

How China Views Its National Security

Eyal Propper

Eyal Propper is the director of Asian and Multilateral Affairs at the Policy Planning Bureau of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Introduction

During a tour of the Golan Heights in 1999, a visiting senior Chinese official told me that China and Israel have similar concerns regarding security—both countries are isolated and surrounded by hostile nations. We are not so similar, I told him, because after all, there is obviously a great difference between the tiny Israel and the giant China. The official replied by saying that little Israel may actually possess an advantage over China, because Israel has the support of the United States, while China, he said, remains completely isolated.

The words of the official reflect China's fear of isolation and its desire to protect itself, a desire which is partially influenced by China's historical experiences. In the nineteenth century, Western powers invaded China and exploited the country's resources.¹ Furthermore, the Chinese cannot forget the Japanese invasion before and during World War II, in which millions of Chinese citizens suffered and died. Even today, as China reemerges as a global power, a feeling of apprehension toward groups that threaten the Chinese nation and its territory still exists among the Chinese people.

The Chinese Perspective on America

China's main security concern is based on the American military presence along China's borders, which could enable a unilateral American attack against the Chinese Mainland. The Second Gulf War, which commenced in 2003, increased the Chinese fear of a preemptive strike, using American technology and weapons, which are vastly superior to the arms in China's current arsenal.²

The American military presence in countries bordering China is viewed as a serious threat by the Chinese, because it could isolate their country and could be used as a forward base for a possible American attack. While the Taiwanese issue is always on the regional agenda, the presence of tens of thousands of American soldiers in countries such as South Korea, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, all of which are in very close proximity to Chinese soil, is a cause of great discontent in China. The Chinese fear of isolation is strengthened by American attempts to form alliances with countries in China's vicinity, such as Japan, India and possibly Australia.

Additionally, the development of anti-ballistic missile systems which the United States plans to position in Japan, or other countries in Asia and the Pacific, is perceived by China as a measure taken not only against North Korea but also against China itself.

The Taiwanese Issue

The Taiwanese issue constitutes the core of China's security concerns and is the greatest challenge facing each and every Chinese government. The conflict between China and Taiwan began in 1949, as a result of the Communist victory against the Nationalists in the struggle for power. After their defeat, the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, withdrew to the island of Formosa, southeast of China, which was reconstituted as the Republic of China and which claimed legitimacy. The Republic gained American military protection, and until 1971, international recognition. (On October 25, 1971, the UN passed Resolution 2758, which declared Communist China the sole representative of China in the UN.⁵) The Chinese government understands that it is unable to overthrow the Taiwanese government by military means, since the Chinese assume that in such an event, the United States would immediately intervene militarily to defend Taiwan. This can be deduced by past actions taken by the United States to support Taiwan, and as required by the Taiwan Relations Act, which passed Congress in 1979.⁴

Therefore, Beijing opts to maintain the status quo with Taiwan, while preserving international recognition of the "One China" policy, which ignores any formal recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. Moreover, China set limits on the secessionist steps taken by Taiwan by passing the Anti-Secession Law on March 14, 2005. This law, by outlining actions China considers offensive and likely to prompt a violent Chinese response, limits the actions Taiwan can undertake to fulfill its ambition for independence.⁵ While many in the Western world feared this law would lead to war between the two nations, the Chinese motive was the opposite—to strengthen the status quo and increase stability in the region through legislative measures. The Chinese consider it beneficial to maintain the current situation with regard to Taiwan. They believe that in time, Taiwan will naturally merge into China, even if that event only takes place in future decades, or the global balance of power changes to facilitate this development. The strong commercial cooperation currently existing between many Chinese and Taiwanese companies, in which the latter annually invest billions of dollars in the Chinese market, strengthens mainland Chinese assumptions regarding Taiwan.

The Taiwanese issue is one of China's basic security concerns, not only because Taiwan's desire for independence will separate Taiwan from China, but also

because it might influence national minorities in various regions in China, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, to step up measures for their independence.

Other security issues which concern China are potential attempts to disrupt China's seaborne energy supplies, possible terrorist attacks on Chinese cities, and instability in Central Asia, which will have an effect on China's borders.

