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A Critique Review of the 'China Threat Theory'

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Introduction

Beginning in the late 1970s, China has been shifting its balance on the aspects of economy, military, technology, diplomacy and also making its influences on the political aspect. The rapid growth of China has caught international attention, some argued that the “China Threat” is inconceivable for China to rise peacefully, it will even pose a threat to the United States.

According to Kenneth Waltz, an American political scientist mentioned that “China will emerge as a great power even without trying very hard so long as it remains politically untied and competent.”¹ As China is evolving its power in the Asian region, Waltz predicted that China will establish hegemony in East Asia, which will become a potential threat towards the United State.

The concept of “China Threat” and the re-emergence of China has been being an important actor of the world economy and politics, which make the trend of rising China catching the global attention. There is an increase of scholars discussing about the rise of China and its implication to world order, some even described China as an inevitable actor of today’s world politics and it may even reshape the world order.² The US treated the growing of Chinese military capabilities as a threat to its global dominance, as a challenge to the US hegemony. Under the theory of Realism, states would prioritise survival to perpetuate their existence. As the survival is the core national interest, self-help becomes the principle of action in the anarchical system.³ As China is evolving to be an international power, in order to prevent the foreign intervention, it started the military modernisation which caused alarm in the West. From developing its military capabilities, even under a defensive aim, there is still tense between the relationship of China and the foreign powers, the security dilemma of the US and China was increasing as both of the countries are afraid of the increasing capability that would damage to the national interest.

This paper is to give a critique review on “China Threat” theory, in order to examine the problems caused by the military growth of China and find out how the military growth and the

¹ Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, “A Critique of the China Threat Theory: A Systematic Analysis.” *Asian Perspective*, Vol.31(2007): 44-45.

² Li Xing, *The Rise of China and the Capitalist World Order* (UK: MPG Books Group, 2010), 57.

³ Baylis.J., Smith.S., Owens.P., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (UK: Oxford University Press), 93.

rise of China is regarded as 'threat' in the West, also to point out the theoretical and strategic problems of the 'China Threat' thesis.

China's military spending compared to the other permanent members of the UN

The rise of China become more controversial in these years due to the rapid military development. But when it is compared to the other 4 permanent members of the UN security council, the military spending as a percentage of GDP is moderate. Taking the year 2011 to 2015 as the example, the United States' average military expenditure is 4.025%; 2.175% of the United Kingdom's GDP; 2.225% for France; 4.1% for Russia and 2.025% for China.⁴ We can see that compared to the other permanent members, China's military spending is moderate although there was a sudden rise of military expenditure in the recent years. Despite the controversy of China's threat regarding the armament spending, comparing to the other permanent members, China seemed to keep a low profile for its military development.

Taking the military expense of China as an example, the actual military spending is higher than the Chinese government reports. China was predicted to be the aggressor who will attack Taiwan due to the large degree of military modernization.⁵ There is a heavy investment of the Chinese military system as the armed forces were modernized, and that would increase the capability of China to project power beyond a war with Taiwan.

However, the military expenditure of China has been criticised by the public due to the dishonesty of announcement. According to the Economist, China announced its official military defence budget has been increased to \$132 billion in 2014, the spending rise by 12.2% compared to 2013.⁶ The economists estimated that the true figure may be 40% higher than it announced, which has caused alarm in the globe, the neighbouring countries considered the evolving Chinese military system as a worrying feature of the rising power. In the past two decades, it has been increasing in double-digit every year, at the same time, Beijing also emphasise on developing high-tech military hardware, such as missile defence system, military

⁴ The World Bank. 2015. Military expenditure (% of GDP). Washington, D.C.: The World Bank (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)).
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

⁵ Broomfield, Emma V. "Perceptions of Danger: The China Threat Theory." *Journal of Contemporary China*: 265-84.

⁶ "China's military spending: At the double" *The Economist*, Mar 15, 2014,
<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21599046-chinas-fast-growing-defence-budget-worries-its-neighbours-not-every-trend-its-favour>

satellites, strike carrier groups⁷, which has strengthened the military troops in a rapid pace. The naval modernisation has been taking into account, as the size of expanding is ambitious, the PLA Navy (as known as PLAN) consists of nearly 190 major components, vessels are mostly designed and built with the boundary. And the PLAN's size overtakes the American Navy by 2020⁸ in spite of the fact that most of the Chinese troops are the small-aircraft carriers, which are not comparable to the US's 11 aircraft-carriers. We can see that China has stepped into a new age of military troops, the competence of it has risen in a vigorous pace.

