

China: Peaceful or Menacing?

Written by Andrew Kujala

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Introduction

Debate amongst academics as to the nature of China's rise has been on going since the late 1970s, born out of China's rapid economic growth and increasing engagement with the international community.^[i] Western scholars have tended to adopt the term 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*), whereas their Chinese counterparts have been keen to promote the less provocative term 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*).^[ii]

Academics often assess China's rise by measuring its absolute and relative economic and military gains.^[iii] This is problematic for three reasons: 1) there is a lack of empirical data available; 2) any data that is available often suffers from serious issues of reliability; 3) there is little consensus as to how any empirical data found should be used.^[iv] Equally, evaluating the nature of China's rise based on any single strand of international relations is ill advised, as it often leads to conclusions based on overly theoretical assumptions.^[v] Nevertheless, there are few (if any) credible alternatives; empirical data and theoretical judgments continue to form the foundations by which China's rise is assessed.

Factors affecting China's rise are abundant, hence why the literature is so vast and varied. This essay offers no comprehensive assessment.^[vi] Rather its primary focus is the Chinese military (Peoples Liberation Army). The PLA is the state's main instrument of war, which means that it is likely to have a considerable impact on whether China is branded 'peaceful' or 'menacing' by other states.^[vii] The nature of China's rise may be judged on how its military capabilities and intentions are perceived by those within the international community.^[viii] Quite often academics have drawn too sharp a distinction between Chinese capabilities and intentions.^[ix] Under one set of assumptions certain military forces could appear to indicate a severe threat, whereas under another they could signal benign intent.^[x]

This essay attempts to evaluate the capabilities and intentions of the Chinese military based on its 2010 Defence White Paper. Much like a manifesto documents the policies, priorities, and intentions of a political party, the Chinese white paper is designed to 'communicate the latest information on China's military development, strategy, capabilities, and intentions.'^[xi] The first section of this paper deals with Chinese military capabilities and development on the basis of its defence budget. It identifies trends and discusses the motivational forces behind them. The second section deals with issues of transparency and how it can be difficult to judge Chinese military intentions and strategy.

This analysis is supplemented by knowledge acquired from the works of sinologists; foreign and military policy experts; government reports; and papers produced by independent institutes (think-tanks). Furthermore, some comparisons are drawn with other actors within the international community, namely the United States. This was an obvious choice on two counts: (1) the US has been the *benchmark* by which other actors within the international system have compared themselves since the middle of the 20th century; (2) US-Sino relations affect all states within the international system.

Chinese Defence White Paper: Capabilities and Military Expenditure

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On March 4, 2011, China released the 7th edition of its biannual defence white paper, announcing its official defence budget for the year as 601.1 billion Renminbi.[xii] This 12.7 per cent increase on the previous year's budget marks a return to *real* double-digit spending (after a one-year hiatus), and is consistent with the upward trend that has been observed for the last quarter of a century (see Appendix B2).[xiii] Some have been eager to draw comparisons with the rise of Germany and Japan during the 20th century.[xiv] However, to do so negates the complexities of internal Chinese politics.[xv]

According to a 2010 INSS (Institute for National Strategic Studies) paper, there has been an increasing trend of bifurcation between elites ('power players') within the PLA and CCP.[xvi] Chinese Party elites of the first and second-generation generally had a military background, be it serving as a PLA political commissar or a combat commander.[xvii] Such past experiences meant that party elites could engage in military affairs with little qualms from PLA top brass. Equally, the latter's involvement in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) gave military 'power players' political experience and legitimized their role within Chinese party politics. Thus, the divide between military and party elites was blurred, producing a 'dual-role elite.' [xviii]

The situation today is markedly different. Opportunities to develop close and enduring links remain scarce, as PLA and CPP elites find themselves on increasingly separate career paths.[xix] Furthermore, China's fourth-generation leaders (notably President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao) do not possess any substantial military experience or knowledge. Thus, increases in Chinese defence spending may be regarded as an indication that China's fourth generation feels vulnerable, and they are merely strengthening PLA loyalty to the state.[xx]

This seems plausible considering the PRC's defence expenditure was at its lowest under the tenure of Deng Xiaoping.[xxi] Deng, a former PLA political commissar and soldier, was so confident in the PLA's loyalty to him that he was able to take resources away from the military and redistribute them towards the 'civilian economy.' [xxii]

