



Accidental Explosion or Maturity? The Future of China's Expanding Military Power — Capability and Intentions Analyzed by Former Senior Leaders of the Japan Self-Defense Forces

Discussion between KODA Yoji and YAMAGUCHI Noboru

Numerical analysis reveals the formidable raw power of the Chinese military



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Koda Yoji: Fear and anxiety about China's People's Liberation Army has been spreading in Japan as China has rapidly expanded its military spending in recent years, but its real capability is relatively unknown. I am afraid this story is taking on a life of its own. Today I would like to discuss matters related to China's military power by calmly analyzing it, because if we overestimate or underestimate its power we won't be able to deal with it properly as a nation.

reflects the growth of China's GDP. Incidentally, the defense budget of the United States was \$717.4 billion in 2011. Although twenty years ago there was a thirty-fold difference in defense spending between the United States and China, this gap has currently narrowed to an eight-fold difference.

On top of that, the breakdown of China's defense spending has not been determined, and there are many areas that are in doubt, such as whether this total includes R&D expenses. In general, it is believed that China's defense budget should be estimated at two to three times the

Yamaguchi Noboru: First, let's begin by confirming China's defense budget. According to the Chinese government, China's defense spending reached \$90.2 billion in 2011, an eighteen-fold increase over the past twenty years. China has been regularly doubling its defense budget every five years. This



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amount announced by the Chinese government. If that is true, there would only be a three-fold difference in actual defense spending between the United States and China. In comparison, Japan spent \$59.8 billion on defense in 2011.

Koda: In tandem with the sharp increase in defense spending, Chinese military operations have been stepped up as a matter of course.

Yamaguchi: I think a prime example of this is the incident when a Chinese naval ship targeted one of Japan's naval vessels using Fire Control System (FCS) radar. Submarines that appear to belong to the Chinese navy also regularly travel underwater in the contiguous zone of the southwestern islands off of Kyushu and in the Okinawa archipelago. There were 306 emergency takeoffs (scrambles) by Japan's Air Self-Defense Force fighter planes against Chinese aircraft that appeared to come close to our airspace in 2012, exceeding the number of scrambles against Russian military jets for the first time.

Koda: It is true that the various numerical data are growing, but this is not enough to determine the real capability of the Chinese military.

Military power is a combination of intentions and capabilities (of policymakers). For example, no matter how much defense capability Japan has, the Japanese people hardly expect Japan to use military force all of a sudden. However, China is a nation with areas of uncertainty that make it unclear as to when it might use military force, and this makes its neighbors anxious.

It is believed that China's strategy is to fulfill its aims without military confrontation through three different kinds of warfare: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. Japan definitely seems to be losing the psychological warfare. Given the fire-control radar incident mentioned earlier, we can't say that China has no intentions, and it also has capability. Therefore, we need to accurately analyze China's intentions and capabilities.

Aegis ships weren't built in a day

Yamaguchi: I agree. First of all, we have to consider the troubling parts accurately, particularly the development of new weapons. Speaking of fighter planes, China has devoted itself to developing a sophisticated J-20 fighter that is classified as a fifth-generation fighter. It seems that China aims to develop a stealth model that is difficult to capture on radar and that has strong sensor capability to detect enemies. The J-20 is believed to have comparable capabilities to the F-35, which Japan has decided to acquire.

New ships and submarines are also being built at a rapid pace, and China is working hard on its first aircraft carrier. A Chinese version of an Aegis ship has also been built and launched. Although China's raw power still cannot be compared to the preeminent international strength of the United States Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Vietnam and the Philippines, China's neighbors, are handily beaten in terms of both quantity and quality. For these Asian countries, China's military power must



certainly be a threat.

Koda: However, as an officer and a senior commander who was actually in the Maritime Self-Defense Force, I would like to point out that high-tech equipment “is not built in a day.” In other words, it took a long time for the United States to create its current high-performance Aegis ship. First of all, it was the Second World War—particularly the fierce aerial assaults implemented by the Imperial Japanese Navy against the aircraft-carrier task forces of the U.S. Navy after 1943—that led the United States to introduce an escort ship with reinforced anti-air capabilities for the first time, which became the basis for the Aegis ship. From that experience, the United States absorbed all the lessons it learned for defending an aircraft carrier from actual sea battles, and finally completed its current equipment by introducing the most advanced scientific technologies at the time and continually making upgrades and improvements.

