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JOURNAL

Is China's military a paper tiger or a real tiger?

By [Robert Haddick](#)

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Contradictory stories on China's military capabilities arrived this week. China's long-awaited DF-21D medium-range anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) is now assumed to be operational, according to Admiral Robert Willard, commander of United States Pacific Command. And *Aviation Week and Space Technology* [reported](#) (with photographs) that China's new J-20 fifth-generation stealthy fighter has begun flight testing. Are the United States and its allies losing an arms race in Asia? Not so fast, [says](#) the *Washington Post*: China's military struggles to perform the most basic peacetime tasks and has gone over 30 years without any combat experience. By the *Post's* account, China's military is a paper tiger and is years away from operational competence. But this assessment also implies that time, diligence, and money - all of which China possesses - will fix its operational problems.

In [an interview](#) with the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, Willard asserted that China's DF-21D ASBM has achieved "initial operational capability" although he expects that China will continue to test the missile for several more years. He noted that China has yet to perform an end-to-end over-the-water test of the system against a moving naval target, but he concluded that "the component parts of the anti-ship ballistic missile have been developed and tested."

The DF-21D uses a maneuvering re-entry vehicle warhead and it is unclear whether the U.S. Navy's Aegis air and missile defense system can currently cope with this type of threat. China's ASBM system is only as good as the long range radars and satellite sensors that can acquire targets such as a U.S. carrier strike group. The U.S. certainly has the capability of attacking China's ocean surveillance satellites. But escalating a U.S.-China conflict into space might be the last tactic the U.S. would wish to consider; U.S. military forces are currently highly dependent on a variety of space assets and thus have a strong incentive to keep combat away from those platforms. The question then for U.S. policymakers and strategists is how much risk they are —to take during a crisis with their carrier and expeditionary strike groups. And what the diplomatic consequences might be of failing to "show the flag" with surface naval forces inside a conflict zone.

Closer to earth, *Aviation Week and Space Technology* [reported](#) that China has begun flight testing its J-20 fifth-generation stealth fighter. The arrival of the J-20 on the runway puts it only a few years behind the troubled F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which is still struggling to complete its test program. Last May, in a [speech](#) railing against bloated defense budgets, Defense Secretary Robert Gates asked, "Is it a dire threat that by 2020 the United States will have only 20 times more advanced stealth fighters than China?" One wonders whether that assertion is still operative, especially given the large cost advantage China enjoys with manufacturing and the continuing test and cost problems suffered by the F-35.

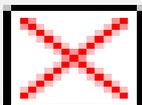
Clashing with these reports was a [story](#) in the *Washington Post* about China's military problems. According to the *Post*,

1. China still can't manufacture reliable jet engines and must rely on Russian imports. China's problems with engines extend into shipbuilding and armored vehicles.
2. China's *Jin*-class ballistic missile submarines are noisier than those built 30 years ago by the Soviet Union. There is no record of a Chinese ballistic missile submarine ever going out on patrol.
3. In 2009, China's fleet of 63 submarines conducted only 12 patrols all year. By contrast, U.S. submarines conducted ten times as many patrols that year; 21 U.S. attack submarines are on patrol **at this moment**.
4. The Chinese navy has yet to master the basic logistical issues (food, water, resupply) of long-endurance deployments.

So is China's military a paper tiger or a real tiger? It is no contradiction for China's weapons designers to deliver the DF-21D and J-20 while China's defense ministry simultaneously underfunds training and equipment maintenance. Such a pattern is standard practice at most defense ministries. However, recent editions of the Pentagon's annual report on Chinese military power have noted that China is adjusting by spending more on training and by taking other steps to improve the quality of its officers and soldiers.

With enough time, diligence, and money, China can fix its problems with training, equipment maintenance, and engine manufacturing. None of the input factors, especially money, are limiting in China's case, a marked contrast with most other countries and, increasingly, the United States. U.S. policymakers will need to make clever and agile adjustments to a Chinese military modernization program that seems to be advancing faster than forecast and that has the resources needed to fix its backlog of operational problems.

About the Author



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Robert Haddick is a contractor at U.S. Special Operations Command. From January 2009 to September 2012 he was Managing Editor of *Small Wars Journal*. During this time, he wrote the "This Week at War" column for *Foreign Policy*. Haddick was a U.S. Marine Corps officer, served in the 3rd and 23rd Marine Regiments, and deployed to Asia and Africa. He has advised the State Department, the National Intelligence Council, and U.S. Central Command.

In the private sector, Haddick was Director of Research at the Fremont Group, a large private investment firm and an affiliate of the Bechtel Corporation. He established the firm's global proprietary trading operation and was president of one of Fremont's overseas investment subsidiaries.

In addition to *Foreign Policy* and *Small Wars Journal*, Haddick's writing has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Air & Space Power Journal*, and other publications. He has appeared in many radio and television interviews.

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{5} <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1467>

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