If Chinese defence spending is motivated by party vulnerability then this upward trend is likely to continue; the expected 'power players' of China's fifth generation (Vice-President Xi Jinping and Vice-Premier Li Keqiang) also have no military background.[xxiii] As such, any concerns within the international community are more likely to be raised on the basis of an 'unstable rise' rather than a 'menacing rise'. The Communist Party (CCP) has been faced with a mass balancing act for some time: it must avoid wide-spread discontent amongst the masses, prevent any power divide(s) amongst the collective leadership being played out in the public domain, and keep the military 'onside.' [xxiv] China's economic development and prosperity is not indefinite. Consistent double-digit growth rates for the last three decades have enabled the state to invest heavily in its armed forces as well as improving general living standards and social provisions. Eventually tough decisions will have to be made. Failure to get them right will most likely result in the world's most populous country plunging into chaos. A possibility that no one wants realised.[xxv]

It is possible that the increases in Chinese defence spending are not solely driven by the necessity of currying favour from the military, but are merely compensating for the neglect suffered by the PLA between 1978 and the early 1990s. As previously alluded, the Chinese military gradually shrank in size and defence industries were 'starved' of resources during the Deng era. In contrast, China's current white paper describes increased defence spending as part of a general process of modernization and restructuring:

China argues that the growth in military spending primarily relates to: 1) improving support conditions for the troops (i.e. increasing salary and benefits of servicemen, improving living conditions, and amending falls in the standard of education and training); 2) accomplishing diversified military tasks – improving MOOTW capabilities (put simply, making sure that the PLA is not just a fighting force but one that is capable of dealing with natural disasters, rescue operations, arms control, and peacekeeping); 3) Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) with Chinese characteristics (i.e. updating the weaponry and information technology capabilities of the military).[xxvi]

If redressing years of neglect is the driving force behind increases in Chinese defence spending and its military capabilities are merely 'catching up' with other major powers within the international system, it is difficult to regard China as 'menacing'. Of course, the big question is what China will do once it does catch up and surpasses other

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powers within the international system—will it then become ‘menacing’ or remain ‘peaceful’? For a better understanding of this question, we now turn to Chinese intentions and issues of transparency.

Chinese Defence White Paper: Intentions and Issues of transparency

If China’s defence white paper is to be effective at ‘increasing trust and alleviating the suspicions of the outside world’ then it must be *transparent*.^[xxvii] The information it supplies should allow other states to ‘assess the compatibility of capabilities with a country’s stated security goals.’^[xxviii] Quite simply, transparency reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict. For example, one of the main reasons why there was no conflict between the USA and the UK when the former was rising power during the late 19th century was due to clear lines of communication and a detailed understanding of one another.^[xxix]

Perhaps what is most revealing about the 2010 white paper is what it fails to mention. Like those before it, there are no discussions of specific military systems or capabilities. When compared to the fact rich documents produced by the United States, it is severely lacking.^[xxx] For example, it fails to make reference to:

- Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) development: referred to as the DF-21D, these missiles are intended to provide the PLA the capability of attacking large ships, including aircraft carriers, in excess of 1,500 km from the Chinese mainland.^[xxxi]
- Space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) development: in 2010, China conducted 15 space launches (equalling the USA), and this figure is expected to increase on a yearly basis. Few of the satellites launched are designed to perform solely civil functions. Instead, most are expected to provide ISR coverage of as much of the globe’s surface as possible (current coverage estimated at 75 per cent).^[xxxii]
- Aircraft carrier development: China has had ambitions to add an aircraft carrier to its list of vessels for decades. The *Kuznetsov Hull-2*, which was purchased from Russia in 2004, underwent its first sea trials in August of 2011, and it is expected to be operational with support ships by 2015.^[xxxiii]
- The Chengdu J-20 5th generation fighter: expected to be operational by 2017-2019.^[xxxiv]

It is difficult to judge Chinese intentions accurately, as its white papers are by no means transparent (especially by western standards).^[xxxv] That being said, China has made significant progress. From 1949 to 1980, the PRC published no details of its defence expenditure. In 1981, things changed and it began publishing a single annual military expenditure figure, which was then followed by the far more detailed annual defence white papers (1995-present). More recently (2008), China voluntarily submitted detailed military information to the United Nations.^[xxxvi]

The 2010 white paper also makes reference to some interesting points in terms of military strategy:

- ‘China maintains committed to mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination.’
- ‘China strives to persevere a path of peaceful development; pursue an independent foreign policy of peace and a national defence policy that is defensive in nature (determined by Confucianism).’
- ‘China will endeavour to foster, together with other countries, an international security environment of peace, stability, equality, mutual trust, cooperation and win-win.’
- ‘China will continue to adhere to the five principles of peaceful co-existence.’
- ‘China maintains its strategy of attacking only after being attacked.’
- ‘China consistently upholds the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, adheres to a self-defensive nuclear strategy, and will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country.’^[xxxvii]

None of the above gives any indication that China’s rise is ‘menacing,’ but it would still be foolish to think that China would advertise any nefarious intentions it did have. Nonetheless, the central issue remains. There is a lack of transparency within the defence white papers that could quite easily lead to over-exaggerated estimates of PLA capabilities and overly negative assumptions about its intentions.

