

IS CHINESE MILITARY MODERNIZATION A THREAT TO THE WORLD?

Raghubandan MC and Poonam Jindal¹

International politics over the last few decades have explored new dimensions of security and economic growth. China has seen sustained growth in its economy, and significant progress in technology through which its military has undergone profound technological transformations. This has defined its commitment for being a great power in the region and the world. China's interest in establishing military strongholds dates to late 20th century when the government started to increase its military expenditure moderately with an objective of homeland security and secure its command in the Asian region which is a natural progression of the country's ascension to great power status. China being the most populated country and third largest country in the terms of geographical area in the world claims to possess all the attributes of a superpower. These conditions have left some analysts with an opinion that rapid growth of Chinese economy and its military power would be a possible threat to the region and the world. Some analysts also have predicted that China will represent an alternative pole to American global dominance. This article looks into the rise of China and its military modernization fueled by its economic might and whether it would bring dynamic changes or challenge the power balance at global level.

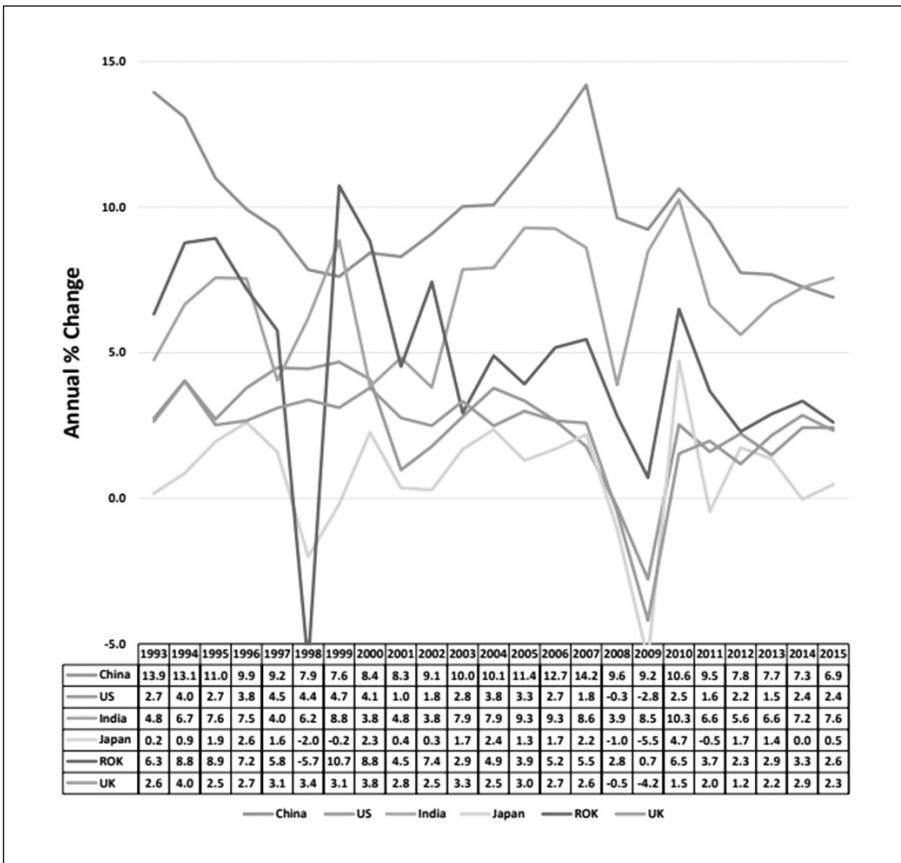
Keywords : China, military modernization, balance of power, power projection, military expenditure, defence acquisition, defence technology, US hegemony

China has acquired power- projection capabilities concurrent to its economic growth which is perceived as a serious threat to the interests of the other powers in the world but till date it has not adopted imperial tactic threatening to control the Asia or the world unilaterally. China's economic prosperity is providing abundance of financial resources to invest in the defense requirements. Since last fifteen years, China's high economic

