

2001

China's Military Faces the Future,

Jianxiang Bi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Bi, Jianxiang (2001) "China's Military Faces the Future," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 54 : No. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss1/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

with China; and the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. These events illustrate a dynamic that pits increased Asian assertiveness against U.S. desire for the status quo.

Bracken argues these points persuasively. Historically, these kinds of systemic transformations have been the most dangerous. In the fifth century B.C., Thucydides asserted that the Peloponnesian War had begun due to Spartan fear of rising Athenian power. Thus, a greater discussion of how to integrate such diverse, assertive, and armed Asian nations would have been interesting.

It could be objected that Bracken incorrectly treats many dissimilar nations, governments, and cultures as if they were the same. Simply stated, it makes a difference what kind of government is in power. In addition, other variables are not accounted for, such as the disintegration of the Iranian theocracy (less than twenty-five years ago Iran was our staunchest ally in the Middle East). In North Korea, whether a “soft landing” or a more violent collapse occurs could fundamentally influence regional transformation. Last, the effect of potentially severe ethnic problems in China is not addressed.

Despite these shortcomings, Bracken deals convincingly with important topics. Footnotes are not to be found, and his bibliography is limited given the breadth of the subject, but he has integrated information from a variety of fields. Defense and foreign policy students and practitioners alike should read *Fire in the East*.

PHILIP L. RITCHESON
Falls Church, Virginia



Lilley, James R., and David Shambaugh, eds. *China's Military Faces the Future*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 356pp. \$29.95

This collection of high-quality essays by some of the leading experts on the Chinese military is the product of the 1997 Seventh Annual Conference on the People's Liberation Army (PLA), sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute. The authors, although inspired by different security and threat perceptions, present sober, straightforward, and reasonable assessments of PLA efforts to modernise itself in the 1990s and of its prospects for the immediate future. Evidence drawn from the essays shows that the PLA is increasingly modern, confident, and assertive but that it has not yet developed sophisticated theories and technologies comparable to those of the United States or relevant to fighting an American-style, high-tech limited war, or any war beyond its borders. The provocative variations on this theme, shaped by starkly different—seemingly contradictory, yet ultimately reinforcing—dynamics of Chinese and East Asian politics, are instrumental in defining the evolution and nature of the PLA.

This perceptive, informative, and well written book is divided into four sections: on the “New High Command,” “Doctrine, Strategy, and Weapons,” the “Support Base,” and “China's Northeast Asian Security Environment.” Each section has its strengths. After a careful but critical examination of biographical materials on new military leaders, the first provides unusual insight into the PLA's inner circle of decision making by identifying two fundamental changes in civil-military relations in the post-Deng era. First, none of the top party leaders has any military background or connections, whereas none

of the senior military commanders and political commissars has any experience in party politics. Second, professionalism and corporatism prevail in the PLA. This distinct disconnection between the party and the PLA challenges the traditional mind-set of the “interlocking directorate of the party and the military,” namely, that the party is the army, while the army is the party.

The second section gives readers a serious but enjoyable discussion of doctrinal, strategic, and weaponry issues reflecting different schools of thought among scholars and analysts. One school holds that the PLA would no longer squander human life by sending waves of peasants against Western firepower as Mao Zedong once did. Advocates of this way of thinking argue that high-tech weapons have become the PLA’s new hallmark but that it has a long way to go before it achieves the level of operational capability and technological sophistication its leadership desires. The fatal weakness lies in its strategy, doctrine, and weapons, which remain thirty to forty years behind those of the United States. The other school of thought insists that the PLA is in fact not so far behind the United States. Data offered here (the excellent bibliography in Chinese and the appendix) is empirical proof that the PLA actively studies the revolution in military affairs and is applying its lessons, developing sophisticated weapons, and acquiring advanced combat systems for asymmetric warfare. The modernized PLA could likely threaten the vital interests of the United States and its East Asian allies in the near future. Whether or not these concerns are justified, there is little doubt that the PLA is catching up with its regional counterparts.

