

2017 PLA Conference Volume

SECURING THE CHINA DREAM

The PLA's Role in a Time of Reform and Change

EDITED BY ROY KAMPHAUSEN, DAVID LAI, AND TIFFANY MA



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With contributions from

Andrew S. Erickson, Benjamin Frohman, Kristen Gunness, Tiffany Ma,
Nadège Rolland, Phillip C. Saunders, Daniel Taylor, Daniel Tobin, and
Joel Wuthnow

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— FOREWORD —

The chapters in this volume were originally presented as papers at the 2017 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and the Department of the Army. Organized around the theme "Securing the China Dream: The PLA's Role in a Time of Reform and Change," the conference focused on the impact of China's changing political landscape, military restructuring, and modernization on the PLA's ability to fulfill its strategic objective of fighting and winning informationized local wars. The seven papers collected in this volume examine how an increasingly advanced PLA capable of undertaking complex joint operations approaches both long-standing missions in support of core national objectives, such as reunification with Taiwan, and emerging missions in support of China's increasingly ambitious foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era, such as the security of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Convened annually at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the PLA Conference assembles leading specialists from academia, government, the military, and think tanks to examine key trends in the study of China's military. The 2017 conference coincided with Xi's consolidation of power at the 19th Party Congress in October of that year. The meeting of party leaders cemented Xi's political dominance and entrenched China in its pursuit of his vision of national rejuvenation, the "China dream." Building a "world class" military is a central objective of this vision. Against this backdrop, the conference explored the PLA's ongoing evolution into a more effective instrument for furthering the core policy objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): sustaining a favorable environment for political security and economic development, gaining control of Taiwan, asserting China's sovereignty in its near abroad, and becoming a recognized leader on the world stage.

This volume analyzes the PLA's role in securing the China dream by focusing on three sets of research questions: how the PLA supports China's strategic goals and how ongoing reforms affect its operational capabilities; how the PLA is preparing to fight and win local informationized wars; and what the security implications of PLA modernization are for the United States and its allies. Taken together, the first two focus areas

survey key missions and examine how the PLA is reforming itself to better achieve them. The third focus area offers new perspectives on U.S. options for responding to China's military rise—not only at the broad strategic level but also in devising and implementing specific policy frameworks in domains such as U.S.-China military-to-military engagement.

While understanding the broad implications of China's growing military power is important, it is also critical to place these developments within the particular contexts of both the PLA and the Chinese political system. This volume builds on the vital work undertaken through the PLA Conference and lays the groundwork for future research by contributing to a growing body of scholarship derived largely from Chinese-language research. *Securing the China Dream: The PLA's Role in a Time of Reform and Change* is an important addition to this literature that will enhance our knowledge of China's military. This is particularly germane as the People's Republic of China approaches the first of its twin centenary milestones in 2021, the hundredth anniversary of the CCP's founding. In the years ahead, the PLA can be expected to assume even greater prominence in China's course as a nation.

The 2017 conference and volume were both collective efforts. NBR is grateful for its longtime sponsors and partners the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College; the China Strategic Focus Group, Headquarters, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; and Headquarters, Department of the Army. Without their support, the research published in this volume would not have been possible. Brian O'Keefe, Jessica Drun, and Alison Szalwinski also deserve special thanks and acknowledgment for their efforts in bringing about the 2017 conference.

Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Tiffany Ma
November 2020

The PLA at an Inflection Point

Tiffany Ma

This introductory chapter assesses the impact of key trends in China's political and security environment under Xi Jinping on the People's Liberation Army (PLA). To answer the question of where prospective inflection points might lie, I focus on distinct developments under Xi that may alter longer-term assumptions and judgments about the PLA's trajectory. Drawing on discussions at previous meetings of the PLA Conference about internal and external drivers of PLA modernization and evolutions in civil-military relations from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, I address Xi's increasing control of the military against the backdrop of China's changing external security environment. Looking ahead, I consider whether U.S. assessments of China's military power could reach a turning point. In considering several possible inflection points, this introduction offers a "big picture" framing for the 2017 conference discussions by examining key trends in China's military power.

Xi's Consolidation of Political and Military Power

Although the PLA is a party army and remains subordinate to the party through political transitions, Xi Jinping is arguably a more consequential political and military leader than his immediate predecessors. Notably, his growing political power has enabled him to reassert the party's control over the military, elevate his own role as a military leader, and push forward an ambitious agenda for the PLA in securing China's interests.

Prior to the 19th Party Congress, Xi was frequently described as the most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping, and he emerged from the

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twice-a-decade event with an even tighter grip on power. Importantly, Xi has amassed political capital and influence to match his ambitious agenda, including major economic and military reforms, and to shore up his own legacy as a “core leader.”

Xi’s personalization of power has been supported by his embrace of traditional ideology and new narratives to enhance both his legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On the one hand, Xi has placed emphasis on traditional Chinese culture as well as on Marxism to reinforce the CCP as the “inheritors of [China’s] imperial past.”¹ This is coupled with a rejection of Western ideas, as articulated in the unofficially released Document No. 9—the contents of which serve to justify and broaden the CCP’s control over society as part of an ideological, and even existential, struggle.

While party control of the gun has remained constant over succeeding generations of leadership—especially as the general secretary typically also is the chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC)—Xi has tightened his personal control and the party’s control of the PLA. In the quest for a strong military capable of fighting to win, he has found that he needs a military that is more disciplined, streamlined, and capable. The widespread anticorruption campaign reached even the highest levels within the PLA, toppling two former CMC vice chairs. As justified by the CMC in 2016, a reformed PLA is necessary for responding to changes in the world, safeguarding national security, and promoting broader national interests.² In step with the reforms, the CMC was downsized at the 19th Party Congress, and the members are closely aligned with Xi, further consolidating his control.³ Xi has positioned himself as a strong military leader, attaining the title of commander-in-chief of the CMC’s Joint Operations Command in 2016. He was also addressed as “chairman” instead of “leader” by PLA troops in Hong Kong in June 2017, and before and after the 19th Party Congress certain high-ranking officials called him *lingxiu* [领袖], a term of reverence that invokes the memories of Mao Zedong.⁴

Moreover, Xi has crafted the narrative of a strong military as integral to securing the “China dream,” which weaves together the pride and

¹ Tony Saich, “What Does General Secretary Xi Jinping Dream About?” Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center Occasional Papers, August 2017, 6.

² “Opinions of the Central Military Commission on Deepening National Defense and Army Reform,” Xinhua, January 1, 2016.

³ Shunsuke Tabeta and Oki Nagai, “Xi Fills Top Military Posts with Loyalists,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, October 26, 2017.

⁴ Nectar Gan, “What Do You Call Xi Jinping?” *South China Morning Post*, October 22, 2017.

aspirations that have long simmered in the consciousness of the Chinese polity and public. The PLA occupies a prominent place in Xi's vision. He has stated that the China dream is the dream of a strong military, and PLA modernization is likely aligned with the dream's two centenary goals.⁵ Xi thus has articulated a clear vision for Chinese power projection and military dominance.

This vision was reinforced by the track record of Xi's first term, which saw the PLA operate further abroad, including the opening of a PLA base in Djibouti, new legislation allowing the PLA to conduct overseas counterterrorism operations, and the use of military coercion to unprecedented levels to secure "core interests."⁶ These trends have persisted in Xi's second term through continued expansion of the PLA's overseas military presence and activities, intensification of military pressure on Taiwan, and stepped up efforts to advance and consolidate territorial claims, particularly in the South China Sea. The emphasis on "preparations for military struggle"—to be capable of fighting and winning, solving major problems, and making practical preparations to enhance deterrence and warfighting capabilities—is in sync with Xi's calls for the PLA to be "action ready" as well as to build capacity for "real combat" and enhance "combat readiness."⁷

Through his increasingly unopposed political power, Xi has both consolidated his own control over the military and reasserted the party's structural dominance of the military. The question thus arises of whether this could represent an inflection point in civil-military relations if Xi's tighter grip on the military allows him to address challenges in China's internal and external environment in ways that his predecessors could not.

Growing Interests and Uncertainties in China's External Environment

Successive Chinese leaders have placed a premium on a "stable" and "favorable" external environment. Linked to a "period of strategic

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C., 2017), https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF; and Edward Wong, "China's Communist Party Chief Acts to Bolster Military," *New York Times*, December 14, 2012.

⁶ Phoenix Kwong, "China Passes Landmark Law to Battle Terrorism at Home and Overseas," *South China Morning Post*, December 27, 2015.

⁷ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Press, 2015).

opportunity,” assessed to be the first two decades of the 21st century, a predictable external environment allows Beijing to devote more attention and resources inward for economic development and other national priorities. Indeed, Xi Jinping has a full domestic agenda. He must address pressing socio-economic issues ranging from a slowing economy to ethnic instability to political unrest in Hong Kong, and a stable external environment is conducive to focusing on these domestic issues.

The PLA plays a central role in securing the external environment, and China’s military thinking and strategy have evolved with its interests. Given that “the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span than at any time in the country’s history,”⁸ the 2015 defense white paper promulgated updated strategic guidelines that prioritized “winning informationized local wars”—referring to potential conflicts along the country’s periphery, likely in support of core interests.⁹ Another important component of China’s military strategy is the prominence of nonmilitary means, as exemplified by the “three warfares,” to achieve strategic objectives, as is evident in the South China Sea disputes.

However, the question remains whether China still perceives its external environment to be as stable and favorable. Compared to the first decade of the 21st century, there is currently greater volatility in China’s relations with major powers. Japan’s political and military resurgence, coupled with a reinvigorated U.S.-Japan alliance, is seen as unfavorable and disruptive to China’s period of strategic opportunity.¹⁰ China’s relationship with India remains tense, even strained at times. Deepening cooperation with Russia serves Chinese economic and security interests, but it remains to be seen whether this is a relationship of convenience or a sustainable partnership.

The most important dyad in China’s major-power relations is of course its relationship with the United States. Xi has advocated “a new type of major-power relations,” a clear departure from Beijing’s rejection of the similar G-2 concept only years earlier.¹¹ According to one prominent Chinese commentator, a “harmonious, prosperous, powerful, yet responsible” United States is part of a favorable external environment

⁸ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Xu Jian, “Rethinking China’s Period of Strategic Opportunity,” China Institute of International Studies, May 28, 2014.

¹¹ Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, “China’s ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’: A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 773–94.

to China.¹² While China benefits from the U.S.-led order, it has chipped away at U.S. hegemony in the region, seeing Washington as an obstacle to, or at least a spoiler of, its core and other strategic interests. Notably, China has accelerated efforts that “effectively displace, block, and deny U.S. power.”¹³ Similarly, it has sought to undermine the U.S. alliance network—seen as a Cold War relic and a means of containment—and U.S. credibility in the region more generally. China’s long-standing preoccupation with U.S. power is reflected in PLA investments to hold at risk U.S. military and strategic assets in the western Pacific. Real or perceived U.S. retrenchment from the region—especially following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—could invite China to fill the vacuum and embolden it to further check U.S. influence, opening room for potentially dangerous miscalculations.¹⁴

Beyond major-power dynamics, China has exhibited dissatisfaction with other aspects of its external environment. It does not act like a status quo power; rather, it has rejected the status quo through the use of military power, including militarizing the South China Sea, retaining recourse to force as an option in its quest for unification with Taiwan, and challenging the regional security architecture. While it vehemently eschews “hegemony,” China has sought to dominate its external environment through both carrots (investment and infrastructure) and sticks (military and economic coercion as well as psychological and legal warfare) to promote its national interests.

China’s changing view of its place in the world is instructive for understanding the type of external environment that the PLA might be directed to secure. Harking back to its historically central role, Beijing is seeking to reassert its primacy in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁵ Toward this goal, it has promoted regionalism through the concepts of a “community of common destiny” and “Asia for Asians” to sideline the West. It has built up and reinforced its leadership roles in regional architecture, such as through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, to expand its sphere of influence. Former defense secretary James Mattis commented that China was, in effect, trying to “dictate” connectivity through the Belt

¹² Zha Daojiang et al., “U.S.-China Flashpoints in the Age of Trump,” ChinaFile, January 18, 2017.

¹³ Patrick Cronin, “Chinese Regional Hegemony in Slow Motion,” War on the Rocks, May 18, 2015.

¹⁴ U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: The Paradox of Progress* (Washington, D.C., January 2017), <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁶ As it sees the world becoming more multipolar, Beijing is launching a global campaign to reassert its “rightful place” in the world. Xi’s desire for China to assume global leadership—as evidenced by promotion of free trade at Davos, as well as championing the Paris accords on climate change and development issues at the G-20—have effectively, if not officially, eclipsed Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of “hiding one’s capabilities and biding one’s time.” This remains true even if China’s growing role has come about partly by default, because “the original front-runners suddenly fell back and pushed China to the front,” according to a Chinese official.¹⁷

As major-power dynamics in the region trend toward greater competition, and as China intensifies its efforts to change the regional and, to some extent, global order, the question arises whether the period of strategic opportunity is drawing to a close as China increasingly utilizes, or relies on, military strength and nonmilitary means to achieve political ends. Regional instability and unfavorable global trends would distract, and at worst derail, China from realizing its internal and external goals. If Beijing no longer views the external environment as stable and favorable, this raises the question of how such an inflection point would shape future PLA thinking and strategy.

An Inflection Point in the U.S.-China Balance of Power?

Xi Jinping’s prioritization of a strong military and a central role for the PLA in securing China’s external environment suggests that the U.S.-China security relationship will continue to become more complex and possibly more volatile. In the context of China’s growing power, is the balance of power between the United States and China facing an inflection point?

As the PLA has evolved, so have assessments of its capabilities and China’s strategic intentions. Notably, the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis served as key turning points. In the aftermath of the former, the PLA lost credibility as a prospective partner for the United States. Bilateral relations cooled, and military-to-military contacts and arms sales were suspended. The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis was the closest that the United States and China have come to a military confrontation and

¹⁶ James Mattis and General Joseph A. Dunford Jr., “Political and Security Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., October 3, 2017.

¹⁷ Josh Chin, “China Says Prepared to Lead Global Economy If Necessary,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2017.

demonstrated the PLA's capability and intent to challenge U.S. interests in the region.

In recent years, China has gone from a “strategic competitor” to a “near-peer competitor.”¹⁸ As a near peer, China already poses a significant challenge to U.S. interests in the region. For example, its military installations in the South China Sea and PLA coercion against Taiwan are more or less intractable. China's military modernization, possibly with the goal of achieving peer capability with the U.S. military,¹⁹ raises the questions of whether the external, internal, and civil-military trends under Xi point toward an inflection point, and if they do, what the timeline might be. The International Institute for Strategic Studies has assessed that the PLA is already at “near parity” with the United States and Western countries by some measures such as airpower, and General Joseph Dunford, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked that China “probably poses the greatest threat to our nation by about 2025.”²⁰

Looking ahead, judgments concerning parity and a possible inflection point require significant nuance. Ample arguments still exist for why the United States retains a strategic advantage over China and why China is still far from displacing the United States as the regional hegemon.²¹ Yet, if we consider a future in which China does attain parity or peer-competitor status, however those terms are defined, how might the United States best position its strategy and planning given the increased urgency and costs of dealing with the PLA's regional and global ambitions?

¹⁸ Gabriel Dominguez, “DIA Chief Refers to China as ‘Near-Peer U.S. Competitor,’” *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 24, 2017.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*.

²⁰ “Chinese Weapons, Warplanes Reaching ‘Near-Parity’ with West, Study Says,” *Japan Times*, February 15, 2017; and Ryan Browne, “Top U.S. General: China Will Be ‘Greatest Threat’ to U.S. by 2025,” CNN, September 27, 2017.

²¹ Michael S. Chase et al., *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015).

World Class: The Logic of China's Strategy and Global Military Ambitions

Daniel Tobin

Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) proclaimed a "new era for socialism with Chinese characteristics."¹ He framed the new era, however, not only as defined by new conditions but also as the period in which the party's consistent aim of restoring China's place in the world will finally be fulfilled. Furthermore, Xi made clear that these ambitions are global, not only regional. The party now promised that China would become "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence" (综合国力和国际影响力领先的国家) by midcentury.² Such aspirations also extended to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which Xi charged to be "fully transformed into world-class forces" (全面建成世界一流军队).³

This chapter argues that to understand what the party's newly publicized—yet, to date, vaguely specified—long-term goals for its military mean for Washington, it is crucial to understand how the objective of a "world class" military flows from the enduring logic driving the party's strategy for China throughout its rule. This consistent logic—gleaned from

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The views expressed in this essay are the author's alone and do not represent those of National Intelligence University, the United States Indo-Pacific Command, the Department of Defense, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

¹ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," October 18, 2017, i, available from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

the party's authoritative, public documents—can be expressed in three points.⁴ Each one counters a prevalent cliché about the party's motivation among Western observers. For each, the 19th Party Congress also heralds a new phase of intensifying rivalry between China and the United States.

First, the widespread characterization of the party's leaders after Mao Zedong as primarily reactive and focused above all on retaining power underplays Beijing's ambition and continuity of purpose. On the contrary, the party's highest aim throughout its rule has been to make China a leading, modern country via long-term planning and target-setting. For the PLA in turn, status—not security alone—drives its modernization goals.

Second, the common narrative that Beijing traded socialist ideals for economic growth and nationalism as the basis of its legitimacy in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse misses the party's unswerving portrayal of socialism as the irreplaceable instrument of national salvation. The party's leaders have consistently seen their governing system as domestically and internationally contested. Yet, far from abandoning competition with the West, the enduring aim of the party's reforms has been to ultimately demonstrate socialism's superiority. For the PLA, this means both that the military is part of an integrated, whole-of-nation systems contest and that the risks of failure on the battlefield include delegitimizing socialism in China.

Finally, a third point flows from the first two. Some observers read China's ambitions as limited to regional predominance. Yet to achieve "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," the party must obtain not only security for but also recognition of China as a leading country. For Beijing, this means replacing threatening components of the U.S.-led international order with features that instead embrace both China's socialist system and the country's status as a global leader. For the PLA, this requires backstopping the party's efforts to reshape the international order by seizing the initiative in global military competition and taking on more international responsibilities to showcase China's contributions to humanity.

⁴ This chapter's approach to reading China's strategy via authoritative, public documents draws upon the pioneering work of Timothy R. Heath in "What Does China Want? Discerning the PRC's National Strategy," *Asian Security* 8, no. 1 (2012): 54–72; and Timothy R. Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014).

Making China Great Again (at Last)

A prevalent cliché about Chinese politics among external observers is that the party's highest goal is to retain its power.⁵ This view, prominent since the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, leads to an image of China's leaders as defensive and status quo-oriented, forever reacting to a boiling cauldron of domestic and international problems. Such a portrait, however, obscures both the party's agency and the consistency of its objectives.

Since his first days in office, Xi Jinping has sought to underline the steadiness of the party's aims across the Mao Zedong and post-Mao periods⁶ and to invoke an even longer continuity by talking about "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as "the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times."⁷ At the 19th Party Congress, Xi further called national rejuvenation "the original aspiration and mission" of the party.⁸ Are these assertions of continuity mere invented tradition? This chapter argues they are not.

A reading of the party's own high-level documents and speeches over time reveals that it has expressed a consistent, overarching goal throughout its rule: building "a modern, powerful socialist country." Indeed, while thumbnail accounts of the dawn of the post-Mao reform era at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 maintain that the party shifted the priority of its work from Maoist class struggle to economic growth, the actual language of the plenum's decision identifies the change not as a shift toward economic development but rather as the restoration of socialist modernization as Beijing's overarching end.⁹ That modernization project, moreover, has always been first and foremost an explicitly nationalist one designed to restore China's place in the world lost during the mid-nineteenth century's Opium Wars. Equally crucial, both

⁵ See, for example, Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 3.

⁶ Xi Jinping, "Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," in *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 24–25.

⁷ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 11. See also Xi Jinping, "Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People," in *The Governance of China*, 38.

⁸ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," i.

⁹ "Communique of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," December 29, 1978, available from http://www.bjreview.com/Special_Reports/2018/40th_Anniversary_of_Reform_and_Opening_up/Timeline/201806/t20180626_800133641.

Mao and Deng Xiaoping identified the goal as not merely to catch-up with “the most advanced countries” but to pass them.¹⁰

To go further, far from the image of party leadership as muddling through, Beijing has systematically pursued modernity and power under Mao, Deng, and their successors via five-year plans and longer-term targets refined and elaborated on as they are approached. Xi frequently talks about achieving the objectives associated with two centenary goals pinned to the one-hundredth anniversaries of the party (2021) and the People’s Republic of China (2049). These are not his inventions. The 2049 deadline for fully achieving national rejuvenation is the final step in a three-step strategic plan for modernization that the 13th Party Congress outlined in 1987.¹¹

Without doubt, Beijing’s vision of what a modern, powerful China should look like has changed over time—neither Mao nor Deng, for example, envisioned, as Xi now does, making China into a cyberpower.¹² But the common denominator has been a comprehensive modernity that would make China a leading country. Indeed, even the functional policy areas in which the party seeks to realize this vision exhibit great consistency. Then general-secretary Zhao Ziyang’s 1987 encapsulation of the midcentury end state for China as “a strong, modern, democratic, and culturally advanced socialist country” (富强、民主、文明的社会主义现代化国家) remains the party’s explicit goal as expressed in the preamble of its constitution.¹³ Only three words have been added to the phrase since: the word “harmonious” (和谐, in 2007 to reflect prioritization of social welfare), the word “beautiful” (美丽, in 2017 to reflect prioritization of a clean environment), and an extra “强” (strong or powerful) added in front of 国家 (country) (also in 2017, which the official translation rendered as “great”).¹⁴ Thus, the 19th Party Congress’s affirmation of the party’s interim goals for

¹⁰ See Mao Zedong, “Strengthen Party Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 314–15; and Deng Xiaoping, “Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles,” in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 2, 1975–1982 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 174–76.

¹¹ Xi, “Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People,” 38; and Xi Jinping, “Study, Disseminate, and Implement the Guiding Principles of the 18th CPC National Congress,” in *The Governance of China*, 12, 21–22. For the language in the 13th Party Congress report, see Zhao Ziyang, “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” in *Documents of the Thirteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (1987)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987), 18.

¹² Xi Jinping, “Build China into a Cyberpower,” in *The Governance of China*, 218–20.

¹³ See Zhao on the party’s “basic line” in “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” 16–17.

¹⁴ 中国共产党章程 [Constitution of the Communist Party of China], October 21, 2007, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/106155/106156/6439183.html>; and Constitution of the Communist Party of China, October 24, 2017, available from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Constitution_of_the_Communist_Party_of_China.pdf.

2020, identification of new interim targets for 2035, and elaboration on goals for the midcentury constituted merely the latest iteration of a decades-long effort to restore China's place in the world via long-term planning.¹⁵

In view of all this continuity, what is the significance of the new era proclaimed by Xi at the 19th Party Congress? In broad terms, the new era means China's modernization has reached a stage both where its achievements afford it a leading global role and where China must begin exercising such a role if it is to attain national rejuvenation by midcentury. Indeed, since the 19th Party Congress, Beijing has insisted that the new era has implications "of tremendous importance" for the history of its development, the development of "international socialism," and "the development of human society."¹⁶ Each one of these goals corresponds to one of the three points of logic addressed in this chapter.

With respect to China's development, for decades Beijing had described the major problem the party faces—which it calls "the principal contradiction"—as "between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and the backwardness of social production."¹⁷ In other words, the biggest problem was addressing China's economic backwardness. By contrast, Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress maintained:

What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. China has seen the basic needs of over a billion people met, has basically made it possible for people to live decent lives, and will soon bring the building of a moderately prosperous society to a successful completion. The needs to be met for the people to live better lives are increasingly broad. Not only have their material and cultural needs grown; their demands for democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, security, and a better environment are increasing. *At the same time, China's overall productive forces have significantly improved and in many areas our production capacity leads the world.*¹⁸ [emphasis added]

What this means is that China's development and modernization efforts are no longer centered on catching up but on the more difficult challenge of assuming and keeping the lead in international competition.¹⁹ On the one hand, the party recognizes that, with China now the number two economy

¹⁵ See Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 23–25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *Resolution on CPC History (1949–81)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), 76.

¹⁸ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 9–10.

¹⁹ Xi Jinping, "Build China into a World Leader in Science and Technology," in *Governance of China II* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), 293–94; and "在2018年春节团拜会上的讲话" [Address at the 2018 New Year's Gathering], *People's Daily*, February 15, 2018, 2, available from <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0215/c1001-29824702.html>.

in the world, it must deliver on other aspects of modernity (such as a clean environment and justice) that people begin to desire once their basic material and security needs are met. Yet it also means that the party now judges that in multiple realms of international competition China has progressed to the stage where it must begin to help design and set international standards (not simply accept them) if it is to protect its interests and assume a position of leadership by midcentury. Xi underscored this point in a 2016 speech to a Politburo collective study session on “global governance” (全球治理).²⁰ Both of these imperatives for China’s development (delivering on the full meaning of “a better life” and seizing the lead in international competition) will place its socialist system into greater competition with other systems than when Beijing’s sole aim was to catch up. It is clear from the 19th Party Congress that one of these key competitive areas is the military. Indeed, Xi’s report in one place appears to define the new era as the one in which military power will provide the final stepping-stone to great power status:

This is what socialism with Chinese characteristics entering a new era means: The Chinese nation, which since modern times began had endured so much for so long, has achieved a tremendous transformation: *it has stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong*; it has come to embrace the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation.²¹ [emphasis added]

The report goes on to identify the goal of building “world class” military forces as one of eight things that Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era makes clear.²² How should this inform views of the PLA?

The Dream of a Strong Military

China has released two defense white papers during Xi Jinping’s tenure: *China’s Military Strategy* (中国的军事战略) in 2015 and *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (新时代的中国国防) in 2019. In talking about the PLA’s missions (使命) and strategic tasks (战略任务), the 2015 white paper describes national rejuvenation as China’s national strategic goal (国家战略目标) and employs Xi’s often recited language that “the Chinese Dream is to make the country strong. China’s armed forces take their dream of making

²⁰ Xi Jinping, “Improve Our Ability to Participate in Global Governance,” in *The Governance of China II*, 487–90.

²¹ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

the military strong as part of the Chinese Dream. Without a strong military, a country can be neither safe nor strong.”²³ The 2019 white paper, which is focused more explicitly on placing China’s defense policies in the context of its overall national strategy, affirms that “building a fortified national defense and a strong military *commensurate with the country’s international standing* and its security and development interests is a strategic task for China’s socialist modernization” (emphasis added).²⁴ What such passages underscore is that the party’s goal of a strong military is not simply the instrumental one of providing safety or security (the same word, 安全, in Chinese), but strength as an end in itself—i.e., a component of what national rejuvenation looks like.²⁵

This perspective contrasts with what have been, for decades, two of the dominant research agendas in Western PLA studies, which have examined how China’s military is seeking to compete with the United States from a position of relative weakness in contingencies on China’s periphery (most notably over Taiwan) and how China’s expanding international interests are pulling the PLA into a greater external role.²⁶ Both narratives are accurate but incomplete. In addition to the pull of providing security, the push of great-power status in explaining the PLA’s modernization goals must also be considered.

In one sense, the dream of military power—via Beijing’s consistent use of the adjective “powerful” or “strong”—has always been at the heart of the modern socialist country the party seeks to build. Indeed, the PLA’s status as a lagging component of China’s composite national power has not reflected a lack of purpose or commitment but rather the legacy of the party’s strategic assessment in the mid-1980s under Deng Xiaoping that major war was unlikely in the near term. China could afford to concentrate on economic development with the express calculation that this would facilitate future

²³ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), available from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm.

²⁴ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-07/24/content_4846443.htm.

²⁵ See, for example, the unsigned article “跨越，想着世界一流军队—怎么看全面推进国防和军队现代化的战略安排” [Leaping Toward World-Class Military Forces: How to Understand the Strategic Arrangements for Comprehensively Modernizing the Military and National Defense], *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, November 14, 2018, available from http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-11/14/content_220624.htm.

²⁶ See two earlier conference volumes in this series: Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2007); and Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2010).

military modernization on a much higher plane.²⁷ The Chinese military, like the party and government, has long possessed a three-step modernization plan ending in full modernization by midcentury. As outlined by Jiang Zemin in a speech to the Central Military Commission (CMC) in the wake of the 15th Party Congress in 1997, the plan originally contained targets for 2010, 2020, and midcentury.²⁸

What is more recent is an explicit, public connection between the party's midcentury end state for its military and China's relative status in a global perspective. The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–20) talked about the midcentury goal in such terms when it framed the 2020 targets as “laying a more solid foundation for progress toward realizing the goal of a strong military and building a world-class military.”²⁹ Further, in adopting world-class as the second of two long-term targets in place of the prior goal of attaining full modernization by midcentury, the 19th Party Congress explicitly accelerated the PLA's long-term modernization targets by fifteen years.³⁰ The 1997 three-part plan had called for military modernization to be complete in 2049, but the 19th Party Congress now urged that “the modernization of our national defense and our forces” should be “basically completed” by 2035.³¹ Indeed, at an August 2017 rally commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA, Xi stated: “We feel more strongly than ever that in order to achieve national rejuvenation and better lives for the people, we must speed up the building of the people's military into a world-class force.”³²

Beijing recognizes that the very decision to contend for global leadership is liable to provoke resistance. Xi frequently intones that today the party is “closer, more confident, and more capable than ever before of making the goal of national rejuvenation a reality.”³³ Yet China's military also commonly references language in a March 2013 speech to PLA delegates at the National People's Congress (NPC), in which Xi declared: “The more our

²⁷ Deng Xiaoping, “Speech at an Enlarged Meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China,” in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, 1982–1992 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 133.

²⁸ Jiang Zemin, “Review and Summary of the Central Military Commission's Work over the Last Ten Years,” in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2012), 462–63.

²⁹ “中央军委颁发《军队建设发展十三五规划纲要》 [The Central Military Commission Has Issued the “Outline for the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Military Building and Development”], Xinhua, May 12, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-05/12/c_1118855988.htm.

³⁰ Central Propaganda Department, 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想三十讲 [Thirty Lectures on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era] (Beijing: Study Publishing House, 2018), 272.

³¹ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 48.

³² Xi Jinping, “Continue to Strengthen Our Military,” in *The Governance of China II*, 452.

³³ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 13.

strength develops, the greater the resistance pressure and the more external risks we will face. This is an unavoidable challenge on our country's path from big to strong. It is an unavoidable threshold we must cross to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”³⁴

What is the source of this resistance Xi is concerned about? Does the party's idea about becoming strong mean building a global military that is the peer of—or even surpasses—the United States? A statement Xi made in the same March 2013 speech to the NPC quoted above is suggestive. He quoted the traditional proverb that “there is no first place in literature, and no second place in military affairs.”³⁵ Beijing almost certainly does aspire to place first, but it remains too coy to say so outright. To make further progress on these questions, however, we need to consider the next two points of enduring logic driving China's strategy.

The Belief That Only Socialism Can Save China

In his first speech to the Politburo as general secretary in November 2012, Xi Jinping echoed each of his post-Mao predecessors in insisting: “[O]nly socialism can save China, and only Chinese socialism can lead our country to development” (只有社会主义才能救中国，只有中国特色社会主义才能发展中国).³⁶ This frequently repeated language contrasts with a second persistent cliché among Western observers, which alleges that in the wake of the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, China's leaders tacitly traded Communism, Marxist-Leninism, or even “socialism with Chinese characteristics” for nationalism and economic growth as their new bases for legitimacy. Such a view neglects how Beijing has, from the beginning, linked its commitment to socialism to the nationalist project of restoring China's place in the world. The incumbent view also leads to a misreading of what the party means by “reform” and to a colossal underestimation of China's dedication to systems competition and ideological rivalry with the West.

³⁴ “强军第一集逐梦” [*Strong Military*, Episode 1: “The Dream”], China Central Television, September 30, 2017, available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUYpfNSpELk>.

³⁵ Xi Jinping, “牢牢把我党在新形势下的强军目标努力建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队” [Firmly Grasp Our Party's Goal of a Strong Military in the New Situation and Work Hard to Construct a People's Liberation Army that Obeys the Party's Commands, Can Fight and Win, and Has a Good Work Style], in 习近平国防和军队建设重要论述选编 [A Selection of Xi Jinping's Important Expositions on National Defense and Military Building] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2014), 91.

³⁶ Xi, “Study, Disseminate, and Implement the Guiding Principles of the 18th CPC National Congress,” 7.

Western observers often think about socialism in terms of specific ideological commitments or ideas about how the economy and society should be organized and governed. Among the images the word conjures are a planned economy, state ownership of the economy, and a European-style social welfare state. By contrast—and this is the second enduring point of logic driving the party's strategy—Beijing has consistently seen socialism as a holistic instrument to realize the nationalist aims of development, modernity, and power.³⁷ The party today defines socialism with Chinese characteristics as comprising the following elements:

- a “path” (道路) that will deliver modernization
- a “theory” (理论体系; literally “theory system”) that allows the party to identify the correct policies to achieve national rejuvenation
- a “system” (制度) of institutions that ensures progress and development (incorporating both China's political and economic systems)³⁸
- a “culture” (文化) as a source of strength and motivation³⁹

While the party has tinkered with its definition of socialism with Chinese characteristics since Deng Xiaoping coined the phrase in 1982, all four of the above current themes are consistent both with how it understands socialism under Mao and with the story the party has repeatedly told itself and the Chinese people about its right to rule.⁴⁰

From Mao to Xi, party leaders have argued that other Chinese patriots tried to revive China in the twentieth century but failed.⁴¹ Capitalist democracy proved too weak in 1919 when Germany's colonial privileges in China were given to imperial Japan at the Paris Peace Conference. By contrast, the party maintains that only the path of socialist dictatorship⁴² could restore China's sovereignty by expelling the imperial powers after

³⁷ Since 1992, the “general program” of the party's constitution has explicitly identified the criteria for judging the party's work not only in terms of development and of the people's welfare but also in terms of whether it increases the composite strength of the socialist state (社会主义国家的综合国力).