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Reaching a Conclusion: Peaceful or Menacing?

In my attempts to comprehensively analyze China's military development, strategy, capabilities, and intentions from its 2010 white paper, I have perhaps raised more questions than I have answered. Where there can be little question is that China is rising, and it is this accession that has added an entirely new dimension to the international system. [xxxviii]

China's policies, like those of Western powers, do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are shaped by the thoughts and actions of those within the domestic and foreign spheres. However, what is markedly different is that China's domestic considerations are more heavily weighted. In Western pluralist states, the party in power has the primary objective of keeping as much of the electorate satisfied as possible, as failure to do this will result in the removal from office. In China, the Communist Party (CCP) is faced with a mass balancing act: it must avoid wide-spread discontent amongst the masses; prevent any power divide(s) amongst the collective leadership being played out in the public domain; and keep the military 'onside.' [xxxix]

Academics have paid insufficient attention to these internal politics when conducting an analysis of China's rise. This is a severe issue, as the correlation between state level politics and interaction in the international system is particularly strong in the case of China.

Obviously, China's rise has been peaceful thus far (by which I mean that there has been no serious conflict with any other actors within the international system). Whether its rise will continue to be peaceful will depend on not only the actions of itself but those around her, particularly the United States, Taiwan, Japan, Russia, India, Vietnam and both Koreas. If the 21st century is actually going to be one of information, then China must increase its transparency and supply the international community with a sustained flow of reliable information sooner rather than later. Failure to do so may lead to its military intentions and capabilities being misinterpreted as 'menacing'. This could spell disaster for everyone.

[i] Deng Xiaoping's reforms of 1978 have transformed China from a once closed, centrally planned economy to an open market-oriented system, yielding sustained growth close to double digits for the last three decades. Since the 1970s China has become an active member of the UN; World Bank; International Monetary Fund (IMF); and the International Atomic Energy Agency (to name but a few of the hundreds of organisations China can claim active membership).

[ii] Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*, (London, 2004), p.6. Please be aware that not everyone considers China to be rising. See, Yue Jianjong, 'Peaceful Rise of China: Myth or Reality?' *International Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2008, pp. 439-56.

[iii] Relative to other power(s) within the international system.

[iv] For example: are military gains measured in regards to a nation's defence expenditure; its numbers of personnel; and/or its level of military technology? The People's Republic of China (PRC) has become progressively less 'closed' since its proclamation in 1949, but sinologists still struggle to find a sustained flow of reliable information to conduct analysis, especially compared to 'open' western states.

[v] Andrew Scobell, 'China's rise: how peaceful?', in Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobel, & Joseph Chinyong Liow (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, (New York, 2010), p.20.

[vi] For example, there is no in-depth discussion as to the sustainability of China's rise. See, Gordon G Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China*, (New York, 2001).

[vii] There is no consensus as to whether China is a Party-State or whether the Chinese Communist Party is a separate entity. Here is not the place to discuss the issue, just know that I find the former a far more accurate description of the Chinese political system and shall use the terms 'party' and 'state' interchangeably throughout this

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essay.

[viii] See, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, (New Jersey, 1976) for a theoretical understanding.

[ix] This essay does no such thing. This essay may be broadly divided into two sections: the first dealing with capabilities and the second with intentions. This is done purely to make the essay more accessible for the reader. In reality I am aware that both ideas are deeply interrelated.

[x] Sean Chen, & John Feffer, 'China's Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?', *Asian Perspectives*, Vol.33, No.4, 2009, p.48. A good example of this (be it one that has no direct relation to China) is how US policy makers find the prospect of one Iranian nuclear weapon far more threatening than the hundreds of warheads possessed by the UK, France and Israel.

[xi] Phillip C. Saunders, and Ross Rustici, 'Chinese Military Transparency: Evaluating the 2010 White Paper', *The International Institute of Strategic Studies*, (July 2011), p.1.

[xii] Document can be found at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm Accessed: 02/11/2011.

[xiii] The last decade (year 2000-2010) has witnessed China's official defence expenditure increase by roughly 4.2 times. Calculation based on raw data in Appendix B.

