [North] Korean leaders will be willing to go," another general opined.\textsuperscript{77} PLA interlocutors argue that China does not wish to see weapons of mass destruction on the Korean peninsula (including potential U.S. weapons in South Korea), and that the PRC seeks stability on the peninsula. Yet, bizarrely, they do not believe that the humanitarian situation in the North is dire, denying evidence of famine, starvation, and malnutrition. ("The North Koreans have a great capacity to endure hardship," they often argue.) Nor do they express deep concern about North Korean ballistic missile tests, possible nuclear weapon development sites, or the likelihood that the country and the Kim Jong Il regime may implode.\textsuperscript{78} Some PLA analysts are even optimistic about North Korea's prospects.\textsuperscript{79} Most PLA officers, however, would likely be opposed to the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula in the event of Korean reunification. One member of the Institute of Strategic Studies at the PLA National Defense University did concede, however, that such a presence would be a matter to be resolved by the U.S. and reunified Korean governments, and that China would not in principle oppose such forces—if they remained south of the 38th parallel and had no offensive mission other than protection of Korean national security.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{74} Pan Junfeng, "Zhanlue geju, daguo guanxi, Ya-Tai huanjing," [Strategic areas, great power relations, and the Asia-Pacific environment], \textit{Guofang}, No. 1 (1997), pp. 10–11.
\textsuperscript{75} Interview, China Institute of International Strategic Studies, Beijing, December 6, 1998.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} PLA interlocutors have conveyed these views in numerous conversations over the last two years. See Eric McVadon, "Chinese Military Strategy for the Korean Peninsula," in Lilley and Shambaugh, \textit{China's Military Faces the Future}, pp. 271–294.
\textsuperscript{80} Interview, National Defense University, Beijing, April 6, 1999. For a more diverse range of PLA views, see McVadon, "Chinese Military Strategy for the Korean Peninsula"; and Taeho Kim,
Uncertainty about the Neighbors to the North

Over the past decade, China’s security calculations with Russia and the Central Asian republics to the north have fundamentally transformed. Moscow and Beijing have moved from the brink of nuclear war to a “strategic partnership.” Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that Russia has turned from China’s adversary to its ally (as both countries profess that this is not their goal), this new strategic partnership has substantially enhanced their mutual and regional security and has given them common cause in opposing “hegemonism and power politics” (Beijing’s code words for the United States). The 1999 Kosovo crisis and Yugoslav war helped to cement the newfound Sino-Russian strategic solidarity, but even before Kosovo the two governments had increasingly begun to side together against the United States in the United Nations Security Council and other international forums. Since Kosovo, the anti-U.S. rhetoric has become more explicit and frequent—as was evident at the August 1999 summit of Presidents Jiang Zemin, Boris Yeltsin, and their counterparts from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. There is little doubt that Chinese leaders and strategists view the United States as the greatest threat to world peace, as well as to China’s own national security and foreign policy goals. China’s 1998 Defense White Paper is only thinly veiled on this point: “Hegemonism and power politics remain the main source of threats to world peace and stability; the cold war mentality and its influence still have a certain currency, and the enlargement of military blocs and strengthening of military alliances have added factors of instability to international security. Some countries, by relying on their military advantages, pose military threats to other countries, even resorting to armed intervention.” Thus far, Sino-Russian opposition to the United States and its allies has remained largely rhetorical, although stepped-up arms sales from Moscow to

83. See, for example, “Anti-Western Edge to Russian-Chinese Summit,” Jamestown Foundation Monitor, August 26, 1999, available at www.jamestown.org/htm/pub-monitor/htm..
Beijing and joint diplomatic initiatives on Kosovo, Iraq, and TMD suggest that their “strategic partnership” is becoming more tangible.

The relaxation of tensions between China and Russia has been evident in several spheres. The two former enemies have completely demarcated their long-disputed 4,340-mile border and have demilitarized the border region. Both sides have placed limits on ground forces, short-range attack aircraft, and antiair defenses within 100 kilometers of the frontier. As part of two landmark treaties—the Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field along the Border Areas and the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Areas—signed together with Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in April 1996 and April 1997, respectively, China and the other signatories agreed to force reductions that will limit each to maintain a maximum of 130,400 troops, 3,900 tanks, and 4,500 armored vehicles within this 100-kilometer zone. Other provisions of the agreements prohibit military exercises exceeding 40,000 personnel, prior notification of exercises and mandatory observers for any involving more than 35,000 personnel, and a limit of one exercise each year of 25,000 personnel or more. China and Russia have also signed several other bilateral agreements to stabilize and enhance their mutual security—including a nuclear nontargeting agreement (1994) and an agreement to prevent accidental military incidents (1994).