³⁸ See Xi, “Study, Disseminate, and Implement the Guiding Principles of the 18th CPC National Congress,” 10, 20–21.

³⁹ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 14.

⁴⁰ See Deng Xiaoping, “Opening Speech at the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, 13–16. From 1987, every report presented by a general secretary to a Party Congress has included “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in its title. For the texts of Party Congress reports, see <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/index.html>.

⁴¹ See Mao Zedong, “On the People's Democratic Dictatorship,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 411–24.

⁴² Mao Zedong, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up!” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 5, 15–18; and *Resolution on CPC History (1949–81)*, 3–13.

1949, protecting China's security in the decades since,⁴³ and marshaling the collective effort for development.⁴⁴ The consistent case the party makes for its system includes the assertion that a dominant role for public ownership of the economy is necessary because China's pre-1949 society suffered from a form of capitalism that was mixed with exploitation by the imperial powers and retarded China's modernization and development, a condition that could return if China fully privatized its economy.⁴⁵ The party's case for its theory as an instrument of national salvation is Marxism's historical materialist claim to be able to make scientific judgments about the world.⁴⁶ Finally, socialism's promise to deliver what Mao called an "advanced culture" by which China could become modern and internationally respected—over and against what many Chinese intellectuals then regarded as the superstition and corruption of traditional Chinese culture—remains a core component of the party's militantly secular, modernist faith. This can be seen in high-level party discussions of culture down to this day, even as Beijing now also seeks both to appropriate the prestige of those parts of China's traditional culture it does not find threatening and to ward off the influence of Western political values that could challenge its governance system.⁴⁷

The party's commitment to socialism as the only instrument of national salvation, however, also places its rule under constant threat. Beijing realizes that its socialist path is not universally acknowledged as correct and legitimate. Instead, the party has always seen its system as both domestically and internationally contested. Indeed, China's leaders from Mao to Xi have viewed the West as seeking to overturn its socialist system via both "peaceful evolution" and "hostile Western forces" combining with forces within China

⁴³ On the possibility of falling back into colonial exploitation if China abandoned its political system, see Deng, "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," 174; and Xi Jinping, "Uphold and Consolidate the Party's Ideological Leadership," in *The Governance of China II*, 356.

⁴⁴ Even before China's breathtaking economic growth of the past decades, Chinese leaders maintained that socialism's capacity to marshal collective effort was the only means to address China's backwardness. Deng Xiaoping, "In the First Decade, Prepare of the Second," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, 26; and Deng, "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," 174–76.

⁴⁵ See Mao Zedong, "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 305–34; and Deng Xiaoping, "We Shall Draw on Historical Experience and Guard Against Wrong Tendencies," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, 224–27.

⁴⁶ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 15–16.

⁴⁷ See Mao, "The Chinese People Have Stood Up!" 18; Mao Zedong, "On Coalition Government," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 254–55; Jiang Zemin, "Speech at a Meeting Celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 3 (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2013), 270–73; and Xi Jinping, "Enhance China's Cultural Soft Power," in *The Governance of China*, 178–80.

to split the country and change its political system. Further, China has long believed that its growing integration with the world—necessary to sustain its rise—increases pressure on its domestic governance system. This challenge is at the heart of the “holistic approach to national security” (总体国家安全观) the party has promoted during Xi’s tenure. The holistic approach to national security (part of the basic policy of the new era) and the formal National Security Commission Xi inaugurated and charged with building a national security system to implement this approach have a much wider scope than implied by the terms in English. They encompass both internal and external security across a breadth of issues.⁴⁸

The party’s post-Mao response to its internal and external challenges, however, has not been to simply muddle through as best it can. Rather, Beijing has engaged in a process of continuous retooling of its governance system designed to improve its effectiveness and ultimately, in Deng Xiaoping’s phrase, prove “the superiority of China’s socialist system.”⁴⁹ This, and not the piecemeal convergence with Western capitalist democracy that many external observers hoped for, is what the party has consistently meant by “reform.” Xi’s three-volume collection of speeches, *The Governance of China*, is designed to promote what the party regards as its success in this effort and to outline for domestic and internal audiences Beijing’s next steps.⁵⁰

In this area of holistic-systems competition with the West, the 19th Party Congress also constituted a watershed moment. For some time after the Soviet Union’s collapse, a joke in wide circulation among the Chinese public turned the “only socialism can save China” axiom on its head to observe that “only China can save socialism.”⁵¹ Xi’s speech to the 19th Party Congress, however, transforms this distinction into proof of China’s greatness in describing the meaning of the new era:

It means that scientific socialism is full of vitality in 21st century China, and that the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics is now flying high and proud for all to see. It means that the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while

⁴⁸ Xi Jinping, “A Holistic View of National Security,” in *The Governance of China*, 222.

⁴⁹ The 8th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 16th, 18th, and 19th Party Congress reports all contain versions of this phrase about the “superiority” (优越性) of socialism or the socialist system, available from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/index.html>.

⁵⁰ See the “Publisher’s Note” at the beginning of *The Governance of China*.

⁵¹ Ch’i Shi-sheng, *The Politics of Disillusionment: The Chinese Communist Party Under Deng Xiaoping, 1978–1989* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 275.

preserving their independence; and *it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind*.⁵² [emphasis added]

This passage represents a huge change from the party's leaders' modesty in recent decades about China's system as a model for others. In the new era, the success of China's rise in the last few decades—the party now believes—ought not only to restore the prestige of international socialism but also to credit China with discovery of a new road to modernity.⁵³ In the wake of international media attention to this passage, the party has sought to dampen international concern by publicly denying that Beijing seeks to export its model. Yet Xi made this vow in a venue whose very purpose was to promote China's vision of the international order and its domestic governance as an exemplar.⁵⁴

Indeed, the party's pride in the achievements of its system, promotion of its "wisdom" (智慧) as "a new option" (全新选择) for other countries, and domestic exhortation to "have confidence" in the four-part definition of socialism with Chinese characteristics noted above are intertwined. Perfecting the socialist system so that it can generate achievements at home will inspire prestige abroad. Recognition abroad will help shore up legitimacy at home. At least, that is what Beijing hopes. How does this systems competition relate to the PLA's goal of a world-class military?

The PLA's "Three Able or Nots"

The PLA's status as a party (rather than a national) army places it at the heart of Beijing's systems competition with the West in several ways.

The first of these is a bedrock responsibility to defend the party's socialist system from internal as well as external challenges. Just as the party regards its socialist system as the "fundamental institutional guarantee for progress and development," it calls the PLA the "strong guarantee" for achieving

⁵² Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 9.

⁵³ See, for example, the widely noted frontpage editorial under the pen name Manifesto (宣言), "紧紧抓住大有可为的历史机遇期" [Firmly Grasp the Promising Period of Historic Opportunity], *People's Daily*, January 14, 2018, available from <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0114/c1003-29763751.html>.

⁵⁴ See "China Will Not 'Export' Chinese Model: Xi," Xinhua, December 1, 2017, http://xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/01/c_136793833.htm; and "Xi Calls on World Political Parties to Build Community with Shared Future," Xinhua, December 2, 2017, http://xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/02/c_136794028.htm.

national rejuvenation.⁵⁵ Beijing's 2015 and 2019 defense white papers both affirm language associated with the "missions in the new historical period" as outlined by Hu Jintao in 2004 and their subordination to national rejuvenation.⁵⁶ These missions, however, begin with a pledge to "resolutely uphold the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics." Both white papers also emphasize the subordination of the PLA's military strategy to the "holistic approach to national security" noted above. Indeed, Xi Jinping's overarching guidance for the PLA is to be "a people's armed forces that faithfully follow the party's commands, are able to win and exemplary in conduct" (听党指挥, 能打胜仗, 作风优良).⁵⁷ Notably, only one of the three parts of Xi's formula ("able to win") refers to the PLA's operational capabilities. The other two speak to the same fears of ideological subversion and corruption the civilian party faces.

Second, if the PLA must spend two-thirds of its effort ensuring its reliability as an instrument to defend the party's rule, the risks it bears for the party in the category of "able to win" are also prodigious. As discussed, Beijing has both consistently rested its legitimacy on "saving" China via socialism and seen the claim that socialism represents the best instrument as contested. At the first meeting of a CMC leading small group that would direct the major military reforms initiated to coincide with the 13th Five-Year Plan, Xi framed them as aimed at "giving better play to the advantages of the socialist military system with Chinese characteristics."⁵⁸ What if, instead, the reforms do not produce a PLA capable of winning a modern war? If a democracy loses a war, its ruling party might suffer at the polls in the next election, but its constitution and the legitimacy of its fundamental political system is unlikely to be at stake. For the CCP, by contrast, which as recently as the 19th Party Congress framed "achieving China's full reunification" (i.e., with Taiwan) as "essential to realizing national rejuvenation," a military bid that fails could implicate not just the

⁵⁵ See, for example, Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 14; and State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*.

⁵⁶ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*; and Hu Jintao, "我军在新世纪新阶段的历史使命" [Our Military's Historic Missions in the New Century and the New Stage], in *Selected Works of Hu Jintao*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016), 256–62. The seminal piece of Western scholarship is Daniel M. Hartnett, "The 'New Historic Missions': Reflections on Hu Jintao's Military Legacy," in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2014), 31–80.

⁵⁷ Xi Jinping, "Build People's Armed Forces That Follow the Party's Commands, Are Able to Win and Exemplary in Conduct," in *The Governance of China*, 242.

⁵⁸ "习近平：以强军目标引领国防和军队改革" [Xi Jinping: Use the Strong Military Goal to Guide National Defense and Military Reforms], Xinhua, March 15, 2014, http://xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/15/c_119785243.htm.

PLA but undermine the legitimacy of the socialist path.⁵⁹ A China Central Television documentary about Xi's military reforms broadcast in 2017 conveys the reforms' urgency in terms of the party's doubts about both the PLA's political and military reliability. It quotes Xi, not long after becoming CMC chairman, as having declared:

What I think about most is whether, when our Party and the people need it, our military forces will be able to hold onto the party's absolute leadership from first to last, will be able to pull together to win, and whether commanders at all levels will be able to lead troops to victory.⁶⁰

These "three able or nots" (三个能不能) echo similar encapsulations of doubt leveled at the PLA by his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.⁶¹

There is, however, a third way in which the PLA is indelibly linked to the party's systems competition with the West. The PLA's role as an integral element of the overall competition is not limited to providing security for the party's rule and the country. It extends to helping meet China's broader development and modernization challenges via military-civilian integrated development.⁶²

In the Mao era, the party encouraged the PLA to assist in economic production, but in recent decades Beijing has increasingly pushed the PLA to both contribute to and benefit from China's overall economic, scientific, and technological competition.⁶³ Hu Jintao had sounded the theme of military-civilian integrated development (军民融合发展), but Xi has elevated it to a national strategy and built a new high-level institution, the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development, to

⁵⁹ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 21.

⁶⁰ China Central Television, 第三集 制胜 [*Strong Military*, Episode 3: "Winning"], available from <http://tv.cctv.com/2017/09/30/VIDEBThJh0ryfDdKRwTf5ZYs170930.shtml>.

⁶¹ See Hu Jintao, "转变战斗力生模式" [Change the Method of Generating Combat Power], in *Selected Works of Hu Jintao*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016), 459, note 2; and Jiang Zemin, "Review and Summary of The Central Military Commission's Work Over the Last Ten Years," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 2, 442. Earlier, Jiang cited Deng Xiaoping's similar doubts in "Respond to the Challenges of World Military Development in a Spirit of Reform and Innovation," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2011), 593.

⁶² Xi Jinping, "Deeper Civil-Military Integration," in *Governance of China II*, 449.

⁶³ On the Mao era, see James Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978–1998* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 36–49.

oversee it.⁶⁴ He describes it as “a key measure to deal with complex security threats and gain national strategic advantage.”⁶⁵

In calling attention to the current “new world revolution in military affairs” (sometimes translated as the “global RMA”), the 2015 white paper maintains that China must “seize the strategic initiative in military competition” (掌握军事竞争战略主动权). The party’s leaders from Jiang to Xi have seen this competition as mutually dependent on competition in the areas of economic modernization and high technology.⁶⁶ On military-civil integrated development, Xi further argues—as Beijing has consistently insisted in other areas—that it “should bring into full play one of the key strengths of our socialist system—its efficiency in pooling resources to solve major problems.”⁶⁷ Again, the PLA’s success or failure will bear on the validity of socialism itself as an instrument of national rejuvenation. The implications of what the party regards as the global revolution in military technology, however, extend beyond the immediate imperative of being able to prevail in a Taiwan conflict. This whole-of-nation technological competition, in conjunction with governance-systems competition and the ideological rivalry the latter engenders, will mean a military competition between China and the United States that is not regional but global. To understand why, we must examine the final piece of enduring logic in the party’s strategy.

China’s Leadership in Global Governance⁶⁸

A third cliché among Western observers of China identifies Beijing’s international ambitions as troubling, but primarily a threat to the United States’ interests and status in Asia rather than to the current international

⁶⁴ Xi, “Deeper Civil-Military Integration,” 448–51; and Brian Lafferty, “Civil-Military Integration and PLA Reforms,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), 627–60, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/82/Documents/books/Chairman-Xi.pdf?ver=2019-03-14-110008-073>.

⁶⁵ Xi, “Deeper Civil-Military Integration,” 448.

⁶⁶ See Jiang Zemin, “The Distinctively Chinese Revolution in Military Affairs,” in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 3, 563–65; and “习近平:准确把握世界军事发展新趋势与时俱进大力推进军事创新” [Xi Jinping: Accurately Grasp the New Trends in the World’s Military Development Advancing with the Times and Pushing Forward Military Innovations], Xinhua, August 30, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-08/30/c_1112294869.htm; and State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy*.

⁶⁷ Xi, “Deeper Civil-Military Integration,” 449.

⁶⁸ This is the title of a book that appeared on the bookshelf in Xi Jinping’s office in the televised coverage of his 2018 New Year’s address: Jin Nuo et al., eds., 全球治理的中国担当 [China’s Leadership in Global Governance] (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2017).

order on a global scale. In such a view, while regionally the party aims to restore China to its historical place as East Asia's leading power, globally Beijing seeks to acquire more influence and voice within the existing order rather than to replace it.⁶⁹ Its endorsement of several features of the current order (e.g., economic globalization and international cooperation on issues of common concern such as the environment and global health),⁷⁰ however, should not obscure the party's consistent desire for what amounts to a very different order.⁷¹

Admittedly, the evolution of China's leaders' rhetoric may have contributed to confusion. Deng Xiaoping, despite his emphasis on "opening" to the world to develop China's economy, explicitly advocated for a "new international order" based on Chinese principles. Jiang Zemin likewise called for a "new international order."⁷² By contrast, both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have called for "reforming global governance."⁷³ In some contexts, Xi has described "the protracted nature of contest over the international order"⁷⁴ and has urged China to "lead the reform of the global governance system."⁷⁵ Yet he has also sought to publicly portray China as an upholder of the post-World War II international order.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ For the incumbent view of China's ambitions as "regional preeminence" and "global influence," see Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War*, 4th ed. (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016), 33–34. On China's interest in more voice within versus overturning the global order, see the conclusion of Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁷⁰ A common approach among Western scholars is to argue that the international order is composed of multiple orders and to evaluate China's stance toward and participation in each of several suborders. For a representative example, see Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018).

⁷¹ For a lucid articulation of this view from China's perspective (contrasting Beijing's support for the "international order" in terms of the features it endorses over and against a "U.S.-led world order"), see Fu Ying, "名家笔谈: 傅莹: 国际秩序与中国作为" [From the Pen of Famous Person Column: Fu Ying: The International Order and China's Role], available from <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0215/c40531-28123484.html>.

⁷² The foreign affairs sections of the reports delivered to Party Congresses by Jiang Zemin from 1992 to 2002 repeated Deng's call for a new international order.

⁷³ See Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Party Congress, available from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/index.html>; and Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 54.

⁷⁴ Xi Jinping, "China's Diplomacy Must Befit Its Major-Country Status," in *The Governance of China II*, 480.

⁷⁵ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 54. See also Xi Jinping, "Using the Thought on Diplomacy for New-Era Socialism with Chinese Characteristics as a Guide to Create a New Landscape in Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," in *On Building a Human Community with a Shared Future* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2019), 550.

⁷⁶ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 22. See also "王毅在第53届慕尼黑安全会议上的演讲(全文)" [Full Text of Wang Yi's Speech to the 53rd Munich Security Conference], Xinhua, February 19, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-02/19/c_1120489830.htm.

Yet while some Western scholars debate precisely what features constitute the current international order,⁷⁷ China's leaders consistently identify several they wish to remove. Among these are the norm of democratization and the global and regional system of U.S. security alliances and partnerships that endow that norm with coercive potential. Xi's call at the 19th Party Congress for international relations characterized by "partnerships, not alliances" reflects this latter aim.⁷⁸ The party's leaders allege that U.S. security alliances are based on a Cold War mentality, which represents a threat to international security, and that U.S. promotion of democracy abroad has led to chaos and suffering in regions like the Middle East.⁷⁹ By contrast, they maintain that the equality of different political and social systems is embodied in the UN Charter's principle of sovereignty and therefore that China is an upholder of the international order.⁸⁰

Regardless of whether Beijing frames the changes it seeks as transformation (变革), reform (改革), or something else, a crucial question for Washington is whether China would alter the nature of the international order in a way that is unacceptable to the United States and its allies. At times, the U.S. debate has been framed as if the choice were a question of whether the United States can accept the loss of its preponderance of power and a more modest definition of the order for China to enjoy a greater voice.⁸¹ Such characterizations imply that the party's leaders aim simply to prune the order of threatening features rather than reconstruct the whole on an alternative blueprint.

Yet what Beijing seeks is not merely to become one pole in the multipolar world it has long assessed to be emerging with the relative decline of the United States (although it prefers such a world to U.S. preeminence). What both the party leadership's words and the logic of national rejuvenation on the basis of socialism imply is that Beijing's aim is not simply international

⁷⁷ For a primer on this debate, see Michael J. Mazarr, Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016).

⁷⁸ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 53. See also Xi, "China's Diplomacy Must Befit Its Major-Country Status," 482–83.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Jiang Zemin, "Establish a New Security Concept Suited to the Needs of the Times," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 2, 305–10; and Xi Jinping's May 2014 speech to the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, "New Approach for Asian Security Cooperation," in *The Governance of China*, 389–96. On the failure of U.S. democracy promotion, see Fu, "The International Order and China's Role."

⁸⁰ Xi Jinping, "A New Partnership of Mutual Benefit and a Community of Shared Future," in *The Governance of China II*, 571.

⁸¹ For two versions of this argument, see Paul Heer, "Understanding the Challenge from China," *Asian Forum*, April 3, 2018, <http://www.theasianforum.org/understanding-the-challenge-from-china>; and Michael D. Swaine, "The U.S. Can't Afford to Demonize China," *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2018, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/29/the-u-s-cant-afford-to-demonize-china>.

tolerance of or security for the party's dictatorship but rather active, international, moral recognition for its governing achievements and influence on the development of humanity on a global scale. This introduces the third point of enduring logic driving the party's strategy, which is that Beijing aims to slowly transform the international order—not only to eliminate the features that threaten its socialist system but also to replace them with others that buttress China's status as a global leader.

What has changed under Xi is the party's evaluation of China's readiness to begin both claiming this moral recognition and exercising a larger leadership role in the world. In a frequently quoted passage of his 2016 New Year's address that China Central Television used in the opening montage for its documentary *Great Power Diplomacy*, Xi proclaimed: "The world is so big, the problems so many, the international community wants to hear China's voice, China's plan. China cannot afford to be absent."⁸² His report to the 19th Party Congress then intoned of the new era: "It will be an era that sees China moving closer to center stage [我国日益走近世界舞台中央, literally, the center of the world stage] and making greater contributions to mankind."⁸³ The phrase invokes Mao but argues for the first time that China is ready for this leadership role. Xi's predecessors had all framed making such contributions as a long-term aim.⁸⁴ In all this, the Party Congress endorsed Xi's 2014 call at a rare Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference for "a diplomacy befitting China's major-country status," repudiating the modest foreign policy guidelines Deng is said to have introduced and which Jiang and Hu explicitly upheld.⁸⁵

What kind of world, then, does Beijing hope to build? For many decades, China arguably offered a clearer vision of what it opposed than what it supported. This changed at the 19th Party Congress, which ratified the foreign policy concepts outlined by Xi over his first term. Xi's concept of a global "community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体, previously translated as a "community of common destiny for mankind") is a significant evolution from Hu's "harmonious world" (和谐世界) outlined

⁸² "习近平主席2016年新年贺词 (双语全文)" [Chairman Xi's 2016 New Year's Address (Bilingual Full Text)], *China Daily*, March 5, 2018, http://chinadaily.com.cn/interface/yidian/1139302/2016-01-04/cd_22925566.html.

⁸³ Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 9.

⁸⁴ See Mao, "Strengthen Party Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions," 314–15; and Mao Zedong, "In Commemoration of Dr. Sun Yat-sen," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 5, 330–31.

⁸⁵ Xi, "China's Diplomacy Must Befit Its Major-Country Status," 479–83. In contrast, see Jiang Zemin, "The Present International Situation and Our Diplomatic Work," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 2, 191–202; and Hu Jintao, "继续抓住和用好重要战略机会期" [Grasp and Make Use of the Important Period of Strategic Opportunity], in *Selected Works of Hu Jintao*, vol. 3, 436–41.

in a September 2005 speech to the United Nations almost precisely ten years prior to Xi's speech in the same venue. If U.S. observers had hoped China would ultimately accept and join the U.S.-led international order, Hu's harmonious world constituted Beijing's response that there was room for cooperation and global flourishing without convergence.⁸⁶ By contrast, Xi's community with a shared future for mankind—although it preserves China's long-standing position that countries can cooperate even while differing on their political and social systems—ultimately aims to promote enough convergence on Beijing's terms to make it a global leader. Acknowledging that China's development and security are increasingly interdependent with the world's, and that this is an opportunity for political influence, Xi aspires to draw the world still closer to China by building a “global network of partnerships”⁸⁷ with deep multivariate ties to China and then use the resulting leverage to reshape the order around the party's standards and preferences.⁸⁸ Crucial to this effort is persuasion based on “mutual benefit.”⁸⁹ Beijing seeks to build support by demonstrating the value of its international contributions in contrast with what it paints as the failed stewardship of the Western-centric model.⁹⁰ While such criticisms of the West are not new, the party's vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind tied to China's “development train” and benefiting from Beijing's example across many areas of domestic governance is. For the party, a centerpiece of this contribution to human development is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative at first envisioned regional, and now global, “policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties” between China and maritime and continental Asia, Africa, Europe, and, more recently, Latin America and

⁸⁶ For hope of convergence, the cardinal text is then deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick's 2005 speech “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility,” available at http://ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf. On “harmonious world” as an explicit counter to that view (ironically, delivered, about a week earlier), see Hu Jintao, “Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity” (statement at the UN summit, New York, September 15, 2005), <http://un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements15/china050915eng.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Xi, “China's Diplomacy Must Befit Its Major-Country Status,” 480–83.

⁸⁸ On China's ambitions with respect to global governance, see Liza Tobin, “Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018), [dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/863](https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/863); and Melanie Hart and Blaine Johnston “Mapping China's Global Governance Ambitions: Democracies Still Have Leverage to Shape Beijing's Reform Agenda,” Center for American Progress, February 28, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/02/28/466768/mapping-chinas-global-governance-ambitions>.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Xi, “Improve Our Ability to Participate in Global Governance,” 488–89.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Yang Jiechi, “推动构建人类命运共同体(认真学习宣传贯彻党的十九大精神)” [Promote the Building of a Community of Human Destinies (Seriously Study, Propagate and Implement the 19th CPC National Congress Spirit)], *People's Daily*, November 19, 2017, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/19/nw.D110000renmrb_20171119_1-06.htm.

the Arctic.⁹¹ For Beijing, BRI arguably has a predominantly political rather than economic purpose, generating weight and momentum behind China's bid to become a global leader.⁹²

What, then, do the party's ambitions, articulated at the 19th Party Congress, for China to occupy center stage and reform global governance mean for the PLA?

A Global Military by Midcentury

As of this writing, the PLA possesses only one military base abroad—in Djibouti, officially opened on August 1, 2017, on the PLA's birthday—and limited, or incipient, expeditionary capability.⁹³ A cautious interpreter of the goal of building “world-class military forces” over the next three decades might argue the phrase does not necessarily envision a PLA that is a leader in every domain of military competition or even capable of the kind of sustained, large-scale global operations the United States executes today, let alone supplanting the United States' global military preeminence. World-class could mean a PLA that is considered unbeatable in a more limited set of missions (e.g., prevailing in conflicts along China's periphery) combined with a modest capability for global operations.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Xi Jinping, “The Belt and Road Initiative Benefits the People,” in *The Governance of China II*, 549. The classic study of BRI is Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research [NBR], 2017). On the original priority for Asia, see Xi Jinping, “The Belt and Road Initiative and Connectivity Are Mutually Reinforcing,” in *The Governance of China II*, 543. On the extension of BRI to Latin America, see Wang Yi (remarks at the opening ceremony of the China-CELAC Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum and China-LAC Business Council annual meeting, January 23, 2018), available from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1529529.shtml. On the extension of BRI to the Arctic, see State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing, January 2018), available from http://xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/26/c_136926498.htm.

⁹² The “background” section of the March 2015 “Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative” released by the State Council talks about “embracing the trend toward a multipolar world” and describes BRI as “a positive endeavor to seek new models of international cooperation and global governance” that “will inject new positive energy into world peace and development.” The text is available from http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

⁹³ “China Opens 1st Military Support Base Overseas,” Xinhua, August 2, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-08/02/c_136492311.htm. For an evaluation of the PLA's current capabilities, see Kristen Gunness, “The Dawn of a PLA Expeditionary Force?” in “Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads,” ed. Nadège Rolland, NBR, Special Report, no. 80, September 2019, 33–46.

⁹⁴ The widely cited 2013 Academy of Military Science volume *Science of Strategy*, while insisting that Beijing needs to be able to win in the global commons, disavows China's pursuit of a global military equal to the U.S. military. Instead, it argues only that Beijing should “form an operational strength capable of supporting limited global military activities.” See Shou Xiaosong, ed., *战略学* [(Science of Strategy)] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 147. The book, however, was written prior to Xi's 2014 repudiation of Deng's “hide and bide” policy, Xi's 2016 call for the PLA to become a world-class military, and the PLA's opening of its first overseas base in Djibouti.

Such a conservative reading, however, neglects the way in which the party's goals for the PLA are integrated with and derive their logic from Beijing's objectives for China as a whole. If China is to become "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence," the requirement is not only for a PLA that is successful in its specific functional area of "national defense and military building." Rather, Beijing also envisions the PLA playing an integral role in China's emergence as a leader on the world stage. This means constructing a military capable of seizing the initiative and winning in the global commons, making international contributions that boost the prestige of China's governance system, and underpinning and sustaining the transformation of the current international order into Xi's China-centric community with a shared future for mankind.

To begin with, Beijing sees what it calls the "new revolution in military affairs" as entering a period both where China enjoys a rare opportunity to seize the strategic initiative by midcentury and where possessing a military capable of "force projection across regions and continents" is a requirement for protecting China's security.⁹⁵ One source that sheds light on this thinking is the 2013 PLA volume the *Science of Strategy*, published by the Academy of Military Sciences. It contains, to be clear, the views of military academics at the PLA's premier doctrinal think tank rather than the public pronouncements of a high-level party, government, or military policy document. Likely written in 2012, it predates the articulation of Xi's foreign policy vision. Yet many of the book's theoretical concepts appear to have been integrated into both the party's military strategy outlined in the 2015 defense white paper and the national defense and military building section of Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress.⁹⁶ The authors of the 2013 *Science of Strategy* maintain that:

The inevitable result of economic globalization and the development of science and technology is that a nation's security and development interests exceed the traditional scopes of territorial land, sea, and air to continuously expand and extend into such global common space [全球共同空间] as the ocean, space, polar regions, and networks [e.g., the internet]. However, the broad application of long-range reconnaissance and early-warning command, the long-range, rapid ability to project military force, and long-range precision strike have also made it necessary to be able to carry out attack and defense confrontations within

⁹⁵ See, for example, Ren Tianyou, "向着世界一流军队目标奋进" [Advance Toward the Goal of a World-Class Military], *People's Daily*, February 4, 2018, available from http://qstheory.cn/2018-02/04/c_1122364903.htm.

⁹⁶ I am indebted to Chad Sbragia for this observation.

*the global commons space to maintain the security of one's own sovereign space.*⁹⁷
[emphasis added]

World-class, this suggests, means being able to prevail militarily in the global commons. Many of the specific domains of competition, however, are the same ones the party identifies as areas where China needs to begin exercising leadership beyond military affairs. In the same 2016 speech to a Politburo collective study session on global governance noted earlier, Xi maintained, “We should also take a more active part in rule-making in emerging fields such as the internet, the polar regions, the deep sea, and outer space, and give more support to programs and cooperation mechanisms related to educational exchange, dialogue between civilizations, and ecology.”⁹⁸

The party’s view of the inseparability of military competition, technological competition, economic competition, the ability to define international rules and norms, and the broader contest for composite national strength is clear. What the white papers and other authoritative writings suggest, however, is a further link between the PLA’s assuming the lead in these emerging domains and its ability to contribute to realizing Beijing’s vision for the international order. The 2015 white paper directly links the PLA’s capability in emerging domains to “the common security of the world community”: “Threats from such new security domains as outer space and cyberspace will be dealt with to maintain the common security of the world community. China’s armed forces will strengthen international security cooperation in areas crucially related to China’s overseas interests to ensure the security of such interests.”⁹⁹

In echoing and further developing Xi’s language at the 19th Party Congress and applying it to the PLA, Beijing’s 2019 defense white paper *China’s National Defense in the New Era* declares that “China is moving closer to the center of the world stage, and the international community expects more international public security goods from the Chinese military.”¹⁰⁰ China already spends considerable energy touting the PLA’s contributions to world peace in the form of UN peacekeeping, antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and the evacuation of civilians (mostly Chinese and

⁹⁷ Shou, *Science of Strategy*, 243.

⁹⁸ Xi, “Improve Our Ability to Participate in Global Governance,” 489.

⁹⁹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy*.

¹⁰⁰ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

some foreigners) from Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015.¹⁰¹ Where the 2019 defense white paper departs from its predecessors is in explicitly connecting the PLA's international contributions to China's efforts to build support for a community with a shared future for mankind:

Committed to the principle of win-win cooperation, China's armed forces will fulfill their international responsibilities and obligations and provide more public security goods to the international community to the best of their capacity. They actively participate in the UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs), vessel protection operations, and international efforts in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), strengthen international cooperation in arms control and non-proliferation, play a constructive role in the political settlement of hotspot issues, jointly maintain the security of international passages, and make concerted efforts to respond to global challenges such as terrorism, cyber security and major natural disasters, thus making a positive contribution to building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.¹⁰²

To go further, placing the party's aspirations for the PLA in the context of its goals for the international order suggests that Beijing looks forward not only to the security and prestige associated with the PLA's emergence as a leading global military but also to the leverage the resulting growth in China's composite national strength will provide it to reshape the order. "The global governance setup," Xi declared at the 2016 Politburo collective study session on global governance, "is decided by the international balance of power, and reform of global governance system stems from changes in the international balance of power."¹⁰³ China's leaders have been talking about reforming global economic governance since the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and about reforming global security governance

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Zhong Sheng (钟声, a pseudonym for "voice of the center"), "中国实力与道义兼具的底气" [China's Strength and Morality Are Emboldened Together], *People's Daily*, February 28, 2018, 3, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0228/c1002-29837992.html>; "China Grows Presence of UN Peacekeeping Missions Abroad," CGTV, February 2, 2018, available from http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-02/28/content_4805572.htm; and "Backgrounder: China's Major Overseas Evacuations in Recent Years," Xinhua, March 30, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/30/c_134110674.htm.

¹⁰² State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in the New Era*. See also Central Propaganda Department (PRC), 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想三十讲, 271. In talking about the PLA's international responsibilities, the paper specifically cites the PLA's role in supporting "the strategic necessity of building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind."

¹⁰³ Xi, "Improve Our Ability to Participate in Global Governance," 488.

since 2012.¹⁰⁴ The 2019 defense white paper further calls for the PLA to “actively participate in the reform of global security governance system.”¹⁰⁵

A key question here is whether Beijing aims, over several decades, to establish military preeminence along the contours of BRI, given the status of the initiative as a major platform for realizing a community with a shared future for mankind.¹⁰⁶ As of writing, Beijing has generally been cautious about linking BRI to the PLA. Yet as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia pointed out in congressional testimony, Xi maintained in a January 2019 speech at a seminar for provincial and ministerial level cadres that “it is necessary to improve the collective construction of a ‘Belt and Road’ security guarantee system.” In July 2019, Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe offered that “China is willing to deepen military exchanges and cooperation with the Caribbean countries and Pacific Island countries under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.”¹⁰⁷ Neither of the defense white papers, nor Xi’s report to the 19th Party Congress, offers specific, detailed contours of what this might look like. The *Science of Strategy*, published in December 2013 just months after Xi announced BRI, discusses the gradual expansion of China’s strategic space throughout “the two-oceans region.” It describes this region as the area including the Pacific and Indian Oceans and the neighboring coastal areas of Asia, Africa, Oceania, North and South America, and Antarctica. The volume advocates expanding cooperation with the relevant nations to establish “overseas supply depots” (海外补给点). This is the same Chinese term later used by the 2019 defense white paper to acknowledge China’s efforts to develop “overseas logistics facilities” (in reality, military bases) like

¹⁰⁴For an overview of Beijing’s use of the term “global governance” that downplays change under Xi, see Michael Swaine, “Chinese Views on Global Governance Since 2008–9: Not Much New,” Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, Winter 2016, no. 49, March 1, 2016, <http://www.hoover.org/research/chinese-views-global-governance-2008-9-not-much-new>. For Xi’s touting the need for global security governance, see “Chinese President Proposes Stronger Global Security Governance,” Xinhua, September 26, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/26/c_136639115.htm.

