

pumped up by imported party workers; and that the political parties did not rely on the civic conscience of their supporters to get them to the polls but rather used organizers and treats such as whiskey to make sure they voted.

In short, those people who were deeply committed to political affairs worked hard to influence those who were not, Altschuler and Blumin say. “The very intensity of this ‘partisan imperative’ sug-

gests the magnitude of the task party activists perceived and set out to perform.” The big turnout at the polls during the period reflects their success in this effort more than it does “the broad and deep political conviction” of the electorate, as the dewy-eyed historians would have it. Indeed, write the authors, “American democracy found its greatest validation in the peaceful and apolitical aftermath of the strident political campaign.”

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

The Phony China Threat

“On the Myth of Chinese Power Projection Capabilities” by Rick Reece, in *Breakthroughs* (Spring 1998), Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 292 Main St. (E38-603), Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

Is China building up its armed strength to expand its presence in the South China Sea, intimidate its neighbors, and ultimately replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia? Some analysts claim that it is, with the immediate aim of gaining control of the sea-lanes through which Mideast oil is transported to the region. But Reece, a marine lieutenant colonel and 1997–98 Marine Corps Fellow in the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, contends that China has nowhere near the military muscle it would need to do that.

During the last 10 years, China has occupied islands, reefs, and islets throughout the South China Sea, skirmishing with rival claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The resulting tensions in the strategically important area have helped propel an East Asian arms race. But the only place occupied by China that has any military significance is Woody Island, the largest of the Paracel Islands, Reece says, and, at most, it provides an airfield “for limited refuelings and emergency landings, not a forward base for staging assaults in the South China Sea.”

China could airlift two divisions (25,000 troops) to attack a foe beyond its territorial waters, Reece observes, sending reinforcements once it seized a good port. However, it lacks ground-attack aircraft to support operations more than about 300 miles from home. China also “does not practice large-scale amphibious operations or naval gunfire support of landing operations.” At least two years

of hard training would be needed to develop an effective amphibious force, he says.

What about airpower? China has bought 72 Russian SU-27 fighter jets in recent years—the equivalent of one U.S. wing. But while it has also acquired aerial-refueling technology from Iran, the Chinese Air Force currently lacks the skills to use it. So the fighters cannot fly into the southern reaches of the South China Sea. If they did, they would confront “the air forces of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, all of which possess advanced American or British aircraft and would be operating relatively close to friendly air bases.” Aircraft carriers? China has none. (The United States has 12.)

Beijing would need a “blue water” navy to pursue any larger regional ambitions, Reece notes. But a 1996 study indicates that China could not build or buy a modern regional navy by 2010 “without major assistance,” he says. “China does not possess the power plant, avionics and metallurgy technologies required to manufacture aircraft that can operate from aircraft carriers in any weather. Chinese pilots have little experience flying without ground control.” And Beijing doesn’t have a lot of money to spend. Its military budget is \$32 billion; the U.S. defense budget is \$264 billion.

Without a blue water navy, Reece says, China will be limited to minor excursions and “showing the flag.” As for protection of the sea-lanes on which it depends for imported oil, China, Reece says, is likely to do what Japan does: rely on the United States.