

THE PLA IN A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

PREPARING FOR HIGH WINDS AND CHOPPY WATERS



Edited by Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch

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With contributions from

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Timothy R. Heath, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Erin Richter, Tsun-Kai Tsai,
Howard Wang, Joel Wuthnow, and Ketian Zhang

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— FOREWORD —

I am honored to present *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, the latest volume from an essential conference series on the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the China Strategic Focus Group at United States Indo-Pacific Command, and the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs. This volume explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is thinking about the use of force in an increasingly complex security environment and assesses the CCP's capability to employ the PLA to achieve its strategic objectives. The superb work of the authors provides a rigorous and insightful assessment of how CCP threat assessments are driving the PLA's modernization efforts, strategy, and operational posture.

China continues its aggressive military buildup through a rising defense budget, a rapidly modernizing conventional force, an exponential increase in space-based capabilities, and an alarming nuclear weapons expansion. Beijing also continues to wage increasingly aggressive gray-zone operations against U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, significantly raising the risk of an incident or miscalculation that could lead to loss of life or spark a wider conflict. In the Taiwan Strait, Beijing is employing all elements of comprehensive national power to coerce Taiwan and the international community to accept that unification is, in fact, inevitable. Although China claims it prefers to achieve unification through peaceful means, Xi Jinping will not renounce the use of force. These actions pose an important question for the U.S. Department of Defense, interagency, and broader China-watching community: to what extent is Xi preparing China for war?

This PLA Conference volume contributes to the expanding global conversation on China strategic intentions by examining the CCP's perceptions of China's external security environment and tracing how these judgments direct whole-of-society preparations for intensifying strategic competition with the United States. It offers unique insights into the primary ideological lens through which Beijing assesses its security environment, as well as the impacts these assessments have on party-army relations. The volume then leverages this context to explore how the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture are evolving along with whole-of-society efforts to compete with the West. It also examines the lessons

the PLA may be drawing from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including how the PLA may be applying these lessons to its assessments of its own strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the volume assesses three operational theaters—Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Oceania—and the future role of the PLA in achieving its objectives in each.

This work offers insights for understanding China's strategic approach to military modernization for potential unification by force that planners, policymakers, and warfighters can leverage toward designing effective and achievable objectives. I am proud to sponsor this conference, and I commend the organizers and participants who contributed their collective discernment to make this volume possible.

Samuel J. Paparo

Commander, United States Indo-Pacific Command

May 2025

China's Military Strategy and Posture in an Increasingly Complex Security Environment

Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch

The 2023 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference, cohosted by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and the China Strategic Focus Group at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, examined how the perception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of its external security environment is shaping its use of the PLA as a tool of national power. Key questions the conference sought to address included the following:

- How do top Chinese civilian and military leaders assess the security environment of the People's Republic of China (PRC)?
- What are the key risks and opportunities these leaders believe they face in achieving their goals?
- How are the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture changing against the backdrop of a more complex external security environment?
- What role will the use of military force play in achieving the CCP's goals?
- How effectively is the CCP using the PLA in coordination with other tools of national power—diplomatic, economic, and informational—to achieve its goals?

Key findings include the following:

- The CCP is using military force and coercion with greater frequency in pursuit of the PRC's territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region and strategy to become a great global power.

Benjamin Frohman is Research Director for the People's Liberation Army Conference and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

Jeremy Rausch is Director of the Political and Security Affairs group at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

- The CCP's more prominent use of the PLA is driven by its view that the PRC's external security environment is worsening while simultaneously presenting it with historic opportunities to accomplish the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."
- Chinese leaders more aggressively use military force and coercion against weaker countries but continue to exercise caution when confronted with the prospect of direct military intervention by the United States.
- The CCP's calculus surrounding the use of military force is informed by confidence that historical forces are propelling the PRC's rise as a great power. As a result, Chinese leaders have been emboldened to act more forcefully in the region while awaiting opportunities to take bolder actions to seize or expand control over additional territory as the PRC increases its global power and influence.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been instructive for Chinese leaders, both highlighting potential shortfalls in PLA capabilities and plans and offering important lessons for preparing for a potential future military conflict.

Even though the PRC's more forceful approach in the Indo-Pacific has yielded only mixed results to date, concern is growing in the United States and capitals around the world about Beijing's more assertive use of the PLA to achieve its regional and global goals. From the China-India border to the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and the CCP's sweeping sovereignty claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea, recent years have witnessed increasingly aggressive actions by the PLA to assert control over territory the CCP believes to be vital to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Flashpoints have included a fatal clash on the China-India border in 2020, which saw the PRC's first use of lethal force against India in nearly half a century; the PLA's aggressive efforts to prevent the Philippines' resupply of Second Thomas Shoal, which continued into 2024; and what CIA director William Burns stated publicly to be CCP general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Xi Jinping's instruction to the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.¹ Meanwhile, China's security forces continue to expand their presence outside the PRC's immediate periphery, including into the small island states of the Pacific.

¹ Olivia Gazis, "CIA Director William Burns: 'I Wouldn't Underestimate,' Xi's Ambitions for Taiwan," CBS News, February 3, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-director-william-burns-i-wouldnt-underestimate-xis-ambitions-for-taiwan>.

Amid these tensions, the United States must update its understanding of the drivers behind the PRC's more aggressive military posture, including the CCP's perception of its security environment and thinking regarding the use of military coercion and force to achieve its goals. This PLA Conference volume provides in-depth analysis of Chinese leaders' assessments of the challenges and opportunities in their external security environment, the PRC's military and economic preparations for a future conflict, and the PLA's evolving posture and capabilities in key regions, including around Taiwan, in the South China Sea, and in Oceania.

Using Military Power in a Turbulent World

The CCP's increasing use of military power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond is informed by a darkening view of its external security environment. Chinese leaders have long perceived both challenges and opportunities for achieving their goals, but in recent years they have assessed that the challenges facing them have grown more severe. This view was articulated by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the CCP's 20th National Congress in October 2022, where he declared:

[China] has entered a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising. Various “black swan” and “gray rhino” events may occur at any time. We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms.²

The CCP's growing sense of unease was captured as early as January 2021, when a commentary in the *People's Daily* expressed similar concern about the challenges the CCP faced heading into the centennial year of its founding. “The closer we get to national rejuvenation, the less likely smooth sailing will be, the more risks, challenges, and even stormy seas there will be,” the commentary warned. It continued:

In the past we were able to take advantage of the trend and opportunities were relatively easy to grasp; now we have to go up against the wind.... In the past, the general environment was relatively stable, and risks and challenges were relatively easy to see clearly; now global circumstances are turbulent and

² Xi Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects” (report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, October 16, 2022), http://my.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792358.htm.

complex, geopolitical challenges are high and pressing, and there are many submerged reefs and undercurrents.³

Shortly before the 20th Party Congress, General Secretary Xi repeated this assessment verbatim, confirming its authoritative encapsulation of views at the highest level of the party-state.⁴

A central factor driving the CCP's assessment of its growing risks is the increasingly fraught state of its relationship with the United States. In 2019 the PRC's vice minister of public security warned that "suppression" by the United States had become the most significant external factor affecting the CCP's "political security."⁵ At the National People's Congress in March 2023, General Secretary Xi took the unusual step of publicly identifying the United States as behind the PRC's growing challenges, declaring that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedentedly severe challenges to our country's development."⁶ That same month, the PRC Foreign Ministry highlighted the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) as posing profound threats to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime and regional stability and peace.⁷

Perhaps paradoxically, despite these challenges the CCP maintains that long-term trends are in its favor. In 2020, an official statement assessed that the PRC's "period of strategic opportunity" would continue beyond the first two decades of the 21st century—the period initially envisioned by former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin in 2002 for increasing the PRC's power and influence in a relatively benign external environment.⁸ What Chinese leaders believe to be a "profound adjustment in the international balance of

³ Ren Zhongping, "征途漫漫从头越: 论新征程上的孺子牛 拓荒牛老黄牛精神" [Long Journey from Scratch: Of the Spirit of a Willing Ox, Pioneering Ox, and Old Ox in the New Journey], *People's Daily*, January 22, 2021.

⁴ Xi Jinping, "In the New Development Stage, the Implementation of the New Development Concept Will Inevitably Require the Construction of a New Development Pattern," *Qiushi*, August 31, 2022.

⁵ Kanis Leung, "China's Public Security Ministry Warns Its Bureaus to Be on Guard against 'Political Risks' Caused by Influence of Protest-Hit Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, June 29, 2019.

⁶ Chun Han Wong, Keith Zhai, and James T. Aredy, "China's Xi Jinping Takes Rare Direct Aim at U.S. in Speech," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2023.

⁷ "China Says AUKUS on 'Dangerous Path' with Nuclear Subs Deal," Associated Press, March 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-aukus-nuclear-submarines-f6ecf854646e2dbddd6beaa2f2e971d>.

⁸ "Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 2021, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-11-17%20Communique%20of%20the%20Fifth%20Plenary%20Session%20of%20the%2019th%20Central%20Committee%20of%20the%20Communist%20Party%20of%20China.pdf?ver=YsJyJy8mBmqG_jladpcHcA%3d%3d.

power” and “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局) reflect their perception of significant opportunities in an era of relative U.S. decline vis-à-vis the PRC. Encapsulating this view, at the same time that Chinese leaders warned of increasing risks and challenges, they began publicly stating that “the East is rising while the West is in decline”—a judgment attributed to General Secretary Xi himself.⁹ Put otherwise by the PRC’s top leader, “time and momentum are on China’s side” and the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is now on an irreversible historical course.”¹⁰

In the CCP’s view, taking advantage of these epochal opportunities is not a passive endeavor. Rather, the CCP believes that it must exert itself and actively “struggle” to achieve its goals, as Kim Fessler highlights in her chapter in this volume. “Military struggle” factors prominently among these efforts, which Chinese leaders believe is a particularly important tool for the PRC to achieve its goals while deterring challenges to its policies from the United States and U.S. regional allies and partners. This philosophy was prominently expressed by former defense minister Wei Fenghe in 2020, when he told delegates to that year’s National People’s Congress that the PRC should “use fighting to promote stability.”¹¹ Illustrating this approach, that year the PLA provoked a violent incident that resulted in the first military fatalities on the Sino-Indian border in 45 years. It also escalated its multiyear coercion campaigns around Japan’s Senkaku Islands, against Taiwan, and in the South China Sea. These campaigns continued into 2024 as the PRC used the PLA and China Coast Guard to sail into waters around the Senkaku Islands and to prevent the Philippines from resupplying its outpost at Second Thomas Shoal. In December 2023 the PRC Foreign Ministry warned that “China-Philippines relations are at a crossroads” and that “the Philippines must act with caution.”¹² Meanwhile, more than 1,700 PLA aircraft intruded into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone in 2023, further stoking regional tensions.¹³

⁹ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “2021 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” November 2021, chap. 1, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/Chapter_1_Section_1--CCPs_Ambitions_and_Challenges_at_Its_Centennial.pdf.

¹⁰ Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, “Xi Jinping Says ‘Time and Momentum on China’s Side’ as He Sets Out Communist Party Vision,” *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021; and Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.”

¹¹ Jun Mai, “Two Sessions 2020: China-U.S. Rivalry in ‘High-Risk Period,’ Chinese Defense Minister Says,” *South China Morning Post*, May 27, 2020.

¹² “China Urges Philippines to ‘Act with Caution’ amid South China Sea Dispute,” Al Jazeera, December 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/21/china-urges-philippines-to-act-with-caution-amid-south-china-sea-dispute>

¹³ Micah McCartney, “China Deployed Over 1,700 Military Planes Around Taiwan in 2023,” *Newsweek*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-military-aircraft-taiwan-strait-2023-1858106>.

These concerning trends require a better understanding of how the CCP is thinking about the use of military force to achieve its objectives in an increasingly complex security environment. To this end, this volume examines how CCP leaders assess the PRC's external security environment, including both the opportunities and threats presented therein; how this assessment is driving changes to the PLA's strategy, planning, and modernization efforts; and how the PLA's posture and capabilities are evolving in key theaters of interest to the United States. The following sections survey the arguments of each chapter and summarize key findings.

Chinese Leaders Assess the PRC's Challenges and Opportunities

The 20th Party Congress highlighted CCP leaders' view of an increasingly uncertain and challenging external security environment. In his address to the assembly, General Secretary Xi Jinping reported that international developments posed a "series of immense risks and challenges" and that the world had "entered a new period of turbulence and change." The opening section of this volume examines how growing diplomatic, economic, and military tensions with the United States and other countries are affecting Chinese leaders' decision-making, party-military relations, and whole-of-society mobilization efforts in the PRC for a potential military conflict.

In the volume's first chapter, Kim Fassler examines the concept of "profound changes unseen in a century" as distilling the CCP's Marxist assessment of its opportunities to shape world events amid favorable historical trends. Identifying Xi's address to the 2017 Ambassadorial Work Conference as being one of the first official uses of this phrase, Fassler concludes that the gathering marked an inflection point toward more assertive efforts by the CCP to achieve its goal of national rejuvenation. She argues that "changes unseen in a century" is the CCP's assessment that strategic trends of multipolarity and economic globalization that it has observed since at least the 1980s are accelerating, driven by the rise of developing economies, technological advancement, and China's growing national power. Under Xi, Beijing has responded to these "profound changes" with new strategies to advance China's vision for global governance and doubled down on "struggle" to accelerate favorable strategic trends. At the same time, Fassler concludes that the apparent certainty of Chinese leaders regarding long-term favorable trends may make them more flexible

in their tactics for engaging in protracted competition with the United States and more willing to tolerate near-term setbacks.

In the second chapter, Joel Wuthnow contributes a fresh analysis of Xi's long-running efforts to strengthen his control over the PLA. To this end, the chapter focuses on the ways in which Xi has catered to the interests of senior officers, politically influential subgroups like the PLA Army, and the PLA itself as a powerful interest group during a period otherwise marked by disruptive change caused by the historic reforms and reorganization of the PLA beginning in 2015. Wuthnow argues that many portrayals of Xi's leadership of the PLA have myopically focused on purges of political rivals and a coercive anticorruption campaign while overlooking the broader political strategy that Xi used to consolidate power and push through ambitious reforms. According to Wuthnow, this strategy must also be recognized as respecting long-standing norms and practices in the PLA, including its prerogatives as a highly autonomous player in the Chinese government bureaucracy. Based on public data, including leadership biographies, budgets, and resource allocation, Wuthnow explains how Xi has galvanized support for his reorganization efforts at the individual, subgroup, and institutional levels. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes that Xi has also had to accept limits on his ability to pursue further reforms to the PLA and that the PLA's continuing high degree of bureaucratic autonomy creates the conditions for additional diplomatic embarrassments like the 2023 spy balloon incident.

The third chapter examines efforts by the CCP to transition its national defense mobilization system (NDMS) from a vehicle for emergency response and economic subsidization to a "war oriented" system capable of supporting national requirements during a protracted conflict. Erin Richter and Howard Wang review the evolution of the NDMS, identifying its initial objectives as geared toward leveraging resources across the whole of Chinese society to enable military operations supporting a "people's war." Subsequently in the mid to late 2000s, the NDMS priorities shifted away from wartime requirements toward economic development through subsidization and domestic emergency response. Richter and Wang identify the most recent transition as occurring in 2015 when the PRC initiated a series of reforms to prioritize the NDMS's war mobilization capabilities—a trend that solidified after the 20th Party Congress in 2022 as PLA media increasingly emphasized the "war orientation" of national defense mobilization work. The chapter concludes that the greatest significance of the 2015 reforms may be in freeing the military to focus on national defense missions while the civilian National

Development and Reform Commission picks up other functions supporting national defense mobilization previously handled by the PLA.

The PLA's Mandate amid a Complex Security Environment

As Chinese leaders perceive an increasingly complex external security environment, they have directed the PLA to step up its preparations to overcome challenges confronting the PRC and take advantage of new opportunities. The second section of this volume explores how the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture are evolving in the context of the PRC's changing security environment, as well as what role the CCP expects the PLA to play in achieving national goals in the coming years. It also examines the strategic, operational, and doctrinal lessons the PLA has learned from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and assesses the PLA's continuing efforts to adequately prepare its personnel to fight and win against a well-prepared opponent on the modern battlefield.

In the second section's first chapter, Timothy Heath challenges the view that Chinese leaders are preparing to initiate a conflict in the near term that could involve military intervention by the United States. Instead, he argues that the PLA has been tasked to focus on long-term military modernization, deterrence, and support of the government's efforts to incrementally change the status quo in China's favor through coercion and other non-war methods. Heath finds that the CCP assesses the primary challenges to its governing legitimacy to be domestic, relegating the PLA to a supporting role in achieving the party's goals in the coming decades. As such, he argues that coercion and gray-zone tactics may constitute the principal Chinese military challenge to Taiwan and others in the region in the near term, while warning that the United States must also plan to deter the long-term threat of an outright attack by the PRC to compel Taiwan's unification.

The next chapter examines the impact of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on Beijing's calculus regarding the use of military force to most effectively achieve political goals. From their wide-ranging analysis of original Chinese sources, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Tsun-Kai Tsai argue that Beijing is carefully studying the trajectory of Russia's invasion—a conflict described by one authoritative source as “the most serious geopolitical event since the end of the Cold War”—and drawing lessons that inform its views on future warfare. The authors highlight several of these lessons as worthy of attention. First, authoritative Chinese observers judge that the risk of an

extremely costly and protracted war between great powers is more likely than at any time since the world wars. Second, these sources clearly warn of the potentially game-changing impact of external assistance, especially from the United States and its allies, on a conflict between otherwise mismatched opponents. Among the most significant forms of external assistance they identify are intelligence support, material assistance, and training provided by the advanced industrial democracies. Finally, Chinese sources have carefully observed the nuclear dynamics of the conflict, concluding that Russia's nuclear deterrent largely failed to force Ukraine's capitulation and deter large-scale military assistance from outside powers once Ukraine proved itself resilient against Russia's initial assault.

In the next chapter, Dennis Blasko and Rick Gunnell argue that, despite major improvements in capabilities in recent years, senior PLA leaders still foresee decades of work before they will feel fully confident in the force's ability to win a conflict against one of the world's leading militaries. Xi Jinping himself has remarked on many of the PLA's self-assessed weaknesses, which include "peacetime malpractices," "ability panic," and the "five incapables," which refer to "some" commanders being incapable of judging the situation, understanding the intentions of higher echelons, making operational decisions, deploying troops, and dealing with unexpected situations. Highlighting the PLA's perception of itself as lagging behind the world's leading militaries in many technologies, the chapter concludes that while the PLA might be required to fight at any time, its leaders would prefer to achieve the nation's goals through efforts short of war and build additional confidence before initiating large-scale combat operations.

Is China Preparing for the Use of Force?

At the same time that its leaders express doubt over some aspects of the force's ability to fight a large-scale modern conflict, the PLA is steadily increasing its presence and improving its readiness to carry out assigned missions around the PRC's periphery and beyond. This volume's final section explores the PLA's changing force posture and capabilities around Taiwan, in Southeast Asia, and in the South Pacific and how Beijing is using the PLA as an instrument of power to deter challenges to its interests and seize opportunities in pursuit of its goals.

In the section's opening chapter, Andrew Erickson examines the PLA's posture toward Taiwan and the force's growing capabilities and options for conducting a cross-strait offensive campaign. Erickson argues that Xi

Jinping is devoting tremendous national resources to improve the PLA's options for an offensive operation against Taiwan and that his "centennial military building goal" of 2027 represents a major milestone for developing a full range of options to coerce or conquer the island. At the same time, Erickson finds that many Chinese writings suggest that Beijing does not yet believe the time is ripe to initiate a military conflict against Taiwan and that "peaceful reunification" remains the least costly way for resolving cross-strait political differences. Others, however, express greater willingness to use military coercion and even force to bring Taiwan under Beijing's control. Erickson suggests that this view may be manifested in the PLA's increasing use of military exercises and other pressure tactics to demoralize Taiwan's leaders and population and instill a sense of futility in resisting the PRC's growing national power.

In the next chapter, Ketian Zhang examines the role of the PLA in China's strategy in Southeast Asia and makes four core arguments. The first is that China has preferred to use gray-zone coercion in lieu of direct military coercion in the South China Sea in recent years, while still using the PLA as an important backstop supporting the China Coast Guard. Second, Zhang finds that Beijing carefully calibrates its use of the PLA alongside its other tools of statecraft, such as gray-zone and economic coercion, in order to avoid direct military intervention by the United States. Third, China's primary military goals in Southeast Asia are improving its combat capabilities, especially vis-à-vis the United States, and deterring other countries in the region from strengthening their own sovereignty claims. Fourth, Zhang argues that Beijing's use of military and nonmilitary coercion often counteracts its economic "carrots" in the region, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of economic statecraft.

In the volume's final chapter, Peter Connolly examines the significant increase in China's security engagement with the Pacific Islands since 2017, noting that this engagement has been supported by and integrated with Beijing's political and economic statecraft. He argues that China has executed its grand strategy in the Pacific Islands with comprehensive whole-of-nation statecraft to build dual-use facilities, establish a police presence in Pacific Island countries, and ultimately gain access to formal military bases. Connolly concludes that Beijing's intensifying outreach in the Pacific Islands demonstrates that the region is of higher strategic importance for China than was previously commonly understood. Ultimately, he encourages the United States and its allies to adapt their approach to better understand the interests and agency of the Pacific Island states and their peoples, recognize the growing role of China's police forces as its weapon of choice for competing in

the South Pacific, and focus on and counter PRC efforts to achieve strategic access in the region.

Conclusion

The nine chapters in this volume from NBR's 2023 PLA Conference offer important insight into the PLA's increasingly prominent role in advancing Beijing's interests in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The first three chapters explore the ways in which Chinese leaders perceive the PRC's external security environment, as well as how their assessment is shaping party-military dynamics and driving reforms to the national defense mobilization system. The next three chapters evaluate how an increasingly complex external security environment is shaping the PLA's strategy and missions, what lessons the PLA has learned from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, and how senior Chinese leaders assess the abilities of the PLA's personnel to execute their missions. The final three chapters examine the evolution of the PLA's posture and presence in three key regional theaters—the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific—and consider how Beijing is using the military tool of power to achieve its goals in each region.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume reveal that Chinese leaders view the PLA as playing an essential and in some cases increasingly prominent role in accomplishing national goals. At the same time, Beijing has also demonstrated caution in using the PLA in ways that could trigger military intervention or direct opposition from the United States. As Chinese leaders forecast long-term trends as being in the PRC's favor, it is likely they will intensify their use of military and gray-zone coercion to pressure their neighbors and steadily change the status quo in a direction favorable to PRC interests. Meanwhile, the PRC may refrain, at least in the near term, from initiating a large-scale combat operation that could jeopardize its long-term prospects until such time as it feels its national power has grown to the point that the United States and other powers will not dare challenge it. Through their careful research and analysis, the contributors to this volume have produced fresh and insightful arguments that will be key to shaping ongoing debates about the PLA's role in achieving the PRC's goals now and in the years ahead.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) analyzes its strategic environment through a case study of Xi Jinping's message about "profound changes unseen in a century" and assesses the likely implications for the party's calculus.

MAIN ARGUMENT

In 2017, China called its overseas envoys to Beijing for a rare event. The Ambassadorial Work Conference, attended by ambassadors, diplomats, and Beijing-based foreign policy officials, was a venue for Xi to share the CCP's assessment of international trends and direct China's foreign policy. He had a message for the hundreds of diplomats: the world was facing "profound changes unseen in a century." "Changes unseen in a century" is the CCP's official assessment that strategic trends of multipolarity and economic globalization are accelerating, driven by the rise of developing economies, technological advancement, and China's growing national power. Under Xi, the CCP has responded to these "profound changes" with new strategies to advance China's vision for global governance and has doubled down on "struggle" to accelerate favorable strategic trends, like multipolarity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- U.S. policymakers aiming to shape the CCP's choices should appreciate its significant and enduring focus on a consistent and relatively limited set of strategic trends: multipolarity, economic globalization, and competition in comprehensive national power.
- The party places great value on comprehensive national power to predict the outcomes of future contests. This argues for greater U.S. attention to how its own comprehensive national power is publicly messaged or discussed with China's leaders.
- Beijing's apparent certainty in an inevitable multipolar future may offer opportunities for short-term compromise because it reduces time pressure on China's leaders, who, assured of future victory, may dwell less on temporary setbacks that do not impede long-term goals.

“Profound Changes Unseen in a Century”: China Assesses Its Security Environment

Kim Fassler

In 2017, China called its overseas envoys to Beijing for a rare event. The Ambassadorial Work Conference, attended by ambassadors, diplomats, and Beijing-based foreign policy officials, was a venue for Xi Jinping to share the assessment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on international trends and direct China’s foreign policy. He had a message for the hundreds of diplomats: the world was facing “profound changes unseen in a century.”¹ The term “changes unseen in a century” is the party’s official assessment that the strategic trends of multipolarity and economic globalization, observed at least since the 1980s, are accelerating, driven by the rise of developing economies, technological advancement, and China’s own growing national power.

This chapter examines this message about “profound changes” as a case study of how the party analyzes its strategic environment and translates its understanding of these changes into policy. Under Xi, the CCP has responded with new strategies to advance China’s vision for global governance and doubled down on “struggle” to accelerate favorable strategic trends, like multipolarity. By exploring the drivers of the party’s assessment, this chapter shines light on China’s enduring goals and offers context for evaluating the likely impact of policy actions on the party’s calculus.

Kim Fassler is a Foreign Affairs Officer at the U.S. Department of State’s Office of China Coordination.

This chapter represents only the views of the author and not those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government.

¹ The official phrase is “百年未有之大变局.” As the concept has become widely promulgated in China, it is almost always abbreviated to “百年变局.” In English, Chinese state media and official government documents most often use “profound changes unseen in a century,” though the phrase is sometimes translated as “great changes unseen in a century” or the clunkier “global changes of a magnitude not seen in a century.”

The CCP's Official Ideology and Decision Logic

U.S. scholars have extensively analyzed Beijing's decision-making through different lenses; however, the party's official ideology—the foundational ideas the CCP uses to analyze China's external environment, develop programs of action, and organize and mobilize around its central agenda—remains either understudied or sorely dated.² The official ideology connects top-level guidance to policy, both of which are observable to outside analysts, but it is often difficult to comprehend the complex connections between the two. Analysts generally detect changes in top-level guidance in the form of a new phrase or slogan, usually only when the party system has already digested the larger, more complex ideas they represent. Parsing the official ideology requires combing through CCP speeches, periodicals, books, and study materials for clues and connections that tell outsiders how the party promotes its ideology to its 98 million members as a basis for policy.³

To translate ideology into action, the party employs a fundamentally different approach to assessing its strategic environment from the approach that is familiar to most U.S. strategists. The assessment starts with the CCP's understanding of history, rooted in Marxism-Leninism, that human social development is not a series of accidental, unrelated events. Rather, history is governed by laws and processes that can be studied, discovered, and harnessed through scientific judgment. This notion is imbedded in CCP leaders' thinking and their foundational documents. The CCP constitution asserts that the party possesses a unique ability to discern “the laws governing the development of the history of human society.”⁴ This view of history, called historical materialism, has been described by Xi Jinping as “the fundamental way for us Communists to understand and grasp history.”⁵ It is the reason why the CCP routinely emphasizes the importance

² The last book-length analysis may be Franz Schurmann's 1968 volume, which explored how the CCP's “practical ideology” articulated in Mao Zedong's speeches and writings translated into the first five-year plan and Great Leap Forward. See Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 20–21.

³ Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, 20–21; and Davis B. Bobrow, Steve Chan, and John A. Kringen, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decisions: The Chinese Case* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

⁴ 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, “Constitution of the Communist Party of China,” October 22, 2022, available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Full-text-of-Constitution-of-Communist-Party-of-China.pdf>.

⁵ Zhang Yanguo, “认识把握历史的根本方法 (学术随笔)” [Understanding the Fundamental Method of Grasping History (Academic Essay)], *People's Daily*, November 8, 2021, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1108/c40531-32276003.html>.

of the “trend of the times.”⁶ “The history of human social development proves that no matter what twists and turns it encounters, history always moves forward according to its own laws,” Xi said in a 2013 speech to the Moscow Institute of International Relations. He added that “no force can stop the wheel of history.”⁷

Therefore, according to the party’s ideology, divining the “correct” assessment of any situation and the direction in which that situation is developing is the starting point for policy design. Goals can only be achieved by first diagnosing the “overall situation” (大局), a larger strategic or geopolitical field of play that involves national interests. The overall situation may include many specific, smaller configurations (格局) developing within the bigger picture. Instead of setting goals and paths to meet objectives—the “ends, ways, means” construct familiar to U.S. strategists—CCP decision-making emphasizes the discovery of “propensity,” “momentum,” or “potential” inherent in any situation.⁸ This requires deep analysis and an understanding of trends (大势), their direction of movement (方向), and sources of initiative (动力). These terms are not easily translated into English, and their meanings can sometimes only be understood through their relationship to each other in context.⁹

⁶ Tanner Greer, “The Theory of History That Guides Xi Jinping,” *Palladium*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.palladiummag.com/2020/07/08/the-theory-of-history-that-guides-xi-jinping>.

⁷ Xi Jinping, “顺应时代前进潮流促进世界和平发展——在莫斯科国际关系学院的演讲” [Conforming to the Trend of the Times and Promoting World Peace and Development: Speech at the Moscow Institute of International Relations], Embassy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Russian Federation, March 24, 2013, http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/ztbd/xjpf/201305/t20130511_3104797.htm.

⁸ For more on “propensity” and its application to military strategy and other fields, please see Francois Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China* (New York: Zone Books, 1995); and Kyle Marcrum, “Propensity, Conditions, and Consequences: Effective Coercion through Understanding Chinese Thinking,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, July 18, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/3093835/propensity-conditions-and-consequences-effective-coercion-through-understanding>.

⁹ For example, an October 16, 2017, Xinhua article reviewing China’s diplomacy since the 2012 Party Congress says: “[T]he party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core has deeply grasped the two overall situations [大局] in domestic and international affairs, observed the general trends [大势], planned major events, actively promoted innovation in diplomatic theory and practice, improved China’s diplomatic strategy and layout, created a new situation in foreign work, and led China to maintain strategic initiative [主动] in the complex and ever-changing international configuration [格局].” In this case, developments in international politics (configuration) are subordinate to the two overall situations, which the party has separately defined as (1) China’s national rejuvenation and (2) profound changes unseen in a century. The party is lauded for correctly diagnosing strategic trends, allowing China to favorably leverage the driving forces inherent in the overall situation (initiative). “大国外交新格局——党的十八大以来历史性变革系列述评之八” [New Pattern of Major Power Diplomacy: Eighth in a Series of Commentaries on Historic Changes since the 18th CCP National Congress], Xinhua, October 16, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-10/16/c_1121810785.htm.

Once the overall situation and underlying trends are correctly diagnosed, skilled leaders must “struggle” to leverage them for progress toward political goals; or as Xi has advised the Politburo, leaders must “be good at understanding and resolving contradictions as a breakthrough to open up the work situation.”¹⁰ Contradictions (矛盾) are opposing forces present in all relationships and are central to the party’s ideology. Xi has called contradictions “the fundamental driving force for the development of things.”¹¹ Party study materials teach that world development is “the result of the intertwining and interaction of various contradictions.”¹²

The prominence of contradictions in senior leader speeches sometimes causes analysts to conclude that China’s leaders have a permanent siege mentality, are reeling in reaction to recent events, or fear for their country’s future. Rather, the party sees danger and opportunity in every critical situation, stemming from its belief that progress occurs by seizing momentum and moving it in a favorable direction through struggle. Struggle (斗争) is especially necessary during periods of turbulence or major transition—one reason why it has appeared more frequently in Xi’s speeches in recent years.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is the source and subject of some of the best U.S. analysis of the CCP’s official ideology in practice because PLA academic institutions write extensively on military planning and decision-making, which reflects the process described above.¹³ China’s military strategists stress that correct judgment of the overall situation is a prerequisite for operational planning. Without it, relationships and linkages

¹⁰ Xi Jinping, “辩证唯物主义是中国共产党人的世界观和方法论” [Dialectical Materialism Is the World Outlook and Methodology of Chinese Communists], *Qiushi*, December 31, 2018, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-12/31/c_1123923896.htm. One practical implication of this worldview is that party leaders are more inclined than their U.S. counterparts to expect competition, turbulence, and conflict as a feature of international relations. While U.S. decision-makers view crises as abrupt, irregular events demanding special coping measures, like task forces or emergency processes, for the CCP these incidents “are the inevitable result of long-term unresolved conflicts” and differ from peacetime only in level of intensity at a particular stage.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “世界正经历百年未有之大变局，变在何处？” [The World Is Undergoing Great Changes Not Seen in a Century, What Are These Changes?], in ‘习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学习问答’ [Questions and Answers for the Study of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era], ed. Bian Ji and Ren Min (Beijing: Study Press and People’s Publishing House, 2021), 42–46. See the Center for Security and Emerging Technology’s translation of this chapter, available at https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0336_Xi_reader_ch8_EN.pdf.

¹³ For recent examples, see Alison Kaufman, “Planning for Escalation: PRC Views on Controlling Escalation in a Conflict,” in *Modernizing Deterrence: How China Coerces, Compels, and Deters*, ed. Roy Kamphausen (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2023), 141–57; and Daniel Shats, Thomas Corbett, and Peter Wood, “Chinese Views of the Spectrum of Conflict: Theory and Action,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, June 20, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/3052393/chinese-views-of-the-spectrum-of-conflict-theory-and-action>.

cannot be understood, and the resulting approaches are likely to fail. Military manuals advise that a commander's ability to "take care of the relationship between the various parts in the overall situation" is "key to the success or failure of the military conflict."¹⁴ Correctly judging the strategic picture can give one an advantage over an adversary. Thus, commanders should "first seek to make better judgment of the situation than their opponents" and grasp "the main contradictions that play a decisive role in overall change."¹⁵ Leaders must also recognize and leverage the unusual features of a crisis, including chaos or distraction, for political advantage. For example, the PLA points to the U.S. military's stationing of troops in Central Asia and the Middle East during its war on terrorism after September 11 as a case of the United States successfully acting in extreme circumstances (terrorist attack) to increase its global military presence in a way that might normally be opposed by some countries.¹⁶

Judging the Overall Situation

Evolution since the 1980s

Since the mid-1980s, the CCP's judgment of the overall situation has been based on an almost unwavering belief in a future multipolar world, characterized by economic interdependence, in which there is a low threat of major-power war. This worldview dates back to 1985, when Deng Xiaoping, in a speech to the Central Military Commission, reversed Mao Zedong's assessment of a likely war with the Soviet Union or the United States. Deng declared that the party had changed "our understanding of the question of war and peace" and concluded that the threat of a great-power war was no longer imminent.¹⁷ The new assessment entered the party's lexicon as the mantra "peace and development are the theme of the times," and, as Deng acknowledged, it allowed China to "concentrate without fear on the drive for

¹⁴ *In Their Own Words: 2020 Science of Military Strategy* (Montgomery: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022), 94, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy>.

