ARMING THE DRAGON: HOW MUCH U.S. MILITARY AID TO CHINA

by

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The focus of this paper will be less on the military modernization of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and more on the U.S. role in that modernization. Nonetheless, a few descriptive remarks about the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are in order.

The PLA, which includes strategic nuclear forces, the army, navy, and air force, totals some four million men and women, with approximately five million reservists.

Strategic nuclear forces include a handful of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM), and approximately 110 Intermediate- and Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles. The PRC has given top priority to the development of its strategic forces as a deterrent against both superpowers. PRC strategists indicate they are satisfied with China's present minimal deterrent force. Nonetheless, Beijing continues to emphasize nuclear weapons and their delivery systems because Soviet nuclear capabilities in Asia are improving rapidly.

China recognizes that its ability to deter the Soviet Union depends upon Kremlin perceptions that any attack against the PRC will result in an unacceptably high level of damage against the Soviet homeland. PRC priority given to the development of its SLBM force reflects Chinese determination to build a survivable second strike capability. Similarly, Beijing's opposition to President Reagan's "Star Wars" concept reflects, at least in part, PRC concerns that China's limited ICBM force might be neutralized.

China's army is the largest in the world with some three million troops. A 25 percent reduction of army personnel is underway, as well as a reduction of eleven military regions to seven. These force reductions and organizational reforms have as their objective the creation of a leaner and meaner army. Currently, there are only about 13 armored divisions as opposed to 118 infantry divisions. China justifiably is proud of its army, and most PLA officers express

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confidence in their ability to lure foreign aggressors deep into China and to annihilate them.

Despite the stated optimism, for several years there has been an ongoing debate within the PLA over the merits of "People's War" under modern conditions. A great deal of interest has been shown in the U.S. Air-Land Battle concept envisioned for Central Europe. However, the PLA would have difficulty implementing this strategy because of its lack of heavy helicopters.[1]

The PLA's most recent performance in the 1979 punitive expedition against Vietnam was not notable. Units had to signal each other by hand; orders were not obeyed because officers were not recognized on the field of battle; casualties were extraordinarily high; and the air force would not provide cover for fear of being shot down.

The PLA navy is large in terms of numbers, but light in individual ship tonnage. The navy is composed of three or more nuclear powered and 107 diesel attack submarines, 44 destroyers and frigates, more than 70 large patrol craft, and about 800 fast attack craft of various designations. In addition, the navy has about 800 shore-based aircraft, including 600 fighters and light bombers, and some 86,500 Marines.

The Chinese navy is divided into three fleets. In the North Sea Fleet there are about 500 vessels of all types; the East Sea Fleet has some 750; and the South Sea Fleet totals about 600 vessels.

The Chinese navy is considered a coastal defense force, although the PRC is moving in the direction of a blue water fleet. During November 1985-January 1986, Beijing sent a destroyer and supply ship 12,000 nautical miles on a goodwill visit to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. One of the main reasons China is increasing her power projection capabilities is to enforce her claims to islands and seabed resources in the South China Sea.

According to Jane's Defence Weekly, China's navy modernization program is focusing on three areas of priority: "upgrading electronics throughout the force, updating the surface fleet, and modernizing the submarine fleet by acquiring Western hardware and electronics. The hardware-related goals are intended to overcome the fact that the fleet is not well equipped for modern war, particularly with the Soviet Union as a potential foe."[2]

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1. June T. Dreyer, "The Military Balance: Can It Be Kept?", paper presented at a seminar on U.S.-China relations sponsored by the Asian Studies Center of The Heritage Foundation, January 28, 1986.

2. "Bringing China's Navy Up To Date," Jane's Defence Weekly, January 25, 1986, p. 113.

The PLA air force has about 120 medium bombers, some thought to be nuclear capable and some armed with anti-ship missiles. There are also about 500 light bombers, 500 ground attack fighters, and more than 4,000 fighter interceptors. More on the air force modernization program will be mentioned later in this paper.

Despite the large size of the PLA and its impressive defensive strength, Chinese armed forces have major weaknesses. As identified by U.S. analysts as early as 1980, these weaknesses include: lack of mobility and mechanization; poor logistics systems for sustained offensive operations; marginal command and control for combined arms or joint service operations; obsolescent weaponry; limited power projection capability; obsolescent aircraft and avionics; poor pilot training; inadequate communications; limited defense industry capability; obsolescent ships and onboard equipment; and limited amphibious lift capability.[3]

Sino-American military cooperation has focused on remedying these weaknesses within certain political parameters. Neither side, for its own domestic and foreign policy reasons, wants to give the appearance of a close military relationship with the other.

The initial steps in opening a dialogue between the military establishments of the two countries took place in 1980. The visit of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to Beijing in January 1980 and that of Deputy Chief of the General Staff Liu Hauqing in May and soon-to-be Defense Minister Geng Biao in June of that year were critical to the early relationship.[4]

Numerous studies were made during the 1978-1980 period to determine how the U.S. could assist the PLA to modernize. One official document leaked to the press was Consolidated Guidance No. 8, which reportedly estimated that $50 billion in U.S. military aid would be required to make the PLA an effective deterrent against the Soviet Red Army. The document described China as playing a "pivotal role" in the global balance of power and stated that it would be in the U.S. interest "to encourage Chinese actions that would heighten Soviet security concerns." The study recommended that the United States help modernize the PLA, because China then would be able to tie down Soviet

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3. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, and Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, The Implications of U.S.-China Military Cooperation: A Workshop (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 31.