¹ Raghubandan MC and Poonam Jindal are Postgraduate Students of MA (DLB) 2016 batch of Jindal School of International Affairs(JSIA),JGU.

growth coincides with the high military expenditure. Chinese military modernization is part of their grand strategy which is an amalgamation of internal and external political, military, economic, technological and socio-cultural strategies that china uses to advance its security interests given that China today is much more interdependent on other countries in the international context. This has compelled the western analysts to form an argument on the lines of ‘China Threat Theory’. According to them, the threat assessment includes two stages, intentions and capabilities. And China’s intentions have expanded with its economic rate plus its growing capabilities permit the country to directly confront the regional and global powers.

Figure 1.1 : shows the GDP figures of China and other Countries



Source : Data from SIPRI Website.

China for long has used the economic instruments to advance its security interests either homeland or regional. Chinese strategic thinkers have

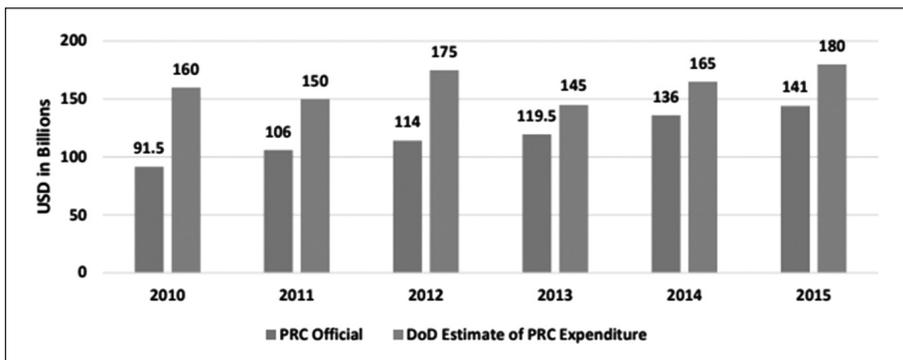
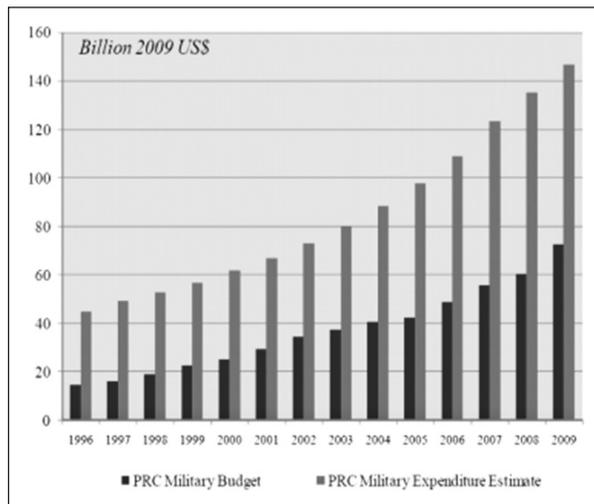
clearly stated that the country's strategy of military modernization reflects its geopolitical stand and protecting the energy resources and territorial integrity. It has ambitions to become a global power and embrace world responsibilities. But militarily these ambitions are bounded by Asia, and this has become reality since the 1970s economic reforms and Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Since then there is a double digit rise in the military budget positioning China as the largest in Asia and second largest in the world. China has always prioritized its national interests and today it is more willing to use force to secure those. We can validate that considering its growing concerns in the south, south-east, East Asian region. In this nuclear age, no country can survive and sustain without a technologically advanced military. And China's approach is no different, it is restructuring PLA, spending on modern defense equipment, and moving ahead of its obsolete military. Military modernization is a trajectory of all the rising powers to achieve their goals, this phenomenon becoming a threat or not depends on the region and country China is challenging. China stands no military threat to any country or region of the world, but it is a hindrance to the US's priorities in the Asian region, India's interests in South Asia, Philippines' concerns, Japan's modernization, and more².