¹⁵ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy 2001* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), 164; and *In Their Own Words*. The Science of Military Strategy is a periodically updated PRC professional military education manual.

¹⁶ *In Their Own Words*, 124.

¹⁷ I am grateful to David Finkelstein for referring me to Deng's speech. Deng Xiaoping, "Speech at an Enlarged Meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," Marxists Internet Archive, June 4, 1985, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1985/78.htm>.

modernization.”¹⁸ Peace and development provided a strategic rationale for the party to focus on the economy, reduce the PLA by one million soldiers, and de-prioritize military spending previously used to prepare for conflict.

The CCP never abandoned its faith in peace and development, despite turbulent geopolitical events at the turn of the century. The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo, and the 1999 accidental bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade led Chinese scholars to temporarily question whether the world did not face the prospect of a major-power war. The debate’s outcome appeared in *China’s National Defense in 2000*, a white paper that contained a much more pessimistic international security assessment than the last white paper published in 1998 and suggested China had previously been too optimistic about the pace at which any country would have the power to rival the United States.¹⁹

Party documents during this time suggested the CCP believed multipolarity was still many years away.²⁰ For example, General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s 2002 16th Party Congress work report reflected tempered optimism by stating that multipolarity and economic globalization were experiencing “twists and turns” and “the old international political and economic order, which is unfair and irrational, has yet to be changed fundamentally.”²¹ Yet, according to Jiang, the situation did not fundamentally affect the enduring, long-term trends. Peace and development remained the dominant trend, and “a new world war cannot be fought within the foreseeable period.”²² He thus reaffirmed Deng’s assessment.

If multipolarity was a distant reality, then how could China gauge those “twists and turns,” the pace and intensity, of multipolarity and economic globalization? In the 1990s and early 2000s, government-affiliated think tanks and universities delved into studying and measuring comprehensive national power (CNP) (综合国力)—a nation’s combined overall strength in economy, military, science and technology, education, resources, and

¹⁸ Deng, “Speech at an Enlarged Meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.” For more on the history of this phrase, see “Peace and Development Are the Theme of the Times,” Center for Strategic Translation, <https://www.strategictranslation.org/glossary/peace-and-development-are-the-theme-of-the-times>.

¹⁹ David M. Finkelstein, “China Reconsiders Its National Security: ‘The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999,’” CNA, December 2000, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2000/PeaceAndDevelopment.pdf>.

²⁰ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 162.

²¹ Jiang Zemin, “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16th Party Congress: Build a Well-Off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” *People’s Daily*, December 10, 2022, http://en.people.cn/200211/18/eng20021118_106983.shtml.

²² Ibid.

influence.²³ The studies offered guidance for where to focus China's national development and predicted when shifts in its relative CNP would affect its external environment. In 2004, professors from China's leading university, Hu Angang and Men Honghua, predicted significant changes through 2020 in CNP among five countries that were "closely associated with China's national interests and geopolitical strategy": the United States, Russia, Japan, India, and China.²⁴ "International competition manifests itself mainly in the dynamic changes in the strategic resources of different countries and the open competition in comprehensive national power," they wrote. Regarding the United States, Hu and Men predicted that in the next twenty years, the narrowing CNP gap between Washington and Beijing would make China "a world power with dominant ability."²⁵

Jiang and his successor Hu Jintao appeared to have this future forecast in mind when they referenced "increasingly fierce" competition in CNP in their 2002 and 2007 Party Congress work reports.²⁶ In 2002, Jiang declared "the first two decades of the 21st century" a "period of strategic opportunity" (战略机遇期) during which China could enhance its national strength by riding the wave of globalization in an era where major armed conflict was unlikely to occur.²⁷ Although the "period of strategic opportunity" can be read as optimism about a peaceful international environment through the 2020s, its time-limited nature also reflects a serious and sober appraisal that changes in CNP would fundamentally alter international politics and challenge China's national rejuvenation. Indeed, Hu's 2007 Party Congress work report noted that "historic changes" in China's relations with the world brought "unprecedented opportunities as well as unprecedented challenges."²⁸

²³ For more on CNP and geopolitical power calculations, see Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2000), 203–56.

²⁴ Hu Angang and Men Honghua, "The Rising of Modern China: Comprehensive National Power and Grand Strategy" (paper presented at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy's "Rising China and the East Asian Economy International Conference," Seoul, March 19–20, 2004), <https://myweb.rollins.edu/tlairson/china/chigrandstrategy.pdf>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jiang, "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 16th Party Congress"; and Hu Jintao, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress: Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects," *China Daily*, October 15, 2007, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm.

²⁷ Jiang, "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 16th Party Congress"; and "Period of Strategic Opportunity," Center for Strategic Translation, <https://www.strategictranslation.org/glossary/period-of-strategic-opportunity>.

²⁸ Hu, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress."

If CNP gave Chinese scholars a quantitative method to analyze the international situation, the 2008 global financial crisis and its dramatic aftermath provided qualitative evidence of seismic shifts in the global order. In a 2009 essay titled “The Financial Crisis and American Economic Hegemony,” Yuan Peng, president of the Ministry of State Security’s think tank, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), which is influential in the government, asserted: “The world’s power has shifted East and the rise of emerging powers has brought unprecedented changes in hundreds of years impacting the U.S.-led international political and economic order.”²⁹ Others, such as Justin Yifu Lin, chief economist at the World Bank, noted that the crisis catalyzed greater participation in global economic decision-making by the G-20 because the G-8, led by the United States, was unable to find solutions.³⁰ Lin said later in a speech to mid-level CCP cadres that “with their waning economic influence, the decision-making authority of these eight nations in global affairs has lessened.”³¹

These sentiments echoed at the highest levels of party leadership. In 2009, Hu, at a rare conference with China’s ambassadors, modified Deng’s core strategic guideline for China to “hide its capabilities and bide its time,” adding that China also must “actively accomplish something.”³² This new guidance was based on CCP leaders’ assessment that major changes were taking place in the “overall situation” that China would have to proactively manage. At the 2012 Party Congress, during his last major speech as general secretary, Hu asserted China was experiencing “fierce competition in comprehensive national power unseen before in this new stage in the new century.”³³ This laid the foundation for Hu’s successor, Xi Jinping, to build on this assessment during his first term (2012–17).

²⁹ Yuan Peng, “金融危机与美国经济霸权: 历史与政治的解读” [The Financial Crisis and American Economic Hegemony: Interpretation of History and Politics], *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 5 (2009): 1–6.

³⁰ Siyan Nan et al., “Justin Yifu Lin on ‘Profound Changes Unseen in a Century,’” *Pekingology*, November 18, 2023, <https://www.pekingology.com/p/justin-yifu-lin-on-profound-changes>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Doshi, *The Long Game*, 160.

³³ Hu Jintao, “Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th CPC National Congress: Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects,” General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, November 8, 2012, http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm.

Profound Changes Unseen in a Century

“Changes unseen in a century” is the party’s assessment that its long-predicted strategic trends of multipolarity and economic globalization are accelerating, driven by the rise of developing economies, technological advancement, and China’s growing national power. Xi’s predecessors, Jiang and Hu, spoke of “profound,” “complex,” and “extensive” changes, but Xi is credited with formally unveiling “profound changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局) during a 2017 conference of China’s ambassadors in Beijing.³⁴ Between 2019 and 2021, scholars convened conferences to study the profound changes, books were published in Chinese and English, and China’s National Social Science Fund, which selects and promotes projects on issues relevant to China’s leaders, sponsored at least four research projects on the topic. Concurrently, the original, clunkier phrase “profound changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局), which Xi used in his 2017 Diplomatic Work Conference speech, was shortened in official communications to its current four-character form (百年变局). This heralded its formal adoption as a *tifa* (提法)—a government-articulated strategic guideline that has been sufficiently digested through internal study so that officials are expected to grasp it without additional context.

The roots of the assessment are complex. A January 2013 *Study Times* article by a high-ranking PLA general, published months after Xi assumed power, offers insight into factors that initially shaped the formulation. The article, titled “Understanding and Considering the Impact of the Unprecedented Profound Changes on the Strategic Configuration of the World and Our National Security Environment,” was penned by then deputy chief of the PLA Joint Staff, Qi Jianguo. The center of global development had shifted from West to East, and the United States, Europe, and Japan faced financial and political issues, Qi asserted. Economic globalization meant countries increasingly relied on each other; problems affecting one country easily affected many others. Great powers were adjusting their foreign policies and security strategies; the United States had abandoned counterterrorism and was pursuing a “strategic adjustment” to Asia to sustain U.S. leadership and respond to “newly rising nations.” Military competition, especially among “great powers” (大国), was becoming more intense, as the United States strengthened its alliances and military

³⁴ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China III* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 489, available at https://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/npc/2021-12/30/c_695142.htm.

deployments in Asia, while Russia, Japan, and India oriented their military forces around China's periphery.³⁵

This assessment coincided with CCP leaders' view that these international dynamics were converging with another consequential trend—China's rise. Xi's landmark speech at the October 2017 19th Party Congress proclaimed that China had entered a “new era” in which it had already stood up, had grown rich, and, going forward, would focus on “becoming strong.”³⁶ Soon after, Xi introduced a new high-level phrase—the “two overall situations” (两个大局). The first situation concerns China's “national rejuvenation,” an overarching political objective pursued by generations of CCP leaders to raise China to a certain level of economic prosperity, national strength, and international influence by midcentury. The second situation, “profound changes unseen in a century,” reflects judgments on global developments that affect China, including foundational shifts in CNP, economic globalization, and the science and technology revolution. The party sees the two overall situations as mutually reinforcing and central to China's national strategy. In 2019, during an inspection tour in central China, Xi said, “I have often said that leading officials should have two factors in mind: One is the strategic goal of achieving national rejuvenation, the other is the world experiencing a level of change unseen in a century. This is the prerequisite to planning our work.”³⁷

Policy Design: Leveraging Strategic Trends

In response to the leadership's assessment, the CCP has focused on using the new reality of China's considerable national strength to accelerate favorable strategic trends in the international environment, such as multipolarity, that in turn reinforce and further China's national rejuvenation. In 2018, at the Central Work Conference on Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping translated the “profound changes” assessment into practical action in the form of four trends (大势) that officials must grasp: (1) accelerating

³⁵ I am grateful to Dan Peck for highlighting and sharing a copy of this article. Qi Jianguo, “前所未有的大变局对世界战略形势和我国家安全环境的认识与思考” [Understanding and Considering the Impact of the Unprecedented Great Changes on the Strategic Configuration of the World and Our National Security Environment], *Qiushi*, January 21, 2013.

³⁶ Xi Jinping, “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress: 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,” *China Daily*, October 18, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

³⁷ Xi, *The Governance of China III*, 99.

multipolarity, along with in-depth adjustment of major-power relations, (2) sustained development of economic globalization, along with a profound evolution of the world economic pattern, (3) overall stability in the international environment, along with complex international security challenges, and (4) exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, along with mutual stimulation of different ideologies and cultures.³⁸ Xi urged China's diplomats to "open up new prospects" and "skillfully defuse potential crises and turn them into opportunities," meaning they must work hard to influence these trends to China's advantage.³⁹ This section explores select ways in which China's foreign policy has responded to his guidance.

Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind

China sees the reform of global governance—the rules, norms, and institutions guiding international interactions—as a key part of accelerating the multipolarity aspect of changes unseen in a century. Xi has instructed China's diplomats to "become more actively involved in global governance and multilateral affairs" and "promote the development of the global governance system in a more just and reasonable direction."⁴⁰ Beijing is acutely aware of criticisms levied against international institutions and views global governance reform as key to balancing against the United States' dominant influence. Governance is one of "the four deficits"⁴¹—a slogan Xi

³⁸ The CCP has convened only six Central Foreign Affairs Work Conferences since 1971. These events offer rare insight into leaders' thinking about strategic trends. At the most recent conference on December 27–28, 2023, in Beijing, Xi affirmed China's confidence in a "great transformation" of the global system and its commitment to "an equal and orderly multipolar world" and "inclusive economic globalization." At the November 28, 2014, Central Conference on Foreign Affairs, he noted: (1) despite "complexities" in the international architecture, the trend toward a multipolar world will not change, (2) despite a difficult economic adjustment, economic globalization will not stop, (3) despite international tensions and conflict, peace and development is "still the underlying trend," (4) despite protracted conflict over the international order, international system reform will not change, and (5) despite uncertainties in China's neighborhood, Asia will remain prosperous and stable. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs Was Held in Beijing: Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Address at the Conference," December 28, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202312/t20231228_11214416.html; "习近平出席中央外事工作会议并发表重要讲话" [Xi Jinping Attended the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference and Delivered an Important Speech], Xinhua, November 29, 2014, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm; and "习近平: 努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面" [Xi Jinping: Strive to Create a New Situation in Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics], Xinhua, June 23, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-06/23/c_1123025806.htm.

³⁹ "习近平出席中央外事工作会议并发表重要讲话"; and "Xi Stresses Centralized, Unified Leadership of CPC Central Committee over Foreign Affairs," *China Daily*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/15/WS5afacfd2a3103f6866ee8868.html>.

⁴⁰ Xi, *The Governance of China III*, 489–94; and "习近平: 努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面."

⁴¹ The four deficits are governance, trust, peace, and development. They are often mentioned as the impetus for China's Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative.

frequently uses when speaking to international audiences about how China's foreign policy will address its efforts to advance "a more just and equitable international political and economic order."⁴²

Xi's answer to the "governance deficit" is his signature foreign policy concept, the "community of shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体), which provides theoretical backing to China's global governance reform program across at least five dimensions: politics, security, development (e.g., economic, social, and technological), culture, and the environment.⁴³ Xi introduced the concept in 2013 at a speech in Moscow, and in 2018 it was written into the preamble of the CCP constitution. In 2018, China's then top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, called the community of shared future "the overall goal of China's foreign affairs work in the new era."⁴⁴ Chinese media assert China's agenda is "true multilateralism," in contrast to the "pseudo-multilateralism" pursued by the United States, which emphasizes alliances and "serves Washington's hegemony."⁴⁵

Under Xi, China has actively deployed its governance reform efforts in international institutions where it has a leading role. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), formed in 2001 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to focus on territorial boundaries, has evolved into a valuable regional security forum for Beijing to pursue diplomatic approaches and multilateral endorsement of its preferred version of governance.⁴⁶ The SCO's 2018 Qingdao Declaration endorsed "building a community for the shared future of humankind," as well as the core tenets of what became China's Global Security Initiative. This happened four years before Xi publicly introduced the initiative to the world at the Boao Forum for Asia in 2022, suggesting that the SCO was a test bed for the concept.⁴⁷ The SCO has also adopted and advocated as a bloc at the United

⁴² Xi, *The Governance of China III*, 503–9, 535–37; and Zhao Jinping, "'One Belt, One Road': Xi Jinping's Way," *Xinhua*, May 19, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-05/19/c_129607528.htm.

⁴³ Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (2018): 154–66.

⁴⁴ Yang Jiechi, "以习近平外交思想为指导 深入推进新时代对外工作" [Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, We Will Further Advance Our Foreign Work in the New Era], *Qiushi*, August 1, 2018, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-08/01/c_1123209510.htm.

⁴⁵ Chen Qingqing, "China Sends Clear Signal at UNGA, Upholding True Multilateralism," *Global Times*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1298731.shtml>.

⁴⁶ Abigail Grace, "The Lessons China Taught Itself: Why the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Matters," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, June 19, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-lessons-china-taught-itself-why-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-matters>.

⁴⁷ "Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation," *China Daily*, July 5, 2018, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2018-07/05/content_53968548.htm.

Nations for principles of internet content management that match China's vision of "cyber sovereignty,"⁴⁸ which runs counter to U.S.-preferred models for freedom of expression in cyberspace.

China has also called on BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to support its foreign policy ideas by building "a new model of international relations" and "a global community of shared future" and "resolutely reject[ing] unilateralism and protectionism"—a veiled reference to trade policies of the United States.⁴⁹ The BRICS countries, which represent close to half of the world's population and 36% of the world's GDP, are exploring alternative payment settlement mechanisms to the U.S. dollar, and China has stepped in as a lender of last resort for developing countries dissatisfied with Western financing models.⁵⁰

In addition, China has approached the global South as a key constituency and geopolitical counterweight to the United States in advancing multilateralism. China desires to "continuously enhance the voice and influence of the global South in international affairs," per the director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.⁵¹ Practically, the global South is an increasingly important voice on geopolitical issues, such as opposing U.S. and Western sanctions on Russia over Ukraine.⁵² This group is a critical driver of global economic development: Chinese analysts cite data showing developing nations will account for as much as 60% of global economic activity by midcentury, with Western countries falling behind.⁵³

Support from the global South also gives China tremendous influence within the UN General Assembly, whose 193 members are mostly developing countries. Beijing has tried to limit international criticism of

⁴⁸ Elliott Zaagman, "Cyber Sovereignty and the PRC's Vision for Global Internet Governance," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, June 5, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/cyber-sovereignty-and-the-prcs-vision-for-global-internet-governance>.

⁴⁹ Xi, *The Governance of China III*, 516–20.

⁵⁰ Lucas Resende Carvalho, "BRICS: The Global South Challenging the Status Quo," Bertelsmann Stiftung, September 21, 2023, <https://globaleurope.eu/globalization/brics-the-global-south-challenging-the-status-quo>.

⁵¹ Wang Yi, "坚持团结合作，共谋世界发展——王毅在2023年全球智库大会上的视频致辞" [Adhere to Unity and Cooperation to Seek Common World Development: Wang Yi's Video Speech at the 2023 Global Think Tank Conference], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), September 2, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202309/t20230902_11137271.shtml.

⁵² Ma Xiaojun, "清晰亮明中国的‘全球南方’身份" [Clearly Clarify China's "Global South" Identity], *Global Times*, August 28, 2023, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4EJZLxbBRA9>.

⁵³ Zhang Yunling, "如何认识百年大变局之变" [How to Understand the Changes That Have Occurred over the Past Century], Asia Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs, March 3, 2019, trans. by Dylan Levi King as "How to Recognize the Great Changes to Come in This Century," Center for Strategic Translation, November 2022, <https://www.strategictranslation.org/articles/how-to-understand-the-great-changes-to-come-in-this-century>.

its human rights record and prevent expansion of Taiwan's participation in international bodies.⁵⁴ Positioning itself as the “largest developing country” within the global South also bolsters the notion that China is a leader of the developing world in a historic struggle against rich, developed nations. This idea is probably not just an empty narrative. In March 2023, echoing ideas from Xi's foreign policy speeches, then foreign minister Qin Gang asserted: “The principal contradiction in today's world is not at all a so-called ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ played up by a handful of countries, but a struggle between development and containment of development.”⁵⁵

Promote the Belt and Road

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most visible manifestation of China's multipronged approach to leveraging international trends and its own strengths for political advantage. BRI's stated aims and connection to overall strategic trends is clear. According to Xi, BRI was created to answer a “call for reforming the global governance system” and “integrate more countries and regions into economic globalization,” while the State Council's 2015 Action Plan on BRI describes the goal of the initiative as to promote “world peace and development.”⁵⁶ Launched by Xi in 2013 under the name “One Belt, One Road” and written into the CCP constitution in 2017, the massive initiative is expected to add more than \$1 trillion of outward funding for global infrastructure from 2017 to 2027.⁵⁷

BRI is more than an infrastructure and investment program. For China, it is a proving ground for a fundamentally different kind of international relations that Beijing portrays as superior to other models. Beijing says BRI is based on the principles of “extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits,” which it contrasts with other development assistance models that involve “majority decision-making by major powers,” treaty adoption,

⁵⁴ Carla Freeman and Lyndi Tsering, “As China Looks to Reform Global Governance, How Does It Approach the U.N.?” U.S. Institute of Peace, September 28, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/china-looks-reform-global-governance-how-does-it-approach-un>.

⁵⁵ “Chinese FM Expounds on Xi's State Visit to Russia,” State Council Information Office (PRC), Press Release, March 23, 2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2023-03/23/content_85186237.htm.

⁵⁶ State Council (PRC), “Full Text: Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative,” March 30, 2015, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm; and Xi, *The Governance of China III*, 550, 562.

⁵⁷ “The Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape,” in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Business and Finance Outlook 2018* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/finance-and-investment/oecd-business-and-finance-outlook-2018_9789264298828-en.

or “transfer of sovereignty.”⁵⁸ The notion that “extensive consultation” means BRI countries will negotiate with China on equal footing for their development needs belies the reality of Beijing’s considerable leverage in many of these relationships. China also portrays BRI as an enabler of world peace. An article written by a National Development and Reform Commission–affiliated research center credits BRI’s influence for restoring diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which China helped broker in spring 2023. The deal, the author states, proves that “the spirit of peaceful cooperation under the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative complies with the requirements of the times and the will of the people, and provides a basis for resolving conflicts between countries through dialogue and consultation.”⁵⁹

Manage Relations with Major Countries Well

Managing relations with major countries has been a long-standing goal of China’s foreign policy; however, there is new urgency in this area because of the potential for resistance as China catches up with other countries in national strength. Xi has asserted that the world is experiencing “the most revolutionary change in the international balance of power in modern times,” suggesting China is entering a period of heightened tension.⁶⁰ In a 2020 book on “profound changes,” four Renmin University professors compare the current transition to other violent, system-shaking shocks in international relations, such as the start of the Vienna system in the early nineteenth century, the post–World War I Versailles system, the post–World War II Yalta system, and the Soviet Union’s collapse.⁶¹ China aims to facilitate this transition to a multipolar world with minimal negative impact on its own interests.

⁵⁸ Zhang Yesui, “共建 ‘一带一路’ 谋求合作共赢” [Jointly Build the “Belt and Road” and Seek Win-Win Cooperation], *Qiushi*, May 18, 2015, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2015/0518/c83846-27015019.html>.

⁵⁹ “紧跟习近平总书记思想足迹 奋力谱写共建 ‘一带一路’ 高质量发展新篇章” [Follow General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Ideological Footprints and Strive to Write a New Chapter of High-Quality Development in Jointly Building the “Belt and Road”], Xi Jinping Economic Thought Research Center, National Development and Reform Commission Belt and Road Construction Promotion Center, October 20, 2023.

⁶⁰ “习近平：推动全球治理体制更加公正更加合理” [Xi Jinping: Promote a Fairer and More Reasonable Global Governance System], *Xinhua*, October 13, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/13/c_1116812159.htm.

⁶¹ Wen Wang et al., *Profound Changes Unseen in Centuries: An Overview of China* (New York: Springer, 2022).

As the world's leading power, the United States and its relative decline is a core part of China's thinking on multipolarity.⁶² Although the pace of U.S. decline is hotly debated by China's experts, the CCP appears unified in its conclusion that Washington will not easily accept the multipolar world and other trends Beijing believes are inevitable. This is because Washington either cannot see or ignores these trends. China's strategy is inherently superior to that of the United States because it is based on the party's "correct" assessment of history and the "overall situation." This belief appears deeply ingrained in Beijing's thinking about relations with Washington. For example, the former president of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Yang Jiemian, argues that the United States refuses to acknowledge the "historical trend" of multipolarity and pursues "unilateralism or gang-style multilateralism."⁶³ China, he writes, is pursuing construction of an international system based on multilateralism because it is "in line with the trend of the times."⁶⁴

The party therefore judges that, at least in the next five to ten years and maybe longer, U.S.-China relations will be fraught with tension that could derail China's national agenda if it is not proactively managed. In a 2020 speech to the CCP Central Committee, Xi noted that this new reality is because of China's greater CNP: "In the past, our development level was low, and we were more complementary to others. Now that our development level has improved, we are more competitive with others."⁶⁵ The way forward, he told the Central Committee in 2021, will demand a "great struggle," since "hostile forces will not sit back and let us achieve national rejuvenation smoothly."⁶⁶ This is why Xi, in high-level speeches, has called on cadres to "effectively manage major-country relations" and "build a healthy and stable framework for major-country relations," adopting a more urgent and

⁶² See Doshi, *The Long Game*, 261–71.

⁶³ Yang Jiemian, "当代国际体系的渐变和嬗变——基于两个三十年的比较与思考" [The Gradual Change and Evolution of the Contemporary International System: Based on the Comparison and Reflection of Two Thirty-Year Periods], Center for China and Globalization, March 9, 2022, <http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/68561>.

⁶⁴ "人间正道开新篇 (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学习问答)" [A New Chapter on the Right Path in the World (Q&A on Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era)], *People's Daily*, July 22, 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0722/c1001-32165548.html>.

⁶⁵ Xi Jinping, "新发展阶段贯彻新发展理念必然要求构建新发展格局" [In the New Development Stage, the Implementation of the New Development Concept Will Inevitably Require the Construction of a New Development Pattern], *Qiushi*, August 31, 2022, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2022-08/31/c_1128960034.htm.

⁶⁶ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China IV* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2022), 94.

proactive tone than Hu Jintao's guidance in 2009 to simply "coordinate" relations between major countries.⁶⁷

Xi's great struggle with the United States involves proactively binding Washington to a set of ground rules for bilateral interactions in anticipation of heightened tensions during a protracted power struggle that could last decades. Moreover, Beijing believes that it alone has the wisdom to lead and manage this transition. According to Da Wei, director of the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University, as China approaches power parity with other nations, it should try to "make the process of change smoother and the changes gentler" and seek major countries' "consensus on the evolution of the international order."⁶⁸ This explains why as early as February 2012 Xi, during his visit to the United States as Hu's heir apparent, advocated for the United States to accept a "new model of major-country relations" based on the United States respecting China's political system, not interfering in its internal affairs, and not openly challenging China.⁶⁹ Around this time, China's scholars seized on the idea of the "Thucydides trap." Chinese officials continue to use this term to argue that armed conflict between established and rising powers during a period of transition is not a foregone conclusion. Instead, China tries to persuade the United States that mutual accommodation is "responsible to history" and that the U.S. paradigm of competition, first highlighted in its 2017 National Security Strategy, "does not conform to the trend of the times" nor "solve... the challenges facing the world."⁷⁰ Those who dismiss this as empty rhetoric overlook the serious analytic assessment about multipolarity that underpins China's strategy toward the United States.

Beyond the United States, Russia is another major country that must be managed. China saw Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as both evidence and a driver of changes unseen in a century, though scholars differ

⁶⁷ "习近平出席中央外事工作会议并发表重要讲话."

⁶⁸ Da Wei, "现行国际秩序演变的方向与中国的选择" [The Evolution Direction of the Current International Order and China's Choice], Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University, January 25, 2021, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zmgx/3066>.

⁶⁹ "Vice President Xi Jinping Attends the Welcome Luncheon Hosted by the U.S. Friendly Groups and Delivers a Speech," Embassy of the PRC in the United States of America, Press Release, February 16, 2012, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgxss/201202/t20120217_4367677.htm; and Wang Yi, "Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations between China and the United States," Brookings Institution, September 20, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/wang-yi-toward-a-new-model-of-major-country-relations-between-china-and-the-united-states>.

⁷⁰ "相向而行，共同努力，让中美关系稳下来，好起来（钟声）" [Let's Meet Each Other Halfway and Work Together to Stabilize and Improve Sino-U.S. Relations (Zhong Sheng)], *People's Daily*, June 21, 2023, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0621/c1003-40018261.html>.

on the scale of its impact.⁷¹ According to a February 2023 analysis by the American Studies Program at CICIR, the war has accelerated multipolarity because the United States, NATO, and Russia have formed political blocs while many developing countries remain nonaligned. The CICIR authors assert the war is an “unprecedented countermeasure” by Russia against the “liberal hegemonic order dominated by the United States” and heralds a “‘post-Western’ world order.”⁷² Others, like Feng Yujun, a prominent scholar at Fudan University, see the war as a “small divergence” that is disrupting global production and supply chains, reinvigorating the role of the United States in transatlantic affairs, and causing adjustments in the global security architecture, but it does not mean a return to Cold War–style confrontation between two hostile camps.⁷³

China does not appear to view the Ukraine conflict as fundamentally altering the direction of the “profound changes”; rather, it sees opportunities to support trends in the conflict that are moving in a direction advantageous to its own interests. It has thus retained political and economic support for Russia because it views partnership with the country as useful for pushing toward greater multipolarity by balancing against the United States and Europe. Beijing is also leveraging international distress about the conflict to criticize the United States’ role in NATO’s eastern expansion and offer its own ideas for changing the existing international security architecture, which it says was ineffective at preventing the outbreak of violence. Since Russia’s invasion, China announced the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative in 2021 and 2022, respectively. It claims that the initiatives will support economic globalization and combat “bloc confrontation,”

⁷¹ “乌克兰危机的影响及启示” [The Impact and Implications of the Ukraine Crisis], Institute of American Studies, CICIR, February 28, 2023, trans. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-impact-and-implications-of-the-ukraine-crisis>; Zhang Yuan, “热点透视：乌克兰危机如何加速国际格局演进？” [Hot Insights: How Does the Ukrainian Crisis Accelerate the Evolution of the International Landscape?], Xinhua, December 22, 2022, http://www.news.cn/world/2022-12/22/c_1129226904.htm; and Zhang Hongzhi, “俄乌冲突与世界变局” [Russia-Ukraine Conflict and World Change], *Outlook*, April 11, 2022, available at http://lw.news.cn/2022-04/11/c_1310551681.htm.

⁷² “乌克兰危机的影响及启示.”

⁷³ Feng Yujun, “俄乌冲突后的世界：不是‘阵营化’，而是‘小分流’” [The Post-Russia-Ukraine Conflict World: Not a “Splitting into Camps,” but Rather a “Small Divergence”], China Foundation for International Studies, July 22, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-post-russia-ukraine-conflict-world-not-a-splitting-into-camps-but-rather-a-small-divergence>.

in direct contrast with “Western international relations theory” that “emphasizes the inevitability of conflict and confrontation.”⁷⁴

Looking to the future, China is monitoring whether the Ukraine conflict will force the United States to “look west” toward Europe, which could favorably alleviate U.S. strategic pressure on China, or whether the “return of great-power politics” and the failure of international institutions to prevent conflict mean that armed conflict will be a more prevalent feature of the future international order, including on China’s doorstep in Asia.⁷⁵ At least officially, Beijing rejects any connections between the Ukraine conflict and a Taiwan contingency.⁷⁶ Privately, it sees clear parallels between the “complex security game” of the United States, Russia, Ukraine, and NATO that it believes triggered the war and a strengthening of U.S. alliances and commitments in Asia that it believes may someday intensify into a U.S.-China conflict.⁷⁷ “No Cold War should be repeated in Asia, and no Ukraine-style crisis should be repeated in Asia,” Foreign Minister Qin Gang told international reporters at a press conference in March 2023.⁷⁸ The war has probably given China a greater appreciation for the complexities of 21st-century armed conflict, including the economic dimensions, such as disruption to global supply chains and the use of sanctions. These are areas where Beijing would be especially vulnerable in a conflict because of its great integration with the global economy. It thus has decried “unilateral sanctions” and “long-arm jurisdiction” for hurting developing countries.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, April 21, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220421_10671083.html; and Liu Zan and Zhang Yuan, “让平安的钟声响彻人间” [Let the Bells of Peace Ring Through the World], *PLA Daily*, April 21, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-04/22/content_338153.htm.

⁷⁵ Yao Lu, “场内秩序的破坏与重建: 乌克兰问题审思” [Destruction and Reconstruction of Order in the Field: Reflections on Ukraine], China Social Sciences Network, March 1, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/destruction-and-reconstruction-of-order-in-the-field-reflections-on-ukraine>.

⁷⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on June 13, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, June 13, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202206/t20220613_10702460.html.

⁷⁷ Yao, “场内秩序的破坏与重建: 乌克兰问题审思.”

⁷⁸ Nectar Gan, “China’s New Foreign Minister Warns of Conflict with U.S., Defends Russia Ties,” CNN, March 7, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/07/china/china-two-sessions-new-foreign-minister-us-rebuke-intl-hnk>.

⁷⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis,” February 24, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

Firmly and Flexibly Carry Out Military Struggle

For leaders in Beijing, the PLA is a critical enabler for both China's accumulation of material power and the management of the transition to a more multipolar world by deterring or prevailing in any armed conflict that could arise during this dynamic period. In party parlance, the PLA is tasked with providing "strategic support" (战略支撑) for a range of goals and missions that will be important during this time, including consolidating the CCP's leadership and authority; safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity; protecting China's overseas interests; and promoting world peace and development. A lengthy security assessment in China's 2019 defense white paper identified the origins and nature of the threats brought by the "profound changes." They range from rising military competition among the United States, NATO, Russia, and the European Union, to arms races and proliferation, to "major-country competition" in the Asia-Pacific, including growing military activism by the United States, Japan, and Australia. The PLA is responsible for controlling any "strategic risks" from these threats that could "delay or interrupt the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."⁸⁰

For the PLA, the CCP's overall emphasis on struggle, especially since the 2022 20th Party Congress, has translated into a focus on military readiness, crisis control, and the development of the capability to win local wars. In October 2022, during a meeting with military leaders after the Party Congress, Xi exhorted them to "firmly and flexibly carry out military struggle."⁸¹ Although the party is rarely clear about the precise target of struggle, a subsequent *PLA Daily* article explaining Xi's guidance strongly implies that the target is the United States: "The more we develop and grow, the greater the pressure and resistance we face, and the fiercer the struggle against various hostile forces." Giving a not-so-subtle hint as to the identity of the "hostile forces," the article cited the Korean War, in which the PLA broke "the myth of the U.S. military's invincibility." The current reality, the author concluded, required the PLA to "focus on the overall situation," have

⁸⁰ Wang Qiang, "如期实现建军一百年奋斗目标" [Achieving the Centenary Goal of the Founding of the Army as Scheduled], *Study Times*, January 6, 2023, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0106/c448544-32601036.html>.

