

WHAT ARE CHINA'S INTENTIONS?

Andrew R. Wilson

Timperlake, Edward, and William Triplett II. *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China's Military Threat to America*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1999. 271pp. \$27.95

Manning, Robert, Robert Montaperto, and Brad Roberts. *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control: A Preliminary Assessment*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000. 91pp. \$10

The release of the Cox Committee Report in May 1999 inspired a surge of concern over China's military modernization, and it heightened anxieties about the ability of the People's Republic of China to steal America's most advanced nuclear weapons technology. While many of the claims made by that committee have yet to be substantiated, the Cox Report contributed to a fractious debate about the Clinton administration's China policy and complicated an already difficult task of assessing Chinese intentions and capabilities. Moreover, the worsening of U.S.-China relations that began with the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and continued through the EP-3 incident earlier this year convinced many that China would represent the greatest challenge, and perhaps the greatest threat, to U.S. interests in the twenty-first century.

Both books use the Cox Report as their starting point. Both also offer assessments of Chinese capabilities and intentions as a basis to make policy prescriptions for the new administration. All similarities, however, end there.

Apparently written to capitalize on the public interest created by the Cox

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Report, *Red Dragon Rising* approaches the issues of China's military modernization and policy objectives as an opportunity for a damning critique of both Beijing and the Clinton administration, which the authors argue was complicit in the recent technological and tactical advancements of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and turned a blind eye to China's continued human rights abuses, intimidation of Taiwan, and sale of advanced weaponry to states that are openly hostile to American interests. The thesis of this work is simple: democratic countries are about to be unpleasantly surprised by the emergence of a hostile,

expansionist, nondemocratic superpower armed with the most modern weapons—and it will be the fault of the United States.

Edward Timperlake, a former Marine aviator now on the staff of the House Committee on Rules, and William Triplett II, the former chief Republican counsel to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, seek to effect a fundamental change in U.S. China policy—a change that would recognize China as the greatest security threat both to the United States and to the democratic nations of the world. A litany of China’s arms sales, acts of oppression, and wars of territorial aggression serves as evidence to support their view. It is odd that a book ostensibly concerned with the future of China and the emerging China threat would spend so much time discussing the past, but the authors argue that a look at the “real history” of Chinese brutality and territorial aggression is necessary to gauge China’s intentions. As a historian of China, I heartily agree with this approach in principle; however, the authors’ claim that they are in possession of China’s “real history” is problematic. Not only are Timperlake and Triplett’s discussions of the Tiananmen massacre, the occupation of Tibet, and China’s foreign wars based on dated scholarship, but they are plagued with factual errors too numerous to list here, and there is at least one glaring contradiction that undermines their entire argument.

By their own admission it is internal security, the suppression of dissent, and the military occupation of border regions (such as Tibet) that consume the majority of money, manpower, and attention within the Chinese military. If this is the case, as the authors claim, how can the People’s Republic also be actively pursuing hegemonic aspirations throughout Asia? Moreover, as their description of Tibet indicates, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is very aware of the cost and time commitment necessary to hold even a sparsely populated region in the face of minimal resistance. This fact would seem to militate against territorial aggrandizement at the expense of China’s neighbors, but Timperlake and Triplett do not address this critical point.

In terms of military modernization, *Red Dragon Rising* presents an extreme view of China’s emerging capabilities. While most of the debate over the Chinese military arises between those who are skeptical about China’s future military capabilities and those who believe that the PLA will achieve *some* significant advances, the authors take all Chinese claims at face value. As a result, Timperlake and Triplett credit the PLA with an across-the-board force modernization and doctrinal innovation that will rapidly outstrip U.S. ability to respond. Unfortunately, Timperlake and Triplett do not use the abundant open-source material on the Chinese military to support their dire predictions about the PLA’s ability to develop and master new weapons systems and engage in information warfare. Nor do the authors make reference to the equally available scholarly

literature on the significant problems confronting China in terms of its political, social, and economic cohesion that may constrain military modernization.

Consisting primarily of speculation and innuendo, almost completely bereft of scholarly merit, seemingly inspired principally by hatred for Bill Clinton and Al Gore, and wholly loyal to the Taiwan lobby, *Red Dragon Rising* will be of little value to readers who are truly interested in serious debate about U.S. policy toward China. The book's inflammatory polemics can only serve to politicize further what the authors correctly identify as an issue of concern to all Americans. Moreover, the desire to list every evil ever perpetrated by the People's Republic serves only to obscure the most critical and alarming new trends—the improvements in China's nuclear capabilities and its growing strategic partnership with Russia.