4. Edward Ross, "U.S.-China Military Relations," paper presented at a seminar on U.S.-China relations sponsored by the Asian Studies Center of The Heritage Foundation, January 28, 1986. Mr. Ross's presentation was the most comprehensive statement to date by an Administration official on Sino-American military cooperation.

forces in a war involving NATO. The Guidance said Washington should consider the possibility of military support to Beijing if a Sino-Soviet nuclear or conventional war broke out.[5]

Although hope for a "quick fix" of the PLA diminished in light of the magnitude of the problems confronting the modernization of the Chinese armed forces, the idea of having China as an ally against the Soviet Union has persisted. The Fiscal Year 1984-1985 Defense Guidance, for example, is reported to have projected China as an ally in the event of a Soviet invasion of the Persian Gulf.[6]

The willingness of the United States to sell arms to the PRC on a case-by-case commercial basis was first announced by Secretary of State Alexander Haig in June 1981. Three years later, in June 1984, Ronald Reagan cleared the way for direct U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to the PRC by declaring, as required by law, that the sale of U.S. weapons to China would "strengthen the security of the United States and promote world peace."

After a period of rocky Sino-American relations during 1981 and 1982, a more cooperative era emerged in May 1983 when Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige announced the liberalization of the sale of dual-use technology to the PRC.[7] A few months later, the basic guidelines for Sino-American military cooperation were established during the visit of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to China in September 1983.

The framework established by Secretary Weinberger included high-level strategic dialogue between senior U.S. and Chinese military leaders; functional military exchanges between the Chinese and American armed services; and the selection of several military mission areas for future arms sales and technology transfers. In subsequent discussions, the mission areas were defined as anti-tank, artillery, air defense, and surface-ship antisubmarine warfare.

Commercial munitions list equipment already sold to the PRC include 24 S-70C Sikorsky helicopters, 5 GE LM2500 gas turbine naval engines, coastal defense radars, and communications equipment. Negotiations are ongoing for numerous other items as well.

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5. Consolidated Guidance No. 8 was summarized in The New York Times, November 4, 1979, p. A1.

6. For highlights of the document, see China Post (Taipei), January 18, 1983, p. 1, citing UPI sources in Washington.

7. Beijing reacted highly favorably to this announcement. See Xinhua, June 28, 1983, in FBIS-China, June 28, 1983, p. B1.

The first U.S. government-to-government sale of military equipment to the PRC was announced in September 1985, a $98 million package including the design and layout of an artillery munitions factory and various technical data packages for 155mm projectiles.

This year additional Foreign Military Sales (FMS) transactions are possible. A co-production agreement for the Improved TOW anti-tank guided missile is being negotiated, as is co-production of the Mark 46, Mod-2 lightweight ASW torpedo. Most controversial, perhaps, is a pending avionics modernization package for China's high altitude interceptor, the F-8.

The F-8 is described by the Administration as a twin-engine, delta wing, high altitude interceptor. The avionics package would give 50 F-8s an all-weather, day-night capability. The $500 million package includes avionics components integrated by a U.S. prime defense contractor under U.S. Air Force supervision.

The integration would take six years to complete and would include an airborne radar; navigation equipment; a heads-up display; mission computer; an air data computer; and a data bus. The F-8s receiving the avionics package would have to be modified; but this modified version, dubbed the F-8-2 or F-8B, may already exist.

There are a number of objections to the avionics package which should be considered.

First, none of our Asian friends agree with the sale. ASEAN does not, South Korea does not, Japan does not, and Taiwan certainly does not. The reason is simple. The sale of advanced avionics to the PRC adversely affects the regional balance of power. While the United States is evaluating the sale in terms of how best to help China deter the Soviet Union, most of the rest of Asia is looking at how the sale adds to the Chinese threat to the region.

Second, the purpose of the sale seems to be misdirected. The F-8 was designed 20 years ago to counter a high-flying, subsonic Soviet bomber threat. But with plenty of SS-20s and Backfire bombers now in the region, the Soviet Union is not likely to send slow high altitude bombers over China. And if they do, they certainly will be escorted by interceptors far superior to the F-8. Therefore, the deterrent capability of the enhanced F-8 is of marginal utility against the Soviet Union. But the improved F-8 can make a big difference in regional conflicts between China and her smaller noncommunist neighbors such as Taiwan.

Third, although the Administration claims that the avionics package is an end-item sale and does not involve co-assembly or co-production or the transfer of design or production technologies, this may not be the intention of the PRC. What is important to China is not simply 50 avionics packages, but rather the technology the

packages contain and the possibility of integrating that technology with other systems.

