# Chinese Perceptions of U.S. Conventional Military Power

## BOTTOM LINES

- **THE U.S. MILITARY AS A THREAT AND MODEL.**
  Chinese strategists see U.S. military power as the greatest potential threat to China's national security interests. At the same time, they seek to emulate certain aspects.

- **CHINESE ASSESSMENT OF U.S. MILITARY ADVANTAGES AND VULNERABILITIES.**
  Chinese analysts highlight the U.S. military's strengths in high technology weapons, power projection capabilities, and information-intensive joint combat. However, they also believe these U.S. capabilities are vulnerable to disruption.

- **CHINESE RESPONSES.**
  China has responded by developing capabilities to deter U.S. military intervention, or, if deterrence fails, to counter U.S. intervention.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES.**
  The United States should concentrate on convincing the PLA that it is capable of mitigating the vulnerabilities identified in Chinese assessments and developing new concepts and capabilities to prevent the PLA from achieving its objectives.

## By Michael S. Chase

### The U.S. Military as a Threat and Model

Over the past 25 years or so, Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers and Chinese civilian national security analysts have paid keen attention to studying the U.S. military's technology, doctrine, organization, and operations. They view the U.S. military as a threat because of its high-tech weapons and equipment, power projection and long-range precision strike capabilities, and unparalleled ability to conduct information-intensive joint combat operations.

Chinese analysts also devote careful study to U.S. military capabilities under development. For example, they closely follow discussion and debate about conventional prompt global strike (CPGS) capabilities—allowing the United States to strike targets anywhere on Earth in as little as an hour—which China views as a potential threat not only to Chinese conventional forces but also to the survivability of its nuclear deterrent.

Another key area of interest for Chinese analysts is Washington's development of new operational concepts. In particular, many Chinese observers see AirSea Battle as aimed primarily at countering China's growing military power. PLA researchers have also followed debates among U.S. analysts pitting "AirSea Battle" against "offshore control" and related approaches that call for a distant blockade designed to maximize economic pressure on China. Many Chinese analysts view all of this as part of a U.S. plot to "contain" China, or at least to check its regional ambitions and prevent its rise from challenging U.S. interests.

In another sense, however, the U.S. military is an important model for the PLA, one that in many ways can inform its own ongoing efforts to become a more modern and professional military. PLA analysts often highlight the U.S. military's high-tech weapons and advanced information and communications capabilities as representing a standard that an aspiring world-class military must strive to meet. Indeed, they admit with some regularity that they still see U.S. defense technologies as many years ahead of their own.

Chinese military and civilian analysts also highlight organizational and institutional aspects of the U.S. military's dominance. Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. military's excellence in the area of joint operations is clearly a model for the PLA. Beijing is now pursuing military organizational reforms that were previously deferred due to potentially daunting internal obstacles—the goal is clearly to create an organizational model that is better suited to conducting more modern, integrated, and information-intensive joint operations. In addition, PLA officers are interested in learning from other aspects of U.S. military dominance, including in areas such as doctrine, training, and personnel.

Studying the U.S. military in action also presents Chinese analysts with a valuable opportunity to deepen their understanding of modern combat operations. This is vital in part because the PLA has not been involved in major combat operations since China's 1979 border war with Vietnam.

### Chinese Assessments of U.S. Conventional Military Advantages and Vulnerabilities

For China, U.S. air power is a major advantage for the United States and a serious threat to China's own conventional military power. Indeed, many Chinese assessments suggest that U.S. air power is one of the key factors that would make the U.S. military an extremely challenging opponent for China in the event of U.S. intervention in a conflict between China and another country in the region.

