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China Looking to Become Artificial Intelligence Global Leader, Report Says

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The United States leads China in innovative national security technology and industrial might, but Beijing is rushing ahead in areas like artificial intelligence, where it feels it can be a global leader in the next decade, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment's latest report concludes.

While the picture for Washington "is quite bright," much of this lead stems from Cold War initiatives like the government and industry relationships that produced the U-2 and SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft, the Atlas ballistic missile and the submarine-launched Polaris missile, said Thomas Mahnken, one of the authors.

Mahnken, who serves as CSBA's chief executive officer, said this close coordination also led to the quick development and fielding of these complex systems.

The competitive bright future also includes the United States tapping into the innovations its allies and partners are making in dual-use technologies and technologies tied directly to security and military needs, he said.

China lags far behind in this area, according to the report, titled: "The Decisive Decade, United States-China Competition in Defense Innovation and Defense Industrial Policy in and beyond the 2020s." But Beijing has made recent efforts, particularly with Russia, to learn from others and not rely on a policy of absorption, to include industrial espionage, in advancing its security technology.

The report adds that China's "achilles heel" in the competition is its "do-it-or-else" systems of governmental penalties placed on industry, while the United States' system is more open to market forces in fostering useful innovation. The United States also retains an edge in developing technologies that fit well in the civilian and military sectors, while China's "structural statist bias" – the report's term – will likely hinder progress.

Tai Ming Cheung, co-author and a professor at the University of California, San Diego, said that since the mid-1990s, when the United States sent two carrier task forces to demonstrate its willingness to defend Taiwan's self-rule, "the Chinese defense establishment regards the United States [as] the game to beat." It has been sharply focused on anti-access/area denial military spending and "is now doubling down" on AI.

"The Chinese think they have a real chance to lead" in this sector, he said, adding that this investment hasn't stopped China from also expanding its traditional military forces, particularly its navy.

"The United States is still trying to debate how big the Chinese threat is," even after the U.S. military finished 20 years of counterinsurgency warfare, Cheung said. The report notes that this large time difference in threat perception "allowed [China] to significantly close the gap" with the United States in traditional "techno-security" areas.

"Techno-security" is used to describe a wide range of innovations that can be applied to meeting national security requirements.

In many of the technological areas related to the threat, China sets timelines for development, adding a sense of urgency to the efforts, according to the report.

On leadership and management in the future, Cheung said the report's concluded there "was sort of a draw." The report says the United States' decentralized government, industry and market system was excellent at evolutionary technological development, but China's top-down approach can push through high-risk rapid change.

A related question to successful rapid change is how effective Beijing's defense industrial base will be at producing high-quality systems in quantity, like aircraft engines, Mahnken said.

"The U.S. techno-security system remains better organized and structured for the long-term techno-security competition than China, but it cannot be complacent and needs to urgently address a raft of structural flaws in its system," the report concludes.

Mahnken said CSBA's next step is to offer recommendations to address those structural flaws.

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John Grady, a former managing editor of Navy Times, retired as director of communications for the Association of the United States Army. His reporting on national defense and national security has appeared on Breaking Defense, GovExec.com, NextGov.com, DefenseOne.com, Government Executive and USNI News.

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