Inception of Chinese Military Modernization

China's military has seen an overhaul over the years and its domestic politics plays an important role. During the decades of 1950 and 1960, Chinese military doctrine was more of 'Preparation of struggle' because then it was Maoist radicalism that shaped the ideological training rather than professionalism. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1970s, leaders pushed for bringing professionalism in the structure of the PLA. This brought a bargain between radicalism and modernization which resulted in fundamental changes in china's strategic thinking. This emphasized more on modernization which further led to economic reforms and securing more economic resources for the restructuring of the armed forces, a step towards professionalism. It is mentioned in a RAND publication that countries with economic growth encourages rise in military expenditure and military capabilities but it does not mean that the defense proliferation is a 'threat'. In terms of purchasing power parity, China has come out to be the largest economy. Today, its economy is two- third the size of the US economic status. Presence of resources and finances have encouraged China to adopt military modernization. This modernization drive began in post- Mao period, the country stressed on economic development and widening its base to further invest in defense. China is known for its long- term strategic thinking and planning, therefore, its foreign and defense policies are well adapted to its domestic and sovereign needs since the economic reforms of

1970s. In this era of multipolarity, military competition is safe and sound. Demilitarization instead would damage the capabilities of the states to challenge the potential opponents. It is in every country's national security interests to expand their military prowess to secure their agendas on the table. A grand strategy can be defined as a coordination and utilization of the government means i.e. military, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and more, to realize goals in peacetime as well as wartime. In times of Cold War, US's grand strategy was 'containment policy' i.e. to contain the spread of communism and state controlled economy. Therefore, the policy of China today is influenced by the past actions of the America. China is transforming from a status- quo country to an expansionist power. With its long- term

Figure 1.2 : Shows the PRC expenditure



Source : Data collated from China's Official Defence Website and Department of Defence, US.

strategy based on maintaining a peaceful international environment that allows China to build the economic and technological foundations necessary to become rich and a powerful country. This strategy helps in advancement of its economy and living standards.

China also faces its own many internal challenges with the simultaneous rapid socio- economic growth. The international system has seen a more assertive China since the Cold War because the leaders have always worked to substitute the unipolar world order under the US's control with a multipolar world order. It has been predicted that China will one-day reach parallel to the US not only in terms of economic power but also in social, cultural, and political influence. China might even challenge the US's military supremacy as the Chinese defense budget is increasing at a high annual growth rate. But China in its nature is not an imperialistic country and still way behind in quality and quantity when comes to defense equipment as compared to the military might of the US or sophistication of other European countries. China after struggling for years has reached to a stage of global economic power², an undeniable fact, but just like China threat argument one day we will observe China collapse argument. This is supported by the power transition theory i.e. a rising new power is a revisionist power that will inevitably disrupt the relative power balance of the international system.

In East Asia, American presence or dominance is not reconciled with the China's growing ambitions fueled by strong economic backup. China will never withdraw from its core interests in the region including Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan Straits, South China Sea, and Diaoyutai Islands. These issues further create uncertainty in the region and in the relations between the two great economies- US and China. Global competition for the scarce natural resources has compelled China to groom its behavior in the international system accordingly. Its dependence on the world oil market is seen as an opportunity for the country's deeper integration with the international actors, thus contributing stability. For survival China needs to acknowledge its quest for the oil which compels it to strengthen the naval forces and adopt expansionist and confrontationist strategies. Issues in the Diaoyutai Islands, South China Sea, and oil diplomacy in Africa is based on the above premise and further has provoked the West.