The first Aegis ship, or a ship that could be called a “baby Aegis,” went into service in 1983, and the United States finally arrived at its current high-performance Aegis ship by continually modernizing and making improvements after that. We have to understand that this has been a very long-term development process—over seventy years from the beginning to the present.

Even if China has built a warship a lot like the Aegis ship by absorbing technologies from the United States by fair means or foul, it is inconceivable for these ships to readily have a performance comparable to that of the U.S. and Japanese ships, given the lack of development know-how and processes through actual experience that are essential to develop such a system, particularly the various lessons that can only be learned by experiencing failure. To ensure the accuracy and increase the proficiency of the Aegis ship, training, such as live missile firings against realistic targets, is essential. For actual shooting training, however, it is necessary to establish an ocean area of several hundred kilometers as “safety/dangerous waters for live firings.” The Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) can conduct this kind of training only twice a year or so in Japanese waters. In order for the JMSDF to prevent any accidental hit by an uncontrolled missile of merchant ships steaming nearby or of aircraft flying on their routes in the vicinity of the firing area, all possible measures must be taken, including reserving a restricted area for sea training that is wide enough to cover the maximum flying range of a missile should it go out of control. The maximum flight distance of the high-performance Aegis anti-air missile in particular is extremely long. This is the reason why the JMSDF needs to reserve such expansive “safety/dangerous” waters for training and why the JMSDF can reserve such an extremely wide area only a few times a year.

Also, as far as the Maritime Self-Defense Force can see, it has not been confirmed that China engages in firing practice by establishing safety/dangerous waters on a large scale.

Yamaguchi: Even if there is considerable divergence between China’s safety standards and those of Japan, etc., if China does engage in target practice for an advanced vessel similar to Japan’s Aegis destroyers, it should establish large-scale dangerous waters. The fact that this has not been confirmed means that China can’t have reached the stage of deploying a ship like this for actual warfare. The Aegis ship is not alone. There are some indications that the mechanization of the Chinese military is about thirty years behind other developed nations.



Koda: Despite its astonishing growth in numbers, the real capability of the Chinese military is still nothing compared with that of Japan and the United States today. However, if China continues to increase its military spending and proficiency at its present rate, its military power may become an international threat in ten to twenty years. What is required for us now is not to nervously react to the present situation, but to systematically prepare for the future point in time when the Chinese military is believed to have truly strengthened its abilities.

The real capability of the Chinese military indicated by fire-control radar targeting

Yamaguchi: I would like to discuss the incident where a Chinese naval ship targeted a destroyer of the Maritime Self-Defense Force using Fire Control System (FCS) radar in January 2013. Firing targeting radar means to zero in on a target using radar for assaulting a ship or an airplane. This is a very dangerous act that could develop into an armed conflict. Assuming that China was escalating an act of provocation against Japan over the Senkaku Islands, a strong sense of caution toward China spread inside the Japanese government.

Koda: Fire Control System (FCS) radar is a very dangerous act that deviates from international rules. It is commonly understood that it should never be done, except for a handful of countries in the world.

Its origins go back to the agreement on preventing incidents at sea (the INCSEA agreement) between the United States and the Soviet Union. This agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union was concluded in 1972 to avoid unexpected occurrences on the water or in midair outside of territorial waters, following the fact that dangerous acts of provocation frequently occurred between U.S. military forces and their Soviet counterparts. Later, this agreement evolved into the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities in 1989, and became more effective. On the heels of this, Russia, following in the footsteps of the collapsed Soviet Union, entered into the same agreement with European countries. Russia also concluded an agreement with Japan in 1993.

Illumination or locking-on of FCS radar is also prohibited very strictly in these agreements. It is such common sense in international society that China cannot say “We didn’t know,” even though China has not entered into such an agreement. China caught the world’s attention by committing a typical prohibited act. I became keenly aware once again that Japan faces the harsh reality that it must interact with a country like this for years to come.