The US Department of Defence has announced that, the military spending figure was estimated to be 2 and 2.5 times than the official figure. Taking the example of military spending for 2006, China announced it was \$35 billion while the Pentagon mentioned that the real figure was between \$70 and \$105 billion.⁹ The gap of the official figure and the real one has been posing worries to the globe as they treated China as an inevitable rising, the Washington D.C. was worrying the rise of China would pose threat to its hegemony in the globe. The military spending became the implication of intentions, as many realists predicted the rapid growth of the economy and military expense would trigger a large scale of transformation of the power, which may reshape the world order as China is starting to act as a "responsible stakeholder" rather than a developing country as it pretended to be.¹⁰

It is controversial that the huge difference between the official figure and the estimated figure of its military spending, many realists and opinion-makers described the rapid development of Chinese military would become a serious menace towards the regional balance of power in East Asia and to the American hegemony in both military and strategic influences. Due to the modernisation of the military, it is posing threat to the US's global dominance as the increasing military devices are giving Chinese capabilities to project global military reach.

⁷ Brown, Harold. *Chinese Military Power*. New York, (NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), 24-29

⁸ "China's military spending: At the double" *The Economist*, Mar 15, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21599046-chinas-fast-growing-defence-budget-worries-its-neighbours-not-every-trend-its-favour>

⁹ Li Xing, *The Rise of China and the Capitalist World Order* (UK: MPG Books Group, 2010), 58-60.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 59.

China's military capabilities: Air Force, Naval modernization

Military capabilities had a much higher requirement and qualification than the spending, which implies a country's credibility and ability of projecting its international influence. Despite the incredible rise of military expense of China has been being the US's concern in these decades, the technology and capability of China is at least two decades behind the US.

According to the Global Firepower, as known as the GFP ranking, it recorded the military size of the countries and calculated the figures of different factors of a military force, such as the manpower, number of aircraft, naval troops, etc. The final value of GFP will be treated as the "Power Index" of the countries, China is now in the third place of the GFP Top 10 ranking, and the US and Russia are in the first and second place. Although the population that fit for service in China is the largest in the 3 countries, which has 618,588,627 people while the US has 120,022,084 and Russia has merely 46,812,553 people;¹¹ the proportion of military troops of China is a lot less than the other two countries. Taking the air power as the example, the air powers includes both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft from all branches of service, the number of total aircraft in China is only 2,860; 3,429 in Russia and 13,892 in the United States.¹² The number of air power in the US is nearly 7 times of China's, the figure revealed the insufficient development of China's military troops even the population of China has a great number. Compared the developed power as the US and Russia, which continue to dedicate significant resources to improve its military forces rather than recruit numerous soldiers, the development and quality of the US and Russia military power seem to be more advanced than China, which reflected a greater capability.

At the same time, China was mobilising for its military modernisation throughout a plan called the PLA, along with the People's Armed Police and the People's Militia, which aimed at maintaining domestic stability and ensuring regime security. China prioritised in maintaining harmony within the boundary, and developing limited power projection along its periphery among its neighbouring countries¹³. As the PLA required the military capabilities in order to defending the Chinese sovereignty and territorial interests, which means that the military

¹¹ "Global Firepower Military Powers Ranked for 2015." Global Firepower. Accessed December 7, 2015. <http://www.globalfirepower.com/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dellios, Rosita, and R. James Ferguson. *China's Quest for Global Order: From Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World*. (UK: Lexington Books, 2013), 67-69.

capabilities and credibility of China would play an important role in the above-mentioned aims. In the PLA, China projected limited power to its neighbouring countries such as Taiwan, the Philippines. Taking Taiwan as the example, China aimed at project its influences toward the island in order to prevent it achieve political independence and reduce its international recognition.¹⁴ The step of military modernisation become the Chinese strategy to enhance the capabilities and its international prestige.