¹⁰⁵State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

¹⁰⁶Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Build a Better World” (keynote speech at the CPC Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, Beijing, December 1, 2017), in *On Building a Human Community with a Shared Future*, 521.

¹⁰⁷Chad Sbragia, “Statement to the U.S. Congress Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Hearing on China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” Washington, D.C., October 17, 2019, <http://transportation.house.gov/imo/media/doc/DOD%20Joint%20Testimony.pdf>; Xi Jinping, “习近平: 提高防控能力着力防范化解重大风险保持经济持续健康发展社会大局稳定” [Xi Jinping: Improving Prevention and Control Capabilities, Focusing on Preventing and Resolving Major Risks, Maintaining Sustainable and Sound Economic Development, and Social Stability], Xinhua, January 21, 2019, http://xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-01/21/c_1124021712.htm; and Wei Fenghe, “China to Deepen Military Cooperation with Caribbean Countries, Pacific Island Countries: Defense Minister,” Xinhua, July 8, 2019, http://xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/08/c_138209338.htm.

its facility in Djibouti.¹⁰⁸ Western media reports on the PLA's negotiations for further overseas basing options have mentioned Cambodia, Pakistan, and Oceania, among other countries and regions.¹⁰⁹

The ability to conduct global operations, of course, does not necessarily equate to a quest for global military dominance. Yet if BRI, stretching from Asia, Europe, and Africa to Latin America and the polar regions, indeed outlines the geographic parameters of Beijing's midcentury ambitions for military preeminence in support of a China-centric order, then the trope that China under the party's leadership is a regional rather than global threat to U.S. security interests whose ambitions can be characterized as confined to "regional preeminence" and "global influence" must be abandoned. Given the party's deep-rooted aspirations for China, as well as the strides in composite national strength it has made since the late 1970s, it would seem a poor wager to bet against such ambitions.

Conclusion

In sum, examining Beijing's ambitions for a world-class military by midcentury in the context of the party's overall national strategy offers a starker portrait of U.S.-China rivalry and its drivers than is commonly depicted. This great-power rivalry is not simply the product of China's growing power and the anxiety this provokes in the United States. Rather, it owes to a competition between two domestic governing systems with different preferences for the international order and Beijing's sense that national rejuvenation requires demonstrating the superiority of its system. For Washington, this suggests that military competition with China is but one component of an integrated systems rivalry that in the coming decades will have global stakes.

¹⁰⁸Shou, *Science of Strategy*, 241–55. For an unpacking of the concept of strategic space contained in this chapter of *Science of Strategy*, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Changing Approach to Military Strategy: The Science of Military Strategy from 2001 and 2013," in *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, ed. Joe McReynolds (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2016), 62–63.

¹⁰⁹State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in the New Era*. For a useful summary of journalism about PLA negotiations for additional PLA bases abroad, see Leah Dreyfuss and Mara Kalin, "All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas," Brookings Institution, September 2019, 4–6, http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_basing_karlin_dreyfuss.pdf.

A More Cohesive Force: Enabling Joint Operations in the PLA

Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders

Since assuming the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in late 2012, Xi Jinping has often referenced the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a tool that may be used to overwhelm opponents. During a visit to the Southern Theater Command in October 2018, for instance, Xi called on PLA units responsible for enforcing China's claims in the South China Sea to "concentrate on preparations for fighting a war."¹ In a speech on cross-strait relations in January 2019, he claimed that "Chinese don't fight Chinese," while asserting that Beijing "reserves the option of taking all necessary means" to achieve reunification with Taiwan.² Although Xi's comments might be interpreted as rhetoric designed to intimidate rivals and assuage domestic nationalists, his administration has taken a number of notable steps to improve PLA combat capabilities. Examples include building new destroyers, developing stealth bombers, and increasing the size of the PLA Marine Corps.³

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This chapter reflects only the views of the authors and not the National Defense University, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

¹ Kristin Huang, "Prepare for War, Xi Jinping Tells Military Region That Monitors South China Sea, Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2170452/prepare-war-xi-jinping-tells-military-region-monitors-south>.

² Liu Zhen, "Beijing 'Will Keep Military Pressure on Taiwan' after Xi Jinping's Call for Unification," *South China Morning Post*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2180653/beijing-will-keep-military-pressure-taiwan-after-xi-jinpings>.

³ "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019.

Xi's agenda is focused not just on force modernization but also on achieving stronger coordination among the PLA's services and branches. Xi and his advocates in the military understand that the PLA must be able to conduct joint operations in a high-tech environment if it is to be able to "fight and win" future conflicts. This is not a new agenda but one that seeks to build on the achievements of Xi's predecessors. Since the early 1990s, PLA training, professional military education (PME), logistics, and doctrinal development have increasingly focused on joint operations. Weaknesses remain, however, such as an army-dominant force structure and the lack of a permanent joint command-and-control system. Under Xi, the PLA has taken steps to correct these and other flaws with a series of organizational reforms launched at the end of 2015. This should be of concern to China's regional rivals as well as to the U.S. military, which will need to contend with a more joint (and thus more lethal) PLA. The PLA's intended direction is clear, but success will depend on its ability to overcome impediments, such as the lack of capable joint commanders and staff officers, as the reforms continue through the planned end date in 2020 (though discussions with PLA officers indicate that date may have slipped by a year or two).

This chapter reviews PLA joint force development under Xi, with equal attention paid to areas of progress and lingering obstacles. The first part reviews progress through a historical lens and identifies the problems that existed when Xi assumed office. The second part discusses the operational drivers of the Xi-era reforms and identifies the specific ways in which the PLA has expanded its joint operations capabilities in command and control, force composition, and human capital. The third part analyzes remaining obstacles and describes indicators of continued improvements. The conclusion assesses the overall impact of the military reforms on the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations and argues that a significant increase in the scale, degree of jointness, duration, and nature of PLA overseas operations will likely require the development of new joint command-and-control mechanisms.

A Long March toward Jointness

Joint operations, referring to the integration of activities by multiple services and branches, have become a hallmark of modern combat. Among the major advantages of drawing from the different services are complementary capabilities, operational flexibility, and the ability of joint

commanders to pose “multidimensional threats” to an adversary.⁴ Major countries employed joint forces in decisive campaigns during World War I, World War II, and more recently in smaller engagements such as the 1982 Falklands War and the 1990–91 Gulf War.⁵ Modern militaries have also evaluated limitations to their ability to conduct joint operations and made corresponding changes. Key examples include the introduction of new joint assignment and PME requirements in the U.S. military, mandated by Congress as part of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, and the creation of a new Russian joint command system following the 2008 Georgia conflict.⁶

China has been a relative latecomer to joint operations. Although PLA historians trace Chinese joint operations to the 1955 amphibious invasion of Yijiangshan, an offshore island held by Kuomintang forces following the Chinese Civil War, most PLA operations during the Cold War, including in the Korean War and the 1979 border conflict with Vietnam, primarily involved ground forces.⁷ This emphasis on ground forces reflected a number of issues: PLA doctrine, which focused on luring enemy forces deep into Chinese territory and then annihilating them using guerilla tactics; the institutional dominance of the ground forces (which dominated the PLA leadership); and the technological inferiority of China’s air and naval forces. Nevertheless, beginning in the mid-1970s, Deng Xiaoping encouraged the PLA to improve its joint operations capabilities, and PLA training began to incorporate some multiservice exercises.⁸

A key milestone came in 1993 with the promulgation of a new military strategy that prioritized the need to prepare for high-tech regional conflicts. As part of this shift, Chinese military planners for the first time regarded joint operations as the “main form” of future operations.⁹ Taylor Fravel

⁴ Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2009), 99.

⁵ Ibid., 98–99; Raymond E. Bell Jr., “The Falkland Islands Campaign of 1982 and British Joint Forces Operations,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2012): 1–107; and Christopher G. Marquis, Denton Dye, and Ross. S. Kinhead, “The Advent of Jointness during the Gulf War,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2017): 76–83.

⁶ James R. Locher III, “Has It Worked?—The Goldwater Nichols Reorganization Act,” *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 4 (2001): 1–21; and Athena Bryce-Rogers, “Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War,” *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (2013): 339–68.

⁷ On the Yijiangshan campaign, see Kevin McCauley, “PLA Yijiangshan Joint Amphibious Operation: Past Is Prologue,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, September 13, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-yijiangshan-joint-amphibious-operation-past-is-prologue>.

⁸ Joel Wuthnow, “A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 1–2 (2017): 175–76.

⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, “Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity,” *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 73–74. See also David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in *Right Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 69–140.

attributes this change to two factors: enhanced party unity following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown and the lessons of the Gulf War, which displayed the type of operations that China might one day need to conduct (or might face if it ever found itself in a war with the United States).¹⁰ An additional factor was the rise of the Taiwan independence movement in the early 1990s, which culminated in the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. These events signaled to Chinese leaders both the potential need for PLA forces to be used in a cross-strait conflict and the operational challenges that would be posed in confronting the Taiwan military, likely backed by intervening U.S. forces.

A subsequent 2004 doctrinal revision placed even more emphasis on what became known as “integrated joint operations” (一体化联合作战). Taking into account the lessons of U.S. and allied operations during the 1999 Kosovo and 2003 Gulf Wars, the concept of integrated joint operations highlighted the need for deeper cooperation between units from different services at the tactical level.¹¹ Previous PLA doctrine, by contrast, had only required the services to form “coordinating relationships rather than foster true interoperability.”¹² An additional focus during the 2000s was encouraging the PLA to make information central to operations, including in the space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains.¹³

Shifts in Chinese military strategy during the tenures of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao resulted in a number of improvements in joint operations. First, the PLA produced a new doctrine that described how the different services would work together in various campaigns, such as blockades and island landings. Initial joint campaign guidelines (联合战役纲要) were published in January 1999.¹⁴ During the early 2000s, the PLA also wrote twelve new joint campaign outlines, although these were never published

¹⁰ Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy,” 74–75. For additional analysis of China’s lessons from the Gulf War, see Dean Cheng, “Chinese Lessons from the Gulf War,” in *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples’ Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 158–63.

¹¹ Fravel, “Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity,” 79–80.

¹² Kevin Pollpeter, “Towards an Integrative C4ISR System: Informationization and Joint Operations in the People’s Liberation Army,” in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 209.

¹³ Mark R. Cozad, “Toward a More Joint, Combat-Ready PLA?” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), 207–10. See also Kevin McCauley, *PLA System of Systems Operations: Enabling Joint Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2017), 8.

¹⁴ Wuthnow, “A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations,” 8.

for unknown reasons.¹⁵ The second improvement was an expansion in multiservice and cross-theater exercises, which became more numerous and complex over time.¹⁶ The Mission Action 2010 exercise, for instance, included drills on joint campaign command, joint firepower strikes, and comprehensive support.¹⁷ Third, the PLA introduced new joint operations courses and experimented with new ways to expose personnel to different service cultures, such as a program in which officers were temporarily cross-posted to other services.¹⁸ Fourth, new command, control, and communications networks were introduced that facilitated cooperation across service and military region (MR) boundaries.¹⁹ Fifth, progress was made in the logistics field with the creation of joint logistics departments in the MRs, which helped reduce redundancy by centralizing the provision of common-use supplies.²⁰

Nevertheless, a number of obstacles remained when Xi Jinping took office as CMC chairman in November 2012. First, PLA force composition remained heavily skewed toward the ground forces. Despite a series of force reductions, which trimmed the army and increased the relative size of the other services,²¹ the PLA by 2013 was still composed of about 69% army personnel, compared to 10% for the navy, 17% for the air force, and 4% for the Second Artillery Force.²² The PLA's senior leadership also contained only minimal representation from officers outside the ground forces. Although the commanders of the navy, air force, and Second Artillery were added to the CMC in 2004 in a symbolic show of jointness, all MR commanders and general department directors were still drawn from the army.²³

¹⁵ Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity," 79–80. See also Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Forthcoming Fifth-Generation Operational Regulations—The Latest 'Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs'?" Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, April 21, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-forthcoming-fifth-generation-operational-regulations-the-latest-revolution-in-doctrinal-affairs>.

¹⁶ Pollpeter, "Towards an Integrative C4ISR System," 214–19.

¹⁷ Mark R. Cozad, "PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 21, 2016, 5–6.

¹⁸ McCauley, *PLA System of Systems Operations*, 41–42.

¹⁹ Pollpeter, "Towards an Integrative C4ISR System," 202–3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

²¹ For a discussion, see Daniel Gearin, "PLA Force Reductions: Impact on the Services," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 327–44.

²² Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications," National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, China Strategic Perspectives, no. 10, 2017, 29.

²³ There were, however, a few other signs of progress: ascending air force and naval officers, for instance, took positions as deputy chiefs of the General Staff Department as a steppingstone to command of their services.

A second obstacle was continuing problems in the human capital arena. Although the PLA conducted more joint training exercises, the quality of those events remained inconsistent: many exercises reportedly featured only token cooperation between the services. Moreover, the PLA lacked an effective mechanism for ensuring that joint training met uniform standards (although the creation of the Military Training Department within the General Staff Department in 2011 aimed to help bridge this gap).²⁴ Meanwhile, regardless of changes to the PME curriculum, most officers did not have significant exposure to joint operations prior to the senior level. As late as 2016, interlocutors from the service command academies reported that their students were still struggling to master combined arms operations (i.e., those involving different branches of the same service) and had little hope of making progress in true joint operations.²⁵ Other initiatives, such as a joint assignment system, were contemplated but did not gain traction or were too difficult to institutionalize across the force.²⁶

Third was the lack of a joint command-and-control system that could command forces from multiple services. Neither the general departments nor the MRs exercised operational control over naval, air force, or Second Artillery units, whose chain of command ran through their own service headquarters. During a conflict, PLA doctrine stipulated that joint theater commands would have to be established on an ad hoc basis, with personnel seconded from the general departments, the MRs, and the services.²⁷ This system was poorly suited to the realities of modern combat, in which a permanent joint command structure is necessary to monitor the security environment and respond rapidly to emerging challenges.²⁸ Nevertheless, likely due to bureaucratic resistance from the services, the old command-and-control system was not fundamentally revised prior to Xi's arrival. In short, despite incremental progress in some areas, PLA structure, training, and personnel remained largely service-centric through much of the post-Mao era.

²⁴ Wanda Ayuso and Lonnie Henley, "Aspiring to Jointness: PLA Training, Exercises, and Doctrine, 2008–2012," in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), 189–90.

²⁵ Discussions with PLA officers, 2016–17.

²⁶ For instance, PLA scholars proposed a joint specialization for officers in the mid-2000s, but this was never adopted. Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "A Modern Major General: Building Joint Commanders in the PLA," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 303.

²⁷ Dean Cheng, "The PLA's Wartime Structure," in Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, *The PLA as Organization*, vol. 2 (report of conference sponsored by Defense Group Inc., Vienna, Virginia, June 13–14, 2012), 458–60.

²⁸ Wuthnow, "A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations," 171–74.

A New Era: Contributions of Xi-Era Reforms

The new round of reforms launched under Xi Jinping sought to address enduring problems in the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations.²⁹ As early as November 2013, the Communiqué of the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress stated that the party would aim to “improve the joint combat command organizations of the CMC and the joint combat command mechanism of the theaters, and push forward the reform of the system of training and logistics for joint combat operations.”³⁰ China's May 2015 defense white paper similarly noted that “integrated combat forces will be employed to prevail in system-vs-system operations featuring information dominance, precision strikes, and joint operations.” The document also stated that the PLA would “gradually establish an integrated joint operational system in which all elements are seamlessly linked and various operational platforms perform independently and in coordination.”³¹

Announcing these goals signaled Xi's intent to complete the “unfinished business” of the Jiang and Hu eras, while also responding to two imperatives. First was the perception of increasing threats to China's security that required the PLA to improve its ability to deter, or if necessary defeat, potential adversaries. David Finkelstein observes that the main challenges identified in Chinese security assessments included “hegemonism, power politics, and neo-interventionism”; pressure aimed at constraining China's rise; “political subversion”; and threats to China's sovereignty.³² This list of problems focused on the United States, which was seen to be strengthening its military posture around China, encouraging its allies to act more provocatively in regional disputes, and even promoting “color revolutions” within China by lauding Uighur and Tibetan dissidents and voicing support for human rights.³³ Another commonly cited concern was Japan's attempts to play a more influential military role in the region.³⁴

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see Wuthnow and Saunders, “Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping,” 23–32.

³⁰ “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reforms,” China.org, January 16, 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/china/third_plenary_session/2014-01/16/content_31212602_15.htm.

³¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm.

³² David M. Finkelstein, “Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 62–68.

³³ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*.

³⁴ Ibid.

Second was the argument that China needed to keep up with the ongoing global revolution in military affairs. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* noted that:

Since the founding of new China, although [the PLA] has engaged in several large-scale wars, all were coordinated operations emphasizing a single service. [The PLA] did not face the real-war test of integrated joint operations. Facing future local wars under conditions of informationization, effectively organizing for integrated joint operations requires that we change our ground force–centric, single-service, and non-autonomous joint operations mindset, closely integrate operational objectives, and carry out integrated joint operations under a unified plan and overall control.³⁵

Jeffrey Engstrom explains that Chinese strategists saw integrated joint operations as vital to competing in the nonlinear battlefields of the information age, in which adversaries seek to degrade and destroy each other's critical systems. For instance, he relays Chinese assessments that “air and cyber forces may be used jointly to conduct operations that affect the information domain,” carrying out coordinated strikes against an opponent's information support systems.³⁶ Due to the reasons outlined above, these doctrinal ambitions were hindered by the PLA's limited progress in integrating forces from different services.

Reforms carried out between 2015 and 2018 made progress in the joint operations arena in several ways. First was overhauling the command-and-control system. The previous system centering on the general departments and MRs was replaced by a new structure that, according to the CMC's January 2016 reform plan, would consist of a “two-level joint operations command system” that would be “lean and highly efficient.”³⁷ The two levels include the CMC, supported by a new Joint Staff Department (JSD), and five new theater commands that replaced the MRs. Each of the theaters assumed responsibility for a specific set of contingencies. For instance, the Southern Theater Command handles the South China Sea, while the Eastern Theater Command is responsible for Taiwan.³⁸ In contrast to the previous system, theater commanders exercise operational control over

³⁵ Academy of Military Science (AMS) Military Strategic Research Department (PRC), 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: AMS Press, 2013), 125.

³⁶ Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), 13.

³⁷ “中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见” [CMC Opinions on Deepening National Defense and Military Reforms], Xinhua, January 1, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_1117646695.htm.

³⁸ For more discussion on the theater commands, see Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, “Coming to a (New) Theater Near You: Command, Control, and Forces,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 227–56.

naval, air, and conventional missile forces within their respective areas, while service headquarters are assigned a “force construction” role. Out-of-area operations are centrally managed by the JSD, though in some cases (such as the Gulf of Aden antipiracy patrols) it appears that the services have retained day-to-day control.³⁹

A related change was the creation of joint operations command centers both at the CMC level and within the theaters. Staffed by personnel from all the services, these centers play a number of key roles in the new command structure, including “carrying out around-the-clock watch functions, maintaining situational awareness, managing joint exercises, and providing a communications hub linking theater commanders with service component commanders and forces.”⁴⁰ They will also play a critical role in the event that the PLA needs to quickly transition from peacetime to wartime operations, thus correcting a major weakness of the earlier system.

A second reform was reducing the size and influence of the ground forces. This was a theme of China’s military strategy under Xi: the 2015 white paper argued that the “traditional mentality that the land outweighs the sea must be abandoned,” which indicated the heightened importance of Chinese maritime interests and suggested that efforts would be made to reduce ground force dominance in the PLA.⁴¹ One way this was pursued was through a 300,000 person downsizing that focused on the army, thus increasing the relative size of the other services. The downsizing, which unfolded alongside changes in ground force structure (including cutting five of eighteen group armies) was declared “basically achieved” in March 2018.⁴² The reforms also provided new opportunities for nonground force officers to assume key positions in the new joint structure. For instance, naval and air force officers were installed as commanders of the Southern and Central Theater Commands, respectively, while the proportion of nonarmy officers in theater deputy commander positions rose from less than a third to more than a half.⁴³

Third was establishing the Strategic Support Force (SSF) as a new quasi-service responsible for information operations. Drawing from space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare assets that previously resided

³⁹ For more information, see Phillip C. Saunders, “Beyond Borders: PLA Command of Future Global Operations,” Institute for National Strategic Studies Strategic Forum, forthcoming.

⁴⁰ “China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win.”

⁴¹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy*.

⁴² “Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on March 29,” China Military Online, March 30, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/30/content_7987839.htm.

⁴³ Wuthnow and Saunders, “A Modern Major General,” 306.

within the general departments, the primary goal of the SSF is to “create synergies between disparate information warfare capabilities in order to execute specific types of strategic missions that Chinese leaders believe will be decisive in future major wars.”⁴⁴ John Costello and Joe McReynolds argue that the SSF will contribute to the planning and execution of joint operations by forming a “common intelligence picture” within each theater command, composed of space-based C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), intelligence support, and battlefield environment assessments.⁴⁵ During a conflict, the SSF will likely provide other strategic capabilities to joint commanders, such as cyberattacks against critical enemy systems and the use of psychological warfare.⁴⁶

Fourth was adjusting the PLA’s training regime to focus more on joint training. In January 2016, the former Military Training Department was elevated to independent status under the CMC and renamed the CMC Training and Administration Department. A key role of this department is establishing training standards to be used across the PLA, including coordinating the new “Outline of Military Training and Evaluation” that was released in January 2018.⁴⁷ The department is also responsible for providing consistent enforcement of training standards, which had been a weakness of the previous system. For instance, in early 2017, inspectors from the new training department, working with the PLA’s Discipline Inspection Commission, identified and punished 99 PLA personnel accused of violating regulations. One of the priorities of these inspections was “theater command-level joint training exercises.”⁴⁸

A related change was more autonomy for theater commands to plan and conduct joint training. While the MRs often took their cues from the General Staff Department, Mark Cozad notes that the new theaters are developing joint training plans based on theater-specific contingencies and are responsible for training to execute those plans during peacetime.⁴⁹ An

⁴⁴ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, “China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era,” National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives, no. 13, October 2018, 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁶ Specifically, it appears that the SSF has assumed control of the 311 Base, which is the PLA’s “sole organization that is publicly known to focus on psychological warfare.” Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ “PLA Releases Second Batch of New Military Training Outline,” China Military Online, January 4, 2019, http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2019-01/04/content_9396247.htm.

⁴⁸ “CMC Intensifies Supervision over Military Training,” China Military Online, March 21, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/21/content_7534230.htm.

⁴⁹ Mark R. Cozad, “Toward a More Joint, Combat-Ready PLA?” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 215.

initial focus of joint training within the theaters was exposing commanders and staff officers to basic joint operations concepts and procedures, such as protocols for running the joint operations command centers.⁵⁰ Some theaters also sought to increase the familiarity of personnel to the unique capabilities of the various services, which is necessary for planning multiservice operations. For instance, the Eastern Theater Command required staff officers to pass a joint duty qualification test, which assessed understanding of the weapons, equipment, and operational principles of the different services.⁵¹

Fifth was adding new joint operations contents into the PME curriculum. One change was establishing the Joint Operations College within the PLA National Defense University, which offers a ten-month course for mid-level officers to gain in-depth education on joint operations subjects.⁵² The university also restructured its course for senior commanders into two tracks: operational command and leadership management. Students in the first track, who include future theater commanders, are exploring joint operations command through case studies and briefings on threats facing each theater.⁵³ Service command colleges also increased course offerings in joint operations and instituted new ways to expose students to the different services, including a program in which students spend a month at each of the service command colleges.⁵⁴

A sixth reform was changes to the joint logistics system. Building on earlier reforms, the PLA announced the creation of the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) in September 2016 that is responsible for managing the distribution of fuel, ordnance, and other supplies to theater commanders.⁵⁵ The JLSF consists of a central base in Wuhan and subordinate joint logistics support centers in each of the theater commands. In addition, the PLA redoubled its attempts to root out corruption in the logistics system, which had been a challenge in earlier years. Anticorruption investigations undertaken under Xi targeted offenders, while the reforms granted more autonomy to supervisory organs, such as the Discipline Inspection

⁵⁰ Wuthnow and Saunders, "A Modern Major General," 308–9.

⁵¹ Cheng Yongliang, "能不能指挥联合作战, 需要 '考证' 了" [Whether One May Command Joint Operations Requires "Certification"], Sina, February 23, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-02-23/doc-ifyavwcv8556596.shtml>.

⁵² Wuthnow and Saunders, "A Modern Major General," 304–6.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ LeighAnn Luce and Erin Richter, "Handling Logistics in a Reformed PLA," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 272.

Commission, the Audit Bureau, and the prosecutorial system, one of whose roles is to investigate graft in the logistics arena.⁵⁶

To recap, reforms commenced under Xi targeted the deficiencies in force composition, human capital, and command and control that had constrained the PLA's ability to field a competent joint force under his predecessors. Xi's enactment of reforms across different systems within the PLA that enable joint operations (intelligence, training, PME, and logistics), along with the new theater command system, has drawn comparisons with the scale and significance of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in instituting a more effective joint force in the United States. Both were pivotal moments that required a major investment of political capital to counter bureaucratic resistance by the services and others who stood to lose.⁵⁷ While it is too soon to judge the impact on operational performance, the PLA is clearly now a much more joint organization than it was under Xi's predecessors.

Challenges and Signs of Progress

Stronger coordination between units from different services will allow the PLA to pose greater operational challenges to China's potential adversaries. In the South and East China Seas, for instance, Beijing could more seamlessly bring naval and air power to bear on its territorial rivals, while incorporating the China Coast Guard (which was placed under formal CMC authority as part of a reorganization of the People's Armed Police in 2018).⁵⁸ The PLA could also execute closer air-ground coordination around China's contested border with India, and thus potentially be more determined in a future incident similar to the Doklam standoff of 2017.

Leveraging the capabilities of all of its services, as well as the SSF and JLSF, would put the PLA in a stronger position to carry out joint campaigns targeting Taiwan, including firepower strikes, blockades, and an amphibious or airborne invasion.⁵⁹ A PLA that can coordinate its long-range missile

⁵⁶ The most famous example of graft involves former General Logistics Department deputy director Gu Junshan, who had amassed a fortune through bribery and was convicted in August 2015.

⁵⁷ David M. Finkelstein, "Initial Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA," CNA, 2016, 18.

⁵⁸ On the China Coast Guard, see Lyle Morris, "China Welcomes Its Newest Armed Force: The Coast Guard," War on the Rocks, April 4, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/china-welcomes-its-newest-armed-force-the-coast-guard>.

⁵⁹ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "What Do China's Military Reforms Mean for Taiwan?" National Bureau of Asian Research, Commentary, May 16, 2016, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/what-do-chinas-military-reforms-mean-for-taiwan>.

capabilities more effectively would also present a more dangerous threat to intervening U.S. forces in the event of a regional crisis.

Nevertheless, the extent of the challenge will depend in part on the PLA's ability to overcome several remaining constraints. One is the ability of PLA doctrine to keep pace with rapid changes in organization as well as with significant technological advances that have occurred in areas such as information technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics. The current doctrinal regulations date from the early 2000s; a reported fifth generation of regulations was apparently never approved by the CMC, and a newer sixth generation may still be under development.⁶⁰ A 2017 restructuring of the PLA Academy of Military Science, which coordinates doctrinal development across the force, could indicate an attempt to spur progress in this area. Signs of improvement may include the release of new pedagogical volumes, such as the *Science of Military Strategy* or *Science of Campaigns*, and evidence that doctrine writers are collaborating more closely with technical experts and operational units.⁶¹

Even if a new doctrine is unveiled, the ability of the PME system to cultivate a generation of officers steeped in joint operations concepts is open to question. One problem is that courses prior to the senior level occur within a specific service: officers may attend courses on joint operations within a service command college, but their fellow students are all from the same service. This means that students might not be adequately exposed to other service perspectives as they think about joint warfighting. An indicator of progress would be full-time enrollment of students in PME institutions outside their home service (just as some U.S. naval officers, for instance, enroll at the Army War College). Another problem is that students in the PLA National Defense University's senior course still appear to be drawn primarily from the ground forces (though interlocutors suggest that the makeup of this course will become more joint in future years). Greater enrollment of nonarmy officers in that program would signify the PLA's commitment to generating a wider pool of future theater and CMC commanders.

A similar challenge is the lack of a formal joint assignment system. Unlike the U.S. military in which officers must take assignments in joint

⁶⁰ Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Forthcoming Fifth-General Operational Regulations—The Latest 'Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs?'" Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, April 21, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-forthcoming-fifth-generation-operational-regulations-the-latest-revolution-in-doctrinal-affairs>.

⁶¹ Joel Wuthnow, "China's 'New' Academy of Military Science: A Revolution in Theoretical Affairs," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 18, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-academy-of-military-science-a-revolution-in-theoretical-affairs>.

organizations, such as combatant commands and the Joint Staff, as a prerequisite for promotion, no such system has been established in the PLA. Without such requirements, joint experience among the rising generation of officers may be limited and inconsistent. It is also unclear whether the current mix of career incentives encourages officers to take positions in organizations such as theater headquarters and the JSD in the first place, as opposed to staying within their own services. Evidence that the PLA is overcoming this problem might include the promulgation of joint experience requirements for officers; mandatory rotation of officers between theaters, services, and CMC departments; financial or other incentives for high performance in joint positions; or a role for the theaters and JSD in promotion decisions.

The influence of the services might also need to be curbed in the operational arena. Despite the new joint command-and-control structure, the services have retained a hand in some types of operational decisions, as illustrated by the navy's continuing role in patrols of China's far seas.⁶² This could be a product of the reality that services have the experience to manage certain missions better than joint headquarters (who may be led by personnel from different services) and the bureaucratic impulse not to cede responsibility. Whether service headquarters will be willing to sacrifice vestigial operational roles—and refrain from interfering with the employment of assets during a crisis—is an open question. Signs of progress would include evidence that theater commanders are leading operations, such as routine deployments in the South and East China Seas or offshore bomber operations, or that the JSD is managing overseas operations (such as antipiracy task forces or noncombatant evacuations).

A related issue is the CMC's unwillingness to delegate control over certain strategic assets to the theater commands. For instance, the CMC retains direct control over nuclear forces and likely would have to authorize employment of conventional missiles, such as DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles (though there is evidence that the theaters have at least some role in coordinating the use of those systems during a campaign).⁶³ John Costello and Joe McReynolds likewise report that SSF capabilities have been regarded as "sufficiently strategic" to remain under CMC control: theater commanders would presumably need to request space or cyber

⁶² For further details, see Saunders, "Beyond Borders."

⁶³ David C. Logan, "PLA Reforms and China's Nuclear Forces," *Joint Force Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2016): 58–60; and David C. Logan, "Making Sense of China's Missile Forces," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 414–17.

support during an operation.⁶⁴ The benefit of this approach is that the party's central leadership retains control over critical capabilities, limiting the chance of unintended escalation in a crisis or conflict. The downside, however, is that this may weaken the ability of theater commanders to quickly employ the full range of capabilities to deter or defeat adversaries. Signs of change would be integration of PLA Rocket Force and SSF participation in theater training, and dual-hatting of officers from those forces as theater deputy commanders.⁶⁵

The centralization of strategic capabilities under CMC authority illustrates a more fundamental potential constraint on the PLA's ability to field an effective joint force: the continued relevance of Leninist decision-making structures. These elements include required Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership for officers; unified control by the CMC, which is a part of the CCP Central Committee; party committees at the regiment level and above; a dual-command system in which commanders and political officers share decision-making responsibility; and a Discipline Inspection Commission system responsible for policing compliance with party rules and norms throughout the PLA. As part of the Xi-era reforms, these were either left intact or in some cases even strengthened. The CMC amassed authority over a range of functions at the expense of the former general departments, while the autonomy of the Discipline Inspection Commission was increased and its director placed on the CMC.

Preserving a Leninist system may hinder joint operations, as well as the larger development of professional competence in the PLA, in several ways. First, decision-making could be slowed both vertically, as commanders and their subordinates seek approval from party committees at higher echelons, and horizontally, insofar as there might be disagreements between commanders and political commissars. The second constraint is that officers need to remain in good standing as party members, such as by participating in CCP meetings and attending political education courses, which is a requirement for promotion.⁶⁶ This means less time available for developing operational skills. Third, officers will have to consider how their professional relationships will be viewed through the lens of intraparty politics. This is especially true in the context of Xi's use of a variety of means, such as discipline inspectors, to root out suspected opponents (most prominently

⁶⁴ Costello and McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force," 15.

⁶⁵ Theater-based ground force, naval, and air force commanders all serve concurrently as theater deputy commanders.

⁶⁶ According to an interlocutor, Xi's military expositions are required reading in some PME courses.

the networks of former CMC vice chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong). All of this may promote a risk-averse organizational culture.⁶⁷

Caution prompted by the need for political control could be a source of comparative weakness for PLA operations. A hallmark of the “Western way of war” is the delegation of operational autonomy to lower-level commanders (known in recent U.S. doctrine as “mission command”).⁶⁸ Providing junior officers greater responsibility in training and on the battlefield promotes initiative, a quicker operational tempo, and resilience in the face of disrupted communications. All of these attributes could be U.S. advantages in a confrontation with a Leninist adversary hampered by slower decision-making and other political constraints. Another strength of the U.S. system is that rising commanders are tested throughout their careers (including in combat situations). They thus enter senior positions with more experience and a greater ability to make decisions independently than would be the case if they had relied more extensively on detailed orders from higher authorities.

