

Progress and Problems: Reflecting on Shambaugh's Assessment of the State of the PLA

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David Shambaugh's *Modernizing China's Military* is an impressive testament to a decade of painstaking scholarship on one of the most important but difficult topics in the analysis of contemporary security affairs: the rise of China as a global military power. The book covers the period from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century and charts both the progress and multi-faceted problems that have characterized the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization drive.

The central thesis of the book is that "although the PLA has embarked on a systematic and extensive modernization program, ... a combination of domestic handicaps and foreign constraints severely limits both the pace and the scope of China's military progress" (p. 10). To argue his case, Shambaugh conducts a comprehensive and exhaustive examination of the key "hardware" and "software" dimensions of the Chinese defense establishment that crucially shape its war-fighting capabilities: doctrine and training, command and control, budgets and financial resource allocations, defense industrial capacity and weapons procurement programs, and civil-military relations.

The strengths of the book are numerous. First is the diverse range of sources that forms the basis of analysis, especially Shambaugh's efforts

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to acquire books and periodicals published by organizations directly and indirectly linked with the Chinese defense establishment. Combining this with other sources—especially both first-hand interviews with PLA officials and close liaison with the Washington "beltway" community of Chinese security specialists—has allowed Shambaugh to develop a detailed, sophisticated, and relatively accurate insight of the PLA. Shambaugh is to be applauded for generally limiting his reliance on dubious sources of information that has tainted other scholarly treatments of the same subject, especially from the less-than-reliable Hong Kong and Taiwanese press.

A second strength is that Shambaugh's assessment is balanced, carefully argued, and nuanced. He asks and answers in detail many of the central questions regarding the PLA's quest for modernity and regional reach—questions related to China's strategic intentions, the pace and nature of the evolution of the PLA's long-term capabilities, and the implications and consequences both for the military dynamics across the Taiwan Strait and for Sino-U.S. relations.

The ambitiously comprehensive approach that Shambaugh strived for is a third strength that allows for a broad net assessment of the state of the PLA after more than a decade of concerted effort to modernize and restructure in a wide range of areas. Shambaugh's overall conclusion is that "as the revolution in military affairs advances militaries faster and further ahead along the technological curve, the PLA falls relatively further and further behind. While its gap with the state of the art may actually be widening, this does not mean that the PLA is unable to meet certain key niche needs in national defense and move ahead with reform of various aspects of military modernization, and potentially challenge its neighbors and American interests" (p. 353). These niche capabilities include ballistic and cruise missiles; information and electronic warfare capabilities; command, control, communications, computing, intelligence and information systems (C⁴I²) networks and anti-air defenses; as well as selective acquisitions of highly capable aircraft and naval systems from Russia.

Another issue that Shambaugh highlights well is the importance to the PLA of information-era warfare and the "revolution in military affairs" (RMA). He carefully outlines the internal writings and discussions that

have been taking place among Chinese military strategists since the early to mid-1990s. This debate has paved the way for a major policy shift that was unveiled at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002; at the Congress, Central Military Commission Chairman Jiang Zemin (江泽民) called for the armed forces to switch from focusing primarily on building a conventional ground force-dominated force posture to giving equal priority to the "dual task of building mechanization and informationalization."¹ What this announcement meant was that the building of digital and information systems and systems integration technology would be accorded the same priority as the development of conventional weapons systems. Information systems technology includes C⁴I², information security capabilities, communications networking and switching infrastructure, and high-performance computing and software capabilities.

On the critical issue of what impact the PLA's modernization efforts will have for the cross-Strait military situation, Shambaugh provides less than a clear answer. His general conclusion appears to be that the PLA lacks the ability to carry out a successful attack against Taiwan (p. 330). Elsewhere in the book, however, he suggests that China's weapons procurement programs from Russia and elsewhere indicate that the PLA could probably pose a credible threat to Taiwan by around 2007 (p. 283).

This issue of whether the PLA is or is not capable of mounting a successful military campaign against Taiwan is perhaps the most immediate and important question in any examination of the PLA's modernization efforts over the next few years, especially given the recent increase in cross-Strait tensions following the re-election of Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) as Taiwanese President until 2008. The PLA's continued and strenuous efforts to build up its offensive military capabilities in and around the Taiwan Strait since the publication of Shambaugh's book suggests that the time-frame within which the PLA will begin to gain the upper hand in the military balance over Taiwan may be shorter than Shambaugh assesses.

¹See Xu Xiaoyan and Zhai Tongzheng, "Hasten Informationization Building within Our Forces," *Jiefangjun bao* (Liberation Army Daily), December 10, 2002, 6.

One of the key tests in evaluating the quality of Shambaugh's analysis is how well it will stand up to developments over the coming years. By this measurement, Shambaugh is likely to do an excellent job because of the breadth and depth of his analysis. He examines developments over more than a decade and delves into the nuts and bolts of such critical issues as training, the breakdown and management of financial resources, structural impediments and organizational reforms, doctrinal evolution, and external threat perceptions held by PLA strategists and planners.

To be sure, there are a few areas of analysis in which Shambaugh appears less sure-footed. The chapter on defense industries and procurement, for example, does not fully take into account significant developments in the overhaul and transformation of the defense technological and industrial base since the late 1990s—these changes have led to a major improvement in the research, development, and production of new generations of weapons systems over the past few years. Shambaugh points out the deep-rooted structural problems that have afflicted the defense industrial complex; many of these—such as the complex's compartmentalization from the civilian economy, poor record of innovation, and separation of research activities—are now being seriously addressed. His conclusion that "the PLA finds itself way behind on the R&D curve—and will be very hard pressed to catch up" (p. 283) may be overtly pessimistic given the major improvements that have taken place over the past few years.

Modernizing China's Military represents an important milestone in the Western academic analysis of the Chinese military system and is required reading and a masterful reference guide for anyone interested in this topic, generalists and specialists alike.
