



People's Liberation Army After Next

By Susan M Puska

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An analytical schism has developed over differing assessments of China's military modernization. Underlying this debate are at least two key questions. First, will the ongoing China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization provide China with significant offensive power projection and/or preemptive capability? If so, by when? Second, does the pace and success of China's military modernization constitute a threat to the United States and/or its friends and allies in the Asia-Pacific region? At the source of these differing views on the pace and likely success of the PLA modernization is a lack of hard evidence, aggravated by a Chinese tendency to conceal both strengths and weaknesses. There are also analysts who are locked into positions on the PLA that the evidence seems unable to alter. Lack of information is often muddled by anecdotal knowledge, sometimes provided by Chinese interlocutors, that may be impossible to confirm or refute. In addition, a large body of conventional wisdom about the PLA has built up over time, which may inhibit fresh reassessment. Finally, peer comparisons of the PLA to the U.S. military, which is without equal in the post-Cold War period, may shape analysis of the PLA's capabilities and shortfalls. As a result, conclusions about China's military modernization often leave considerable room for interpretation on any side of an argument. The policy decisions made today based in part on the absence of hard analysis will likely haunt U.S. and allied policy and interests well into the 21st century, as China's comprehensive strength and historic aspirations mature. In order to minimize miscalculations about the PLA modernization, debate is essential, for it can help reduce the twin analytical evils of overestimation and underestimation. Debate can reduce wishful thinking or demonization about China's strategic capability and intentions. It may also preclude counterproductive self-imposed constraints on U.S. policy options based on fear of self-fulfilling prophecies of a China threat. Active debate, finally, can lead to a reevaluation of old, well-worn assumptions, and spur greater exploitation of publicly available information about the PLA and China's national security. All of this would potentially help to develop a clearer picture of China's People's Liberation Army After Next into the 21st century.

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