

To what extent is the 'China threat' a legitimate concern for regional security in the Asia-Pacific?



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This essay will explore the notion of a 'China threat' and its implications on regional security in the Asia-Pacific. The essay maintains that the notion of China threat is a legitimate security concern for the Asia-Pacific. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) rapid rise to become a major economic power and its current projection to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy as soon as 2028, according to some estimates (BBC News 2020), has been subject to awe and suspicion. This rapid economic growth is the background to the issue of the China threat which can be traced back to early 1993 in the US (Storey and Yee 2002). Another factor contributing to this issue is differences in political ideology. The collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent end of the Cold War with the West emerging as victorious seemed to confirm that there was no viable alternative to the US-led international order. Consequently, the PRC's authoritarian socialist political system and its ability of maintaining high economic growth rates since 1978 and how the PRC will use its substantial growth in wealth has aroused suspicion among conservative circles in the US and its allies in the region (Storey and Yee 2002). The PRC has long been increasing its military capabilities, notably its air force and naval capabilities (Liff and Ikenberry 2014) and has demonstrated its progress in recent years. Contrary to its initial rise to the IR agenda, I argue that China's economic prospects are no longer the dominant aspect of the China threat rather it is the upgrading of the PRC's armed forces with the potential of fostering a security dilemma.

The essay aims to provide a rationale that justifies security concerns over the PRC's threatening military modernisation by analysing how it is perceived by actors within the Asia-Pacific. Due to the complex and controversial nature of the China threat this essay will adopt and expand on the analytical framework used by Amaka Satoshi. This framework proposes that the China threat should be analysed in the following dimensions: threat as image; threat as intention and threat as capability (1997). The first section of the essay will focus on threat as image and answer the following questions: how does the PRC's foreign policy and actions constitute a threat? Who is threatened and it is rational for them to be threatened? The next section, 'threat as intention', will explore what the PRC intends to do with its increasing power and how this threatens neighbouring states, regional stability, and the status quo. The final section will focus on threat as capability. Does the PRC have the capacity to be a credible threat? And how might a China threat materialise?

Threat as image

A key and controversial aspect of the idea of a China threat is that its proponents rely on threat perceptions and perceptions are subjective. The implications of this are many: different states hold different perceptions; policymakers may be threatened whereas the public are not; past experiences may skew perceptions; insecurity and uncertainty can lead to a security dilemma. Consequently, to reach a critical analysis of the China threat within this framework of threat as image requires that the above implications are disclosed to avoid a biased or irrational analysis of a China threat.

Classical realism maintains that states are driven by humans who have an innate 'will to power' quality (Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 10). Thus, from a classical realist perspective the PRC's use of force to consolidate its power domestically, most notably in the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, highlights that the PRC

has the 'will power' to use force as a means to ends both domestically and internationally. The occupation of the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef is a prime example. Though no fighting occurred, the occupation was clearly military in nature with the erection of four structures equipped with a radar station and large enough to facilitate landing pads for helicopters. Furthermore, Mischief Reef lies within the 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines thus violates the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Storey and Yee 2002).

In addition, the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis from 1995 to 1996 and the PRC's continued emphasis on upholding the 'One China' principle, in which Taiwan is viewed as an 'inalienable part of one China to be reunified one day' (BBC News 2017) supports the China threat theory particularly from the perspectives of Taiwan and the USA. The PRC first demonstrated itself as a legitimate threat in this regard when it responded to what it perceived as moves towards Taiwanese independence from President Lee-Teng-hui. Beijing conducted provocative missile tests close to Taiwan followed by military exercises off the coast between 1995 and 1996. As a result, the US sent two carrier battle groups within the vicinity of Taiwan in March 1996 to demonstrate support, provoking another show of force by the PRC with some 150,000 troops (Storey and Yee 2002). This demonstration of force towards Taiwan has been a salient issue for the national security of Taiwan and the interests of the US as Taiwan's security guarantor. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) routinely violates Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), with a record number of 103 incursions within a 24-hour period in September 2023. Likewise, when US House of Representatives speaker, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taipei in a show of solidarity with Taiwan, the PRC orchestrated unprecedented provocations including ballistic missile launches over the island, air and naval operations across the centreline and on the edge of Taiwan's territorial waters, and a wave of cyber-attacks (Haenle and Sher 2022). These demonstrations of force imply that China's image does constitute a threat. There are some objections to this however, stemming from structural realism and liberal internationalism.