The Chinese and Russian heads of state and government have held annual reciprocal summit meetings, while ministerial-level officials shuttle regularly between the two capitals. The two military establishments have forged particularly close relations—including the transfers of substantial numbers of Russian weapons and defense technologies (including training) to China. Russian arms exports to China in 1996 were an estimated $2.1 billion, comprising nearly one-third of their total bilateral trade. Overall, China bought approximately $8 billion in Russian weapons between 1991 and 1999. During the 1990s, these sales included a wide range of weapons, among them: 15 Ilyushin-72 transport aircraft; 100 RD-33 turbofan engines for China’s J-10 fighter; 72 Sukhoi-27 fighters, with a license to coproduce 200 more; 24 Mi-17 transport helicopters; the SA-10 “Grumble” air-defense missile system, with 100 missiles; 4 Kilo-class diesel submarines; 2 Sovremennyi-class guided missile destroyers (currently undergoing sea trials in Russia); 50 T-72 main battle tanks; and 70 armored personnel carriers.85 More recently (August 1999), after four years of negotiation, Moscow and Beijing concluded a deal for 60 Sukhoi-30 fighters.

Overall, two-way trade remains relatively minuscule ($5.5 billion in 1998, representing only 2 percent of total PRC trade volume and less than 5 percent of Russia’s). It is largely limited to compensation trade and some exchange in the spheres of machine building, electronics, power generation, petrochemicals, aviation, space, and military technology and weapons. China and Russia have set a target of $20 billion for two-way trade by 2000, although this seems far too ambitious as the two actually have few economic complementarities. Indeed bilateral trade declined from $6.8 billion in 1997 to $5.5 billion in 1998. In an ironic historical reversal, Beijing even pledged a $5 billion concessionary loan to Moscow in 1998, in an effort to help alleviate its basket-case economy.

Improved Sino-Russian relations are not necessarily mirrored on the perceptual level. In contrast to many Chinese civilian analysts who portray Russia as a passive and weak power in decline that no longer threatens China, some military analysts express reservations about Russia’s long-term strategic ambitions and current defense policies. They argue that Russia seeks to rebuild and reassert itself as a great power, particularly across Eurasia and in East Asia. In both cases, Russia is seen as trying to use collective security mechanisms as a wedge to reassert its strategic presence in lieu of its former military presence in the region. While PLA analysts recognize the problems affecting Russia’s military forces, not all assess the Russian military as atrophied. They point to the Russian armed forces’ increased emphasis on developing large-scale mobile assault forces, while maintaining a robust nuclear deterrent. This is a strategy of necessity, some National Defense University analysts believe, as the Russian navy has collapsed and rusts in port. Although articles in some PLA journals discuss the deteriorating domestic situation in Russia and the im-

---

proved Sino-Russian relationship, there is no commentary in these open-source journals on the extensive military-to-military relationship or on what Russia is doing to assist PLA force modernization.

China’s ties with the Central Asian states have also improved. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China moved quickly to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian republics and has subsequently built sound ties with its new neighbors to the north. Central Asian oil reserves are estimated at about 200 billion barrels, and this has become strategically important to China, which became a net importer of crude oil in 1996 and relied on the Middle East for 53 percent of its total imports in the same year. The PRC has paid particular attention to Kazakhstan, with which it has signed several accords for joint energy exploitation. Accordingly, an oil pipeline has been built between the two countries, which began to carry crude to China in 1997.

Another principal motivation for Beijing to solidify ties with the Central Asian states is its own fears of ethnic unrest among its Muslim and minority populations in Xinjiang Province. Small arms and other support have flowed to insurgents in China’s northwest from Iran, Afghanistan’s Taliban, and sympathetic brethren in the former Soviet Union.