Political challenges should not, however, be overstated. Interviews with Chinese POWs during the Korean War, for instance, found that open divisions between commanders and political commissars were rare, with commanders being generally responsible for making key decisions during battles.⁶⁹ One study even found that political commissars were “more help than a hindrance” during China’s 1962 border conflict with India by focusing on troop morale rather than interfering in operations.⁷⁰ It is also unclear that party members within the PLA cannot be both “red” and “expert,” excelling in both their political and operational roles. Nevertheless, observers will need to find ways to gauge the extent to which Leninism is hampering joint operations, such as through candid conversations with PLA interlocutors.

A final problem is the impact of corruption within the PLA. As noted above, graft in the logistics system was a key obstacle to modernization in that arena. Corruption could also plague other parts of the PLA related to joint operations, including equipment development, promotions, and even

⁶⁷ For an argument that Leninism may be a hindrance to PLA operations, see Ellis Joffe, “Party and Army: Professionalism and Political Control in the Chinese Officer Corps, 1949–1964,” Harvard University, 1965, 61.

⁶⁸ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Mission Command* (Washington, D.C., 2012); and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, D.C., 2017), II-2.

⁶⁹ Alexander George, *The Chinese Communist Army in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 113.

⁷⁰ Larry Wortzel, “The General Political Department and the Evolution of the Political Commissar System,” in *The People’s Liberation Army as Organization: Reference Volume 1.0*, ed. James Mulvenon and Andrew N. D. Yang (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2002), 240–41.

the PME system. Ongoing anticorruption investigations might also have the effect of reducing morale and fostering resentment as illicit revenue streams are cut off. Direct evidence that corruption is abating as a concern is difficult to obtain: a decrease in the number of investigations could imply either that the primary offenders have been caught or that the campaign has run into trouble (though some inferences can be made based on who within the PLA is being targeted).⁷¹ It is also possible that corruption will decline as long as Xi is able to sustain the campaign, but will resurface after he has left the scene.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's military reforms mark an important milestone in the PLA's long-term process of developing a modern joint operations capability. The reforms that have been implemented have already had a major impact on how the PLA is organized and how it expects to plan, train, and execute combat operations. The reforms still in the works—especially those to the military education, assignment, and promotion systems—are likely to play a decisive role in determining whether a reformed PLA can realize Xi's goal of building a joint force capable of fighting and winning informationized wars.

While this chapter has identified some specific indicators of progress, the most salient test of the new system will be real-world combat. One of the most valuable attributes of a future limited conflict, such as a border clash with India or Vietnam, will be the lessons the PLA learns about its own weaknesses and the changes it makes in response. Much as the U.S. military derived lessons from the aborted 1980 attempt to rescue hostages in Iran, including the necessity of joint training and interoperability at the tactical level,⁷² Beijing will review its performance in any conflict—successful or not—and take steps to correct any flaws. This will put the PLA in a stronger position to engage in large-scale joint operations at a later date.

One future requirement that current PLA reforms do not fully address is the potential need to command and support a broader range of military operations beyond China's borders. In the last several decades, PLA overseas operations have been limited to United Nations peacekeeping operations, counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden (since 2008), short-term

⁷¹ For instance, targeting senior PME officials could indicate that corruption in that arena has been an obstacle to reform.

⁷² Richard A. Radvanyi, "Operation Eagle Claw—Lessons Learned" (master's thesis, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2002).

deployments to participate in military exercises and conduct military diplomacy, and a few noncombatant emergency evacuations.

To date, most of these operations have been small, of short duration, and in relatively permissive environments. These types of operations could be assigned either to the JSD's Overseas Operations Office or to one of the service headquarters, depending on the nature of the operation. However, existing mechanisms are likely to prove inadequate if PLA overseas operations become larger, require joint forces, last for extended periods of time, or occur in nonpermissive environments where deployed forces face serious threats from hostile state or nonstate actors. If the PLA begins to regularly conduct such operations, new joint command-and-control mechanisms will likely be necessary.

Economic Integration Is Not Enough: Policy and Planning for Taiwan in the Xi Jinping Era

Daniel Taylor and Benjamin Frohman

Beijing has claimed the unification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland to be an important national interest since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The urgency with which PRC leaders have addressed this issue, however, has fluctuated depending on changes in the domestic and international environment. Designated in 2003 as a “core” PRC interest, Taiwan has been joined in recent years by Tibet, Xinjiang, and China's broader claims of sovereignty along its land and maritime periphery, among other issues, in this highest tier of pressing national concerns.¹

General secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping has adopted a much more forceful stance toward Taiwan—as well as toward China's other sovereignty disputes—since assuming office in 2012. At the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 2017, Xi punctuated his assertive policy toward China's sovereignty claims by declaring what has become known as the “six any's”: that China would not allow “any person, organization, or political party, at any time, or by

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not reflect any official policy or positions of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. government.

¹ Michael Swaine, “China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 34, February 22, 2011.

any means, to separate from China any piece of its sovereign territory.”² He repeated this statement two months later at the CCP’s 19th National Congress, this time directing it against Taiwan, and expressed his view that Taiwan’s unification with the PRC was a prerequisite for achieving the objectives of his signature “China dream.”³ Under Xi’s watch, Beijing has intensified its military intimidation activities targeting Taiwan—largely suspended under Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao—resulting in a significant increase in military tensions in the region. Regardless of the political party in office in Taiwan, the PRC under Xi has approached its cross-strait policy with a greater sense of urgency backed by an increasingly capable and credible military threat.

This paper examines the PRC’s policy toward Taiwan under Xi and the PLA’s operational planning to support this policy’s goals. It first analyzes Beijing’s current cross-strait policy and its evolution since the administrations of former CCP general secretaries Hu and Jiang Zemin. It then explores the PLA’s interests related to Taiwan and considers how these may affect national-level policy formulation. The paper concludes with an assessment of PLA operational planning and capability development for a Taiwan campaign and explores new operational concepts that the PLA appears to be developing for an invasion of the island. Overall, the paper finds that the PRC’s policy toward Taiwan has grown increasingly uncompromising and coercive under Xi. Combined with a dramatic increase in PLA capability over the past two decades, this policy presents an increasingly serious threat to Taiwan and peace in the region.

The Contradiction of “Peaceful Unification”

Since Xi Jinping assumed office, the PRC has advanced a cross-strait policy that combines some of the most coercive elements of past leaders’ policies with an increasingly credible military threat. Under Xi, Beijing has retained—and even deepened—the beneficial economic and social policies introduced by previous top leaders intended to attract key groups in Taiwan. However, the PRC has also increased political, economic, and military pressure on Taiwan, while many of its policies designed to deepen cross-strait economic and social integration have been advanced unilaterally

² Xi Jinping, “习近平：在庆祝中国人民解放军建军90周年大会上的讲话” [Speech at Meeting to Celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the Establishment of the People’s Liberation Army], August 1, 2017.

³ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” Xinhua, November 3, 2017.

and viewed by Taipei as coercive. The PRC has also adopted a greater sense of urgency in taking steps toward unification, with Xi making clear linkages between Taiwan's unification with the mainland and the national goals contained in his vision for the "China dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Beijing's Taiwan policy under Xi has been a component of its broader uncompromising approach to sovereignty disputes in the region. At the CCP's 19th National Congress, Xi declared that "no one should harbor the fantasy that China will swallow the bitter fruit of damaging its own interests." He has used his "six any's" claim to advertise China's resolve to defend its sovereignty claims over Taiwan as well as other territory in the region.⁴ Still, Beijing maintains that Taiwan occupies a particularly important position among its national interests, with Yang Jiechi, China's highest-ranking foreign affairs official, stating in November 2018 that Taiwan remained China's "most important" and "most sensitive" issue.⁵

The PRC's interest in Taiwan, however, appears to go beyond sovereignty concerns to serving its broader geostrategic ambitions in the region and around the globe. Long a key element of PLA thinking, civilian leaders in Beijing may now also calculate that PRC control over Taiwan would improve China's strategic posture and ability to project military force worldwide. As discussed at length in its 2015 defense white paper, Beijing has cast its sights more directly on securing its "overseas interests" while preparing for a military conflict in the maritime areas surrounding and beyond Taiwan.⁶ Today, it is hard to imagine that Xi and other civilian leaders would dismiss PLA arguments in favor of controlling Taiwan to better control the region and project power deep into the western Pacific.

To understand the present direction of cross-strait policy, it is instructive to first review the evolution of Beijing's approach to Taiwan since the end of the Cold War. Through this review, it appears that Xi may possess the greatest affinity for the PLA's consistently uncompromising approach to cross-strait relations of any Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping introduced the concept of "peaceful unification" in 1979. Combined with Taiwan's hesitation to deepen cross-strait economic integration and the PRC's increasing military capability and global ambitions, the PRC under Xi seems likely to continue

⁴ "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress"; and Xi, "习近平：在庆祝中国人民解放军建军90周年大会上的讲话。"

⁵ Karen Leigh, "Chinese Envoy Gives Taiwan Hawk Bolton a Warning on U.S. Ties," Bloomberg, November 7, 2018.

⁶ Ministry of National Defense (PRC), 中国的军事战略 [China's Military Strategy] (Beijing, May 2015).

using the PLA and its other instruments of power to pressure Taipei toward political and economic negotiations on Beijing's terms.

The PRC Struggles to Attract Taiwan after the Cold War

In the early 1990s, a confluence of events prompted Beijing to seriously reappraise its Taiwan policy. Confidently free of the existential threat once posed by the Soviet Union along its northern border, the PRC emerged from the Cold War facing an unprecedentedly nonthreatening security environment. With Taiwan's transition toward multiparty democracy and the ailing health of top leader Deng Xiaoping, the PRC faced new challenges in determining the direction of its cross-strait policy. Deng had introduced a new policy of peaceful unification toward Taiwan in 1979 and even remarked that the PRC could tolerate waiting one thousand years to unify Taiwan with the mainland.⁷ However, Taiwan's democratic transition and growing interest in *de jure* independence sparked a reappraisal in Beijing of the role of the military in supporting its peaceful unification strategy.⁸ In 1993 the PRC issued its first white paper on Taiwan, in which Beijing clarified that it would retain the right to use military force to uphold its claim of sovereignty over the island. At the same time, Beijing balanced its threatening language with a number of conciliatory gestures to attempt to draw the two sides closer together, enshrined in policy in CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin's "eight-point proposal" on Taiwan introduced in 1995.⁹ Under this policy, Beijing offered to improve economic ties with Taipei and lend limited support to its economic and cultural engagement with the international community.

This relatively conciliatory approach, however, met with significant opposition from the PLA and the PRC's other national security agencies. Military leaders, who had been fundamentally uncomfortable with the implications of the PRC's peaceful unification policy and prioritization of economic development for efforts to modernize the PLA, advocated for a firmer stance on Taiwan than Jiang and other civilian leaders were

⁷ Deng Xiaoping, "On 'One Country, Two Systems'" (Beijing, June 22–23, 1984).

⁸ Tai Ming Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun: China's Central Military Commission and Its Relationship with the Military, Party, and State Decision-Making Systems," in *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000*, ed. David M. Lampton (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2001), 75; and Zhang Wannian, 张万年传 [Biography of Zhang Wannian] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2011), chap. 26.

⁹ Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 77.

willing to adopt.¹⁰ A comprehensive PLA review of cross-strait relations in early 1993 reportedly caused alarm in military circles and solidified this view that a tough response was needed to deter Taiwan's moves toward *de jure* independence.¹¹ Faced with the need to formulate a response to these developments while placating PLA hard-liners, Jiang approved PLA requests on a number of occasions to carry out military activities threatening Taiwan.¹² The most prominent example of this was the PLA's test-firing of ballistic missiles off Taiwan's coast in 1995 and 1996, which some sources suggest was intended to compensate for what military leaders viewed as the failure of the conciliatory approach advocated by more moderate civilian leaders.¹³

The PRC's approach to Taiwan hardened in the late 1990s and early 2000s as both conciliatory gestures and military intimidation appeared to do little to slow Taiwan's development of a separate political and cultural identity. During this period, Jiang spoke for the first time in broad terms of the need for a timeline for unification. In 2000, he announced that unification with Taiwan was one of the PRC's three goals in the new century, and in 2002 he warned that the PRC could not allow Taiwan's independent existence to "drag on indefinitely."¹⁴ Beijing issued a second white paper on Taiwan in 2000, introducing conditions for the use of force or adoption of other "drastic measures" to bring Taiwan under its control.¹⁵ Notably, these conditions included Taipei's permanent refusal to negotiate a unification agreement with the PRC. Shortly after the white paper's publication, Zhang Wannian, vice chairman of the PRC's Central Military Commission (CMC), reflected this newfound sense of urgency in stating to civilian delegates at a session of the 9th National People's Congress that the issue of Taiwan's unification could not continue to be "kicked down the road."¹⁶ During this

¹⁰ You Ji, "The Supreme Leader and the Military," in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Jonathan Unger (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 289–93; and Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 76.

¹¹ Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 76.

¹² Ji, "The Supreme Leader and the Military," 290; and Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 76–77.

¹³ Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 77; and Bonnie Glaser, "The PLA Role in China's Taiwan Policymaking," in *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 175.

¹⁴ Jiang Zemin, "中国共产党第十五届中央委员会第五次全体会议公报" [Report to the Fifth Plenum of the 15th Party Congress], October 11, 2000, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64568/65404/4429268.html>; and "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 16th Party Congress," Xinhua, November 17, 2002.

¹⁵ Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, *White Paper: The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue* (Taipei, February 2000).

¹⁶ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 26.

time period, the PLA carried out frequent military intimidation maneuvers, including large-scale amphibious assault and other naval and air exercises near Taiwan.¹⁷

Following Hu Jintao's consolidation of authority over decision-making by becoming CMC chairman in 2004, the PRC adopted a markedly more conciliatory approach to Taiwan policy, reflected in both its diminished use of military intimidation and its diminished sense of urgency. In 2005 the PRC passed the Anti-Secession Law, which codified the conditions under which it would use force against Taiwan. Nevertheless, a number of new developments supported Hu's decided shift in emphasis in cross-strait relations. First, Taiwan's economic investments in the PRC and a "mainland fever" among Taiwan businesses increased rapidly, despite cross-strait political tensions. Hu encouraged this trend by introducing major economic concessions to Taiwan.¹⁸ Second, he gambled that independence-leaning president Chen Shui-bian's growing unpopularity at home, coupled with the breakthrough summit between Hu and former Kuomintang (KMT) chairman Lien Chan in 2005, would pave the way for improved cross-strait ties if a KMT candidate succeeded Chen as president in 2008.¹⁹

Hu's language on Taiwan in key public speeches during the mid-2000s was remarkably nonconfrontational, despite deep concerns in the PRC—almost certainly including within the PLA—over Chen's calls for a Taiwan independence referendum and other moves toward *de jure* independence.²⁰ In his 17th Party Congress address in 2007, Hu dropped all mention of the PRC's right to use force against Taiwan, the first absence of this language at a CCP national congress in a decade, and did not repeat Jiang's remarks regarding a timeline for unification. Hu's low-key rhetoric was also matched by a notable decrease in outwardly coercive PLA activities. Beginning in at least 2006, it is difficult to identify PLA exercises overtly aimed at intimidating Taiwan.²¹

Taiwan's election of KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou in 2008 significantly eased cross-strait tensions and seemingly validated Hu's patient, lower-key approach. Beijing and Taipei quickly boosted economic ties and opened

¹⁷ Glaser, "The PLA Role in China's Taiwan Policymaking," 176; and Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 26.

¹⁸ Jianwei Wang, "Hu Jintao's 'New Thinking' on Cross-Strait Relations," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 29, no. 1 (2007): 23–34.

¹⁹ Wang, "Hu Jintao's 'New Thinking' on Cross-Strait Relations."

²⁰ Hu Jintao, "胡锦涛在庆祝建军80周年暨全军英模大会上的讲话" [speech at Military-Wide Heroes and Model Workers Meeting at the 80th Anniversary of the People's Liberation Army Founding Celebration], Xinhua, August 1, 2007, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2007-08/01/content_703414.htm; and "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress," Xinhua, October 24, 2007.

²¹ Glaser, "The PLA Role in China's Taiwan Policymaking," 177.

the “three links” of mail, transport, and trade—an outcome long sought by the PRC. Beijing also approved of Taipei’s increased engagement with the international community and dropped its opposition to Taiwan participating as an observer at the World Health Assembly in 2009. During the remainder of Hu’s second term as CCP general secretary, Beijing took purposeful steps to avoid staging military exercises near Taiwan, including during two major country-wide training events in 2009 and 2010.²² As a capstone to the apparent success of his nonconfrontational policy, Hu declared in his address at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 that Beijing must continue its “important thought of peaceful development of cross-strait relations.” In using the term “important thought” to describe the approach to cross-strait ties he had advanced since assuming office, he effectively elevated his signature contribution to Taiwan policy to the PRC’s ideological pantheon.²³

Xi Jinping’s assumption of office in late 2012 marked a decisive break, however, from the mostly patient and coercion-free development of cross-strait ties under Hu. Despite relations between Taipei and Beijing being at an all-time high, Xi quickly signaled his new approach by resuming high-profile military intimidation activities and conveying a renewed sense of urgency in bringing Taiwan under PRC control. In the summer and early fall of 2013, the PLA carried out a series of well-publicized military exercises in Fujian and Guangdong Provinces. Both areas are directly across from Taiwan and had been conspicuously devoid of this type of training activity during Hu’s tenure as CMC chairman. During one of the exercises, Assault 2013, the PLA carried out the largest army aviation exercise in its history. Dozens of attack and transport helicopters operated alongside air force, navy, and special operations forces to practice seizing key points along an adversary beach.²⁴ In another series of training events, designated Mission Action 2013, over 40,000 troops staged long-distance and amphibious landing maneuvers supported by joint firepower and information attacks.²⁵ During the drill’s final phase, Chinese media footage of the exercise headquarters “prominently displayed a map of Taiwan with military bases marked.”²⁶

²² Glaser, “The PLA Role in China’s Taiwan Policymaking,” 177.

²³ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress”; and Wang, “Hu Jintao’s ‘New Thinking’ on Cross-Strait Relations.”

²⁴ Li Yun, “陆军航空兵正在成为中国陆军新型主战力量” [Army Aviation Corps Becoming the New-Type Main Combat Strength of PLA Army], Xinhua, August 27, 2013; and “PLA Army Aviation Holds ‘Assault-2013’ Live-Fire Exercise in Eastern Guangdong,” CCTV News, August 21, 2013.

²⁵ “陈虎点兵:解放军4万人大演习背后意味着什么” [Chen Hu’s View on Military Affairs: The Implications of What Is Behind the PLA’s 40,000 Troop Big Exercise], Xinhua, September 27, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2013-09/27/c_132755914.htm.

²⁶ Glaser, “The PLA Role in China’s Taiwan Policymaking,” 177–78.

Simultaneous with this military training activity, Beijing initiated a diplomatic campaign pressuring Taiwan to move past economic integration toward resolving cross-strait political differences. At an APEC summit days before PRC media aired footage of the exercise, Xi remarked to former Taiwan vice president Vincent Siew that political differences between Taipei and Beijing “cannot be passed down from generation to generation.”²⁷ Several days later, the director of the Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhang Zhijun, publicly remarked that Xi’s words had “deep meaning,” that paying attention only to economics and not politics was not sustainable, and that the PRC was not willing to “wait passively without doing anything” to resolve political differences.²⁸ In a move possibly intended to punctuate these statements, China sailed its newly commissioned aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait for the first time in late November 2013.²⁹

With these developments, Beijing indicated that cross-strait ties under Xi would be marked by an emphasis on political issues and a new readiness to employ military pressure that many argued his predecessors had lacked. Despite Ma Ying-jeou’s embrace of the “1992 Consensus”—the framework denoting the one-China policy that Xi later insisted must form the basis for all productive cross-strait exchange—this combination of military intimidation and political pressure characterized the latter years of his tenure in office. The unprecedented summit between Ma and Xi in Singapore in November 2015, the first between leaders of both sides of the Taiwan Strait since the PRC’s establishment, was no exception. In July 2015, Beijing broadcast footage of PLA troops at a major training base staging a mock assault on a replica of Taiwan’s presidential palace, which satellite imagery showed the PLA had begun constructing the year prior.³⁰ That September, the PRC publicly announced a three-day live-fire exercise in the Taiwan Strait.³¹ The PLA Air Force also began conducting long-distance flights through sensitive airspace to the north and south of Taiwan in 2015, with the largest grouping of aircraft that year flying through the Miyako

²⁷ “习近平会见萧万长一行 强调两岸应加强交流合作” [Xi Jinping Meets Vincent Siew, Emphasizes Both Sides of Taiwan Strait Should Strengthen Exchanges, Cooperation], *Xinhua*, October 6, 2013; and Glaser, “The PLA Role in China’s Taiwan Policymaking,” 178.

²⁸ Alan D. Romberg, “From Generation to Generation: Advancing Cross-Strait Relations,” *Hudson Institution, Chinese Leadership Monitor*, no. 43, March 14, 2014.

²⁹ Claudia Liu and Sophia Wu, “China’s Carrier Fleet Did Not Cross Taiwan Strait Midline: MND,” *Focus Taiwan*, November 28, 2013.

³⁰ Victor Robert Lee, “Satellite Imagery: China Staging Mock Invasion of Taiwan?” *Diplomat*, August 9, 2015.

³¹ Ben Blanchard, “China to Hold Live-Fire Drills in Taiwan Strait,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2015.

Strait to Taiwan's north several weeks after the Singapore summit.³² At the summit, Xi used emotional terms to express to Ma his views on Taiwan's continued independent existence, declaring that Taiwan's separation from the PRC was like "the pain of the heart being gouged out of the Chinese race" and that only unification between the two sides could "wash clean" half a century of "humiliation."³³

The inauguration of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leader Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan's president in May 2016 produced an immediate and strongly negative reaction from the PRC. Tsai adopted an approach containing a number of elements consistent with the idea of the one-China policy, while reassuring Beijing of her intent to avoid the moves toward *de jure* independence pursued by her DPP predecessor, Chen Shui-bian.³⁴ However, after early signs of possible flexibility regarding the framework for cross-strait ties, Beijing ultimately suspended formal communication and began to exert significant diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan while increasing its military intimidation activities. Beginning in March 2016, Beijing began poaching Taipei's diplomatic partners, breaking the "diplomatic truce" that had existed between the two sides since 2008 and establishing ties with six countries that previously recognized Taipei.³⁵ The PRC also decreased the number of mainland tourists visiting Taiwan and began using tourism restrictions as a weapon against Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners.³⁶ In the military domain, the PLA stepped up its intimidation activities, carrying out additional publicized live-fire exercises and aircraft carrier transits in the Taiwan Strait and exerting pressure on Taiwan's less-defended eastern side by flying bombers and other aircraft around the island.³⁷

³² Mark R. Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 22–25.

³³ "习近平同马英九会面" [Xi Jinping Meets with Ma Yingjiu], Xinhua, November 7, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-11/07/c_1117071846.htm.

³⁴ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), "2016 Annual Report to Congress," November 2016, 359–61.

³⁵ USCC "2018 Annual Report to Congress," November 2018, 345–46; and Richard C. Bush, "China's Gambia Gambit and What It Means for Taiwan," Brookings Institution, March 22, 2016.

³⁶ USCC, "2016 Annual Report to Congress," 361–62; and "China Issues Travel Ban. Tourist Groups Cannot Travel to the Vatican and Palau," Central News Agency, November 22, 2017.

³⁷ Cozad and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water*, 39–41; "China Sends Carrier Through Taiwan Strait After Xi Jinping Warns against Separatism," *South China Morning Post*, March 21, 2018; and "China Holds Live-Fire Drills in Taiwan Strait," *Straits Times*, April 19, 2018.

At the CCP's 19th National Congress in October 2017, Xi indicated that his hard-line approach to Taiwan had been formalized as official PRC policy. In language more strident than any of his predecessors had used in such a forum, Xi targeted his "six any's" formula at Taiwan while declaring that China had "firm will, full confidence, and sufficient capability" to defeat any form of Taiwan's "secessionist plot."³⁸ He also dropped key language on Taiwan used by Hu and Jiang in their past Party Congress addresses, including Jiang's eight-point proposal and the ideological modifier "important thought" from Hu's signature contribution to Taiwan policy.³⁹ Despite retaining other elements of previous leaders' language describing Taiwan policy, Xi's address indicated that PRC leadership felt increasingly confident in pursuing a more uncompromising approach to cross-strait relations.

Since the Party Congress, Beijing has continued its strident rhetoric and multidimensional pressure campaign against Taiwan. At the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018, Xi once again repeated the "six any's" while declaring that any actions to "split" China would meet with the "punishment of history."⁴⁰ The PRC has also taken a number of unilateral steps to push forward political, economic, and social integration across the strait. In January 2018, Beijing expanded the use of the M503 commercial air route near Taiwan, in effect treating the island as a subordinate entity and drawing strong protests from Taipei.⁴¹ It also pressured U.S. and other foreign companies to change references to Taiwan on their websites to denote Taiwan as part of the PRC.⁴² At an impasse in mutually agreed-on steps to increase cross-strait economic interaction, Beijing introduced a number of economic incentives to attract Taiwan's citizens to study and work in the PRC that some in Taiwan have described as efforts to "dig out [Taiwan's] roots" and hollow out its economy.⁴³ For instance, in addition to tax breaks and subsidies for high-tech companies and research grants for academics, Beijing introduced policies allowing Taiwan's citizens to work in the PRC without a permit and apply for a residence card that conveys

³⁸ "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress"; and Richard C. Bush, "What Xi Jinping Said About Taiwan at the 19th Party Congress," Brookings Institution, October 19, 2017.

³⁹ "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress"; Bush, "What Xi Jinping Said About Taiwan at the 19th Party Congress"; and USCC, "2018 Annual Report to Congress," 344.

⁴⁰ "Speech Delivered by President Xi at the NPC Closing Meeting," *China Daily*, March 22, 2018.

⁴¹ USCC, "2018 Annual Report to Congress," 348; and Jess Macy Yu, "Taiwan Calls China's New Aviation Routes in Taiwan Strait Irresponsible," Reuters, January 8, 2018.

⁴² USCC, "2018 Annual Report to Congress," 347.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 355–56.

benefits related to employment, insurance, housing, and travel.⁴⁴ In response, Taipei denounced these moves as having “clear political intentions” and as a “plot...to assimilate Taiwanese into mainland Chinese society.”⁴⁵

The PLA's Approach: Bureaucratism, Fervor, and Geopolitics

While the PRC's civilian leaders have tacked between engagement and pressure, patience and urgency in their cross-strait policy, the PLA's approach to Taiwan's independent existence has been remarkably consistent since the early 1990s. Regardless of the level of political tension across the strait, the PLA has advocated for a steady military buildup and an unyielding policy to achieve Taiwan's unification with the mainland and improve the PRC's geostrategic position in the region. Evidence suggests that these recommendations have significantly influenced the policies and outlook of successive generations of civilian leaders, who have increased the PLA's announced annual budget from around \$6 billion in 1994 to \$167.2 billion in 2018.⁴⁶ Since Xi Jinping assumed office, if not before, civilian leaders have also appeared to embrace the PLA's thinking on the utility of military intimidation to Beijing's cross-strait strategy and the geostrategic implications of PRC control over Taiwan. Since the end of the Cold War, the PLA's approach to cross-strait policy has been informed by its bureaucratic interests, guidance from civilian leaders, and geostrategic considerations.

The PLA viewed preparations for a military conflict with Taiwan as its new organizing principle in the altered security environment following the end of the Cold War. With the disappearance of the existential threat posed by the Soviet Union, the PLA turned to Taiwan as the primary rationale for and driver of its modernization efforts, which suited its bureaucratic interests in an era when Deng Xiaoping had relegated the PLA to a subordinate role in China's national modernization drive.⁴⁷ In the early 1990s, Beijing issued new strategic guidelines for the PLA, which almost certainly instructed the PLA to focus its preparations for military conflict on a war with Taiwan.⁴⁸ According to the memoirs of Zhang Wannian, one of the PLA's top leaders

⁴⁴ USCC, “2018 Annual Report to Congress,” 355–56.

⁴⁵ “Taipei Counters Beijing's Bid to Lure Taiwanese Talent, Capital to Chinese Mainland,” *South China Morning Post*, March 17, 2018; and “Getting Chinese Residency Cards Called ‘Treasonous,’” *Asia Times*, September 19, 2018.

⁴⁶ USCC, “2018 Annual Report to Congress,” 175; and Richard A. Bitzinger and Chong-Pin Lin, “The Defense Budget of the People's Republic of China,” Defense Budget Project, November 1994.

⁴⁷ Zheng Jian, “Managing China's Future Security Crises,” in *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, ed. Michael Pillsbury (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1997), 105.

⁴⁸ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 21 and 22; and Ji, “The Supreme Leader and the Military,” 289.

in the 1990s responsible for developing military planning for Taiwan, the new guidelines clarified the objectives and direction of China's military modernization and determined that military training would focus on fighting a new "combat target" in a "specific battlefield environment."⁴⁹ Shortly after the guidelines were issued, Zhang conducted an intensive review of "battlefield construction" along China's southeast coast geared toward a Taiwan conflict.⁵⁰ In 1995, following what he described as the largest joint exercise ever to be held in the PLA's military area command facing Taiwan, Zhang instructed senior officers that preparing for a Taiwan conflict was the PLA's "most practical and most urgent" mission.⁵¹

The PLA has almost certainly continued to treat a conflict with Taiwan as its "primary strategic direction" and focal point for military planning and modernization despite the significant expansion of its missions since the 1990s.⁵² In 2001, Liu Yazhou, a top PLA strategist and later a political commissar of the PLA's National Defense University, authored an article claiming that cross-strait tensions "were not a bad thing" because they gave the PLA critical stimulus and guidance to prepare for next-generation warfare.⁵³ In a discussion on the subject in 2009, another PLA commentator confirmed Taiwan's continued importance to military planning and modernization, identifying the "glorious mission" of unifying Taiwan with the mainland as the PLA's most important goal since the end of Cold War.⁵⁴ In 2016, Wang Hongguang, former deputy commander of the PLA's military area command with primary responsibility for Taiwan, wrote that the East China Sea–western Pacific axis remained the PLA's primary strategic direction, with Taiwan being the primary target for "campaign-level attack."⁵⁵

The PLA has achieved significant bureaucratic success from its focus on preparing for a cross-strait conflict, which has been a major factor behind the large year-on-year budget increases it has received since the mid-1990s. Civilian leaders have approved significant budget increases regardless of

⁴⁹ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 21 and 22; and Cheung, "The Influence of the Gun," 66.

⁵⁰ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 21.

⁵¹ Ibid., chap. 26.

⁵² Sun Zhaoli, 军事战略 [Science of Strategy] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013); Wang Hongguang, "王洪光：毫不犹豫地把东海作为主要战略方向" [Wang Hongguang: Decisively Setting East China Sea as Our Primary Strategic Direction], Sohu Military, March 2, 2016, <http://mil.sohu.com/20160302/n439166167.shtml>; and Ji, "The Supreme Leader and the Military," 289.

⁵³ Liu Yazhou, "对台军事斗争的几点思考" [A Few Considerations Regarding Military Struggle against Taiwan], in *Selected Works of Liu Yazhou's Strategy*, October 10, 2001.

⁵⁴ Zheng Hui and Lin Yunhui, 六十年国事纪要军事卷 [Military Summary of 60 Years of National Affairs] (Changsha: Hunan People's Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Wang, "王洪光：毫不犹豫地把东海作为主要战略方向"

the state of cross-strait relations. During the period of Hu Jintao's relatively conciliatory approach to Taiwan, the PLA made substantial progress in its modernization program and gained a number of clear advantages over Taiwan's military.⁵⁶ In contrast, Taiwan's military budget flatlined during the years of the Ma Ying-jeou administration. By the end of Ma's tenure, the PLA's announced budget had grown to almost fifteen times the size of Taiwan's, from just short of six times in 2008.⁵⁷

PLA preparations for a Taiwan conflict have also served as a pillar of the PRC's national policy goal of peaceful unification, although PLA authors have often discussed the violent undercurrent of this policy more openly than civilian leaders. In the PLA's view, the military capability to invade or otherwise forcibly subjugate Taiwan is the only guaranteed method to achieve unification on the PRC's terms and prevent Taiwan from further consolidating its independence. Combined with the PRC's growing economic power and international stature, the PLA believes its latent and demonstrated military threat will ultimately improve the chances of bringing about a negotiated solution to the two sides' political differences without the need to risk the possible failure of a military campaign.⁵⁸ In the words of Zhang Wannian, "the more comprehensive the 'military preparation' is, the more powerful the 'diplomatic offensive' shall be...what cannot be obtained on the battlefield also cannot be obtained through negotiation."⁵⁹ Given the constant need to deter perceived "splittist" activities, the PLA has therefore found it impossible to view national policy toward Taiwan as one cleanly divided between war and peace. Rather, the PLA views cross-strait relations as being in an ongoing state of crisis requiring it to continually remind Taiwan of its ability to cause violent harm to the island.

The PLA's views on its role as an instrument of national cross-strait policy are also notable because they frequently describe Taiwan's importance to national PRC goals in far starker and emotional terms than do official documents issued by civilian leaders. PLA authors thereby unwittingly reveal some of the deepest insecurities, fears, and ambitions driving Beijing's overall Taiwan policy. According to Liu Yazhou, Taiwan's unification with

⁵⁶ Ministry of National Defense (Taiwan), *National Defense Report 2008* (Taipei, May 2008); and Ministry of National Defense (Taiwan), *National Defense Report 2015* (Taipei, October 2015). See U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington, D.C., 2016).

⁵⁷ USCC, "2015 Annual Report to Congress," November 2015, 508–9.

⁵⁸ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 26; and "台军战备训练改革评析" [Analysis and Estimates on Taiwan's Military Combat Readiness and Training Reform], 2009.

