

Securing the China Dream

The People's Liberation Army in a Time of Reform and Change

COLLOQUIUM BRIEF FOR THE 26TH ANNUAL PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY (PLA) CONFERENCE

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Key Insights

- To understand the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in advancing China's national goals, achieving the "China dream," and quelling the insecurities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese military theory, practice, capabilities, and reforms need to be analyzed in the context of the CCP's ideational discourse and other dimensions of China's national power.
- Recent CCP rhetoric suggests that the party believes its approach to economic development can serve as an example to authoritarian governments that aspire to develop their economies without becoming liberal democracies. CCP rhetoric does not suggest, however, that the party is attempting to export its indigenized Leninist political system abroad.
- Military power alone cannot resolve the CCP's existential insecurities. Were the PLA to achieve or surpass military parity with the United States, the CCP would still feel threatened by liberal democratic political systems.
- Recent military reforms in China have consolidated Xi Jinping's control of, and reasserted the party's structural dominance over, the PLA.
- The PLA continues to prioritize joint operations development, institutionalizing a joint command and control structure and pursuing the human capital necessary to conduct joint operations. Nevertheless, PLA operational effectiveness remains hindered by a lack of combat experience, bureaucratic restraint, corruption, and political thought training.
- To secure the China dream in a dynamic Indo-Pacific, the PLA is advancing its ability to fight and win informationized wars along China's periphery, most notably in the Taiwan Strait, but also on the Korean Peninsula, in China's "near seas," and in regions incorporated in the Belt and Road Initiative.
- U.S.-China military-to-military relations have benefited both militaries, but the benefits have asymmetrically favored China.
- The effects of the U.S. Navy's freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), combatant "ship days," port visits, military exercises, and other operational tools on domestic and international perceptions and behavior remain poorly understood.
- U.S. Indo-Pacific allies see an array of security challenges posed by the PLA to their militaries and to the current hub-and-spoke security architecture in the region, as well as a range of approaches to mitigating these challenges through bilateral cooperation with the United States and multilateral cooperation with other states.

The 26th annual People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference convened at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on October 27–29, 2017.

This invitation-only event, “Securing the China Dream: The People's Liberation Army in a Time of Reform and Change,” was jointly sponsored by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) of the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Pacific Command, and the Headquarters of the Department of the Army. Leading specialists from academia, government, the military, and policy think tanks examined the PLA within the strategic context of an evolving China and a shifting international system, assessing how China's restructured force operates in support of objectives pursuant to achieving the “China dream” of national rejuvenation.

- The conference included a series of panels and breakout sessions on the following themes:
- Assessing the PLA under China's leader, Xi Jinping
- Fighting and winning informationized local wars
- Addressing the rise of the PLA
- Expert reflections and regional perspectives

Each theme is delineated in greater detail below. SSI is publishing an edited volume of conference papers to extend the conversation to the broader academic and policymaking communities.

Assessing the PLA under Xi Jinping

The Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping envisions a China that is stronger, richer, and more influential on the world stage. Xi has overseen a series of

comprehensive reforms that seek to strengthen the economy, promote common social values, and advance national interests. Commensurate with these priorities is the requirement for a modern military capable of safeguarding national security and supporting the country's growing interests, in particular those beyond its borders. In January 2016 the Central Military Commission (CMC), which Xi chairs, outlined principles for reforming the PLA, including centralizing to a greater extent military management and command, reducing the force size, strengthening ideological and political training, and improving discipline and the rule of law. In April of the same year, Xi was revealed to have attained a new title, that of commander-in-chief of the CMC's Joint Operations Command. Xi's personal authority was further institutionalized when the 19th Party Congress downsized the CMC from eleven to seven members in October 2017. Through increasingly unopposed political power, Xi has consolidated his control of the military, and reasserted the party's structural dominance over the PLA.

Xi's reforms, however, belie a combination of aspiration and anxiety. The CCP desires national rejuvenation, yet despite what appear to be high levels of domestic popular support, it is nervous about its own political survival. Xi has mounted an ideological campaign against Western ideas, excepting a re-emphasis on Marxist studies. The party's Document No. 9, leaked in 2013, attacked “false ideological trends” like “Western constitutional democracy,” “universal values,” “civil society,” “neoliberalism,” and “the West's idea of journalism.” A rumored Document No. 30 in 2015 supposedly admonished that such ideas be purged from universities and cultural institutions. Xi and

the party thus appear intent to justify and broaden ideological control as part of a struggle, perhaps one they perceive as existential, against the liberal West.