⁸¹ "习近平出席中央外事工作会议并发表重要讲话."

a “deep understanding of the political attributes of war,” and “carry forward the spirit of struggle.”⁸²

China’s military strategy leverages another assessed trend of the “profound changes”—the science and technology revolution—to enhance the PLA’s ability to prevail in future conflicts. Xi’s top-level direction to the PLA to build a “world-class military” by midcentury demands that it take advantage of cutting-edge military technologies to shape the future of warfare. Seizing the science and technology revolution is a national priority. “Science and technology have never had such a profound impact on the future and destiny of a country as it does today,” noted a 2021 article in the *PLA Daily*. It elaborated that “whoever masters cutting-edge military technology and has the military talents to control this technology will be able to grasp the strategic advantage in future military confrontations.”⁸³

Conclusion

A Post-Pandemic Assessment: Doubling Down on Struggle

Major geopolitical events of the last few years, including the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s war in Ukraine, have not altered China’s confidence in long-standing strategic trends. If anything, recent events have led the party to double down on its agenda with a greater emphasis on “struggle.” In an October 2020 Central Committee meeting where he affirmed Jiang Zemin’s assessment that China still faced “strategic opportunities,” Xi Jinping added a clause: “there are new developments and changes in both opportunities and challenges.”⁸⁴ “When the concept of the period of strategic opportunity was proposed, it referred to the first twenty years of this century,” Xi said, referencing Jiang’s declaration in 2002. “Today, twenty years later, how to judge the period of strategic opportunity is a major issue.” He continued:

In the past, we followed the trend, and it was easier to grasp opportunities; now, we have to go against the wind, and the difficulty of grasping opportunities is different. In the past, the general environment was relatively stable, and risks and challenges were easier to see clearly; now the world situation is turbulent and

⁸² “坚定灵活开展军事斗争——认真学习宣传贯彻党的二十大精神系列谈” [Firm and Flexible Military Struggle: Seriously Study, Publicize, and Implement the Spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], *PLA Daily*, November 24, 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1124/c448544-32573422.html>.

⁸³ Qi Xiaoshan, “深入实施新时代人才强军战略” [Deeply Implement the Strategy of Strengthening the Army with Talents in the New Era], *PLA Daily*, December 13, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-12/13/content_305100.htm.

⁸⁴ Xi, “新发展阶段贯彻新发展理念必然要求构建新发展格局.”

complex, geopolitical challenges are high and the waves are high, and there are many hidden reefs and undercurrents, which put forward higher requirements for resilience.⁸⁵

The idea that China faces unusual circumstances that required doubling down on struggle became a core leadership instruction and coincided with an increased focus on risk at the highest levels of the party. It was reflected in a phrase that appeared in late 2020 around the year-end Central Economic Work Conference and was included in the March 2021 release of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development at China's annual legislative meetings: "Be good at taking advantage of crises and opening up new opportunities in changing situations."⁸⁶ At the October 2022 Party Congress, Xi's speech included the modified "strategic opportunities" assessment—"strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising."⁸⁷ Xi's articulation of leadership consensus around a more urgent assessment of international developments than at any point in the last 30 years is likely to steer China's entire political, economic, and national defense system to act and operate in new and different ways. These may include increased military posturing on China's periphery, allocating resources to deal with domestic threats, and deploying economic countermeasures that Beijing has developed but only selectively used.

Implications

This chapter has several implications for U.S. policy toward China. First, it describes how the party assesses its strategic environment and translates official ideology into policy choices, a theory of leadership decision-making that supplements other explanations for China's actions. While not incompatible with Rush Doshi's important articulation of China's grand strategy in *The Long Game*, this chapter suggests that the country's strategy is influenced by the CCP's particular theory of history and attention to strategic

⁸⁵ Xi, "新发展阶段贯彻新发展理念必然要求构建新发展格局."

⁸⁶ Zhang Laiming, "善于在危机中育先机, 于变局中开新局" [Be Good at Raising Opportunities in Crises and Starting New Opportunities in Changing Situations], *Qiushi*, December 1, 2020, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-12/01/c_1126799010.htm; and "(两会受权发布) 中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要" [(Promulgated by the Two Sessions) The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Outline of the Vision Goals for 2035], *Xinhua*, March 13, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-03/13/c_1127205564_2.htm.

⁸⁷ Xi Jinping, "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects," Embassy of the PRC in Malaysia, October 16, 2022, http://my.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792358.htm.

trends that include, but go beyond, the perception of U.S. power and threat.⁸⁸ This is important because policymakers seeking to influence China must understand the way the party assesses the world and the factors its leaders believe are most important. Despite highly dynamic international events over the last 40 years, it is notable that several generations of China's leaders have each affirmed the core importance of a consistent and relatively limited set of strategic trends: multipolarity, economic globalization, competition in CNP, and the science and technology revolution. This is not to suggest that the United States should make the global South or international institutions a battleground for strategic competition with China, but only that it should appreciate that China's leaders are likely to be especially attuned to dynamics in these areas.

The value the party places on CNP to predict outcomes of future contests also argues for greater U.S. attention to its own CNP and how U.S. CNP is messaged or discussed with China's leaders. Beyond the economy and military, Beijing also pays close attention to how the United States stacks up in science and technology, education, and influence. This is important because the party will assess China's likelihood of success in future interactions or struggles with the United States and other countries based on its understanding of relative CNP in fields ranging from technology competition to military confrontation.

At the same time, governments looking to shape the CCP's choices must be sober about their ability to do so because of the remarkable consistency of China's strategic assessments over time. A review of events since the 1980s suggests that only an event beyond anyone's control, on the magnitude of a world war or financial crisis, is likely to shake China's leaders from their trajectory. As far as predicting shifts in the party's direction or action, it is helpful to understand that China's leaders are most likely to adjust their approach if they perceive a foundational shift, acceleration, or reversal in one or more of the core trends, such as multilateralism, as was the case with the 2008 global financial crisis. They are more likely to act boldly and double down on "struggle" if they observe trends with the potential to move conditions in a favorable direction.⁸⁹ Indeed, China's bold national campaign for global technology dominance in the Fourth Industrial Revolution is because Xi sees technological innovation as a core element of the "profound changes" and key to achieving China's rejuvenation, or even accelerating the

⁸⁸ Doshi, *The Long Game*, 17.

⁸⁹ Bobrow, Chan, and Kringen, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decisions*, 121–22, 127.

downfall of U.S. global leadership.⁹⁰ The party's core belief in the antagonistic nature of international affairs also means it is unlikely to abandon efforts to deplete the resources and momentum of its primary strategic competitor. Thus, despite Beijing's public opposition to competition as a framework for major-power relations, it expects competition, possibly even open confrontation, with the United States and is actively "struggling" to shift dynamics in its favor.

Finally, because the arrival of the CCP's optimal future could take decades, in the near term China remains flexible in the timing and mode of tactics used to manage the risks of what it expects will be a protracted competition. This apparent certainty in an inevitable multipolar future wherein China surpasses the United States may offer opportunities for short-term compromise because it reduces time pressure. Assured of future victory, China's leaders may dwell less on temporary setbacks that do not impede long-term goals.⁹¹ Xi's pronouncement at the 20th Party Congress that China has entered "a period in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges coexist" suggests Beijing believes it faces a critical period in the next five to ten years during which it must meet ambitious national development targets on its path to national rejuvenation by midcentury. The CCP's interest in stability during this period may open room for limited compromise with foreign governments in discreet areas, as long as China does not see such concessions as undermining long-term goals, providing a window of opportunity that others might leverage.

⁹⁰ Rush Doshi, "The United States, China, and the Contest for the Fourth Industrial Revolution," Brookings Institution, July 31, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-united-states-china-and-the-contest-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution>.

⁹¹ Bobrow, Chan, and Kringen, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decisions*, 64.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter analyzes Xi Jinping's strategy for strengthening control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA), focusing on the ways in which he catered to the interests of senior officers, politically influential subgroups, and the military writ large during a period of disruptive change.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Portrayals of Xi's leadership of the PLA have focused on purges of political rivals and an anticorruption campaign to intimidate those who might oppose his plans. However, this focus on coercion overlooks the broader political strategy that Xi used to consolidate his power and push through ambitious reforms. That strategy included protecting the careers of senior officers who supported his agenda, allowing the ground forces to retain a high degree of influence despite losing manpower, and granting the military as a whole respect, resources, and autonomy rather than overturning basic patterns of civil-military relations in place since the 1980s. Public data, including leadership biographies, budgets, resource allocation, and Xi's own activities, shows galvanized support at the individual, subgroup, and institutional levels, with significant ramifications for the party's ability to control the military.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Satisfying the interests of key constituencies in the PLA means that party-army relations are relatively stable; open military discontent with Xi's leadership of the sort witnessed in other autocratic societies is unlikely.
- Needing buy-in from individual and corporate interests in the PLA could restrict the scope for further reforms, especially in areas that would require deeper changes in organizational culture.
- A political imperative to respect PLA autonomy means that corruption could continue to flourish and allow the military to operate without a high level of central supervision.
- The PLA will likely receive continued budget increases despite growing economic headwinds, which is a result both of Xi's views of a darker security environment and his need to protect military equities.

Stabilizing the Boat: Revisiting Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping

Joel Wuthnow

At the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Xi Jinping was reappointed for a third five-year term as general-secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). At the same time, he selected a slate of senior officers for his CMC that some observers portrayed as a war cabinet for a future military operation against Taiwan.¹ A few months later, Xi warned of a darkening security environment when he stated that the United States was plotting “comprehensive containment, encirclement, and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our country’s development.”² A visit by the U.S. Speaker of the House to Taiwan and a looming presidential election on the island also occupied attention from China’s leadership. These developments raised questions about how well Xi could lead the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into an uncertain future.

Western analyses of Xi’s control of the PLA have focused on his heavy-handed tactics and Mao-like cult of personality, but this has led to

Joel Wuthnow is a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs within the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. He is also an Adjunct Professor in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

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¹ Greg Torode, “Xi’s New Generals Offer Cohesion over Possible Taiwan Plans,” Reuters, October 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/need-speed-china-xis-new-generals-offer-cohesion-over-possible-taiwan-plans-2022-10-27>.

² John Ruwitch, “China Accuses U.S. of Containment and Warns of Potential Conflict,” NPR, March 7, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/07/1161570798/china-accuses-u-s-of-containment-warns-of-potential-conflict>.

skewed impressions of party-army relations during his tenure.³ It is true that Xi leveraged the anticorruption campaign, propaganda work emphasizing his absolute control, and a new lineup of supervisory mechanisms within the PLA to consolidate his authority and reduce opposition to his agenda for massive structural changes. However, myopically focusing on these elements understates the degree to which Xi has respected long-standing norms and practices in the PLA, ignores his attempts to compensate losers of the reform process, and gives a false perception of resentment as Xi broke apart patronage networks and rewickered the bureaucracy.

The most underappreciated element of Xi's leadership is the extent to which he satisfied interest groups within the PLA—and the PLA itself as an interest group⁴—to centralize power and cultivate support for his agenda. He did this by protecting the careers of those who performed diligently and waited their turn, respecting retirement norms (rather than keeping his cronies on active duty), approving large pay raises and other benefit reforms, compensating those forced out of the PLA before retirement, preserving “big army” influence in key leadership positions, minding the interests of the theater commands, approving larger military budgets despite mounting economic difficulties, and tolerating a high degree of PLA autonomy. As a manager, Xi has acted as if he realized that a more brutal approach to compliance would backfire and that what was needed at a time of great disruption was—in many respects—stability.

The ways in which Xi has catered to PLA interests have four implications for party-army relations at present and into the future. First, civil-military relations are generally stable, and the chances of a coup are low. Second, Xi has needed to accept limits on deeper reforms to the PLA by retaining a top brass composed mostly of army officers. Third, the PLA continues to exercise a high degree of autonomy that insulates it from outside checks and balances, despite Xi's vaunted consolidation of power under the “CMC chairman responsibility system.” Such autonomy was on display in the dismissal of Xi's defense minister in 2023 and in the backdrop to the 2023 spy balloon incident. Fourth, the party will continue to provide large budgets

³ For general assessments, see James Char, “Chinese Civil-Military Relations,” in *Reshaping the Chinese Military: The PLA's Roles and Missions in the Xi Jinping Era*, ed. Richard A. Bitzinger and James Char (London: Routledge, 2018), 9–44; James Char, “Subjective Conditional Control: Return of the Strongman in China's Party-Army Relations,” in *Asian Military Evolutions*, ed. Alan Chong and Nicole Jenne (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), 197–228; and Chien-wen Kou, “Xi Jinping in Command: Solving the Principal-Agent Problem in CCP-PLA Relations?” *China Quarterly* 232 (2017): 866–85.

⁴ See Isaac B. Kardon and Phillip C. Saunders, “Reconsidering the PLA as an Interest Group,” in *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 33–57.

to the PLA despite economic challenges at home, which will contribute to the military's ability to meet its modernization timelines.

This chapter develops these arguments in five sections. The first reviews the literature focusing on the coercive aspects of Xi's control and explains the limits for Xi in moving too far in a punitive direction. The following three sections illustrate the ways in which Xi has respected norms or offered side payments to key interest groups at three levels: individual senior leaders as well as lower-ranking officers, the military services and theater commands as the major subgroups within the PLA, and the military as an institution with its own equities that need to be protected vis-à-vis the civilian sphere. The final section explains the implications for Xi's control, further PLA reforms, bureaucratic autonomy, and military modernization. The chapter draws insights from publicly available data on career patterns, budgets, resource allocation, and Xi's inspection visits.

The Limits of Xi's Heavy Hand

Coercion has been a distinctive feature of Xi Jinping's political consolidation within the PLA but cannot by itself explain the PLA's acquiescence to his agenda. Foreign scholars have focused on three coercive aspects of Xi's leadership, starting with his political purges. A campaign to address corruption in the ranks predated Xi's arrival as CMC chairman, having been launched by General Logistics Department deputy director Liu Yuan in early 2012.⁵ Xi expanded this campaign and refocused it on his political adversaries, most notably former CMC vice chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, who had been appointed by Jiang Zemin and still exercised influence behind the scenes, as well as other senior officers connected to Xu or Guo.⁶ Eliminating these officials created vacancies that Xi filled with those deemed to be politically reliable, some of whom he had known in his earlier provincial career.⁷ At the 20th Party Congress in 2022,

⁵ James Mulvenon, "The Only Honest Man? General Liu Yuan Calls Out PLA Corruption," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2012, 1–5. Liu's most famous target was former General Logistics Department deputy director Gu Junshan.

⁶ See "Visualizing China's Anti-corruption Campaign," ChinaFile, August 15, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/infographics/visualizing-chinas-anti-corruption-campaign>; and Zi Yang, "Character Assassination and the Contemporary Anti-corruption Campaign in the Chinese Military," in *Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*, ed. Sergei A. Samoilenko et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 117–30.

⁷ Daniel C. Mattingly, "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign-Domestic Threat Dilemma in China," *American Journal of Political Science* (2022): 7–8.

Xi continued this pattern by selecting a CMC composed of those regarded as close associates, including longtime acquaintance Zhang Youxia.⁸

The anticorruption campaign complemented a propaganda effort to highlight Xi's pivotal role in the military, appearing as a "cult of personality." With Xu's and Guo's arrests in hindsight, Xi's landmark speech on party discipline at the November 2014 Gutian Conference served as an implicit reminder to the officer corps that neither his leadership nor his agenda could be questioned.⁹ At the same time, the PLA began to discuss the "CMC chairman responsibility system" (军委主席负责制), highlighting Xi's authority and implicitly contrasting it with the situation under Jiang and Hu Jintao in which the CMC vice chairmen made key decisions.¹⁰ Invocations of this concept accelerated in the following years, reaching a fever pitch prior to the 19th Party Congress in 2017. On the eve of that event, the CMC passed an opinion stating that the "CMC chairman responsibility system" must be implemented to "ensure that the entire armed forces...resolutely follow the command of and are responsible to Chairman Xi, enabling Chairman Xi to feel assured."¹¹ Such messages reaffirmed Xi's status, though as discussed below, in practice Xi continued to grant the PLA a level of autonomy that allowed it to operate in some ways without strict day-to-day supervision.

A final part of Xi's coercive strategy was modifying key organizations to improve his control of the bureaucracy. Specifically, at the outset of the reforms in late 2015, Xi disbanded the four general departments, replacing them with fifteen smaller departments, commissions, and offices that are in principle less powerful and easier to manage. Under the new system, three key supervisory organs, which had previously been housed within the General Political Department, including the discipline inspection system (key to the anticorruption campaign), the political commissar system, and the military courts, were separated from each other and placed under CMC control.¹² Facilitated by the CMC General Office, whose function is

⁸ Lyle J. Morris, "What China's New Central Military Commission Tells Us about Xi's Military Strategy," Asia Society Policy Institute, October 27, 2022, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/what-chinas-new-central-military-commission-tells-us-about-xis-military-strategy>. Other longtime colleagues included Miao Hua and He Weidong.

⁹ James Mulvenon, "Hotel Gutian: We Haven't Had That Spirit Here Since 1929," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2015, 1–9.

¹⁰ James Mulvenon, "The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the 'CMC Chairman Responsibility System,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, 2015, 1–4.

¹¹ James Mulvenon, "The Cult of Xi and the Rise of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2018, 4–5.

¹² Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2019), 532–25.

to manage information flows between the CMC and its subordinate organs, this change meant that Xi had several independent channels to monitor political problems and threaten noncompliant officers.¹³

While these efforts were essential for Xi's efforts to increase control over the PLA, they also faced limitations. The coercive strategy was enhanced by propaganda work and reformed supervisory mechanisms, but its "teeth" were in the use of anticorruption campaigns to remove or silence opponents. Nevertheless, Xi could not have overplayed this strategy and still expected to have a functioning military leadership. To retain a professional military and implement ambitious reforms, he could not have simply replaced a generation of experienced senior officers—most of whom were corrupt and many of whom owed their career progress to Xu, Guo, or their associates—with a younger cohort of officers not yet ready for command.¹⁴ Overdoing such threats also could have bred debilitating paranoia within the ranks as officers turned on each other or used the campaign to settle scores. At the extreme, Xi himself could have been at risk if resentments spiraled out of control. In effect, this meant that he needed to match selective purges with reassurances and incentives if they demonstrated compliance.

Ultimately, Xi did not overextend his coercive approach within the PLA. Instead, he adopted a more sophisticated political strategy that also relied on efforts to build support by satisfying the interests of those whose support he would need to gain control and execute his agenda. This meant respecting long-standing norms and traditions within the PLA that Xi could have overturned or offering side payments to those on the losing side of his reforms. The following sections analyze these features of his strategy on three levels: rewarding officers who performed well and offering a graceful exit to those who were laid off, finding ways to compensate the ground force for its sacrifice and parceling out opportunities among the theater commands, and maintaining a generally stable civil-military paradigm that continued to offer the PLA respect, resources, and autonomy.

Individual Interests

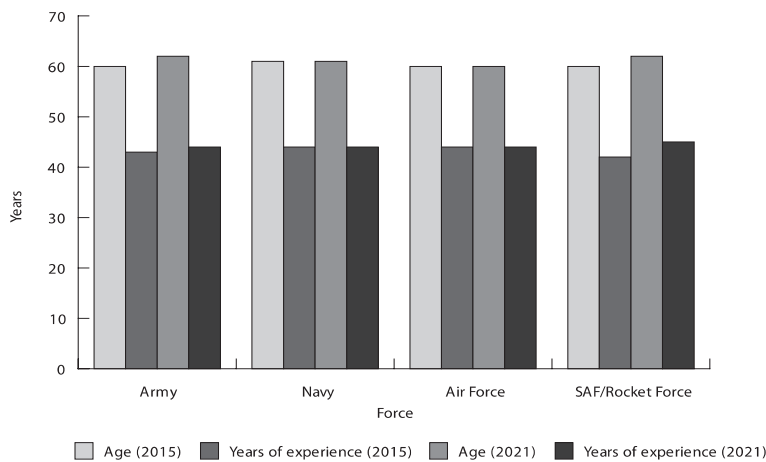
Xi found several ways to satisfy the interests of individual PLA officers. While the anticorruption campaign made it clear that challenges to his

¹³ Joel Wuthnow, "The CMC General Office: Recentralizing Power in the PLA," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, May 11, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/cmc-general-office-recentralizing-power-pla>.

¹⁴ "Visualizing China's Anti-corruption Campaign."

authority would be punished, there was a complementary assurance that compliance and political obedience would be rewarded. At the pinnacle of the command structure, Xi mostly followed norms under which officers needed to meet time-in-grade requirements for promotion.¹⁵ **Figure 1** demonstrates that there was no reduction in the average age or years of experience of senior officers across the four services between 2015 and 2021. This practice kept faith with those who had waited their turn for promotion. Officers also typically retired on time, with longtime Xi associate Zhang Youxia’s reappointment as CMC vice chairman in 2022 being a rare exception.¹⁶ It would have been more disruptive to PLA reforms for Xi to use his appointment power as CMC chairman to pick more junior officers for

FIGURE 1 Average age and experience of senior PLA officers by service (2015 and 2021)



SOURCE: Joel Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons: Assessing China’s Senior Military Leadership*, China Strategic Perspectives 16 (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2022), 40–43.

NOTE: SAF stands for Second Artillery Force. Senior officers are those at the theater deputy leader grade and above.

¹⁵ An exception was new CMC vice chairman He Weidong, who skipped a grade at the 20th Party Congress in 2022.

¹⁶ Zhang (72 years old) was also only one of two Central Committee members whose reappointments at the 20th Party Congress broke the age norms. The other was Wang Yi (68 years old).

idiosyncratic reasons (e.g., personal connections) or to allow cronies to stay on active duty past the age limit.

Similarly, although several generals were caught up in the anticorruption campaign, Xi protected most senior officers from career setbacks due to massive organizational changes to the PLA under his leadership. After the seven military regions were consolidated into five theater commands, for instance, new roles at equivalent grades were found for all the former military region commanders and political commissars.¹⁷ Most of them subsequently retired on time with full benefits.¹⁸ Even the 2017 “below the neck” reforms to the ground forces did not harm the careers of the affected leaders.¹⁹ **Table 1** compares the career trajectories of the commanders and political commissars of the thirteen remaining group armies (white columns) to those in the five disbanded ones (shaded columns), showing no major difference in their ability to reach higher grades. Indeed, this cohort’s most successful member was Lin Xiangyang, the last commander of the now defunct 47th group army, who became the commander of the Eastern Theater.

Officers who faithfully performed their duties during the tumult of the reforms were not only protected but also rewarded. Prior to Xi’s arrival, the PLA was already enhancing officer compensation, which was necessary to attract and retain talent as the military began emphasizing quality over quantity.²⁰ These trends continued under Xi. **Figure 2** documents rising overall personnel expenditures between 2008 and 2021 and a corresponding increase in per capita expenses amid a 300,000-person downsizing between 2015 and 2018. Under benefits reform in 2017–18, officer salaries in

¹⁷ Of the fourteen officers who served as the last military region commanders and political commissars, eight were appointed as theater commanders and political commissars, and six were given positions at the same grade in service headquarters (including the new army and Strategic Support Force) and CMC departments. This pattern extended to all senior officers at the theater command leader grade and above. See Saunders and Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping,” 540.

¹⁸ The exception was Cai Yingting, the last commander of the Nanjing Military Region (MR). Following later service as president of the Academy of Military Sciences, he was reportedly demoted and forced into early retirement. Minnie Chan, “Chinese Military’s Rising Star Falls Back to Earth ‘over Links to Disgraced Senior Commanders and Daughter’s Marriage to Frenchman,’” *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2146274/chinese-militarys-rising-star-falls-back-earth-over>.

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 358–61.

²⁰ The formula to focus on quality over quantity was approved by Jiang Zemin in 1995. See David M. Finkelstein, “Thinking about the PLA’s ‘Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs,’” in *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs*, ed. James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein (Arlington: Center for Naval Analyses, 2005), 2–4.

TABLE 1 Status of 2017 group army commanders and political commissars in 2022

	Commander	Political commissar
1	XXX	XXX
12	XXX	–
13	XX	XX
14	XX	XX
16	X	X
20	XX	X
21	X	X
26	X	X
27	X	XX
31	XX	XX
38	XX	X
39	*	X
40	X	X
41	XX	X
42	X	X
47	XXX	XXX
54	XX	XX
65	X	X

SOURCE: PRC Directory of Military Personalities, 2017 and 2022.

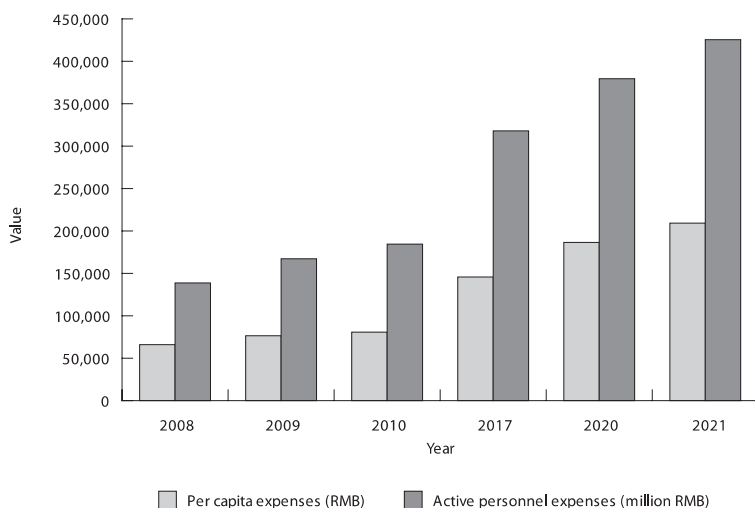
NOTE: Dash=resigned, *=died, X=corps leader, XX=theater deputy leader, XXX=theater command leader, white columns=surviving group armies, shaded columns=disbanded group armies.

particular rose by roughly 40%,²¹ followed by another reported 40% increase in late 2021 (when one Beijing-based colonel claimed that his monthly income soared from 15,000 to 22,000 yuan).²² The PLA also created a new “holiday stipend.” All personnel would receive 1,000 yuan on five holidays, and officers in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing would receive

²¹ Marcus Clay, *Understanding the “People” of the People’s Liberation Army: A Study of Marriage, Family, Housing and Benefits* (Washington, D.C.: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2018), 49.

²² Minnie Chan, “China to Boost Pay for PLA Forces after Years of Sweeping Reforms,” *South China Morning Post*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3118636/china-boost-pay-pla-forces-after-years-sweeping-reforms>.

FIGURE 2 Per capita and total personnel expenses (select years, 2008–21)



SOURCE: UN Military Expenditure Database; and International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Military Balance Database.

an additional 1,000 yuan.²³ Improvements to the welfare of rank-and-file officers after the reforms both incentivized good performance and likely mitigated discontent on the part of those required to change billets or adapt to a new system.

Xi also took steps to compensate those who were required to leave the military before their normal retirement ages. The vast majority of these individuals (mostly midcareer army officers in noncombat roles) were not sidelined by anticorruption investigations.²⁴ Instead, they were given opportunities to move into civilian positions, with the party center coaxing local governments to provide former military members with positions of equivalent seniority, creating enormous frustration in the localities, which often lacked funding for those transfers.²⁵ Other former officers opted for a self-directed “career transition” (转业), which would entail

²³ Clay, *Understanding the “People” of the People’s Liberation Army*, 49.

²⁴ One study found only 62 low-level “flies” investigated in the military at the outset of the reforms. Most likely the true number is significantly higher but still a very small percentage of the 300,000 downsized. See “Visualizing China’s Anti-corruption Campaign.”

²⁵ Ma Cheng-kun and John Chen, “System Overload? The 2015 PLA Force Reduction, Military-Locality Relations, and the Potential for Social Instability,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 661–709.

a large lump-sum payment—for instance, 413,000 yuan for a battalion-grade officer in 2017—plus a continuing monthly stipend.²⁶ This system complemented the creation of the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs in March 2018 to strengthen the management of benefits such as pensions and healthcare.²⁷ Managing potential discontent by those forced to leave the PLA—which might have spilled over to their colleagues who remained—required financial compensation.

Service and Theater Interests

A second level of analysis focuses on how Xi Jinping protected the interests of the PLA's major constituencies: the services and theaters. Special attention should be given to the ground force, which experienced the most disruptive changes under Xi: it absorbed the bulk of the downsizing and lost five group armies, its remaining divisions were converted into smaller brigades (and regiments into battalions), and a new army "headquarters" put it on the same bureaucratic plane as the other services.²⁸ While the ground force remained the PLA's largest service, its share of total end strength declined from nearly 70% in 2015 to slightly less than 50% two years later.²⁹ Nevertheless, Xi did not bludgeon the army into submission. In addition to protecting the careers of senior officers and softening the blow for downsized personnel, he also found ways to protect the influence of the service as an institution.

One sign of Xi's attention to the ground force was his frequent visits to army units during and after the reforms. As exhibited in **Figure 3**, between 2015 and 2022, Xi conducted ten such inspections—twice as many as his visits to naval or air force units. Given the intense demands on his time, visiting these units was a signal of his attention to army equities.³⁰ He also offered encouraging words. At a ceremony conferring a flag on

²⁶ Clay, *Understanding the "People" of the People's Liberation Army*, 51.

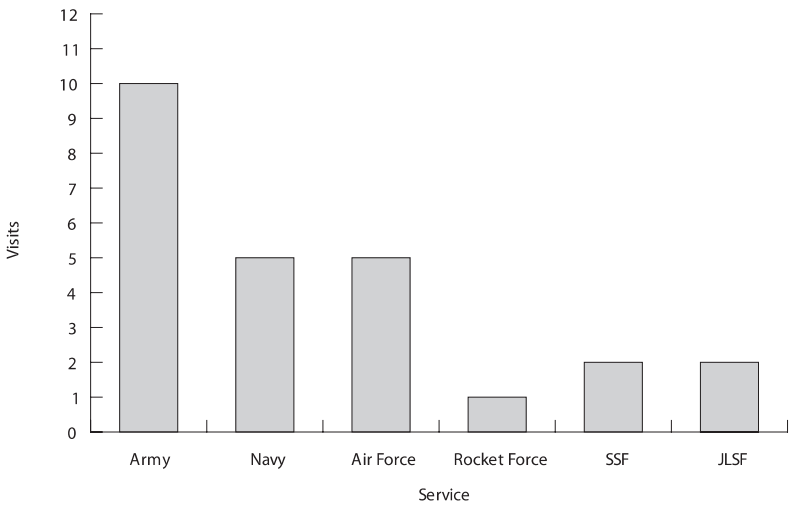
²⁷ Kenneth W. Allen and Marcus Clay, "All Eyes on the Ministry of Veterans Affairs," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 11, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/all-eyes-on-the-ministry-of-veterans-affairs>. For background, see Neil J. Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Veterans' Political Activism in China," *Modern China* 41, no. 3 (2015): 278–312.

²⁸ Prior to the reforms, the PLA Ground Force was managed by the general departments (at the national level) and the military regions (at the theater level), while other services were managed by lower-grade service headquarters and military region component commands.

²⁹ *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), 237; and *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), 279.

³⁰ Leadership travel has also been discussed as a signal of priorities in international relations. See Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 163–77.

FIGURE 3 Xi Jinping's PLA inspections by service (2015–22)



SOURCE: Academy of Military Sciences, “强军十年大事记” [A Record of the Strong Army’s Ten Years], *PLA Daily*, October 10, 2022.

NOTE: SSF stands for Strategic Support Force and JLSF stands for Joint Logistic Support Force.

its new headquarters at the end of 2015, Xi stated that the army “plays an irreplaceable role in safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests.”³¹ This alluded to enduring ground force missions in areas such as border defense, Himalayan and Korean Peninsula scenarios, a Taiwan contingency (given that the main amphibious units would be drawn from the army), and overseas peacekeeping.³² Xi’s comments appeared to legitimize maintaining a force of more than 900,000 personnel trained for diverse missions, even as the shares of the other services increased.³³

A more concrete way in which Xi protected army interests was by preserving its influence in senior positions. As documented in **Table 2**,

³¹ “习近平向中国人民解放军陆军火箭军战略支援部队授予军旗并致训词” [Xi Jinping Gives Remarks and Confers Flags to the PLA Army, Rocket Force, and Strategic Support Force], *People’s Daily*, January 2, 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0102/c64094-28003839.html>.

³² Joshua Arostegui, “PLA Army and Marine Corps Amphibious Brigades in a Post-Reform Military,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2022), 161–93.

³³ John Chen, “Choosing the ‘Least Bad Option’: Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Forces,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 94.

TABLE 2 Service affiliation of theater commanders and political commissars (2016–23)

	Incumbent 1	Incumbent 2	Incumbent 3	Incumbent 4	Incumbent 5
Eastern Theater commander	Army	Army	Army	–	–
Eastern Theater political commissar	Army	Army	Army	–	–
Southern Theater commander	Army	Navy	Army	–	–
Southern Theater political commissar	Army	Army	Air Force	–	–
Northern Theater commander	Army	Army	Navy	–	–
Northern Theater political commissar	Army	Air Force	–	Army	–
Western Theater commander	Army	Army	Army	Army	–
Western Theater political commissar	Army	Army	Army	–	–
Central Theater commander	Army	Air Force	Army	Army	Army
Central Theater political commissar	Army	Army	Army	–	–

SOURCE: PRC Directories of Military Personalities, 2016–22.

only 5 of the 33 individuals who served as theater commanders or political commissars between 2016 and 2023 were from the other services. The army held 85% of the most senior theater positions despite possessing only 48% of total manpower, punching far above its weight. Moreover, while the appointment of naval and air force officers as theater commanders represented key “firsts” for those services, it is notable that by 2023 nine of the ten senior positions were held by the army. The army not only maintained its outsized influence but also gained authority since, unlike the

former military regions, they would now have peacetime control over air and naval forces in their respective theaters.³⁴

A similar pattern can be found in the CMC. At the 20th Party Congress in 2022, all of Xi's selections for the high command had started their careers in the army (though two subsequently transferred to other services as political commissars). There were no operational air force or navy selectees.³⁵ An army bias can also be found in the fifteen CMC departments, commissions, and offices. Of the 37 individuals who led these institutions at some point between 2016 to 2023, only seven (19%) came from outside the ground force (see **Table 3**). Some organs, including the Joint Staff Department, Logistics Support Department, and Training Management Department, have only been led by army officers. As with the theaters, Xi handed a few opportunities to the other services, but he largely respected a tradition in which key joint positions are held by one service. Such patterns are not merely a vestige of the old system; they can also be interpreted as a form of compensation for the service required to sacrifice the most.

Xi has adopted a different approach to the theaters. In the absence of a single bureaucratic "loser" that needed to be compensated, he has more evenly distributed attention, influence, and resources among the five theaters. One indicator concerns his travel patterns. Given his reported goal for the PLA to be fully prepared for a Taiwan contingency by 2027, Xi might have been expected to spend the most time in the southeast, but he has instead made it a point to regularly visit all the theaters (see **Figure 4**).³⁶ Similarly, Xi has parceled out opportunities for officers with prior service in every theater to be promoted to the PLA's highest grades, avoiding the creation of a "cradle of generals" (e.g., in areas where he previously served in provincial roles) (see **Figure 5**).³⁷ These opportunities extended to the new CMC in 2022. Despite widespread media attention on the elevation of

³⁴ Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, "Is the Chinese Army the Real Winner in PLA Reforms?" *Joint Force Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2016): 46.