⁵⁹ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 26.

the mainland bears on the very “rise or fall” of the PRC as well as on Beijing’s ability to control the other minority populations under CCP rule. Alluding to the fall of the Ming Dynasty, Liu suggests that the PRC’s failure to control Taiwan could negate the “legality” of its political authority and doom it to collapse.⁶⁰ Speaking at the 9th National People’s Congress in 2000, Zhang Wannian claimed that Taiwan’s independent existence threatened the PRC’s “destiny” and the “higher purpose of Chinese civilization.” At a CMC meeting the year before, he remarked that the PLA would be “sinners in history” if it failed in its “sacred duty” to unify Taiwan with the PRC.⁶¹ In perhaps the most revealing reflection of PLA thinking on cross-strait relations, the 2001 edition of the Academy of Military Science’s *Science of Strategy* declares that Taiwan’s unification with the mainland bears on the PRC’s very survival and identity as a state. In the words of the document, should unification not occur,

[t]he indispensable strategic space for national revival [will] be strangled. The Chinese people and government have no ground for negotiation because this issue is related to Chinese national existence, prosperity, and honor. If a peaceful solution is blocked, there is only one way: by arms... This is the greatest and final obstacle to Chinese national revival in the 21st century that we should get rid of and it is the gravest of the 21st century’s national security strategy issues.⁶²

The PLA mixes urgency and caution in its view of the relative importance of the PRC gaining control over Taiwan compared with Beijing’s broader goals. In the same essay expressing his discomfort with Taiwan’s independence, Liu Yazhou also cautions the PRC not to view unification as an issue for which it would sacrifice its broader ambitions and interests. According to Liu, Mao considered achieving control over Taiwan to be only one element of the PRC’s overall political reconstruction, and Deng transformed the PRC’s economy without Taiwan. In this view, a ruinous conflict over Taiwan, especially one that prompted the intervention of the United States, could be self-defeating or even suicidal. However, the PLA also views Taiwan’s independence as a personal issue requiring speedy resolution. Speaking to a U.S. audience in 1996, then CMC vice chairman Chi Haotian remarked that as an “old soldier” he was “keenly aware of the deep scars that agonizing chapter [of Taiwan’s independence] has left on the

⁶⁰ Liu, “对台军事斗争的几点思考.”

⁶¹ Zhang, 张万年传, chap. 26.

⁶² Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, 军事战略 [Science of Strategy] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2001).

hearts and minds of [the PRC's] people.”⁶³ In a 2018 interview, former vice president of the Academy of Military Science, He Lei, expressed his hope that Taiwan would be unified with the PRC in the “near future” so that the PLA's next generation of leaders would not be like previous generations who waited so long their “hair turned grey.”⁶⁴

Finally, the PLA's approach to cross-strait relations is informed by an exacting and ambitious geopolitical calculus. In the view of PLA strategists, PRC control over Taiwan would position the PLA to dominate the region and unravel the alliance structure and military strategy underpinning U.S. regional influence. According to the 2001 edition of *Science of Strategy*, Taiwan “controls the shipping lanes of the western Pacific Ocean” and is a “strategic puncture point of the first island chain [stretching from Japan to the Philippines and Borneo] for China to cross into the western Pacific.”⁶⁵ Put otherwise by James Holmes of the U.S. Naval War College, control over Taiwan would increase the PRC's geostrategic leverage by “[turning] the southern flanks of Japan and South Korea” and enabling the PLA to “command” the South China Sea's northern reaches.⁶⁶ Conversely, according to the *Science of Strategy*, without controlling Taiwan, the PRC's “deep ocean defense will be lost,” and Beijing will “forever be locked to the west side” of the first island chain.⁶⁷ Although the 2013 edition of the *Science of Strategy* does not explicitly repeat this calculation, it is difficult to imagine that a more powerful PLA would have abandoned such a fundamental viewpoint.

Beyond the implications for the region, PLA strategists also view PRC control of Taiwan as overturning key undesirable tenets of the existing international order and balance of power. Stated simply by Xiao Tianliang, vice president of the PLA's National Defense University, without controlling Taiwan, the PRC will find it impossible to become a “great global power.” Xiao made this statement in 2001—well before the PRC began outlining its global ambitions more openly.⁶⁸ In a related view, Liu Yazhou argues that Beijing's efforts to control Taiwan are at their core part of a broader struggle for strength and influence with the United States, the “entire West,”

⁶³ Chi Haotian, “U.S.-China Military Ties,” in Pillsbury, *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, 65.

⁶⁴ Wang Siyu, “Lieutenant General: Hope Next Generation Won't Wait Until Hair Turns Grey to Achieve Reunification of China,” China Military Online, November 21, 2018.

⁶⁵ Peng and Yao, 军事战略.

⁶⁶ James R. Holmes, “Mahan and the South China Sea,” in *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 69.

⁶⁷ Peng and Yao, 军事战略.

⁶⁸ Xiao Tianliang, 肖天亮讲稿自选集 [Compilation of Xiao Tianliang's Selected Lectures] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2015).

and Japan. According to Liu, Taiwan functions as a U.S. “trump card” to contain the PRC, the loss of which would render Japan and South Korea much more difficult to defend and undermine the United States’ ability to maintain its power and influence in Asia.⁶⁹ Beijing’s official guidance to the PLA in recent years to increase its global presence and improve its “strategic posture” and “layout” suggests that the PRC’s civilian leaders are at minimum aware of, and most likely embrace, the PLA’s views of Taiwan’s geostrategic importance.⁷⁰

PLA Planning and Capability for Taiwan Contingencies

Assessments of the PLA approach to operational planning for a conflict with Taiwan have evolved considerably over the past two decades as PLA capabilities have grown. In the early 2000s the PLA had limited options to deal with any action it could have been ordered to take against Taiwan. The Department of Defense (DoD) annual report to Congress on Chinese military power in 2002 assessed that any military action would only be designed to force negotiations, not compel the capitulation of the Taiwan government. The report also stated that the PLA would feel a need to complete any operations fast enough to preclude third-party intervention, likely because it lacked capabilities to counter U.S. forces at any significant distance from China’s coast. Moreover, Taiwan was assessed to have had a qualitative edge in most areas; the PLA certainly would have had a hard time defeating it even without U.S. intervention.⁷¹

By 2015 the PLA had made significant progress in modernizing equipment and training to prepare for a Taiwan conflict. The DoD report that year focused on the potential for a maritime quarantine or some sort of blockade as the preferred planning option for the PLA. An amphibious invasion was described as something that would “strain China’s armed forces and invite international intervention.”⁷² The report described an amphibious invasion as something designed to “break through or circumvent shore defenses, establish and build a beachhead, transport personnel and materiel to designated landing sites in the north or south of Taiwan’s western

⁶⁹ Liu, “对台军事斗争的几点思考.”

⁷⁰ Ministry of National Defense (PRC), 中国的军事战略.

⁷¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2002* (Washington, D.C., 2002).

⁷² U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

coastline, and launch attacks to seize and occupy key targets and/or the entire island.”⁷³

The major challenge identified by the DoD that year was that China did not have sufficient amphibious lift to execute such an invasion and did not appear to be engaging in a buildup of amphibious ships to reach the required capability. Similar work done in Taiwan’s Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in 2017 assessed that the PLA had the capability to impose a blockade on Taiwan or conduct “multidimensional operations,”⁷⁴ but the report made no mention of capability for a large-scale amphibious operation, likely due to an assessed lack of amphibious lift capability. This deficiency identified in these reports was an interesting gap in capabilities, given that the PLA seemed to be developing new weapons in significant numbers in nearly every other domain of warfare.

An assessment that the PLA lacked the requisite amount of amphibious lift could have been interpreted as a sign that it was not planning for a large-scale invasion of Taiwan. Similar to the DoD reports and Taiwan’s QDR, one could have assessed that the PLA was only focused on a blockade or other more limited military options. This assessment, however, would have been challenged by a series of exercises in 2015 called Joint Action 2015. This series consisted of five exercises in different military regions that involved more than 140,000 troops from over 140 units of various types.⁷⁵ The PLA described this series as being characterized by “the full coverage of strategic and campaign forces, all-dimensional unfolding in the land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace domains and the involvement of whole systems and all the elements, with stress being laid on training in the maritime direction, missions-oriented joint training, joint operations command training, and specialized joint actions.”⁷⁶

What the PLA demonstrated in the Joint Action series is probably the best model to date to understand all the moving parts that would be involved in a PLA operation plan for Taiwan. Of particular interest to this study, the Joint Action 2015B portion appeared to be directly focused on exercising a plan for operations on the main island of Taiwan. According to

⁷³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015*.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Defense (Taiwan), *2017 Quadrennial Defense Review* (Taipei, 2017), <http://www.ustaiwandefense.com/taiwan-ministry-of-national-defense-reports>.

⁷⁵ “A Live-Fire Military Drill Kicks Off in E. China,” Xinhua, August 11, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-08/11/c_134504824.htm.

⁷⁶ “PLA Holds Series Exercise to Beef Up Combat Power in Joint Operations,” China Military Online, October 14, 2015, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-10/14/content_6722821.htm.

the DoD report in 2016, this exercise included elements of the 12th Group Army, reserve forces from what was then the Nanjing Military Region, and elements from the air force, navy, and Second Artillery Corps (now the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force).⁷⁷ These forces were supported by significant civilian elements, including the use of civilian ferries and roll-on/roll-off ships. The DoD report concluded that the “focus on operations following a landing suggests the PLA is confident in its ability to seize and to expand significant beachheads during an amphibious operation.”⁷⁸

The focus in Joint Action 2015B on follow-on, or second echelon, actions on Taiwan does not help explain how the PLA would execute its landings if it still lacks sufficient amphibious lift. While the DoD report discussed the use of civilian vessels, it was unclear whether these would be sufficient to make up for the previously assessed lack of amphibious lift to get first echelon elements onto Taiwan. One answer to this conundrum would be that the PLA still planned for a dramatic increase in construction of PLA amphibious ships. While such a buildup could come in the future, it seems increasingly unlikely that the PLA is working to develop all the required capabilities for a Taiwan operation while holding out on amphibious ship construction until some unknown time. The DoD report in 2018 addressed this issue by noting the following:

China's amphibious fleet...has in recent years focused on acquiring a small number of LPDs, indicating a near-term focus on smaller scale expeditionary missions rather than a large number of LSTs and medium landing craft that would be necessary for a large-scale direct beach assault. There is also no indication that China is significantly expanding its landing ship force at this time—suggesting that a direct beach assault operation requiring extensive lift is less likely in planning.⁷⁹

If a large buildup of amphibious ships is not the answer, then it is valuable to examine what the PLA is saying about how it would execute an amphibious operation against Taiwan—something that it seems to be revising based on recent writings.

A November 2017 article in *Renmin haijun* (the official paper of the Communist Party Committee of the PLA Navy) described how the PLA Navy is innovating in the methods it plans to use for amphibious operations.

⁷⁷ After the PLA reforms of 2016 the 12th Group Army is now the 71st, the Nanjing Military Region is now the Eastern Theater Command, and the Second Artillery is now the PLA Rocket Force.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*.

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, D.C., 2018).

The authors described the old methods as being based on old tactics for fixed amphibious operations that were very similar to those used in the Normandy landing during World War II. These old tactics were assessed as having a series of defects that would cause them to fail. The authors noted that the PLA Navy has adopted new types of equipment, such as amphibious dock landing ships and large hovercraft, and that new equipment called for new tactics. In the article, a South Sea Fleet amphibious unit was described as working on a new concept of “multi-wave joint beach landing operations with multiple types of ships from multiple directions.”⁸⁰

Of course, new types of naval amphibious tactics are not the only component of a potential PLA invasion of Taiwan. It is important to look at all the aspects of a PLA campaign design and how each makes the success of the whole operation more likely—or at least how they make the PLA more confident in its capabilities even without a large buildup of naval amphibious ships. In March 2018, LTG Wang Hongguang authored a series of articles published on a website affiliated with the *Global Times* that outlined how he thought the PLA could seize Taiwan in three days. While Wang is known for his hawkish comments and clearly could have written the article to influence his reading audience, his outline for the campaign concept provides a good framework that tracks well with PLA training and capability developments.

In Wang’s concept a PLA operation would begin with firepower operations conducted by long-range rockets, tactical aviation forces, army aviation, and naval ship-based artillery. Two key, and relatively new, aspects of these firepower operations are the long-range rockets and the army aviation. The capability of the PLA to fire high volumes of rockets onto Taiwan from the shores of mainland China is a significant new capability, and army aviation has moved from a supporting element to a main combat arm of the ground forces. The use of these types of firepower attacks would be designed to degrade Taiwan’s defenses.⁸¹ This firepower assault is key to the success of the landing operations. Wang expects that long-range precision firepower and close-air support from Z-10 attack helicopters will destroy the

⁸⁰ Zhou Qiqing and Gu Yagen, “New Tactics Are Created in the ‘Pervasive Battle Smoke’—Landing Ship Flotilla of the South Sea Fleet Organizes Tactics Innovation in Light of the Actual Conditions of Friends, Foes, and the Battlefield,” *Renmin haijun*, November 17, 2017.

⁸¹ Wang Hongguang, “为什么统一的炮声一响，‘台独’顶多撑三天” [Why ‘Taiwan Independence’ Would Only Last Three Days at Most When the Cannons of Reunification Sound], *Beijing huanqiu wang*, March 29, 2018.

beach defenses while also striking the Taiwan army's counterattack units that would be moving to counter the landing.⁸²

In addition to firepower, Wang emphasizes the use of electronic warfare (EW) and cyber operations along with special forces and psychological operations to weaken the ability of Taiwan's forces to defend against the invasion. Special operations forces would be assigned to carry out decapitation attacks against key targets on Taiwan that survived the firepower strikes. Cyber and EW operations would cut off networks and power on the island, while psychological operations would be focused on splitting the people of Taiwan from their leaders.⁸³

The most interesting parts of Wang's concept are what he called targeted and full-spectrum operations. Here is where we come to the concepts that could have transported all of those forces ashore in the scenario the PLA exercised in Joint Action 2015B. Wang describes modern landing operations as not requiring waves of attacks; instead, targets can be divided into those that will be destroyed and those that will be suppressed or overtaken. Landing forces will hit the beach and then go directly to attack their assigned targets instead of methodically building up a beachhead. Since the operations will be carefully targeted, they will require smaller numbers of troops in the landing force. These targeted landings will be substantially assisted by full-spectrum operations involving alternative means of getting troops into Taiwan beyond traditional beach landings. Airdropped forces will seize airfields and ports, while army aviation units will rely on ships to support helicopter operations, enabling them to shorten flight times and increase combat efficiency.⁸⁴

While Wang's articles could be dismissed as propaganda or information operations aimed at Taiwan, they contain interesting elements that seem to be supported by other sources like the previously cited *Renmin haijun* article. Another interesting article appeared in *Jiefangjun bao* in October 2018. This article describes what the authors term a "profound change" in amphibious operations.⁸⁵ Three key elements of this change are the size of landings, the incorporation of multidimensional effects and nonlinear operations, and the means of logistical support to be employed. In each of

⁸² Wang Hongguang, "武统台湾怎么打? 六种战法三天拿下" [How Will China Take Taiwan by Force? PLA Lieutenant General: Six Types of Military Operations, Take it in Three Days], *Beijing huanqiu wang*, March 27, 2018.

⁸³ Wang, "为什么统一的炮声一响, '台独'顶多撑三天."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Shi Yixing and Wu Zhidan, "两栖作战, 战争舞台的常青树" [Amphibious Operations, the "Evergreen Tree" in the Forest of Warfare], *Jiefangjun bao*, October 20, 2018.

these areas the authors contend that old models are now outdated due to advances in science and technology as well as weapons development.

The authors' emphasis on new technology is demonstrated by their comment that traditional amphibious operations had to rely on large numbers of forces due to the limited level of equipment development. In older operations it was important to seize a beachhead to create conditions allowing follow-on forces to break out and attack in-depth. Similar to Wang's articles, these authors focus on direct attacks on key nodes and targets without a methodical buildup of forces both off and onshore. These attacks on the key nodes will be enabled by precision firepower as well as electronic, network, and psychological warfare efforts.⁸⁶ An additional enabler that traditional landings did not have is the use of smart decision systems and big data support for planning. The authors describe the merging of brain and machine allowing the conversion of information superiority into decision-making superiority. This will allow commanders to dynamically control the situation so that they will not need as many forces to achieve objectives.

The linear nature of traditional amphibious operations is described by the authors as a focus on breaking through beach defenses. The traditional model relied on amphibious landing ships and craft, amphibious armored vehicles, and ship-mounted fire-support equipment. This has changed with the development of large amphibious assault ships that can deliver forces using air-cushioned landing craft and helicopters. Supporting these are new precision firepower and airborne landing platforms that enable raids on targets farther inland. The linear nature of traditional landings will also be broken by reconnaissance and attack drones and a variety of unmanned aerial and undersea platforms.

What does this all mean? The key here is to focus on the comment from the 2017 DoD report indicating that the lack of a large buildup of amphibious ships means that a direct beach assault on Taiwan is a less likely element of PLA planning. Instead of interpreting this to mean that the PLA is not considering an invasion of Taiwan, a better interpretation is that the PLA is not thinking of conducting a traditional type of beach landing that would require the large-scale buildup of amphibious ships. Rather, the PLA appears to be working on new methods of getting forces ashore, supplemented by precision firepower and other advances in technology. It is also, as demonstrated in Joint Action 2015B, focused on what its forces would do once on Taiwan to force Taipei's capitulation. This means that the challenge of warning about potential PLA operations against Taiwan is now

⁸⁶ Shi and Wu, “两栖作战，战争舞台的常青树。”

harder than it was in the past. U.S. and Taiwan analysts can no longer rely on looking for large amphibious ship construction to determine China's military intentions for the island.

Conclusion

With the CCP's removal of term limits for its highest leadership post, it appears the uncompromising and coercive approach Beijing has taken to cross-strait relations since Xi Jinping assumed office will continue or even intensify. The PLA's efforts to improve its capabilities and campaign planning for an invasion of Taiwan may further embolden Beijing in carrying out this strategy. As evidenced by the U.S. 2018 National Defense Strategy's labeling of the PRC as a "strategic competitor" to the United States, the PLA threat to Taiwan, the region, and the United States is much greater today than it was under any of Xi's predecessors. The PLA's increasingly frequent exercises and other coercive activities targeting Taiwan, therefore, present a much more serious danger than when Beijing last carried out an intimidation campaign in the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, the PRC's coercive strategy does not appear to have prompted any greater willingness in Taiwan to countenance a negotiated end to cross-strait political differences on Beijing's terms. It is also far from certain that Beijing feels confident that it could successfully prosecute an invasion or other decisive military campaign against Taiwan, especially given the probability of U.S. intervention in a conflict. With the PRC's expanding litany of national interests, Chinese leaders may not view a complete deterioration of cross-strait ties as worth the damage a crisis or conflict would cause to its other interests and goals. Writing in 2001, Liu Yazhou argued that it would be a terrible mistake to view "China's destiny as resting on the gain or loss of a single island."⁸⁷ With the PRC's growing military strength and sense of urgency, however, the current leadership in Beijing does not appear willing to wait to take actions to force Taipei closer into its orbit. And while Beijing may not yet be ready to risk an offensive operation across the Taiwan Strait, behind every one of its coercive actions will be the prospect of a devastating military conflict.

⁸⁷ Liu, "对台军事斗争的几点思考."

The China Dream and the Near Seas

Kristen Gunness

The approach of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to securing its interests in the near seas will have an impact on its role in the region, its relationship to the United States and other regional powers, and regional stability.¹ This paper discusses China's security interests in the near seas, including managing territorial disputes; securing sea lines of communication (SLOC) and trade, resources and food, and Chinese ports and mainland coastal areas; and fostering China's growth as a regional power. It then examines China's military objectives in the near seas: (1) defending maritime claims and economic interests, (2) securing maritime approaches and SLOCs, (3) preventing U.S. or allied forces from attacking China's mainland, and (4) providing regional security.

Next, the paper highlights improvements in the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including the surface warfare and submarine fleet; airlift and sealift capabilities; coastal defense assets; attack and bomber aircraft; short- and medium-strike assets; cyber, space, and information warfare capabilities; and civilian and paramilitary maritime capabilities. There are four implications: (1) although China's security interests for the near seas are unlikely to change in the coming years, Beijing's angst could grow as factors such as a worsening U.S.-China relationship, evolving regional alliances and partnerships, and slowing economic growth challenge and constrain Chinese leaders, (2) the PLA will continue to prioritize developing high-end regional maritime capabilities that exploit traditional

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¹ For this paper, the "near seas" include the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Yellow Sea. Also, it is worth noting that while the U.S. Department of Defense uses the terms "near seas" and "far seas," China uses the terms "offshore" (*jinhai*) and "far seas" or "open seas" (*yuanhai*).

and new domains such as space, information, and cyber, (3) how the PLA approaches near-seas contingencies and what capabilities it focuses on might indicate the types of capabilities they are building for missions abroad, and (4) the PLA will continue to hone capabilities that bolster China's reputation as a regional power such as SLOC protection, counterpiracy patrols, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

The China Dream and China's Maritime Power

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has outlined a vision of China's revitalization as a great power, referred to by President Xi Jinping as the "China dream." This dream lays out policy objectives to ensure China's economic prosperity, social stability, and an overall higher quality of life for Chinese citizens. It also contains policy objectives related to expanding the country's national power through modernizing the military to protect China's interests at home and abroad.²

Maritime power is an essential component of Xi's China dream. Significant economic growth and expanding security interests abroad, continued unresolved sovereignty issues (including Taiwan and the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas), security of regional maritime trade, and the ability to protect SLOCs require China to focus on building maritime power. This focus has been increasingly evident in official PRC documents such as the 2015 defense white paper, *China's Military Strategy*, which extensively discusses maritime concerns, including over seaborne trade and the protection of territorial and economic interests.³ The 2019 defense white paper, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, lists "to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests" as one of the main defense goals, focusing on territorial sovereignty and maritime delimitation issues as

² These goals were reiterated in Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress. See "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm. For a comprehensive discussion of the China dream, see Timothy R. Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); "Xi Jinping chuxi zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [Speech by Xi Jinping at the Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Work], *Xinhua*, November 29, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm; and "Xi Jinping: Jianchi zongti guojia anquan guan, zou Zhongguo tese guojia anquan daolu" [Xi Jinping: Commit to a Grand National Security Concept, a Roadmap for National Security with Chinese Characteristics], *Xinhua*, April 14, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm.

³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm.

among the range of security risks that China faces.⁴ Xi has also emphasized the requirement for China to become what he has called a “true maritime power,” meaning the capability to protect PRC maritime interests in the near seas and increasingly the far seas, stating that “a strong navy is a symbol of a world-class army and is a pivot for building the nation into a great maritime power.”⁵ From Beijing’s perspective, China’s growth as a nation is inextricably tied to its growth as a maritime power, which in turn requires a capable navy.

PLA leaders, therefore, are devoting an increasing amount of resources to the development and improvement of the PLA Navy and other Chinese maritime capabilities, including the China Coast Guard (CCG) and China Maritime Militia.⁶ In addition to building its naval prowess, the PLA continues to hone other capabilities for a near-seas contingency, including fielding improvements to the PLA Air Force and PLA Rocket Force to conduct offensive and defensive offshore operations such as strike, air, and missile defense, strategic mobility, and early warning and reconnaissance missions.⁷ The next section will examine China’s primary security interests in the near seas.

The Near Seas and China’s Security Interests

China is grappling with numerous security concerns related to its interests in the near seas, and its approach to securing or defending these interests will ultimately affect its role in the region, its relationships to the United States and other regional powers, and regional stability. This in turn will affect whether Xi Jinping can truly achieve the China dream as he and the CCP envisions it. China’s security interests in the near seas include: territorial disputes, the security of SLOCs and trade routes, resource and food security, the security of Chinese ports and mainland coastal areas, and regional power.

⁴ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

⁵ “Xi Calls for ‘Strong, Modern’ Navy,” China Military, May 24, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-05/24/content_7616327.htm.

⁶ For an in-depth discussion on China’s views of maritime power and its efforts to build its maritime capabilities, see Michael McDevitt, “Becoming a Great ‘Maritime Power’: A Chinese Dream,” CNA, June 2016, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/IRM-2016-U-013646.pdf.

⁷ U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2017* (Washington, D.C., May 2017), 49–55, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF.

Maritime Territorial Disputes

China is involved in numerous maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, some of which go back decades or even centuries. The PRC's ability to win these claims has implications for its security interests and role as a regional power. Much of the disputed territory in the East and South China Seas is rich in natural resources, including hydrocarbons and natural gas critical to Chinese energy policies. Moreover, China's militarization of disputed islands, such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, increases the potential for the PLA to deploy aircraft, missiles, and missile defense systems to any of its constructed islands, boosting China's power projection and extending its operational range south and east by as far as one thousand kilometers.⁸ In terms of regional power, Chinese leaders view the ability to defend (or pursue) maritime claims in the face of growing assertiveness from regional nations such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan as important to China's pursuit of regional—if not global—power status.

Currently, disputes in which China is a claimant include the Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu by China; claimed by Japan, Taiwan, and China), the Spratly Islands (called Nansha by China; claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei), Scarborough Shoal (called Huangyan Dao by China; claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines), and the Paracel Islands (called Xisha by China; claimed by China and Vietnam).⁹ And, of course, there is the unresolved issue of Taiwan, which the CCP has named a “core interest” (*hexin liyi*) under the umbrella of “protecting national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unification.”¹⁰

The Security of SLOCs and Trade Routes

Major commercial shipping routes pass through China's near seas and in particular the South China Sea. For example, an estimated \$3.4 trillion worth of international shipping trade passes through the South China Sea

⁸ “China's Maritime Disputes: A CFR InfoGuide Presentation,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/chinas-maritime-disputes?cid=otr-marketing_use-china_sea_InfoGuide#!/chinas-maritime-disputes?cid=otr-marketing_use-china_sea_InfoGuide.

⁹ Ronald O'Rourke, “Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Disputes Involving China: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R42784, September 15, 2017, 7–8, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=804483>.

¹⁰ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Peaceful Development* (Beijing, September 6, 2011), http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7126562.htm.

each year, or about 21% of global trade in 2016.¹¹ China is particularly reliant on access to the South China Sea, which includes the Malacca Strait, with over 64% of China's maritime goods transiting the waterway in 2016. Other regional actors rely on the South China Sea as well: for example, nearly 42% of Japan's maritime trade passed through it in the same year.¹²

Over the past decade, Chinese leaders have emphasized the security risk created by China's reliance on the South China Sea and especially the Strait of Malacca. Xi Jinping's predecessor, Hu Jintao, warned of the risk of trade disruption by "certain major powers" as far back as 2003, and this has led China to seek to develop alternative shipping routes.¹³ The most recent manifestation of this strategy is Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. China has pledged to spend an estimated \$150 billion per year on infrastructure and trade route development, the maritime component of which is called the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The goal of the Maritime Silk Road is to better connect China, economically as well as physically, to Eurasia through increased access to ports and the construction of new port facilities, as well as expanding maritime trading partnerships with BRI countries.¹⁴

Resource and Food Security

China's pursuit of energy security continues as the country modernizes and its economy grows, necessitating greater amounts of oil, gas, and other forms of energy. Although Beijing's search for energy security has been global, regionally it has focused on the East and South China Seas for oil and gas exploration. Figures vary substantially, but the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that there are approximately 11 billion barrels and 190 trillion cubic feet of proved and probable oil and natural gas reserves in the South China Sea and 200 million barrels of oil and anywhere from one to two trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves in the East China Sea.¹⁵ Although there have been several disputes over oil and gas reserves in the near seas between China and regional nations—for example, the 2014

¹¹ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), China Power, August 2, 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea>.

¹² "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?"

¹³ Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma,'" Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, April 12, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-malacca-dilemma>.

¹⁴ Johnathan E. Hillman, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later," CSIS, January 25, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-five-years-later-0>.

¹⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "South China Sea," February 7, 2013, https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/regions_of_interest/South_China_Sea/south_china_sea.pdf.

standoff between China and Vietnam over the PRC's Hai Yang Shi You 981 (HYSY 981) drilling rig in the South China Sea¹⁶—China is attempting to use its economic clout to sway regional nations to enter into energy exploration partnerships. For example, in November 2018, Xi Jinping and Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte signed a memorandum for joint oil and gas development in contentious waters.¹⁷

In addition to energy security, China's near seas are home to contested fisheries and marine resources that are important to the PRC for food security and the maritime economy, including exports of fish. In 2017, for example, China held the number one spot for export of frozen fish, amounting to \$2.7 billion, or 11.6% of all exported frozen fish globally.¹⁸ The South China Sea alone accounts for more than 12% of the global catch.¹⁹

The Security of Chinese Ports and Mainland Coastal Areas

China is the largest export economy in the world and relies extensively on sea freight for shipping. It is therefore unsurprising that the country is also home to seven of the world's ten busiest ports.²⁰ Of China's ten largest ports, six can only be reached by sailing via the Yellow Sea.²¹ These ports include Qingdao, Shanghai, and Tianjin, some of the largest in the world in terms of throughput of containers.²² Given this, protecting access to these ports from the maritime approaches such as the Yellow Sea is a security concern for Beijing.

Regional Power

Finally, a broader but no less important security issue to CCP leaders is to foster China's rise as a regional power that is increasingly connected to

¹⁶ Michael Green et al., "Counter-Coercion Series: China-Vietnam Oil Rig Standoff," CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, June 12, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-oil-rig-standoff>.

¹⁷ Sarah Zheng, "As Beijing and Manila Shake Hands on South China Sea Energy Deal, Backlash from Filipino Critics Begins," *South China Morning Post*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2174282/beijing-and-manila-shake-hands-south-china-sea-energy-deal>.

¹⁸ Daniel Workman, "Frozen Fish Exports by Country," World's Top Exports, May 1, 2019, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/frozen-fish-exports-country>.

¹⁹ South China Sea Expert Working Group, "A Blueprint for Fisheries Management and Environmental Cooperation in the South China Sea," CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, September 13, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/coc-blueprint-fisheries-environment>.

²⁰ Alexander Simoes, "China," Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn>.

²¹ McDewitt, "Becoming a Great 'Maritime Power,'" 7.

²² "Top 50 World Container Ports," World Shipping Council, <http://www.worldshipping.org/about-the-industry/global-trade/top-50-world-container-ports>.

Southeast Asia and Eurasia. The maritime trade routes through the near seas are essential to this vision. A white paper published in 2017 titled *China's Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative* outlines efforts to build new maritime routes and connections.²³ Part of China's growth as a regional power also includes being able to aid nations in the region when called upon, such as during natural disasters. China has been criticized in the past for not responding quickly enough (or at all) during times of crisis. For example, in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the United States provided substantial aid to the Philippines, whereas China did little, offering only a small sum of aid money.²⁴ The PLA's efforts to build HADR capabilities reflects growing awareness in Beijing that regional powers need to be able to provide security assistance when required.²⁵

China's Military Objectives in the Near Seas

Given the economic and security interests described above and the increasing operational imperative for China to be able to defend and secure its interests in the near seas, how have China's near-seas military objectives evolved? Here too we see the influence of the China dream on PRC military objectives in the maritime domain: in a 2017 speech, Xi Jinping stated that the PLA must be ready to "fight and win wars" as China would never compromise on defending its sovereignty.²⁶ During his marathon speech at the 19th National Party Congress, Xi emphasized the connection between the China dream and building a powerful military, including a world-class navy.²⁷ The PLA reorganization, started in 2015 and currently ongoing, embodies this sentiment and includes a focus on developing the PLA Navy and other maritime assets. China's military objectives in the near seas include defending its maritime claims and economic interests, securing maritime approaches and SLOCs, preventing or deterring U.S. military

²³ "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative," PRC, June 20, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm.

²⁴ "Typhoon Haiyan: China Sends Relief Team to the Philippines," BBC, November 20, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24997186>.

²⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, no. 47, June 2006, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf.

²⁶ "China Focus: 'Be Ready to Fight and Win Wars,' China's Xi Orders Reshaped PLA," Xinhua, August 1, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-08/01/c_136491455.htm.

²⁷ "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress."

forces from attacking China's mainland during conflict, and providing regional security.

Defending China's Maritime Claims and Economic Interests

One of China's primary military objectives is preventing U.S. or allied forces from countering China's enforcement of maritime claims, control of maritime territory, and defense of the PRC shoreline in a conflict with a regional adversary. The PLA is addressing this security concern by building capabilities to enforce its disputed claims to sovereignty over islands and other land features in the East and South China Seas, prevent "large-scale plundering" of oil and gas fields, and defend claims to its exclusive economic zones (EEZs).²⁸ China's ongoing building of military installations in the South China Sea also fits under this objective, including bases in the Spratly Islands that host anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles.²⁹ Airfields and hangars are also being constructed, and it is likely that the bases will host PLA Air Force bombers and combat aircraft in the future.³⁰ The increasingly regular combat air patrols in the South China Sea are also an example of the PRC expanding its military presence and normalizing its operational tempo in the region to defend its maritime interests.³¹

Securing Maritime Approaches and SLOCs

A second important military objective in the near seas is developing the ability to achieve control over the maritime approaches to China (in the air and sea) and defend important SLOCs. China's 2004 defense white paper first articulated this goal of maritime control by expanding the PLA Navy's offshore defensive operations in the near seas to protect PRC maritime interests:

The PLA Navy is responsible for safeguarding China's maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its territorial seas along with its maritime rights

²⁸ M. Taylor Fravel, "Maritime Security in the South China Sea and the Competition over Maritime Rights," in *Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea*, ed. Patrick Cronin, (Washington D.C.: Center for New American Security 2012), 31–50; and Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 100.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019* (Washington, D.C., May 2019), ii, https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹ "Chinese Air Force Patrols the South China Sea," China Military, November 23, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-11/23/content_7840210.htm.

and interests. The Navy has expanded the space and extended the depth for offshore defensive operations. Preparation for maritime battlefield is intensified and improved while the integrated combat capabilities are enhanced in conducting offshore campaigns, and the capability of nuclear counter-attacks is also enhanced.³²

The 2015 defense white paper further discusses the need for China to be able to defend strategic SLOCs and highlights the PLA's efforts to address this vulnerability through building maritime capability:

It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.³³

Preventing or Deterring U.S. Military Forces from Attacking China's Mainland during Conflict

Many of the PLA's capabilities are aimed at countering or deterring U.S. military forces from intervening in a regional conflict (referred to as counter-intervention by China and anti-access/area denial by the West). Building the military capabilities to defend China's interests in the near seas also serves to counter or deter an adversary's forces from attacking the Chinese mainland. For example, the PLA Navy's increased deployment in the region as well as the construction of military installations in the South China Sea could be viewed as part of a broader counter-intervention effort by China to deter U.S. involvement in a conflict by turning its near seas into a "buffer zone."