It is important that military analysts consider the evolving mission and capabilities of the PLA within the context of the CCP's ideational discourse and its vision for China's place in the world. That discourse and vision are not without their own internal tensions and ambiguities, however. For instance, does the CCP view socialism, which it has long professed to champion, as a means of restoring national greatness; or, alternatively, is restoring national greatness a means to achieve the "higher" goal of a socialist society? What is the party's endgame? China's methodical economic reforms have propelled it to a position of regional and global prominence. Yet despite the state's continued heavy hand in key sectors, no immediate signs suggest that China is abandoning its largely capitalist economy or withdrawing from the globalized world in pursuit of a socialist or Marxist political economy. The regime, therefore, appears satisfied with China rising within the global economic system and, broadly speaking, does not wish to force this system in a socialist (or communist) direction.

Nevertheless, since the era of Deng Xiaoping, China has talked about either creating a new international order or reforming the existing order to make it safe for socialism—such that no country would wish to overturn China's political system. In his work report at the 19th Party Congress, Xi stated that China's experience could provide an example for other countries that wish to develop economically while preserving their form of (non-democratic) governance. Is China calling for the proliferation of non-democratic government;

or, more radically, does the CCP wish to export its political model abroad? The latter is highly unlikely. China's brand of Leninist party-state took shape through a unique process of indigenization into Chinese society, making it exceedingly difficult to transpose elsewhere. The former, however, may have some credence insofar as China does not wish to see other authoritarian governments become liberal democracies. The party does not want to be an authoritarian outlier—the only non-democratic regime among the world's most developed countries. If other authoritarian governments remain intact, they will be theoretically more disposed to accord the CCP the political respect it seeks on the world stage, which may contribute to enduring respect for the party at home as well.

In discerning the role of the PLA in China's strategy for national rejuvenation, an exclusively military focus sometimes clarifies and sometimes obfuscates the regime's intentions. The PLA has on occasion proceeded under a different agenda than party elites, and even Xi has butted heads with some of China's top brass, particularly in his crackdown on corruption and opposing factions. Moreover, the Chinese military has not fought a war in decades and has only recently begun extending its reach abroad. Military theory and practice, then, while essential to examine, should not constitute the sole criteria for understanding how the army may be used to advance national goals, achieve the China dream, or quell regime insecurities. The role of the PLA should be considered amid other dimensions of national power and how these dimensions are fostered and employed strategically. Finally, it is important to note that military might alone will not, regardless of its potency, resolve the regime's existential concerns.

Even if the PLA were to achieve or surpass military parity with the United States, the CCP would still feel threatened by liberal democratic political systems and advocates, both within and outside the country.

With these provisions in place, analysts can examine the PLA more closely, scrutinizing particular changes in its capabilities and operations. One area of change is an emphasis on joint operations that began after the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis and has grown steadily since. In the latest reform cycle, the PLA created a permanent joint command and control (C2) structure at the theater and strategic levels, such that C2 is no longer conducted ad hoc. More recently, the PLA has emphasized human capital and developing the personnel needed to man and command joint operations. PLA officials are traveling to foreign countries to understand how their counterparts abroad conduct joint operations and training and are returning in possession of useful methods and knowledge.

Obstacles to a strong joint force persist, however, including a lack of combat experience, bureaucratic restraint, corruption, and even political thought training, which may interfere with operational training and effectiveness. It is also unclear how well the PLA Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF) are coordinating with each other, or how strong and healthy the connective tissue is between forces in general. The United States would benefit from further collaboration and exchanges with counterparts in Taiwan and Japan who function in regular proximity to the PLA and may be able to shed light on its joint force progress. Observers might also consider scenarios in which some of the obstacles enumerated above could grow into major challenges for the PLA.

