The Growth of the Chinese Military

An Interview with Dennis Wilder

The *Journal* sat down with Dennis Wilder to hear his views on recent developments within the Chinese military—including the modernization of the People’s Liberation Army—and their implications for security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. Mr. Wilder began his career with the U.S. government as a China military analyst in the Central Intelligence Agency. He then helped shape U.S. policy toward China and East Asia as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for East Asian Affairs on the National Security Council. He is currently an Adjunct Professor of Asian Studies in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

Journal: You served on the National Security Council (NSC) staff between 2004 and 2009. What did your work entail and what were some challenges you faced during your tenure in the White House? What role did the NSC play in shaping the George W. Bush administration’s worldview and foreign policy approach towards Asia?

Wilder: The role of the NSC, which was established in 1947, is not to implement foreign policy, but rather to coordinate foreign policy. In the U.S. government, you can argue that the lead agency in foreign affairs is the Department of State. However, there are many other departments that also engage in foreign policy implementation. There is the Office of the Trade Representative. There is the Department of Defense. There is also the Department of Commerce. In some cases, you even have the Department of Energy. There is a myriad of people and organizations with a role
in foreign affairs. What the NSC tries to do is take the president’s instructions, which are best spelled out in the president’s national security strategy, take the core principles of a president’s foreign policy and ensure that, as the agencies execute foreign policy, they are keeping within the guidelines of what the president is trying to do. In other words, the NSC tries to make sure that the priorities of the president are the priorities of the various agencies of government.

For example, what were the priorities of President Bush in East Asia? First, it was to keep our alliances strong. I thus spent a great deal of time during my tenure at the White House making sure that our relationships with the allies in East Asia were kept in good order and that we had robust contact with them. When the president went to visit these countries, we had a set of programs and deliverables that we were going to move forward in those relations.

Second, in East Asia, we obviously have the problem of North Korea: the dangers of North Korea as both a nuclear power and a proliferator. The members of the NSC spent a lot of time figuring out ways to engage the North Koreans while also keeping them from proliferating. The issue of China’s rise and how the United States was going to deal with that was also a very important part of our work. What you will find at the end of the East Asia section of the National Security Strategy report in 2006 (released by The White House) is the word “hedging.” What we designed was a policy of hedging. Hedging implies that we do not know what course China is going to take in the future. The Chinese may continue to develop their military capability as they become a status quo power in the system. In other words, they may buy into the international norms that have been in place since World War II. If so, we welcome a prosperous, strong China.

What if the Chinese in the future decide they are a non-status quo power, though? What if the Chinese decide that the rules that the world has lived by since 1949, for whatever reason, do not suit them? In that case, we are going to have to be in a position of being able to confront China on that. That is where the hedging strategy comes in. So, building the American alliances in East Asia, keeping a strong, robust American military presence in East Asia, and keeping our economic engagement with East Asia strong are all part of that, and that was a big part of my job at the NSC.
Journal: You are currently teaching a course on the growth of the Chinese military at Georgetown University. What do you see as the primary driver behind the expansion of military investment and development in China?

Wilder: There are two ways of looking at the question. First of all, there is no doubt that China is making an enormous military investment. They have gone from about $22 billion to at least $130 billion in defense spending over a decade, if not more. On the one hand, we can say that this is a natural development of a country that has become, over that decade, much more economically viable. As the economy has grown the defense budget has grown as well. The Chinese will point to the fact that the percentage in GDP used on defense has not significantly changed over that decade. The real dollars spent on defense obviously have grown quite tremendously, and yet the Chinese will say, “Well, but the price of labor is higher. There are a lot of reasons for this.”

My concern, however, is not that China has increased its defense spending. I am worried about the lack of transparency with regards to the objectives of increased defense spending in China. For example, in the South China Sea, the Chinese have been very ambiguous about the nine-dash line. Does the nine-dash line mean that China proposes that the entire South China Sea is theirs, and therefore every nation who has somebody on one of those islands out there—be it the Philippines or Vietnam—has to leave those islands? Or is the nine-dash line merely an indication of China’s interest in the South China Sea? It is very unclear, and the Chinese have made their neighbors extremely nervous with their lack of clarity as well as the aggressive manner in which they seem to be moving ahead in that area.

Journal: Where do you see Chinese nuclear capabilities heading? Will China’s expansion of nuclear weapons capability lead to tensions within the region, such as a nuclear rivalry with India?

Wilder: In the nuclear arena, it appears China continues to have a “deterrent force,” not a “first strike force.” The Chinese believe that because they are a smaller nuclear power, they need to have the capability to strike back against a country that uses nuclear weapons against China. I have a hard time believing the Chinese would be
first to use nuclear force though. So I think their “no first use” policy is still credible. If you look at what the Chinese are doing in nuclear development, they are apparently building a new ballistic missile submarine, and they may build several of these ballistic missile submarines. However, that is to make sure that they have a triad, and that they have missiles that cannot be found, so that they survive a first strike from another power. I am not too worried about that. I do not see the Chinese massively building up their nuclear capabilities. Now, that is from an American perspective, because obviously we have tremendous capabilities in this area. If I were viewing this from India’s perspective, I imagine this would make the Indian leadership very nervous. Modernization of the Chinese nuclear force does mean that China has a capability against India that is bigger and better than what the Indians have against China. So they have to worry more about the notion that China might change its “no first use” policy at some point.

**Journal:** What remains your most outstanding concern regarding the growth of the Chinese military?

**Wilder:** Again, it comes back to this question of transparency. When you look at what China’s neighbors do in defense, they publish white papers. They publish on defense budgets and plans that are available for public scrutiny. The Japanese do. The Australians do. The South Koreans certainly do. The Chinese white papers—while they have improved over the last few years—are not what you would call transparent documents. They pull their punches. They do not explain everything China is doing, and they certainly do not explain some areas of great concern.

