

China Rises as America Weakens

The death of the Asia Pivot

By Bill Gertz

We are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and in space can no longer be taken for granted.

—Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel

FOR THE PAST five and a half years, the United States military has suffered the devastating effects of hundreds of billions of dollars in budget cuts. At the same time, China's armed forces—both conventional and nuclear—have made dramatic gains. The People's Liberation Army was derided a decade ago by some China-watchers as a “junkyard army” incapable of coming close to matching the military prowess of the U.S. Army. Today, the PLA boasts new strategic capabilities that validate Hagel's words about the

BILL GERTZ is senior editor of the *Washington Free Beacon* and a national-security columnist for the *Washington Times*. His last article for COMMENTARY was “China's High Tech Military Threat” (April 2012).

new era of declining American military dominance.

The new Chinese military is armed with highly sophisticated weaponry. They include cyber-warfare forces capable of crippling American electrical and financial infrastructures from computer keyboards in Shanghai as well as precision-guided anti-satellite missiles that can quickly enfeeble the U.S. military's unparalleled ability to combine long-distance war-fighting with precision attack.

The new power balance—a weakening American military facing a rising Chinese power—has dire implications for global peace and stability. Furthermore, the sharp decline in funds for U.S. military operations and modernization, coupled with China's rapid build-up of forces, has rendered President Obama's premier foreign-policy initiative, to strategically shift toward the Asia Pacific and away from conflicts in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, all but impossible to achieve.

The American retreat from this plan to “pivot to Asia” became clear in several startling statements earlier this year by the senior military commander in charge of the U.S. Pacific Command. His name is Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III.

Locklear first came to national attention in 2009 because of a surprising interview with the *Boston Globe*, in which he said North Korea's belligerence and China's mounting aggression and military buildup were not his main concerns. Rather, this four-star admiral, in charge of the 300,000 Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corp personnel based in Asia and the Pacific, said the most serious security problem facing the United States was *climate change*. "People are surprised sometimes" by his concern, he said, even as he insisted that the global upheaval due to rising sea levels was more likely to "cripple the security environment" than anything else.

In January of this year, Locklear gave a speech about the threats and challenges in the Asia Pacific and listed them in presumed order of importance: natural disasters, transnational crime and drug trafficking, human trafficking, competition for food and water, territorial disputes, North Korea, and a rising India and—in *last* place—China. Note how Locklear lumped the rise of these countries, as if the world's largest democracy poses the same challenges as the Communist dictatorship in Beijing armed with nuclear weapons.

Locklear also issued this curious comment:

So, what is changing? Our historic dominance, that most of us in this room have enjoyed, is diminishing. No question. So let me say it again. Our historic dominance that most of us in our careers have enjoyed is diminishing... [I]t's going to be a highlight that our dominance is diminishing. But it's something we have known was going to happen, and we have to expect to continue to happen.

In Beijing, Locklear's declinism was the subject of intense discussion. Some commentators said it proved China would have little difficulty managing its relationship with the United States as the Western superpower diminished itself. The jingoistic *Global Times*, a publication of the Communist Party of China, said Locklear's remarks demonstrated that America is "losing its grip on the Pacific."

But many of Beijing's state-controlled commentators dismissed Locklear's words as a calculated de-

ception designed to frighten the United States into increasing its spending on defense. They insisted that China's military power is lagging so far behind America's that there can be no contest.

The line that China is not a threat is a common propaganda theme out of Beijing. It is reflective of the ancient Chinese strategist Tai Kung, whose classic *Six Secret Teachings* includes the tactic of convincing your enemy that you pose no threat. In this way you lull him into complacency before defeating him decisively in battle.

There was good reason for the Chinese to play down their growing military power in response to

A publication of the Communist Party of China noted that Admiral Locklear's remarks in January showed America 'losing its grip on the Pacific.'

Locklear's remarks. Less than a week earlier, on January 9, 2014, American intelligence agencies surveying Chinese airspace detected the testing of a revolutionary new strategic weapon: a hypersonic glide vehicle.

It was a hybrid cruise/ballistic missile carried atop the last stage of a larger ballistic missile that released it in "near space" at an altitude of around 80,000 feet. The unpowered vehicle then traveled thousands of miles toward western China at a speed estimated to be 10 times the speed of sound, or Mach 10 (7,612 miles per hour).

The hypersonic vehicle, dubbed the Wu-14, is considered cutting-edge military technology. The test represented a major breakthrough not just in hypersonic weapons technology but in China's ability to develop high-technology arms on a rapid timetable.