Chinese assessments of U.S. naval power generally, and aircraft carriers specifically, emphasize the unparalleled power projection capabilities they provide to the United States. They also focus on U.S. abilities in undersea warfare: specifically, they examine the U.S. Navy's submarine force, which they see as the most technologically advanced and operationally capable in the world. This makes the submarine force an extremely serious threat to China's military, given China's relative weakness in anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

Chinese analysts also perceive U.S. space and cyberspace capabilities as important advantages for the U.S. military. Specifically, they focus on U.S. ability in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), communications, early warning, and navigation and positioning. They also appear to believe that the United States seeks the ability to deny the use of space to an adversary in the event of a military conflict. Similarly, Chinese military authors see the United States as the world's cutting-edge cyber warfare power, and they believe this presents serious challenges to Chinese interests in cyberspace. Indeed, many Chinese military officers and security analysts clearly believe the U.S. military has the upper hand in the "network warfare" struggle, not the PLA.

At the same time, however, Chinese strategists see the United States as beset with serious vulnerabilities. In particular, they see many of the capabilities the U.S. military relies upon to operate effectively in the region—most notably forward bases, space capabilities, computer networks, and information technology systems—as potentially vulnerable to disruption. For example, the location of U.S. military bases in the Pacific, like in Okinawa and Guam, makes them vulnerable to attack by China's conventional long-range strike capabilities.

PLA strategists also see U.S. dependence on space systems and computer networks as a vulnerability China can exploit to complicate U.S. conventional military operations. Because they see space and cyberspace as "offense dominant" domains—ones in which the vulnerability of key assets gives the attacker the advantage over the defender—they believe China can degrade or deny access to U.S. satellites and computer networks more easily than the United States can defend them. In addition, Chinese analysts also appear to see geography as working to their advantage in likely conflict scenarios involving U.S. military intervention along China's periphery, despite the U.S. military's overall lead in terms of equipment and personnel.

## Chinese Responses

Given the threat U.S. military intervention could pose to the PLA's ability to achieve its objectives in a regional conflict, it should come as no surprise that China's response to this problem has involved modernizing its military capabilities, with an emphasis on developing "counter-intervention" capabilities to deter U.S. military intervention, or if that fails, to ensure that U.S. involvement does not prevent the PLA from accomplishing its goals.

Official and unofficial assessments of Chinese military modernization highlight a wide range of advances in China's capabilities for counter-intervention operations, which U.S. analysts generally refer to as anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. For example, China has invested substantial resources in the development of conventional cruise and ballistic missiles to strike targets like U.S. military bases in the region. China has also developed and started to deploy anti-ship ballistic missiles to hold U.S. aircraft carriers at bay. In addition, China's assessment of the importance of space and information dominance, and its analysis of U.S. dependence on potentially vulnerable space systems and computer networks, have motivated Beijing's development of space and cyber warfare capabilities.

## Recommendations for the United States

As these developments continue to unfold, closely tracking and assessing Chinese perceptions of U.S. conventional military power is becoming increasingly essential to help inform U.S. decisions in areas such as acquisition, basing, strategy, and doctrine. It also helps shape an effective approach to deterring China from using force or coercion to resolve its maritime territorial disputes.

For example, the United States must concentrate on convincing the PLA that the U.S. military can not only mitigate potential vulnerabilities but also develop new concepts and capabilities that would allow it to prevent the PLA from achieving its objectives in any regional conflict. It is essential to demonstrate that the U.S. military will remain an extremely challenging opponent even as Chinese capabilities continue to improve. The purpose should be to ensure that Chinese leaders never conclude they can employ military power to achieve their political objectives, or at least that they cannot be confident of doing so rapidly, decisively, and at low cost.

Toward this end, the U.S. military should continue to conduct exercises and demonstrate capabilities that highlight its ability to operate effectively in stressing counter-intervention situations. This could include actions such as demonstrating the ability to operate from numerous, dispersed, and potentially unexpected locations; emphasizing U.S. denial and deception capabilities to generate uncertainty about China's ability to observe and assess U.S. actions; demonstrating capabilities that enable it to interfere with Chinese military operations from longer distances, beyond the reach of China's counter-intervention capabilities or at least at ranges where they are more limited; and highlighting capabilities and operational concepts that would enable the U.S. military to successfully operate in an environment in which an adversary has degraded U.S. space systems, computer networks, and other information technology. Finally, the United States should also continue to take military and diplomatic actions that underscore U.S. resolve to defend its allies and security partners. ♦

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