³⁵ Joel Wuthnow, "Xi's New Central Military Commission: A War Council for Taiwan?" *China Leadership Monitor*, 2022, <https://www.prcleader.org/wuthnow-december-2022>.

³⁶ Sam LaGrone, "Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027, Sees No Near-Term Intent to Invade," *USNI News*, June 23, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/23/milley-china-wants-capability-to-take-taiwan-by-2027-sees-no-near-term-intent-to-invade>.

³⁷ Some have suggested preferential treatments for alumni of the Nanjing MR. See Cheng Li, "Xi Jinping's Inner Circle (Part 1: The Shaanxi Gang)," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2016, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Xi-Jinping-Inner-Circle.pdf>.

former Eastern Theater commander He Weidong, the PLA's new top brass brought experience in multiple theaters.³⁸

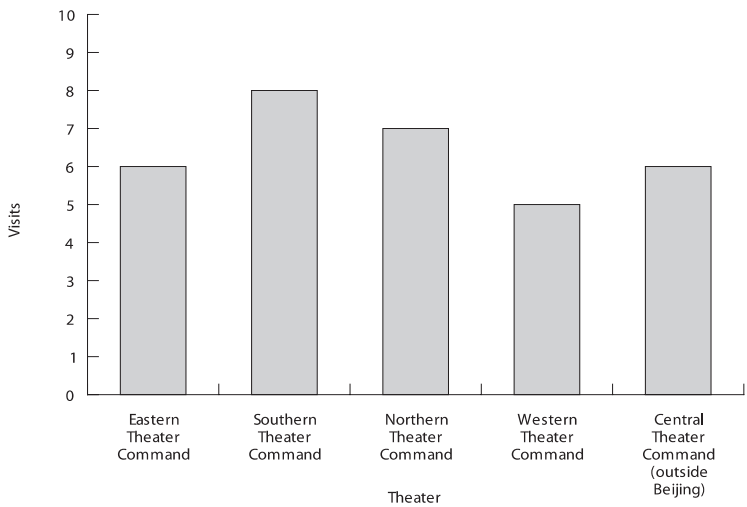
TABLE 3 Service affiliation of CMC department, commission, and office heads (2016–23)

	Incumbent 1	Incumbent 2	Incumbent 3	Incumbent 4
General Office	Army	Army	–	–
Joint Staff Department	Army	Army	Army	–
Political Work Department	Army	Navy	–	–
Logistics Support Department	Army	Army	Army	Army
Equipment Development Department	Army	Strategic Support Force	Air Force	–
Training Management Department	Army	Army	Army	–
National Defense Mobilization Department	Army	Army	–	–
Discipline Inspection Commission	Army	Army	–	–
Political and Legal Affairs Commission	Army	Army	Navy	–
Science and Technology Commission	Army	Navy	–	–
Strategic Planning Office	Army	–	–	–
Reform and Organization Office	Army	Army	–	–
Office of International Military Cooperation	Navy	Army	Army	–
Audit Office	Army	Army	Army	–
Offices Administration Agency	Army	Air Force	–	–

SOURCE: PRC Directories of Military Personalities, 2016–22.

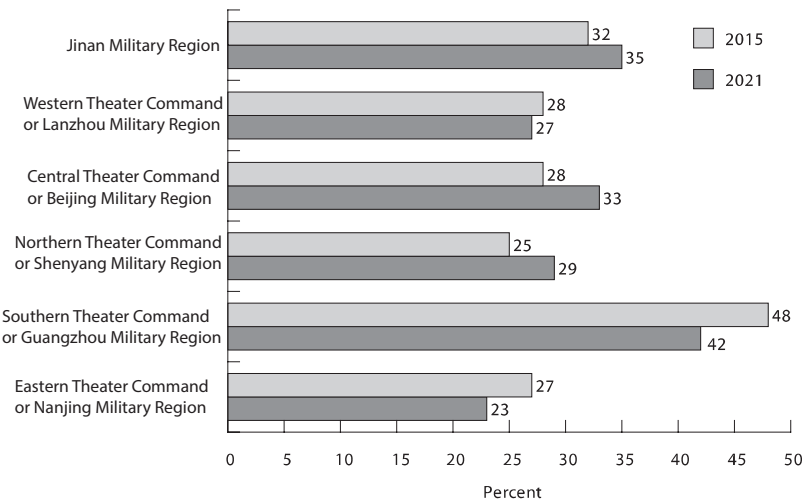
³⁸ See, for example, Torode, “Xi’s New Generals Offer Cohesion over Possible Taiwan Plans.” Of note, He Weidong himself had also been a deputy commander of the Western Theater Command. No other CMC member had previously served in operational roles in the Nanjing MR or Eastern Theater. See Bonny Lin et al., “How Did the 20th Party Congress Impact China’s Military?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, China Power Project, <https://chinapower.csis.org/20th-party-congress-china-military-pla-cmc>.

FIGURE 4 Xi Jinping's PLA inspections by theater (2015–22)



SOURCE: Academy of Military Sciences, “A Record of the Strong Army’s Ten Years” (强军十年大事记), *PLA Daily*, October 10, 2022, 1–7.

FIGURE 5 Senior PLA officers’ previous positions by military region and theater (%; 2015 and 2021)

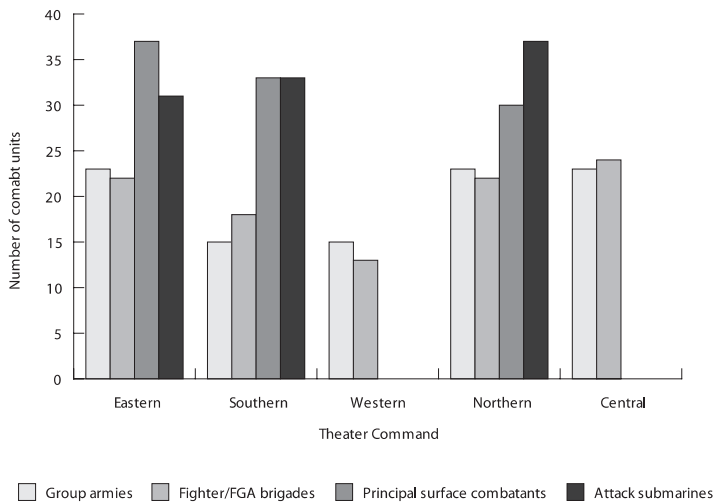


SOURCE: Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons*, 31.

NOTE: Senior officers are defined as theater deputy leader grade or higher. Data is from the previous decade of an officer’s career.

Xi has also ensured an equitable distribution of combat forces across the theaters. Despite its status as the primary theater, the Eastern Theater does not claim a disproportionate share of combined arms brigades, tactical aviation brigades, large surface combatants, or submarines (see **Figure 6**). In addition, while some of the PLA's most advanced assets have initially been deployed in the Eastern Theater, they have often become widely allocated across the country. Under Xi, for instance, the J-20 has been based in all five theaters.³⁹ Catering to the interests of the theaters in these respects served two mutually reinforcing purposes. The first is maintaining readiness across China's broad periphery, which is consistent with Xi's

FIGURE 6 Number of major combat units by theater (2023)



SOURCE: *The Military Balance* (London: IISS, 2023), 243–45.

NOTE: The principal surface combatants include aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and frigates. The Western and Central Theaters do not have a naval component. Figures do not include the military districts in western China that do not report to the Western Theater.

³⁹ Liu Xuanzun, “J-20 Fighter Jet Active in All Five Theater Commands: Delegate,” *Global Times*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202210/1277527.shtml>. Previously, the Nanjing MR was the first to receive the Su-27 in 1992, but the Su-27s (and subsequent Su-30s) proliferated across other military regions in the next decade. See Rick Kamer, “Flankers of the People’s Liberation Army,” *Chinese Military Update* 1, no. 7 (2004): 5–6. Similarly, all three fleets possess the latest (Type-052D) destroyer.

frequent admonition that the PLA needs to be able to respond to threats in “all strategic directions.” It also ensures that his senior advisers have broad experience.⁴⁰ The second purpose is satisfying the interests of key subgroups within the PLA when tough choices did not need to be made.

PLA Institutional Interests

The final way that Xi Jinping pursued stability in a time of change was by preserving the broad parameters of civil-military relations. Since Deng Xiaoping, there has been an implicit bargain, which Western scholars have labeled “conditional compliance,” in which the PLA defers to the party’s leadership in return for the resources it needs for modernization and autonomy over its own affairs.⁴¹ This has allowed the PLA to focus on becoming a professional warfighting force while avoiding challenges to the regime. Only when there was a split in the leadership in the early 2000s—with Jiang Zemin remaining as CMC chairman and Hu Jintao being promoted to party general-secretary—were there serious questions about PLA compliance.⁴² Xi preserved this bargain by limiting military influence in civilian decision-making while approving large budget increases and avoiding external intervention in PLA business.

In contrast with Mao’s behavior during the Cultural Revolution, Xi did not provide the PLA a greater degree of influence in elite politics. At the highest level, he did not return a military officer to the Politburo Standing Committee (whose last military member, Liu Huaqing, retired in 1997). The two CMC vice chairmen remained as ex officio members of the 24-person Politburo, but no others were added. Xi kept a relatively consistent share of PLA representatives on the lower-level Central Committee—22% of the 204-person body in 2022. There was also consistency in PLA discourse in elite politics: military representatives to the National People’s Congress under

⁴⁰ Joel Wuthnow, “System Overload: Can China’s Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?” Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 15, 2020, 11.

⁴¹ James Mulvenon, “China: Conditional Compliance,” in *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 317–35; Ellis Joffe, “Shaping China’s Next Generation of Military Leaders: For What Kind of Army?” in *The “People” in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2008), 379–82; and You Ji, “Fragmented Party Control of the Gun: Civil-Military Relations in China,” in *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard (London: Routledge, 2016), 216–34.

⁴² Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, “Civil-Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA’s Role in Elite Politics,” INSS, *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 2, 2010, 26–27.

Xi echoed their predecessors by focusing on political loyalty and military professionalism, avoiding encroachment into domestic policy issues.⁴³

However, Xi offered the PLA many of the same benefits as his predecessors in return for political deference. One way he did this was by sustaining robust defense budgets despite declining real GDP growth and the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic. The official military budget grew from under \$200 billion at the start of Xi's tenure to nearly \$300 billion in 2022, with annual growth of around 7% since 2016 (see **Figure 7**). This budget does not include categories such as defense research and development, paramilitary forces, and foreign weapons purchases, which collectively add an estimated \$60 billion.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, military spending did not grow as a share of overall government expenditures. This is a sign that, due to increasing government revenue, the party saw no reason to make different choices between guns and butter and gave the military the resources it needed to modernize.

Another part of the bargain was that the PLA continued to exercise a high degree of autonomy over its own affairs.⁴⁵ This did not mean that it could continue to conduct business as usual. The anticorruption campaign and a new lineup of supervisory organs not only enhanced Xi's control but also reflected his expectation for the PLA to become cleaner and more professional. This obviously damaged the interests of those who profited from those schemes, even as Xi's family continued to benefit and as some corrupt schemes apparently continued within the PLA itself.⁴⁶ The arrangement, however, was that tighter enforcement would be pursued internally. There is no evidence that civilian authorities were able to scrutinize activities within the PLA and mete out punishment to the offenders.⁴⁷ Neither did Xi bring

⁴³ Zhifan Luo, "Politicalization or Professionalism? A Case Study of the Military's Discourse in China," *Armed Forces and Society* 48, no. 1 (2020): 185–204.

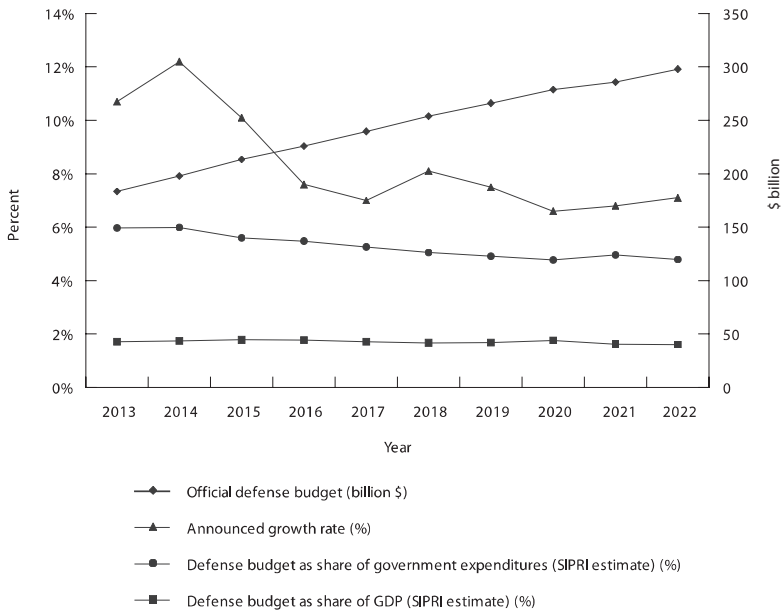
⁴⁴ Nan Tian and Fei Su, *A New Estimate of China's Military Expenditure* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). For background, see Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, "Demystifying China's Defence Spending: Less Mysterious in the Aggregate," *China Quarterly* 216 (2013): 805–30; and Phillip C. Saunders, testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington D.C., June 20, 2019.

⁴⁵ Andrew Scobell regards this as so critical that it is the "number one rule" of civil-military relations in China. Andrew Scobell, "Civil-Military 'Rules of the Game' on the Eve of China's 19th Party Congress," National Bureau of Asian Research, Brief, October 2017, 5, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/PLA_brief_scobell_101117.pdf.

⁴⁶ Desmond Shum, *Red Roulette: An Insider's Story of Wealth, Power, Corruption, and Vengeance in Today's China* (New York: Scribner, 2021).

⁴⁷ Instead, CMC Discipline Inspection Commission secretary-general Zhang Shengmin, who was appointed to the CMC in 2017, served as the PLA's representative on the Central Discipline Inspection Commission and was responsible for inspecting PLA party committees. For background, see Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, "The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 571–73.

FIGURE 7 PRC defense budget growth (2013–22)



SOURCE: CSIS, China Power Project; and SIPRI, Military Expenditure Database.

in civilian party cadres to enforce his dictates⁴⁸ or turn to civilian advisers to examine military spending.⁴⁹ As in the past, the PLA policed itself and decided how to implement the CMC chairman's vision.

Autonomy meant freedom not only from civilian scrutiny but also from forced cooperation with the Chinese government.⁵⁰ Military-civilian stove-piping had long plagued the Chinese system, driven by the PLA's desire not to share information or otherwise cooperate with bureaucratically junior

⁴⁸ Xi did bring in a single civilian aide, Zhong Shaojun, who was given a military rank of senior colonel and later elevated to director of the CMC General Office, but this was not surprising. Jiang and Hu also put their own civilian mishu into similar roles. Edward Wong, "The 'Gatekeeper' in Xi Jinping's Inner Circle," *New York Times*, September 30, 2015, <https://archive.nytimes.com/sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/the-gatekeeper-in-xi-jinpings-inner-circle>.

⁴⁹ The U.S. parallel to such a move would be Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's reliance on civilian accountants to scrutinize the military services' budgets.

⁵⁰ An alternative path to reform would have been to place the PLA under government and National People's Congress supervision; instead, the PLA remained a party-army.

agencies such as the Foreign Ministry.⁵¹ A notable change at the outset of Xi's tenure was the creation of a Central National Security Commission. Its purpose, in the eyes of some Chinese observers, was to bridge the civil-military divide by strengthening interagency strategic planning and crisis response.⁵² Yet those expectations were dashed when the commission failed to adopt a strong external role, and crises continued to be handled by the individual bureaucracies.⁵³ In retrospect, that failure can be explained by Xi's deference to the PLA's institutional interest in autonomy, which was necessary to gain its acquiescence in his agenda to push through once-in-a-generation reforms.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's strategy to accumulate the authority and support within the PLA he would need to undertake major reforms was not only or even primarily the result of coercion. The anticorruption campaign, cult of personality, and increasing internal supervision were distinctive tools that were helpful in removing sources of opposition at the outset of the reform and deterring organized resistance to Xi's leadership. Yet they are insufficient to explain the broad support Xi has enjoyed during his tenure. Of greater utility are the traditions that he did not break—such as respecting long-standing promotion and retirement norms, dividing his attention and material resources between the theaters, and upholding both sides of the civil-military bargain that had been in place since the 1980s—and the side payments that he offered to the “losers,” especially the outgoing officers and the army as an institution. In short, Xi needed buy-in from the PLA officer corps and the stability provided by these efforts to pursue the disruptive changes he sought for the PLA.

Bringing these approaches into the picture has four implications for party-army relations in the remainder of Xi's tenure and beyond. First, there is a greater level of stability between the civilian leadership and the military than would be suggested by a preoccupation with coercive instruments. There may be lingering resentment from those forced to abandon corrupt

⁵¹ Thomas J. Christensen, “More Actors, Less Coordination? New Challenges for the Leaders of a Rising China,” in *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes It and How Is It Made?* ed. Gilbert Rozman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21–38.

⁵² Joel Wuthnow, “China's New ‘Black Box’: Problems and Prospects for the Central National Security Commission,” *China Quarterly* 232 (2017): 886–903.

⁵³ Author's discussions with a PLA interlocutor, May 2023.

schemes or give up personal privileges, but most officers have benefited from predictable career advancement as well as large pay raises and other benefits reforms.⁵⁴ The PLA as an institution has also been protected from invasive outside supervision while being granted ever-increasing budgets, despite an economic slowdown. These measures likely support contentment. Satisfaction with his leadership means that Xi is unlikely to face the same instability in military governance that leaders in other autocratic systems have faced, such as Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 or Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. Stability is likely to continue if Xi's successor similarly adheres to the interests of military subordinates.

Second, Xi's need to find a *modus vivendi* with the PLA could reduce the prospects for deeper reforms. Retaining senior PLA officers because they waited their turn deprives Xi of the opportunity to accelerate the promotion of a younger generation of officers more attuned to modern operations or "mavericks" known for their disruptive thinking rather than their conformity. Similarly, respecting a tradition in which the top positions are mostly held by the army reduces the prospects for a true joint staff equivalent involving equity among the services. There is also the question of whether Xi has reached the limit of his ability to reform the army. He probably expended political capital in asking the army to become the "biggest loser" of reforms and could face resistance if he seeks further cuts that are seen as favoring the interests of the other services. In these respects, it is questionable whether Xi will be able to take credit for breaking the "big army" mentality that runs deep in the PLA's organizational culture.⁵⁵

Third, preserving PLA autonomy comes at the expense of civilian oversight and interagency cooperation. Xi has regularly extolled the virtues of military professionalism, but maintaining the tenets of "conditional compliance" means that there are limits on the extent to which he can expose the military to external supervision. The reform of the CMC bureaucracy was a useful step in corralling the bureaucracy but left the PLA a self-policing organization with no significant external checks and balances. Those might have included supervision by the equivalent of civilian political appointees, the civilian discipline inspection system, outside legal authorities, or the National People's Congress—that is, the tools that strengthen civilian

⁵⁴ On the personal privileges, see James Mulvenon, "'Comrade, Where's My Military Car?' Xi Jinping's Throwback Mass-Line Campaign to Curb Military Corruption," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2013, 1–5.

⁵⁵ "习近平: 构建中国特色现代军事力量体系" [Xi Jinping: Build a Modern Military Force System with Chinese Characteristics], *People's Daily*, August 15, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0815/c164113-25470901.html>.

oversight of Western militaries.⁵⁶ The PLA also reorganized its internal budgeting and financial supervision process but did not accept greater external oversight or increased transparency.⁵⁷

One ramification is continued corruption. In July 2023, it came as a surprise to many observers that Xi was forced to fire the leadership of the Rocket Force and the defense minister under a cloud of corruption in the acquisition system.⁵⁸ A focus on his anticorruption campaign and control of appointments would have suggested that such incidents were unlikely a decade into his tenure. Yet from the perspective of institutional bargaining, in which Xi needed to cede some autonomy to the PLA in return for general support for his leadership and agenda, the persistence of these cases is more readily explainable.⁵⁹ Continuing to allow the PLA to function as a self-policing organization, with only intermittent intervention by Xi through the “CMC chairman responsibility system,” could breed similar cases of noncompliance with laws and party rules. It could also frustrate a successor (likely a civilian party cadre) who would need to respect these traditions to cement his own authority.

Another result of excessive autonomy is poor civil-military coordination. Bureaucratic stove-piping can explain the repetition of cases in which the military did not appear to share information or deconflict its activities with the party center or civilian ministries, resulting in embarrassing situations for civilian leaders. These incidents include the inaugural test of the J-20 fighter that clouded Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s visit to Beijing in January 2011 and apparently took Hu by surprise,⁶⁰ the September 2014 Sino-Indian border standoff that took place prior to Xi’s visit to New Delhi, the 2017 standoff involving Chinese troops in Doklam (which happened as China was trying to peel New Delhi away from a revived Quad), and the February 2023 spy balloon incursion prior to Secretary of State Antony

⁵⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁵⁷ Wu Ti, “新军改进程中的国防预算决策研究” [Defense Expenditure Policy Research in the Process of New Military Reforms], *Financial Management* 29 (2018): 153–57.

⁵⁸ Former defense minister Li Shangfu had previously served as director of the CMC Equipment Development Department. Christian Shepherd, “Chinese Defense Minister Removed after Just Seven Months in Latest Purge,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/li-shangfu-china-defense-purge>.

⁵⁹ Joel Wuthnow, “Why Xi Jinping Doesn’t Trust His Own Military,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/why-xi-jinping-doesnt-trust-his-own-military>.

⁶⁰ Bob Davis, “Robert Gates on the Military’s Relationship with China,” *Wire China*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.thewirechina.com/2023/11/19/robert-gates-on-the-militarys-relationship-with-china>.

Blinken's visit to Beijing.⁶¹ The latter program may have been known to Xi, but the specifics not reported to civilian aides. Similar incidents are likely to reoccur if the party-army bargain is maintained.

Finally, the PLA will likely be adequately resourced for its modernization milestones. China's economic headwinds have raised questions about potential impacts on the PLA, yet a combination of Xi's assessment of a worsening security environment and a political desire not to alienate the PLA by threatening its resources means that cuts are unlikely. Recent evidence suggests that in most respects the PLA continues on an accelerated path toward the modernization of its conventional forces, including larger shares of advanced naval and air force capabilities, as well as its nuclear buildup.⁶² Both are essential in meeting Xi's goal of improving the PLA's capability to conduct major operations against Taiwan by 2027.⁶³ Nevertheless, while modernization will continue apace, Xi will have to wrestle with other aspects of party-army relations, such as corruption and resistance to deeper reforms, that could limit the PLA's ability to "fight and win wars" and thus influence his confidence in the armed forces.

⁶¹ Tyler Jost, "The Bad Advice Plaguing Beijing's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/bad-advice-plaguing-beijings-foreign-policy>.

⁶² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023), <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THEPEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

⁶³ Brian Hart, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Matthew P. Funairole, "China's 2027 Goal Marks the PLA's Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 26, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization>; and LaGrone, "Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines efforts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to transition its national defense mobilization system (NDMS) from a vehicle for emergency response and economic subsidization to a war-oriented system.

MAIN ARGUMENT

PRC leaders have twice reoriented the NDMS toward different strategic ends. The system initially embodied the “people’s war,” leveraging resources across the whole of Chinese society to enable military operations. In the mid to late 2000s, its priorities shifted toward economic development through subsidization and domestic emergency response. Yet the preponderance of these efforts had limited value for wartime mobilization. In 2015 the PRC initiated a series of reforms to prioritize war mobilization capabilities. Key among these reforms is the assumption by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of control over PRC government mobilization planning and support for the military. Reforms further standardized mobilization structures at all levels of government, potentially streamlining mobilization coordination between the government and military. While actual capability improvements remain to be seen, these reforms could effectively free the military from many traditional mobilization responsibilities to enable greater focus on war preparedness.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- NDRC leadership is likely to encounter significant challenges in posturing China’s resources to support PLA requirements for large-scale combat operations, given the competing requirements to recover and develop the nation’s economy.
- The PRC could seek to portray its NDMS as comprehensive, efficient, and effectively oriented to support wartime operations—regardless of the system’s true readiness—as a deterrent against the U.S.
- PLA leaders’ requirement that the system become war-oriented suggests that mobilization activities will be a key indicator of Chinese Communist Party leaders’ intent or willingness to fight a costly war.

China's Transition to a War-Oriented National Defense Mobilization System

Erin Richter and Howard Wang

The national defense mobilization system (NDMS) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is currently undergoing its second reform in two decades as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders reconceptualize a system oriented toward supporting People's Liberation Army (PLA) operations in a major war. This transition toward a war-oriented system faces significant challenges from a legacy of prior NDMS reforms—undertaken in the heyday of China's economic growth—that made the NDMS a vehicle for subsidizing civilian construction projects in pursuit of economic growth. Ongoing NDMS reforms continue to struggle against this legacy, particularly given the local economic conditions from lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The measures outlined by CCP leaders to achieve a war-oriented NDMS draw on the same resources necessary for local economic recovery.

This chapter proceeds in six sections. The first section introduces the NDMS and its legacy from Mao Zedong's way of war. The second section details the system's first transition toward focusing on economic construction and its resultant mission to emphasize subsidizing civilian economic construction at the expense of warfighting. The third section then highlights CCP leaders' efforts to reorient the NDMS to warfighting missions as part of the 2016 PLA reforms, while the fourth section discusses its long-standing deficiencies, and the fifth section outlines specific actions taken since 2016 to strengthen national defense mobilization mechanisms. The sixth and final section forecasts additional reforms and their prospects for improving wartime capabilities, given competing demands for economic development.

Erin Richter is a Senior Analyst within the U.S. Department of Defense.

Howard Wang is a Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

The views expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the U.S. government, the RAND Corporation, or its research sponsors, clients, or grantors.

The “People’s War” Orientation of National Defense Mobilization

The CCP has historically employed the concept of national defense mobilization (国防动员) to supplement its armed forces with civilian manpower and materiel. National defense mobilization is a sweeping concept that attempts to commit whole-of-society efforts to supporting the PLA and its operations. To facilitate this, CCP officials created the National Defense Mobilization Commission (NDMC), a coordinating organization jointly managed by the State Council and Central Military Commission (CMC), with most operations being conducted in provincial and municipal offices through local NDMC offices.¹

From its inception through the early 2000s, the NDMS was oriented toward the Maoist legacy of war. National defense mobilization was an expression of “people’s war” (人民战争), leveraging resources across the whole of Chinese society to enable and sustain the CCP’s defense policy and military operations, particularly in wartime.² In 2005, then CMC vice chairman and minister of national defense General Cao Gangchuan appealed to this legacy and the NDMS’s warfighting orientation in a *Qiushi* article, writing that “it is necessary to strengthen national defense mobilization construction...[and] further improve the national defense mobilization system” to strengthen China’s ability to prosecute a people’s war.³ Cao was explicit about the CMC’s expectation that the NDMS enhance the PLA’s warfighting capabilities. In a 2003 speech at a meeting of the Beijing Military Region’s NDMC, Cao explained that “a successful NDMS” will “enhance the PLA’s operational capabilities, transform war potential into war power, and enhance the PLA’s overall deterrence and combat capabilities.”⁴

¹ For more on the NDMS, see Erin Richter and Benjamin Rosen, “China’s National Defense Mobilization System: Foundation for Military Logistics,” in *PLA Logistics and Sustainment: PLA Conference 2022*, ed. George R. Shatzer and Roger D. Cliff (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2023), 33–74.

² Mao Zedong, “On Protracted War,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1965); and Ren Min, 国防动员学 [The Science of National Defense Mobilization] (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2008).

³ Cao Gangchuan, “伟大的历史壮举 不朽的爱国篇章” [Great Historic Feat, an Immortal Patriotic Chapter], Embassy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Republic of India, August 3, 2005, http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/ssygd/jnkrzz/200508/t20050803_2359138.htm.

⁴ “曹刚川强调：把国防动员各项建设提高到新水平” [Cao Gangchuan Emphasizes: Raise the Construction of National Defense Mobilization to a New Level], Sina, August 7, 2003, <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-08-07/0758520237s.shtml>.

Reorienting the NDMS to Domestic Emergency Response and Economic Construction

Shifting from Preparing for War to Economic Development

In the mid to late 2000s, PLA and CCP discourse around the NDMS clearly indicated a shift in priorities away from warfighting toward economic development and emergency response.⁵ In 2007, the deputy director of the PLA National Defense University National Defense Mobilization Teaching and Research Section, Xu Kui, and a researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Science (AMS), Cao Yanzhong, published an article explaining that the NDMS's "focus had shifted from preparations for war to instead combine long-term development with emergency preparedness." They suggested that the key driver of this shift was the growing prioritization of economic growth, stating that over the mid to late 2000s, laws and regulations governing the NDMS had shifted "from simply serving for war needs to serving both national defense and economic construction."⁶

CCP leaders likely directed this shift to align NDMS work with peacetime conditions. Party leaders continued to assess that China enjoyed a "period of strategic opportunity" to grow its economy and, by extension, its comprehensive national power.⁷ CCP leaders likely viewed the NDMS's economic construction work as an opportunity to align military and civilian efforts to advance China's overall development during a period of permissive security environments.

Provincial implementation revealed nonstandard approaches to the NDMS's shift to prioritize economic construction, and several provincial and municipal leaders responsible for implementing changes in mobilization work wrote openly about their new responsibilities. Both Chengde mayor Zhang Gujiang and Xuhou mayor Cao Xinping, the leaders of their respective municipal NDMCs, publicly announced that their cities must

⁵ CCP leader discussion over this reorientation likely began as early as 2000, when drafting of the 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law began. Li Yun and Yang Lei, "国家国防动员委员会有关负责人就国防动员法答问" [Relevant Person in Charge of the National Defense Mobilization Commission Answers Questions about the National Defense Mobilization Law], Xinhua, February 27, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100305101333/http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-02/27/content_1543167.htm.

⁶ Xu Kui and Cao Yanzhong, "新中国国防动员体制的历史演变" [The Historical Evolution of New China's National Defense Mobilization System], *Military History*, no. 2, 2007.

⁷ Jiang Zemin, "全面建设小康社会, 开创中国特色社会主义事业新局面——在中国共产党第十六次全国代表大会上的报告" [Build a Well-Off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—Report to the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], Xinhua, November 8, 2002; and Hu Jintao, "继续抓住和用好重要战略机遇期" [Continue to Hold Fast to and Use Well the Important Period of Strategic Opportunity], in *Selected Works of Hu Jintao*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016), 436.

“incorporate national defense construction into their plans for economic and social development.”⁸ Yet this guidance was not yet standardized at the provincial levels, and the leaders led different resulting programs. Cao emphasized employing civilian talent in the militia and reserve forces, leading the municipal military subdistrict to establish talent reserve databases and leverage them to create units for specialized disaster response functions such as chemical defense and firefighting reconnaissance.⁹ Zhang emphasized city design for “peacetime-wartime integration, military-civil fusion, and residing the military within the civilian.”¹⁰ Under his policy, this entailed building civilian stockpiles of critical materials, considering troop mobility when designing traffic networks, and ensuring connectivity between military and civilian crisis management centers.

CCP leadership standardized guidance for NDMS reorientation with the passage of the 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law (NDML) and other national-level regulations, which collectively demonstrated the party’s perceptions that NDMS activities were subordinate to China’s broader economic policies. The NDML heavily emphasized the process for incorporating national defense requirements into economic construction projects, in which the PLA proposed requirements for civilian government review.¹¹ Officials from the National People’s Congress (NPC) and NDMC General Office similarly reiterated that civilian governments held approval authority over PLA requests, in line with a State Council directive to “subordinate national defense and military building in service of the big picture of economic construction.”¹² Preparation for war became a diminishing priority subordinated to economic growth.

⁸ “张古江：努力推进我市国防动员建设创新发展” [Zhang Gujiang: Strive to Promote the Innovative Development of National Defense Mobilization Construction in Our City], *Chengde Daily*, September 24, 2008, https://www.chengde.gov.cn/art/2008/9/24/art_360_79734.html; and Hu Jiayou, Niu Qinghuai, and Liu Peisheng, “谱写尚武拥军新乐章” [Compose a New Symphony to Promote Martial Spirit and Embrace the Military], *People’s Frontline*, May 21, 2009, http://www.fqjw.com/News_View.asp?NewsID=99.

⁹ Hu, Niu, and Liu, “谱写尚武拥军新乐章.”

¹⁰ “张古江：努力推进我市国防动员建设创新发展”

¹¹ “中华人民共和国国防动员法 (全文)” [PRC National Defense Mobilization Law (Full Text)], *Xinhua*, February 26, 2010, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2010/02-26/2141911.shtml>.

¹² State Council Research Office (PRC), “如何在新的历史起点上推进国防和军队现代化建设?” [How to Promote the Modernization of National Defense and the Armed Forces at a New Historical Starting Point?], March 19, 2008, http://www.gov.cn/2008gzbg/content_924089.htm; Liang Guanglie, “关于‘中华人民共和国国防动员法 (草案)’的说明” [Explaining the “PRC National Defense Mobilization Law (Draft)”], National People’s Congress (PRC), May 7, 2010, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/huiyi/lftz/gfdyf/2010-05/07/content_1867628.htm; and Li and Yang, “国家国防动员委员会有关负责人就国防动员法答问.”

National Defense Mobilization as Subsidization

Shifting language in China's defense white papers revealed that in the early 2000s the missions of the NDMS increasingly emphasized subsidizing economic construction as national defense and warfighting declined in priority. Each defense white paper published between 2002 and 2008 described an evolving vision of mobilizing the national economy, trending toward a policy of subsidizing civilian ventures with military resources under the auspices of peacetime mobilization work advancing national defense. According to the 2002 and 2004 white papers, mobilizing the national economy primarily entailed systematically aligning work such that China's economic growth would also enhance its national defense.¹³ Neither white paper specified discrete tasks to advance these objectives; the relevant discussions instead emphasized the overarching logic of China's NDMS to meet the needs of national security.

The language of the 2006 defense white paper shifted toward subsidizing civil construction as a component of national defense mobilization. It explains that one of the "basic policies for the mobilization of the national economy" includes recasting economic mobilization as a "bridge between China's economic development and available national defense capacities, striking a balance between military and civilian needs and between peacetime and wartime needs in economic restructuring."¹⁴ It also argues that, under the guidance of national defense mobilization, China's economic growth increases the national defense capacity. As such, economic construction is mobilization work: "in building information and communications systems, highways, railways, bridges, tunnels, airports, ports, docks and major urban infrastructures, China pays close attention to the requirements of national defense, and ensures that peacetime needs and wartime needs are properly balanced."¹⁵ The described projects are all fixed asset investments, a traditional driver of China's economic growth and a compelling financial opportunity for provincial mobilization departments and PLA servicemembers alike.¹⁶ These financial incentives likely captured

¹³ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2002* (Beijing, December 2002), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20021209/index.htm>; and State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing, December 2004), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20041227/index.htm>.