Yamaguchi: There are two views about this incident: one is that it was an order from certain central authorities, such as China’s Ministry of National Defense, and the other is that it was a tactical decision made on site. In any case, China’s Ministry of National Defense denied that it fired targeting radar.

Koda: It isn’t hard to imagine why China’s Ministry of National Defense doesn’t admit firing targeting radar itself. As we have been discussing in some detail, once China realized that it was amiss, as might be



expected given that this is an unacceptable act by international standards, it had no choice but to assert that no such thing occurred, in order to maintain its credibility.

If the incident was due to an order by central authorities, that would result in China's decision-making process being considered pathetic. That could lead to the tacit consent that important international matters could not be left to China in the future. On the other hand, if the incident was due to overeagerness on site, that would result in the People's Liberation Army, particularly its naval force, being condemned as an organization in which army regulations are not observed. China would be seen as a country with a military organization whose on-site personnel could go out of control at any time.

Yamaguchi: So China will never admit it. However, if China shrugs off this act, saying, "What's wrong with it?" it would be accurately seen as a country with an alarming military that might shoot real bullets at any time. Although it is paradoxical, we can feel safer as long as China denies this fact than otherwise [*laughs*].

Although the truth is not known, the Kyodo News service reported that "more than one senior official, including general officers in the Chinese military, admitted the firing of radar for targeting." The report also said that "they emphasized that it was an accidental case and denied the view that it was a planned mission, saying that it was a 'quick judgment of the captain.'" China denies this report as well, but I assume that this may be closer to the truth.

The Chinese military has been promoting expansion and modernization at quite a fast rate. I would imagine that the firing of targeting radar this time is a phenomenon like growing pains in this transition period. I see it rather optimistically. That's because when I spoke with military personnel or former military men in the Chinese military, some of them were interested in understanding the agreements on preventing incidents, saying, "I would like you to tell me about these agreements in detail."

Koda: Imagining Beijing's position in my own way, it's hard to believe that the illumination of FCS radar was a strategic provocative act. Japan shouldn't overreact to it.

Eventually ceases belligerent acts

Yamaguchi: Other than the firing of targeting radar, various belligerent acts have occurred at sea, but if we warn them after a few occurrences, China stops these.

For example, a nuclear submarine belonging to the Chinese navy invaded Japanese territorial waters near Ishigaki Island in Okinawa in 2004. As this was a total violation of international law, we were very surprised and lodged a protest. After that, it didn't happen again.

Also, belligerent acts such as Chinese military helicopters or airplanes approaching vessels of the Japan Self-Defense Forces happen frequently. However, if we sound a warning, they don't happen again after that. This gives us the impression that China is trying to ascertain what is considered a belligerent act.



Koda: I hope that's true.

Yamaguchi: In 2011, I participated in the Tokyo–Beijing Forum (sponsored by the Genron NPO), which aims to improve relations between Japan and China, and some Chinese participants called for an agreement to be drafted to manage these crises at sea. Since relations between our two countries became strained over the Senkaku Islands, China has handled its sea activities in a controlled manner. I am not that pessimistic about the situation.

After all, partly because China is the world's preeminent continental nation, it sometimes seems that it doesn't quite understand that there are public areas on the sea and in the air, although it is sensitive to its territorial boundaries. In the past, there was a time when China accused the Japan Self-Defense Forces of conducting "espionage activities" when we went to observe Chinese naval ships sailing on the high seas. I assume China didn't understand the rules of the high seas—that both countries are allowed to move freely to a certain degree. Lately, China appears to have become aware of this misconception and has stopped protesting.

As I mentioned a little while ago, I think that the Chinese military is in the process of maturing. I imagine that some day in the future we will be able to have a mature relationship like the one between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era.

The true face of Chinese military personnel

Yamaguchi: Do you think that Chinese military personnel have matured lately?

Koda: I think so. For more than ten years, I have been holding an event for "exchanges between field officers" of our two countries, in which lieutenant colonels/commanders and majors/lieutenant commanders in the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the People's Liberation Army have a dialogue.