For example, the radar, which apparently will have a range of about 35-37 nautical miles plus a look-down capability, can be integrated with beyond visual range radar guided missiles and heat-seeking, all aspects short-range missiles. There is some indication the Chinese may have acquired a few French R-530 radar missiles and the Pytheon III infra-red missile for the purpose improving their own line of advanced air-to-air missiles.

It should also be noted that the heads-up display weapons aiming component of the avionics package will give the F-8 first sighting and first attack capability, a critical advantage in gaining air superiority.

It seems reasonable to expect that during the six years needed to integrate and install the F-8 avionics package, the PRC will seek to broaden technology cooperation with the United States. For several years now, China has been looking to purchase new fighter engines. Talks are ongoing with the United States over the GE-404 and PW-1120 engines. Moreover, China currently is developing follow-on fighters such as the F-10 and the F-12. Both of these will need an advanced avionics and weapons package, as well as powerful, reliable engines.

Thus, the avionics package being offered the PRC should not be seen as an isolated sale, but rather the cutting edge of a substantial improvement in China's air force.

Fourth, despite Administration disclaimers, the avionics package may have an adverse impact on the qualitative balance of power in the Taiwan Strait.

It is widely accepted that Taiwan presently enjoys air superiority over the Strait. The enhanced F-8B, however, with its longer-range radar (about twice the range as Taiwan's), its look-down capability, and its heads-up display weapons aiming component could---if combined with medium-range and short-range missiles with all aspects capability--establish air superiority over the Taiwan Strait.

The F-8 could do this without engaging in Korean War-style dogfights, but rather by positioning itself at high altitudes, locating Taiwan's lower flying fighters (which do not have radar capable of looking up), and then dropping down and attacking Taiwan's fighters with beyond visual range missiles.

It should also be kept in mind that Taiwan's F-5E co-production line will shut down in a few months, that the F-5E is a small plane and not much more can be done to enhance its capability, and that

Taiwan's own domestically produced fighter will not be operational before the mid-1990s--at best.

Admittedly, the avionics sale is not a short-term problem for the United States or its noncommunist Asian friends. But it could pose a long-term threat to U.S. friends if the PRC is able--as it is attempting--to integrate the avionics package with longer-range missiles and a more powerful engine.

If, despite all of this, the Administration proceeds with the avionics sale, then the Administration ought to take steps to enhance the defense capabilities of noncommunist Asia. In the case of Taiwan, this would mean either a strengthened U.S. defense commitment, the sale of an advanced fighter such as the F-20 with appropriate avionics and armament, or a very significant upgrading of the technology sold to Taiwan to enable it to build its own air defense capabilities. To do any less would send a clear signal that the U.S. gradually was abandoning Taiwan.

For the Reagan Administration to introduce technology which could tip air superiority over the Taiwan Strait to the mainland's favor is a very serious matter. Such a step would weaken Taiwan's security; and it would send a disturbing message to ASEAN and Northeastern Asian allies that the U.S. was an unreliable friend who bases policy on short-term expediency rather than long-term commitments. In an era of rapidly expanding Soviet military presence in the region, the image of long-term commitment to one's friends is a far more useful image for Washington to convey.

The avionics sale to China is a complicated issue which brings into play conflicting national interests. But what is clear, I hope, is that the pending sale is not an open and shut case as the Administration would like the public to believe. There are some real problems which should be addressed before Congress rubber-stamps this transaction.

The avionics sale is useful to examine as a case study because it raises many unanswered questions regarding the U.S. military relationship with the PRC. For example:

- o Are we concentrating too much on the Soviet threat in Asia and not paying enough attention to the long-term security concerns of our Asian friends who worry about the future intentions of China?
- o How effective against the Soviet Union will be the weapons and technology we sell to the PRC; and if they are not effective, what is the purpose in selling Beijing hardware which can be used only against China's weaker, noncommunist neighbors?

o Is a stronger PRC likely to be more cooperative with the United States in Asia, or will it pursue policies increasingly counter to our own interests?

These are some of the questions that were debated at the outset of Sino-American military relations. That satisfactory answers have not been forthcoming suggests that our military relationship with the PRC should proceed much more cautiously than our political, economic, and cultural ties.

Some sort of military relationship with China is in the national interests of both Washington and Beijing. But clearer guidelines need to be established by the Administration.

Perhaps the framework of Sino-American military cooperation defined by Secretary Weinberger can be useful here. We can continue a high-level dialogue between the military establishments of both countries. We can exchange military officers for training purposes. Exchange of intelligence can be useful, and symbols of cooperation such as port calls and naval passing exercises in the South China Sea create no real problems. We can even sell limited amounts of weapons to China as long as these remain primarily ground-based defensive systems.

But an upper limit on U.S. arms sales to the PRC has to be established to avoid serious problems in the future. U.S. interests are not served by selling China advanced weapons such as the F-8 avionics package. These sales undermine the security of Taiwan, make it more difficult for Washington to balance the requirements found in the Taiwan Relations Act and the August 17, 1982, U.S.-PRC Joint Communique, and demonstrate U.S. insensitivity to the long-term regional concerns of noncommunist Asia.

Clearly, in the case of the avionics package and similar sales, the costs to the United States outweigh the benefits.

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