Structural realism argues that states merely aim to survive in an international structure characterised by anarchy. Waltz (1979) highlights that states seek security above all else. When analysed from this perspective the extensive military modernisation by the PRC does not appear to constitute a threat. China has been subject to domination by various powers in modern history, particularly Japan in the Second World War. Therefore, surely the PRC's desire to have a military capable of assuring sovereignty over its territory is justifiable on the grounds of national security. For example, the upgrading of the PLAAF with indigenous aircraft developments, such as J-10 and J-20 fighter jets provides the PRC with an air force capable of reacting quickly to potential security threats within its vast territory and over 20,000 kilometres of borders. This is of particular importance in regard to China's insecure borders within Afghanistan and India. (Storey and Yee 2002). Furthermore, the PRC regards Taiwan as a domestic issue, from Beijing's perspective Taiwan is a breakaway province that must be reunited with the PRC mainland. Therefore, a pursuit to upgrade its military capabilities to uphold its sovereignty against other powers and protect the integrity of its borders may be justified by this structural realist notion.

However, this argument is irrationally naïve, developments in the PRC's air and naval capabilities also increase its power projection capabilities well-beyond its territorial borders and into the second island chain of the South China Sea (SCS). Moreover, realist theory is inadequate here as there is no credible argument that an independent Taiwan represents a security threat to the PRC. Taipei does not command a military with power projection capabilities beyond its own borders and its military strategy is completely defensive in nature. On the other hand, the extensive power projection capabilities and the PRC's routine demonstration of force undoubtedly fosters a threatening image for other states. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) outperforms other ASEAN claimants to the disputed SCS territories and China is increasing its prospects for maintaining sea denial capabilities within the SCS (Pradt 2016). The PLAN is the largest navy in the world by number of vessels, operates two aircraft carriers including the new Fujian class

carrier which will rival the Ford class supercarrier operated by the US Navy (Hille 2023). There is also substantive evidence of Chinese military and coastal guard vessels harassing the vessels of SCS states and the US (CNN 2009; Reuters 2023; Detsch 2023). Understandably, security analysts maintain the notion of a China threat given that the PRC appears to be advancing towards regional hegemony which threatens the security interests of several states, most notably Taiwan, as China's military developments may deter US involvement in any future crisis, as well all US treaty allies in the region who support the status quo.

On the other hand, the PRC has endorsed the slogan 'peaceful rise' and has been eager to demonstrate their engagement, albeit selective, in the international community. Liberal internationalists argue that international institutions along with economic cooperation enhance the prospects for cooperation among states (Mearsheimer 2001). China's relations with ASEAN as well other international commitments arguably undermines the notion of a China threat. For example, cooperative security within frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in the early 1990s demonstrate that Beijing has been socialised into a cooperative security norm (Katsumata et al 2008). Nonetheless, the extent to which China's relations with ASEAN undermines the China threat theory is limited. ASEAN has only succeeded in making process, not progress in regard to economic integration and security cooperation (Jones and Smith 2007). This is supported by the fact that despite China's violation of UNCLOS in their occupation of Mischief Reef prompted condemnation by ASEAN, the PRC did not back down but instead expanded structures on the Reef over the following years (Pradt 2016). The TAC also lacks any enforcement mechanism primarily due to the 'ASEAN way'. These are the norms which form the basis of the ASEAN, characterised by a respect for sovereignty and guaranteed non-interference (Horhager 2016). Thus, the prospects for ASEAN facilitating security cooperation in the region are narrow given that the PRC not only has no obligation to abide by ASEAN rules but also has the means to unilaterally violate any rules that may be imposed. The PRC has also demonstrated little to no interests in comprising as it seeks to unilaterally change the status quo through military seizures of disputed territories, provocations towards Taiwan, and refusal to set up military dialogues with the US (Sun 2023).

On the one hand, the alleged threat posed by China's military modernisation programme can be dismissed by the PRC's need to uphold its sovereignty against other powers and protect the integrity of its borders. On the other hand, some aspects of the PRC's military modernisation programme since the 1990s and its demonstration of their increased power projection capabilities support the idea of a China threat. China's rise has led to a changing distribution of material capabilities in the Asia Pacific which has exacerbated extant insecurities in the region. The acquisition of stealth fighter jets and advancements in the PRC's blue water combat capabilities along with violations of international law such as the UNCLOS supports the idea of a China threat. Therefore, the image of China can be argued to present a threat for security analyst, particularly states such as Taiwan, the Philippines, and the USA. However, regarding China as a threat solely on its image is irrational, an analysis of the future aims of the PRC is required.