The third section offers a professionally knowledgeable overview and analysis of the PLA’s budget, logistics, and technology, detailing some “contradictions” inherent in the support system. For example, the PLA’s modest defence budget is, at least for now, qualitatively different from those of industrialized countries; its essence is different, and its implications are different. For whatever reasons, the PLA has remained integrated within a larger socioeconomic composite that is able to provide unlimited resources for soldiers and to focus procurement priorities on items suitable for conflict scenarios with Taiwan.

A more troublesome issue, and one central to PLA logistics, is a continued debate on centralization and decentralization. Lack of consensus and resources often forces the central command to encourage units to find their own ways to survive economically or to upgrade their weapons and equipment, even while it tries to create a unified, reliable, and effective support system.

The PLA’s most vulnerable aspect remains its technological obsolescence. Even though the PLA closely watches developments in military technologies, progress in its key technologies is very slow, and technical difficulties make its military modernisation programs less than ideal. The resulting inconsistent policies and uneven development may eventually neutralize the effectiveness of its future operations.

The final section examines regional security issues with respect to the Korean Peninsula and Japan, areas of deep concern in Washington at a time when America’s presence there is already stretched thin. The analysis shows that China’s approach to Korea is rational. The most visible factor is that Beijing

does not want Pyongyang to collapse, politically or economically; at the same time, Beijing is pessimistic about the reunification of North and South Korea. Similarly, emerging nationalism in China and in Japan, and military modernisation in both nations, strengthen their threat perceptions. A confrontation between these two regional powers is possible, but a military one would appear to be highly unlikely in the near future. In short, regional stability and security hang on the joint efforts of all regional powers.

The book has two major flaws concerning PLA capabilities. First, the authors of these essays rely exclusively on their distinct assessments of PLA material power and terms of reference, and these leave unrecognized the role of Chinese spiritual power—that is, political indoctrination and nationalism—and of the incalculable advantages to the Chinese of fighting a war, whether high-tech or low-tech, on their homeland. Second, naval readers will regret the lack of an in-depth study of the Chinese navy. Also, there is no mention of recent developments in divesting the PLA of commercial enterprises, implementing the regulations of joint operations, or in introducing a joint support system.

All in all, the book is not only highly recommended for students of PLA studies but will undoubtedly also interest readers who have a general concern for Chinese and East Asian security.

JIANXIANG BI
Kanata, Ontario, Canada



Kim, Duk-ki. *Naval Strategy in Northeast Asia: Geostrategic Goals, Policies and Prospects*. Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 2000. 261pp. \$57.50

The growing economic, strategic, and cultural importance of Asia calls for a U.S. foreign policy attuned to the unique environment of this diverse area. As this economic dreadnought emerges from the fog of uneven treaties, wars, and cultural misunderstanding, U.S. politico-military thinkers must recognize the pressures of history and geography that will dislodge any policy not firmly anchored in Asian realities.

Northeast Asia in particular, with its increasing importance in world trade, its potential for undersea resource development, archipelagic territorial disputes, and the possibility of environmental catastrophe caused by its rapid industrialization and nuclear-waste dumping at sea, is vital to U.S. geostrategic interests. These factors, coupled with historical regional animosities, a diminishing Russian and U.S. military presence, a naval arms buildup, and the associated ability to project power from the sea, highlight that security in Northeast Asia has assumed a decidedly maritime flavor.

Competing interests and local concerns abound. China desires to be a world power and regional leader, if not a full-fledged Asian hegemon. Japan quietly remilitarizes as it accepts a larger regional security role. South Korea desires unification of the peninsula under democratic rule, eagerly awaiting the collapse of the intransigent and Stalinist regime. Finally, the United States and Russia have growing regional economic and political interests, accompanied by a waning military presence brought on by budget constraints and defense retrenchments. Thus Northeast Asia, a bubbling cauldron that may boil over at any moment, is a focus of world attention.

This book is largely based on research for the author's doctoral dissertation.