**ASEAN and Multilateral Regional Security**

While China’s relations with Southeast Asia are correct, a wariness in the region exists toward China and the PLA. For their part, PLA analysts tend not to write about Southeast Asia and subregional security issues. Because China considers its maritime claim to the South China Sea to be a “domestic issue,” a position similar to China’s claim on Taiwan, the Liberation Army Daily and other PLA publications do not write about them. One senior PLA intelligence official defined the South China Sea issue as both a “sovereignty matter” (zhuquan yinsu) and a dispute over territory and resources (lingtu yu ziran chongtu).

95. One of the few even to discuss exchanges in the military realm was the National Defense University’s 1997–98 strategic survey. See Pan, *Shijie Junsifu Xingshi*, 1997–98, pp. 277–279.
97. Interview with General Staff Department Second Department official, Beijing, December 8, 1998.
To the extent that PLA interlocutors are positive about the potential for regional cooperative security mechanisms (and they generally are not), they tend to view these regimes as means to constrain U.S. hegemony and to break through the perceived U.S.-Japan containment policy toward China.98 Few, if any, PLA analysts assess the ARF and the idea of cooperative security in their own right; Luo Renshi of the PLA General Staff Department’s China Institute of International Strategic Studies is an exception.99 A retired PLA officer and former Chinese delegate to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Luo is one of China’s most knowledgeable experts on cooperative security institutions. His writings show an appreciation of the underlying norms—including transparency—of such regimes, rather than viewing them as mere tactical instruments to pursue realpolitik. Some, such as Colonel Wu Baiyi of the Foundation for International Strategic Studies (another General Staff Department-affiliated think tank), are more explicit in promoting multilateral security and the new security concept as a means of countering U.S. hegemony and alliances.100 Other PLA interlocutors argue that a new East Asia security architecture should have three overlapping strands: common security, cooperative security, and comprehensive security.101 Most PLA analysts remain wed to traditional geometric and balance-of-power approaches to Asian security, and pay little heed to multilateral institutional mechanisms;102 some, however, see the ARF as evidence of the rising regional role of ASEAN as a “new power.”103

100. Wu Baiyi, “Dong Ya guojia anquan zhengce de tedian yu yitong” [Similarities and differences in East Asian countries’ security policies], unpublished paper (May 1998).
Worries over South Asia

PLA analysts have not published much on South Asia. Unlike their civilian counterparts, prior to 1998, they were even silent about Indian “regional hegemony.” India’s May 1998 nuclear tests, however, sounded an alarm to the Chinese military. “India’s Attempt to Seek Regional Hegemony Has Been Longstanding!” roared a headline in the Liberation Army Daily within days of the blasts.104 Another article in the armed forces newspaper elaborated in unprecedented detail the composition and order of battle of India’s conventional military forces (one wonders how analysts felt describing how much more advanced these forces are compared with the PLA in virtually all conventional categories). “Through fifty years of efforts, India now boasts a mighty army,” the authors observed. To what end is the Indian buildup to be put? The article was clear: “The military strategic targets of India are to seek hegemony in South Asia, contain China, control the Indian Ocean, and strive to become a military power in the contemporary world. To attain these targets, since independence India has always pursued its military strategy of hegemonist characteristics.” The authors continued by chastising the Indian policy of “occupying Chinese territory in the eastern sector of the border region” (saying nothing, of course, about the western sector where Chinese forces occupy 14,500 square kilometers of Indian-claimed territory), targeting its missiles on southern and southwestern China, and “maintaining its military superiority in the Sino-Indian boundary region to consolidate its vested interests and effectively contain China.” India, the authors concluded, “is waiting for the opportune moment for further expansion to continue to maintain its control over weak and small countries in South Asia, advance further southward, and defend its hegemonist status in the region.”105

While PLA vitriol increased, so did its deployments opposite India.106 Other PLA commentators expressed fear of an accidental nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, citing the situation on the subcontinent as “far more serious than the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.”107 The PLA has seemingly found a new adversary in India.