Threat as intention

China's rise has led to a changing distribution of material capabilities in the Asia Pacific which has exacerbated extant insecurities within the region. But what exactly does the PRC intend to do with its growing power? This a controversial and difficult question, even to most prescient of Chinese leaders (Liff and Ikenberry 2014). The PRC has consistently branded their rise as peaceful; however, it could be argued that certain aspects of their foreign policy are odds with this idea. The history of China suggest that it has long been a non-expansionist nation (Storey and Yee 2002) and it could be argued that China's socialist system suggests that it will never seek hegemony. General Xing Shizong, President of the National Defence University, stated that 'China's socialist system determines that my country will always adopt an independent and peaceful foreign policy' and that China is only concerned with defensive national policy

and military strategy (Zhong 1996). Arguably the biggest factor in the China threat notion is that of Taiwan and potential conflict across the Strait. In 2008, the National People's Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law which formalised in law, the longstanding policy of the PRC to use military force against Taiwan independence should all other means be exhausted. From a China-centric viewpoint, this statement has merit given that even the most controversial and detested aspects of the PRC's foreign policy could be argued to be defensive in nature. For example, the PRC's claim on all territories within the SCS on the grounds that they rightly belong to China and the modernisation of its military to ensure territorial sovereignty seem to suggest that the PRC has adopted a defensive strategy.

Again, these perspectives should be regarded with scepticism. The PRC may have the rhetoric of a peaceful state, but its actions severely undermine its credibility. Not only does law in the PRC grant military force to solve the Taiwan question, but the PRC actively engages in demonstrations of military force against Taiwan. The law may give the impression that the PRC is facilitating a peaceful way forward, but any deliberation will be dominated by the interests of the PRC, with the PRC arbitrarily determining alternative 'peaceful' approaches and when they are exhausted. Undoubtedly, the sincerity of the PRC's commitment to a peaceful rise is questionable. Although the PRC's military modernisation programme provides it with increased defence capabilities, it also increased the PRC's power projection capabilities with some weapons system clearly more offensive than defensive. For example, China's progress in its missile technology appears offensive. The downing of a decommissioned weather satellite in January 2007 in the testing of a direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) missile was criticised by the USA, India and Japan for violating international law and contradicting the PRC's promise of a 'peaceful use of outer space' (Pradt 2016, pp. 63). Similarly, China's Dongfeng programme has potential for a 'carrier-killing anti-ship ballistic missile' with its development of a medium-range ballistic missile, the DF-21D (Pomfret 2011). These weapons systems evidently stretch beyond defensive capabilities. Moreover, the PRC's use of military forces in the occupation of Mischief Reef and lack of security cooperation within the ASEAN pacific gives rise to suspicions about the PRC's future intentions and whether it will use its increasing military capabilities to solve disputes (Pradt 2016).

Alternatively, development requires a peaceful international environment which suggests that the PRC will abide by a peaceful foreign policy wherever it can. The geostrategic importance of the SCS, in that 45% of the world's international trade passes through it (Bradsher 2002) and the obvious economic consequences on all states from an armed conflict encourages the PRC and its neighbours to look for peaceful solutions. Security analysts within Japan and South Korea may express alarm at the improved capabilities of the PLAN given their reliance on imported energy resources and the potential for the PRC to exploit this in their foreign policy strategy. However, it is highly unlikely the PRC would risk conflict due to the avoidable economic consequences that come with it. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) monopoly of power within the PRC relies on continued economic progress (Fravel 2005) and given that conflict hinders such progress, it can be expected that the PRC would resist using some of its more offensive capabilities.

Although the PRC may argue that China's rise will be peaceful, it is difficult to state that this will always be the case. A shared interest in maintaining undisrupted trade in the SCS may discourage any escalation of tensions in the region for now, but as Chinese power projection capabilities improve will the PRC use force as a means to end? Undoubtedly, the PRC has demonstrated that it is prepared to be forceful in some scenarios; however, the PRC has not yet engaged in any serious confrontation which in turn supports Chinese claims of a peaceful rise. While its military modernisation programme and tendency to ignore international norms may be indicators of threatening moves by the PRC, claims of a China threat on the grounds of intentions alone should be taken with caution.