China's economic growth resulted in a significant rise in the amount of oil and gas imported it from Middle Eastern countries, which was shipped mostly through the Strait of Malacca. The Strait, which is located along the borders of Indonesia and Malaysia, is protected by the US Navy. This gives China the feeling that it is protected by the United States. China's navy is not large enough to provide the same level of security and thus the countries in the region prefer to be protected by the Americans rather than the Chinese.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were seen by China as a wake-up call, a portent of the threat of terrorism on modern society. China's rapid development has made it a target of extremists such as small Muslim groups (around twenty million Muslims reside in China) that combine nationalism with religious fanaticism, and would not hesitate to take action against the Chinese government in order to bring independence to Muslim provinces in northwestern China. Other groups that could draw attention to their struggle through acts of violence are the Falun Gong and the Tibetans. This was demonstrated by the riots in Tibet that began on March 10, 2008. As the 2008 Olympics draw near, the Chinese government is aware of the terrible consequences that a terrorist attack on one of China's main cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai, could have on the Chinese nation. Therefore, the Chinese are taking action, through both internal and external measures, to prevent such an event from occurring. It should be noted that in the last few years, several Chinese citizens, working in African and Asian countries, were attacked by terrorist groups. The Chinese government cooperates with different countries, such as Russia and Central Asian nations, which are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in order to obtain better intelligence on groups that pose a threat to China. The Chinese authorities reject the Uyghur minority representatives' claim that the Chinese use the threat of terror as an excuse to oppress Muslim groups in Xinjiang that strive toward independence, though not necessarily by violent means.⁶

China's Goals and Concepts

China's security concepts are based on the assumption that China's economic growth and system of government can only be maintained through long-term regional and global stability. China aims, therefore, to shape a quiet and peaceful surrounding both regionally and globally, in order to prevent war, on the one hand, while being ready to demonstrate and project strength on the other.

In order to be prepared to protect the nation and to demonstrate power when needed, the Chinese Army trains its forces for every possible scenario. The first objective in China's war scenario is a swift conquest of Taiwan, before any American intervention is possible. Given the high emphasis placed by the Chinese on the Taiwan issue, it would seem that without such a cause, there would be a significant decrease in the investment in the Chinese military system. China, however, has to maintain its status as a superpower, which will sustain its economic growth and political importance. This, in part, will be achieved through the strength of its armed forces. In the same vein, it is important to clarify that even though China became a nuclear power more than forty years ago, it still only possesses a small nuclear arsenal and adheres to the No First Use policy.⁷

Based on China's understanding of the current global situation, the following policies are being adopted:

- **Improving and modernizing the Chinese armed forces and technology**

At the core of this is preparation for a possible conflict with the United States. The Chinese currently avoid any stance which might lead to an armed conflict with the United States, while supplying vast funds to the defense ministry in order to improve China's military capabilities.

- **Solving border-related disputes with neighboring countries**

China borders fourteen countries on both land and sea. In the past, China was embroiled in armed conflicts with some of them—the USSR in the 1960s, India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979. In order to avoid such conflicts in the future, the Chinese aim to create a quiet and peaceful region, partly by achieving a comprehensive solution to outstanding border disputes with its neighbors. China's greatest achievement in this field is the border pact signed with Russia in 2004, which includes agreements on the frontier in contested areas in northeastern China. Additionally, the Chinese government continues to hold bilateral talks with India and Japan in order to solve respective border issues with those countries. Despite the complex discussions needed in order to reach a border agreement, bilateral talks are being held annually in order to reduce instability in East Asia.

- **Strengthening regional cooperation while holding multilateral talks**

Even if the United States is seen as a superpower on the decline by some Chinese experts, Beijing understands that in terms of global power and influence, the United States is still very much its superior. While China works to preserve peaceful relations with the United States, treaties and alliances are being developed between China and nations throughout the world in order to form a network of multilateral

and regional connections, some of them against the will of the Americans. One such multilateral organization is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in which China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are members; India, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Iran are observers.⁸ As part of a desire to strengthen regional cooperation, China also strengthened its ties with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), created forums for cooperation with Africa, the Arab League and Latin America, and increased the number of Chinese soldiers in the UN Peacekeeping Forces in order to strengthen China's position in the UN.⁹

- **Formulating and implementing responsible global policy**

China strives to present itself as a great and responsible power working toward regional and global stability, assists in solving global crises and condemns extremist entities. The Chinese highlight the fact that their status as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council entails deep commitment to maintaining international stability, while also pledging not to meddle in other nations' affairs. However, the main difference between old China and new China in terms of international involvement is the willingness of the leaders in Beijing to involve itself in global crises and take initiatives to solve them. For example, in the 1994 nuclear crisis with North Korea, China was merely a spectator. However, in the current crisis, which began in 2003, China suggested that Six-Party Talks be held in Beijing, with China as one of the main negotiators. The Chinese do not wish to see a collapse of North Korea, due to their fear of being inundated with North Korean refugees, and also because North Korea acts as a buffer between China and the American forces based in South Korea.¹⁰