[xiv] See, Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, (New York, 2011).

[xv] Not only is it simplistic it can be misleading. For example, a review of the percentage of Chinese GDP and overall expenditure spent on the PLA from 1979-2010 actually indicates downward trends (see Appendix B3.) This is a stark contrast to the upward trends of the USA, particularly from 2000-2010 (can be attributed to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; it is unclear as to whether this upward trend will be sustained as both conflicts 'wind down'). China contends that its military spending is proportional to the country's economic development; statistics suggest that this is indeed the case. It may be difficult to describe China's rise as menacing when it adheres to the principle of military development being subordinate to overall economic development. After all rising 'menacing' powers of the past fully mobilized their economies towards the military and defence (China does not). Then again these same 'menacing' rising powers were 'symmetric'; China's rise has been identified as 'asymmetric' (by which it is meant that it has invested heavily in information or space based technologies). Put simply it is developing unconventional means of winning a conflict. An overall budget gives little information on the extent of military capability acquired. A detailed breakdown of military spending (the 2010 paper offers no breakdown by service, rather the budget is presented under three categories: personnel, training and maintenance, and equipment) and trends (of which vary depending on the statistics they are based) offers the best possible chance of understanding China's military capabilities.

[xvi] Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Civil-Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA's Role in Elite Politics', *Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 2, (August 2010), p.5.

[xvii] Ibid p.5.

[xviii] Amos Perlmutter & William M. LeoGrande, 'The Party in Uniform: Toward a theory of Civil Military Relations in Communist Political Systems', *The American Political Science Review*, (December 1982), 76:4, p.778-79.

[xix] 'China's current top military leaders are educated almost exclusively in military institutions and spend much of their early careers within a single military region...China's Party leaders make their careers on the basis of political connections and/or political skills'. See, Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, No. 2, (August 2010), p.6.

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[xx] Note 'strengthening' rather than 'buying' or 'bribing' as some loyalty does already exist. Although be aware that the party's basis of legitimacy has evolved from being 'charismatic authority' to a 'rationale of mutual benefits'.

[xxi] See, Appendix B. Defence Exp.

[xxii] See, Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*, (Oxford, 2007), p.72.

Some may question the plausibility on the basis that the figures in Appendix B. are not inflation adjusted. Perhaps a far more accurate analysis would be based on the percentage of GDP and percentage of total expenditure spent on the military. The average percentage of GDP and total expenditure spent on the military during the second generation is actually higher than the fourth generation. 1978-92 average 12.5 per cent of Gov. Exp. & 2.85 per cent of GDP. 2003-present average 7.02 per cent of Gov. Exp. & 1.41 per cent of GDP. Perhaps then the current leadership does not feel so vulnerable after all? On the contrary, the numbers of PLA personnel has declined rapidly since the 1970s. There are no recent concrete figures as to the total of PLA personnel today (see, Appendix A. there has been no transparency for the total numbers of PLA personnel for the last 3-4 years). However, the PLA has undergone a significant adjustment in terms of making itself streamlined (downsizing) since the 1970s. There is a general consensus amongst sinologists and military experts that the total number of PLA personnel has fallen so much as to conclude that far more money is spent on the PLA per troop today than any other time in the PRC's history.

[xxiii] Under the Chinese Constitution this transition of leadership is expected to unfold in 2012-2013. It is unclear whether President Jintao will relinquish his position as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) immediately, or follow the precedent set by his predecessor Jiang Zemin and retain the CMC Chairmanship for a number of years to facilitate the power transition.

[xxiv] Shirk (2007), p.72.

[xxv] Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, (New York, 2003) pp.81-87.

[xxvi] Summary based on section VIII. Defense Expenditure of the Chinese Defence White Paper, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2011-03/31/content_22263774.htm, Accessed: 02/11/2011.

[xxvii] Quote taken from Major General Qian Lihua (Director of the Ministry of National Defence Foreign Affairs Office). See, Saunders and Rustici, (July 2011), pp.1-2.

[xxviii] Michael Kiselycznyk, and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Assessing Chinese Military Transparency', Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives, No. 1, (August 2010). Here it is making reference to external rather than internal transparency. Both are interrelated but distinct: the former relates to information supplied to those within the international community be it specific countries or international/regional institutions; the latter refers to information provided to the general public and the level of involvement of the legislature in formulating defence policy.