Being a regional power in Asia, China is stepping forward to become a global committed military power in the coming twenty years. In order to protect its sovereignty, the current force structure and doctrine are using the term “Defence-in-depth” to against the invasion of Chinese territory. The PLA authorized China to project its power across land borders, and against smaller regional powers to prevent them being evolved and independent. Although China is the strongest military power in the East Asian region, when it comes to compare with the US, we can still see the rooms of improvement for the Chinese technology. Having the ambition of becoming a greater power beyond its own boundaries, new devices and pilot training improvement were introduced in the plan of People’s Liberation Army Air Force (as known as PLAAF). The plan has been making effort on extending the capabilities in air-to-air interceptions and limiting air-to-ground strikes. China has acquired 100-plus forth-generation fighters (which is also called as SU-27s and SU-30s), which is purchased from Russia since the early 1990s. The imported aircrafts are the most advance fighters already in the PLAAF’s inventory, which implied the limitation of military development and invention in China. The SU-27s and SU-30s are often used to compare with the US devices, American F-15C¹⁵, both of them are capable for carrying six radar-homing Alamo air-to-air missiles (AAMs). By buying these carriers from Russia, China finally had its first chance to fly missions far from the coastline. The case of the PLAAF revealed the lack of an operational, in-flight refuelling capacity for more than 100 aircraft also brought out the implication of limiting capabilities to invent devices and arrange daily training for the pilots as the lack of advanced technology hindered the military development of China even it has a great spending on the military.

¹⁴ Menges, Constantine Christopher. *China: The Gathering Threat*. (US: Nelson Current, 2005), 141-145.

¹⁵ Brown, Harold. *Chinese Military Power*. New York, (NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), 27-30

For the Naval power in China, the People's Liberation Army Navy (as known as PLAN) was stepping towards a new generation of modernisation with improved air defence and nuclear attack submarine. In order to improve its influence in the region, the expanding of navy became an inevitable factor, there were advanced torpedoes and cruise missile capabilities, also the replenishment at sea was also greatly improved. In the PLAN, the Russian Sovremenny-class destroyer was the most advanced destroyer which was designed to counter the US Aegis-class destroyers in the cold war age. The purchase of the Russian Sovremenny-class destroyer became the major improvement for the naval modernisation as it is capable for carrying Russian Sunburn anti-ship missiles,¹⁶ which is one of the most advanced missiles and only limited countermeasures existed in the world. However, the PLAN was criticised by the lack of integration in its command, control and communication systems, also the cooperation with the air defence and anti-submarine warfare system. The PLAN ships are fragile when it comes to the attack from aircrafts and missiles. There are rooms for improvement as China lacks capabilities to invent the home-made naval weapons and self-defence on the sea.

Supporters of the "China Threat Theory" also claimed that the naval modernisation of China was a challenge towards the superiority of the super powers and also pose threat to the neighbouring countries due to the rising of military. However, according to the Congressional Research Service Report in 2007, it said "Observers believe a near-term focus of China's military modernisation is to field a force that can succeed in a short duration conflict with Taiwan and act as an anti-access force to deter US intervention or delay the arrival of US forces, particularly naval and air forces, in such a conflict."¹⁷ From the report and the strategies of developing naval force in the PLAN, we can see that China aimed at protecting its sovereignty from the US intervention by building its military capabilities and credibility in its region, rather than challenging the hegemony of the US and disturbing the world order.

¹⁶ Ibid, 28.

¹⁷ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, Report to Congress No. RL33153, February 7, 2007, p. ii.

Competition between the United States and China: The rise of “armament race”

The US has been treating China as a potential threat since the late 1990s about the war plan that China delivered about the Taiwan independence in 1999. Talking about the relations between Taiwan and China, the former President Lee Teng Hui of Taiwan once said that the relations between the 2 countries should remained on a “special state to state” basis, which implied that Taiwan was trying to define a “two China” situation but Beijing rejected his plan.¹⁸ And China even replied that if Taiwan declares its independence, force would be used immediately. The Central Military Commission of the Party in August 1999 given an analysis of the Taiwan situation for military and civilian leadership of China, the rejection and stance that China expressed had put a great concern of the West especially the US.¹⁹ More than the denial of Taiwan independence, the purchase of the new Russian-built guided missile destroyer also made the Sino-US relations in tense. The rapid growth of China in the last 2 decades has put challenges to the US strategic interests, the US was worried about the Chinese ambition which would re-take Taiwan and its military.

According to the US delegation led by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot, who was meeting Chinese officials in Beijing on February 18, 2000, Talbot has mentioned that “President Clinton is determined to further promote US-China relations along the lines of constructive strategic partnership in the remaining months of his tenure”, and he also talked about he administration as “opposed the proposed Taiwan Security Enhancement Act would prevent it from becoming law.”²⁰ However, 3 day later, Beijing reported the conduction for the routine military exercise, and submarines were used to block the Taiwan strait, the command of submarines and the missiles in the region was catching the global attention about the Chinese ambition of absorbing Taiwan. And at that moment, the US Deputy Secretary started to use the term “threat” to describe the Chinese regional strategies, which brought China to the beginning of tense relationship with the US.