Providing Regional Security

A final military objective in the near seas is fostering China's status as a regional power through developing military capabilities to be a provider of nontraditional security. This includes HADR, peacetime SLOC protection, and counterpiracy patrols. For example, the PLA participated in Cooperation Spirit 2017, a series of tabletop exercises focused on joint HADR with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.³⁴ The PLA also

³² State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing, December 2004), en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004.html.

³³ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*.

³⁴ "Cooperation Spirit 2017' HADR Tabletop Exercise Concludes in China," China Military, December 11, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-11/23/content_7840210.htm.

conducts regular deployments of its hospital ship, the *Peace Ark*, in the region and beyond and continues honing its naval skills through ongoing antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.

Capabilities for Near-Seas Contingencies

Over the past decade, the PLA has focused on building the capabilities and operational skills necessary to meet the above military objectives in the near seas and, in the case of maritime territorial disputes, provide PRC leaders with a range of options from civilian and paramilitary forces to PLA Navy capabilities. The PLA reorganization effort, though still evolving, increases navy personnel, ships, and resources. In fact, the PLA Navy, with over three hundred ships, is now the largest navy in the region.³⁵ Beijing's level of investment in the navy is an indicator of the importance of building maritime capability to PRC leaders. The following discussion presents examples of specific capabilities in the maritime domain in which the PLA is investing that could be used in near-seas contingencies.

Surface combatants. The PLA Navy is continuing construction of various models of surface combatants, with the next generation of new guided-missile destroyers (DDG) and guided-missile frigates (FFG) a significant upgrade to the PLA Navy's air defense, anti-ship, and antisubmarine capabilities.³⁶

The submarine force. The PLA Navy is slated to significantly increase its number of nuclear-powered attack and ballistic missile submarines (the force currently includes six and four, respectively).³⁷ The navy has made modest improvements to undersea warfare capabilities, including use of Jin-class nuclear attack submarines to provide a sea-based nuclear deterrent.³⁸ Additionally, according to PLA media, a new marine rescue squadron has been deployed to "rescue ships, [deploy] life-saving equipment and divers to save lives, resolve submarine-related problems and respond to emergencies, to minimize losses in submarine accidents."³⁹

³⁵ "Reform to Downsize PLA Army, Boost Navy Numbers," China Military, July 12, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-07/12/content_7672557.htm.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁸ "Does China Have an Effective Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrent?" CSIS, China Power Team, December 28, 2015, <https://chinapower.csis.org/ssbn>.

³⁹ "PLA Navy Sets Up Another Marine Rescue Squadron," China Military, October 20, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-10/20/content_7794999.htm.

Airlift/sealift. The PLA is building more strategic airlift and sealift capacity that can aid in near-seas missions. China has fielded its Y-20 large transport aircraft and the world's largest seaplane, the AG600, which will supplement and eventually replace the old Il-76 long-range transport aircraft.⁴⁰ The large transports are intended to support airborne command and control, logistics, paradrop, aerial refueling, strategic reconnaissance operations, and HADR missions, and will largely negate the strategic airlift deficiency that had previously hampered the PLA.⁴¹ In addition, the PLA Navy continues to build a large number of fleet replenishment oilers for at-sea refueling and is starting to use civilian ships to supply navy ships. For example, in December 2019, Xinhua news agency reported that a PLA Navy supply ship made its first transfer at sea from a civilian vessel. The transfer followed from a PLA study that looked at ways to replenish ships at sea, which would enable longer deployments without having to return to the mainland.⁴² All of this will extend deployment times and negate the need for ships to return to the mainland, allowing the PLA Navy to better control tracts of disputed waterways in East Asia.

Attack and bomber aircraft. The PLA has taken steps to improve navy and air force attack and bomber aircraft, including the medium-range H-6K bomber. These can field six land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), giving the PLA precision-strike capability to reach targets as far as Guam.⁴³

Coastal Defense Assets

The PLA is investing in coastal defense capabilities including cruise missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, submarine-launched torpedoes, and naval mines. These capabilities can be used in various near-seas contingencies, highlighted by their incorporation into PLA joint exercises. For example, in August 2017 the PLA held a multi-fleet live-fire exercise simultaneously in the Yellow Sea and Bo Hai, with naval ships, submarines, aircraft, and coastal defense units, as well as air

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, D.C., May 2018), 29, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>.

⁴¹ "Chinese Large Freighter Plane Enters Military Service," *China Daily*, July 7, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/06/c_135492568.htm.

⁴² "Naval Resupply Advance Gives China New Edge in Maritime Disputes," *Voice of America*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/naval-resupply-advance-gives-china-new-edge-maritime-disputes>.

⁴³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, 34.

force participation.⁴⁴ In June 2018 the PLA conducted island encirclement exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan that combined coastal defense capabilities with naval and air assets.⁴⁵

Short- and medium-range strike. The PLA continues to upgrade its short- and medium-strike capabilities through the PLA Rocket Force. This includes increasing the number and capability of anti-ship ballistic missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, and land-attack cruise missiles.⁴⁶

Cyber, space, and information warfare. The PLA established the Strategic Support Force (SSF) in 2015 to better integrate cyber, space, and information warfare capabilities into China's overall military operations. The SSF is still evolving, but it is expected to enhance the PLA's ability to conduct cyberwarfare, use space-based assets in a conflict, and increase information warfare capabilities—all relevant should a near-seas contingency occur.⁴⁷

Personnel increases and training. Though PLA Navy personnel are being added across the service, the most significant increase appears to be to the PLA Navy Marine Corps, which is set to expand from two brigades and 10,000 personnel to seven brigades with potentially 30,000 personnel by 2020.⁴⁸ The marines are training for amphibious assault missions, which would be used in a Taiwan contingency, as well as to defend China's South China Sea military outposts.

In addition, the PLA has stepped up efforts to train personnel in realistic combat conditions in near-seas contingency scenarios. For example, recent PLA articles have highlighted the PLA Navy's East Sea Fleet's live-fire confrontation exercises in the Yellow Sea, where sailors were tested under realistic conditions in unfamiliar areas.⁴⁹ Another article discussed the East Sea Fleet's joint confrontation exercises, which involved multiple types

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* 2018, 7.

⁴⁵ "PLA Conducts Island Encirclement Exercises around Taiwan," China Military, June 27, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/27/content_8071402.htm.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* 2018, 36.

⁴⁷ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2018), 1, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* 2019, 36.

⁴⁹ Zhao Lei, "Navy Training Exercises Deemed Success," *China Daily*, April 24, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-04/24/content_29050321.htm.

of ships and fighter aircraft.⁵⁰ Other PLA articles discuss the PLA Navy's training in the South China Sea, focusing on exercises staged from the Sanya Training Base.⁵¹ One article highlights a destroyer flotilla air-defense drill, with a commander stating that such training is essential for the PLA Navy to generate combat power given the variety of capabilities now at its disposal.⁵²

Honing psychological warfare and messaging capabilities. Though not a strictly military capability, China has continued to emphasize psychological warfare and political messaging in the near seas. PRC messaging on maritime issues in the near seas has become more nuanced over time and includes both military and civilian channels. This includes political signaling through state media emphasizing China's claims to disputed waters and territory and, increasingly, comments rationalizing China's buildup of military capabilities in the South China Sea in response to U.S. military presence. For example, during a freedom of navigation operation conducted by the USS *Hopper* on January 17, 2018, the PRC media warned the ship to leave Chinese waters and accused the United States of being behind the "militarization" of the South China Sea. The article further warned that "such reckless behavior will only hit a brick wall."⁵³

Another example is China's use of propaganda aimed at preventing implementation of the 2016 arbitration award in its dispute with the Philippines, messaging that "China's rights in the South China Sea are unaffected by the tribunal ruling."⁵⁴ Continued emphasis on political signaling and commentary to justify Chinese actions and cast doubt on U.S. intentions in the region will be the norm as China builds its maritime capabilities.

Growing civilian and paramilitary maritime capabilities. In addition to the above PLA capabilities, China is rapidly developing robust civilian and paramilitary maritime capabilities to better conduct gray-zone activities in

⁵⁰ Liu Yaxun, "East Sea Fleet Organizes Dissimilar Vessels and Aircraft to Carry Out Sea-Air Joint Confrontation Exercise; Navy Commander Issues Orders for Air Force Early Warning Aircraft," *Liberation Army Daily*, November 9, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-11-09/docifynrsrf3073460.shtml>.

⁵¹ Wu Yonghua, "Big Battles of Offense and Defense Staged Together as Navy Uses Sanya Training Base to Organize Continuous 36-Hour Double-Blind Opposing-Forces Training Exercise," *Renmin haijun*, June 17, 2015; and "PLA Navy to Conduct Far-Sea Training," China Military, February 13, 2017, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2017-02/13/content_4772388.htm.

⁵² Jiu Yongyan, Wang Dong, and Wang Keman, "The Ship Kunming of a Destroyer Flotilla Writes a Glorious Chapter in Its Voyage on the Deep Blue Sea," *Renmin haijun*, May 9, 2017.

⁵³ "U.S. Navy's Reckless Operations in South China Sea Will Only Hit a Brick Wall," China Military, January 23, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-01/23/content_7917755.htm.

⁵⁴ Cecily Liu, "China's Rights over South China Sea 'Unaffected' by Tribunal Ruling," *China Daily*, July 26, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-07/26/content_26218627.htm.

the near seas—meaning the use of tactics that fall just below the traditional definition of war—through a mix of civilian and military actors, ambiguous objectives, and aggression short of outright conflict. Examples include building the CCG patrol ship fleet to over 130 ships, making it the largest in the world and giving it the capability to conduct extended offshore operations in multiple locations.⁵⁵ The CCG also operates more aggressively than other coast guards around the world, with larger, more heavily armed ships.⁵⁶ For example, the CCG's lead Type 818 vessel includes 30-mm close-in weapons systems (CIWS, type 630), and naval guns.⁵⁷ The CCG routinely patrols the South China Sea and has also been spotted in the East China Sea. In at least one case, its vessels intruded into Japan's territorial waters.⁵⁸ In 2018 the CCG was officially merged into the military command structure and placed under the People's Armed Police, which falls under the Central Military Commission. This reorganization could facilitate closer coordination between the CCG and PLA Navy.⁵⁹

The PRC is also building a maritime militia that supports PLA Navy and CCG operations such as protecting maritime claims and assisting with reconnaissance and surveillance activities, particularly in the South China Sea.⁶⁰ Although the militia is considered a civilian organization and thus theoretically allows China to enforce its claims in a less escalatory manner than deploying the PLA Navy, the maritime militia has proved increasingly aggressive in its engagement with regional vessels. For example, the militia has been involved in numerous instances of harassment of Vietnamese fishing vessels deemed to be in China's territorial waters. The maritime militia also played a role in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff and the 2014 standoff with the Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil rig. It would

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, 56.

⁵⁶ Lyle J. Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards in the Asia-Pacific Is upon Us," RAND Corporation, March 8, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/03/the-era-of-coast-guards-in-the-asia-pacific-is-upon.html>.

⁵⁷ "China Arms Type 818 Coastguard Ship with Close-In Weapons System," Jane's Navy International, April 13, 2017.

⁵⁸ Jiji Kyodo, "Two Chinese Coast Guard Vessels Intrude into Japanese Waters," *Japan Times*, July 17, 2017.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, 53.

⁶⁰ For a comprehensive overview of China's maritime militia, see Connor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA," U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, China Maritime Report, no. 1, March 2017, http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Naval-War-College_CMSI_China-Maritime-Report_No-1_People%E2%80%99s-Armed-Forces-Maritime-Militia-Tethered-to-the-PLA_Kennedy-Erickson_201703.pdf.

likely be deployed along with the CCG and PLA Navy in any future maritime incident.⁶¹

Implications

China's growth as a regional power and Xi Jinping's articulation of the China dream illustrate the priority that CCP leadership places on China's ability to secure its maritime interests in the region. Near-seas contingencies—territorial and resource conflicts involving Japan, Taiwan, or various nations in the South China Sea—are some of the most challenging conflicts the PLA is likely to face, potentially involving not only robust regional forces but also U.S. military intervention. As this paper highlights, the PLA's modernization efforts have prioritized the building of more robust naval and maritime capabilities to better meet the maritime challenges present on China's periphery. Several implications arise from this discussion.

First, China's security interests and military objectives for the near seas are unlikely to change in the coming years, barring major regional conflict. However, Beijing's angst over protecting its security interests in the region could grow as geopolitical factors such as a worsening U.S.-China relationship, increased great-power competition, evolving regional alliances and partnerships, and, potentially, slowing economic growth create challenges and constraints for PRC leaders. This could lead China to be more assertive in the near seas, such as on territorial disputes, should the country feel that its status as a regional power is threatened or its influence diminished.

Second, the PLA is likely to continue to prioritize building the capabilities highlighted in this paper to defend its maritime claims and economic interests, secure maritime approaches, and focus on counter-intervention in the near seas. As China grows as a regional power, these capabilities seem to be increasingly important to Beijing, judging from the emphasis placed on developing high-end regional naval capabilities such as advanced surface ships and submarines, and on investing in other components of maritime power such as the CCG and maritime militia. The focus on building near-seas capabilities can also be seen in the establishment of new organizations such as the Strategic Support Force that aim to exploit capabilities in the space, information, and cyber domains.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, 56.

All of these capabilities are critical in the event of a regional maritime territorial contingency.

Third, increasingly, PLA writings on China's maritime strategy lean toward a blended approach to near-seas and far-seas missions. To wit, the name of the PLA Navy's current strategy is "Near Seas Defense, Far Seas Protection" (*jinhai fangyu, yuanghai huwei*), which is emphasized in the 2015 defense white paper.⁶² This strategy is an evolution from the previous strategy of near-seas defense, which the PLA Navy had held since 1993 and was primarily focused on maritime challenges on China's periphery.⁶³ In other words, near-seas and far-seas missions are increasingly viewed by China and the PLA as part of a broader integrated maritime strategy—what the PLA does in the near seas is with an eye toward far-seas capabilities. Therefore, a follow-on implication of this shift in mindset is that how the PLA approaches near-seas contingencies and what capabilities it chooses to focus on might also indicate the types of capabilities and skillsets it is building for missions abroad. A good example is the expansion of the PLA Navy Marine Corps, which, when fully operational, can be used for both regional contingencies involving amphibious assault and for expeditionary missions to protect China's interests overseas.

Fourth, while the focus has been on increasing China's ability to protect and defend its interests in the near seas, the PLA seems aware that it also needs to build capabilities that benefit the region in terms of security and humanitarian efforts in order for China to be viewed as a robust regional power. The PLA will likely continue to build maritime capabilities such as SLOC protection, counterpiracy patrols, and HADR and deploy "soft" military assets such as its hospital ship, which can provide visible benefits to countries in the region, feed into China's narrative as a benign rising power, and give the PLA a chance to hone its skills in these areas.

Finally, this topic raises several questions for additional research given China's evolving approach to near-seas protection. Key questions include:

- As China grows as a regional power, how will it balance its security and military objectives in the near seas with the goals of maintaining stability and expanding regional integration (e.g., through BRI)?

⁶² *Yuanhai huwei* is also sometimes translated by the Chinese as "open seas protection." See State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*.

⁶³ Christopher H. Sharman, *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones toward a New Maritime Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015), 35, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-9.pdf>.

- What shortfalls in maritime military power does China believe it needs in order to fully address challenges in the near seas?
- How will China balance the priorities of near-seas defense with the increasing imperative to protect its interests abroad in the far seas?

In conclusion, as China grows as a power, so do its security concerns in the near seas and beyond. Xi's China dream and large-scale projects like BRI's Maritime Silk Road have provided the PLA an operational imperative to build the capabilities to defend China's regional maritime interests, but these efforts have also opened China up to greater regional security vulnerabilities. Although the PLA has made strides in improving its naval, air, and strike capabilities to defend and secure these interests, it faces the significant challenge of integrating new organizations, forces, and capabilities into its mission set as the military reorganizes. In addition, the PLA Navy must contend with increasing pressure to deploy more regularly and for longer periods of time to the farthest reaches of the region, necessitating more complex logistics and training of service members for longer missions. How successfully the PLA navigates these challenges will determine China's future approach to securing the near seas.

Securing the “China Dream” Along the Belt and Road

Nadège Rolland

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched by Xi Jinping in late 2013.¹ Its broad aim is to revitalize the historical silk routes that used to connect China and its surrounding region, both over land and sea via the construction of infrastructure projects across the Asian, European, and African continents, including highways, fiber-optic cables, railroads, and pipelines.² Under BRI’s push, China’s overseas interests are expected to expand, stretching its “traditional frontier” to a regional and even global scale.³ In addition to the 65 mostly Eurasian countries originally included in Beijing’s vision, Latin America, Oceania, and the African continent have been subsequently added to BRI’s scope. The initiative also includes “new territories” (新疆域), as illustrated by the “Digital Silk Road” in cyberspace

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This paper led to a 24-month NBR project directed by the author, examining in detail how China’s expanding overseas interests along the Belt and Road are likely to affect its military and security calculations. A multi-authored NBR Special Report, “Securing the Belt and Road: Prospects for Chinese Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads,” was published in September 2019.

¹ The initiative was referred to at that time as One Belt, One Road (OBOR).

² For an in-depth analysis of BRI and its drivers, components, and implications, see Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research [NBR], 2017); and “A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative,” NBR, Backgrounder, April 11, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³ Deng Minghui, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用” [The Restructuring and Overseas Use of Military Power under the “Belt and Road” Strategy], 读书会 [Readers’ Club], October 19, 2016, <http://www.dushuhui423.com/Activity/ActivityInfoes/Details?id=eb1ea336-92ce-4913-a81c-04383ade02a2>.

and the “Silk Road on Ice” in the Arctic region.⁴ As more Chinese banks and companies invest in and build infrastructure projects across these vast expanses, they will increase their global footprint, operate more businesses and engage in more commercial activities abroad, bring in more Chinese goods and workers, and export back to China more resources from areas that had been largely outside of China’s traditional reach.

This geographic broadening and overall acceleration of overseas activities are intended to deliver economic and political benefits to China, but they also increase the potential security risks faced by both Chinese property and personnel abroad. BRI’s geographic scope extends over regions where the security situation has been increasingly volatile due to territorial disputes, ethnic and religious violence, and destabilizing spillovers from conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan.⁵ The potential risks create a conundrum for the Chinese military and security forces, which do not yet have the full capacity to project power far beyond China’s borders or to deploy forces in situations of high-intensity conflict. In addition, China continues to abide by its long-standing principle of noninterference, which constitutes a real normative constraint on future overseas deployments. The question of how to protect the country’s growing overseas interests under BRI thus poses a new set of challenging requirements for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and for China’s security forces as a whole.

Wary of igniting a new round of “China threat theory” sentiments, official documents and government representatives do not publicly assert the necessity for BRI to have a military component. Instead, the official narrative is consistent in focusing on the economic and other benefits the initiative is supposed to bring to the regions through which it passes. Although the Ministry of National Defense publicly denies any military or geostrategic intent,⁶ there are ongoing internal discussions among Chinese military and security planners about how to address the physical security risks associated with BRI. The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation hosted in Beijing in May 2017 sparked a “wide public debate

⁴ The “new territories” include the polar regions, the deep-sea, cyberspace, and outer space. See Yang Jian and Zheng Yingqin, “‘人类命运共同体’ 思想与新疆域的国际治” [The Community of Common Destiny” Concept and the New Territories of International Governance], *国际问题研究* [International Studies] 4 (2017), http://www.csis.org.cn/gyzz/2017-07/26/content_39056954.htm.

⁵ Du Debin and Ma Yahua, “‘一带一路’：中华民族复兴的地缘大战” [Belt and Road: The Grand Geostrategy for China’s National Rejuvenation], *地理研究* [Geographic Research] 34, no. 6 (2015): 1005–14.

⁶ “国防部：中国一带一路没有军事意图不谋求势力范围” [Ministry of Defense: China’s Belt and Road Has No Military Intentions and Does Not Seek Spheres of Influence], *Sina*, May 25, 2017, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2017-05-25/doc-ifyfqvmh8893454.shtml>.

among officers and soldiers of the armed forces and the armed police.”⁷ A few weeks after the event, Admiral Liu Jingsong, a former president of the Academy of Military Sciences, chaired a National Security Forum specifically devoted to “BRI and the PLA.” More than three hundred people attended and discussed the various BRI-related security challenges, studied relevant “strategies for coping with these security challenges,” and put forward “countermeasures.”⁸ Unfortunately, the discussions that took place were not made available to the public. However, echoes of the internal debate regarding the PLA’s role in BRI-related contingencies have surfaced in the Chinese media and academia.

The tone is mostly prudent. Overall, the discussions and commentaries give the impression that the PLA is reluctant to consider a bigger role for itself as a security provider for BRI. Some Chinese military experts share the view that a more prominent PLA role in supporting and securing Belt and Road activities is a logical and inevitable requirement—an ironic reversal of the era of European imperialism, when trade used to follow the flag—but when it comes to concrete forward-looking recommendations, they seem to use the issue only as a way to demand more of the same equipment and material resources. Indirect options are envisaged as a way to minimize the PLA’s actual involvement on the ground by subcontracting BRI’s security burden to host nations or to private security companies (PSCs).

This paper will address PLA thinking about how to respond to security challenges arising along the Belt and Road. Its purpose is to provide a snapshot of internal debates among Chinese military and security thinkers, which are, by nature, in constant evolution and could take a different direction in the event of a security contingency affecting Chinese interests along the Silk Roads. The first section will describe the security risks related to BRI as assessed by China’s security community.⁹ The second section examines several internal constraints that restrict greater PLA involvement in protecting the Belt and Road routes. The third section looks at the

⁷ Gao Ke, “‘一带一路’ 战略面临的挑战与应对策略” [Challenges Faced by the Belt and Road Strategy and Their Countermeasures], Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, April 26, 2016, http://www.cssn.cn/zxx/gjzzx_zxx/201604/t20160426_2983797.shtml.

⁸ Zhang Yan, “纪念建军90周年暨第七届国家安全高级论坛隆重开” [Opening Ceremony of the Commemorations of the 90th Anniversary of the PLA Foundation and of the Seventh National Security Forum], *China Daily*, July 30, 2017, http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-07/30/content_30293560.htm.

⁹ For the purpose of this paper, the Chinese security community is understood as including active and retired senior officers from the PLA, People’s Armed Police, National Defense University, and Academy of Military Science, as well as members of military and security-related think tanks such as the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and experts focusing on security-related issues in other think tanks.

implications for future PLA developments, while the final part identifies the prescriptions recommended by Chinese security experts to address foreseeable challenges without PLA involvement.

Assessment of Security Risks

“As Chinese business has expanded across the world, so the Chinese government has had to cope with a new map of global risks for its overseas interests,” note Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel.¹⁰ Growing numbers of Chinese businesses are now operating abroad, and as they increase their activities along the Belt and Road, more of them will be at risk in countries that form the “arc of instability” that extends from Central Asia to the Middle East.¹¹ According to the Ministry of Commerce, over one million Chinese nationals were working overseas by the end of 2014. Two years later this number had doubled, according to the China International Contractors Association, with 90% of Chinese workers present in Asia and Africa, mostly in BRI countries.¹² Over the years, Chinese citizens abroad have been killed, kidnapped, or attacked, and the number of such incidents is expected to rise.¹³ Chinese state companies bear the bulk of the financial burden associated with security risks. The director of security at China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) notes, for example, that between 3% and 5% of his firm’s total investments in risky countries are spent on security. In Iraq, the percentage is as high as 20%. During its 24 years of “going global,” CNPC has invested up to \$3.3 billion on security out of its total overseas investment of \$11 billion.¹⁴

When assessing the challenges facing BRI, Chinese experts do not agree about the nature of the risks. Some, such as the director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) center, insist that BRI is an economic

¹⁰ Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China’s Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad* (Routledge: New York, 2015), 9.

¹¹ Ma Janguang and Zhang Nan, “‘一带一路’背景下如何保护中国企业的海外利益” [How to Protect the Overseas Interests of Chinese Companies under the Belt and Road Background], China Military Online, http://www.81.cn/201311/jxjyh/2016-08/17/content_7212299.htm.

¹² “海外中国的隐秘侍卫” [The Secret Guards of Overseas China], *Caijing*, July 24, 2017, <http://yuanchuang.caijing.com.cn/2017/0724/4304911.shtml>.

¹³ Four oil workers were kidnapped in Colombia in 2011, 29 were detained in South Sudan in 2012, and 11 engineers were attacked in Cameroon in 2014. See Ma and Zhang, “‘一带一路’背景下如何保护中国企业的海外利益.”

¹⁴ Jia Wei, “中企海外安保需要多少‘吴京’” [How Many “Wu Jings” Are Necessary to Protect Chinese Companies Abroad?], *中国经济周刊* [China Economic Weekly], August 28, 2017, <http://www.ceweekly.cn/2017/0828/203229.shtml>.

cooperation platform focusing on development issues, and that security issues should not “be treated with contempt” but also should not be exaggerated.¹⁵ The best way to deal with and solve potential problems, he contends, is to “align with everyone else’s strategic interests” and to focus on what everyone is most concerned about—i.e., economic development. “On the road to development, there are all sorts of obstacles and risks,” but because all countries are willing to cooperate with China for the sake of economic development, “there is no need to exaggerate the degree of risk.”¹⁶ Other experts are not as prone to dismiss the security challenges faced by BRI projects. These analysts tend to focus on nontraditional threats, primarily terrorism, while quickly glancing over contingencies such as natural disasters, climate change, epidemics, or even transnational organized crime. Political instability, social unrest, and religious extremism are generally seen as key elements underlying the complexity and volatility of the region encompassed by BRI.¹⁷ The opening of several cross-border connections with China’s neighbors is also seen as a potential cause of harm within the homeland, requiring tightened border controls and surveillance measures.¹⁸

Traditional security threats appear to be a cause for concern primarily on the maritime Silk Road. The main traditional security challenge to BRI is posed by the U.S. Navy and, more generally, by the U.S. forward military presence in the western Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf. One PLA expert notes, in particular, that the threat to China’s maritime security is acute because 97% of its overseas trade and 75% of its total oil imports are to be transported by sea. A U.S. naval blockade in the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean would thus put China’s lifeline at risk. In addition to the five U.S. bases that enable a permanent foreign military presence around the region and have “a direct impact” on the maritime Silk Road’s security,¹⁹ the

¹⁵ The SCO center belongs to CIIS, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶ Li Zigu, “‘一带一路’面临的风险与安全机制‘缺憾’” [Risks Faced by ‘Belt and Road’ and “Disappointment” of Security Mechanisms], CIIS, September 8, 2017, http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2017-09/08/content_40005193.htm.

¹⁷ Li, “‘一带一路’面临的风险与安全机制‘缺憾’”; Deng, “‘一带一路’战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用”; and Hua Xiaohui [花小惠], “发扬我军光荣传统为‘一带一路’保驾护航—纪念中国人民解放军建军90周年” [Carry Forward the Glorious Tradition of Our Armed Forces for the ‘Belt and Road’—Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army], February 14, 2018, http://hfzg.hefei.gov.cn/24011/24012/201802/t20180214_2480681.html.

¹⁸ “一带一路风险管控，中国‘力量投射’的重大考题” [Controlling the Belt and Road Risks, a Major Issue for China’s ‘Power Projection’], Sina, April 13, 2017, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2017-04-13/doc-ifyeifqx5606289.shtml>.

¹⁹ In his article, Deng Minghui defines the U.S. bases as follows: Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea), Guam, Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Singapore), Indian Ocean (Diego Garcia), and Australia.

“frequent intrusions of U.S. warships in China’s peripheral maritime space and airspace clearly implies [intended] provocation and containment (挑衅、遏制).”²⁰

BRI is an essential component of China’s efforts to “become a global power,”²¹ but it faces challenges directly affecting the security of Chinese interests and citizens abroad. The PLA therefore has no other choice than to contribute to the national effort and to “unsheathe the sword” (亮剑)²²—in other words, to openly display its resolve to defend China’s interests, including by using force if necessary. “Where national interests expand, the support of the military forces will have to follow,” (国家利益拓展到哪里, 军事力量支撑就要跟进到哪里), notes one PLA expert.²³ When they settle in conflicted areas abroad, Chinese citizens do not want to worry about their security, but rather to “feel the protection of the motherland,” contends one *PLA Daily* journalist. The Chinese military needs faster modernization so that “in the near future, every Chinese citizen can shout, our government and our army are our strong backing, the motherland will always escort us.”²⁴

Over the years, China’s central government has taken incremental measures to better protect the security of its overseas citizens and assets. In 2004 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up an Overseas Interests Affairs division (海外利益事务司),²⁵ the same year Hu Jintao assigned “new historic missions” to the PLA. The need to “safeguard China’s expanding national interests” reflected “new requirements and challenges created by China’s increasingly global interests and entanglements.”²⁶ The PLA subsequently included the development of MOOTW (military operations other than war) capabilities as one of its priorities, including how to develop “pockets of elite capability to deploy on missions outside of its

²⁰ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

²¹ Hua, “发扬我军光荣传统为‘一带一路’保驾护航—纪念中国人民解放军建军90周年.”

²² Wang Huayong, “东海舰队持续加大出岛链战备巡逻” [East China Sea Fleet Continues to Increase Its Island Chain Combat Readiness Patrol], China Military Online, March 6, 2016, http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2016-03/06/content_6944549.htm; and Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

²³ Wang, “东海舰队持续加大出岛链战备巡逻.”

²⁴ Guo Xiaohang, “海外利益保护能力建设：大国崛起的必修课” [Building Capacity to Protect Overseas Interests: A Compulsory Course for Rising Great Powers], China Military Online, March 7, 2016, http://www.81.cn/jwsj/2016-03/07/content_6945691.htm.

²⁵ “李杰吴国华解读‘一带一路’所涉海上安保问题” [Li Jie and Wu Guohua Decipher the Maritime Security Issues Related to the “Belt and Road”], Sohu, April 7, 2016, <http://mil.sohu.com/20160407/n443560980.shtml>.

²⁶ James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions,’” Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, 2009, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>.

littoral waters.”²⁷ The 2013 defense white paper noted that “security risks to China’s overseas interests are on the increase,” and, for the first time, the 2015 white paper issued by the State Council Information Office titled *China’s Military Strategy* included a section on the responsibility for protecting Chinese overseas interests as one of the eight missions assigned to the PLA.²⁸ Protecting China’s “sovereignty, security and development interests” broadens the PLA’s scope of action to the global level, and demands that it start thinking and planning as a global force.

A greater PLA involvement in securing BRI routes and projects therefore seems like an inevitable choice, but one that PLA officers seem reluctant to endorse. Just as trading along the ancient Silk Road was safe and prosperous as long as a strong military presence was maintained (which declined as the Tang Dynasty’s military power started to wane), so too military power is a “guarantee” for the success of BRI.²⁹ But even if they are encouraged by the central government, Chinese analysts are aware that protection or “escort” missions (护航任务) in nonfriendly environments are very complex, and “direct protection by hard power, especially military, is subject to considerable restrictions,” as will be described in the following section.³⁰

Constraints

One of the main themes generally associated with Chinese expert discussions about securing the Silk Road is how to reconcile the expanding scope of China’s military deployment and increased overseas role with its efforts to manage its international image. This concern has been consistent since the beginning of China’s military modernization, as Chinese authorities have been wary of fanning the so-called China threat theory. Along the

²⁷ Military operations other than war include responses to nontraditional security threats, such as emergency disaster relief and assistance, peacekeeping, counterpiracy, and counterterrorism. For more information, see Michael S. Chase and Kristen Gunness, “The PLA’s Multiple Military Tasks: Prioritizing Combat Operations and Developing MOOTW Capabilities,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 21, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-multiple-military-tasks-prioritizing-combat-operations-and-developing-mootw-capabilities>.

²⁸ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), available at <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China’s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf>. See also State Council Information Office (PRC), *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces* (Beijing, April 2013), available at <http://en.people.cn/90786/8209362.html>.

²⁹ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

³⁰ Xiao He, “中国海外利益保护中的‘变’与‘不变’” [“Changeables” and “Unchangeables” in the Protection of China’s Overseas Interests], 世界知识 [World Knowledge] 8 (2017), http://www.iwep.org.cn/xscg/xscg_lwybg/201704/W020170418664068695745.pdf.

same lines, as the PLA thinks about extending its reach in BRI countries, it is painstakingly trying to avoid causing suspicion and being perceived as aggressive and threatening to others.³¹ A report published in January 2015 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on “Assessing the Security Situation in China’s Periphery: Belt and Road and the Periphery Strategy” identifies neighboring countries’ suspicions about China’s strategic intent as the first challenge to BRI’s implementation.³² This self-consciousness does not mean that the PLA refuses to go abroad under any circumstances, but military leaders are aware of the need to take image management into account as they think about an increased future overseas role.

