

## **China's Neighbors Are Stronger Than We Think**

**All across the Indo-Pacific arc, countries are beefing up their defenses.**

BY SALVATORE BABONES

For two decades, China has gotten its way in almost every dispute in its neighborhood. Advancing in the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea, China has become the main threat across a wide arc of the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's defense spending is now more than six times as high as it was at the start of the millennium, according to independent SIPRI estimates. Over the last two decades, China has risen from sixth in the world to second in total defense spending—a spectacular increase.

If China's near neighbors are the potential partners U.S. President Joe Biden is so eager to work with, they hardly need U.S. encouragement to raise their guard when it comes to China. A look around China's borders shows that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) faces incumbent and emerging military competitors on all sides. Even assuming a Russia-China rapprochement—a prospect that is always more forthcoming than actual—China faces challenges all across what one might call the Indo-Pacific arc. These countries, stretching from India in the southwest to Japan in the northeast, would form an effective bulwark against Chinese expansionism even in the absence of explicit U.S. encouragement and support.

The Indo-Pacific arc is strongest at the ends and weakest in the middle. Japan's Self-Defense Forces have a high reputation for technology and readiness. Countering China's aircraft carrier building program, Japan is converting two existing helicopter carriers into fixed-wing aircraft carriers. Although the Japanese carriers will be much smaller than China's, the Japanese carrier-launched fifth-generation F-35 stealth fighters will pack a much bigger punch. By comparison, the PLA Navy's Shenyang J-15 is a less advanced fourth-generation fighter that has experienced serious technical problems.

Japan certainly has the resources and the technological know-how to take care of itself. At the opposite end of the Indo-Pacific arc, India is often perceived to be a relative weakling when compared to China. But those perceptions are long out of date, if in fact they were ever true. Back in 1962, China seized large tracts of Indian mountain territory in a lightning five-week war. But that victory was the result of a peacetime surprise attack against an unsuspecting friendly country. Since then, India has taken to heart the old proverb: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

Despite China's massive military modernization, India likely now has the upper hand on the Himalayan frontier. To begin with, China's 1962 advances, though deeply resented in India, moved the front line closer to India's supply bases—and further from China's. More subtly, China's infrastructure improvements have been matched by the mountain tunnels and all-weather roads built by India's Border Roads Organisation. In a strategic theater where logistics is everything, the BRO's tunneling has vastly increased the Indian Army's ability to transport heavy equipment from rear bases up to the Indian-Chinese Line of Actual Control. Add to that extensive experience fighting on glaciers and the toughness of India's Special Frontier Force

commandos (many of whom have been recruited from the Tibetan exile community), and India has a winning proposition in high-altitude warfare.

The Indian Air Force also has a major technical advantage over China's PLA: At an altitude of 10,000 feet (3,000 meters), India's forward air bases are very high, but not nearly as high as China's. And unlike India, China has no low-altitude bases anywhere in the region. That makes a huge difference, since China's aircraft must shed up to half of their missiles and fuel in order to take off in the super-thin air of the Tibetan Plateau. Throw in India's acquisition of top-of-the-line French Rafale jet fighters, the potential modernization of its Russian Sukhoi SU-30 squadrons, and the impending delivery of advanced Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, and the Indian Air Force may soon possess absolute air superiority across the LAC. India's indigenously-developed Tejas multirole fighter is just the icing on the cake.

Farther to the east, China's 1,300 mile (2,100 kilometer) border with Myanmar is so insecure that China, perhaps inspired by former U.S. President Donald Trump, is building a 10-foot (3-meter) high wall to seal it off. The military takeover in Myanmar, widely perceived in the West as favoring China, has actually been a setback: China was especially close to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and now sees its position in the country threatened by both the military and the street protesters. China has long been accused of supporting separatist rebels in Myanmar; the military's overthrow of the civilian government led by Suu Kyi might have been as much an anti-China as an anti-democracy coup.

Vietnam, which like India was once the victim of a Chinese surprise attack, has been on poor terms with its communist big brother ever since China's 1979 invasion. Vietnam's defense budget today is relatively small, but it has focused its investments on coastal defense. Mirroring China's early-2000s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, it has invested heavily in anti-ship missiles, and is perpetually rumored to be on the verge of acquiring the joint Russian-Indian BrahMos, a supersonic ramjet cruise missile that is reportedly the fastest such weapon in the world. Thus as China moves forward from A2/AD to force projection strategies in the South China Sea, Vietnam is developing its own A2/AD capacity in order to deny the PLA Navy the ability to operate in the area.

The weak spots in the Indo-Pacific arc are the islands. The Philippines, which under its erratic President Rodrigo Duterte has flirted with a potential Chinese alliance, is a wildcard. Yet after four years of strident anti-U.S. rhetoric, Duterte faces an increasing backlash from a broadly pro-American public. The country's armed forces presumably also favor maintaining close ties with the United States. Like its Vietnamese counterpart, the Philippine Navy is keen to acquire BrahMos anti-ship missiles in a deal that is much closer to consummation than the one between India and Vietnam. In another A2/AD evolution, the only realistic target for these missiles would be China's PLA Navy operating in the South China Sea.

Taiwan is another weak spot. The problem here is not a failure of resolve—the repression in Hong Kong has only hardened Taiwanese opinion against China—but an unwillingness to make the necessary sacrifices. Taiwan spends only 1.7 percent of its GDP on defense, a small fraction for a country that faces constant threats of invasion from its much larger neighbor. Although Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has budgeted a major defense increase for 2021, the budget has still been called insufficient by U.S. officials. Taiwan has announced the purchase of 66 workhorse F-16 fighter jets, but its immediate need is for Harpoon anti-ship and Patriot anti-aircraft missiles. Acquisition programs for both have been hit by budget constraints.

Finally, although South Korea is concerned primarily with the threat from the North, the country has announced its own indigenous aircraft carrier and jet fighter programs. Some commentators have called them national vanity projects, but they might just as credibly be cast as efforts to catapult South Korea's already impressive defense industrial base into the information era. As hulls and airframes turn into commodity products, South Korea's main domestic value-add for its fighters will be avionics such as radar and guidance systems. The country's planned aircraft carrier will be equipped with U.S.-made F-35 jets and South Korean electronic warfare equipment.

Put it all together, and the PLA Navy's three aircraft carriers—one an old Soviet hulk, the second an improved copy of the first, and the third an experimental Chinese design—will have to face two Japanese carriers and a South Korean one equipped with F-35s, plus two Indian carriers to boot. And that's before even factoring in the U.S. Navy's Japan-based supercarriers. In the air, China faces the thoroughly modern air forces of India, South Korea, and Japan, and growing A2/AD threats from the countries in between. Farther afield, Australian forces can potentially play a buttressing role if Canberra musters the political will. There are still weak points in the Indo-Pacific arc. But overall, the prognosis does not look good for China.

The overarching lesson in all of this is that the United States does not have to provide security in the Indo-Pacific to keep the region “free and open,” never mind “resilient and inclusive,” as the four Quad leaders resolved at their summit last week. All Washington has to do is provide a security framework into which other countries can insert their own efforts. It could do this through the Quad mechanism, but that would require a Quad focused on maritime security—not on climate change and the coronavirus. But even without a defense-focused Quad, the countries of the Indo-Pacific arc are perfectly capable of securing themselves against Chinese aggression. The United States might offer tools, technology, and training, but China's neighbors can and should take the lead in keeping their own neighborhood safe.