¹⁴ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2006* (Beijing, December 2006), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/194421.htm>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ World Bank Group, *Innovative China: New Drivers of Growth* (World Bank: Washington, D.C., 2019), 4–6, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/833871568732137448/innovative-china-new-drivers-of-growth>.

significant aspects of the NDMS and motivated the use of mobilization as a vehicle for subsidizing investment-led growth in China's provinces in lieu of enhancing national defense.

The growing role of the NDMS in civilian construction was part of a broader transition throughout the PLA. The 2008 defense white paper includes a section on "Participating In and Supporting National Construction," trumpeting that the PLA and People's Armed Police had committed 14 million workdays since 2006 to support over 200 key construction projects in energy, transportation, hydropower, and communications.¹⁷ This iteration notably does not include the extensive discussion of national defense mobilization missions found in the 2002, 2004, and 2006 white papers. Instead, it notes China's efforts to establish an efficient national defense mobilization mechanism before stipulating that the PLA "subordinates its development to overall national construction" and "supports local economic and social development."¹⁸

Such shifting language in China's defense white papers reveals what Xu and Cao meant in their explanation that the focus of the NDMS had "shifted from preparations for war to instead combine long-term [economic] development with emergency preparedness."¹⁹ Between 2002 and 2008, Chinese policy and objectives for mobilizing the national economy transitioned away from the initial goal of planning economic construction in a way that serves national defense. Warfighting and its necessary preparations held a diminishing role in NDMS missions. By the end of the decade, the NDMS embraced a policy of subsidizing civilian growth as a subordinate to China's investment-led growth model.

Toward a War-Oriented NDMS

Reorienting the NDMS toward Warfighting

In 2013, CCP leadership discourse regarding the PRC's security environment shifted from strategic opportunity to strategic competition among powerful nations, most importantly the United States, as well as a clash between opposing ideological systems.²⁰ Recognizing that this shift

¹⁷ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2008* (Beijing, January 2009), http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7060059.htm.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Xu and Cao "新中国国防动员体制的历史演变," 19.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023), 6.

in the security environment could pit China against the United States and other regional states in a military confrontation, CCP leaders reevaluated NDMS priorities. In a 2015 speech, Xi Jinping indicated that planned NDMS reforms were in part motivated by what he assessed to be an “increasingly profound and complex international situation.”²¹ Though economic construction remained an important part of the NDMS through its reform process, CCP leaders likely concluded that their security environment was no longer permissive enough for the NDMS to emphasize economic growth at the expense of warfighting support.

Speaking at the first conference on CMC reforms in 2015, Xi flagged NDMS reform as part of the PLA “above the neck” leadership command system reforms, which officially launched the following year.²² CCP and PLA leaders likely had not yet decided on the totality of reforms to the NDMS at that time. On March 25, 2016, the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) Party Committee assembled and noted that the new requirements posed by the PLA’s 2016 reform goals required that the NDMS reorient itself toward “a new system, new functions, and a new long-term mission.” The committee emphasized the need to “renew lines of thinking and conscientiously transform ideas to fit a transforming [national defense mobilization] system” without presenting a vision for that transformation.²³

The party clarified its intent for such reforms in a joint Xinhua–PLA *Daily* article published in October 2017. The piece appeals to the NDMS’s warfighting legacy, writing that the “light of people’s war glows in the light of a new era, and the construction of national defense mobilization has entered a new historical stage.” It explains what sort of NDMS should be the object of PLA construction work in this new era: a successful reform will “take enhancing the ability to win wars as the goal, closely focus on the

²¹ Cao Zhi, Li Xuanliang, and Wang Shibin, “习近平:全面实施改革强军战略 坚定不移走中国特色强军之路” [Xi Jinping: Comprehensively Implement the Strategy of Reforming and Strengthening the Military, Unswervingly Follow the Road of Strengthening the Military with Chinese Characteristics], Xinhua, November 26, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20180612225338/http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-11/26/c_1117274869.htm.

²² Ibid.

²³ Fei Shiting, Ou Can, and Liu Guoshun, “军委国防动员部下设民兵预备役局边防局等单位” [CMC National Defense Mobilization Department Has Subordinate Militia Reserve Bureau, Border Defense Bureau, and Others], Xinhua, April 13, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-04/13/c_128890214.htm.

requirements of winning information warfare, and make solid preparations for military mobilization to ensure rapid and effective mobilization.”²⁴

In the following years, PLA media and officials responsible for national defense mobilization emphasized reorienting toward warfighting, often while also acknowledging the system's importance to China's economic activities. In 2018, the deputy director of the Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Committee, Jin Zhuanglong, wrote in *Qiushi* that the goal of building the NDMS takes “economic and social development as the basis and ensuring victory in informationized local wars as the core” to ultimately “enhance peacetime-warfare integration.”²⁵ In 2021, the secretary of the Guiyang Provincial Party Committee, Chen Yiqin, noted in a speech that, pursuant to requirements from the CMC, NDMD, and Southern Theater Command Party Committee, the NDMS's “war preparation mission has been strengthened,” and achievements in the system have been made contributing to the province's social and economic development.²⁶ In 2022, *National Defense* ran a full-page advertisement celebrating the contribution of ten Chinese individuals to the NDMS and explained that “national defense mobilization is born of war, it marches toward war, and the master it serves is war. Ensuring victory in war is the mission the NDMS has chosen for itself.”²⁷ Without abandoning their continued obligations in economic construction, NDMS implementors were clearly signaling that the longtime policy of prioritizing economic construction over warfighting had come to an end.

After the 20th Party Congress in late 2022, PLA media began coalescing around the line of needing a “war-oriented national defense mobilization” system. The *Chinese Militia* editorial board wrote, “from beginning to end, the NDMS in the new era never lost sight of preparing for war, the strong enemy, or victory in battle; it has assumed the responsibility for war-oriented

²⁴ Li Xuanliang et al., “谱写国防动员建设新篇章——以习近平同志为核心的党中央领导和推进强军兴军纪实之九” [Writing a New Chapter in National Defense Mobilization Construction: Nine Documents on the Leadership of the Party Central Committee with Xi Jinping at the Core on Promoting a Strong and Prosperous Military], Xinhua, October 7, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-10/07/c_1121767974.htm.

²⁵ Jin Zhuanglong, “开创新时代军民融合深度发展新局面” [Create a New Situation for In-Depth Development of Military-Civil Fusion in the New Era], Xinhua, July 16, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-07/16/c_1123133733.htm.

²⁶ Xu Shaoting, “谌贻琴：奋力推进贵州国防动员工作高质量发展” [Chen Yiqin: Strive to Promote the High-Quality Development of National Defense Mobilization in Guizhou], Xinhua, January 8, 2021, http://m.xinhuanet.com/gz/2021-01/08/c_1126959685.htm.

²⁷ Mo Fuchun and Wang Lingshuo, “动员大舞台 奋斗天地宽” [Mobilizing on the Grand Stage, Struggling across the Breadth of Heaven and Earth], *PLA Daily*, September 29, 2022, http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-09/29/content_325024.htm.

national defense mobilization construction.”²⁸ In an NDMD meeting to study the lessons of the 20th Party Congress, NDMD director and NDMC secretary general Lieutenant General Liu Faqing delivered a speech urging the importance of “strengthening the alignment of warfighting organs with war preparations and returning the main part of [our] work to the correct path of mobilization preparation” for war or emergency.²⁹ Following these documents, PLA media has repeatedly emphasized the “war orientation” of national defense mobilization work.³⁰

An Emerging War-Oriented Mission Set

PLA discussions regarding the specific missions that a war-oriented NDMS should be able to perform remain ongoing. While no single source is authoritative, some recent academic research and media articles offer insights. Proposed missions range from a continuous deepening of the NDMS into civilian economic development—albeit after rebalancing priorities between security and development—to a list of tasks that would support, sustain, and enable PLA operations in a prospective great-power war.

One of the most conservative proposals was offered in 2017 when AMS researcher Xu Peng argued that the NDMS should synthesize the contradiction between “the new requirements for national defense and military construction” resulting from an ongoing revolution in military affairs and the “relatively limited resource support that will exist for a certain period of time.” According to Xu, China should “accelerate construction of a modern NDMS with Chinese characteristics” that takes “mobilization as the traction, economic and social development as support, and ensuring victory in modern war as the core—taking emergency response and

²⁸ “奏响建设打仗型国防动员最强音” [A Clarion Call for War-Oriented National Defense Mobilization Construction], *Chinese Militia* 8 (2022), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/zgmb/2022nd8q/jsy_242650/10196251.html.

²⁹ Han Dezhong and Liu Dechao, “军委国防动员部组织机关和直附属单位 2022 年度总结表彰和学习贯彻 党的二十大精神体会汇报交流” [Organs of the Organization Department of the National Defense Mobilization Department of the Central Military Commission and Units Directly Subordinate to It: 2022 Annual Summary Recognition and Learning Implementation, Report and Exchange on the Spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], *Chinese Militia*, 2023, http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/zgmb/2023nd2q/bkyw_244656/16207848.html. “Mobilization preparation” [动员准备] as defined in the 2011 *Junyue* refers to peacetime preparations for rapid and effective implementation of national defense mobilization as precaution against war or disaster. Academy of Military Science All-Military Military Terminology Committee, 军语 [Junyu] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Publishing House, 2011), 36–37.

³⁰ See, for example, Mo and Wang, “动员大舞台 奋斗天地宽”; and Chen Lixin, “构建打仗型国防动员新格局” [Build a New Layout of a War-Oriented National Defense Mobilization System], *People's Daily*, January 31, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/1/2023-01/31/07/2023013107_.pdf.pdf.

stability maintenance and service construction as supplemental tasks.”³¹ This proposed direction is purely additive, accepting no trade-offs between subsidization and warfighting. It maintained that future NDMS missions should not abandon the emergency response or civilian development tasks it accepted under the policy of subsidization but should additionally restore warfighting support as the system’s main task. Xu’s long-term vision for the NDMS requires that by 2050 the system be fully capable of “ensuring victory in informationized wars, responding to emergencies, and serving economic and social development.”³²

Major General An Weiping, then Northern Theater Command deputy chief of staff and former director of the Shenyang Military Region Headquarters Mobilization Department, offered a more war-oriented mission set in 2019. He proposed his mission set in the AMS-published journal *National Defense*, arguing that the NDMS should focus on three major tasks: (1) mobilize civilian transportation to meet temporary surges in demand, (2) supplement PLA information operations, and (3) stopgap PLA maintenance personnel shortages.³³ “Mobilizing civilian transport” entails imposing military capacity standards on civilian trucks and roll-on/roll-off ships in peacetime, pre-positioning transportation assets in advance of a conflict, and deploying rapid response teams to conduct emergency repairs in transit during a conflict. Immediately following the outbreak of war, the NDMS may mobilize civilian transportation capacity to rapidly deploy and continue flowing forces to the front lines. “Supplementing PLA information operations” primarily entails integrating civilian reconnaissance assets (e.g., civil maritime domain awareness and emergency rescue) into military systems to fill gaps as PLA assets become degraded in a conflict. “Stopgapping PLA maintenance personnel shortages” acknowledges the PLA’s current “maintenance support capability for high-tech equipment is relatively weak,” requiring wartime mobilization of civilian professionals to maintain combat platforms and their digitized systems.

Another leading PLA officer suggested that deterrence should be a central mission for the NDMS. In March 2023, the deputy political commissar of the Shanghai Garrison organized directly under the CMC NDMD, Major General Wei Changjin, insisted that national defense mobilization would “have the function of strategic deterrence” in “great-

³¹ Xu Peng, “加强国防动员战略管理” [Strengthen the Strategic Management of National Defense Mobilization], *Chinese Public Administration* 386, no. 8 (2017): 119–20.

³² Ibid.

³³ An Weiping, “联合作战国防动员问题研究” [A Study on the National Defense Mobilization for Joint Operations], *National Defense*, no. 11 (2019): 38–41.

power games.”³⁴ He also insisted it was necessary for the PLA to “use various strategic means, including national defense mobilization and reserve forces, to build a strategic system that effectively deters and defeats the enemy.”³⁵ A January 2023 *PLA Daily* article made a similar case, arguing mobilization can deter the United States. The authors asserted that national defense mobilization “naturally has a strong deterrent function” and that it is a key component of China’s response to “the threat of ‘hybrid war’ launched by some hegemonic forces,” clearly indicating the United States and its allies.³⁶

Other PLA research further developed the linkage between the NDMS, a strategic system, and deterrence. According to researchers from the AMS War Studies Institute, constructing an integrated national strategic system would change the NDMS by “breaking the segmentation and ‘go it alone’ pattern between military and civilian,” integrating the currently scattered institutional setup, and producing an NDMS more responsive to central management. Moreover, the authors argued that national defense mobilization exhibited at sufficient scale could delay or deter enemy actions—including deterring the “strong enemy” of the United States—by demonstrating power and a will to fight.³⁷

Addressing Enduring Deficiencies in the NDMS

PLA and government officials have long noted deficiencies in the NDMS that restrict its effectiveness for wartime mobilization. Officials oft note that the existing legal framework does not establish a clear chain of command between military leaders and local authorities and that the system remains hampered by unclear definitions of powers and responsibilities for wartime

³⁴ Wang Lingshuo and Wang Fei, “共绘高质量发展新图景——军队代表委员热议加强国防动员和后备力量建设” [Collectively Drawing a New Picture of High-Quality Development: Military Representatives Passionately Discuss Strengthening National Defense Mobilization and Reserve Force Building], *National Defense*, March 10, 2023, http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/21/2023-03/10/01/2023031001_pdf.pdf.

³⁵ Wang and Wang, “共绘高质量发展新图景——军队代表委员热议加强国防动员和后备力量建设”; and Chai Hua et al., “八一勋章获得者、战斗英雄韦昌进——坚守阵地岂止在战场” [Wei Changjin, Recipient of the Bayi Medal and a War Hero—Standing His Ground Not Only on the Battlefield], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), August 22, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/xjdx/4892553.html.

³⁶ Yu Yunxian and Zhang Pengxuan, “奋力实现建军一百年奋斗目标系列谈 | 加强国防动员和后备力量建设” [A Discussion Series on Striving to Reach the Goal of the Military’s 100-Year Struggle | Strengthen National Defense Mobilization and Reserve Force Building], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), January 3, 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfdy/4929797.html>.

³⁷ Yu Sen, Wang Xiongchun, and Rao Kan, “依托一体化国家战略体系和能力提升国防动员能力” [Relying on Integrated National Strategic Systems and Capabilities to Enhance National Defense Mobilization Capabilities], *China Military Science*, no. 3 (2022): 72–73.

mobilization, inefficient operational support linkages, and insufficient connections between theater command and mobilization offices.³⁸ The 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law delegates the “organization, direction, and coordination” of national defense mobilization activities to military districts and national defense mobilization commissions, but the provincial and local governments manage the mobilization work. In practice, uncertain chains of command have resulted in bureaucratic infighting and inhibited the development of organizational experience.

PLA authors noted that mobilization offices throughout the system consisted primarily of personnel working mobilization duties as a collateral assignment. A small number of full-time cadres struggle to carry out mobilization tasks in competition with other government priorities.³⁹ In 2015, authors affiliated with the National Defense Mobilization Research and Development Center of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) complained that the scope of responsibilities for military commands and government organizations at every level was unclear, as was an understanding of how those responsibilities are altered in war or emergencies, resulting in both overlaps and gaps in mobilization actions.⁴⁰ In 2016 the CCP Central Committee, State Council, and CMC issued “Opinions on the Integrated Development of Economic Construction and National Defense Construction,” which serves as a programmatic document for integrated economic and national defense construction in the Xi Jinping era. It signaled the implementation of reforms to improve institutional mechanisms, policies and regulations, and development models so that “economic construction can provide stronger material foundation for national defense construction, and national defense construction will provide a stronger security guarantee for economic construction.”⁴¹

Between 2016 and 2020, the majority of NDMS reforms focused on the PLA’s internal mobilization structure, severing government control of

³⁸ Zheng Weibo, “探索构建融入联合作战指挥体系的省级国防动员指挥机构” [Explore the Construction of Provincial Defense Mobilization Command Structures That Are Integrated into the Joint Operational Command System], *National Defense*, July 1, 2018.

³⁹ Guo Zhonghou, Lu Chun, and Hu Yue, “国民经济动员球体报机制研究” [A Study of the Reporting Mechanisms for Submitting National Economic Mobilization Demands], *China Military Science*, October 20, 2019.

⁴⁰ “国民经济动员机制的深化路径研究” [Research on the Deepening Path of the National Economic Mobilization Mechanism], *Civil Service Journals Network*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.21ks.net/lunwen/guominjingjilunwen/29726.html>.

⁴¹ “中共中央 国务院 中央军委印发 ‘关于经济建设和国防建设融合发展的意见’” [The Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission Publish “Opinions on the Integrated Development of Economic Construction and National Defense Construction”], *State Council (PRC)*, Press Release, July 21, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-07/21/content_5093488.htm.

military units and associated resources at the provincial level and below and establishing new institutions tasked with strengthening the PRC's defense industrial base. However, through 2021, significant deficiencies within the NDMS restrained the confidence of NDMD officials tasked with planning and effectively implementing war mobilization actions. At the 31st meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th NPC in October 2021, the director of the NDMD at the time, Sheng Bin, proposed reforms to the NDMS to optimize the institutional framework, adjust the NDMC office structure, improve military-civilian connections for command and operation, and make overall improvements to the national defense policy system.⁴²

NDMS reforms accelerated shortly after the 20th NPC in October 2021. Xi's work report for the 20th NPC included the statement that "we will improve our national defense mobilization capacity and the development of our reserve forces, and we will modernize our border, coastal, and air defense.... We will consolidate and boost unity between the military and the government and between the military and the people."⁴³ These comments did not dramatically differ from those made by Hu Jintao in his 17th and 18th NPC work reports or even by Xi in his 19th NPC work report.⁴⁴ However, it appears that this time signaled changes would soon be implemented to streamline national defense mobilization mechanisms and establish a legislative mechanism to identify, prepare, and rapidly mobilize resources when required.

NDMS Reforms for a New Era

Since 2016, the PRC has created institutions and passed legislation intended to strengthen and clarify national defense mobilization authorities,

⁴² Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (PRC), "Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to Provisionally Adjust the Application of the Provisions of Relevant Laws during the Period of Deepening the Reform of National Defense Mobilization Systems," October 23, 2021, available at <https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=36703>.

⁴³ Xi Jinping, "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects," Embassy of the PRC in Malaysia, October 26, 2022, http://my.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792358.htm.

⁴⁴ Hu Jintao, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress: Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects," *China Daily*, October 24, 2007, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm; Hu Jintao, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th Party Congress," available from Embassy of the PRC in Nepal, November 18, 2012, http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/Diplomacy/201211/t20121118_1586373.htm; and "Xi Jinping's Work Report at the 19th Party Congress," *Xinhua*, October 18, 2017, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19pcnc/zb/kms/index.htm>.

streamline coordination mechanisms, and leverage the potential of China's professional and technical base to bolster the PLA with the necessary capabilities for future warfare.

National Defense Mobilization Department

In January 2016 the PLA publicly announced the establishment of the NDMD, which is responsible for national defense mobilization planning, coordination, reserve and militia force management, civil air defense and border defense operations, and command of provincial military districts.⁴⁵ The NDMD subsequently led the transformation of the military district system throughout China, standardizing structures, and implemented systems to manage national defense education, recruit and organize reserve and militia forces, and draw on the resource potential of China's provinces to support the operational requirements of the CMC and the theater commands.⁴⁶

The NDMD also assumed the role of leading the day-to-day activities of the national-level NDMC. The commission is a deliberative and planning body jointly led by the State Council and CMC and comprising senior party, military, and government officials responsible for developing and organizing national resources to support the PRC's national defense requirements.⁴⁷ In this role, the NDMD led initiatives to improve coordination across military and government institutions to develop manpower, infrastructure, material, and technological capacity necessary to support national defense. In order to support the planning and execution of national defense mobilization, the NDMD also led efforts to systematize and informatize government collection, aggregation, and reporting of data on mobilization potential.⁴⁸ While its efforts crossed a myriad of institutions, the NDMD worked most closely with the NDRC Economic and Defense Coordinated Development Department, which was the lead institution for economic mobilization within the NDMS, and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

⁴⁵ "China Releases Guideline on Military Reform," Xinhua, January 2, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-01/02/content_37439478.htm.

⁴⁶ Zheng, "探索构建融入联合作战指挥体系的省级国防动员指挥机构."

⁴⁷ Hua Hao, "改革开放以来我国国防动员法规建设的实践与启示" [Practice and Enlightenment of China's National Defense Mobilization Law Construction since Reform and Opening Up], *National Defense*, May 2019.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Ding Wenyuan, Wu Yong, and Jia Yong, "2021年全国国防动员潜力数据资料集中会" [The 2021 National Defense Mobilization Potential Data Collection Meeting], *China National Defense News*, July 9, 2021, https://www.81.cn/dy/2021-07/09/content_10060054.htm.

Military-Civilian Fusion Development Committee

In an effort to enhance military-civilian coordination in science and technology to improve not only overall economic development and military capabilities but also national defense mobilization potential, the PRC established the Military-Civilian Fusion Development Committee in 2017.⁴⁹ Notably, then vice premier Zhang Gaoli was designated to lead the committee's subordinate Military-Civilian Fusion Office, which is responsible for the day-to-day coordination of economic and national defense construction related to science and technology. This role is usually reserved for a lower-ranking official.⁵⁰ Zhang's appointment was almost certainly meant to emphasize the importance of military-civilian fusion to Xi Jinping's overall national social and economic development strategy and recognize the vast challenges associated with implementation.

The concept of military-civilian fusion is not new. Dating back to at least the 1950s, it embodies the efforts of PRC leaders to find synergies between economic development and military modernization and balance investment across each system. The establishment of the 2017 variant of the military-civilian fusion system is a revitalization of this enduring struggle to solve problems in China's defense industry, such as bureaucratic inertia and poor efficiency.⁵¹

Between 2017 and 2019, Military-Civilian Fusion Committees and Offices were established within governments at the provincial level and below across the PRC to lead integration of military-civilian institutions focused on science and technology and coordinate joint military-civilian research, development, and production. However, the institutionalization of the offices varied, with some aligned under local Development and Reform Commissions and others subordinated to the local Office of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense. In general, the functions of these offices are distinct from those responsible for national defense mobilization, though in some localities the Military-Civilian Fusion Committees also manage some national defense mobilization functions, suggesting variation in the interpretation of roles.

⁴⁹ “习近平主持军民融合委员会全体会议” [Xi Jinping Presided over the Plenary Meeting of the Commission on Civil-Military Integration], Phoenix Television, June 17, 2017, https://news.ifeng.com/a/20170620/51287296_0.shtml.

⁵⁰ Choi Chi-yuk, “In Unusual Move, Xi Appoints Top Party Leader to Lead Daily Affairs of Key Committee,” *South China Morning Post*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2099248/xi-jinping-further-consolidates-power-commission>.

⁵¹ Elsa B. Kania and Lorand Laskai, “Myths and Realities of China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy,” Center for a New American Security, January 28, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/myths-and-realities-of-chinas-military-civil-fusion-strategy>.

In 2019, the functions of the Military-Civilian Fusion Development Committee were transferred to the NDRC.⁵² This transition was part of broader 2018 State Council institutional reforms and may have been initiated to centralize management of all economic mobilization mechanisms under a single organization.⁵³

Joint Office of the National Defense Mobilization Commission

In late 2022, the National Defense Mobilization Commission (国家国防动员委员会) transitioned to the Joint Office of the National Defense Mobilization Commission (国家国防动员委员会联合办公), also known as the Joint Office.⁵⁴ While little information is available on the specific functions of the Joint Office, one source reports that it was established to strengthen the CCP's centralized and unified leadership and coordination of national emergency management and mobilization work.⁵⁵ The leadership structure remains unclear but likely continues to include senior CCP leaders, including the premier of the State Council, secretary general of the State Council, and director of the CMC NDMD. However, the national-level General Office of the NDMC might have transitioned from the NDMD to the NDRC, suggesting a significant transition of mobilization coordination from the military to the government. According to a media report, in November 2022, Guo Lanfeng, a member of the leading party group of the NDRC and full-time deputy director of the Joint Office of the NDMC, led a team to Beijing to investigate the construction of civil air defense projects. An NDRC website asserts that, as of 2022, Guo served concurrently as the head of the NDRC National Defense Office (NDO) and the head of the NDMC General Office, a role formally assigned to the CMC NDMD director.⁵⁶

⁵² National Development and Reform Commission (PRC), “职能配置与内设机构” [Functional Configuration and Internal Organizations], <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzggw/bnpz/?code=&state=123>.

⁵³ “(两会受权发布) 国务院机构改革方案” [(The Two Sessions Are Authorized to Issue) the State Council's Institutional Reform Plan], Xinhua, March 17, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/17/c_1122552185.htm.

⁵⁴ Li Hang, “在国防动员实践中巩固提高一体化国家战略体系和能力” [In the Practice of National Defense Mobilization, We Should Consolidate and Improve the Integrated National Strategic System and Capabilities], *People's Daily*, October 18 2023, <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2023/1018/685342.shtml>. According to the article, Li Hang serves as secretary of the Party Leadership Group and director of the Jiangsu Provincial National Defense Mobilization Office.

⁵⁵ “国家国防动员委员会联合办公室” [Joint Office of the National Defense Mobilization Commission], Estrong, May 25, 2023, <http://www.hivpaper.cn/zxxz/10440.html>.

⁵⁶ “国家国防动员委员会联合办公室领导来京调研人民防空工作” [Leaders of the Joint Office of the National Defense Mobilization Committee Came to Beijing to Investigate Civil Air Defense Work], People's Government of Beijing Municipality, Press Release, November 4, 2022, http://www.beijing.gov.cn/ywdt/gzdt/202211/t20221104_2852101.html.

These changes indicate that the role of the NDRC system has been elevated to manage the day-to-day work of both military-civilian fusion and national defense mobilization. While the NDRC NDO has long managed economic mobilization, its planning responsibilities appear to have expanded to serve as the predominant working office for national defense mobilization, potentially freeing the NDMD to focus on war planning and requirements generation.

Within governments at the provincial level and below, NDMCs were likewise redesignated Joint Offices of the NDMC under the overall leadership of the party committee.⁵⁷ Development and Reform Commissions across China were appointed as responsible for national defense mobilization administration and assumed control of local Civil Air Defense Offices, which were designated to serve as National Defense Mobilization Offices (NDMOs).⁵⁸

National Defense Mobilization Offices

In December 2022, ceremonies to establish NDMOs began taking place across China. By March 2023, most provincial-level governments in the eastern half of the country had performed similar ceremonies. According to official government media reports associated with these events, NDMOs are established on the basis of local Civil Air Defense Offices. They coordinate mobilization activities across government organizations, conduct surveys about mobilization potential, maintain mobilization databases, draft mobilization plans, assume mobilization command, and manage the execution of mobilization in emergencies and wartime.⁵⁹ As an extension of their Civil Air Defense Office responsibilities, NDMOs also continue to manage military facilities protection, civil air defense construction management, disaster prevention, education, and response, in addition to wartime air defense responsibilities.

⁵⁷ Liu Juan, Wen Xiao, and Jia Yong, “多地国防动员办公室挂牌后，地方党委、政府——把国防动员摆上位主动抓” [After the National Defense Mobilization Offices in Many Places Were Put on the Spot, Local Party Committees and Governments Took the Initiative to Grasp National Defense Mobilization], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), April 14, 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfdy/zddy/16216922.html>.

⁵⁸ “Shanghai Putuo District National Defense Mobilization Office Was Officially Established,” iNews, March 16, 2023, <https://inf.news/en/world/7113a80acbe16a6bbdb0afc9bd4693e.html>.

⁵⁹ Xue Zhiliang and Hou Zhengzhou, “合力唱好国防动员‘一台戏’” [Unite to Sing the “One Play” of National Defense Mobilization], *PLA Daily*, February 24, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-02-24&paperNumber=03&articleid=716378u](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-02-24&paperNumber=03&articleid=716378u;); and “Shanghai Putuo District National Defense Mobilization Office Is Officially Listed,” Shanghai Putuo Media Center, March 16, 2023, <https://inf.news/en/world/7113a80acbe16a6bbdb0afc9bd4693e.html>.

While the functions of NDMOs are not new to governments at the provincial level and below, their establishment is being portrayed as a major reform to the NDMS. According to PLA authors, there has long existed a misunderstanding that national defense construction is a matter for the armed forces—that is, that “the military runs national defense.” This reform has adjusted national defense mobilization “from the provincial MD system to the local government at the same level.”⁶⁰ PLA authors report that under the new system the provincial military district is the leading organ of local military work, serving as the military work department of the local party committee at the same level, to guide mobilization work as the “chief of staff” based on military requirements. The military districts should partner with NDMOs to ensure mobilization and the provision of required resources; NDMOs are designated to work across government organizations at their level.⁶¹

Legislative and Regulatory Reforms

In 2020 the PRC began making changes to the legislative and regulatory mechanisms necessary for national defense. The aggregate of the new laws and regulations establishes the foundation for broader reforms partly intended to improve national defense mobilization capabilities, capacity, and support. In November 2020 the PRC adopted its first-ever Veterans Protection Law, followed by the adoption of a revised National Defense Law in December 2020.⁶² In August 2021, it released a new Military Service Law, and in December 2022 the Reserve Personnel Law was adopted.⁶³ In March 2023 the PRC’s first legislation specific to overall reserve manpower issues,

⁶⁰ Xue and Hou, “合力唱好国防动员‘一台戏’”; and “济南国防动员: 建设‘准军事化’机关, 锻造全过硬国防动员铁军队伍” [Jinan National Defense Mobilization: Build a “Quasi-Military” Organ and Forge an All-Round and Excellent National Defense Mobilization Iron Army], Jinan National Defense Mobilization Office, March 14, 2023, http://jnrf.jinan.gov.cn/art/2023/3/14/art_11611_4771755.html.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² National People’s Congress (PRC), “Veterans Law of the People’s Republic of China,” November 11, 2020, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c2759/c23934/202112/t20211209_384819.html; and National People’s Congress (PRC), “Law of the People’s Republic of China on National Defense,” December 26, 2020, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c2759/c23934/202109/t20210914_384857.html.

⁶³ “China Updates Military Service Law,” National People’s Congress (PRC), Press Release, August 23, 2021, http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2021-08/23/c_678200.htm; and National People’s Congress (PRC), “中华共和国预备役员法” [Law of the People’s Republic of China on Reserve Personnel], December 30, 2022, available at <http://lawdb.cncourt.org/show.php?fid=153938>.

the Reserve Personnel Law, went into effect.⁶⁴ In April 2023 the PLA adopted a revised Regulation on Conscription, the first revision since 2001.⁶⁵

Common themes across the newly promulgated laws include the clarification of military and civilian roles and responsibilities for national defense, the rights and protections of military personnel, wartime mobilization requirements, and adjustments to the recruiting and conscription criteria to prioritize the accession and retention of educated and skilled soldiers. Notably, veterans and reservists are now viewed as critical sources of skill and experience that quickly bolster the PLA's combat capabilities, particularly in wartime. Further, the laws and regulations raise the age of recruitment-eligible personnel and institute protections for female soldiers. These changes expand mobilization potential and remove some social constraints to access a broader segment of society.

Laws enacted since 2021 may also signal future changes in the management of militias. Since the PLA's 2016 reforms, China has actively sought to create a "new-type militia force system" (新型民兵力量体系) to support the needs of future informatized warfare and domestic emergency response operations. These new-type militias seek to absorb personnel with specialized and professional skills into formations to support national defense requirements.⁶⁶ The organization and training of such militias appear to be a major focus for the new NDMOs at the provincial level and below. However, the 2021 Military Service Law makes no mention of militia forces. This is a significant shift from previous versions of the law, which specified that the PRC military service system "combines conscripts with volunteers and a militia with a reserve service." Chapter 6 of the 1984, 1998, and 2011 Military Service Law was dedicated to the militia and stated that "the militia

⁶⁴ Previous legislation provided regulations for reserve officers and military manpower in general, but not for the overall reserve force. National People's Congress (PRC), "Reserve Officers Law of the People's Republic of China," May 10, 1995, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/12/content_1383717.htm; National People's Congress (PRC), "Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China," December 29, 1998, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1383961.htm; and National People's Congress (PRC), "Law of the People's Republic of China on Reserve Personnel," December 30, 2022, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/202212/675bfd572d1440d89e29080e7310b6f.shtml>.

⁶⁵ State Council (PRC), "征兵工作条例" [Regulations on Conscription], April 1, 2023, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2023-04/12/content_5750986.htm.

⁶⁶ Li Shenghua and Bi Shengyi, "加快构建新型民兵力量体系" [Accelerate Construction of the New-Type Militia Force System], China Military Online, August 31, 2017, http://www.81.cn/mb/2017-08/31/content_7071618.htm; and "重点编建, 打造新型民兵应急力量" [Focus on the Establishment and Building of a New Type of Militia Emergency Response Force], *PLA Daily*, July 28, 2021, http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2021-07/28/content_295152.htm.

is an armed organization of the masses not divorced from production and is an assisting and reserve force for the PLA.”⁶⁷

The elimination of all mention of reserves from the Military Service Law was likely done to clearly differentiate reserve and militia forces and continue the transition of all reserve forces to the CMC. These reforms institutionalized the inseparable role of active and reserve forces in wartime missions. Militia forces, however, remain loosely defined and managed by various People’s Armed Forces departments under the control of provincial military districts and military subdistricts. It is possible that additional legislation is forthcoming regarding militia service, pending reforms to the NDMS.

Over the next two years, China will likely amend additional laws specific to the NDMS to clarify the roles, missions, rights, and responsibilities of the military, local governments, commercial enterprises, and society to support national defense mobilization based on institutional adjustments carried out since 2020. On October 24, 2021, the Standing Committee of the NPC announced that it planned to amend and improve the NDML, the Civil Air Defense Law, the National Defense Transportation Law, and the National Defense Education Law.⁶⁸ Based on the national defense mobilization reforms carried out thus far, their date of promulgation, and their order of precedence, it is likely that the NDML, last amended in 2010, and the Civil Air Defense Law, last amended in 2009, will be released prior to any other law specific to the mobilization sector.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ministry of National Defense (PRC), “Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China,” June 29, 2021, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/Publications/LR/4888367.html>; National People’s Congress (PRC), “Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China,” August 20, 2021, http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2021-08/20/c_815291.htm; National People’s Congress (PRC), “Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China,” May 31, 1984, available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c31f5cd2.html>; National People’s Congress (PRC), “Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China,” December 13, 2007, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1383961.htm; and National People’s Congress (PRC), “Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China (2011 Amendment) [Effective],” December 11, 2018, available at <https://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/201812/11/WS5c0f1ba9498eefb3fe46e8cc/military-service-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2011-amendment-effective.html>.