Chinese Defense white papers states that Chinese military modernization is mainly to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. First white paper was released in 1995 under the direction of the Chinese government. Every paper suggests and tries to convince the West and others that China rise is a

² Chinese White Paper (1995), PRC, pp.19-26

‘peaceful rise’. These defense papers are a Chinese narrative to be accountable to the other powers of the globe and counter the western allegations of lack of transparency in the defense structure of the country. It also highlights the fact of ‘No First Use’ policy of its nuclear strategy. China encourages military build up to sustain its second- strike capability, but US on the other hand possesses second- strike capability and refuses to withdraw first-strike capability. US and China acquire nuclear weapons, the probability of a direct war between them greatly decreases and the probability of proxy wars increases. It has been a long time that China is modernizing its nuclear arsenals which is a cause of concern for the US. But China claims that this is a key to increase its survivability of the second- strike capability and will enhance mutual vulnerability which in turn will bring stability to the Sino-US crisis. US has military superiority to China, and the former is benefitting from the America’s established economic order.

As the world had recovered from the devastating World Wars and Cold War, new economic prospects were coming forward. In international relations though geopolitical, military security and ideological factors cannot be ignored but the role of economic factors is outstanding along with growing economic interdependence among nations.

With sophisticated weapons taking a stage worldwide process of modernization and procuring modern warfare is also a necessity. With new international security system, there is stress on settlement of disputes through political, economic, diplomatic, and military means and the reinforcement of military strength is an important way to safeguard their own security and national interests. China after humiliation of obsolete military equipment, the history of Opium wars and war with the Japanese, loss of territory, and years of colonialism and subjugation, had always stressed on military spending and defense overhaul. The costs of defense are allocated based on the needs and the country’s financial capacities.

Military Modernization and Restructuring of Chinese PLA

China often make efforts to convince that its defense development is not a threat but beneficial in terms of the subsequent economic benefits of expanding trade and investment. One of the grand strategy can be preservation of the political and territorial status- quo and increase the national prosperity level through diplomatic tools. China asserts a soft power image in the global arena since its reputation is at stake because of the incident of Tiananmen Square in 1979. It advocates new diplomatic concepts such as ‘responsible power’, the ‘good neighbor policy’, and a ‘harmonious world’. Its efforts to engage with the ASEAN countries, to popularize

AIIB, SCO, and NDB, and formation of other bilateral trade treaties are evidence of China strengthening relations with the other countries in the international system through economic determinism.

Chinese economic growth is a pre-condition to the massive military modernization program. It has helped China in revamping conventional and asymmetric warfare capabilities inclusive of sea-air-missile-nuclear capabilities. As said by analysts and experts China is committed to be a reformer and not a hardliner military power and proposed a moderate increase in defense spending to fulfil its national foreign and defense policy interests. China started to cooperate and participate in joint military exercises and regional security cooperation's like 'ASEAN, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Council on Security Cooperation in Asia and Pacific Region (CSCAP), Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD)³ and other activities enforcing that all countries should further mutual understanding and trust by deliberations on security issues through these governmental and non-governmental channels. Chinese philosophies reflect that international relations are not necessary a zero sum game, if the rising power is benevolent in nature then can act as a stabilizing power rather than pose a threat.

The reform in Chinese economy began in 1978 under the leader Deng Xiaoping which further provided space to the PLA to increase its defense spending. Between the periods of 1978 to 1988, the percentage of total production in the defense industry increased from 14.6% to 66% and simultaneously the PLA's budgetary earnings increased. China was encouraged to acquire a high-technology force after the success of US military operation in Iraq. The country increased its investment in military in 1990s. Additionally, the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-56 and US's power projection in the region reinforced China to develop its military to secure its national interest from external and internal threats. Taiwan has been the pivotal strategic note that China began military modernization explicitly. Therefore, the growth in the economy and confrontation with the US made China to decide in favor of military modernization which is accounted as a counter-move to the former country's containment policy in the Asian region and its technological advantages. The military modernization in China has always been incremental. Facing decline in the military budget till 1989, defense expenditure experienced a rise after that. There came a time when the figures of expenditure were more than GDP growth rate.