While equally concerned with China's capabilities and intentions, Robert Manning, Ronald Montaperto, and Brad Roberts approach the same issues with significantly more critical objectivity in *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control: A Preliminary Assessment*. The result is a provocative, at times alarming, but quite balanced discussion of several alternative futures for China's strategic arsenal and nuclear doctrine, and for U.S. policy. This short volume is the first product of a series of roundtable discussions among senior China analysts, national security specialists, and nuclear experts. The authors state, however, that this book represents not a consensus among the entire group but rather their own preliminary assessment. Manning is a former Asia policy analyst at the State Department for the George H. W. Bush administration; he is now the director of Asian studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Montaperto, a China expert who was formerly on the faculty of the National Defense University, is dean of academics at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. Roberts is an arms control expert at the Institute for Defense Analyses. The three authors possess sufficient scholarly expertise to make this book essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the basic context of China's nuclear policy and the forces that drive China's nuclear decision making.

Rather than accept the Cox Report's suspicions as fact, Manning, Montaperto, and Roberts begin with what little we do know about China's strategic weapons, delivery systems, fissile material stockpiles, and nuclear doctrine. They use this sketch of current and potential capabilities to posit five notional-force futures for China's strategic arsenal. Drawing from analyses at both ends of the spectrum regarding PLA capabilities, as well as best and worst-case assessments of Chinese intentions, these scenarios run the gamut from minimum deterrence to parity with the United States. Perhaps of more significance, however, is the authors' discussion of how Chinese decisions on force structure and doctrine might be influenced by a variety of factors. While internal forces like interservice

competition for resources, changes in regime, and economic growth will inform Chinese actions, and international trends, such as South Asian proliferation and Japan's changing security posture, will influence China's nuclear planning, the authors contend that it is the American approach to nuclear weapons in general and to China specifically that will have the greatest impact on Beijing. This prospect bodes well for the ability of the United States to exercise influence over China's nuclear arsenal, but it also demands a significant reorganization in U.S. nuclear policy, which would include a linkage between nuclear policy, China policy, and planning for both theater missile defense and national missile defense. According to the authors, the decisions that the Bush administration makes regarding the scale and deployment of missile defenses will undoubtedly have a significant influence on China's nuclear doctrine.

From Beijing's point of view, the prospect of a U.S. national missile defense system implies the prospect of living in a world in which Washington can dictate terms to China anywhere and everywhere that Washington has interests, be it in the service of Taiwanese independence or human rights in Tibet.

While these statements are likely to raise calls from critics like Timperlake and Triplett that the authors are sympathetic to Beijing, such considerations are critical to shattering what the three authors view as the dominant "bipolar" paradigm of U.S. nuclear policy, which is fixated on U.S.-Russian relations, and to building a new, more nuanced approach that takes second-tier nuclear powers like China seriously. Likewise, U.S. policy choices may influence China's willingness to participate in and abide by international arms control regimes.

Finally, *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control* makes the rarely heard argument that policy makers in Washington must address the role that Russia will play in the Sino-U.S. equation. Russia currently occupies the second spot in China's hierarchy of bilateral relationships, after the United States, and this dynamic must be incorporated into a new "tripolar paradigm for nuclear arms control." The intersection of these three powers, the authors argue, is what should drive an entirely new American approach to nuclear policy and to discussions with China on nuclear issues. This approach will require combining the issues of nuclear weapons, missile defense, and China in a wider U.S. national debate and within U.S. security institutions. This could in turn lead to a more constructive dialogue with both Russia and China, and maximize the ability of the United States to influence Chinese policy choices for the better. While I do not share the authors' optimism about positively influencing either Chinese decision making or Chinese impressions of America, I do find their ultimate prescriptions for a new nuclear policy framework to be persuasive.

The major shortcoming of *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control* is its frustrating brevity. To be fair, this is more the result of the paucity of reliable

open-source material and secondary works on China's strategic forces and doctrine, as compared to the abundant material on both the PLA's conventional forces and its emerging information warfare doctrine. While Timperlake and Triplett rely primarily on speculation "to accurately chronicle" China's rise, neglecting readily available open-source material, Manning, Montaperto, and Roberts are forced to speculate, because the relevant material does not yet exist. However, given the prolific publishing records of all three authors, we can anticipate more detailed works to follow that will flesh out this preliminary assessment. A secondary weakness of the book is its lack of a bibliography. While the footnotes are a useful reference for further reading, a full bibliography of relevant primary and secondary sources, perhaps even annotated by the knowledgeable authors, would have been invaluable. Yet even with these flaws, the book is a concise, scholarly, and balanced assessment of a topic that is critical to U.S. national security.