In other developments, CMC reforms have downsized the number of total members while preserving the two CMC vice-chairs and adding the head of discipline inspection. This smaller and restructured CMC (reminiscent of the downsized Politburo Standing Committee) may be able to reach decisions more quickly. At the same time, service branches have been reluctant to relinquish command of their service forces to an overall joint commander. With the new reforms, China now has a CMC superior in authority to the service branches, so how future force structure and budget allocations will be decided remains unclear. The army is, in fact, already complaining about a smaller budget. It is possible, of course, that the recent CMC restructuring will enable the CMC to better address these dissatisfactions. When it comes to personnel management, Xi will be involved in promotion and inspection decisions and will be positioned to closely assess operational competency, political reliability, and cases of possible corruption. To date, at least 50 generals have been brought up on corruption charges, while numerous other officers have either been purged or simply not promoted.

Fighting and Winning Informationized Local Wars

To secure the China dream in a dynamic Indo-Pacific, the PLA is advancing its ability to fight and win informationized wars along China's periphery. The primary focus of these efforts remains a potential contingency in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA has re-envisioned Taiwan's status as not only a matter of patriotism but also a part of China's overall geopolitical strategy. Taiwan is now viewed as central to shipping-lane security, far seas defense, and access

to the western Pacific. Moreover, an alignment appears to have set in between PLA opinion on Taiwan and the hawkish preferences of Xi Jinping. Since Xi took the helm, the PLA has conducted numerous exercises, including joint operations, bomber flights, circumnavigations around Taiwan, and demonstrations by the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). These shows of power appear intended to signal that China possesses the capabilities and, more importantly, the resolve to take Taiwan by force and deter or delay U.S. entrance into a conflict scenario. China's hope is that it can bring both Taiwan and the United States to the conclusion that unification is inevitable and resistance too costly. For Xi himself, these demonstrations have the added advantage of mobilizing support for his rule within the PLA.

Taiwan, for its part, has responded to China's operational developments with significant strategic and operational strides of its own. Yet a danger persists that the PLA may not comprehend the deterrent value of Taiwan's strategy or its anti-access weapons systems. Reducing and managing misperception will be essential to maintaining cross-strait peace. Unfortunately, the lines of communication between China and Taiwan are attenuating. Meanwhile, Xi and the PLA are well aware of the trend among the island's younger population to increasingly identify as Taiwanese—rather than as Chinese or a combination of the two—which could make unification more difficult as time passes.

A second peripheral focus for the PLA has been the Korean Peninsula. Here the PLA is developing its military planning and operational capabilities through experimentation. Priority has been given to plans in the northeast theater to cultivate an informationized command structure with the capacity to respond to crises, most notably on the China–North

Korea border, through effective emergency response and joint force coordination. The Shenyang Military Region has also invested in propaganda training that would enable the PLA to better utilize media warfare during a military contingency. In an actual scenario, a host of non-military entities would take part in the Chinese response, including the People's Armed Police (PAP) and healthcare workers, among others. Hence, civil-military training and coordination are also becoming key features of Chinese military modernization regarding the peninsula.

China's "near seas"—the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Yellow Sea—present a third massive and contentious peripheral challenge, and becoming a true maritime power in these regions constitutes a key feature of the China dream. China's primary near seas interests are its claims to disputed maritime features; the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), trade routes, resources, and food security; the safety of its ports and vast coastlines; and the accrual of regional power through maritime connections to Southeast Asia and Eurasia. Pursuant to these interests are several concomitant military objectives. The PLA must be able to defend and control access to China's claims and occupied features, secure SLOCs and land and air approaches to the coasts, prevent or deter U.S. and allied forces from attacking China or intervening in a conflict, and provide regional security through humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, peacetime SLOC protection, and counterpiracy patrols. China's growing integration with the region, especially in trade, will only continue to enhance the need for a strong PLA and the potential for Chinese military power to alarm neighboring states. While policymakers have so far paid greatest attention to the role of the PLAN in the near seas, China's so-called maritime militia is also finally receiving serious

consideration after alarming numerous governments with its coercive activities. In an actual PLA joint force operation, this militia could be utilized to intimidate and even attack foreign maritime vessels. Meanwhile, the PLAAF could play an even more prominent role than the PLAN in a near-seas contingency. It remains to be seen how China will balance its role as a regional trade integrator with its interests in security and enhanced geopolitical influence. Looking ahead, scholars and policymakers should explore other PRC activities that seek to expand Chinese influence and military presence in the region. For instance, since 2011, China has been conducting joint patrols of the Mekong River with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand—an understudied but important issue.