In addition to concerns about projecting a threatening image, the PLA’s leaders also need to think about future operations within the framework of China’s claimed commitment to respect the principle of noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs. This self-imposed normative obligation imposes another constraint on possible future PLA deployments, including the use of military force, along the Belt and Road. Although the principle of nonintervention is still very important to Beijing, it is not absolute. According to two legal experts from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China retains the “ability to adapt to the changes of its national and international security environment,” and it is “obviously” not necessary to consider the principle as “dogma.”³³ Peking University professor Wang Yizhou, for example, has called for a relaxation of the principle in the form of “creative involvement.”³⁴ His main idea is that China’s interests can be safeguarded without infringing on the legitimate interests of other countries. Although Wang’s advice can be complicated in real-life situations, his reflections demonstrate a will to adapt the principle to China’s new needs. By authorizing the PLA and People’s Armed Police (PAP) to execute counterterrorism operations overseas with the approval of the Central Military Commission, the Counterterrorism Law passed by the National People’s Congress in December 2015 has already offered some degree of

³¹ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

³² “报告称‘一带一路’步入务实阶段 面临三大挑战” [Report Says the “Belt and Road” Has Entered Concrete Stage, Faces Three Big Challenges], *People’s Daily*, January 15, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0115/c70731-26393372.html>.

³³ Xue Guifang and Zheng Jie, “中国21世纪海外基地建设的现实需求与风险应对” [China’s Overseas Base Construction in the 21st Century: Concrete Requirements and Risk Responses], *国际展望* [International Outlook], no. 4 (2017), <http://www.sis.org.cn/UploadFiles/file/20170829/201704008%20%20薛桂芳.pdf>.

³⁴ Wang Yizhou, *Creative Involvement: A New Direction in China’s Diplomacy* (Routledge: New York, 2017).

elasticity to the noninterference principle by providing a legal foundation for future PLA deployments in counterterrorism contingencies.³⁵

Finally, there is still a significant gap between the requirement to defend expanding national interests and the actual military capabilities available. Hu Jintao identified this issue as one of two major “incompatibilities” that the PLA had to face.³⁶ It is still an issue today. One observer reckons that despite some improvement, the “PLA cannot fully meet the needs of our overseas interests’ expansion and protection.” First and foremost, the Chinese military has to achieve a transformation of its mindset and “strategic guidance” (战略指导思想) as the “interests frontier” (利益边疆) expands beyond the nation’s geographic boundaries.³⁷ Recalibrating the PLA mindset away from a ground forces–centric mentality and rebalancing the force structure to allow for more jointness is a long-term task. For now, BRI seems to be used as an opportunity to advance the PLA’s wider goal of becoming a modernized force.

Implications of BRI for PLA Modernization

With several hundred infrastructure projects progressing along the continental belt and the maritime road, the geography of China’s overseas interests is expanding far beyond its borders. But if anything, BRI is only accelerating a trend that began well over a decade ago. Chinese presence in places such as Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America did not start with the launch of BRI in late 2013. Already with the new historic missions announced in 2004, the leadership recognized the need for the PLA to help safeguard these expanding interests. BRI creates new security requirements that will have to be addressed, but from what can be gleaned in the available open sources, it only serves as further justification for long-distance power projection and reinforces inclinations that were already visible before 2013. BRI is not, however, a game changer for future PLA modernization. Absent the initiative, the PLA Navy would continue to develop blue water capabilities. At best, BRI gives the navy an additional reason to push for

³⁵ Peter Mattis, “New Law Reshapes Chinese Counterterrorism Policy and Operations,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 26, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-law-reshapes-chinese-counterterrorism-policy-and-operations>.

³⁶ Cortez A. Cooper, “The PLA Navy’s ‘New Historic Missions,’ Expanding Capabilities for a Re-emergent Maritime Power,” testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., June 11, 2009, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2009/RAND_CT332.pdf.

³⁷ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用”

more overseas basing in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. Meanwhile, there is little indication that the army is preparing for a large-scale projection of ground forces in the event of a conflict against a sophisticated opponent on land. One indication to the contrary is the possible expansion of the PLA Navy Marine Corps, which could eventually become the core of a future expeditionary force, but there have been no public discussions about what kind of missions this corps would carry out.

When thinking about future contingencies along BRI routes, Chinese security analysts cautiously stay at the lower end of the engagement spectrum. The future missions they envision seem to be mostly distant military operations in permissive environments that do not involve actual combat, similar to the evacuation campaigns in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015. There are no in-depth discussions—at least in publicly available sources—about antiterrorist raids or counterinsurgency campaigns involving kinetic operations, let alone stabilizing operations. Absent a “comprehensive capability” equivalent to that of the U.S. military, which some strategists acknowledge “cannot be used as the reference point for what we need to do about Belt and Road security,”³⁸ the best option for the PLA is to continue to strengthen its existing capabilities in some key areas, such as early-warning and long-range capabilities, including rapid reaction forces and overseas basing. In these domains, BRI is seen as an opportunity for creating “traction” in achieving the military’s “strategic transformation.”³⁹

In order to better anticipate and assess risks, as well as to improve overall situational awareness, the PLA needs to develop its early-warning, intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance capacities, which includes military imaging and satellite coverage of BRI regions.⁴⁰ Intelligence collection can also be envisaged in unconventional ways thanks to greater civilian-military integration, especially if greater coordination between business companies and governmental entities can be achieved.⁴¹ Renmin University professor Wang Yiwei suggests, for example, that companies such as Huawei or Alibaba’s subsidiary Alipay work hand in hand and “share their

³⁸ Wang Yiwei, “以夷制夷 建设全球化的中国军队” [Using the Barbarians to Rule the Barbarians: Building a Globalized Chinese Military], Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University, August 9, 2017, <http://www.rdcy.org/displaynews.php?id=38254>.

³⁹ Su Tian Jiu Si, “‘战狼2’启示: ‘一带一路’呼唤军队‘走出去’” [Wolf Warrior 2 Revealed: “Belt and Road” Calls the Military to “Go Out”], 察网 [Chawang], August 13, 2017, <http://www.cwzg.cn/politics/201708/37795.html>; and Qiao Liang, “中国陆军的发展方向正确吗? 合理吗?” [Is the Development Direction of the Chinese Army Correct? Reasonable?], China Military Online, May 7, 2015, http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20150507/19650325_all.html.

⁴⁰ “一带一路风险管控, 中国‘力量投射’的重大考题”

⁴¹ Ma and Zhang, “‘一带一路’背景下如何保护中国企业的海外利益”

information, data, and technologies” with the security and military forces. Wang believes that such cooperation would be very efficient in terms of intelligence gathering along the BRI area.⁴² Civil-military integration could also prove useful, for example, if civil airplanes were used as substitutes for PLA Air Force “strategic delivery.”⁴³

In addition, the PLA needs to enhance its long-range capabilities. Both advocates of a strong navy and proponents of a modernized army are referencing possible future contingencies in BRI countries to demand more projection capacities outside the mainland and China’s close neighborhood. The question of priority given to either continental or maritime deployments has yet to be resolved. Some push for the building of a blue water navy “that can compete for sea power and protect sea lanes of communication.”⁴⁴ The PLA Navy currently lacks “large ships and strategic transport aircraft” that can be used in response to large-scale overseas evacuation operations.⁴⁵ Some restructuring of the command structure is also envisaged: Wang Yiwei recommends, for example, that the State Oceanic Administration give way to “regional commands” to be organized according to the U.S. model: there would be a Belt and Road Oceanic Bureau with a China branch, a Baltic Sea branch, a Mediterranean branch, an Indian Ocean branch, and a South Pacific branch.⁴⁶ Other voices call for the creation of an expeditionary corps, “not to invade others, but to protect our own national interests across our borders.”⁴⁷ This would require that the PLA ground forces procure large transport aircraft, in addition to rapid response and special combat capabilities.⁴⁸ Sources within the PLA stated in March 2017 that it intends to increase the size of its marine corps from around 20,000 to 100,000 personnel in order to improve rapid reaction capacity. Six additional special combat brigades would be moved to the marine corps for missions that could include deployments in Djibouti or Gwadar.⁴⁹ However, the Ministry of Defense has not officially confirmed this information.

⁴² Wang, “以夷制夷 建设全球化的中国军队.”

⁴³ Su, “‘战狼2’启示: ‘一带一路’呼唤军队‘走出去’”

⁴⁴ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

⁴⁵ Guo, “海外利益保护能力建设: 大国崛起的必修课.”

⁴⁶ Wang, “以夷制夷 建设全球化的中国军队.”

⁴⁷ Qiao, “中国陆军的发展方向正确吗? 合理吗?”

⁴⁸ “一带一路风险管控, 中国‘力量投射’的重大考题.”

⁴⁹ Minnie Chan, “As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Percent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say,” *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase>.

Whether these contingents, which are “untested on the modern battlefield,” would be kept in their barracks or used for counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and security assistance remains to be seen,⁵⁰ but they conducted their first live-fire drills in Xinjiang in 2016 and engaged in their largest ever transregional training in Yunnan and Shandong in March 2018.⁵¹ Together with an “expanding network of naval bases along the MRS [maritime Silk Road] and Indian Ocean littoral that includes small detachments of permanent or rotational forces, coupled with expeditionary capabilities, the PLAMC is poised to become the muscle behind China’s Silk Road ambitions,” predict two American experts.⁵²

In order to support future deployments, the PLA needs additional supply bases and protection facilities.⁵³ These in essence could serve a dual purpose: ports on the maritime Silk Road are “for now basically for commercial and trade considerations,” but China needs to start planning for the longer term and the possible military use of these facilities.⁵⁴ Some observers doubt, however, that commercial ports “meet the standards of military bases in terms of scale and function.”⁵⁵ In a study about China’s overseas base construction in the 21st century, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Law of the Sea experts Xue Guifang and Zheng Jie assert that China is amply “justified in building overseas bases to safeguard its national interests and serve the needs of its peaceful development.” The current lack of overseas bases “limits the effectiveness of the Chinese military forces, including the PLA Navy,” and their construction has therefore become “unavoidable.” The two authors argue that, to make this possible, China needs to create a favorable, “accepting” environment by buttressing the “soft function of hard power” (peacekeeping and humanitarian missions) that serve world peace, and by showing to the host country all the benefits it could reap from accommodating a Chinese base on its soil (such as high rental fees,

⁵⁰ Jeremy Maxie and Grant Newsham, “The Muscle behind China’s New Silk Road Is Over the Horizon,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Reconnecting Asia, June 26, 2017, <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/muscle-behind-chinas-new-silk-road-over-horizon>.

⁵¹ Guo Yuandan, “PLA Marine Corps Conducts Massive Groundbreaking Maneuvers,” *Global Times*, March 15, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1093617.shtml>.

⁵² Maxie and Newsham, “China’s New Silk Road.”

⁵³ Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, “‘Not an Idea We Have to Shun’: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century,” National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 7, October 2014, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Deng, “‘一带一路’ 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用.”

⁵⁵ Chen Guoquan, “中国在吉布提保障设施建设, 这些值得了解” [A Few Things Worth Understanding about China’s Construction of Protection Facilities in Djibouti], 中国海军网 [China Navy Network], December 4, 2016, http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2016-12/04/content_4765618_2.htm.

technical assistance, trade preferences, and security spillover effects). An adequate legal basis is also required (e.g., UN Charter and agreements with the host nation).⁵⁶ When all these conditions are in place, China will be able to push forward.

Overseas basing is not necessarily limited to the maritime Silk Road. In January 2018, reports emerged about a possible Sino-Afghan agreement to build and supply a military base in Badakhshan, the northeastern Afghan province that borders China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. These claims were denied by the Chinese defense ministry but confirmed by several Afghan defense officials.⁵⁷ Vasily Kashin, a Moscow-based China defense expert, speculates that the Chinese presence in the region could be modeled after the Russian presence in Syria: “In particular, relying on a coalition with local government forces, support of friendly units from the local population, supporting allies with air strikes and special operations actions, with limited participation by land forces. The first step will be forming local forces, with limited participation by Chinese forces.”⁵⁸ As they envisage their future role along the Belt and Road, Chinese military experts seem to confirm Kashin’s analysis. As will be described in the next section, they appear inclined to support options that would, as much as possible, allow the PLA to avoid direct involvement in local quagmires while at the same time retaining a certain degree of control over the security of both Chinese people and assets.

Prescriptions: Indirect Options

Wang Yiwei maintains that the protection of BRI is not so much a “defense” problem as it is a “security” problem.⁵⁹ Thus, the responsibility to safeguard China’s overseas interests and citizens need not necessarily rest entirely on the PLA, or even on China’s shoulders. Chinese experts are discussing solutions that would allow China to defend its overseas interests with less than large increments of military force, possibly without boots

⁵⁶ Xue and Zheng, “中国21世纪海外基地建设的现实需求与风险应对”

⁵⁷ Joshua Kucera, “China Denies Plans to Build Military Base on Afghan-Tajik Border,” EurasiaNet, February 7, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/china-denies-plans-to-build-military-base-on-afghan-tajik-border>; Paul Goble, “What Is China’s Military Doing on the Afghan-Tajik Border?” Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 8, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-military-afghan-tajik-border>; and Bruce Pannier, “Majlis Podcast: China’s Increasing Role Along Afghan Border,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 25, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/majlis-increasingly-complicated-political-landscape-northern-afghanistan/29061939.html>.

⁵⁸ Kucera, “China Denies Plans to Build Military Base.”

⁵⁹ Wang, “以夷制夷 建设全球化的中国军队”

on the ground, and with limited impact on other countries' perceptions of Beijing's intentions.

First among the proposed solutions is to increase military diplomacy and international cooperation in order to normalize China's military presence around the region. More regular military activities showcasing the PLA's goodwill around the world, such as the PLA Navy's escort operations in the Gulf of Aden or joint military exercises like the 2016 Peace and Friendship exercise with Malaysia,⁶⁰ could help reduce the impression that China intends to use gunboat diplomacy in BRI countries.⁶¹ By participating in cooperative efforts to tackle common security challenges, China not only "fulfills its international obligations but also, in parallel, strengthens its military exchanges" with local countries.⁶² In addition, the PLA's participation in the MH370 search operation, its special dispatch to fight the Ebola virus in Liberia,⁶³ and its assistance after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal⁶⁴ offer various examples of its "active involvement" in international security cooperation and of "China's harmless use of overseas military force."⁶⁵ Peacekeeping operations, antiterrorism and counterpiracy cooperation, and disaster relief operations offer additional possibilities for the PLA to raise its benevolent profile and to concurrently protect China's interests in BRI countries. Although current Chinese peacekeeping missions are outside of BRI countries (Mali, South Sudan, Darfur, DRC, and Lebanon), they constitute China's largest international military engagement⁶⁶ and can provide a good model and possible reference for the "safe use of military forces" in countries along the Belt and Road. In the future, because the security situation could worsen in BRI countries, peacekeeping operations

⁶⁰ "China-Malaysia Joint Military Exercise Wrapped Up," China Military Online, November 28, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-11/28/content_7381020.htm.

⁶¹ Deng, "'一带一路' 战略下的军事力量重塑与境外运用."

⁶² "一带一路风险管控, 中国'力量投射'的重大考题."

⁶³ Ying Li et al., "Chinese People's Liberation Army on Action of Fighting against Ebola in Africa: Implications and Challenges," *Chinese Medical Journal* 128, no. 10 (2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4830329>.

⁶⁴ "Four Air Force Aircraft Join Nepal Earthquake Relief," China Military Online, April 27, 2015, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-04/27/content_6463339.htm.

⁶⁵ Guo, "海外利益保护能力建设: 大国崛起的必修课."

⁶⁶ "一带一路风险管控, 中国'力量投射'的重大考题." The article notes that over the last 25 years the PLA has sent 30,178 officers and soldiers into peacekeeping operations, and 10 of them were killed. For a broader take on China's participation in such missions, see Dennis J. Blasko, "China's Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, December 5, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-contribution-peacekeeping-operation-understanding-numbers>.

could conceivably be extended into those areas,⁶⁷ which would take the full responsibility for regional security away from the PLA.

The security challenges along BRI routes are so daunting that it is simply impossible for one single country—including China—to resolve them. Both bilateral and multilateral military cooperation are therefore necessary.⁶⁸ According to the deputy director of the Chinese Institute for International Studies' Belt and Road research center, Beijing should first and foremost rely on its comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia: "Although it is not a full-fledged security mechanism, it is more important than anything else" and constitutes a "critical" pillar when thinking about addressing regional conflicts. The current level of cooperation with Moscow creates the basis for stability in Eurasia because it can help reduce the possibility of outside powers "using the promotion of democracy as an excuse for arbitrary interference in countries' internal affairs." The Sino-Russian partnership also forms the core of the SCO, whose annual Peace Mission joint exercises provide a "solid foundation for the stability and security of the Silk Road Economic Belt,"⁶⁹ especially when addressing the terrorism challenge. The June 2017 China-Kyrgyzstan joint antiterrorism exercise that took place in Xinjiang was also carried out within the SCO framework.⁷⁰ Even if the SCO has "no teeth," it remains preferable to any specific BRI security mechanism which would only "politicize" the initiative and increase foreign suspicions about Beijing's real intentions.⁷¹

In addition to its security-related activities within the SCO framework, China has developed several initiatives, principally with an eye on Afghanistan and the possible spillover of violence there into Xinjiang. Joint antiterrorism exercises were held with Tajikistan in October 2016 along the Afghan border.⁷² Besides China building several outposts for Tajik border guards, the two countries agreed to deepen their defense, security, and intelligence cooperation in late 2017.⁷³ In August 2016 the chiefs of staff of

⁶⁷ "一带一路风险管控, 中国'力量投射'的重大考题"

⁶⁸ Li, "一带一路'面临的风险与安全机制'缺憾."

⁶⁹ "一带一路风险管控, 中国'力量投射'的重大考题"

⁷⁰ "China, Kyrgyzstan, Hold Anti-Terror Drill in Xinjiang," Xinhua, June 27, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/27/c_136398788.htm.

⁷¹ Li, "一带一路'面临的风险与安全机制'缺憾."

⁷² Joshua Kucera, "China Holds Anti-Terror Exercises on Afghanistan-Tajikistan Border," EurasiaNet, October 24, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/s/china-holds-anti-terror-exercises-on-afghanistan-tajikistan-border>.

⁷³ "China, Tajikistan, Step Up Intelligence Contacts to Fight Terrorism," Reuters, September 1, 2017, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2109310/china-tajikistan-step-intelligence-contacts-fight>.

the armed forces of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan created the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in order to “to jointly fight terrorism and maintain regional peace and stability.”⁷⁴ Increasing security cooperation with local countries, especially in areas such as intelligence sharing, counterterrorism, search and rescue joint operations, and law enforcement⁷⁵ could “enhance China’s overall security needs.”⁷⁶ But as noted by Niklas Swanström in 2015, China’s military aid to Central Asian states, although on the rise, still remains modest in relative terms.⁷⁷ The question remains whether BRI will provide a new impetus for increased Chinese military cooperation with the region beyond shared declarations of intent, in the form of either arms sales or training and equipment programs. As Beijing knows well, any substantial push in those directions in Central Asia will be met with strong resistance from Moscow.

Wherever possible, Beijing might choose to rely on the local military forces to provide security for its citizens and assets, as is already the case in Pakistan. In September 2016, Islamabad created a Special Security Division and a Maritime Security Force numbering an estimated 15,000 men, as well as a security unit staffed with 700–800 police officers, specifically tasked to protect the workers and projects along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁷⁸ Beijing assured Islamabad in September 2017 that it would “fully assist Pakistan in building the capacity of civil armed forces” that protect CPEC,⁷⁹ but details were not disclosed as to what this assistance would exactly entail. There were also reports in local media about

⁷⁴ “China Joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan in Security Alliance,” Reuters, August 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security/china-joins-afghanistan-pakistan-tajikistan-in-security-alliance-idUSKCN10F1A6>; and Li Jiayao, “PLA Chief of Joint Staff Meets with Afghan Counterpart,” China Military Online, August 28, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/28/content_7733915.htm.

⁷⁵ Chen Xiangyang, “2016, 如何维护中国国家安全?” [In 2016, How to Safeguard China’s National Security?], Cfsnet, January 4, 2016, <http://comment.cfsnet.com/2016/0104/1303593.html>.

⁷⁶ “一带一路风险管控, 中国‘力量投射’的重大考题”

⁷⁷ Niklas Swanström, “The Security Dimension of the China-Central Asia Relationship: China’s Military Engagement with Central Asian Countries,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission, Washington, D.C., March 18, 2015, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf.

⁷⁸ Syed Raza Hassan, “To Protect Chinese Investment, Pakistan Military Leaves Little to Chance,” Reuters, February 7, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-china-security-gwadar/to-protect-chinese-investment-pakistan-military-leaves-little-to-chance-idUSKCN0VH06F>; and “15,000 Pakistani Military Personnel Protecting CPEC,” *Indian Express*, February 21, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/15000-pakistani-military-personnel-protecting-cpec-4536689>.

⁷⁹ Zahid Chaudhary, “CPEC: China to Assist Pakistan in Capacity Building of CAFs,” *Pakistan Observer*, September 17, 2017, available at <http://www.cpecinfo.com/cpec-news-detail?id=NDAYOQ==>.

similar offers to train Pakistani security forces.⁸⁰ There, too, details about cooperation areas and assistance programs are unfortunately scarce, and the CPEC case might not be replicable in other BRI corridors.

The PLA's apparent reluctance to being entangled in local conflicts along the Belt and Road routes could also give rise to an increased role for China's private security companies. According to Major General Zhu Chenghu, using PSCs could temporarily help fill the gap between China's expanding interests and the current lack of adequate military capability. He explains that China's interests "cannot be protected by others: we must rely on ourselves, we should create our own protection teams that imitate Blackwater." This will only be a transitory solution, however: "at this point in time, it is still extremely difficult for the PLA to 'go out,' but in the long run, the military will eventually have to go out."⁸¹

Since the law that regulates Chinese PSCs was amended in 2010,⁸² several companies have started to operate internationally. In comparison to their Western counterparts, which have hundreds of thousands of employees and hundreds of worldwide subsidiaries, the Chinese PSCs are still mostly small, inexperienced, and scattered. Alessandro Arduino notes that "more than 5,000 registered local Chinese security corporations that offer close personnel protection and unarmed guards employ roughly three million security officers. Among these companies, less than a dozen have the capabilities and the experience to provide stand-alone international services."⁸³ Their equipment is nowhere near what is available in the military (no helicopters nor ammunition, and they are usually not allowed to carry guns), and although their recruits mainly come from the PAP and PLA ranks, they lack foreign language skills and overseas experience.⁸⁴ In that sense, they look more like "a demilitarized security service than private military contractors."⁸⁵

In the long run, however, PSCs might become a useful resource that the Chinese state could use to secure assets without having to deploy

⁸⁰ Lawrence Sellin, "Is Chinese Militarization of Pakistan Beginning?" Daily Caller, December 15, 2017, <http://dailycaller.com/2017/12/15/is-chinese-militarization-of-pakistan-beginning>.

⁸¹ Yun Shan Shui, "解放军有能力保护'一带一路'战略利益吗?" [Can the PLA Protect "Belt and Road" Strategic Interests?], Sina, October 22, 2015, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4e2f86430102w2a9.html.

⁸² "Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services," State Council (PRC), October 13, 2009, available at www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=7779.

⁸³ Alessandro Arduino, "China's Belt and Road Security Needs: The Evolution of Chinese Private Security Companies," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Working Paper, no. 306, August 29, 2017, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/WP306.pdf>.

⁸⁴ "李杰吴国华解读'一带一路'所涉海上安保问题"

⁸⁵ "‘海外中国’的隐秘侍卫."

a full-fledged military response. Although nominally “private,” the “intermingling between PLA and private security contractors often staffed by ‘former PLA’ is a blurry line.”⁸⁶ According to Liu Xinping, deputy director of the China Overseas Security and Defense Research Centre, about 3,200 Chinese employees of private security groups were based abroad last year, as compared with the 2,600 Chinese troops deployed under UN mandates in conflict zones.⁸⁷ The number could yet grow, especially given Xi Jinping’s 2015 announcement that military personnel would be reduced by 300,000.

Among the emerging new Chinese players on the international scene are Dingtai Anyuan, Huaxin Zhongan, and De Wei, founded in 2011, which now has the largest overseas network.⁸⁸ The growing need for security services may encourage more players to surface, and the central government is trying to regulate their activities: the Ministry of Public Security has been asked to establish a “white list” of recommended PSCs for the reference of Chinese companies that operate overseas.⁸⁹ At the same time, the Chinese government is opening the door for increased cooperation with international big players in the hope that their Chinese counterparts can benefit from their experience and practice. In 2018, CITIC Group, China’s largest state-owned investment company, expanded its stake in Frontier Security Group, an American PSC owned by the former CEO of Blackwater, Erik Prince. The venture is specifically eying BRI as a potential market: training bases have been established in Yunnan (for Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand) and Xinjiang (for Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan).⁹⁰

As the Chinese security community explores options to circumvent both China’s normative constraints on military overseas operations and the PLA’s actual capability limitations, a set of indirect prescriptions emerge. These include extended international cooperation in nontraditional security and subcontracting the securitization of BRI routes to either host nations or private contractors.

⁸⁶ Charles Clover, “Chinese Private Security Companies Go Global,” *Financial Times*, February 26, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a1ce1c8-fa7c-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ De Wei operates in Kenya, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Guinea, Madagascar, Pakistan, Thailand, and Argentina. See “‘海外中国’的隐秘侍卫。”

⁸⁹ “‘海外中国’的隐秘侍卫。”

⁹⁰ Don Weinland and Charles Clover, “Citic Boosts Stake in Erik Prince’s Security Group Frontier,” *Financial Times*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/97c14e0e-2031-11e8-a895-1ba1f72c2c11>.

Conclusion

The continental Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road both originate from China and end up in Europe. Their vast geographic scope, both on land and at sea, constitutes a first stumbling block for any attempt to protect and secure Chinese projects, considering the PLA's current limited expeditionary capacity. The regions traversed by BRI are also recurrently beset with instability and conflicts that could threaten the safety of both Chinese citizens and key assets. Although the protection of national interests sparked a lively internal discussion among Chinese security experts, there is no indication that the PLA intends to develop comprehensive power-projection capabilities similar to those of the United States that would allow counterinsurgency operations, stabilization operations, or major military operations in remote nonpermissive environments. For the foreseeable future, in order to meet the security needs along the Belt and Road, the PLA will continue to develop transport, logistics, and resupply solutions, including through overseas basing, to allow primarily for missions other than war. Meanwhile, China will increasingly rely on indirect options, including subcontracting the security of Chinese assets and citizens to host nations and to PSCs. In a sense, in order to protect the 21st-century version of the Silk Road, Beijing seems to want to revert to the old Qing Dynasty playbook: using the barbarians to rule the barbarians (以夷制夷).

U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations: Policy Considerations in a Changing Environment

Andrew S. Erickson

The U.S. government's executive and legislative branches are engaged in a sweeping re-evaluation of the United States' policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). This sea change is driven by perceptions that China is approaching the status of a peer competitor and threatening U.S. leadership in critical advanced industries that underwrite the United States' national security leadership and military power. Beijing is doing so through information operations, influence efforts, and espionage designed to confuse and lower resistance as it seeks to undermine U.S. strength, acquire information to emulate U.S. sources of power, and achieve dominance in critical areas essential to U.S. leadership. While concern is outpacing consensus on what strategies and actions to take, engagement is no longer the default setting for U.S. policy. Official U.S. government and other institutional interchanges with the Chinese state and society, particularly military relations, will increasingly be scrutinized to ensure that they are not undermining U.S. interests.

Accordingly, for the United States, China's ongoing lack of transparency regarding both military capabilities and intentions, coupled with its rapid increases in defense spending and wide-ranging military modernization, generates great concern. Defense policy goes to the heart of a nation's vital interests and is necessarily sensitive and contested. This extends to

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bilateral and multilateral military relationships. Military relations cannot bolster or independently stabilize Sino-U.S. relations. Typically, they serve as an indicator of the overall relationship's broader health, one that is able to influence relations only for the worse. Chinese interlocutors frequently refer to military-to-military relations as "the short stave in the barrel" of the overall relationship, but they are mistaken when they imply that the stave can be simply lengthened independently to increase the water level. Military-to-military relations are indeed a limiting factor, but not one that simply may be manipulated to achieve broader progress—at least not without a degree of reciprocity that Beijing is unwilling to provide at present.

Chinese interlocutors also frequently blame the United States for limitations in military engagement. They typically call for Washington to make several major concessions preemptively. This includes taking steps to remove what they view as unacceptable impediments to bilateral military relations by ceasing arms sales to Taiwan and terminating the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), revising the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), and repealing related provisions such as the DeLay amendment.¹ Additionally, People's Liberation Army (PLA) interlocutors, including senior PLA officials, periodically state that U.S. military forces must cease "close in" reconnaissance operations.² They charge that the NDAA—and increasingly other policy documents from the Trump administration—has communicated that the United States sees China as an adversary, and that defining the relationship in this way makes it difficult for China to become more transparent and participate in some areas of cooperation.

These preconditions are all nonstarters in the mainstream U.S. policy community—and rightly so. Moreover, Beijing does not appear to be open to making any substantial concessions of its own. China's approach vis-à-vis critical issues that the United States views as vital to its security interests and military operations is therefore not currently compatible with a substantial upgrading of bilateral military relations and engagement.

This article argues that the NDAA remains a necessary oversight and safeguard mechanism for U.S. policy regarding military-to-military relations with China. It is divided into the following sections: The first section examines the NDAA, what it does and does not limit, and the

¹ The DeLay amendment "prohibits military-to-military exchanges that involve the training of the People's Liberation Army of China by U.S. Armed Forces." H.Amdt.154 to H.R.1401, 106th Cong. (June 9, 1999), <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/106th-congress/house-amendment/154?s=a&r=11>.

² Scott W. Harold, "Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability: A Strategy for Improving U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations," *Asia Policy*, no. 16 (2013): 110.

rationale for maintaining it as a feature of U.S. policy. The second section addresses principles for the United States to better improve its own processes with respect to engaging China. The third section suggests five principal areas that offer meaningful opportunities for Sino-U.S. military exchanges and cooperation. The fourth section concludes by considering options for managing expectations and military relations with China in the Xi Jinping era.

The National Defense Authorization Act: The Situation Today

What Does the NDAA Restrict?

Policy, not law, regulates the scope of U.S.-China military engagement. Military-to-military activities are carefully vetted to ensure that they meet Department of Defense engagement objectives, do not pose a risk to the forces of the United States or its allies, and ensure compliance with the NDAA. Because the Department of Defense's appetite for engagement now clearly falls below the upper bound set by the NDAA, the current limiting factor is the department's own engagement objectives, not the NDAA itself.

Consider the specific provisions that were initiated in 2000, updated in 2010, and further revised in recent years.³ The NDAA prohibits contacts that would "create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure" of the PLA to twelve operational areas relating to warfare and preparation therewith.⁴ Exceptions are permitted for search and rescue and humanitarian exercises or operations. Additionally, the secretary of defense is authorized to grant waivers—even regarding the twelve restricted areas—but must explain why doing so would be in the U.S. interest. Nothing is automatic; even

³ *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2000*, Public Law 10665, 106th Cong. (October 5, 1999), 113 Stat. 779–82, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ65/pdf/PLAW-106publ65.pdf>; and *NDAA for Fiscal Year 2010*, Public Law 111–84, 111th Cong. (October 28, 2009), 123 Stat. 2544–45, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ84/pdf/PLAW-111publ84.pdf>. Key amendments included expanding the title and focus of the annual report to Congress to cover broader security developments and cooperative aspects, as well as new requirements for reporting and strategizing vis-à-vis bilateral military contacts.

⁴ *NDAA for Fiscal Year 2000*, 113 Stat. 779a. See also Shirley A. Kan, "U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (CRS), CRS Report for Congress, RL32496, October 27, 2014, 12–18, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32496.pdf>. The twelve proscribed areas are force projection operations, nuclear operations, advanced combined-arms and joint combat operations, advanced logistical operations, chemical and biological defense and other capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction, surveillance and reconnaissance, joint warfighting experiments and other activities related to transformations in warfare, military space operations, other advanced capabilities of the armed forces, arms sales or military-related technology transfers, release of classified or restricted information, and access to Department of Defense laboratories.

meeting via the Defense Telephone Link (DTL) requires a defense contact proposal. All contacts involving Defense Department personnel are carefully vetted by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and other stakeholders to ensure policy coordination and legal compliance.

Within these parameters, the United States and China maintain a wide range of military-to-military engagements, including visits, exchanges, and exercises.⁵ The NDAA mandates issues to address in the Department of Defense's annual report to Congress on military and security developments involving China, including the aforementioned bilateral engagements.⁶ These requirements and engagements are managed through a centralized process overseen by the deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. The deputy assistant secretary of defense works closely with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the joint staff director for East Asia, and other bureaucratic stakeholders.⁷

As a consequence of growing perceptions in Washington that Beijing is increasingly engaging in behavior contrary to U.S. interests and values, and that previous efforts to influence China through engagement have been unsuccessful, recent NDAA revisions have further restricted bilateral military relations. The 2017, 2018, and 2019 NDAAs contain numerous references to China. The 2019 NDAA reflects the emergence of a bipartisan congressional and executive consensus that the United States must counter China's "all-of-nation long-term strategy" and "malign activities" with a comprehensive response of its own:⁸

- Section 1259 bans China from the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise unless it halts all land reclamation, removes weapons installations in the South China Sea, and demonstrates "a consistent four-year track record of taking actions toward stabilizing the region." All three criteria are subject to waiver by the secretary of defense.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017* (Washington, D.C., 2017), 85–92, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF.

⁶ NDAA for Fiscal Year 2000; NDAA for Fiscal Year 2010; and Kan, "U.S.-China Military Contacts," 12–18.

⁷ Harold, "Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability," 136.

⁸ Robert Sutter, "The 115th Congress Aligns with the Trump Administration in Targeting China," Pacific Forum, PacNet, no. 62, August 30, 2018, https://www.pacforum.org/sites/default/s3fs-public/publication/180830_PacNet_62.pdf.

- Section 1261 declares Congress's position that "long-term strategic competition with China is a principal priority for the United States that requires the integration of multiple elements of national power." This section requires the president to submit a "whole-of-government strategy" for dealing with China, which he did by the stipulated deadline of March 1, 2019.
- Section 1262 stipulates that the State and Defense Departments should coordinate to report to Congress on "the commencement of any significant reclamation, assertion of an excessive territorial claim, or militarization activity by the People's Republic of China in the South China Sea." This stipulation may also be waived if the secretary of defense deems a public report to be contrary to the national interest.