Threat as capability

Regardless of China being perceived to be a threat by some analysts and its alleged threatening intentions, the important question is whether China has the capacity to be a credible threat. This specific question is difficult to provide definite answers for given the extremely unpredictable nature of conflict. Traditionally, within IR discourse the US was regarded as the global hegemon with unilateral capabilities; however, in recent years analysts are a lot more hesitant regarding this view. Indeed, following concerns of a more assertive China in the SCS the Obama administration formally declared a pivot from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. There are considerable arguments that support that the US is the regional hegemon. It has the most advanced navy and air force and maintains close military ties with various Asian states whereas the PRC does not. For example, the USA and Japan are cooperating on research of theatre missile defences (TMD) which if effective, would seriously hinder the PRC's power projection capabilities. In contrast, the technologically advanced weapons systems acquired by the PRC may be considered too insignificant to be a threat. For example, the PLAN does not yet have the capacity for a fully effective aircraft carrier defence strategy due to a lack of supporting elements like advanced submarines or destroyers. The PRC is also likely still in the research and development phase, and it is widely accepted that the PRC's military is at least a decade behind the standard of a Western military power (Pradt 2016). This challenges the China threat theory on the grounds that China has not yet reached the military might needed to threaten the hegemon.

Although the PRC's military progress may be the most impressive in the region, the PRC has not been the only state in the region upgrading its military's projections. Japan has slowly been increasing its defensive prospects in recent years. It is widely understood by most Chinese analysts that Japan can do more militarily than it does (Christensen 1999). Japan's defence spending and high levels of military sophistication (with antisubmarine capabilities and advanced fighters like the F-15 and F-35) along with its strong military alliance with the USA, hinders the prospect of China being able to reach regional hegemony within the foreseeable future. Furthermore, other Asian states - which also claim some of the disputed SCS territories - have been upgrading their military capabilities. Malaysia's acquisition of Russian fighter jets (SU-30MKMs and MiG-29) and two French Scorpene class submarines improved and modernised Malaysia's power capabilities in which these new assets are poised to defend its territory and potentially intervene in possible future SCS disputes. Likewise, Thailand has been investing in its air capabilities with the acquisition of Swedish JAS-39 Gripen fighter jets, providing Thailand with the ability to monitor developments in the SCS. Although China is evidently a leading power in the Asia Pacific, it is unclear whether the PRC has the capacity to threaten multiple states, particularly if they are backed by the USA.

Nevertheless, the PRC appears to be making steadfast progress to systematically challenge the military might of the US. The PRC has engaged in an aerial denial strategy, known as A2/AD, which seeks to render US dominance of the SCS obsolete not by matching its military strength per se but by extending the contestation of space. For example, during the Third Taiwan Strait crisis the US Navy had uncontested access to the waters surrounding Taiwan, however, if a repeat scenario were to occur, the PRC now has the means to threaten not only US carrier strike groups in the region but also major military bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam (Lake 2023). Moreover, the PRC has been expanding its nuclear arsenal marking an abrupt shift from its 'minimal deterrence' policy to one more akin to the nuclear posturing during the Cold War. It is estimated to have 410 nuclear warheads in 2023, an increase of 60 from the previous year (Asano 2023). The US Department of Defense projects that the PRC could have as many as 1500 warheads by 2035 which has alarmed members of Congress so much so that they call for the US to diversify or expand its nuclear arsenal (Asano 2023). However, such an approach risks creating a dangerous nuclear competition. The best way to reduce risks and prevent an arms race would be to engage in dialogue to explore the potential for transparency, crisis management, and confidence-building measures (Asano 2023). To date, the PRC has rejected the proposals by the US for military dialogue, giving credibility to the notion of threatening intentions on part of the PRC.

In sum, the PRC's military modernisation programme when viewed at a glance appears to show that China does pose a credible threat. The military superiority of the USA and its strategic alliances are being challenged by failing deterrence against the PRC. The remarkable progress of the PRC's military and its refusal to abandon SCS claims suggests that in the future the idea of a China threat may begin to materialise.

Conclusion

This essay has established how the PRC constitutes a threat by analysing its military modernisation and the grounds in which the Asia-Pacific region may interpret this as a threat, analysing PRC military and foreign policy to decipher its intentions, and assessing the PRC's material and strategic capabilities to threaten the region. The work is undoubtedly controversial and subjective but from an IR approach, it is evident that there are legitimate reasons for the Asia-Pacific to be threatened by the military modernisation of the PRC. To conclude this solely on the image is irrational. Thus, Satoshi's framework is necessary to rationalise the notion of a threat. Although it can be claimed that the PRC's intentions and capabilities appear to go against the idea of China being a threat, and that the PRC has a desired interest for a peaceful environment for continued economic progress. These arguments fail to appreciate the increasingly assertive and coercive tendencies of the PRC which when analysed in the context of an anarchic international environment, it is difficult to not regard as threatening.

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