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WikiLeaks Cables Reveal China's Modernizing Military Might

By Aprille Muscara

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A Wikileaked January 2009 diplomatic cable from the United States' Beijing embassy forecasting the next three decades of U.S.-China relations warned of the Asian giant's "rapid military modernization".

"The PLA [People's Liberation Army] thirty years from today will likely have sophisticated anti-satellite weapons, state-of-the-art aircraft, aircraft carriers and an ability to project force into strategic sea lanes," the cable read.

Days ahead of a highly anticipated summit between the two countries' leaders, slated to begin here next Wednesday, much attention has been paid to Beijing's military might following a visit to the East by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates this week.

Gates spent three days in China, the U.S.'s largest trading partner outside of North America, attempting to revive military-to-military ties, which Beijing cut in protest of U.S.-Taiwan arms sales announced last January.

In public statements, Chinese leaders have parroted the 2009 cable's timetable on the modernization of its military.

"We cannot call ourselves an advanced military country," said Liang Guanglie, China's defense minister, on Monday. "The gap between us and advanced countries is at least two to three decades."

Just a day after Liang's assurance, on Jan. 11, the PLA conducted a test flight of its J-20 stealth jet prototype, joining a select set of world powers with aircraft undetectable by radar and other technologies.

Along with the U.S. – which, with its fleet of stealth planes like the F-22 and F-35, leads on this front – and Russia – whose version, the T-50, is in the early testing stage – China is one of few countries with this type of technology, and the only one in the region. But not for long.

A month before the J-20 show of force, India struck a deal with Moscow to obtain aircraft similar to the Russian T-50, and currently, Gates is in Japan negotiating the sale of U.S. F-35s, among other objectives.

Regional Tensions

"Perceived threats to China's security posed by Japan's participation in missile defense or by future high-tech U.S. military technologies might cause tomorrow's Chinese leaders to change their assessment and to exert economic pressures on U.S. allies like Thailand or the Philippines to choose between Beijing and Washington," the 2009 cable predicted.

Indeed, China displayed increasing self-confidence in the region last year – although not through economic pressures, but with territorial assertions and diplomatic missteps that, by most accounts, have backfired.

Where South Korea, Japan and others in the South China Sea seemed to be inching closer to Beijing, China's perceived "bullying" in 2010 served to nudge its neighboring capitals back in Washington's direction, experts say.

Another leaked diplomatic cable from February 2008 warned that, "As China's international presence and nationalist sentiment grow, commensurate with greater political, economic and military might, Chinese analysts anticipate a more assertive Chinese foreign policy."

Beijing's growing military capability, as evidenced most recently by the J-20 flight exercise, and its regional – and global – impacts have thus been a major focal point for China-watchers.

Gates's public statements indicating that President Hu Jintao seemed unaware of the test flight have also provided more fodder to analysts who question the ties between Beijing's civilian and military leaders, scrutinizing the influence of the PLA on China's foreign policy.

This week's visit by Gates to restore military ties was supposed to take place last year, but his trip was twice cancelled – at least once by the PLA, Gates himself suggested.

Regardless of the political fractures in Beijing, if any, Tuesday's exhibition of the country's advancing military capacity is a surprise to no one.

No Surprises

"I've watched them evolve this capability," U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen told reporters at a National Security Strategy update Wednesday, adding, "It's not the [PLA's] only high-end capability."

Exactly four years before the Jan. 11, 2011 J-20 test flight, on Jan. 11, 2007, the PLA destroyed an old weather satellite, announcing its anti-satellite capabilities to the international community – the first successful trial of its kind since the U.S. conducted a similar exercise 22 years prior. The following winter, in December 2008, the PLA Navy for the first time left its home waters for military purposes to participate in anti-piracy efforts in Africa. Another naval milestone will be China's first aircraft carrier, of which a Soviet vessel is in the process of being modernized and plans for building new carriers have been set.

Then, exactly three years after China exhibited its ASAT capabilities, it exhibited its anti-missile resources. On Jan. 11, 2010, China's state-sponsored news agency reported the successful testing of a ground-based system for intercepting missiles midcourse.

The report came days after the Pentagon announced plans to sell 6.4 billion dollars of weapons to Taiwan – a move that has since been a recurrent flashpoint in Washington-Beijing dealings.

And last month, the Pentagon confirmed that Beijing's anti-ship ballistic missile – the world's first – was operational.

"The Chinese have every right to develop the military that they want," Mullen said. "What I just have not been able to crack is the why on some of these capabilities. Whether it's [the J-20], whether it's anti-satellite, whether it's anti-ship, many of these capabilities seem to be focused very specifically on the United States."

The reaction to Beijing's latest display of military prowess has ranged from hysteria over a perceived climaxing security threat to the region and to Washington, to being downplayed as an expected development and, well, not that big of a deal.

Hide and Bide

According to the leaked 2009 cable, this uncertainty surrounding Beijing's intentions is a relic of decades past, a product of the policies of Deng Xiaoping, the grandfather of modern China.

"Deng Xiaoping's maxim urging China to hide its capabilities while biding its time should caution us against predicting that the PLA's long-term objectives are modest," the assessment read. "In the years to come, our defense experts will need to closely monitor China's contingency plans."

Analysts say that China's military developments also include advanced attack submarines, air defense systems, counter- space systems and cyberwarfare capabilities.

Most surprising to some experts, however, is not necessarily the technological breakthroughs themselves, but the speed at which they are being made.

"Over the years, the Chinese military doctrine was one of 'hide and bide' – hide your military resources and bide your time," said Vice Admiral David J. Dorsett, the U.S. naval intelligence chief, at a briefing last week. "They now appear to have shifted into an era where they're willing to show their resources and capabilities."

Still, Dorsett said, the trajectory of China's defense follows a timetable of "decades", as it will take time for the emerging power to coordinate these ad hoc developments into a fully operational military capable of managing the entire spectrum of war.

What is certain, experts say, is that key to fostering mutual understanding – and moving closer to deciphering the full scope of Beijing's defense capabilities – is the renewal of defense ties and the strengthening of U.S.-China cooperation beyond the military front – something both leaders will attempt to tackle here next week.