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Military Modernization and the Future of Warfare in Asia

What do military modernization programs in Asia tell us about the future of warfare in the region? According to Sunil Dasgupta, the area's states are betting that 1) nuclear deterrence will work; 2) potential conflicts will not globalize or affect population centers; and 3) deception will be a more effective tactic than confrontation.

By Sunil Dasgupta for ISN

In 1999, the American nuclear strategist Paul Bracken heralded "the second nuclear age" in Asia. Since then, the continuing rise of China has fueled expectations of a shift in the Asian balance of power, and the continent's major powers have added significant new conventional military capabilities. What does this military modernization say about the future of warfare in the region? Below I offer five different ways to look at Asian military modernization.

Five expectations

First, Asian states expect nuclear deterrence to work. India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998, and North Korea tested its own device in 2006. Iran has sought nuclear capability at considerable cost to its economy and international position. China has advanced its nuclear warhead design and missile technology. Beijing has acquired a robust ability to launch ballistic missiles from its submarines and is reportedly working on a nuclear-capable cruise missile. In 2013, Pakistan announced its tactical nuclear capability and India is now believed to be working on multiple warhead missiles (MIRV).

The one partial holdout on nuclear deterrence is Japan. Although Tokyo generally eschews nuclear weapons and does not expect nuclear deterrence to be effective vis-à-vis North Korea, it fully expects the American nuclear umbrella to deter China. This anomaly is a consequence of regional politics. North Korea is seen as having a volatile and unpredictable regime, which might attack Japanese cities even at the cost of its own destruction, but military competition with the Chinese is limited to the unpopulated Senkaku/Daiyou Islands. Even the most hawkish Japanese are not concerned about the prospect of Chinese nuclear attacks on Japanese cities. Consequently, the Japanese have sought a limited area, sea-based ballistic missile defense system to identify and destroy North Korean missiles close to launch. Further, the Japanese government has sought legal authority to target North Korean missiles bound for the United States. The Japanese constitution defines self-defense narrowly, prohibiting military action even in cases of attacks against Japanese allies.

Second, Asian states expect their conflicts to remain limited to their particular regional security complexes of East, Southeast, South, and West Asia. The idea of Asia itself is ambiguous. The continent stretches from the Persian Gulf to Japan and Siberia to Indonesia, but practically no government sees these diverse parts of the world in the same frame. Despite the structural changes brought on by globalization and the rise of China, Asia has not become a singular strategic entity. Consequently, balance-of-power calculations in Asia remain generally contained to regions.

Although there have been reports of the long arc of Chinese aggressiveness from the Senkaku Islands to the Bay of Bengal, Chinese military modernization, with the exception of nuclear weapons and delivery, is largely focused on East Asia, and in particular on denying American military influence in the region. China's controversial Air Defense Identification Zone is notably limited to the region. Similarly, Japan remains focused on East Asia, somewhat less interested in South China Sea, and practically not at all interested in Chinese activity in the Bay of Bengal. Vietnam and the Philippines are faced with Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, which has brought the ASEAN states closer, but the region has had difficulty persuading India to become interested in the South China Sea. India has territorial disputes with China, but its security focus has been to the west, on Pakistan. Japan has little interest in the India-China territorial dispute. West Asia remains the most distinct security complex on the continent. Few other Asian states want to become involved in its violence.

Third, Asian states expect war to occur at a distance from population centers—at sea, on unpopulated islands, in mountains and deserts. These conflicts will have economic and symbolic consequences, but their human cost should be significantly lesser than "the people's wars" or "war of the cities" of the past.

With the exception of its dispute with Taiwan, China's territorial conflicts all focus on sparsely populated territory, which shapes Chinese military modernization. The rearmament of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) outstrips the effort expended on the strategic forces of the Second Artillery Corps. The PLAN has its own air force that is comparable in size and capability to the PLA Air Force. A new aircraft carrier, several new amphibious landing ships and new submarines, and advanced missile and radar technology is expected not only to give China blue water capabilities after 800 years but also to push war away from continental China, after 250 years.

The military invasion of Taiwan by China was the last real possibility of triggering a people's war in East Asia. Not only have relations between the two Chinas improved, but their military balance has also changed. In the 1990s, Taiwanese military officials estimated that they would be able to hold out against an invasion for three months. Recently, a Taiwanese official reported that the holdout time was down to one month, suggesting that the prospect of a Chinese invasion is fading.

