

PLA ON THE MARCH

MILITARY TRANSFORMATION AND MODERNIZATION IN THE PRC

“ CHINESE MILITARY ENVISAGES GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT FROM REGIONAL TO GLOBAL POWER. HISTORY SHOWS THAT CHINA ALWAYS HAS TIME AND LEADERS IN BEIJING KNOW THIS”- CLAIMS PAWEŁ BEHRENDT, DEFENSE ANALYST FROM CENTRE FOR STUDIES POLAND-ASIA, INTERVIEWED BY RAFAŁ WIŚNIEWSKI FROM R/EVOLUTIONS’ EDITORIAL TEAM ON THE TOPIC OF PRC’S DEFENSE POLICY.

INTERVIEW WITH **PAWEŁ BEHRENDT**
BY RAFAŁ WIŚNIEWSKI

Let us start our discussion of Chinese defence policy with the fundamental strategic considerations. What is, in your opinion, the overall threat assessment as seen by the top civil-military leadership of the PRC? In other words, what kind of conflict is the People’s Liberation Army preparing to fight in?

PRC and PLA leadership has traditionally remained enigmatic about this matter, however recently this has changed. In last year’s report about the government’s work Wen Jiabao stated that: “the most important thing (for the PLA) is to win local wars under conditions of information age.” From that moment onwards, this doctrine has been confirmed several times by top political and military leaders and officially confirmed in the 2013 Defence White Paper.

The People’s Liberation Army is currently undergoing a period of far-reaching transformation in terms of doctrine, training and equipment. Despite impressive achievements, questions remain as to how deep and effective the reforms are in reality. In your opinion, how well is the PLA prepared in order to conduct a “high-tech local war under conditions of informatization”?

The PLA is just at the beginning of transformation and modernization processes. The industry is set to begin serial production of modern equipment. Work on new training programmes, which concentrate on new technologies have only been announced in February 2013. Despite declarations of greater transparency on the PLA’s side we still don’t know how much progress the Chinese have made. There are few elite units which have been issued modern weapons and equipment. Those units also conduct exercises testing new doctrines. For example in November 2012 one of Beijing Military Region’s mechanised divisions conducted combined forces manoeuvres with joined command post on board of an AWACS1 aircraft. Despite big PR successes like the presentation of J-20 and J-31 fighters, there is still a long way ahead and the majority of units still use equipment based on technologies from 1980s or even older. Nevertheless, modernization programmes have been awarded high priority and enjoy high level support. Thus we can expect that in 10 years time the PLA will be ready for “high-tech local war under conditions of informatization.”

1 AWACS- Airborne Early Warning and Command System (Editor’s note – RW)

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The official Chinese doctrine stresses the defensive nature of the state's military posture. A lot is made of the PRC's desire to acquire capabilities for denying its surrounding airspace and sea to potential opponents (read US). At the same time, so is the process of fielding some systems (like for example an aircraft carrier or long range transport aircraft) which are associated with power projection. What is your take on the issue of the further development of Chinese military? Will it concentrate on regional operations or pursue power projection in distant theatres?

Chinese leaders attach great importance to both “peaceful development” policy and restoration of their great power status. CPC leadership recognizes that armed conflicts are not conducive to realize their primary interests, however there exist the political will and means to become a global power. As we can see in the case of People's Liberation Army Navy, its ability to conduct regional operations is only one stage on the road to “Middle Kingdom's” revival. The PLAN development's concept includes three stages: a Brown, Green and Blue water fleet. The Chinese navy is now somewhere between the first and second stages. The Brown water fleet should be capable of conducting operations in neighbouring waters, that is: the Yellow, East and South China Seas. A Second stage includes the development of potential for operations in the Philippine Sea and waters surrounding the Indonesian archipelago. Finally, the Blue water fleet is an oceanic navy, which could rival the US Navy in the Pacific. This stage is supposed to be completed in the next 20 years. We can suspect that analogous plans have been prepared for air and land forces. In other words, Chinese military envisages gradual development from regional to global power. History shows that China always has time and leaders in Beijing know this.

Recently many questions have been raised concerning the presumably growing political clout of military leaders in Chinese politics. Those issues are inherently difficult to study, as they are shrouded in secrecy. Nevertheless, could you comment on the current state of civil-military relations in the PRC?

This is a very difficult question; I would even say that such knowledge is hermetic. The CPC views the military as one of the basic pillars of its rule, but also wants tight control over the PLA. From their side, top military leaders declare absolute loyalty to Beijing. How relations between top level officials or local administration on the one side and the military on the other look like, I don't know.

Chinese military modernization does not take place in a vacuum. Asia is bursting with arms procurement and military build-ups. What is the PLA's position in comparison with armed forces of such states as Japan or India?

Chinese military build-up is one of main reasons for arms races in Asia, but hardly the only one. The entire continent is bursting with conflicts such as Korea, territorial disputes, revolts of ethnic and religious minorities and old resentments. Dealing with Japan and India alone, we must remember that both states are China's old rivals and possess both the will and capabilities to become great powers. Japanese Self Defence Forces are the most modern armed forces in Asia, second only to USA. What is especially interesting, Japanese defence spending is traditionally limited to a maximum level of 1% of GDP. Even then it permanently ranks among the ten biggest defence budgets in the world. The main obstacles for full remilitarization of Japan are its pacifist constitution and society weary of foreign adventures. However, because of China this is changing. In the last general election defence issues played an important role for the first time. India, similarly to China, buys much weaponry from Russia; however its defence modernization faces numerous problems stemming from corruption and other defects of state administration. For now Indian ambitions are directed towards the Indian Ocean basin, but in light of the Chinese engagement in the Af-Pak2 region and Burma, New Delhi seeks cooperation with another potential enemy of PRC- Vietnam. Generally, the PLA is numerically superior to any other Asian military force, except India. In terms of military technology and modern training China still lags far behind Japan or Republic of Korea.

Paweł Behrendt graduated from Szczecin University with a MA in international relations. Since 2009 he is associated with the Centre for Poland-Asia Studies, specializing in military affairs and the conflicts of the Far East. He is also head of the news department at konflikty.pl.

2 Afghanistan-Pakistan (Editor's note – RW)

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