

*China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities*

ROGER CLIFF

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015

xvi + 362 pp. \$99.99

ISBN 978-1-107-10352-2 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000874

Roger Cliff, a leading expert on China's military, has written a groundbreaking and thorough assessment of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). There are many studies on the topic of China's armed forces but few have the scope and rigour of *China's Military Power*. Most authoritative books and reports focus on a particular service or dimension of the PLA. Many are good at charting the development of new weapon systems or describing the broad contours of military modernization. Yet, most studies are deficient in providing comprehensive analysis and assessing the sum of the component parts of the PLA. Hence, they tend to have relatively short shelf lives. Roger Cliff's volume will be a more enduring piece of scholarship. His feat is all the more impressive because it was completed on the eve of the most thoroughgoing military reforms in three decades – a development that would render most books immediately obsolete. But because Cliff has put considerable effort into developing a lucid framework and generating ten-year benchmark assessments (2000 and 2010 as well as projections out to 2020), *China's Military Power* will remain an invaluable reference guide and handbook for anyone seeking to make sense of Xi Jinping's ambitious re-organization of the PLA.

The book constitutes a major step forward in scholarship on contemporary China's military. Cliff makes good use of literature in the wider field of security studies to develop concepts and assessment measures employing a construct currently in vogue in the US Department of Defense: doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities ("DOTMLPF"). The result is an extremely comprehensive and illuminating set of seven chapters which address in turn doctrine, organization, weaponry, personnel, training, logistics and organizational culture. This framework permits an impressive holistic evaluation of China's military modernization across time. Cliff takes this endeavour a step further and in chapter nine explores how the PLA might perform in the year 2020 in separate notional conflicts in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

For many, a country's military prowess is synonymous with size – the number of high-tech weapons and/or personnel in uniform. But Cliff's scholarship underscores the reality that mere "bean counting" is not the most reliable way to evaluate the effectiveness of armed forces. "The quality and...quantity of...weaponry are less important" (p. 8) than how the components listed in the above paragraph are blended together. Indeed, Cliff finds significant deficiencies in several areas, including the PLA's organizational culture, which he believes does not foster the necessary "adaptability and innovativeness" necessary to implement a doctrine of "indirection and maneuver" (p. 178).

In spite of weaknesses in several of the above dimensions, Cliff concludes that by 2020 the PLA will be capable of winning a military campaign against Taiwan or the Philippines. Of course there are important caveats, the most important of which is the disposition and preparedness of the US military. Furthermore, while Cliff concludes PLA success is conceivable, it is far from guaranteed. Nevertheless, the author's conclusions are sobering reminders that "critical weaknesses in organizational structure, logistics and organizational culture" (p. 244) do not mean that China's potential

adversaries have nothing to worry about. On the contrary, the PLA has made tremendous strides in the areas of doctrine, equipment, personnel and training so that by 2020 “the quality” of each of these four dimensions “will likely be approaching... those of the United States and other Western militaries” (p. 244).

While students of the Chinese military might quibble with some of the specifics of the author’s framework and findings, most will applaud his efforts. Perhaps the most contentious topic will be Cliff’s treatment of doctrine. Although chapter two provides one of the most thoughtful analyses of PLA strategy and doctrine this reviewer has seen anywhere, some interpretations and characterizations will be hotly debated. But Cliff has done his homework and exhaustively mined a wide range of sources, including Chinese language ones as well as the extensive corpus of PLA studies, such as the proceedings of the two annual conferences hosted separately by the RAND Corporation and the US Army War College.

*China’s Military Power* raises the bar for scholarship on the PLA. Along with other research such as a recent groundbreaking think tank report lead-authored by Eric Heginbotham (*The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* [RAND, 2015]), this volume indicates that the field of PLA studies is maturing and starting to engage meaningfully with the broader security studies literature.

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*China’s Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China*

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Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016

xviii + 868 pp. £32.99

ISBN 978-0-19-026105-4 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000886

John Garver has written the most complete, balanced and up-to-date account of the foreign relations of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) available. It likely will remain so for a long time. This well written, lucid and lengthy volume should be a core component of all Chinese foreign policy reading lists. Because of its emphasis on the domestic political drivers of external behaviour, *China’s Quest* also has considerable relevance for those interested in domestic politics. It should be understood that Garver’s book is more about the content of China’s foreign relations and less about the process by which it is made.

Garver’s core analytic assertion is that Chinese foreign policy has been driven by the ongoing need for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to overcome a domestic political legitimacy deficit by pursuing a sequence of broad foreign policies (three in number) that each, in its own distinctive way, has sought to provide a legitimacy to the CCP regime that its domestic actions alone could not provide. For Mao, it was a revolutionary foreign policy that could “mobilize positive elements” for domestic change (p. 145). For Deng Xiaoping, it was an economic foreign policy that anchored legitimacy in improved material conditions. To achieve this, he needed to pacify the outside world to the degree possible. And, for Xi Jinping, it now seems to be big power diplomacy anchored in making China great again – the China Dream – assertive nationalism.