Policy Implications and Conclusions

This article has surveyed the PLA’s perceptions of China’s security environment after the Cold War. It has argued that although China enjoys its most peaceful and least threatening environment since 1949, the PLA nonetheless perceives a variety of sources of instability, uncertainty, and potential threat. Perhaps it is the nature of military analysts and planners worldwide to find (and hence exaggerate) potential threats, even when they do not objectively exist, but the PLA perceptions presented above are notable for their angst. After half a century of feeling encircled by hostile powers, the PLA finds it difficult to break this mind-set.

As perceptions underlie and precede policy decisions and actions, the PLA’s sense of uncertainty about its security environment has implications for the United States and nations near China. The most evident implication is the need to continue to engage the PLA at many levels, officially and unofficially, in security-related dialogues. The United States and other nations must better understand the PLA’s view of the world and the underlying reasons for its perceptions. Interlocutors must also realize that although many of these perceptions are at variance with their own (often times extremely so), and the PLA often seems stubbornly rigid, at the same time these perceptions are not necessarily immutable. Although China’s Leninist political culture and PLA discipline contribute to a remarkable uniformity of articulated perceptions, it is also evident that a range of perspectives exist among PLA officers and between the military and civilian leaders and analysts. These need to be constantly probed and better understood.

The PLA’s views of the United States and its security posture outlined in this article should be of considerable concern for U.S. policymakers, and suggest that the United States should be on guard against Chinese attempts to undermine core U.S. security interests in Asia and elsewhere. Dialogue may increase clarity and understanding—even if it does not narrow differences—but those Americans who interact with the PLA, officially or unofficially, should be under no illusion about the depth of China’s suspicion and animosity toward the United States. This has long been apparent, but it has worsened since the 1999 Yugoslav war and mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, after which popular images of the United States turned from cautiously critical to overtly hostile overnight. The attacks by thousands of Chinese demonstrators on the U.S. embassy in Beijing and consulates elsewhere expressed the depth of public hostility, which was also evident in elite
attitudes and commentary. A torrent of anti-American invective was unleashed in the Chinese media the likes of which had not been seen since the Cultural Revolution. The official People’s Daily, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, published a series of authoritative “Observer” and “Commentator” articles lambasting U.S. “hegemonism,” “imperialism,” “arrogance,” “aggression,” and “expansionism.” One article accused the United States of seeking to become “Lord of the Earth” and compared contemporary U.S. hegemony to the aggression of Nazi Germany.

The political fallout from the embassy bombing and the Yugoslav war will be felt for some time in Sino-American relations, and it has introduced new instability to an inherently fragile relationship. It has also enhanced the element of strategic competition between China and the United States. Despite China’s lack of global political influence and military power projection capabilities, there exists a new strategic competition between the two countries today. Thus far, it has largely been a war of words, despite the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and Chinese “missile diplomacy” near Taiwan in 1995–96. Increasingly, though, the two nations’ hard national security interests rub up against each other in the Asia-Pacific region, the Persian Gulf region, and South Asia, while differences over the Kosovo crisis momentarily brought the strategic competition to Europe. Institutionally, the Sino-American strategic competition is increasingly apparent in the United Nations Security Council and other international forums. Although not yet a new Cold War of geopolitical competition or a “clash of civilizations” in the Huntingtonian sense, the essence of the competition is very much a clash of worldviews about the structure, nature, and norms of international relations and security.


Geography and long-term national interests suggest, however, that the United States and China must coexist in the world and in the Asia-Pacific region. Increasingly, too, the United States and other nations must live with a more capable and modern Chinese military. A valuable opportunity remains to influence how the PLA views the world and the region, how it understands its—and others’—national interests, and the uses to which it will put its new military capabilities. To have a chance to sensitize the PLA to other nations’ perceptions and interests requires, however, that the PLA increase its travel abroad and interact much more extensively with Americans and other foreigners in China.

Given the PLA’s perceptions and suspicions outlined above, it will be an uphill battle working and coexisting with the Chinese military. But coexistence is one sibling of strategic competition, as competitors need not become adversaries. The other—confrontation—is to be avoided if possible. An opportunity remains for the United States and its allies and security partners to establish a strategic relationship of competitive coexistence with elements of cooperation with the PRC. Given the clash of national interests and divisive perceptions outlined in this article, competitive coexistence is probably the most realistic relationship that can be achieved. Even this kind of relationship will require constant high-level attention to policy and hard work by both sides, if an adversarial relationship is to be avoided.