A fourth peripheral challenge of enormous consequence to the China dream is ensuring security in countries and regions being incorporated into Xi's signature foreign policy program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has framed BRI as an infrastructure and economic project designed to bring benefits and "win-win" cooperation to participating states, but some analysts have suggested it is much more geostrategic than the CCP acknowledges. BRI provides an ideal vehicle through which to enhance China's political influence abroad. Yet, due to the complicated security environments of prospective BRI locations, the initiative will create novel and nontraditional security challenges for China. To meet these challenges, China will most likely continue to make use of private security companies, as it has been doing over the past several years, rely on local forces in BRI partner countries, or combine these two approaches. The CCP harbors deep reservations about U.S. wars and security operations in the Middle East and Central Asia and does not wish to

mire the PLA in prolonged regional conflict. At the same time, China must also avoid being perceived as threatening by smaller neighbors—a task it has not always managed well—or contravening its principle of noninterference in the affairs of other states.

Addressing the Rise of the PLA

Washington is searching for effective ways to manage its relationship with a more confident Beijing and a stronger PLA, while securing U.S. interests and those of U.S. allies. In years past, military-to-military contacts have generated significant benefits for both sides. Overall, however, these benefits have asymmetrically favored China. Given the significance of the bilateral relationship for world politics, there are ample reasons to continue strengthening military-to-military relations, including the need for realistic mutual assessment, improved crisis management, and effective deterrence. Yet the foreseeable future presents little hope for a major breakthrough in military-to-military relations generally or in specific subsets of the relationship. The two states have incompatible goals in the maritime domain, with China reclaiming massive amounts of land and installing military infrastructure and weapons on formations in the South China Sea. China also continues to demand unrealistic concessions from the United States on arms sales to Taiwan, Congress's National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAAs), and U.S. reconnaissance operations near the mainland, while proposing no substantive military concessions of its own. Finally, military-to-military relations must flow from the broader U.S.-China relationship; they cannot drive it. Even if they enhance strategic trust or provide operational value, the extent and impact of their progress is dependent on the bilateral

relationship writ large. Thus, the state of overall U.S.-China engagement will be critical to the health of bilateral military relations. Under current conditions, however, few are betting on major advances at the state level.

Xi has called for the PLA to become a world-class military by mid-century. The headway of the PLA toward achieving Xi's goal is readily apparent in the expanded frequency and range of its naval and air surveillance operations, which have alarmed many of China's neighbors. According to Japan's Ministry of Defense, in FY2016, the Japan Self-Defense Forces scrambled fighters on 851 occasions to monitor Chinese military aircraft—an increase from 31 only eight years prior. That said, technological progress does not equate to professionalization, and Chinese pilots have a record of intercepting foreign surveillance aircraft at unsafe distances and in risky fashion. In 2001, a Chinese PLAN jet collided with a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft off the coast of Hainan, killing the Chinese pilot. In an effort to standardize practices, China and the United States signed nonbinding agreements in 2014 and 2015 on the rules of behavior for the safety of maritime and air encounters. The implementation of these agreements will be critical as China steps up its operations amid sustained U.S. reconnaissance.

In addition to surveillance, the U.S. military uses a variety of other operational tools to promote security and U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the maritime domain where Chinese policy has been increasingly assertive. Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) have attracted the most publicity, though they are neither the only tool in the U.S. Navy's operational toolkit nor the one most frequently employed. The navy conducts hundreds of port visits, combatant "ship

days," and military exercises each year. These operations serve myriad purposes including promoting norms, standards, and rule of law; signaling U.S. capabilities and resolve; reassuring U.S. allies; and safeguarding lawful use of sea lanes and exclusive economic zones. However, their effects on public perception, both within the United States and abroad, remain poorly understood. Citizens and foreign governments are often unaware of the type and frequency of such operations, and it is unclear how effectively they signal U.S. credibility and resolve. Military operations alone, then, appear necessary but insufficient for shaping public perception. Could greater transparency by the U.S. government or a U.S. civil society group make this signaling more efficacious—even absent increases in U.S. force presence or posture? What effects would improved transparency and communication have on respect for rule of law in the region (particularly given that the United States is not a party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea)? Could clearer strategic communication slow down or prevent further Chinese land reclamation and militarization in the South China Sea? The benefits and challenges of operational signaling in shaping public perception, both foreign and domestic, merit further investigation as the United States develops its Indo-Pacific strategy and the means for addressing a stronger China and PLA.