These and other restrictions imposed by the NDAA continue to generate vocal Chinese opposition.⁹ This raises two specific questions: What does the NDAA proscribe—without the possibility of exemption or waiver—that would be in the United States' interest to pursue? And which provisions impose an opportunity cost high enough to offset the risk of abandoning a provision outright? The following section considers these questions and presents an argument for why the NDAA remains highly useful to U.S. policy toward China.

Cases in Point

The annual report that the NDAA mandates is invaluable. The Pentagon's annual publication provides an unmatched, highly cost-effective educational reference for U.S. and allied policymakers and experts. The awareness it fosters sends a valuable message of deterrence to the PLA and its civilian leaders while reducing harmful misperceptions. The report also offers researchers and readers authoritative unclassified details that are not available from other sources. While citations and methodological explanations are typically absent, most findings are borne out as new information emerges over time. Periodic Chinese objections to the report, while heated, do not typically challenge any of the actual data, which is further testimony to its general accuracy.¹⁰

⁹ Zhou Bo, "FY 2000 Defense Authorization Act Now Handicaps the U.S. Military," China-U.S. Focus, September 14, 2015, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/fy-2000-defense-authorization-act-now-handicaps-the-us-military>.

¹⁰ See, for example, "Washington Hypes Up Threat Theory for Its Own Agenda," *China Daily*, May 6, 2019, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/06/content_9496174.htm.

The United States and China continue to engage in many positive opportunities that are not subject to NDAA limitations. The NDAA prohibits engagement in twelve areas, leaving a long list of acceptable options for military-to-military cooperation. Leaders of both sides' armed forces have met hundreds of times over the past two decades. The two militaries maintain numerous officer, student, and faculty exchanges of limited duration.¹¹ Though these tend to yield modest results, they remain worthwhile. Some of the most substantive, if still imperfect, exchanges involve the development and employment of confidence-building measures (CBMs). Given the importance of risk reduction for maintaining strategic and operational stability, it has recently been a top objective for U.S. bilateral military engagement and a common thread in all current engagements. For instance, the United States and China signed the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement over two decades ago. This has largely been used to arrange annual, regularized safety discussions between military officials and has had less impact on enhancing their ability to manage maritime matters in real time.¹² More recently, in November 2014, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping announced two memoranda of understanding (MOUs), which were later signed. The first MOU, "Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters," is aimed at communications and maneuvering procedures for military encounters. In the second one, "Notification of Major Military Activities," the two countries agreed to broadly inform each other of political and strategic developments as well as of observations of military activities.¹³

Of the two CBMs developed in 2014, the "rules" MOU is focused on operational issues and has been consummated and absorbed. Its functional scope of issues is covered in recurring meetings, now led by U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. The "notification" MOU is a more strategic and living document. Annexes can be added to expand its scope to include additional exchanges of information along the lines of traditional CBMs, such as those between the United States and Russia. For example, in 2015 the two sides discussed ballistic missile launch notifications as a possible annex, but the PLA

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*.

¹² Indeed, the mechanism proved to be ineffectual during the 2001 EP-3 crisis and remains considered largely a talk shop, in which familiar interlocutors recite predictable policy points.

¹³ For detailed analysis of the CBMs, see Peter Dutton and Andrew Erickson, "When Eagle Meets Dragon: Managing Risk in Maritime East Asia," RealClearDefense, March 25, 2015, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/03/25/when_eagle_meets_dragon_managing_risk_in_maritime_east_asia_107802.html.

ultimately declined. The MOU requires an annual working-level meeting that establishes a channel to discuss its implementation, including an exchange of reports each year on the number of activities covered under the MOU, which is intended to encourage reciprocity. However, it is unclear from public sources how often and how successfully this channel has actually been employed. The meeting is also a venue in which to discuss new or future annexes in other areas.

These CBMs are voluntary, which makes it more difficult to achieve reciprocity.¹⁴ Although the U.S. Department of Defense published the English versions of the MOUs on its website, the PLA has never released the Chinese text, making it harder for outsiders to observe their level of functionality. U.S. officials' lack of access to their Chinese counterparts is another obstacle to bilateral engagement. Chinese officials must first await central policy edicts from Beijing before engaging their foreign counterparts, including accepting phone calls during times of tension or uncertainty.¹⁵ At the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue in November 2018, Washington and Beijing agreed to "seek to maintain communication on implementing existing Confidence Building Measures and developing a military-to-military Crisis Deconfliction and Communication Framework."¹⁶

Finally, there are many areas not prohibited by the NDAA that are arguably in both the U.S. and Chinese national interests but where the PLA still does not engage with the U.S. military substantively. Too often when Beijing criticizes the NDAA with disciplined messaging, Washington fails to publicly defend it or suggest positive alternatives. Rather than condemning the proscription of twelve areas of potential engagement, for example, China could pursue cooperation in the wide range of permissible areas.

It would be extremely regrettable if the MOUs regarding CBMs were one-way documents that limited the United States without ensuring Chinese participation. Beijing declines many opportunities to communicate during a crisis and reduce risk that Washington suggests. For example, the United States will immediately accept a call from anyone in China's chain of command at any time; Chinese defense officials will not take an

¹⁴ Mira Rapp-Hooper, "What's in a Confidence Building Measure?" *Lawfare*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2015/02/whats-in-a-confidence-building-measure>.

¹⁵ For further discussion of this obstacle, see Harold, "Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability," 132.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue," Media Note, November 9, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-china-diplomatic-and-security-dialogue-3>.

immediate call.¹⁷ Even though China is given 48 hours to take a call, there is no public evidence that the DTL has actually ever been used during a crisis. Before introducing new dialogues, the two sides need to make sure that existing mechanisms for communication can withstand a crisis—currently an unlikely prospect. When the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act went into effect in 2018, for example, China recalled Admiral Shen Jinlong from the International Seapower Symposium, withdrew General Wei Fenghe from the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, canceled the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism (the premier communications path between the two countries' joint staffs), and canceled the *Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group's visit to Hong Kong. While China later reversed two of these decisions, the situation reflected a decades-old problem: when tensions rise, which is precisely the most important time to talk, Beijing cuts communications. And when China is willing to communicate, it shuns the hotline that the two sides labored to establish in favor of going through the Defense Attaché Office at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

Some controversial activities continue without limitation by the NDAA. A provision requiring the secretary of defense to certify by the end of each calendar year whether any military contacts authorized that year had violated the NDAA was not retained in the 2011 NDAA. Instead, internal coordination is integral to the process of ensuring legal compliance with the NDAA so that the secretary can certify that all contacts are appropriate. Additionally, the NDAA does not limit actions by retired military officers or officials, even if they involve engagements with problematic optics. The most prominent of these activities is the U.S.-China Sanya Initiative, an annual dialogue held with retired senior officers from both militaries.

Track 2 dialogues are not inherently limited by the NDAA and can offer an excellent opportunity to improve mutual understanding and share ideas without committing governments to specific policy decisions. But they are also susceptible to China's potent propaganda and perception management efforts. The Sanya Initiative is one example of a Track 2 dialogue that poses such risks without offering commensurate rewards for U.S. interests. First, the backgrounds of U.S. and Chinese participants are not always comparable: U.S. participants have included many high-ranking retired flag officers, while Chinese participants, led by former PLA chief of intelligence General Xiong Guangkai and later Admiral Sun Jianguo under the auspices

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, by contrast, typically remain accessible but are often kept out of the loop regarding crisis events. For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs representatives learned of the 2009 *Impeccable* incident from the U.S. embassy. Author's discussion with U.S. official, Newport, RI, June 2019.

of the China Association for International Friendly Contact, have included high-ranking intelligence officers, including many focused specifically on Taiwan.¹⁸ At the inaugural February 2008 meeting, Chinese participants “asked the U.S. participants to help with PRC objections to U.S. policies and laws: namely the Taiwan Relations Act, Pentagon’s report to Congress on PRC Military Power, and legal restrictions on military contacts in the NDAA for FY2000.”¹⁹ Second, some U.S. defense experts “worry that the venue is a Chinese intelligence effort to woo a cohort of high-ranking ex-officers who could lend legitimacy to the PRC’s preferred policy positions,” rather than being a productive give and take.²⁰ The very persistence of this widely criticized initiative underscores the fact that the NDAA’s purview has limits.

Some NDAA restrictions merely reflect limitations that would exist anyway. The status of China’s armed forces, as well as U.S. interactions with their leaders and personnel, makes it abundantly clear that the PLA is not empowered to take policy in a direction more favorable to U.S. or mutual Sino-U.S. interests, regardless of the degree of bilateral military contacts.²¹ Engaging with Chinese military leaders and personnel, while sometimes useful for other reasons, is unlikely to generate substantial strategic trust or operational value.²² Neither the area and intelligence officers that China authorizes to interact with foreigners nor the students that China’s armed forces have previously sent to U.S. professional military education institutions are likely susceptible to substantial ideational socialization in accordance with U.S. approaches to military relations. Those who might actually benefit from such exchanges by obtaining new perspectives and reducing misperceptions—i.e., field officers and personnel with the most

¹⁸ According to U.S.-China Economic and Security Review commissioners Carolyn Bartholomew and Larry Wortzel, the China Association for International Friendly Contact is “a front organization for the International Liaison Department of the People’s Liberation Army’s General Political Department, which is responsible both for intelligence collection and conducting People’s Republic of China propaganda and perception management campaigns, particularly focused on foreign military forces.” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2011 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (Washington, D.C., 2011), 365, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/annual_report_full_11.pdf. See also Larry M. Wortzel, *The Chinese People’s Liberation Army and Information Warfare* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 34; and Larry M. Wortzel, *The Dragon Extends Its Reach: Chinese Military Power Goes Global* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), 154.

¹⁹ Kan, “U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress,” 32.

²⁰ Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability,” 129.

²¹ James Nolan, for example, contends that while U.S. flag/general officers have the most decision-making autonomy of any military leaders, their Chinese counterparts are significantly less empowered than even Russian flag officers. James P. Nolan, “Why Can’t We Be Friends? Assessing the Operational Value of Engaging PLA Leadership,” *Asia Policy*, no. 20 (2015): 67–68.

²² See *ibid.*, 67–68, 78.

sensitive and isolating responsibilities (e.g., in the PLA Rocket Force)—are unlikely to be released for substantive interactions with U.S. personnel.²³

Some opportunities that might have prompted reconsideration of certain NDAA limitations have faded over time. Chinese sources, including the most demonstrably authoritative, show an acute real-time awareness of U.S. and allied forces and capabilities.²⁴ Thus, even what has been promoted as a useful objective for U.S. military exchanges with China in the past is now unconvincing: there are few, if any, opportunities left to deter by engagement.

In sum, the NDAA brings bureaucratic focus, organization, and discipline to an important and challenging issue. It does not preclude bilateral activities in the United States' interests but does bar those activities contrary to them. Determining that an activity is the former and not the latter requires a cautious, deliberative process through which bad ideas are weeded out. Possible areas for improving this process include additional training and counterintelligence briefings ahead of engagement and post-engagement reviews for U.S. military staff.

Rethinking the Fundamentals

The abovementioned realities suggest that caution in military-to-military engagement is needed and that bilateral progress is likely possible only at the margins—particularly given a more capable PLA, a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, and a potentially even more conflictual military relationship. As a guiding principle, the Hippocratic oath, “first, do no harm,” is useful here and suggests that bilateral relations should not help the PLA improve anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) or power-projection capabilities. There is considerable room, however, for the United States to better improve its own processes with respect to military exchanges; and there may be room for further achievements in specific areas. To ensure that military-to-military activities proceed in accordance with its national security interests, the United States should pursue an approach that is (1) clear and cogently communicated, (2) conditional and credible, (3) comprehensive, and (4) consistent.

²³ Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability,” 121.

²⁴ This formidable Chinese awareness has been documented extensively by the PLA-watching community. See, for example, Lyle J. Goldstein, “How China Sees the U.S. Navy’s Sea Hunter Drone,” *National Interest*, January 31, 2017; and Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples’ Wars* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2011).

Clear and Cogently Communicated

U.S. officials must formulate and deliver messages effectively. While its rhetoric and actions often diverge, China is often clearer about its strategic intentions than its capabilities (e.g., operations, tactics, and force levels). The United States' decentralized democracy, by contrast, is relatively open at all levels, although more confusing to Chinese and other outside observers at the strategic level. Washington would benefit greatly from further clarifying its strategy. This would help advance several objectives: better informing U.S. policies, reassuring U.S. allies and security partners, and providing stability for relations with China, particularly in the military realm. Such an organizing principle could greatly strengthen Sino-U.S. military relations, and the 2019 NDAA's requirement for the president to submit a strategy offers a useful impetus. The dedicated chapter in the Pentagon's annual report on China and high-level presentations, such as the secretary of defense's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, reflect U.S. objectives for bilateral military engagements, but officials should make additional authoritative speeches and public statements.

Furthermore, Washington should greatly improve its strategic communications and messaging to prevail in a battle of narratives by more clearly and forcefully rejecting Chinese slogans in public statements. Political-organizational factors have made this an area in which Beijing enjoys particular strengths, while Washington (if it even acts in full coordination) suffers from significant weaknesses. To strengthen the U.S. approach to communications, it is important to review negative and positive examples from the recent past, particularly regarding U.S. military visits and related communications.

In a negative example, U.S. military officials have repeatedly expressed disproportionate enthusiasm about strengthening ties and overstating the value of engagement, miscalculations that China encourages and exploits. Related excesses and inconsistency over the past decade arguably motivated China to use military relations as a lever. It also helped generate unmet expectations that were more damaging when dashed than they would have been if they had never been raised to begin with.

In a positive example, while the U.S. government overall appeared to embrace China's concept of a "new type of great-power relations," the U.S. military (and the navy in particular) appears to have declined to embrace related variants, including the "new type of military-to-military relations." Thanks to a well-established pattern of Chinese government organizations implementing overall leadership guidance within their specific issue areas,

attention to broad Chinese policy approaches and slogans can help U.S. military leaders anticipate loaded policies and terms and prepare to avoid such traps.

But circumventing pitfalls is not enough: Washington must do a better job of articulating its own concepts and policies and supporting military personnel at all levels in such efforts. This will further reduce the risk of Chinese interlocutors driving interactions and policy conversations in a direction that could undermine U.S. and allied interests. A good next step would be to press the PLA to explain why the two sides have been working on communications (e.g., the DTL) for decades, yet are no closer to an executable crisis communications methodology. U.S. officials should ask their PLA counterparts to outline on the record how they think this should work, as well as how they perceive that the United States will communicate in times of urgency.

Conditional and Credible

U.S. engagement with China in military exchanges should hinge on the principle of reciprocity (or, at least, the concrete reality of transactionalism). Chinese unwillingness or inability to reciprocate equitably remains one of the greatest impediments to effective military relations. Chinese professional military education represents a microcosm of this problem. Whereas the United States integrates foreign officers directly into its facilities and curriculum, China segregates them—to the extent of providing different instructors, curricula, and even campuses, regardless of the students' linguistic abilities.²⁵ As Scott Harold correctly assesses, “Such a situation undermines the basic reciprocity that undergirds and legitimizes military exchanges.”²⁶ China inaccurately blames the NDAA for restrictions on educational exchanges. During a 2014 visit to Harvard University, for

²⁵ Unlike the United States and its allies and partners, the PLA segregates foreign students from its own (with rare exceptions for very friendly states, such as North Korea). China has, and is increasing, invitations to foreign students, but these invitations are to “foreigner courses” with only a few PLA colonels and senior colonels participating. Foreigners do not attend the courses where the PLA educates its own at the National Defense University and Academy of Military Science. Whereas foreign students at the U.S. Naval War College take core curriculum classes and most electives with their American counterparts and use its main library and electronic databases, foreign students at China's closest analogue—the Naval Command and Staff College in Nanjing—take separate classes and must use a separate section of the main library and separate electronic databases (author's onsite observations). Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party does not trust PLA officers (save those with significant vetting for loyalty purposes) to socialize, converse, or engage in education with a foreign pool of officers, which would entail a dangerous discussion of values. The party also does not enable foreign insight into PLA doctrine and strategy, which would undermine PLA advantages in warfighting capabilities—most importantly in strategic concepts and developments.

²⁶ Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability,” 121.

example, then PLA Navy commander Admiral Wu Shengli expressed frustration that, in his opinion, the NDAA effectively prohibits PLA officers from studying at U.S. institutions, particularly professional military education schools, under officially sanctioned exchanges.²⁷ In fact, this is a policy decision. U.S. concerns about the lack of reciprocity and PRC opposition to Taiwan students' presence there are what in practice prevent PLA students from studying at U.S. institutions and limit facility visits and exercises to some extent. In another example of the disproportionate benefits that exchanges have had for China, then minister of defense General Chang Wanquan asked for help mastering the art of carrier-based air operations, and the nature of a PLA Navy delegation tour aboard the USS *Ronald Reagan* at RIMPAC in 2014 reportedly triggered concerns that China was being afforded excessive knowledge to an area in which the United States possesses the undisputed gold standard, without equivalent offerings from China in return.²⁸

Recent events risk the appearance that Washington is saying one thing and doing another, ceding narrative space to Beijing. As the region worries about the long-term U.S. commitment, the United States has appeared to undermine its opposition to China's actions in the South China Sea with a series of underexplained actions. For instance, in April 2018 the United States took the dramatic step of disinviting the PLA Navy from RIMPAC with a public statement objecting to the militarization of the islands in the South China Sea. However, only a few months later, in September 2018, the United States invited the PLA Navy commander to the International Seapower Symposium on a naval counterpart visit, and in November it hosted the commander of the PLA Hong Kong Garrison on the USS *Ronald Reagan* to observe cyclical flight operations. Meanwhile, conditions worsened in the South China Sea with the Chinese destroyer *Lanzhou's* harassment of the USS *Decatur*. Indeed, even during the USS *Ronald Reagan* visit, open press reporting indicated additional Chinese land-building activity in the South China Sea. Moreover, it is not in the U.S. interest to help the PLA improve its ability to engage in A2/AD operations or project power.

To ensure credibility with China and U.S. allies alike, Washington should pursue a thoughtful, tailored approach and impose consequences and costs—including ones that limit future activities—for any failure

²⁷ Wu Shengli made these comments in a discussion with the author and university administrators, faculty, and students at Harvard University, September 20, 2014.

²⁸ Jeremy Page, "China Pushes Limits to Closer Ties with U.S. Military: Beijing's Navy Chief Seeks Greater Access to U.S. Aircraft Carriers," *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/china-pushes-limits-to-closer-ties-with-u-s-military-1405964884>.

by Beijing to honor its commitments. To support this approach and maintain its leverage, Washington must not be an “ardent suitor”: it should not appear to want progress in the relationship any more than Beijing does.²⁹ Instead, a transactional negotiated approach is needed. If the United States wants something (e.g., progress on the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement agenda, crisis communication dialogues, or the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism), it must be clear about what it wants, understand what China wants, and hold something that China wants at risk (e.g., disaster-management exchanges that portray China as a peer).

Comprehensive

The United States must be careful to avoid the trap of pursuing risk reduction only in the areas and with the actors with which China seeks to reduce risk. Arguably, China has made air and maritime encounter rules agreements with the U.S. military because it fears the U.S. capabilities in these areas. Yet elsewhere (with foreign militaries or paranaul forces, for example) Beijing has avoided risk-reduction measures that would decrease its ability to leverage its asymmetric advantages. In this regard, one area that has received insufficient U.S. attention is a mismatch in its interactions with China that confers excessive focus, credit, and sometimes even new initiatives regarding all relevant parties’ adherence in practice to norms and safety measures that are already internationally mandated (for example, by customary international law and the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea). In a sign that the United States is now moving away from such duplicative focus on areas that China should be addressing anyway, the Pentagon’s 2019 report on China’s military power emphasized three interconnected priorities for bilateral military contacts that transcend risk aversion: “(1) encouraging China to act in ways consistent with the free and open international order; (2) promoting risk reduction and risk management efforts that diminish the potential for misunderstanding or miscalculation; and (3) deconflicting forces operating in close proximity.”³⁰

The U.S. Navy engages in extensive exchanges and has some bilateral protocols with the PLA Navy, and the U.S. Coast Guard engages in some exchanges with the China Coast Guard. Yet there are currently no shore-based contacts whatsoever with China’s third sea force—the People’s

²⁹ For further discussion of the term “ardent suitor” as it applies to Sino-U.S. military relations, see Randall Schriver, “Bound to Fail,” *Washington Times*, July 25, 2017, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/jul/25/bound-to-fail>.

³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019* (Washington, D.C., 2019), 107.

Armed Forces Maritime Militia. Moreover, no bilateral commitment to safe practices and professional seamanship specifically covers China's coast guard and maritime militia, even though they are the major actors in the near-seas activities that are at variance with international law and U.S. and allied interests. Washington should work to close this loophole and link the future of bilateral naval relations to the positive participation of China's other two sea forces. For example, the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) was endorsed almost unanimously at the 2014 Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao. All U.S. and Chinese sea forces should always be following CUES—a relatively simple but valuable set of safety procedures.³¹ At the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the U.S. and Chinese officials “discussed the importance of all military, law enforcement and civilian vessels and aircraft—including those in the PLA Navy, Chinese Coast Guard and PRC Maritime Militia—to operate in a safe and professional manner in accordance with international law.”³² To be sure, advancing deliverables related to China's coast guard and maritime militia will likely require senior advocacy from at least the secretary of defense, as well as pressure on Xi himself.

There are other important areas in which a Track 1 dialogue is not occurring but could be useful for the United States. Communication and deconfliction could become important in Korean Peninsula scenarios. Apparently considering a Korean contingency at sea, Senior Colonel Zhang Guochen, chief of staff of the Dalian Military Subdistrict, suggests that in the event of major incidents involving “neighboring coastal countries,” such as invasion and civil strife, China would employ geographically layered maritime blockade and control operations. He promotes the maritime militia as ideally suited for this task, in cooperation with China's coast guard and navy. Zhang calls for the differential engagement with and processing of ordinary refugees, military and political figures, and armed personnel and their vessels and equipment by their identity and status, as well as by their location and activities. A “combat mission” under joint theater command could conceivably employ such weapons as sea mines. While Zhang stipulates that militiamen should adhere to international law, such activities could bring militia forces into close proximity to U.S. and allied forces with

³¹ Thus far, the PLA Navy has not always been willing to follow CUES in practice when encountering U.S. Navy vessels, including in the South China Sea. However, some adherence is arguably better than none. Author's discussion with U.S. Navy officer, Newport, RI, December 2016.

³² James Mattis (statement at a press conference for the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, Washington, D.C., November 9, 2018), available at <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2018/11/secdef-mattis-calls-for-prc-maritime-militia-to-operate-in-a-safe-and-professional-manner-in-accordance-with-international-law>.

different missions, communications standards, and rules of engagement.³³ As Roy Kamphausen documents, PLA authors articulate a similar tiered system for interception, neutralization, and sorting along China's land borders with North Korea. While suggesting caution about entering North Korea, given the risks of escalation and precedent for U.S. and allied intervention, they "indicate that the best choice for the holding camps would be outside Chinese territory" and "claim that the setup of camps within the borders of the refugee source country is legal."³⁴

The evolution of China's nuclear triad and advances in missiles and missile defense by both sides are further increasing the salience of strategic deterrence issues. The Pentagon assesses that China is "developing advanced cruise missiles and hypersonic missile capabilities that can travel at exceptional speeds with unpredictable flight paths that challenge our existing defensive systems."³⁵ Within a decade, such advances are likely to mean that neither nation's homeland is a sanctuary fully defensible from the other's nuclear or conventional strikes. In fact, this is generally true already with respect to China's and even the United States' inability to defend completely against the other side's nuclear strikes, as well as with respect to China's inability to defend itself fully against U.S. conventional strikes. As for Chinese conventional strikes against the United States, U.S. defense capabilities are limited, but China currently lacks the ability to reach out and strike conventionally at that range. At some point soon, however, it will be able to strike the U.S. homeland with conventional weapons. Before these dynamics fully transform deterrence relations, it would behoove the two powers to discuss the potential implications and reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation where possible.

Consistent

The NDAA provides important guidance from the U.S. Congress on what the Department of Defense can and cannot do. The two decades of meteoric rise in Chinese military power since the inception of this act makes it look even more prudent in retrospect. The NDAA helps promote

³³ Zhang Guochen, "Haishang minbing canjia haishang feng kong xingdong yanjiu" [Study on the Participation of Maritime Militia in Sea Blockade and Control Operations], *National Defense*, November 2016, 41–43.

³⁴ Roy Kamphausen, "The DPRK in Distress: Potential PLA Intervention in North Korea" (paper presented at the PLA Conference organized by the National Bureau of Asian Research and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, March 2015).

³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *2019 Missile Defense Review* (Washington, D.C., January 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF>.

policy coordination by constraining overly enthusiastic individual officers and officials who might otherwise be misled into embracing the unrealistic premise that they can personally achieve a breakthrough in bilateral relations.³⁶ It is part of a larger vetting process run by the Office of the Secretary of Defense that helps ensure consistency and the ability to implement a strategic approach rather than an approach centered on a service or combatant command, and thereby prevents seams from being exploited. The NDAA can strengthen the hand of U.S. officials in negotiations and other interactions by making clear that the sort of personal cultivation at which Chinese governmental organs and operatives excel cannot catalyze precipitous changes in U.S. policy or bilateral military relations. Certainly there is room for improvement, and the Defense Department must speak with one voice. While Beijing will not embrace all U.S. points, or even the majority of them, each side expressing its respective views is far more productive and sustainable than Washington ceding the narrative initiative to Beijing. Perhaps more than ever, U.S. officials will need to “agree to disagree” in many areas with their Chinese interlocutors, even as genuine mutual interests allow them to cooperate in an evolving but limited set of areas.

Productive Areas for Engagement

Despite the problems and limitations discussed in the preceding section, at least five principal areas offer meaningful opportunities for Sino-U.S. military exchanges and cooperation: public goods provision, negotiated CBMs, waterfront-wide inclusion, operational trust, and mutual restraint. Several of these even offer opportunities for growth and development.

First, as both the United States and China continue to share substantial interests in international security and prosperity, and China’s interests and capabilities continue to expand globally, the two sides could expand cooperation on nontraditional security threats and the provision of public goods. Xi has highlighted “terrorism, cyber-insecurity, major infectious diseases, and climate change” as “common challenges” that merit international cooperation.³⁷ In particular, the significant medical expertise resident in the U.S. and Chinese militaries makes combating infectious

³⁶ For documentation of this sort of risk, see Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability,” 109.

³⁷ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017), 53.

diseases another potentially productive area for cooperation, especially given the continued risk of pandemic influenza.³⁸ All could be pursued without altering the NDAA. Additionally, the United States could consider increasing its emphasis on military engagement with China in multilateral forums, which may offer important opportunities and avoid some of the pitfalls of bilateral engagement.

Second, while *pro forma* exchanges are unlikely to increase dramatically, there is room for further functional interaction that brings more components of the countries' armed services into contact with one another. As detailed above, China's coast guard and maritime militia regularly operate in international waters, in part to promote China's disputed sovereignty claims. Any bilateral maritime interactions and exchanges are simply incomplete without these groups' representation. While the U.S. Coast Guard is not employed to advance disputed sovereignty claims, it could participate more extensively in maritime discussions as well.

Third, while open-ended engagement faces major limitations, and China does not seem to have cooperated fully with some existing CBMs, there remains some potential for the further pursuit and implementation of negotiated CBMs.³⁹ For example, as noted above, CUES and related protocols will be incomplete—and of limited efficacy—without the inclusion of all three Chinese sea forces. A comprehensive protocol to include all Chinese and U.S. maritime forces merits consideration. Other potentially productive areas include high-level or joint issues, such as crisis communications.

Fourth, even though improving strategic trust appears unrealistic for now, there is considerable potential to improve operational trust.⁴⁰ Differences in national interests, as well as enduring differences in historical experience, culture, and political institutions, have produced a significant lack of strategic trust on both sides at the broadest level.⁴¹ While strategic trust remains elusive in critical areas and cannot be readily improved through military exchanges, increasing operational trust and reducing the risk of unintended escalation are realistic goals for bilateral

³⁸ Andrew S. Erickson, "Combating a Truly Collective Threat: Sino-American Military Cooperation against Avian Influenza," *Global Health Governance* 1, no. 1 (2007), http://ghgj.org/Erickson_1.1_Combating.htm.

³⁹ Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016), 248–50.

⁴⁰ Dale C. Rielage, "An Imperative to Engage," *Proceedings* 141, no. 4 (2015), <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015-04-0/imperative-engage>.

⁴¹ Michael D. Swaine et al., *U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey: Findings and Implications* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013); and Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Mistrust* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012).

military relations. Dale Rielage, U.S. Pacific Fleet director for intelligence and information operations, explains that “operational trust is built over time through demonstrated competence, predictability, and reliability.... [It] is often expressed in minute detail and well-worn procedures.” For example, “despite being political adversaries, the U.S. and Soviet navies achieved a degree of operational trust that allowed both to work in close proximity during the Cold War with a limited number of incidents.”⁴²

Fifth, even absent related agreements, it is possible to pursue some measure of mutual restraint in the most dangerous and volatile areas. On the positive side of the ledger, some degree of cooperation is possible even when both parties face a security dilemma, although factors such as offense vs. defense, technology, and geography must be considered with particular care.⁴³ Yet negotiating durable agreements under a great-power security dilemma can be extremely difficult, as both sides have incentives to cheat, and no outside party can adjudicate effectively.⁴⁴ Each side’s belief that the other will simply pocket any concessions without reciprocal actions or benefits strongly disincentivizes unilateral restraint or accommodation. Fortunately, effective arms control and deterrence relations need not be limited to formal treaties; they simply require arranging forces in such a way that neither side has the incentive to act adversely toward the other. Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin’s explication of this issue is worth considering in depth.⁴⁵

A broader, more flexible form of engagement that applies Schelling and Halperin’s conceptual approach to focus on reducing the incentives to use capabilities rather than reducing the capabilities themselves can thus address U.S. and Chinese concerns that would render aspects of formal agreements deal-breakers. China appears absolutely unwilling to accept technical inferiority, and any agreement that attempts to keep the PLA in such a position will fail; nor will the United States voluntarily relinquish capabilities that it has labored and invested to develop, particularly in the face of a security dilemma. Informal understandings may evolve over time through informal communication, and may even lead to more explicit agreements.⁴⁶

⁴² Rielage, “An Imperative to Engage.”

⁴³ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

⁴⁴ Kenneth A. Oye, “Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies,” *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 1–24.

⁴⁵ Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey, 1985), 2–3.

⁴⁶ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 74–87, 181; and Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions,” *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 226–54.

The overall strategic positions of the United States and China are relatively clear; it may be difficult to justify extensive dialogues that fail to go beyond policy platitudes. What could be useful to discuss are operational and perhaps even tactical specifics, which remain far less clear. The most realistic possibility to pursue over time is therefore some form of implicit, non-treaty-based understanding between the United States and China that even if the use of certain lower-end capabilities may be impossible to rule out, other types of capabilities are primarily for deterrence rather than actual operational use. This would help clarify thresholds, an important aspect of risk management.⁴⁷ As explained previously, however, this approach will only be effective to the extent that both sides restrain themselves. It will fail if Beijing expects preemptive or unilateral concessions from Washington.

Managing Military Relations and Expectations in the Xi Era

Amid mounting U.S. concern about Chinese actions, Xi has arguably initiated the most difficult extended period in U.S.-China relations since rapprochement in the 1970s. This period is likely to become even more challenging, with no relief in sight. As either a trailing indicator or a source of harm to bilateral relations, military relations cannot escape the constraints of the bilateral relationship at large. Given the gravity of the issues at stake, unrealistic expectations and the risk of disruptive disappointment should be minimized. It is better to proceed steadily, if slowly, rather than to grasp at a breakthrough only to have it unravel amid bitter recriminations.

The NDAA is important, but it does not define the bilateral military relationship, nor is it a hindrance to engagement. It has not prevented much in the way of military exchanges, and there are many potential areas of cooperation not affected by the NDAA in which China remains unwilling to engage. Should Beijing's paradigm radically change (that is, by sharing greater values, embracing greater transparency and collective security, accepting and supporting the U.S. alliance system and international norms, and so forth), then engagement activities could expand to more operationally relevant capabilities. For now, however, rather than risk harm to U.S. interests and Chinese disappointment from false expectations, the United States should retain the NDAA with its limited exceptions and possibility of

⁴⁷ Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), xiii, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG614.pdf.

waivers and focus both its military exchanges and broader relationship with China in the five areas outlined above. Doing so would enable the two sides to pursue some form of “competitive coexistence.”⁴⁸

The United States welcomes a strong, developing, stable, and open China committed to observing the norms and rules of international society and peacefully resolving its differences with neighbors in accordance with international law. This approach builds on areas of mutual interest even while recognizing that the two countries differ in important areas. It acknowledges the complex realities outlined above and rejects a simplistic binary choice between full agreement on sensitive issues (which is unrealistic) and the threat of an inevitable drift to war (which is similarly unlikely given its unacceptable cost). In the Xi era, this is both the best approach available and the key to entering a new era with U.S. interests and regional peace intact.

⁴⁸ Andrew S. Erickson, “Competitive Coexistence: An American Concept for Managing U.S.-China Relations,” *National Interest*, January 30, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/competitive-coexistence-american-concept-managing-us-china-relations-42852>.

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In October 2017, the National Bureau of Asian Research, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and the Headquarters, Department of the Army, jointly convened a conference of leading experts on the People's Liberation Army in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The 2017 PLA Conference examined the Chinese military within the strategic context of an evolving China and a shifting international system and analyzed how this restructured force operates in support of national objectives. This volume collects seven papers from the conference.

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