Back to the time of 2000s to 2010s, the United States still treated China as an ambitious and potential threat to the country, due to the military strategies that China presented. Seeing the rapid growth of China’s capabilities of being a developed country, the US felt the pressure and challenges were putting on its throne of hegemony power. In the point of view of Timperlake

¹⁸ Menges, Constantine Christopher. *China: The Gathering Threat*. (US: Nelson Current, 2005), 141-145.

¹⁹ Ibid, 141-145.

²⁰ CRM, no.281, as quoted in the Ching Chi Jih Pao (Hong Kong, 2000)

and Triplett, they warned that “American economic, political and social system is essentially unprotected against a Chinese information warfare attack.” They add “It is our judgement that information warfare from the People’s Republic of China is an unheralded national security threat to the US and the rest of the democratic countries.”²¹ From the military plan of the PRC, the US was worrying about the strategic weapon used by Beijing will finally affected the interests of the US as it will hugely damage the superiority status of it nowadays. Despite the economic cooperation of China and the US draw them closer and both of the powers were looking for a way to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific, critics still had the fear of Beijing’ rising. In case of Chinese refusal of Taiwan independence, the anti-China hands were unconfident of China due to the modified weapons proliferation and military improvement, they believed that China was looking for a way to increase its military competence to project its power in the Asian region.

The term “China Threat” seem to be used by the US government to describe the military threats, security threats that caused by the military ranging in China. In the International Herald Leader (IHL), China’s normal development and the Chinese products all become the US target, the anti-China hands also mentioned that China was stealing US nuclear technology, once this dragon owns communications companies, that would ²²definitely cause a harm and pose threat to US national security as there would be competitions between the US and Chinese companies. In the annual report “Strategic Assessment 2012”, it indicated that there would be a new round of post-Cold War major strategic adjustment in order to ensure its global dominance, the US would revive its leadership in the Asia-Pacific region, and counter-balance the rise of emerging power, which typically implied the rise of China would pose a threat to the US global leadership. More than that, the US also worried about the Chinese military power would also threatens Japan²³, which is the “ally” of US in the Asian region, as strong Japan would do a great favour for the US in maintaining regional security and keep a balance of power in the region.

At the same time, the Central Military Commission (CMC) document presented a systematic approach to geostrategic. It mentioned that the former President Jiang Zemin would meet with

²¹ Timperlake, Edward, and William C. Triplett. *Red Dragon Rising Communist China's Military Threat to America*. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub,1999), 129.

²² “International Herald Leader” China Scope, May 9, 2013, <http://ihl.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2013/0509/205800.shtml>

²³ Ibid.

Kyrgyzstan, the Russian leader.²⁴ Beijing arranged meetings and the president, in order to expand cooperation in the fields of security, and ensure the exchanges with the neighbouring countries by land routes during the war. The defence modernization serves both internal and external objectives, to ensure the economic development and greater integration into the global economy and maintain political stability. To achieve domestic goals for resolving domestic problems, such as a smooth political succession, the PLA was set for protecting its political standing and influences originally. As China is evolving to be a world power rather than a regional power, the PLA dedicate itself to be more professional and operationally competent military²⁵. China was developing a defence to against the US intervention, also, the rapid economic growth facilitated the budget increase and weapon purchase abroad.

The US treated the rise of China as a threat to its global dominance in terms of the rising Chinese military capabilities, while China presents its military development strategies as a way of protection from the foreign intervention.

Conclusion

Giving a critique review on “China threat theory”, we first look at the mobilisation of China and the West, the aims and purpose of the countries seem to be similar as they both prioritise the survival as the core national interest, which means to avoid foreign intervention that may affect one’s sovereignty. In the methodological aspect, the term “China threat” is a hypothesis and estimation of the future, which implies the sensitive diplomatic strategies as the US believe that the forecast of China is a threat to the national security, as the Chinese economic and military growth will be continued to grow at the same rates. In order to reduce the tense between the US-China relations, and decline the distrust of China, more diplomatic strategies could be carried out in order to increase the opportunities for cultural exchanges.

²⁴ Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, “A Critique of the China Threat Theory: A Systematic Analysis.” *Asian Perspective*, Vol.31(2007): 50-52.

²⁵ Ibid.

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