The people's wars should continue in parts of South and West Asia, but these conflicts will occur in the form of insurgency, terrorism, and proxy wars. Military modernization efforts in South and West Asia do address subconventional conflicts, but the spending on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency remains significantly less than on advanced conventional weapons, indicating a mismatch between security threats and military preparation. Governments and armed forces expect that preparing for higher intensity conflicts will automatically address lower intensity conflicts, but military power is not always as fungible. The consequence of the mismatch for the future of warfare in South and West Asia is that these conflicts are likely to endure as low-intensity conflicts.

Wars of the cities remain a concern in East Asia to the extent that North Korea poses a threat to South Korean and Japanese cities. War of the cities is also a possibility in West Asia, where it is fueled by regional politics and military asymmetry between competing armed forces. In contrast, South Asia has set a new norm for fighting away from cities. Despite the intensity of their rivalry, India and Pakistan have stayed away from bombing each other's cities in past wars going back to 1965. Pakistan's most

vital city, Lahore, is 14 miles from the Indian border, but it has not been attacked since 1947.

Drone warfare represents an opportunity to make war more distant from the population but also decreases the cost of bringing of war back to population centers. Unmanned drones remove human presence from the weapons platform, but in doing so reduce the cost of more dangerous missions, thereby risking greater damage and escalation.

Asian states have been acquiring drones in large numbers, but most appear to be for surveillance rather than lethal use of force. This will change with time, which brings us to the role of technology in Asia's military modernization.

Fourth, Asian states expect conflict to occur away from populations in another way—on the internet and in outer space. In cyberspace, China has developed a sophisticated ability to infiltrate and disrupt foreign computer systems. In space warfare, Beijing is developing the capability to collide ballistic missiles with enemy satellites. Recently, Japan and India have established cyber warfare units as part of their armed forces. Singapore and Australia already have advanced cyber capabilities.

Although cyber and space warfare can cause enormous economic damage and deny military advantage in air, space, and sea—the global commons—to others, they do not yet threaten human life directly. The economic damage caused by cyber and space warfare may lead to reprisals or other second-order consequences that result in human deaths, but the relative non-lethality of cyber and space warfare serves as an interesting new limit on war itself. Cyber and outer space may not remain clearly delineated from the physical world in the future, but Asian states do not seem to be at the cutting edge of developing the kind of technological breakthrough that would blur those lines.

Fifth, Asia's new cyber and space warfare capabilities reflect a strategic preference for deception and denial rather than confrontation and attrition. Apart from nuclear weapons, the navy, and the naval air force, Asian states have focused on advancing their radar and stealth capabilities.

Western military doctrine and equipment has long set the benchmark for mobility and standoff warfare, including the use of technology for deception and denial. Asia's adoption of Western concepts of deception and denial—and military technology in general—demonstrates the lasting influence of Schelling's nuclear brinksmanship tactics of "fighting without fighting" as well as Asia's growing technological and financial capacity.

There are huge disparities among Asian states, in terms of their technological and financial ability. Japan has both, China has financial capacity but limited access to foreign technology, and India has relatively poorer financial ability, but better access to foreign technology. Saudi Arabia has money but not the ability to absorb and integrate technology into its armed forces. Singapore has both resources and great ability to absorb technology, but is limited by its size. These differences determine the deception and denial capabilities of Asian states, suggesting technological and financial determinism, especially when it comes to advanced technology weapons and the future of warfare.

To the extent that technology and financial capability drive further military modernization, Schelling should prove to be right: Asia will have arms races but not outright war and the possibility that accidents could happen would make Asian states exercise greater self-control in war decisions.

Conclusion

The impact of Asia's military modernization on the future of warfare reveals an unexpected puzzle: the continent's great structural changes, particularly economic transformation and technological advance, have not caused a dramatic shift in the balance of power. China may be rising, but Japan

continues to have the capacity to balance China's rise with its self-defense forces and treaty commitments. The India-Pakistan balance of power has remained unchanged even after the two countries acquired nuclear weapons and thereafter pursued conventional rearmament. The balance of power in West Asia shifted to Iran after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, but recent Sunni assertiveness is restoring the old status quo. Meanwhile, the threats from North Korea and regional (as opposed to global) terrorism remain in place as they were fifteen years ago.

Economic transformation unaccompanied by structural change in political-military relations breaks from a history that was dominated by balance-of-power politics. Either there is now an extraordinary lag between the rise of economic and military capabilities, or the expectations of balance of power itself are incorrect, and economic growth with muted military competition may be the new balance-of-power politics.

Seventy years ago, the UN Charter outlawed military conquest and laid the groundwork for the separation of economic and military power. Japan and Germany went on to become a new kind of great power with mighty economic capabilities but no commensurate military. Asia, overall, seems to have followed this path for now.

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