³ Quoted in Weixing R. Hu, Gerald Chan, Daojiong Zha *China's International Relations in the 21st Century: Dynamics of Paradigm Shifts*, University Press of America, Washington DC, 2000, p.78

Over the time, PLA has seen many financial setbacks, therefore, as soon as the economy started booming the leaders announced to prepare China for modern warfare and propagate survival of the 'second strike capability'. During these years, lack of preparedness in 'revolution in military affairs (RMA)' frustrated the Chinese strategic thinking which further created a desire for technological push in PLA structuring. Post- 1990s, China underwent huge reformation of military expenditure, establishing its image as an emerging power in the region.

Power politics plays an important role in international political, security and economic arena. Financial and economic risks are increasing, and economic security has become a concern for all countries. As the gap in development and the disparity between rich and poor countries continue to widen all over the world, particularly between the South and North, polarization has become an increasingly serious problem. China has embraced the role of a responsible power as declared by President Xi Jinping in the WEF summit at Davos recently. China taking up a responsive and responsible leadership role plus carrying forward globalization drive even if America is adopting anti- globalization measures under Trump. Ironclad America pulled back from the Paris Agreement, but China stated that it remains committed as before. Another incident is that the newly elected President of South Korea in support to China's concerns ordered to halt the deployment of THAAD Missile Defense System. Australia, an American ally has embraced China as its largest trading partner. Influence of China has been expanding over the years and reducing the possibilities of China being a military threat to the world. China is securing its interests and 'peaceful rise' in the Asian region through its policy of denial, deterrence, dominance, engagement, and coercion. China is pursuing military and economic instruments for counter- containment in peacetime and counter- intervention in a crisis. China pushes economic cooperation such as its recent policy of One Belt One Road to achieve its geo- strategic and security objectives. Therefore, China's military modernization is not a hard power threat if the international system adopts proper rules of engagement.

China is propagating many idiosyncratic warfare instead of hard power confrontation such as psychological warfare- undermine enemy's ability to execute combat operations through activities like espionage and demoralizing enemy military personnel; media warfare- influencing domestic and international public opinions to build support for its national interests; and legal warfare- use international and domestic law to establish strongholds of its own over the other. Therefore, China tends to become a balancer and a mere challenger but not an aggressive threat. To counter

the expansionist powers, China requires to intensify its military power. For the same China is building carrier at home, developing long- range missiles, as well as exporting arms and weapon technology to Iraq, Libya, Iran, and Pakistan. China's spending comprises of personnel, equipment costs, and cost of maintenance and no category for hard weaponry expenditure. Under its military modernization comes the better wages to the forces, improved social benefits to the personnel, institutional education, R&D, and maintenance and storage of hardware. Another arena where China has been investing is outer space. But it has no full range capabilities in space needed for intelligence and military benefit. China does have equal military space presence as compared to the countries like Russia and the US.

Main concern of China as a rising power is how to maintain a friendly external environment. Deng Xiaoping suggested that China should avoid confrontation and refrain from seeking hegemony while amassing power. China assures change in focus of the foreign policy rhetoric from peaceful rise to peaceful development to avoid linkage between China's modernizations with its expansionary agenda. China threat premise emerged in 1990s in America and Japan but it gradually dissolved with prosperity that China brought in Asia. This theory is inly based on the external influences and does not consider in the internal factors as well as China's dependency on the existing global system. The economic and trade interdependency prevent wars in lieu of the higher costs of engaging in a war. Also, the updates version of China's foreign policy aims to promote economic and cultural cooperation of newly independent states, and oppose colonial ambitions. Since 2005, the main principles followed by China are the need to create a collective security within existing multilateralism where countries should base their relations on mutual trusts, benefits, and equality. China will always want to preserve its economic growth, therefore will not desire to transform the existing system and will not take any offensive actions against other states. With economic and military growth, China is keen to develop its soft power image and use its cultural aspects to mend relations with the other nations of the international system. The country has been successful in successive image-building efforts, which includes hosting mega-events like the Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo, broadcasting promotional films abroad, and establishing Confucian Institutes around the world with an aim to disseminate Chinese language and culture.

Chinese Security Policy And Its Ambitions

In 2008, China dealt with various complex security situations as that time it overcame a devastating Earthquake in Sichuan province. The same year