For example, I mentioned the ballistic missile submarines. One of the concerns that anybody should have about a country with ballistic missiles or countries with nuclear weapons on board subs is what the fail-safe mechanisms are. We are quite open about the fact that we have clear fail-safe mechanisms on our nuclear weapons. It is easy to do on land. It is harder to do at sea. So I think the Chinese need to come forward once they start to deploy these nuclear ballistic submarines with a better explanation of how you keep from having accidental launches, or how you keep them from a rogue submarine commander. This is not to say that I think that the Chinese are going to have this kind of problem. However, you always have to
be prepared for the worst, and I think the Chinese have not been clear and up front enough about nuclear command and control.

**Journal:** China is often viewed as the de facto leader of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose member states have protested the idea of new missile defense systems being set up by U.S. allies in the region. What role does the SCO play in shaping the future of the regional security architecture in Asia?

**Wilder:** East Asian security architecture has vexed many foreign policymakers in the United States. Unlike in Europe, where you have a lot of commonalities between countries in terms of heritage and culture, in East Asia, all of these nations have quite distinct heritage and culture. Consequently, when you are trying to find an overarching architecture for the region, it is very difficult. We have not found it yet. Henry Kissinger’s latest book, which came out a few months ago, is very interesting in that it addresses this question of world architecture. He asks, “What is security architecture in the twenty-first century?” Increasingly, we have a networked world—a world in which it is not just nation-states, but all kinds of different networking going on because of the computer age. Human beings are now also in touch with each other in ways that they never were before. What I find interesting about Kissinger’s book is that he lays out the problem terrifically and criticizes the G8, G20, United Nations, and many of these international organizations. He identifies that these organizations are not doing as well as they need to. Interestingly though, by the end of the book, he does not actually offer a solution. That is somewhat disappointing from Kissinger because I look to him for great models and great thinking. I think that shows how difficult this problem of architecture is, not just in East Asia, but around the world. We are at a point where the old models are falling apart, and we do not have any new models to replace them. Perhaps it is the next generation of Asia scholars who will have to develop new models. My generation may have failed on this point, so it may be that the next group will have to take up that torch and figure out a new architecture for East Asia and for global security.

**Journal:** Recently, there was an incident during which a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft had a close encounter with a Chinese jet fighter in the South China Sea. What kinds of steps can China and the United States take to reduce the likelihood of such
Wilder: This is where we have struggled to engage the Chinese military. The Chinese military, of all the elements in China, has been the least willing to engage in direct relationships with the United States and the neighbors in East Asia. For very real reasons, the economic side of the Chinese government has been very open to relationship with the outside world, though it was necessary for economic reform. The political side has been willing to engage because, obviously, as China has become a player in the world, it needs to engage heavily with the world. The military has not felt that need. In fact, the military has felt that engagement is rather dangerous for them in the sense that we would be able to see their weaknesses, their areas of vulnerability, and consequently, they have been very parsimonious in their willingness to engage. One area, for example, is that if you look at the history of U.S.-China military-to-military ties—and with most countries—China only sends the top generals for these discussions. There is very little that goes on at the colonel-to-colonel, the major-to-major, or captain-to-captain level. That is a problem because at the lower levels of the Chinese military, unfortunately, they are still indoctrinated to believe that the United States is the adversary. I think that the more exposure we can get for those lower-level officers to our side, the more they will learn that we are not the adversary they think we are. Moreover, by engaging with us, they begin to establish relationships and friendships. As they move up the command structure, these relationships would be helpful in overcoming some of these problems.

Journal: In what areas do you think China and the United States can or should develop military cooperation amidst all of the challenges you mentioned?

Wilder: There are many areas in which the United States and China would be able to cooperate. I am cautiously optimistic that Chairman and President Xi Jinping has pushed the military forward in regard to military-to-military cooperation with the United States. I always felt during the Bush administration that President Hu Jintao was interested in improving the military-to-military relationship, but he did not have the kind of influence with the Chinese military to actually make that happen. It appears that what we are seeing now is a greater willingness on the part of Xi Jinping. Xi seems to recognize that there
needs to be, as he calls it, a new “great power relationship” between the United States and China. He is beginning to impress this view on the Chinese military. For example, we have recently seen four visits to the United States by the Chinese naval commander. I think that is a very positive sign. However, as I mentioned earlier, we need a robust discussion on the nuclear side, as well as an extensive discussion of rules of engagement off of the Chinese coast. One major issue is that the Americans and the Chinese have never sat down to have a discussion about the rules of engagement in detail. We need some rules of the road so we do not have these problems in the future. These are two pressing areas on the nuclear side and on the maritime side. I was always impressed with what Colin Powell said regarding the need for lower-level military contacts. Powell made the point that the people he met as a young officer were terribly important to him when he became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because they also had moved up their command structure. He thus had a long history with these individuals and understood them well. That is what I hope to see between the United States and China in the future—that we begin to have those kinds of personal relationships between military officers so that someday, sources of tensions can be much better managed than they are today. This is because I think fundamentally—and this is my personal view—that the Chinese and the Americans are not that different. We actually share a lot of traits in common. We are both industrious peoples. We certainly are peoples who enjoy a good joke, who enjoy a good meal. I think the more we get to know each other the more it will work to the betterment of the relationship.

Dennis Wilder was interviewed by Thomas Snyder, Brian Wielk, and Zi Yang on 23 September 2014.