[xxix] This was by no means the only reason why the UK and USA never came to blows. It was also because they both had similar political and ideological outlooks (liberal democracy and market capitalism). Perhaps China's rise can be interpreted as peaceful (especially by western powers) as it has progressed from a socialist to a socialist market and is heading in the direction of full market capitalism? Then again it is difficult to believe that if China was a liberal democracy with a capitalist market economy that there would be no discussions as to the nature of its rise. After all its culture and history is distinct. See, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order*, (London, 2002). Does difference breed misunderstanding? Which in turn may lead to labels such as 'menacing' being brandished too hastily?

[xxx] For example, the *U.S. military's Quadrennial Defense Review, Nuclear Posture Review, Ballistic Missile*

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Defense Review; and the *Space Posture Review*. All four documents combine discussion of strategic intentions with more detailed and concrete discourse on hardware and acquisition plans. Can be found at: <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/> <http://www.defense.gov/npr/> <http://www.defense.gov/bmdr/> <http://www.defense.gov/spr/>.

[xxxix] Annual report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf p.3. Accessed: 02/12/2011.

[xxxix] Ibid p.5.

[xl] Ibid p.46.

[xli] Ibid p.32. This is by no means a comprehensive list.

[xlii] But should Chinas transparency be judged by Western standards?

[xliii] See, UN Military Budget Transparency Mechanism and Conventional Weapons Registration System.

[xliv] Summary based on preface, I. The Security Situation and II. National Defence of the Chinese Defence White Paper, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2011-03/31/content_22263774.htm, Accessed: 02/11/2011.

[xlv] Some even goes as far as to say that it has risen above the USA and replaced it as the world's leading superpower. Pew Research Centre, Global Attitudes Project, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower/>. Accessed: 02/11/2011.

[xlvi] Shirk (2007), p.72.

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Appendix A

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Source: Phillip C. Saunders & Ross Rustici, 'Chinese Military Transparency: Evaluating the 2010 White Paper', Institute for National Strategic Studies, (July 2011), p.3. <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA546388&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

Appendix B

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YEAR	GDP (Billion RMB)	EXPENDITURE (Billion RMB)	DEFENCE EXP.	China % of GDP spent on Mil.	China % of Gov. EXP. Spent on Mil.
1978	364.522	112.209	16.784	4.6	14.96
1979	406.258	128.179	22.264	5.48	17.37
1980	454.562	122.883	19.384	4.26	15.77
1981	489.156	113.841	16.797	3.43	14.75
1982	532.335	122.998	17.635	3.31	14.34
1983	596.265	140.952	17.713	2.97	12.57
1984	720.805	170.102	18.076	2.51	10.63
1985	901.604	200.425	19.153	2.12	9.56
1986	1027.518	220.491	20.075	1.95	9.1
1987	1205.862	226.218	20.962	1.74	9.27
1988	1504.282	249.121	21.8	1.45	8.75
1989	1699.232	282.378	25.147	1.48	8.91
1990	1866.782	308.359	29.031	1.56	9.41
1991	2178.15	338.662	33.031	1.52	9.75
1992	2692.348	374.22	37.786	1.4	10.1
1993	3533.392	464.23	42.58	1.21	9.17
1994	4819.786	579.262	55.071	1.14	9.51
1995	6079.373	682.372	63.672	1.05	9.33
1996	7117.659	793.755	72.006	1.01	9.07
1997	7897.303	923.356	81.257	1.03	8.8
1998	8440.228	1079.818	93.47	1.11	8.66
1999	8967.705	1318.767	107.64	1.2	8.16
2000	9921.455	1588.65	120.754	1.22	7.6
2001	10965.517	1890.258	144.204	1.32	7.63
2002	12033.269	2205.315	170.778	1.42	7.74
2003	13582.276	2464.995	190.787	1.4	7.74
2004	15987.834	2848.689	220.001	1.38	7.72
2005	18321.745	3393.028	247.496	1.35	7.29
2006	21192.346	4042.273	297.938	1.41	7.37
2007	25730.556	4978.135	355.491	1.38	7.14
2008	31404.5	6294.27	417.876	1.33	6.64
2009	34090.3	7874.99	495.11	1.45	6.29
2010	37304.2	9022.42	601.1	1.6	6.66

Key
Second Generation
Third Generation
Fourth Generation

Source: http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577_21.htm

Appendix B1

China: Peaceful or Menacing?

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China: Peaceful or Menacing?

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Source: http://www.usgovernmentpending.com/us_20th_century_chart.html

Appendix B2

China: Peaceful or Menacing?

Written by Andrew Kujala

Appendix B3

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Written by: Andrew Kujala
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Dr. Anatol Lieven
Date written: December 2011