⁶⁸ Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (PRC), “Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress to Provisionally Adjust the Application of the Provisions of Relevant Laws during the Period of Deepening the Reform of National Defense Mobilization Systems.”

⁶⁹ General Office of the People’s Government of Guangdong Province (PRC), “中华人民共和国人民防空法” [Civil Air Defense Law of the People’s Republic of China], August 8, 2009, http://www.gd.gov.cn/zwgk/wjk/zcggk/content/post_2524017.html; and “中华人民共和国国防动员法（全文）” [Law of the People’s Republic of China on National Defense Mobilization (Full Text)], February 2, 2010, available at <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2010/02-26/2141911.shtml>.

Prospects for an Improved and More War-Oriented NDMS

The NDMS remains in an ongoing transition toward a new war-oriented objective after a decade-long focus on subsidizing domestic economic construction. In response to the CCP's 2015 assessment of an increasingly complex security environment, the broader national defense mobilization apparatus has begun a wholesale effort to better understand mobilization requirements for modern war and emergency response. While the outcome of these ongoing reforms remains to be seen, CCP leaders clearly believe that the NDMS requires large structural and institutional adjustments.

Over the last three years, changes to the NDMS have focused on structural readjustments, alignment and clarification of responsibilities, and definition of authorities to improve the efficiency of national defense mobilization work and tailor it to war mobilization requirements. Within the PLA, the CMC NDMD has assumed control over the planning and organization of defense mobilization, including recruitment and conscription of personnel and the formation of reserve and militia units—firmly establishing these as within the purview of the military. If early pronouncements are accurate, the NDRC has assumed control over the state's planning and support of the military. Its responsibilities include approving national defense construction, detailing national resource potential for mobilization, leading military-civilian fusion to build national defense capacity, and directing government support at all echelons to mobilize and organize mobilization activities—establishing these as the role of the government—in collaboration with the military and based on its specified requirements.

This restructuring establishes the NDMD and NDRC NDO as partners in national defense mobilization, with clear responsibilities and authorities. These partnerships carry down through the echelons of government. At the provincial level and below, reform measures standardize organizations responsible for the day-to-day work of planning, organizing, and preparing for mobilization activities based on the guidance of government and military leadership, embodied under the local NDMC. On the surface, this standardization of responsibilities has the potential to streamline coordination mechanisms between the government and military based on a predictable organizational framework established throughout the country. NDMD, theater command, and military district planners would have clear interlocutors for all mobilization-related issues, without the historical variation across localities. Further, legislative reforms enacted thus far are intended to smooth the path for the military to tap into the most limited

national resources during wars and emergencies—technically educated and trained human capital.

However, whether these reforms will actually improve defense mobilization capabilities and capacity to support wartime requirements remains a question. While the apparent transition of responsibilities from the national-level NDMC General Office to the NDRC NDO appears significant, it should be noted that the NDRC has been charged with leading economic mobilization since the 1990s. Thus, the preponderance of mobilization work throughout the government has long been under the purview of the NDRC.⁷⁰ The reforms appear to free the military to focus on planning and preparing for national defense missions rather than on instituting revolutionary change to the NDMS, thus leading to questions of how the government institutions responsible for supporting military mobilization requirements are actually becoming more war-oriented.

Whether greater civilian government responsibility for national defense mobilization work will in fact lead to a more war-oriented NDMS will also depend on the nature and degree of national-level oversight of provincial NDMOs and coordination with their PLA counterparts. Although civilian mobilization leaders are adopting the charge to embrace war-oriented work, clear national standards and continuous oversight will almost certainly be necessary to ensure a nationwide transition toward a warfighting focus. Moreover, while shifting mobilization work out of the PLA portfolio enables the military to focus on its warfighting missions, the separation likely creates additional coordination requirements with heavier burdens to coordinate between civilian mobilization activities in peacetime and military needs in wartime. Whether the NDRC and NDMD will coordinate efficiently during and after the NDMS's war-oriented transition remains to be seen.

The numerous leadership and organizational relationships that could hinder or facilitate national defense mobilization also remain unclear. Membership in the national-level NDMC in the wake of the 2023 PRC Institutional Reform Plan has yet to be publicly reported.⁷¹ Given Xi Jinping's predisposition to serve as the head of national security-related institutions, it raises the question of whether adjustments will be made to the NDMC leadership structure, which may necessitate changes to the NDML. Further,

⁷⁰ State Council and Central Military Commission (PRC), “国务院、中央军委关于成立国家国防动员委员会的通知” [The State Council and the Central Military Commission on Notice on the Establishment of the National Defense Mobilization Committee], November 29, 1994, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2011-08/12/content_7081.htm.

⁷¹ “A Guide to China's 2023 State Council Restructuring,” NPC Observer, <https://npcobserver.com/2023/03/07/china-npc-2023-state-council-reorganization/#update>, accessed 13 May 2023.

as ongoing State Council reforms adjust the roles and authorities across the State Council ministries, it is plausible that the organizations actively participating in national defense mobilization planning and coordination at the ministerial level will be significantly reduced.⁷²

Restraints to the NDMS's war orientation also include the broad roles with which it is tasked—to support wartime and emergency response requirements. The designation of Civil Air Defense Offices as NDMOs and the establishment of specialized militias do not necessarily enhance wartime capabilities. Civil Air Defense Offices have long served as the organizational establishment for standing and predesignated but ad hoc emergency response units.⁷³ The majority of NDMO activities publicly discussed since December 2022 remain focused on the mobilization and training of units for disaster response and recovery tasks as well as on the preparation of civil air defense facilities, though some limited tactical air defense training is included. Certainly, many of these requirements are transferable to supporting wartime needs (e.g., assisting in recovery from enemy airstrikes in urban areas), but they have limited value for improving PLA combat service support and sustainment capabilities.

In the near term, the real value of NDMOs to the NDMS may be threefold: (1) to serve as an instrument of political mobilization, (2) to enhance limited transportation and information mobilization capacity for PLA requirements, and (3) to provide an instrument of deterrence. In particular, the widespread announcement of NDMO establishment and the publication of national defense mobilization work meetings at provincial-level governments and below increase public awareness of defense mobilization, clarify the power and responsibilities of the NDMS, and outline the party's expectations for how the government and private institutions should support national defense mobilization. Further, the numerous government media releases discussing NDMO and NDMC activities to improve the readiness of civil air defense shelters and recovery mechanisms for use during wartime signal to domestic audiences their association with national defense issues. These media releases may also be intended to signal to global audiences the willingness of the PRC to go

⁷² From 2017 to 2018, approximately 26 State Council, party, and military organizations participated in national-level NDMC meetings. See Richter and Rosen, "China's National Defense Mobilization System," 37.

⁷³ National People's Congress (PRC), "Civil Air Defense Law of the People's Republic of China," January 1, 1997, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/218752.htm>.

to war in defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, regardless of potential domestic restraints.⁷⁴

For these signals to have a deterrent effect, however, Chinese leaders would need to demonstrate widespread, successful implementation of national defense mobilization efforts. It is not yet clear that the government has adopted Major General An Wenping's recommendations for the wholesale integration of military requirements into civilian infrastructure maintenance plans or transportation platform production and pre-positioning for war. Additional research into municipal civil infrastructure plans and the degree of their coordination with mobilization exercises would be needed to monitor the actual effects of the NDMS transition and its ability to sustain the PLA during wartime. If implementation of war-oriented mobilization work lags behind CCP leader expectations or remains uneven in key theaters, the deterrent effect of the NDMS could be undermined, and the war-oriented objective could remain aspirational rather than implemented policy.

⁷⁴ See, for example, “2023年全市国防动员（人民防空）工作暨全面从严治党工作会议召开” [In 2023, the City's National Defense Mobilization (Civil Air Defense) Work and Comprehensive Strict Party Management Work Conference Was Held], Xuchang Municipal People's Government Office (PRC), May 4, 2023, <http://www.xuchang.gov.cn/ywdt/001005/20230430/4ca4bbb0-89fc-43f8-bc30-416a559687da.html>; and “鄂州市国动办调研小组赴浙江省宁波市学习考察” [The Research Team of Ezhou State Mobilization Office Went to Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province for Study and Inspection], Ezhou National Defense Mobilization Office (PRC), April 18, 2023, http://rfb.hubei.gov.cn/bmdt/dtyw/szrftdt/202304/t20230427_4643728.shtml.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter assesses the primary threats to the “China dream,” considers Chinese leaders’ plans to manage these threats, and concludes that the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will center on modernization, deterrence, and non-war missions.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The period from now through midcentury will be a critical one for Chinese leaders eager to ensure that the People’s Republic of China reaches its centenary in 2049. They have directed the PLA to focus on military modernization, deterrence, and support of the government’s efforts to incrementally change the status quo in China’s favor through non-war methods. Paradoxically, despite expanding security concerns, the military’s role in the coming decades will likely be fairly limited. Eager to minimize risks to the China dream, Chinese leaders have shown no interest in chancing a war with the U.S. over Taiwan. Knowing this, U.S. planners and decision-makers will need to consider coercion and gray-zone tactics as the principal Chinese military challenge in the near term and the deterrence of an attack on Taiwan as a long-term challenge.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Taiwan will face an ongoing threat of Chinese coercion and gray-zone tactics through 2049. U.S. planners and decision-makers will need to focus on these challenges in the near term to midterm and find ways to reduce tensions between Taiwan and China.
- Although unlikely, a Chinese attack to compel Taiwan’s unification remains a long-term threat. U.S. planners might need to consider options to maintain a credible, sustainable deterrence posture near Taiwan that lasts decades. A smaller, lighter posture could prove more sustainable but run a higher risk of battlefield failure in the event of hostilities.
- China’s reluctance to risk war with the U.S. over Taiwan opens opportunities for crisis management. If the U.S. and China can strengthen crisis-management mechanisms and reduce tensions, the risk of war could stay low.

Lumbering toward the China Dream: The PLA's Strategic Mission Through 2049 and Beyond

Timothy R. Heath

The period from now through midcentury will be a critical one for Chinese leaders eager to realize the centenary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049. The coming years will be difficult, owing to decelerating growth rates and an increasingly uncertain domestic and international environment. The military's role in the coming decades will likely be fairly limited. Eager to reduce risks to the "China dream," Chinese leaders have shown no interest in risking a war with the United States over Taiwan. Instead, they have directed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to focus on military modernization, deterrence, and support of the government's efforts to incrementally change the status quo in China's favor through coercion and non-war methods. U.S. planners and decision-makers might need to focus on the gray-zone challenges in the near term to midterm and consider deterrence near the Taiwan Strait a long-term issue that could span many more decades.

This chapter is organized in the following fashion. The first section discusses the importance of the China dream in guiding the work of all elements of state power, including the military. Having largely achieved the country's modernization, many of the remaining Chinese Communist Party (CCP) goals require at most incremental changes. However, some goals, such as unification with Taiwan, remain unfulfilled. The second section reviews the primary threats to the China dream in the coming years, many of which could intensify. The largest perils are domestic and include discontent over yawning inequality, corruption, diminishing opportunities, and poor governance. Economic-related interests abroad are expanding, and threats to them may grow more severe as well. Worsening tensions with the United

States also pose a danger, but Chinese leaders judge war as unlikely. The third section outlines how Chinese leaders intend to manage these myriad dangers. Paradoxically, even as they elevate the importance of security, Beijing envisions a limited, but important, role for the military. Chinese leaders, led by Xi Jinping, have outlined principles to guide decision-making in the coming decades that will prioritize national development, the consolidation of CCP rule, security, risk reduction, and favorable changes to the international environment. The PLA's role will accordingly center on modernization, deterrence, and non-war missions, including coercion and gray-zone tactics.¹

The Importance of the China Dream and the Period of Strategic Opportunity

As is well known, the CCP aims to realize the nation's revitalization (i.e., the China dream) by midcentury. According to Xi Jinping, this dream is “the goal of completing the building of a wealthy, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious socialist modernized nation” by the centenary of the PRC's founding.² To this end, the CCP has outlined ambitious, albeit vague, goals. Through 2035, the party hopes to “significantly increase” the country's comprehensive national power, achieve a per capita GDP “on par with that of a mid-level developed country,” and become “one of the world's most innovative countries.” Chinese leaders have also outlined goals to modernize the economy, the system of governance, and the armed forces.³

These goals are so vaguely defined that they may be interpreted as having been largely achieved already. China's economy is the second-largest in the world, and its per capita income reached \$11,312 in 2020, placing it just shy of high-income status according to standards used by the World Bank.⁴

¹ For this study, I analyzed official Chinese documents, such as the 20th Party Congress report, the CCP's Proposal for the 14th Year Program, and various speeches by CCP general secretary Xi Jinping. I also examined analysis and commentary provided in Chinese media sources, such as Xinhua, the *People's Daily*, and the *PLA Daily*, as well as academic publications in both Western and Chinese sources.

² “习近平在参观《复兴之路》展览时强调” [Xi Jinping Addresses Exhibition on China's Renaissance], Xinhua, November 29, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c_113852724.htm.

³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” October 25, 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/25/content_WS6357df20c6d0a757729e1bfc.html.

⁴ Huo Li, “China's GDP per Capita Just Passed \$10,000, but What Does This Mean?” CGTN, January 17, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-17/China-s-GDP-per-capita-just-passed-10-000-but-what-does-this-mean--NkvMWAMYNO/index.html>.

The country has overseen a remarkable modernization of its military as well as improvements in its government capacity and technological innovation.⁵ It has initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious transnational geoeconomic infrastructure project. China has already become wealthy and powerful, with a comprehensive national power second only to that of the United States.⁶ Not all goals have been achieved, of course. Most notably, China has failed to unify with Taiwan. But this failure did not prevent Beijing from judging its own performance as an unqualified success at the centenary of the CCP's founding in 2021, a symbolic date arguably equal in importance to that of the anticipated centenary of the PRC's establishment. In a speech commemorating the event, Xi expressed no bitterness, regret, or humiliation over the goals left unfulfilled. Rather, he judged the party's achievements as "great and glorious."⁷

Whether Chinese leaders will take such a sanguine view of a failure to ensure Taiwan's unification by midcentury is difficult to say. At the 20th Party Congress, Xi called unification a "natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."⁸ Some Western commentators claimed the statement implied a 2049 deadline.⁹ However, Chinese media has made no such claim, nor has any Chinese official followed Xi's statements with clarifying remarks about unification deadlines. In the past, Chinese leaders have expressed aspirations to achieve unification by key dates but have done nothing when the dates passed. In 2002, for example, Jiang Zemin expressed the hope of realizing Taiwan's unification "at an early date," which suggested the CCP's 2021 centenary as a potential deadline. He added that the "Taiwan question must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely."¹⁰ Yet the date passed without apparent consequences for the leadership. Moreover, the year 2049 is several decades away, which provides a politically convenient way for Xi to punt the Taiwan ball to his successors as Jiang Zemin did.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C., November 2022), <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2022-China-Military-Power-Report>.

⁶ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Views of the Balance of Power between U.S. and China," Pew Research Center, December 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/views-of-the-balance-of-power-between-u-s-and-china-2019>.

⁷ "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC," Xinhua, July 1, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm.

⁸ State Council Information Office (PRC), "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China."

⁹ Kevin Rudd, "The Return of Red China: Xi Jinping Brings Back Marxism," *Foreign Affairs*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/return-red-china>.

¹⁰ "Full Text of Jiang Zemin Report to the 16th Party Congress," Xinhua, November 17, 2002, available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Nov/49107.htm>.

In sum, the China dream has been largely, although not completely, achieved, which is why Xi has expressed such confidence that its realization is “now on an irreversible historical course.”¹¹ As long as these gains are preserved, the CCP’s judgment about its successful performance will probably hold. Its main task in the coming decades, then, will be to hold onto and not squander these achievements. How the CCP manages that task will determine the PLA’s roles and missions.

Challenges to Achieving the China Dream

Success is hardly assured because the easy part of China’s rise is over. With its high growth rates and political stability, the Hu Jintao era (2002–12) may well stand as the “golden age” of CCP rule.¹² From 2001 to 2008, China’s growth outpaced credit, resulting in relatively healthy national finances. But rapid credit expansion in the wake of the global financial crisis deepened the country’s dependence on debt to maintain growth, with diminishing returns.¹³ Furthermore, a declining population will exert additional downward pressure on the country’s prospects.¹⁴ As the Chinese economy cools, its growth rate may slow to 2%–3% annually through midcentury.¹⁵

Severe domestic and international security challenges also loom. The period of strategic opportunity upheld during the Jiang Zemin era (1989–2004), characterized by a benign domestic and international situation, is largely over. Although Chinese leaders have judged that strategic opportunities persist, they regard risks and dangers as equally, if not more, prominent. Regarding security concerns through 2035, Xi Jinping has stated that the “current and coming period will be a period prone to all kinds of contradictions and risks in our country, with a marked increase in risk

¹¹ State Council Information Office (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.”

¹² David Dollar, Yiping Huang, and Yang Yao, “Global Clout, Domestic Fragility,” International Monetary Fund, June 2021, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2021/06/the-future-of-china-dollar-huang-yao.htm>.

¹³ Jude Howell and Jane Duckett, “Reassessing the Hu-Wen Era: A Golden Age or Lost Decade for Social Policy in China?” *China Quarterly* 237 (2018): 1–14.

¹⁴ Michael E. O’Hanlon, “China’s Shrinking Population and Constraints on Its Future Power,” Brookings Institution, April 24, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/04/24/chinas-shrinking-population-and-constraints-on-its-future-power>.

¹⁵ Roland Rajah and Alyssa Leng, “Revising Down the Rise of China,” Lowy Institute, March 14, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/revising-down-rise-china>.

factors, both foreseeable and difficult to foresee.”¹⁶ According to Beijing, the main dangers stem from domestic sources. When Xi described the threats to national security at the 20th Party Congress, he began by listing issues of “social governance,” likely referring to popular discontent over corruption, inequality, and local malfeasance. He then mentioned “ethnic separatists, religious extremists, and violent terrorists,” as well as organized crime and natural disasters, before moving on to discuss other perils, including pressure from the United States.¹⁷ The strong emphasis on domestic dangers should not be surprising. International polls similarly show that domestic issues such as crime, unemployment, and corruption are top concerns in many developing countries, including China.¹⁸

Similarly, in a 2019 speech Xi outlined the seven most prominent risks to the China dream: politics, ideology, the economy, science and technology, society, the external environment, and party building.¹⁹ Only the dangers posed by the “external environment” implied a potential military threat. Xi characterized the international situation as “complex and grim” and urged officials to “guard against various risks acting in conjunction with one another like a chain.” In particular, he directed action to protect overseas interests and safeguard China’s “core interests,” which include Taiwan and other disputed territory. Chinese leaders have also described an increasingly unstable and uncertain international environment, featuring tensions with the United States, Japan, India, and others.²⁰

Chinese leaders have escalated their criticisms of the United States, though this likely in part reflects the overall worsening of U.S.-China relations. In 2020, Defense Minister Wei Fenghe stated that U.S.-China relations had entered a period of “high risk” and blamed the United States for “interfering in our internal affairs.” To a PLA delegation to the National People’s Congress, he called for China to adopt a “fighting spirit” and use

¹⁶ “习近平: 关于‘中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议’的说明” [Xi Jinping: Explanation on “CCP Central Committee Recommendation on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan on Developing the National Economy and Society and 2035 Long-Term Goals”], Xinhua, November 3, 2020.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.”

¹⁸ “Crime and Corruption Top Problems in Emerging and Developing Countries,” Pew Research Center, November 6, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/11/06/crime-and-corruption-top-problems-in-emerging-and-developing-countries>.

¹⁹ “习近平在省部级主要领导干部坚持底线思维着力防范化解重大风险专题研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话” [Xi Jinping Makes Important Speech at Opening Ceremony of Provincial and Ministerial-Level Major Leading Cadres’ Thematic Workshop on Persisting in Bottom-Line Thinking and Concentrating Efforts on Guarding Against, Resolving Major Risks], Xinhua, January 21, 2019.

²⁰ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019).

“fighting to promote stability.”²¹ Such acrimonious language reflects, in part, the poor state of relations. In the same period, for example, senior U.S. officials lambasted China in harsh terms and, in some cases, openly advocated the overthrow of the CCP.²²

Despite a worsening security environment, Chinese leaders continue to regard the possibility of war with the United States as unlikely. The 2019 defense white paper, for example, stated that “forces for peace predominate over elements of war” and considered the Asia-Pacific region as “generally stable.”²³ Similarly, Xi has stated that the “historical trends of peace” are “unstoppable.”²⁴ His judgment that “strategic opportunities” persist underscores the CCP leadership’s assessment of the low likelihood of a major war.

Although the danger of war may be low, other perils loom. Accordingly, China’s leaders have elevated the priority of national security and expanded its scope. In 2013, Xi established the country’s first National Security Commission, and in 2015 the legislature passed the first National Security Law. Around this time, Xi also invoked the notion of a “comprehensive security concept” to justify the expansion of security policies into virtually all policy domains. Security spending remained high, not only for internal security but for the military as well. Defense budget increases remained above the national economic growth rate even as the economy decelerated.²⁵

Paradoxically, national security has become increasingly vital for China, and the military continues to grow more powerful, even though its role remains limited. At most, China’s military power has provided a strategic deterrent or coercive backup to gray-zone operations in the first island chain and on the Indian border. But even in these disputes, the PLA’s role may be overstated. China has not carried out any military aggression or even limited combat operations. Its growing counter-intervention capabilities have not brought about concessions from Taipei toward unification, nor have neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam, or India felt compelled to yield

²¹ Jun Mai, “Two Sessions 2020: China-U.S. Rivalry in ‘High-Risk Period,’ Chinese Defense Minister Says,” *South China Morning Post*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3086308/two-sessions-china-us-rivalry-high-risk-period-chinese-defence>.

²² Kate O’Keeffe, “Mike Pompeo Urges Chinese People to Change Communist Party,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/secretary-of-state-pompeo-to-urge-chinese-people-to-change-the-communist-party-11595517729>.

²³ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

²⁴ State Council Information Office (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.”

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022*.

in their disputes with China. The U.S. military has similarly improved its lethality and survivability in the face of a stronger PLA.

In short, the PLA's combat capabilities have made a modest contribution at best to resolving long-standing territorial disputes. This reflects in part the persistently high risks that a military conflict might pose, especially with the United States. But the limited contribution of military power also reflects the real source of Beijing's anxieties. The most dangerous threats to CCP rule rest in the public's dissatisfaction with the government's performance, not in the claims of rival states over desolate islands and barren borders.

How Chinese Leaders Aim to Achieve the China Dream

Given the ominous security situation, the coming decades will unsurprisingly weigh heavily on the minds of China's top leaders. Documents such as the 19th and 20th Party Congress reports, the proposal for the 14th Five-Year Plan, speeches by Xi Jinping at high-profile events such as the CCP's 100th-anniversary celebrations in 2021, and the 2019 seminar for provincial and ministerial leaders reveal considerable anxiety about what might happen in the 2030s and 2040s.

In these sources, Chinese leaders frequently and consistently acknowledge the possibility of unexpected, shocking developments. At the 20th Party Congress, for example, Xi warned of potential "black swans" (unexpected developments with major impacts) and "gray rhinos" (highly probable high-impact events that are often neglected) and stated that "uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising."²⁶ In a speech to students at the Central Party School in 2019, Xi warned that on the road to rejuvenation, "the risks and challenges that we face will only become increasingly complicated, and we may even encounter raging torrents and storms beyond our imagination."²⁷ At the same time, however, Chinese leaders have insisted that decision-making in any crisis be grounded in key principles consistent with the China dream. This approach is usually cast as a series of "major principles" to which decision-making should adhere in the years leading up to 2049. This suggests a generally cautious outlook that accepts disputes and confrontations with others as inevitable but

²⁶ State Council Information Office (PRC), "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China."

²⁷ "习近平在中央党校（国家行政学院）中青年干部培训班开班仪式上发表重要讲话" [Xi Jinping Gives Important Speech at Opening Ceremony of Central Party School's (National School of Administration) Training Course for Young and Middle-Aged Cadres], Xinhua, September 3, 2019.

prioritizes non-war methods to address them. Collectively, the sources listed above call on officials to adhere to the following major principles in their decision-making through midcentury: prioritize national development, consolidate CCP rule, maintain comprehensive security, manage risks, and incrementally shape the international environment. Although a subsequent section will explore the role of the military in more detail, this section will touch on the role the PLA plays in such guidance.

Prioritize National Development

Xi has consistently stated that national development will remain a top priority over the next few decades. At the 20th Party Congress, he stated that the CCP's "central task" in the coming years will be to lead the people to "build a powerful, modern socialist country in a comprehensive way."²⁸ Similarly, in explaining the party's plans through 2035, he upheld the main theme of promoting "high-quality economic and social development."²⁹ Xi explained that this required a focus on high-quality development, strengthening technological innovation, improving governance, enhancing the country's cultural appeal, and advancing the country's ecological condition.³⁰

The military plays an important role in ensuring security for overseas personnel and assets. The PLA has established one military base in Djibouti and may add other facilities. PLA Navy ships have maintained a presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2009 to protect vital shipping lanes.³¹ The PLA also supports the nation's interests in space and cyberspace through the deployment of relevant capabilities.³² Yet another way the PLA could aid development is through dual-use efforts. Military investments in technological innovation could have commercial applications, just as civilian efforts to develop advanced technologies could result in military improvements.³³ Similarly, the construction of facilities and infrastructure

²⁸ State Council Information Office (PRC), "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China."

²⁹ "习近平: 关于《中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议》的说明"

³⁰ "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC."

³¹ John Fei, "China's Overseas Military Base in Djibouti: Features, Motivations, and Policy Implications," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, December 22, 2017.

³² Timothy R. Heath, "China's Pursuit of Overseas Security," RAND Corporation, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2271.html.

³³ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda, "China's Pursuit of Advanced Dual-Use Technologies," International Institute for Strategic Studies, Research Paper, December 2018.

in China and abroad could benefit both commercial and military development.³⁴

Consolidate CCP Rule

Xi has emphasized the consolidation of CCP rule as a second major principle. This includes measures to both strengthen the party internally and bolster its popular base of support. In terms of party-strengthening, Xi has on numerous occasions reiterated the importance of enhancing the CCP's capacity to govern, tightening discipline, and improving ideological commitments. He stated in the 20th Party Congress report and the 2021 centenary speech that the CCP will adhere to a "centralized, unified leadership" as a guiding principle even as it tries to "unite and lead the Chinese people" to a better life by "resolving imbalances and inadequacies in development."³⁵ Supporting commentaries also emphasize the importance of tackling major popular grievances, such as crime, corruption, and social inequality, as complementary to party-strengthening efforts and the best way to ensure the CCP's grip on power.³⁶

The armed forces support the party's rule by serving as the ultimate guarantor of power. In particular, the People's Armed Police, which answers to the Central Military Commission, augments law enforcement as a paramilitary enforcer of domestic order.³⁷ In addition, the Strategic Support Force supports civilian authorities in countering threats to CCP rule in the information domain. It is responsible for psychological and information operations in the cyber domain that target enemies of the CCP and counter efforts to undermine the party's legitimacy.³⁸ The PLA also bolsters popular support for the CCP through high-profile demonstrations of military prowess, such as exercises and parades.

³⁴ Alexander E. Farrow, "Modernization and the Military-Civil Fusion Strategy," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 6 (2023): 102–14.

³⁵ "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC."

³⁶ Zhong Guo'an, "以习近平总书记总体国家安全观为引领谱写国家安全新篇章" [Take General Secretary Xi Jinping's Overall National Security Concept as Guidance and Write a New Chapter of National Security], *Seeking Truth*, April 15, 2017.

³⁷ Joel Wuthnow, "China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform," *National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 14, April 2019.

³⁸ Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, "The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese Information Operations," *Cyber Defense Review* 3, no. 1 (2018): 105–21.

Maintain Comprehensive Security

Xi has directed the maintenance of comprehensive security as another major principle, directly linking it to the nation's focus on development.³⁹ Similarly, at the CCP's centenary, he emphasized the importance of adhering to the "comprehensive security concept" in responding to myriad challenges in the "coming years."⁴⁰ The National Security Law's broad definition of national security includes the "relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security."⁴¹ Likewise, the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans introduced national security requirements as part of their development plans.⁴²

The PLA's role in comprehensive national security is manifold. First, it provides a critical deterrent to foreign aggression or threats in the form of a robust nuclear arsenal and strong conventional combat capabilities. Chinese officials routinely invoke strategic deterrence and the safeguarding of national security as fundamental responsibilities of the PLA in the "new era."⁴³ In territorial disputes and regarding Taiwan, the PLA backstops paramilitary and nonmilitary forces that take the lead in incrementally changing the status quo or deterring separatism. Gray-zone tactics have become a favored instrument for China to advance its interests in a manner that minimizes the risk of war. China has demonstrated a willingness to use such tactics in its territorial dispute with India on its border in 2020, in harassment of rival South China Sea claimants, in the standoff with Japan near the Senkaku Islands, and in military exercises near Taiwan.⁴⁴ The military plays a more limited role in supporting civilian authorities in the economic, financial, societal, cultural, and ecological domains of national security, all of which have gained prominence under Xi.

³⁹ State Council Information Office (PRC), "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China."

⁴⁰ "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC."

⁴¹ National People's Congress (PRC), "中华人民共和国国家安全法" [PRC National Security Law], July 1, 2015, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-07/01/content_2893902.htm.

⁴² "习近平: 关于《中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议》的说明."

⁴³ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in the New Era*.

⁴⁴ Bonny Lin et al., "A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics," RAND Corporation, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA594-1.html.

Manage Risks

Reflecting the generally cautious outlook adopted by Chinese leaders regarding the coming decades, Xi has consistently emphasized the importance of managing and reducing risks. In a 2019 speech, he stated that “guarding against and resolving major risks is a political duty of party committees, governments, and leading cadres at all levels.”⁴⁵ At the 20th Party Congress, he similarly highlighted the importance of “preventing and mitigating major risks” in a number of areas.⁴⁶ For example, when addressing “economic security,” he decreed that officials should “properly deal with major risks” that might arise in real estate, in financial markets, and from unemployment.⁴⁷ The focus on managing risk and exercising caution does not imply that China should become conciliatory or passive in disputes. Chinese officials regard confrontation and disputes with rival states as inevitable owing to the country’s rise and anticipated resistance from Western countries led by the United States.⁴⁸ Xi has thus ordered all government officials to manage a careful balancing act to protect the country’s interests while maintaining stability—a pair of contradictory directives captured in his oft-repeated dictum to “protect rights, protect stability” [维权维稳].⁴⁹

To protect the country’s interests in a manner that does not threaten stability, Chinese officials have generally favored gray-zone and non-war methods, including coercion. In 2021, for example, Chinese troops brawled with Indian soldiers in disputed territory along the Sino-Indian border. Following the deaths of twenty Indians, Beijing sought to de-escalate the situation. China also endured criticism from the United States after establishing artificial islands in the South China Sea and carrying out coercive gray-zone actions against rival claimants in the maritime domain as well as near Taiwan.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ “习近平在省部级主要领导干部坚持底线思维着力防范化解重大风险专题研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话。”

⁴⁶ State Council Information Office (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.”

⁴⁷ “习近平在省部级主要领导干部坚持底线思维着力防范化解重大风险专题研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话。”

⁴⁸ Minghao Zhao, “Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on U.S.-China Strategic Competition,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 3 (2019): 371–94.

⁴⁹ State Council Information Office (PRC), “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.”

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2022.

The PLA can help reduce risks through deterrence. China has in recent years overseen a major increase in its nuclear arsenal. Although some observers fear that this could enhance its coercion against neighboring powers, nuclear weapons have proved to have limited value in low-stakes bargaining situations because they lack credibility.⁵¹ Nuclear weapons are also of doubtful utility in most Taiwan scenarios, as annihilating the island would undermine the whole point of conquest. At most, a larger nuclear arsenal could be used to deter the United States from launching preemptive strikes against China.⁵²

Incrementally Shape the International Environment

Xi has called for gradually shaping the international environment in pursuit of long-standing goals in a low-risk manner. He has emphasized the importance of expanding diplomatic relations and interactions through BRI and has directed non-war methods to achieve unresolved goals, such as over Taiwan's status or disputed maritime regions.⁵³ Xi also appears to view the Chinese diaspora as a potential basis of international support. As a principle for coming years, he called for strengthening the "great unity of the Chinese people," highlighting the importance of the united front both within China and around the world. The directive called for officials to "build broad consensus" to further the goal of national revival.⁵⁴

To support this foreign policy imperative, the PLA has since the 2000s increased its diplomatic activities, including leadership visits, personnel exchanges, multilateral exercises and training, port calls, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁵⁵ Through these interactions, military officials support the foreign ministry's goals of building partnerships, expanding China's influence, and shaping international institutions in China's favor.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 173–95.

⁵² Minnie Chan, "PLA Adopts Nuclear Deterrence to Stop Foreign Intervention on Taiwan: Analysts," *South China Morning Post*, August 21, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3189597/pla-adopts-nuclear-deterrence-stop-foreign-intervention-taiwan>.

⁵³ "习近平: 关于 '中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议' 的说明."

⁵⁴ "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC."

⁵⁵ Philip C. Saunders and Junwei Shyy, "China's Military Diplomacy," in *China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations*, ed. Scott McDonald and Michael C. Burgoyne (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2019).

⁵⁶ Timothy R. Heath, "Winning Friends and Influencing People: Naval Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *China Maritime Studies Institute, China Maritime Report*, no. 8, September 2020.

Not Mentioned: Preparation for War

Equally important to the major principles outlined by Xi are those he has not mentioned. Xi has not directed the country to prepare for war with the United States, Taiwan, or anyone else. He also has not adopted language that could justify massive risk-taking or catastrophic casualties in pursuit of yet-to-be-achieved party objectives. Nor has he said that the resolution of Taiwan's status should take priority over national development or other goals, such as the preservation of stability.