Expert Reflections and Regional Perspectives

The United States' most powerful allies in the Indo-Pacific—Australia, Japan, and South Korea—discern notable security challenges from a stronger PLA as well as unique options for mitigating these challenges through bilateral cooperation with the United States and multilateral

cooperation with other states. Australia's remote location vis-à-vis its security partners, combined with its vast maritime space, make it highly dependent on trade and the sustenance of a rules-based international and Indo-Pacific order. The challenge posed by China today is multidimensional, spanning the domains of lawfare, security, and intellectual property. PLA modernization in particular has direct consequences for routine practices like shipping transit and gateway controls, as well as for Australia's broader capacity to support its partners, maintain a technological edge, and defend against would-be aggressors. A growing proportion of Chinese missiles are now able to strike northern Australia, and some of China's far seas operations are occurring in Australia's near seas. Australia has responded through internal balancing, greater rotations in its defense operations, and stronger strategic relationships with Japan, India, Singapore, and Indonesia. While some prominent Australian strategists believe that China's rise will force Canberra to eventually abandon the United States, others argue that the government still has a range of options for improving its strategic position, alliances, and partnerships.

In Japan's case, following the National Defense Program Guidelines of 2010 and 2013, there has been an active domestic discussion concerning the power shift stemming from relative U.S. decline. Japan knows it cannot compete with China's increasing military budget. It also faces challenges in gray-zone operations, where Chinese capacities are developing apace. Were China to mount an amphibious invasion of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan would almost certainly be unable to defend them. Tokyo has thus adopted a three-fold approach of deterrence, diplomacy, and integration.

It is working diligently to strengthen its alliance with the United States, which alone provides credible deterrence. Consecutive U.S. administrations have affirmed that if attacked, the Senkaku Islands would fall under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. But Japan is also hedging diplomatically by cultivating a network of security partners—for example, in the nascent Japan-Australia-India partnership and in more comprehensive engagement with ASEAN. Finally, Japan is searching for ways to continue integrating China into regional rules and global institutions. Since 2015, the two countries have resumed discussions on coordinated responses to counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance, among other issues.

Less powerful than Japan, South Korea faces a particularly acute form of uncertainty given Beijing's ambivalent stance on North Korea, China's sole semblance of an ally. Would the PLA come to the North's aid in the event of a preemptive military strike by the United States or a full-blown, even nuclear, war? Does China seek to unify the peninsula under the North and drive U.S. forces from the region? Could it achieve the latter without the former? PLA modernization, in the eyes of South Korea, has the potential to make a range of undesirable scenarios much more plausible. China's growing military power could even lead the PLA to become overconfident in its own capabilities and underestimate the United States—increasing the chances of a disastrous miscalculation that could pull South Korea into a regional war. The South Korean public is divided on what to do. Many citizens feel their national capacity for self-defense is diminished by the presence of and South Korean dependence on U.S. forces. And indeed, senior

military officials, for their part, do sometimes rely too heavily on the United States—thus discounting the importance of conducting dangerous training and exercises.

From the perspectives of these U.S. allies, it may be the case that the region's hub-and-spoke security system has grown outdated and that the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners need to evolve beyond this post-World War II framework. If so, allies would need to play a greater role in their own security, even if this raises the suspicion and ire of China and the PLA. A strategy of minilateralism, with stronger security ties among smaller states even as they continue their alliances with the United States, could eventually prove the preferred approach to Indo-Pacific regional security.

Conclusion

The PLA is playing an integral role in the CCP's pursuit of national rejuvenation. As the PLA attempts to advance and defend China's security interests, both at home and on a vast and expanding Chinese periphery, the United States and its allies and partners are tasked with responding strategically and proactively to secure their interests and preserve peace in the region. Effective interstate cooperation and partnerships, informed judgment of CCP goals and PLA modernization, and clear and professional engagement with China, especially when Chinese and U.S. interests are irreconcilable, will be central to managing a stronger and more capable China and PLA in the years to come. ♦

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