In the beginning, some SDF personnel told me their belief that "the Chinese navy lacks an understanding of international law," but I feel that an understanding of international law has gradually developed in Chinese military personnel at sea lately.

Yamaguchi: At this event for exchanges between the Self-Defense Forces and the People's Liberation Army, China also tended to send only practical elite at first, such as political officers and intelligence officers, but after several sessions they began to send what we call line officers who have operational background in the field. Looking at these people, I get the impression that they are appropriately trained, and some personnel are international-minded.

The Ground Self-Defense Force, which I am from, is currently sending PKO (peacekeeping operations) units to South Sudan. During these operations, a Chinese colonel took charge of a mission to bring the parties to a ceasefire agreement. He had a good command of English and understood the function of the United Nations well. To bring both parties to a ceasefire agreement, it was necessary to encourage them to compromise, and he had a fairly good sense of how to do this. We learned how to



serve as a buffer between the parties in dispute, which Japan looks good at from the Chinese side *[laughs]*. It was surprising, and I thought that he did an excellent job.

Although the military personnel China sent into the international arena ten years ago were limited to certain elite such as political officers and information officers, China has started to bring military men with field experience onto the international scene in recent years. I think this is a sign that the level of the Chinese military as a whole has been elevated. I would imagine that the People's Liberation Army will become more sophisticated as a result of its experience in the international arena, and acquire international standards.

Koda: That's a possibility.

Yamaguchi: Reading reports from China's Ministry of National Defense, I realized that they describe how the Chinese military interacts with the military forces of various countries. I think these exchanges will also significantly contribute to the maturing of the Chinese military. I would imagine that conflicts on site will gradually decrease in tandem with the maturing of Chinese military personnel.

Putting off sending troops abroad? Addressing domestic issues is an urgent need

Koda: Now I would like to take a close look at the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in consideration of the danger of China becoming serious about having a conflict with Japan. If we analyze the expansion of Chinese military spending in detail, we can see that China is spending a considerable amount of funds and personnel on the army. In other words, China is facing the unavoidable fact that it must devote a considerable amount of time to "domestic" issues, such as its problems with Taiwan and Tibet and frequent in-country uprisings, before embarking on sending troops abroad and/or to islands as a maritime nation. Landing on the Senkaku Islands or invading islands in the South China Sea, which Vietnam and others have claimed sovereignty over, are low-priority issues for China at the moment compared to the domestic issues just mentioned, and don't seem to be urgent. Of course, their priority in the future, when domestic conditions have stabilized, could be different.

Yamaguchi: The breakdown of the number of Chinese military personnel is as follows: 1.6 million in the army, 250,000 in the navy, and 400,000 in the air force. As the army is huge, China has to put a considerable amount of resources into modernizing it. In the first place, looking at the history of the Chinese army, its mission was to defeat the military of the Chinese Nationalist Party in the beginning. In other words, the purpose of the Chinese military has been to deal with "domestic" issues from the beginning.

When I talk to military personnel in the Chinese army, they definitely still name the handling of domestic issues as one of their missions. As I mentioned a short while ago, as they have allocated a considerable number of units to PKO, a tremendous amount of energy appears to have been lost.



Koda: In China, there is also a huge organization separate from the army called the People's Armed Police, with 1.5 million people. Some have theorized that a larger investment has been made in this organization—the primary mission of which is security enforcement such as riot suppression—than in the army. As reported in Japan, riots including anti-Japan demonstrations are happening all the time in China. The Chinese government has thoroughly clamped down on anti-Japan demonstrations, terrified that they will lead to pro-democracy movements. In other words, the country must address its domestic issues before it can aim to become a maritime nation.

There is a Chinese joke that when President Xi Jinping wakes up in the morning, he asks first, “Where did riots take place last night, and how big were they?” Although this is a funny story suggesting that domestic affairs are the top priority issues before the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands, I think this is a point we shouldn't forget when considering whether or not China can send troops abroad in the near future.