To be clear, Xi has frequently criticized the United States directly or indirectly in many speeches and has on several occasions called on the PLA to improve its readiness to fight a “strong enemy.” This veiled reference to the United States, however, reflects restraint more than enthusiasm for war. Despite ongoing tensions and frequent criticisms by U.S. officials, Chinese leaders have been reluctant to openly discuss the possibility of war with the United States. Their indirect references to the United States contrast sharply with the furious rhetoric typical of previous Chinese leaders who mobilized the population for conflict.⁵⁷ In the lead-up to China's intervention in the Korean War, for example, Mao Zedong routinely denounced Americans as “imperialists” determined to “strangle China's revolution in its infancy.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Zhou Enlai stated at a CCP leadership meeting prior to the war that the U.S. government was “the most dangerous foe of the People's Republic of China.”⁵⁹ Leaders of other countries also routinely marshal public support through inflammatory accusations and the demonization of an enemy. Years before launching the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin routinely gave speeches in which he railed against the United States and NATO as enemies, denounced Ukraine's rulers as “neo-Nazis,” and threatened war.⁶⁰ Chinese leaders have refrained from such escalatory rhetoric. Xi has on occasion directed the military to ensure its “combat readiness,” but this is not significantly different from his predecessors' demands that the military be ready for a “military struggle.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Steve Thorne, *The Language of War* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁸ Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited,” *China Quarterly* 121 (1990): 94–115.

⁵⁹ Zhou Enlai, *The Selected Works of Zhou Enlai* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1981).

⁶⁰ “From Accepting NATO Aspirations to ‘Denazifying’: 20+ Years of Putin's Changing Views on Ukraine,” *Russia Matters*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/accepting-nato-aspirations-denazifying-20-years-putins-changing-views-ukraine>.

⁶¹ For one example, see “Perform Vital Mission, Hu Tells Military,” *China Daily*, March 14, 2005, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/14/content_424515.htm.

In sum, Chinese leaders appear concerned about the many potential hazards in the decades leading up to the PRC's centenary. To manage these threats, Xi and his colleagues have prioritized the preservation of the country's gains and mitigation of potential dangers. His guidance has consistently emphasized maintaining a focus on development, consolidating CCP rule, maintaining security in all domains, managing risk, and incrementally changing the status quo in China's favor. Chinese leaders have balanced contrasting imperatives to defend the nation's interests and minimize risk by favoring coercive and non-war tactics over the initiation of combat operations. Indeed, Beijing has given no indication that it intends to initiate a hot war of any kind or launch an invasion, attack, or kinetic strike on a neighbor to seize territory or compel their subjugation.

The Role of the PLA through 2049

The PLA's role and missions in the coming decades will be largely determined by the guiding principles and priorities outlined by the central leadership. In particular, Xi Jinping has directed the military to carry out a robust modernization, for which he demands progress by certain benchmark dates. In terms of missions, Chinese leaders have called on the PLA to adopt a largely supporting role to the government's policies. The military's guiding principles for the use of force also continue to emphasize crisis prevention, management, and deterrence, as well as preparation for combat contingencies.

PLA Modernization

In the 20th Party Congress report and other documents, Xi has outlined modernization goals for the military for 2035 and 2049. The 14th Five-Year Plan also includes modernization goals: "strengthening the armed forces through reform, science and technology, talent development, and administration according to the law" and "accelerating the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization."⁶²

Some observers have reported directions to the PLA for contingencies by key dates. CIA director William Burns stated, "We do know, as has been made public, that President Xi has instructed the PLA, the Chinese military leadership, to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan, but that doesn't mean that

⁶² "习近平:关于'中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议'的说明."

he's decided to invade in 2027 or any other year as well.” However, other U.S. officials clarified that there was no evidence that the leadership had made a political decision to compel unification.⁶³ The dates only appear to reference to modernization deadlines. Chinese leaders have routinely tied modernization goals to commemorative dates.⁶⁴ Doing so helps bolster the CCP's prestige. For example, in the early 2000s, reports surfaced that suggested that China had “secret plans” to invade Taiwan by 2020.⁶⁵ Yet the reports proved inaccurate because Western experts had misunderstood the significance of the goals. The 2020 date for military modernization was tied to broader development goals that coincided with the centenary of the CCP's founding in 2021. Underscoring this point, China held a lavish ceremony that year to whip up patriotic enthusiasm.⁶⁶

In sum, preparations for contingencies remain an important driver of the military's modernization, but modernization is also driven by other considerations. Preparation for a contingency does not imply any intent to carry out military aggression. Instead, analysis of the senior leadership's guidance suggests that modernization is likely driven by a range of political goals that have nothing to do with starting a war.

Revised Historic Missions

Since 2004, central leaders have invoked the “historic missions of the armed forces in the new period of the new century,” often referred to as “new historic missions,” to describe the military's role in ensuring the nation's security.⁶⁷ The concept outlines four responsibilities. First, it provides an important guarantee of strength for the party to consolidate its ruling position by directing the PLA to defend the CCP's rule from domestic and external threats, such as those posed by cyberattacks designed to discredit its authority. The second mission directs the military to protect the nation's sovereignty, national unity, and territorial interests and prepare for contingencies related to Taiwan and disputed maritime and land areas.

⁶³ Timothy R. Heath, “Is China Planning to Attack Taiwan? A Careful Consideration of Available Evidence Says No,” *War on the Rocks*, December 14, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/12/is-china-planning-to-attack-taiwan-a-careful-consideration-of-available-evidence-says-no>.

⁶⁴ Barry Naughton, *Growing Out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶⁵ Kyle Mizokami, “Report: China Has Secret Plans to Invade Taiwan by 2020,” *Popular Mechanics*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/news/a28510/china-secret-plan-invade-taiwan>.

⁶⁶ “Ceremony Marking CPC Centenary Held in Beijing,” *Xinhua*, July 1, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/01/c_1310037722.htm.

⁶⁷ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2006* (Beijing, December 2006).

The third mission directs the military to protect overseas interests, such as BRI investments and citizens abroad, primarily through non-war missions. A fourth task directs the PLA to promote world peace and common development, as China requires a stable international environment to further its development.⁶⁸

For the coming decades, the central leadership has directed the PLA to maintain its historic missions but in a constrained manner. The PLA is expected to provide “strategic support” [战略支撑] to whole-of-government efforts to maintain favorable conditions for the China dream.⁶⁹ This represents a downgrade in the role of the military from leading to supporting the government’s effort to ensure national security. This point is underscored by the creation of the civilian-led National Security Commission, which takes the lead on security policy—a responsibility previously held by the Central Military Committee. As explained in a 2019 article in the *PLA Daily*, the modification reflects the perspective that China’s security challenges have exceeded what the military alone can manage and that closer coordination is required between the military and civilian authorities.⁷⁰ It also reflects the ongoing desire to minimize risks by ensuring a tight civilian grip on the military and by relying on nonmilitary assets to lead on many security missions. As the 2019 defense white paper stated, in the “new era” the PLA will “strive to keep in alignment with and contribute to the general strategies of the CCP.”⁷¹

Guidance on Employment of Military Power

The emphasis on managing crises and reducing risk while ensuring adequate military readiness for contingencies can also be seen in revisions to the PLA’s guidelines for building and operating military power. The essence of PLA military strategy is captured in the “military strategic guidelines,” which contain the “principles and plans for preparing for and guiding the overall situation of war.”⁷² Under Xi, the PLA revised its military strategic guidelines in 2014. It upheld its long-standing emphasis on crisis prevention,

⁶⁸ “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s report at 17th Party Congress,” *China Daily*, October 24, 2007, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm.

⁶⁹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

⁷⁰ Yan Wenhui, “正确理解新时代军队使命任务” [Correctly Understand the Military’s Missions in the New Era], China Military Online, July 26, 2019.

⁷¹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

⁷² Academy of Military Science All-Army Military Terminology Management Committee, 中国人民解放军军语 [Military Terminology of the People’s Liberation Army] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2011), 50.

crisis management, and escalation control while prioritizing the information and maritime domains for war preparations. In sum, China's military continues to prioritize crisis prevention and management even as it refines its preparations for war based on an evolving understanding of the modern battlefield.⁷³

Given the current guidance, what might the PLA do in a crisis? Consider a Taiwan election with a surprising outcome and a U.S. policy change regarding Taiwan. If Taiwan were to elect a government that openly advocated for independence, the result would likely be a severe crisis. China could be expected to order the PLA to be on high alert and to posture for an attack. However, the PLA's deterrence and intimidation operations would take a back seat to diplomacy. Chinese leaders would probably seek U.S. help to manage the situation. If the United States were to refuse to cooperate and instead were to recognize Taiwan as an independent state, this would probably rupture U.S.-China relations and provoke Chinese leaders to re-examine their entire strategy. U.S. intentions could only be read as implacably hostile and result in what could well be the abandonment of the current national strategy in favor of a state of hostility that regarded a war of some kind with the United States as unavoidable.⁷⁴

Indeed, an escalation of tensions with the United States to a point of overt hostility is probably the only scenario in which China would abandon its current strategy and pursue more militarily aggressive actions. As happened from the 1950s to the 1970s, the designation of a world power as a primary threat to China's survival would render its current peacetime strategy unviable. In the face of a clear U.S. intention to destroy the nation, China may choose a new wartime strategy to seek the defeat of U.S. power. The result would be a potentially catastrophic global war between China and the United States.⁷⁵

Could Xi or a successor adopt a preemptive strategy of military aggression against Taiwan or the United States? Could they do so in a manner that evaded detection and thus permitted China to launch some sort of surprise attack? Xi has consolidated power, having placed himself at the center of the small leadership groups responsible for virtually all policy. He has also promoted loyalists to senior positions of power. However, repeated purges of top-tier leaders, including Qin Gang and Li Shangfu, suggest

⁷³ Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Military Strategy for a 'New Era': Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022): 1–36.

⁷⁴ Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Tristan Finazzo, *The Return of Great Power War: Scenarios of Systemic Conflict between the United States and China* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2022).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

that these individuals may be less than reliable.⁷⁶ Although the country's diplomacy has shown greater assertiveness, important continuities remain between Xi and his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. In all cases, Beijing has prioritized national development, rejected military aggression, and favored a stable order, albeit on terms that reflect China's interests. There may yet be some in the military with divergent views regarding appropriate strategies to secure the nation's interests. For example, some military leaders may well hold a more bellicose view of the United States. However, there is no evidence that the military as an institution has in any way sought to overturn or otherwise derail the political leadership's strategy to realize the China dream.

Any successor to Xi who sought a radically different strategy would need to demolish and discredit the existing strategy. The first step would be to clearly articulate a radical agenda and strategy that praised war and violence and argued in favor of a reprioritization of goals. The new leader would need to purge elites and suppress citizens who opposed such a change. Thus, a turn toward military aggression would likely be accompanied by considerable intra-elite conflict and extensive political repression. China would also need to manage intense international criticism and punitive measures. All of this would provide the United States with ample opportunities to exacerbate China's strategic difficulties and could provide time to mobilize its military and other assets to counter Chinese aggression.

Conclusion and Implications

China's challenge through midcentury will be to manage its relative decline amid a perilous domestic and international environment. With economic growth slowing and the domestic and international situation worsening, the CCP faces strong incentives to maintain a cautious attitude. China's best prospects for enduring into the next century lie in avoiding war, concentrating on national development, shoring up the foundations of CCP rule, and mitigating risks where possible. This summarizes the approach that Chinese leaders intend to take over the next few decades.

The military's role in achieving the China dream appears limited. The PLA is carrying out a range of coercive and other non-war activities to defend the nation's interests in a manner that minimizes the risk of war.

⁷⁶ Chad de Guzman, "Disappearance of Ministers Underscores China's Unpredictability as Xi Tightens Grip," *Time*, September 18, 2023, <https://time.com/6315253/china-missing-ministers-qin-gang-li-shangfu>.

Moreover, China has made it clear that it is dissatisfied with U.S. power and intends to challenge it in some way. All rising powers have sought to change elements of the status quo, and China is no different in this regard. However, its methods have to date proved to be far less bellicose than the methods used by past rising powers.

In 2049, the PRC will be 100 years old, an impressive achievement compared with the average duration of Communist regimes. But a PRC that reached its first centenary would still be considerably younger than major modern nation-states such as the United States, which reached its second centenary in 1976. Moreover, by the measure of Chinese imperial history, a 100-year-old PRC would rank as a modest achievement. The two immediately preceding dynasties, the Ming and Qing, each lasted roughly 300 years. In light of the CCP's disparagement of imperial dynasties as backwards and inferior, it would be humiliating in the extreme if CCP rule failed to endure beyond its first century. The PRC's first century will be an important milestone, but only that—a milestone. Chinese leaders are already thinking about the second century. Chinese media explain that the sixth plenary session of the 19th Party Congress, held in 2021, began initial guidance for “the second century of the CCP.”⁷⁷ Xi Jinping similarly emphasized the CCP's “responsibility to our descendants.”⁷⁸

China's disinterest in risking a war over Taiwan should provide the United States some breathing room to rebuild its own military and attend to its own pressing domestic demands. However, it also means that the United States will need to consider competition and gray-zone tactics as the principal challenges from China for the foreseeable future. There may be opportunities to build stronger crisis management mechanisms to reduce risks further. Moreover, Washington may need to adopt a broader perspective if it is to maintain deterrence near Taiwan over the long term. If China is willing to wait another century to resolve Taiwan's status, the United States may need to match Beijing's patience in what could prove to be an exceptionally long-lasting rivalry.

⁷⁷ Zhu Zheng, “Sixth Plenary Session Will Hold Great Significance in China's History,” CGTN, November 8, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-11-08/Sixth-plenary-session-will-hold-great-significance-in-China-s-history-14ZPqjFr8Y0/index.html>.

⁷⁸ Zhong, “以习近平总书记总体国家安全观为引领谱写国家安全新篇章.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines how the conflict in Ukraine has influenced the calculus of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for determining both whether to use military force in pursuit of political aims and how to use force most effectively.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Beijing is carefully studying Russia's faltering invasion of Ukraine and drawing lessons that inform its views on future warfare. PRC scholars assess that the risk of a protracted, costly, potentially disastrous great-power conflict has increased. To address this, they urge leaders to (1) improve deterrence capabilities, (2) avoid unnecessary conflict, and (3) prepare alternative means to resolving conflict to include the use of proxy wars and irregular warfare. PRC international security scholars are developing a renewed appreciation for the wide range of nonkinetic options available to sympathetic nations to support a nation resisting aggression, including economic sanctions and rapid provision of arms, material information, and intelligence support. PRC scholars portray the current conflict in Ukraine as deadlocked and treat the use of nuclear weapons as a real possibility. They also predict that many countries will observe the fate of Ukraine and decide to develop their own nuclear weapons programs. Some PRC observers portray U.S. efforts coordinating international support to Ukraine as a guide for predicting U.S. actions in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. and the West's demonstrated capacity to rapidly field an integrated slate of economic sanctions, material aid, weapons, and intelligence support in the face of Russian aggression has the potential to serve as a deterrence multiplier against the PRC.
- Uncertainty surrounding continued support to Ukraine may weaken U.S. deterrence in a Taiwan contingency, given that PRC analysts portray U.S. support to Ukraine as a useful proxy for assessing U.S. capacity to sustain persistent support in a protracted conflict.

PRC Lessons Learned from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for a Taiwan Conflict

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Tsun-Kai Tsai

When historians write the story of the 21st century, there is no doubt that Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine will mark a critical inflection point in worldwide perceptions about the use of military force. The lessons that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is learning from Russia's invasion and the implications that such thinking might have on Beijing's assessments regarding the potential for armed conflict over Taiwan are of high interest to nations around the globe. International security scholars have written hundreds of articles dissecting Beijing's response to the war since the onset of hostilities.

In Beijing, the conflict is also receiving tremendous attention. Referred to in the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as "the most serious geopolitical event since the end of the Cold War," Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been widely studied in PRC military and civilian research institutions.¹ As one interlocutor described the situation, the war is a true "research hot spot"; just about every university, think tank, and military research institution in the PRC has an effort underway to analyze some component of this conflict.

This level of interest is not surprising. During the initial months following Russia's invasion, PRC international security analysts were grappling with four shocks. The first was the invasion itself. Given the

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise is Director of the China Studies Program at CNA.

Tsun-Kai Tsai is a Senior Research Specialist in the China Studies Program at CNA.

This chapter represents only the views of the authors and not those of CNA or any of its sponsors, including the U.S. Navy, or the U.S. government.

¹ Ye Heng, "International Observation: 'Proxy War' Overdrafts U.S. Strategic Credibility," *People's Daily*, April 22, 2022.

public way in which Russia's invasion unfolded, the initiation of Russian hostilities was not exactly a surprise, but it was still a shock. The PRC, like most countries, saw the potential for a Russian invasion of Ukraine and took steps to prepare. Its diplomatic posturing in the lead-up to the invasion was carefully orchestrated, balancing implicit support for Moscow with closely held principles of peaceful coexistence—especially the principle of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.² At the onset of hostilities, Beijing did not have talking points ready to address Russian aggression and did not articulate a clear position for almost 24 hours. Moreover, Beijing conducted a confused and halting evacuation of PRC nationals from its mission in Kyiv.³ For these reasons, many Western observers assess that—although it is impossible to know what China's top leaders did or did not know about Vladimir Putin's plans—the PRC governing apparatus was not prepared for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁴ The second shock was the swift and decisive response to the invasion by sympathetic nations around the globe. This response was widely criticized by the PRC government as well as its civilian and military-affiliated scholars.⁵ The third shock was Russia's failure to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion. Last, the fourth shock was the potential for nuclear escalation. PRC observers were struck by the fact that the potential for crossing the nuclear threshold was greater than it

² Gu Ziyi, “德美法英外交官员就乌克兰局势等举行会谈” [German, American, French, and British Diplomats Hold Talks on Ukraine Situation], Xinhua, January 21, 2022, http://www.81.cn/w-j/2022-01/21/content_10125517.htm; “What Are Related Parties Calculating amid Massive Military Buildup Regarding Ukraine?” Xinhua, January 27, 2022, <http://english.news.cn/20220126/ca86d758bf8249c89c4989dfb3b2c8fa/c.html>; and Fang Xiaozhi, “北约出动战略航空兵并使用实战武器,对俄挑衅‘加码’” [NATO Dispatches Strategic Aviation and Uses Actual Combat Weapons “to Raise the Stakes” of Russia's Provocation], *PLA Daily*, November 25, 2021, http://www.81.cn/w-j/2021-11/25/content_10110527.htm.

³ Steve Holland, “China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine Invasion until after Olympics—NYT” Reuters, March 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-officials-say-china-asked-russia-delay-ukraine-war-until-after-beijing-2022-03-02>; Gu, “德美法英外交官员就乌克兰局势等举行会谈”; “What Are Related Parties Calculating amid Massive Military Buildup Regarding Ukraine?”; and Fang, “北约出动战略航空兵并使用实战武器,对俄挑衅‘加码’”

⁴ Holland, “China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine Invasion until after Olympics—NYT”; Gu, “德美法英外交官员就乌克兰局势等举行会谈”; “What Are Related Parties Calculating amid Massive Military Buildup Regarding Ukraine?”; and Fang, “北约出动战略航空兵并使用实战武器,对俄挑衅‘加码’”

⁵ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Press Release, February 24, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220224_10645282.html; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on March 1, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), March 1, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220301_10646858.html; Zhang Yunbi, “Experts: NATO's Role Worsens Ukraine Crisis,” *China Daily*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/29/WS62425b33a310fd2b29e53d06.html>; and “Self-Created Problems Nothing for Biden to Brag Of,” *China Daily*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/02/WS621f5d22a310cdd39bc89dbd.html>.

had been at any time since World War II and struggled to find language to describe the nature of this threat.

The conflict in Ukraine has undoubtedly influenced Beijing's understanding of the changing nature of warfare as well as its calculus for determining *whether* to use military force in pursuit of political aims and *how* to use it most effectively, both in general and in the context of a Taiwan conflict.

This chapter explores this thinking by considering PRC lessons from the conflict tied to escalation control, external assistance, and multidomain warfare. Next it describes key PRC views on the nuclear dimensions of the conflict. Finally, it discusses the implications of these lessons for the PRC's thinking about a potential Taiwan contingency.

PRC Lessons from Russia's War in Ukraine

Escalation Control Is Essential

One of the most significant PRC takeaways from Russia's prolonged military misadventure in Ukraine is the realization that, in the current geopolitical environment, controlling conflict escalation between major powers is extremely complex and that failing to do so can have disastrous consequences. Some PRC analysts argue that protracted conflict between major powers is more likely than it has been at any time since the two world wars: comparisons between the fight for the Donbas region and the Battle of Verdun are a common trope in this community.⁶ In a modern, protracted conflict between major powers, occasionally referred to as a "symmetric major-power war" (大国之间的对称战争), the ability to control escalation is perceived as essential to success.⁷

People's Liberation Army (PLA) authors have argued that most major-power wars since the end of the Cold War can be categorized as asymmetric, suggesting that some within the PRC had seen symmetric conflict as relegated to history. These authors counter that the Ukraine conflict demonstrates that symmetric conflict between great powers is still possible. They point to several key differences between the symmetric war currently being fought in Ukraine and the symmetric wars of the past—such as World

⁶ See, for example, “鏖战224天, 巴赫穆特‘绞肉机’之战终于结束, 接下来是哪里?” [After 224 Days of Fierce Fighting, the Battle of Bachmut's "Meat Grinder" Finally Ended. Where to Go Next?], Xinhua, May 22, 2023, http://www.news.cn/mil/2023-05/22/c_1212190204.htm.

⁷ Wu Qiang, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers," *Military Digest*, no. 7 (2023).

War I—and argue that key differences make symmetric major-power wars now more dangerous and difficult to control.⁸

The first difference is that today's major-power wars occur under the shadow of nuclear escalation.⁹ PLA scholars argue that this potential for escalation complicates risk assessments and decisions about both target selection and the intensity of force used.¹⁰ The second difference is that a symmetric war between major powers inherently complicates efforts to limit the scale or types of forces used. As one representative passage suggests, "Once the fighting begins, the fighting force will be quite large.... If warring powers still have allies in a war zone, the war is likely to affect these countries and create a spillover effect."¹¹ The third difference is in the types of weapons available. In addition to increasingly precise and lethal traditional weapons, these authors argue that major powers have more nonmilitary means available than ever before. For these reasons, they assert that it is extremely difficult to control the timing, scale, or costs associated with this type of war.¹²

One author describes three imperatives for actors seeking to mitigate the challenges of a symmetric major-power war: (1) improve deterrence capabilities by building and demonstrating a capacity to successfully prosecute this type of protracted war, (2) remember that the "strategic endurance of any great power is limited" and that it is therefore important to control war objectives and avoid entering conflict unnecessarily, and (3) prepare alternatives to resolve conflict, including with such tools as political, diplomatic, and economic actions, as well as proxy wars or irregular wars if necessary.¹³

⁸ Wu, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers"; Wu Daihui, "Large-Scale Regional Conventional War under Conditions of Quasi-Nuclear Deterrence," *World Knowledge*, no. 1 (2023); Wang Lin and Shi Yunfeng, "Research on Cognitive Confrontation of Nuclear Deterrence in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *China Aerospace*, no. 1 (2023); and Wu Chunsi, "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on International Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament," *International Outlook* 14, no. 3 (2022).

⁹ Wu, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers."

¹⁰ Wu, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers"; Wu, "Large-Scale Regional Conventional War"; Wang and Shi, "Research on Cognitive Confrontation of Nuclear Deterrence in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict"; and Wu, "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on International Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament."

¹¹ Wu, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers." Of note, although the term is not specifically used in these articles, the authors do appear to be discussing the potential for horizontal escalation.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

External Assistance Can Be a Game-Changer

Another high-level takeaway that PRC and PLA analysts appear to be drawing from the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a renewed appreciation for the wide range of nonkinetic options sympathetic nations have available for providing support to a nation resisting aggression. External assistance to Ukraine has had a profound impact on the conflict's trajectory and has been a critical element of virtually every Ukrainian military success. Many PRC writings on external aid have focused on criticizing the United States and NATO for interfering and prolonging the conflict. At times, external military assistance to Ukraine has been framed as a U.S.- and NATO-led plot to prolong the suffering of the Ukrainian people while attempting to defeat Russia in a proxy war.¹⁴ While direct criticism of Russia is more difficult to find in PRC publications, as the war continues, some reporting by PRC military enthusiasts contains interesting discussions on Russia's lack of foresight. One particularly direct comment posted on the social media account for the Chinese Institute of Command and Control took this issue head-on.¹⁵ The authors challenged any effort to explain away the Russian military's performance by blaming Western intervention: "Did they [the Russian planners] not take into account the support of the Western countries when drawing up the war plan? How could the biggest variable that could shape the course of the war be ignored?"¹⁶

PRC civilian academics have noted two aspects of support that suggest lessons for the PRC. First, they have discussed the speed at which an external supporter's decision to provide aid can translate to new weapons and equipment being fielded on the ground in Ukraine. One piece portrayed this as "a wake-up call that the logistical, transportation, and training capabilities of these old imperialist countries are still very strong." The author urged careful study of the pace of external assistance in the Ukraine war as well as a re-evaluation of confrontation with any of China's neighbors, such as India, based on this information.¹⁷

Second, PRC authors have argued that Ukraine's military has benefited as much from foreign intelligence support as it has from the provision of

¹⁴ "俄乌冲突暴露美新版代理人战略" [Russia-Ukraine Conflict Exposes New U.S. Proxy Strategy], Xinhua, April 7, 2022, http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-04/07/c_1211633995.htm; and Zhang, "Experts: NATO's Role Worsens Ukraine Crisis."

¹⁵ For more on the Chinese Institute of Command and Control, see <http://www.c2.org.cn>.

¹⁶ "“俄乌冲突”给中国军队的10大启示" [Ten Lessons for the Chinese Military from the "Russia-Ukraine Conflict"], Chinese Institute of Command and Control, June 6, 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid.

material goods.¹⁸ In particular, PRC authors have noted the importance of tactical air reconnaissance platforms, communications systems such as Starlink, and the use of facial recognition software. They have also noted that foreign intelligence support has played a critical role in some of the Ukrainian military's more high-profile successes, such as the April 2022 sinking of the Russian warship *Moskva*.¹⁹

It is uncertain to what extent the role of external intelligence support is featured in PRC leaders' thinking about future warfare; however, civilian academics are clearly drawing lessons about the PRC's future defense needs. One civilian academic opined:

U.S. support for the entire intelligence system of Ukraine has formed an asymmetric and transparent advantage over Russia. Russia's strategy, tactics, communications, logistics, and military mobilization are transparent to Ukraine, while Ukraine's military operations are half-blind to Russia. Our country urgently needs to summarize the advantages of the U.S. intelligence system, establish a Chinese version of the Starlink system, strengthen wartime communication system security and battlefield situation awareness capabilities, and optimize intelligence and counterintelligence system capabilities.²⁰

All Domains Matter, and There Are No Magic Weapons

PLA writings have long described future warfare as “multidomain” in nature and emphasized the importance of new warfighting domains such as cyber, space, and cognitive.²¹ In writings on the conflict in Ukraine, there is little to suggest that the PLA's core concept of multidomain precision warfare has changed. However, an emerging theme is that all domains are important, that none can be neglected, and that several of Russia's battlefield failures can be linked to a lack of appreciation for this reality. In the early weeks of the war, it was common to find articles calling out specific aspects of the conflict—such as the use of cognitive warfare or certain types of weapons

¹⁸ Zhang Gaoyuan, “The Intelligence Support Practices of the United States and the West in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict,” *Journal of Intelligence* 42, no. 1 (2023); and Zhou Songqing, “A Study on the Asymmetry and Transparency of U.S. Intelligence Support for Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict,” *Journal of Intelligence* (2023).

¹⁹ See, for example, “讲武谈兵 | 新‘非对称作战’?从俄乌军事冲突看当代游击战” [Talking about War and Discussing Soldiers—New “Asymmetric Warfare?” Looking at Contemporary Guerrilla Warfare from the Perspective of the Russia-Ukraine Military Conflict], *Paper*, April 19, 2022, https://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao_detail.jsp?contid=17687358&from=kuaibao.

²⁰ Zhou, “A Study on the Asymmetry and Transparency of U.S. Intelligence Support.”

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023), 41, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

like man-portable air-defense systems—and portraying them as decisive. However, as the conflict reached the one-year mark, this narrative began to shift to a gradual recognition that, while the war had brought to light many important developments, no single weapon or tactic would alone decisively affect the war or its conclusion.

Hybrid, information, and cognitive warfare are critical but have limits. Early in the war, there was much discussion—both in PRC and global media—about the role information, and especially social media, would play in garnering international support, sowing confusion among adversaries, gaining tactical advantage, and collecting battlefield intelligence. Some portrayed information as a game-changer that would determine the course of the war. However, this discourse now reflects a recognition that, while information and intelligence remain critical wartime assets, in order to defeat an adversary, operations in the physical and nonphysical domains must be coordinated and combined.²²

As one author noted: “The development of ‘joint war’ has given it significant technological characteristics of the times. In this Ukrainian crisis, information warfare and cyber warfare coordinate with traditional military operations and joint military deployments to dominate conflicts.”²³ Another author provided the following assessment:

On the one hand, online news has become an important source of battlefield intelligence, such as the creation of official apps that encourages the Ukrainian public to post discovered Russian actions online to help Ukrainian forces judge Russian tactical deployments. On the other hand, this has greatly increased the difficulty of hybrid and information warfare. Disinformation spread by both sides is endless, making the battlefield foggy.... In the end, the battlefield is still about logistics and supplies and the country’s overall strength.²⁴

To be clear, understanding how to make better use of technology and more effectively leverage unmanned systems, information, space, and cyber capabilities in war continues to be a focus for PRC and especially PLA authors. Intense research is undoubtedly underway to dissect and intensify lessons from operations taking place in every warfighting domain. Starting

²² A piece on this issue written by Japanese analyst Koichiro Takagi was translated into Chinese and seemed to gain some traction. See Koichiro Takagi, “乌克兰战争中的认知战给了中国人民解放军哪些启示?” [What Did the Cognitive Warfare in the Ukraine War Teach the Chinese People’s Liberation Army?], Guancha, August 6, 2022, https://www.guancha.cn/KoichiroTakagi/2022_08_06_652581_2.shtml.

²³ Xu Shuyue and Gao Fei, “A Theoretical and Practical Analysis of ‘Hybrid Warfare’ in the Context of the Ukraine,” *Peace and Development*, no. 4 (2023).

²⁴ “俄乌打了一年,这些战争经验被改写” [Russia and Ukraine Have Been Fighting for a Year and These War Experiences Have Been Rewritten], Xinhua, February 24, 2023, http://www.news.cn/mil/2023-02/24/c_1211732542.htm.

about a year after the invasion, however, PRC writings suggest a gradual recognition that, in a protracted war, these tools are most effective when used in coordination with physical attacks.

Russian hypersonic missiles can be countered. PRC observers were also struck by reports in May 2023 that Ukrainian forces were able to intercept a hypersonic Russian Kh-47 Kinzhal missile—a weapon that some in the PRC had referred to as an anti-NATO “assassin’s mace” (杀手锏).²⁵ As reports filtered in, many in the PRC expressed doubt that such an intercept was theoretically possible, while others pointed to weaknesses in the Russian missile and suggested that it was of inferior quality and could be countered.²⁶ It is unclear what PRC observers ultimately concluded; however, the incident did cause at least one PRC observer to comment that “there is no such thing as a weapon that cannot be intercepted.”²⁷

The low-altitude battlefield cannot be ignored. While no specific weapons system has been viewed as a singular game-changer, PRC and PLA observers of the conflict have developed renewed appreciation for the importance of the low-altitude battlefield in establishing air supremacy. Sometimes referred to as “the ‘junction’ connecting airspace and the land area,”²⁸ low altitude is defined by the PLA as 100 to 1,000 meters.²⁹ PRC civilian and military analysts have noted that Ukraine has been successful in using the low-altitude domain to mount an effective defense against Russian military forces and are likely considering the implications of this development for potential future conflicts. One article in the *PLA Daily* described the importance of the low-altitude battlefield as follows: “With the rapid development and large-scale application of low-altitude combat equipment such as helicopters, small and medium-sized micro-UAVs, and loitering bombs, low-altitude

²⁵ “乌克兰声称击落匕首高超音速导弹,难道是神话破灭了吗?” [Ukraine Claims to Shoot Down Dagger Hypersonic Missile, Is It a Myth?], Sohu, May 12, 2023, https://news.sohu.com/a/680554795_121687414.

²⁶ “乌称‘爱国者’拦截俄‘匕首’ 组建无人机部队乌欲大反攻?” [Ukraine Claims That “Patriot” Intercepted Russia’s “Dagger” and Formed a Drone Force. Is Ukraine Planning a Major Counterattack?], CCTV, *Focus Today*, May 8, 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/05/08/VIDEgLM3fTuRBFQXSwPJZBv2230508.shtml?spm=C45305.PmBKBQYn4ReN.E2dBM12Vdbg1.34>.

²⁷ “‘匕首’深陷‘被拦截’迷雾英国援乌远程巡航导弹俄乌冲突恐陷入‘风暴阴影’” [“Dagger” Is Mired in the Fog of “Being Intercepted,” Britain Aids Ukraine with Long-Range Cruise Missiles, and the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine May Fall into a “Storm Shadow”], CCTV, *Military Commanding Heights*, May 14, 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/05/14/VIDELY2WcZdd1MYpMOICJPgp230514.shtml?spm=C52346.Pbpce3GiZw4.EAppepud582n.23>.

²⁸ Zhang Peng, “夺取未来陆战低空制权” [Seize the Low-Altitude Dominance of Future Land Warfare], *PLA Daily*, May 23, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-23&paperNumber=07&articleid=906414.

²⁹ Zhu Rongchang, ed. *空军大辞典* [Air Force Dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press, 1996); and Yao Wei, ed. *中国空军百科全书* [China Air Force Encyclopedia], vol. 2 (Beijing: Aviation Industry Press, 2005), 800.

battlefields have become more and more important, and low-altitude control has become one of the comprehensive controls that must be captured in future land warfare.”³⁰

PLA authors have also reflected on the various means of establishing air dominance. As one PLA author notes:

The traditional way to seize air dominance is to use air to control the air, that is, to use fighter jets to clear air threats, cover bombers to bomb enemy airports, and destroy enemy aircraft. With the gradual improvement of the combat performance of the ground air defense system, ground-to-air control has also become an important means of seizing control of the air...the method of “air combat + ground combat” is often adopted, and air-ground joint control of air power has become the norm.³¹

PRC military enthusiasts note that Russia has suffered significant losses due to its failure to establish low-altitude air dominance (低空制空权). In particular, they note the disproportionate costs associated with the low-altitude battlefield.³² While the Russian military can establish high-altitude air dominance, its inability to control the junction between land and air has made it vulnerable to Ukrainian attacks and placed its high-altitude air dominance at risk.³³ This risk has manifested in a loss of helicopters, fighter aircraft, and, most significantly, pilots. Reports that Russia lost ten warplanes in a single day in March 2022 left a particularly deep impression.³⁴

PRC authors credit external support for much of the Ukrainian military’s success at low altitudes. They argue that Ukrainian forces have been able to challenge Russia in this battlespace because of access to both superior drones that assist in targeting and portable anti-aircraft missiles.³⁵ When discussing whether the PLA would fare better in such a conflict, one article noted the sizeable PLA inventory of helicopters with insufficient

³⁰ Zhang, “夺取未来陆战低空制权.”