Frank Kendall, an undersecretary of defense, told the House Armed Services Committee during a hearing on January 28 that the Chinese hypersonic threat will make it much more difficult for U.S. missile defenses, developed over the past several decades at a cost of tens of billions of dollars, to be successful. As his deputy, Alan Shaffer, put it during a recent defense-industry conference: "Integrated air-defense systems are getting to be very hard. Electronic warfare is part of the answer but part of the answer is speed. If they can't catch you, you can get in and do your strike."*

All in all, according to Kendall, the Wu-14 test highlights growing concerns in the Pentagon that China's military advances, coming at a time of extreme fiscal austerity for the United States, will overtake ours in as few as five years. Kendall said he felt "reasonably

* Shaffer says the Pentagon is moving ahead with its own hypersonic craft, the Boeing X-51 scramjet. Unlike its Chinese counterpart, the X-51 is powered by a revolutionary jet engine that travels at speeds of Mach 5.1.

comfortable where we are today but not necessarily so comfortable [with where we'd be] five or ten years from now." Hypersonics, he continued, "is one of the technologies that would be on that list of things that in five or ten years we might have a much bigger problem with." He said he had come to Congress "to try to elevate that concern" because he thinks that "it is a significant one, especially since, given time, it will manifest."

In 2013, Pentagon investment in hypersonics was relatively small, with only \$36 million devoted to research and development. The current budget lowers that figure. (Congress is expected to add funding to hypersonic research.)

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Lora Saalman, a specialist on Chinese strategic systems with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, believes these hypersonic weapons are an outgrowth of earlier Chinese advances—precision-strike missiles such as China's DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile, and China's own version of missile defenses, which use high-speed hit-to-kill capabilities and anti-satellite missiles.

The Wu-14 test shows that Beijing is now streamlining its weapons-development process. "With the integration of strategic analysis and planning into technical research, China's pursuit of hypersonic and high-precision weaponry promises to be faster and more focused," Saalman said. "This recent test is a manifestation of this trend." China's submarine-launched ballistic missile took longer than a decade to develop. But the Wu-14 went from concept to demonstrator in record time over the past decade.

U.S. intelligence agencies also confirmed China's deployment of yet another new ballistic missile system, the intermediate-range Dong Feng-26C, designed to fill the gap in China's arsenal of short-range and long-range missile systems. It would give China the capability to hit the island of Guam in the South Pacific, a territory of the United States and a key strategic element in the supposed military buildup in the Asia Pacific that is central to the Asia Pivot.

FIRST ANNOUNCED for the Pentagon by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in *Foreign Policy's* November 2011 issue, the pivot has been the centerpiece of President Obama's foreign

and defense policies. Originally, the concept involved a series of muscular military steps designed to make clear to China and North Korea—and to our allies in the region—that the United States was serious about keeping the peace in the waters around Asia. A plan, originally designed by the George W. Bush administration, to station 60 percent of all U.S. naval forces in Asia was adopted by Obama-administration officials as a part of its new initiative.

But in a speech she delivered in early March of this year, Assistant Secretary of Defense Katrina McFarland let the truth slip: "Right now, the pivot is being looked at again because, candidly, it can't happen." There simply wasn't enough money for it.

McFarland was instantly chastised inside the administration and the Pentagon for her honesty, and then produced a classic Washington "clarification."

In a statement issued through a

Pentagon spokeswoman, McFarland insisted she was echoing the defense secretary's earlier comments about having to do more with less. "The rebalance to Asia," her statement said unconvincingly, "can and will continue."

The pivot had already come under pressure from policymakers and business leaders, who feared it would upset trade and commercial ties to Beijing. As a result, the military elements of the pivot—known as the "Air Sea Battle Concept"—were delayed, downplayed, and limited.

In the end, the limited measures finally adopted included the addition of a fourth attack submarine to Guam, the rotation of 2,500 Marines to Darwin, Australia, and a small number of new Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore. Other pivot features were limited to increased technical spying and modest increases in regional missile defenses. The new strategy may have died aborning.

Meanwhile, in early March, China announced its largest increase in military spending in decades—12.2 percent more than the previous year. Its budget for 2014 will be the equivalent of \$132 billion. But that is a false number. Most actual spending on defense is conducted by the secretive and powerful People's Liberation Army, and it remains hidden and off the budget. Pentagon analysts say that if one includes China's space program and other state-run defense-industry spending, the overall defense budget is at least twice the published figure, or around \$260 billion. Including other ministries that support the military (such as the Public Security Ministry-run People's Armed Police, an internal-security armed force of 1.5 million troops, and the Telecommunications and Education Ministries

involved in military work), the budget probably approaches \$400 billion. That would be only \$95.6 billion less than the current U.S. defense budget request. And given China's propensity for sharp defense-spending increases, the two budgets could be equal in a few years.

The steep cuts in the Pentagon will produce what Hagel, in a major understatement, termed "additional risk in certain areas" for the U.S. military. That is especially true in Asia. Navy Captain James Fanell, the U.S. Pacific Fleet's senior intelligence officer, spoke on February 13 about a recent analysis of military war games by the Chinese—which produced indicators that Beijing is preparing for what Fanell termed a "short, sharp war" with Japan. He continued:

[We] concluded that the PLA has been given a new task: to be able to conduct a short, sharp war to destroy Japanese forces in the East China Sea, followed by what can only be expected [as] a seizure of the Senkakus, or even the southern Ryukus.