China is too busy to fan the flames of the Senkaku problem

Yamaguchi: At the beginning of this dialogue, you said that military power is a combination of capabilities and intentions. Now, I would like to discuss the intentions of the state called China.

Koda: What are China's national goals? Making a guess based only on Western standards, I think that its first goal is to maintain the authoritarianism of the Communist Party. The second is to protect its national interests. In terms of security, I assume that its objective is to protect its national sovereignty and territory and territorial waters. Its third goal is to maintain economic growth and distribute wealth to its people. I imagine that its fourth objective is to have military power equivalent to that of the United States.

Although China has a Dong-Feng 31, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching almost the entire region of the United States, it doesn't have a large enough number of DF-31s. China doesn't have any other missiles that can directly reach the United States. This is still the best China can do for now.

While the United States still has the capability to engage in conflicts around the world, despite the fact that the country is said to be a “sinking superpower,” China doesn't have such far-reaching power. One of the goals of the country's expanding military spending must be to have power on par with that of the United States.

There is also the possibility that China will promote further military expansion to maintain its economic growth, which is its third goal. To maintain the Communist Party's one-party rule by maintaining the growth rate and distributing wealth in the country to eliminate dissatisfaction, securing maritime transportation (Sea Lines of Communication: SLOCs) will be a very important task. Toward that end, the People's Liberation Army, especially the PLA Navy, will be heavily and widely involved in some form, I'm afraid.

Let me elaborate on this a bit more. Resources imported from abroad support the Chinese economy, particularly the production capacity of a country with the world's second largest economy. Currently,



China mainly obtains these resources from Africa, Australia, and South America. When it imports them from Africa, for example, ships must travel through the Indian Ocean and enter the South China Sea through the Straits of Malacca. When importing them from Australia, ships have to enter the South China Sea from the Arafura Sea. From South America, they travel through the Pacific Ocean. Viewing the import of resources from this perspective, China's priority is to secure the South China Sea. In other words, most of the flow of resources, or the SLOCs for China that support its economic growth, an important national goal, runs through the South China Sea in one way or another, except for the route from Latin America, which can be directly accessed from the Pacific Ocean.

Solely based on this perception, recognizing the importance of these SLOCs in its waters, China is claiming rights in its exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and island disputes, and is trying to increase its influence in the South China Sea. To back this up, China must have strong naval power.

Yamaguchi: Further, as we discussed a moment ago, China has many things to deal with, as it faces problems domestically with Tibet and Taiwan and in its relationships with Russia and India, with whom it has a border issue. Thinking systematically about the issues China faces, it isn't beneficial for China to fan the flames of the Senkaku problem.

Koda: Since these are only speculations based on Western standards, China's true intent is difficult to ascertain. However, it is necessary to figure out China's overall intentions regarding these things, because we won't be able to deal with it appropriately for diplomatic and security purposes just by excessively reinforcing a sense of caution.

Yamaguchi: It is hard to imagine that the Senkaku problem is a top priority for China. However, the Chinese government cannot take a weak position regarding the Senkaku Islands for the sake of its people, no matter what. They have no choice but to keep shaking their fist in view of their people, once they begin. I would imagine that deep down they would like to quietly lower their fist when the people aren't looking. The same is true for Japan. That's why both China and Japan have to kind of leave this without irritating each other.

Looking at the long history of our relationship with China, Japan has always been fearful of China's hegemony. In the past, the parent in Asia was China, while the oldest son and second oldest son were Korea and Japan, respectively. However, these roles were reversed over the last 100 years. Yet as China has made a rapid comeback and regained its confidence in recent years, it is reinforcing the feeling of resentment against Japan, recalling its past 100 years of humiliation. Only because we are in such a difficult period, it seems that the Senkaku problem is being highlighted more than necessary.

Koda: The Chinese government should not seek to undermine its relationship with Japan for no reason. Keeping this in our minds as well, I think we should accurately determine China's military power and calmly deal with it without overestimating it while at the same time being sure to avoid underestimating it. Of course, it goes without saying that we must figure out the strengths and weaknesses of the Self-



Defense Forces' capabilities and the policies and systems pertaining to Japan's security and defense in a cool-headed manner.

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