The Chinese are also involved in talks with Iran. They pride themselves in being a nation which enjoys close ties with countries on both sides of the conflict (unlike the United States). Even though the issue of a nuclear Iran is not at the center of China's security concerns, the Chinese publicly declare that they do not want Tehran to possess nuclear weapons, since they understand that Iran's ongoing ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons could prompt a military strike against that country, Iran, which would obviously cause instability in the Middle East.

- **Promoting the idea of "Peaceful Development" rather than "Peaceful Rise"**

The Chinese authorities hope that China's development will not be termed a "peaceful rise" because of the imperialistic connotations of such a phrase. Instead, they would like it to be called a "peaceful development." Clearly, China does not want its development to be viewed as a threat by its neighbors. Moreover, the Chinese passed a national regulation on the export control measures of unconventional weapons in 2002.¹¹ In addition, the Chinese applied to become

members of international organizations that monitor the export of nuclear weapons and missiles. The Chinese leadership seems to believe that one of their long-term national interests is to convince the world that it is a responsible global power on the international stage. This belief is partly due to a simple economic truth: A stable and responsible leadership is directly connected to the amount of money invested annually in the Chinese economy (\$63 billion in 2006). These investments are much more useful economically and politically than the few million dollars earned from selling weapons to irresponsible nations. China's pragmatic view of these losses and profits is an integral part of their national policies and also their security policy.

However, China's goal of creating a peaceful environment suffered a major blow after its test of anti-satellite missiles in January 2007, and more recently, in the unrest of Tibet. The missile testing prompted many countries, including the United States, to voice their doubts about China's real aims and their fear of Chinese military expansion. The Chinese are currently trying to assuage these fears. Accordingly, China announced it is going to increase the transparency of the Chinese armed forces by providing the UN with annual budget reports of the Chinese military and information on Chinese weapons systems to the UN Military Register of Conventional Arms.

Conclusion

China is developing into one of the most important nations in the global community, and seems to be the only long-term rival to the political dominance of the United States. Therefore, many nations are apprehensive regarding China's future objectives and military and security policies. It is impossible to predict what China's outlook will be in twenty years or the main contours of its security policy then. Besides genuine fear of the power of a giant China, it must be remembered that the Chinese have many legitimate security concerns and these should be addressed in order to obtain a better understanding of China's policy. To be sure, an appreciation of China's perspective on international affairs will help reduce tensions and enhance cooperation with Beijing in the future.

Notes

- ¹ The Chinese constitution outlines these events in the preamble, as follows: “After 1840, feudal China was gradually turned into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country. The Chinese people waged many successive heroic struggles for national independence and liberation and for democracy and freedom,” from Zhang Fusen (ed.), *China, Outlines of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China* (Beijing, 2004), p. 118.
- ² Susan M. Puska, “Assessing America at War: Implications for China’s Military Modernization and National Security,” in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, *Shaping China’s Security Environment: The Role of the People’s Liberation Arm* (Washington, 2006), p. 67.
- ³ The complete resolution can be found at <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/327/74/img/nr032774>.
- ⁴ The complete bill regarding Taiwan can be found at http://www.ait.org.tw/en/about_ait/tra.
- ⁵ Clause 8 of the Anti-Secession Law states, “In the event that the ‘Taiwan’s Independence’ secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The State Council and the Central Military Commission shall decide on and execute the non-peaceful means and other necessary measures as provided for in the preceding paragraph and shall promptly report to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress.”
- ⁶ Yitzhak Schichor, “Fact and Fiction: A Chinese Documentary on Eastern Turkestan Terrorism,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, IV: 2 (2006), 89-108.
- ⁷ <http://www.nyconsulate.prchina.org/eng/xw/t204631.htm>.
- ⁸ See SCO website <http://www.sectsc.org>.
- ⁹ Tang Yongsheng, “China’s Participation in UN Peacekeeping Regime,” in Wang Yizhou (ed.), *Construction Within Contradiction* (Beijing, 2007), pp 73-98.
- ¹⁰ John J. Tkacik, “How the PLA Sees North Korea” in Scobell and Wortzel, op.cit., p. 149.
- ¹¹ http://www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/expreg_0802.htm.