Fanell was referring to the uninhabited Senkaku islands located north of Taiwan just south of Japan's Ryuku islands. China claims the entire chain as its Diaoyu islands and insists they are Chinese territory, despite the fact that Tokyo has administered the islands since December 1953 with no protests from China until 1970, two years after the discovery of large undersea oil deposits nearby.

Fanell made news last year by stating bluntly that China's maritime patrol craft were engaged in the bullying of regional neighbors and that the Chinese had stepped up aggressive actions—culminating in the unilateral imposition of what it called a new "Air Defense Identification Zone" over the East China Sea in November 2013. The action was taken without warning and included not-so-veiled threats by China to shoot down intruding aircraft that did not inform Beijing in advance of flight plans.

China's most recent provocation toward the United States occurred on December 5, when a Chinese naval vessel sailed within 100 yards of the U.S. Navy-guided missile cruiser USS *Cowpens* in the South China Sea, in an attempt to force the ship to cease monitoring naval maneuvers by China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*. The incident was the most serious U.S.–China naval encounter in the past several years.

"Tensions in the South China and East China seas have deteriorated, with the Chinese coast guard playing the role of antagonist, harassing China's neighbors,

while PLA navy ships, their protectors, conduct port calls throughout the region, promising friendship and cooperation," Fanell said. He noted another alarming Chinese provocation—the publication weeks earlier of maps in the Communist Party–controlled newspaper *Global Times*. The maps showed the possible effects of JL-2 nuclear-missile attacks on the West Coast, specifically naming Seattle and Los Angeles. The article said the attacks could kill up to 12 million Americans through direct blasts and wind-dispersed radiation. "Imagine the outrage," Fanell said, "if a similar statement had been made by any U.S. media outlet."

Navy Captain David A. Adams, director of the Captain's Initiatives Group of the 7th Fleet, warned at the same conference at which Fanell spoke that the combination of China's nuclear buildup and the lack of any dialogue with the United States about its strategic forces is a combustible mix. The Chinese "are pursuing a hybrid approach to warfare—not the big war, but it could be high-tech, hybrid, low-tech, legal, financial, cyber, and we're already losing that war in the South China Sea today," Adams said. "And we're not focused on that, and our strategy, that peripheral conflict."

To counter China, the United States would need to bolster its current strategic advantage of more and better submarines and its air power—which means additional aircraft carriers and subs deployed in the western Pacific. "We have to think unconventionally," Adams said, "and be ready to win a hybrid war that we're not even thinking about." But the kind of build-up needed for both deterrence and potential war-fighting cannot be carried out because of the drastic cuts in defense spending.

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The same day the Pentagon unveiled its fiscal 2015 budget, with tens of billions of dollars in new reductions, its four-year strategy report was released. The Quadrennial Defense Review for 2014, like its 2010 predecessor, was short on specifics and long on vague pronouncements. But it did include a dire warning—albeit on page 80 of an 88-page document—from Army General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Obama's most senior military adviser. Dempsey stated bluntly that because of the funding cuts and the expected decline of U.S. forces and their high-technology edge against foreign powers, the risk

of a conflict in Asia will increase over the next decade.

“In the next 10 years,” Dempsey said, “I expect the risk of interstate conflict in East Asia to rise, the vulnerability of our platforms and basing to increase, our technology edge to erode.” The future conflict can also be expected to take place at a much faster pace than past wars and will be played out on much more difficult high-technology battlefields.

And, unlike past wars, the coming conflict in Asia might be waged directly on the territory of the U.S. homeland, whose distance from the continent is no longer sufficient for it to remain “a sanctuary either for our forces or for our citizens.” Attacks in space and in what the military calls the “cyber domain” are also likely to be starting points for future conflicts, and these are both areas in which China is developing niche weapons systems designed to trump U.S. strategic advantages.

“We are likely to be surprised—pleasantly and unpleasantly—by the speed of technology proliferation, increasingly sophisticated systems being developed by potential state adversaries, the cleverness and persistence of terrorists, the ability to adapt our own acquisition programs and capabilities, and the vitality of the U.S. technology and economic cycle,” Dempsey wrote. “Estimations of how and where we would fight a war or militarily intervene will also probably be largely wrong.”

In an indirect reference to China’s deployment of high-tech weapons, Dempsey called for developing new military capabilities that will allow better operations in contested areas and allow for forced entry into the Asia Pacific. And while Dempsey was largely silent as the Obama administration and Congress moved in on the defense budget beginning in 2011, he signaled with this statement that he could no longer remain so.

“Operational plans cannot be executed with a large force that is not ready in time or a ready force that is too small,” he said. “Our aging combat systems are increasingly vulnerable against adversaries who are modernizing—many of whom have invested in leap-ahead technologies—making our ability to develop and employ leading-edge technologies, systems, and concepts even more urgent.”

That means China.

Beijing’s rulers are beginning to follow through on their main strategic goal: driving the United States military out of Asia and forcing all the states in the region to bow to Beijing’s wishes. China is among several important foreign powers that have come to recognize that the Obama administration’s behavior has opened new possibilities for them—possibilities that are creating new and unprecedented threats to the United States and the world. 