³¹ Wu Mingqi, “回望世纪空战风云,制空权有何新变化” [Looking Back at the Air Combat Situation of the Century, What Are the New Changes in Air Dominance], *PLA Daily*, May 12, 2022, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4910704.html>.

³² Tiege Feima, “Why Does Russia, Which Has Air Supremacy, Still Allow Advanced Western Weapons to Be Transported into Ukraine?” *Sina*, August 21, 2022.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “俄空军表现不佳? 专家提醒避免两个‘错觉’” [“Russian Air and Space Forces Underperforming? Experts Warn to Avoid Two ‘Illusions’], *Xinhua*, March 7, 2022, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2022-03/07/c_1211598519.htm.

³⁵ “俄空军表现不佳? 专家提醒避免两个‘错觉’”; and Tang Jun, “低空杀手:从俄乌冲突看便携式防空导弹” [Low-Altitude Killer: Looking at Portable Air Defense Missiles from the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine], *Paper*, March 18, 2022, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17180475.

electronic countermeasures to counter shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles and called for an upgrade.³⁶

Future warfare is drone-centric. While they are not presented as decisive weapons that could alone change the course of a war, discussion of drones is ubiquitous in PRC writings about the Ukrainian battlefield. The conflict has provided professional militaries around the world an opportunity to see drones as both enablers of military operations and important weapons in their own right. Russia's and Ukraine's successes and failures in their respective uses of drones are often discussed.³⁷

PRC military observers note that integrating drones into low-altitude warfare has provided added value in terms of intelligence collection and targeting and enabled Ukraine to make critical gains.³⁸ Others have observed the value of drones as swarming weapons for use during "suicide" attacks.³⁹ The attack on the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet in the port of Sevastopol, where Ukraine conducted a joint air and sea attack using swarming drones and unmanned boats, is often cited as an example.⁴⁰ One PRC author portrayed this battle as a preview of a "new model of maritime warfare."⁴¹ An assessment of how such technology could be applied to operations in and around the Taiwan Strait contended with these capabilities. It argued that drones could be used for (1) air reconnaissance and early warning, (2) battlefield surveillance and reconnaissance, including long-term, real-time monitoring of key sea areas around the island of Taiwan and the skies above Taiwan's outer islands, and (3) electronic jamming, with an eye toward both blinding the enemy's air-defense radar and paralyzing the command communication system.⁴²

³⁶ "‘俄乌冲突’给中国军队的10大启示."

³⁷ Liu Yunhua, Yang Jian, and Kang Jing, "聚焦俄特别军事行动中无人机的突破与困境" [Focus on Breakthroughs and Difficulties of UAVs in Russian Special Military Operations], China.com, July 4, 2022, <https://military.china.com/news/13004177/20220704/42714899.html>; and "谁在提供情报?从哪里发动攻击? 乌军无人艇偷袭事件谜团重重" [Who Is Providing Intelligence? Where to Attack From? The Sneak Attack on the Unmanned Boat of the Ukrainian Army Is Full of Mysteries], Xinhua, May 26, 2023, http://www.news.cn/mil/2023-05/26/c_1212192403.htm.

³⁸ Feima, "Why Does Russia."

³⁹ Lan Shunzheng, "小船搏大舰——自杀式小艇袭击与防御问题漫谈" [Small Ships Fight Big Ships—a Discussion on the Attack and Defense of Suicide Boats], *Shipboard Weapons*, April 20, 2023, available at <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=980397>.

⁴⁰ Chen Yang, "无人艇凌晨突袭" [Unmanned Boat Raid in the Early Morning], *Paper*, November 3, 2022, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_20577383; and "‘苏联海军最后的余晖落幕!’ 巨舰沉没, 无人作战时代来临" ["The Last Glimmer of the Soviet Navy Has Ended!" The Giant Ship Sank, and the Era of Unmanned Combat Has Arrived], Xinhua, February 17, 2023, http://www.news.cn/mil/2023-02/17/c_1211729787.htm.

⁴¹ "‘苏联海军最后的余晖落幕!’ 舰沉没, 无人作战时代来临."

⁴² Yang Jiahui, Zhu Chaolei, and Xu Jia, "The Use of Drones in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Tactical Missile Technology*, no. 3 (2022); and Zhang Yuanhua, "Research on the Combat Use of Drone Technology in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Science, Technology and Innovation*, no. 9 (2023).

PRC Thinking on the Nuclear Dimensions of the Conflict

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, PRC scholars and military analysts observing the war in Ukraine believe that it shares similarities with protracted campaigns throughout history. However, because this conflict is occurring in the shadow of nuclear escalation, it is fundamentally different from what has preceded it and possibly the start of a new type of conflict.

PRC authors often discuss the seemingly unique deterrence dynamics reflected in the conduct of the war. The most frequently cited event in this discussion is Russia's announcement on the third day of the crisis that its nuclear forces had been placed on their highest alert. This move is portrayed as an effort by Russia to deter the United States, NATO, or others from intervening in the conflict. That the warring parties were only partially deterred and international support continued to flow into Ukraine appears to have been something of a surprise for PRC analysts. One academic referred to the resulting conflict as a "large-scale regional conventional war under conditions of quasi-nuclear deterrence," noting that "large-scale" referred to not only the geographic scope of the war but also the ranges of weapons used and the costs associated with the conflict.⁴³ PRC analysts have observed with interest which actions Russia's nuclear saber-rattling has deterred and appear to be struggling to determine whether there are any generalizable lessons on the nature of nuclear deterrence. These academics portray the conflict as deadlocked and treat the use of nuclear weapons by either side as a very real possibility.⁴⁴ As one author wrote: "Although Russia has issued vague nuclear threats many times, it has not caused Ukraine to give up its resistance, nor has it stopped the Western aggression led by the United States.... In other words, the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent has eroded. This is obviously an ominous sign for a nuclear power."⁴⁵ Other aspects of the conflict discussed include the risks to nuclear power facilities and the potential for damage to Chernobyl.

Beyond the immediate conflict in Ukraine, PRC academics appear to see implications for proliferation in Asia. One author voiced concerns about the increased potential for non-nuclear weapons countries to cross the nuclear threshold. Suggesting that many nations were comparing the

⁴³ Wu, "Large-Scale Regional Conventional War."

⁴⁴ Wu, "Large-Scale Regional Conventional War"; Wu, "Analysis of the Complexity of Symmetrical War between Great Powers"; and Wang and Shi, "Research on Cognitive Confrontation of Nuclear Deterrence in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict."

⁴⁵ He Liu and Wang Weinan, "The U.S. Strategy to Intervene in the Russo-Ukrainian War and Its Impact on U.S. Taiwan Strait Policy," *Cross-Taiwan Strait Studies*, no. 3 (2022).

fate of Ukraine to the fate of North Korea, the scholar asserted that Japan and South Korea both had the potential to develop nuclear weapons in the not-too-distant future and suggested that other nations in the Indo-Pacific could soon follow.⁴⁶ This was portrayed as a worrying risk to be mitigated. To address these challenges, the author urged the PRC to pursue a policy of “self-restraint” by providing “positive energy” for nuclear arms control and disarmament and seeking opportunities to promote nuclear safety. The author also encouraged the PRC to more carefully track attitudes toward nuclear proliferation in countries around its periphery—especially in Japan and South Korea.⁴⁷

Implications for the PRC’s Thinking about a Potential Taiwan Contingency

It is difficult to assess the extent to which observations of the conflict in Ukraine, the performance of Russian and Ukrainian forces, and the international community might influence PRC thinking about the potential for the use of force in a Taiwan contingency. There can be no doubt that PRC leaders are assessing the United States’ actions during the war and determining whether its support for Ukraine provides lessons for predicting similar actions in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. One especially detailed article published in a journal run by the Shanghai-based Taiwan Institute makes several predictions—some of which are clearly at odds with how the United States would view a conflict in Taiwan.⁴⁸

- The United States would be prepared to launch a special military operation in Taiwan similar to the one Russia is currently carrying out in Ukraine.
- The United States would provide military assistance to Taiwan before the war broke out. This assistance would include not only weapons, equipment, and intelligence support but also the design of flexible combat models tailored to local conditions and field training for the Taiwanese military.

⁴⁶ Wu, “The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ He and Wang, “The U.S. Strategy to Intervene in the Russo-Ukrainian War.”

- The United States would attempt to mobilize the international community and impose sanctions designed to weaken the PRC's access to strategic resources. The United States would also use information warfare and public opinion to damage the PRC's international image.
- The United States would be wary of China's status as a nuclear power and would not want to trigger a nuclear war; it thus would maintain some degree of restraint in aiding Taiwan. If China achieved rapid success—unlike Russia's experience with Ukraine—then U.S. aid to Taiwan would likely consist only of political and moral support.
- If China failed to win quickly, the United States would likely directly or openly send troops to participate in the war.
- U.S. allies closer to Taiwan, such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand, would play the role of Poland and the Baltic countries in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- The United States would promote ideological differences and frame support for Taiwan as support for democracy.⁴⁹

Although it is unclear how widely these assessments are believed, the fact that such a specific and detailed discussion of how U.S. actions in support of Ukraine can be applied to a Taiwan contingency exists and has been printed in the PRC shows that some in China are making these comparisons. At the very least, U.S. and NATO responses to Russian aggression, and the staying power of U.S. and NATO support, are being carefully analyzed.

With regard to Russia's shortcomings, PRC writings suggest some level of confidence in diagnosing the cause of Russian missteps and ensuring that Chinese political and military systems would not make similar errors. However, given Beijing's controlled information environment, this confidence should be viewed with a level of skepticism. It is difficult to imagine that true introspection is permissible in the public domain. There is little room for public discussion in the PRC of the possibility that Chinese political and military leaders could be susceptible to the same errors made by Russian leaders. There is even less room for public discussion about whether Beijing is capable of making accurate assessments of the resolve of the international community on an issue as emotionally charged as Taiwan. Nonetheless, it is clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides an object lesson in errors that militaries should avoid.

⁴⁹ He and Wang, "The U.S. Strategy to Intervene in the Russo-Ukrainian War."

There is evidence that Beijing sees the war in Ukraine as an indicator that the current geopolitical climate has made protracted conventional war among great powers more likely. While PRC military theorists may still be struggling to develop the language to describe these changes, it is clear that they recognize the new costs and risks associated with this type of conflict. If nothing else, PRC leaders are developing a greater appreciation for the types of costs the PRC might expect to pay (across all the elements of national power) in a protracted conflict and are seeking mechanisms to mitigate them. Areas where it is most logical to expect that PRC thinking has shifted include the role of nuclear weapons, international support for Taiwan below the threshold of active military participation, the wartime uses of drones in both reconnaissance and combat, the critical role of intelligence support, and the expanding role of the information domain in modern warfare.

Finally, it is worth noting that the conflict's ultimate resolution may have an outsized impact on Beijing's calculus and actions. As the conflict continues, the PRC will no doubt carefully assess U.S. and European staying power—especially in light of debates over foreign military aid budgets. Beijing will also continue carefully monitoring the long-term costs of economic warfare for all parties and the impact of these costs on the global economy. PRC leaders will surely make their own assessment about the ultimate fate of Russia and its comprehensive national power. Whether they will view the war as a strategic failure for Russia, and whether such lessons will discourage the PRC's use of military force across the Taiwan Strait, remain to be seen.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) within the context of its modernization process and argues that the persistence of shortcomings may undercut the confidence senior leaders would prefer to have before deciding to initiate major combat.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Over the past decade, the PLA has significantly increased the capabilities of its services in all domains of war, providing China's leaders with new military options to defend the country's national interests. However, based on problems in its combined arms and joint warfighting capabilities, leadership, and political loyalty, senior PLA leaders foresee decades of work before the PLA considers itself a modern, world-class military confident in its ability to conduct advanced, system-of-systems warfare. Despite the numerous improvements in equipment and organization, the PLA perceives itself as trailing the world leaders in many aspects of military technology, racing against time while its opponents are not slowing down. Even though the PLA may be required to fight at any moment, its leaders would prefer to stick to their modernization schedule ending in 2049 and achieve the nation's goals through efforts short of war.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Evaluating Chinese reports of the PLA's weaknesses is difficult because they are subjective rather than objective and measurable.
- Underestimating PLA capabilities is dangerous, but overestimating the pace and effectiveness of PLA modernization could lead to policies that cause China to increase the speed and scope of its efforts, resulting in an escalatory spiral or arms race.
- The PLA's self-assessments of its capabilities should be compared with both the actions it undertakes and the potential options it refrains from taking.
- When interacting publicly with foreigners, Chinese leaders will not display doubts about PLA capabilities to "fight and win."

Assessing the PLA's Strengths and Weaknesses for Achieving the PRC's Goals

Dennis J. Blasko and Rick Gunnell

Since Xi Jinping became chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2012, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has significantly increased the capabilities of its services and forces in all domains of war (land, sea, air, space, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive), providing China's leaders with unprecedented military options to protect the country's sovereignty and national interests. Yet, despite undertaking its most extensive organizational military reforms in years from 2015 to 2020, the PLA continues to identify many significant weaknesses in its combined arms and joint warfighting capabilities, combat leadership, and political loyalty, some of which have plagued the forces for years.

Using generalized slogans and specific criticisms, Chairman Xi, his senior generals, and the official military media routinely acknowledge that the PLA still has decades to go before it considers itself a modern, world-class military and is confident in its ability to conduct modern system-of-systems warfare. Therefore, if possible, the PLA would prefer to follow the multi-generation military modernization strategy it began 25 years ago and is scheduled to conclude in 2049. Yet, if external circumstances dictate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) orders the use of military force, the PLA leadership will obey and seek to accomplish its assigned missions with the forces at hand despite their shortcomings.

Dennis J. Blasko is a retired Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, with 23 years of service as a Military Intelligence Officer and Foreign Area Officer specializing in China.

Rick Gunnell is the Research Professor of China Military Studies in the U.S. Army War College's China Landpower Studies Center.

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This chapter first briefly describes PLA strengths identified mostly by the U.S. government and analysts outside the People's Republic of China (PRC). It then discusses what 2027, 2035, and 2049 mean in the process of PLA modernization. Subsequently, the chapter examines general PLA slogans that urge its personnel and units to improve their combat capabilities and provides recent examples of specific PLA-identified weaknesses. Within this context, it speculates about how the Russian and Ukrainian militaries' battlefield performance might have influenced the PLA's internal assessments of its own capabilities.

The PLA's Strengths

Generally, senior PLA leadership and official military media do not publicly boast about the PLA's strengths compared to other militaries. Instead, they praise the progress it is making in its military modernization process, including the wide array of modern weapons and equipment that have entered the force over the past two decades. For example, the *PLA Daily* stated that the new Type 055 destroyer, compared to its predecessor, features several improvements, but the paper does not go so far as to call it a world-class ship.¹ PLA media frequently uses the term “assassin's mace” (撒手锏) to describe the many weapons and capabilities that can provide a battlefield advantage, such as aircraft carriers, Dongfeng (DF) missiles, and J-20 stealth fighters.² Technological improvements in equipment are noted officially, such as in the report from the 2021 All-PLA Equipment Work Conference: “The PLA no longer uses first-generation equipment, and second-generation equipment is minimized. The PLA has established an equipment system-of-systems with third-generation equipment as the main equipment and fourth-generation equipment as the backbone.”³

In August 2023, the *PLA Daily* published a series of posters depicting recent PLA technological accomplishments and listed the following systems by date (mostly by their introduction into the active force):

- 2016: Y-20 heavy-lift transport aircraft

¹ “The Eighth Type 055 Destroyer Officially Commissioned to PLA Navy,” China Military Online, April 23, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16219372.html.

² Yu Shiyong, “能力更强大 手段更可靠” [Stronger Capabilities, More Reliable Means], *PLA Daily*, August 9, 2021, http://www.81.cn/pl_208541/jdt_208542/10073231.html.

³ Wu Qian, “2021年11月国防部例行记者会文字实录” [Transcript of the Ministry of National Defense's Regular Press Conference, November 2021], Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (PRC), November 25, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/shouye/2021-11/25/content_4899682.htm.

- 2018: Type 15 light tank and the Z-20 helicopter
- 2019: DF-17 hypersonic medium-range ballistic missile, DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile, and *Shandong*, the first domestically produced aircraft carrier
- 2020: *Nanchang*, a Type 055 destroyer
- 2021: *Changzheng-18*, a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine; *Dalian*, a Type 055 destroyer; *Hainan*, a Type 075 amphibious assault ship; and three echelons of J-20 stealth fighters (which flew over Tiananmen Square and first entered the force in 2017)
- 2022: *Fujian*, the second domestically produced but first domestically designed aircraft carrier, and the YY-20 aerial refueler

The text of the accompanying article described these accomplishments as “significant progress...in the construction of national defense science and technology and weapons and equipment.” These accomplishments are the result of Chinese “initiative through independent innovation” in contrast to “frequent reports of great powers’ heavy weapons.”⁴ Still, with none of its modern weapons systems or personnel tested in combat, the PLA itself appears to be hesitant to assume the mantle of “best in the world.” Highly choreographed parades on land or sea for anniversaries and important events are used to display advanced weapons and support equipment. However, official Chinese media is less effusive about the PLA’s ability to employ its new weapons according to its evolving doctrine in advanced, system-of-systems joint and combined arms operations.

On the other hand, outside China, advances in PLA weapons often are portrayed as having reached state-of-the-art or nearly state-of-the-art levels. In 2020 the U.S. Department of Defense’s China Military Power Report declared that the PRC is already ahead of the United States in shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems. The report further asserted that the “PRC continues to place a high priority on modernizing the PLA’s capability to command complex joint operations in near and distant battlefields. The PRC is seeking to enhance the PLA’s joint command and control systems, joint logistics systems, and command, control, communications, computers,

⁴ “科技是核心战斗力——八论全面深入学习贯彻习近平强军思想” [Science and Technology Are the Core of Combat Effectiveness—Eight Essays Comprehensively and Thoroughly Study and Implement Xi Jinping’s Thought on Strengthening the Military], *PLA Daily*, August 9, 2023, http://www.81.cn/tj_208608/16243763.html.

intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.”⁵ At the same time, the PLA is modernizing and expanding the size and capabilities of its nuclear triad. These strategic assets are enhanced by Chinese space operations, which, according to the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, are “steadily progressing toward [the PRC’s] goal of becoming a world-class space leader, with the intent to match or surpass the United States by 2045.”⁶

In 2023 the Australian Strategic Policy Institute concluded that China leads the world in 37 of 44 critical technologies, especially in advanced data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, and hardware accelerators.⁷ The PLA’s strengths in intelligence gathering, processing, and exploitation systems enhance its ability to comprehensively assess the United States’ and other militaries’ capabilities. The use of terms and phrases such as “strong enemy” (强敌), “formidable opponent” (强敌对手), and “use the enemy to train the troops” (拿敌练兵) are explicit calls to learn from adversaries and develop realistic training.⁸

As early as August 2018, the PLA began procuring a new (or likely enhancing an existing) open-source intelligence database on foreign militaries.⁹ As the PRC reduces foreign access to its own data, it is applying AI to leverage open-source intelligence to better understand foreign militaries and defense industries, including those from the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and India. The PLA is also increasing its use of virtual reality and training simulators to increase soldier and unit

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020* (Washington, D.C., September 2020), 38, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

⁶ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C., February 2023), 8, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

⁷ Jamie Gaida et al., “ASPI’s Critical Technology Tracker—Sensors and Biotech Updates,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 22, 2023, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/critical-technology-tracker>.

⁸ Ryan D. Martinson and Conor Kennedy, “Using the Enemy to Train the Troops—Beijing’s New Approach to Prepare Its Navy for War,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 25, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/using-the-enemy-to-train-the-troops-beijings-new-approach-to-prepare-its-navy-for-war>; and “深入推进实战化军事训练” [Deepen Combat-Oriented Military Training], *PLA Daily*, February 16, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-02-16&paperNumber=07&articleId=662882.

⁹ “外军防务开源情报数据库建设” [Building an Open-Source Intelligence Database on Foreign Militaries], All-Military Weapons Procurement Information, August 27, 2018; and Julian E. Barnes, “China Investing in Open-Source Intelligence Collection on the U.S.,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/01/us/politics/china-us-open-source-intelligence.html>.

capabilities, especially for pilots and staff in all services.¹⁰ The PLA is likely pursuing these efforts to develop both capabilities and countermeasures against potential adversaries.

The divergence between the PLA's reporting on its progress and Western assessments of its capabilities can likely be attributed to the PLA wanting to position itself as a world leader (but not necessarily the leader) in the future. The PLA recognizes that technology and future warfare will evolve in ways that can only be imagined today; thus, its current opacity probably has less to do with masking true progress and more to do with being realistic that warfare and equipment can evolve in many ways over the coming decades, with the lead shifting back and forth among countries over time in various domains and technologies. The U.S. military is not always the PLA's measuring rod for world-class standards because the PRC accepts that one country cannot be the leader in every aspect of warfare. Instead, it looks at military modernization holistically, taking inspiration from whichever country is leading and working toward being competitive in all domains.

Recent changes in the PLA Rocket Force's senior leadership notwithstanding, the PLA is likely most confident in its ability to execute a large-scale, conventional short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missile punishment attack against Taiwan. "Soft kill methods" against Taiwan, such as cyberattacks, infrastructure "kill switches," and psychological warfare, are more feasible, as well as less disruptive internationally, and are an option that is already being employed.¹¹ The Taiwan situation is one example of how the PLA's strengths are formidable due to its geographic advantage within the first island chain and increasingly out to the second island chain. As the PLA operates farther from the Chinese mainland, these strengths decrease.

Lastly, the PLA regards its "military-political dual leadership system" (军政双首长制) as a strength and "magic weapon" (法宝).¹² At the company

¹⁰ Chen Dianhong, "模拟飞行, 虚拟空间磨砺打仗本领" [Simulated Flight, Virtual Space to Sharpen Combat Skills], *PLA Daily*, May 14, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-14&paperNumber=02&articleid=905740; and "东部战区陆军 科技练兵 仿真技术助推飞行员战力提升" [Eastern Theater Command Army's Training Simulation Technology Boosts Pilot Combat Strength], China Central Television, April 28, 2022, <https://tv.cctv.com/2022/04/28/VIDEz1wZjKvntArv2EmeFJyI220428.shtml?spm=C28340.P3GbPoIN6ktz.EYNivD0SyIDR.3>.

¹¹ Elisabeth Braw, "China Is Practicing How to Sever Taiwan's Internet," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/21/matsu-islands-internet-cables-china-taiwan>.

¹² Dang Jian, "在党的旗帜下奋斗强军" [Strive to Strengthen the Army under the Banner of the Party], *PLA Daily*, July 20, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-07-20&paperNumber=01&articleid=910913.

level and higher, a commander and political commissar (or political instructor) share responsibility for everything the unit does. Despite flaws in some officers and questions about party loyalty, the system has survived multiple restructurings over many decades and is designed to ensure that all participants clearly understand and are prepared to execute their assigned missions.

The PLA's Modernization Timeline

The PLA is halfway through a five-decade, multifaceted military modernization process. Over time, the milestones and specific goals have been modified, but the end date has remained the same. Due to the complexity of this process and the PLA's lack of recent combat experience, the senior leadership would prefer to take the time necessary to train its personnel and units for the rigors of high-intensity, multidomain conflict rather than committing the PLA to battle when it is not fully prepared.

In 1997, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, the CCP's 15th National Congress issued a strategic plan to modernize the PLA in three stages over the next 50 years. Jiang noted that "there are still some prominent contradictions and problems in the PLA's development [that] affect and restrict PLA building."¹³ However, the CCP did not announce this plan to the world until its 2006 white paper on national defense, which stated:

China pursues a three-step development strategy in modernizing its national defense and armed forces.... The first step is to lay a solid foundation by 2010, the second is to make major progress around 2020, and the third is to basically reach the strategic goal of building informatized armed forces and being capable of winning informatized wars by the mid-21st century [i.e., 2049].¹⁴

The milestones for 2010 and 2020 were so vague that nearly any progress would suffice. Two years later, the end goal was modified to "by and large reach the goal of modernization of national defense and armed forces by the mid-21st century,"¹⁵ dropping the reference to informatized armed forces and wars probably because the senior PLA leadership realized that by

¹³ Jiang Zemin, "江泽民: 实现国防和军队现代化建设跨世纪发展的战略目标" [Jiang Zemin: Realize the Strategic Goal of Cross-Century Development of National Defense and Military Modernization], *China Reform*, December 7, 1997, <http://www.reformdata.org/1997/1207/5729.shtml>.

¹⁴ "China Issues White Paper on National Defense," *China Daily*, December 29, 2006, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-12/29/content_770831.htm.

¹⁵ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2008* (Beijing, January 2009), available at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/156833/China_English2008.pdf.

2049 some new form of war would require capabilities unknown in 2008. “Modernization” was a safer, yet nebulous, term, allowing the flexibility to make further adjustments as conditions changed.

In 2017, Chairman Xi Jinping established 2035 as a new intermediate goal to “modernize military theory, organization, personnel, and equipment, and basically achieve national defense and PLA modernization.” He also revised the ultimate objective to “build the people’s army into a world-class military [世界一流军队] by mid-century.”¹⁶ The intermediate goal likely includes completing doctrinal, structural, and personnel reforms and replacing nearly all Soviet-era equipment. By 2035, initial batches of the PLA’s new equipment will be two to three decades old and approaching retirement in the coming decade as military leaders continue to tweak their modernized forces over the next fifteen years. A “world-class military” was not defined, but it suggests that the PLA will continue to adjust and integrate new capabilities so that it can routinely undertake multidomain, global operations that are supported by overseas bases. PLA capabilities will be “commensurate with the country’s international standing and its security and development interests.”¹⁷

After the 2020 milestone passed, Chairman Xi added a new third step: “achieving the military’s centennial goal (百年奋斗目标) by 2027,” the PLA’s 100th anniversary.¹⁸ Numerous senior U.S. military officers and others have predicted that this means the PLA will go to war by 2027, resulting in multiple refutations of such speculation.¹⁹ In fact, the PLA has publicly pronounced the years leading to this date as an acceleration of the modernization process.²⁰

¹⁶ “Xi Calls for Building a Strong Army,” Xinhua, October 26, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/26/c_136708142.htm.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html.

¹⁸ Zhong Xin, “确保实现建军百年奋斗目标(深入学习贯彻党的十九届五中全会精神)” [Ensure the Realization of the Military’s Centenary Goal (In-depth Study and Implementation of the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee)], *PLA Daily*, January 25, 2021, http://www.81.cn/2021zt/2021-01/25/content_9973944.htm; and Brian Hart, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Matthew P. Funaiolo, “China’s 2027 Goal Marks the PLA’s Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 26, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization>.

¹⁹ For example, see Kevin Baron, “‘Lower the Rhetoric’ on China, Says Milley,” *Defense One*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2023/03/lower-rhetoric-china-says-milley/384693>.

²⁰ “Efforts Must Be Made to Accelerate Modernization of National Defense and Armed Forces,” *China Military Online*, July 13, 2021, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2021special/2021-07/13/content_10061116.htm.

Recent public statements by U.S. intelligence officials suggest an internal debate within the U.S. government about China's specific, unspoken goals for 2027. For example, the CIA director is quoted as saying: "We know as a matter of intelligence that [Xi has] instructed the PLA to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion. Now, that does not mean that he's decided to conduct an invasion in 2027 or any other year, but it's a reminder of the seriousness of his focus and his ambition."²¹ A few days later, the U.S. director of national intelligence described a more limited objective: "Beijing is working to meet its goal of fielding a military by 2027 designed to deter U.S. intervention in a future cross-strait crisis."²² Contrary to the CIA assessment, deterring U.S. intervention is one element of an invasion of Taiwan that focuses on the maritime and aerospace domains but does not include the massive land domain element of a cross-strait assault.

Despite the dissonance in U.S. government analysis, senior Chinese leadership in 2022 and 2023 consistently repeated its modernization timeline.²³ In late 2022, outgoing CMC vice chair Xu Qiliang called 2027, 2035, and 2049 near-, medium-, and long-term goals, respectively, for strengthening the military.²⁴ Identifying and solving problems or challenges in the force remains the core focus for the PLA's long-term modernization process.

The PLA's Self-Identified Weaknesses

Although the PLA's visible strengths cause understandable regional and global concern, official Chinese media organizations report almost daily on a litany of major and minor shortcomings throughout the PLA. Even though these assessments often are only a small part of articles, they identify problems that inhibit the PLA's ability to conduct modern war. The CCP and PLA's propaganda system uses slogans and phrases to remind everyone, from senior leaders to the newest recruits, that building a world-class force

²¹ Olivia Gazis, "CIA Director William Burns: 'I Wouldn't Underestimate' Xi's Ambitions for Taiwan," CBS News, February 3, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-director-william-burns-i-wouldnt-underestimate-xis-ambitions-for-taiwan>.

²² U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, 7.

²³ Dong Yongzai, "朝着实现党在新时代的强军目标奋勇前进" [Forge Ahead toward the Party's Goal of Strengthening the Army in the New Era], *PLA Daily*, March 10, 2023, available at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/16207985.html>.

²⁴ Xu Qiliang, "如期实现建军一百年奋斗目标(认真学习宣传贯彻党的二十大精神)" [Achieve the Goal of 100 Years of Building the Army as Scheduled (Carefully Study, Publicize, and Implement the Spirit of the 20th Party Congress)], *People's Daily*, November 7, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-11/07/nw.D110000renmrb_20221107_1-06.htm.

takes significant time, hard work, and a daily commitment to excellence. Because these self-criticisms appear in domestic Chinese-language media, they likely are not deception operations, as the primary audience is domestic rather than international.

General Self-Assessment Slogans and Formulas

The CCP and PLA frequently use blunt slogans about continuing problems such as (1) a lack of warfighting capabilities, (2) combat leadership issues, and (3) doubts about political reliability. The most prominent slogans created or re-emphasized by Chairman Xi Jinping are the following:

- “Two inabilities” (两个能力不够 or 两个不够): (1) The PLA is unable to fight a modern war, and (2) its cadres (officers) at all levels are unable to command modern war.
- “Two big gaps” (两个差距很大): There are big gaps between the PLA’s military modernization level and (1) the requirements for national security and (2) the level of the world’s advanced militaries.
- “Three whethers” (三个能不能): These ask whether the PLA can (1) constantly maintain the party’s absolute leadership, (2) fight victoriously, and (3) rely on its commanders at all levels to competently lead forces and command in war when needed by the CCP.
- “Five incapables [cannots]” (五个不会): Some commanders cannot (1) judge the situation, (2) understand the intention of higher authorities, (3) make operational decisions, (4) deploy troops, or (5) deal with unexpected situations.²⁵
- “Five weaknesses” (五弱): These include (1) adaptation to the environment, (2) management and coordination, (3) equipment operations, (4) combat command, and (5) training organization.²⁶

Of note, over the past two years, the frequency with which these slogans have appeared in the Chinese-language version of the *PLA Daily* seems to have decreased. This is likely due to the Chinese counterintelligence apparatus observing that they have attracted foreign attention. Nonetheless, the “five incapables,” “two inabilities,” and “two big gaps” have appeared

²⁵ Dennis J. Blasko, “PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns about PLA Capabilities,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., February 7, 2019, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf.

²⁶ Kenneth W. Allen et al., “Personnel of the People’s Liberation Army,” BluePath Labs, November 3, 2022, 11, available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/Personnel_Peoples_Liberation_Army.pdf.

multiple times in 2023, while the “three whethers” was last observed in 2022.²⁷ The “five weaknesses” is one of the less frequently used slogans—perhaps because it is so harsh and the PLA has made some progress in addressing these issues. It was also last seen in 2022.²⁸

Additional terms, such as “peace disease” (和平病), “peacetime habits” (和平积习), and “peacetime malpractices/accumulated disadvantages” (和平积弊), have been used to refer to the PLA’s lack of recent combat experience and bad habits developed as the result of long periods of peace. A 2022 *PLA Daily* article warned that “peacetime officers” are training “peacetime soldiers” to do “peacetime things” (e.g., taking shortcuts, lowering standards, and falsifying scores).²⁹ The term “peacetime habits” has not appeared since 2021, and “peace disease” was only observed once in July 2023.³⁰ The currently preferred terminology (cited on many occasions in 2023) appears to be “peacetime malpractices,” with some progress noted.³¹ Another term, “accumulated malpractices” (沉疴积弊), is being used to represent long-standing problems even as “peacetime malpractices” are being rectified.³²

Additional terminology for issues in “grassroots” (基层) units (battalion and below) includes the following:

- The “four winds” (四风), which represent persistent problems caused by formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance;³³

²⁷ Tian Hongming, “真抓实干, 向难攻坚砺刀锋” [Work Hard, Attack Hard, and Sharpen the Blade], *PLA Daily*, May 21, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-21&paperNumber=01&articleid=906287; Su Liangbo, “加快推进军事教育高质量发展” [Accelerate High-Quality Development of Military Education], *PLA Daily*, June 22, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-22&paperNumber=03&articleid=908658; and Zhang Yi, Xu Jun, and Li Longyi, “把人民军队建设成为世界一流军队 (领航中国)” [Build the People’s Army into a World-Class Army (Leading China)], *People’s Daily*, September 24, 2022, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/10186986.html.

²⁸ “治军, 当以严为要” [Strictness Is Key in Administering the Military], *People’s Navy*, August 9, 2022, 3.

²⁹ Chen Guohai, He Quanda, and Wang Yumei, “旗语呼救, 老的本领丢不得” [The Flag Calls for Help, Don’t Lose Old Capabilities], *PLA Daily*, June 1, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/01/content_316839.htm.

³⁰ Dang, “在党的旗帜下奋斗强军”; and Shi Ming, “以担当尽责践行初心使命” [Carry Out the Original Mission with Responsibility], *PLA Daily*, June 9, 2021, http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2021-06/09/content_291272.htm.

³¹ Chen Feihu, “透过连队这扇窗, 我看到了什么” [What Did I See through the Company’s Window?], *PLA Daily*, March 27, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-27&paperNumber=08&articleid=901890.

³² Xia Wenxiang, Feng Pihu, and Gu Chaojie, “抓住科学推进军事治理的枢纽” [Seize the Hub of Scientific Promotion of Military Governance], *PLA Daily*, September 12, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-09-12&paperNumber=07&articleid=915074.

³³ Li Jiyuan, “廉洁奉公树立新风——牢牢把握主题教育的目标要求” [Establish a New Style of Honesty and Integrity—Firmly Grasp the Goals and Requirements of Thematic Education], *PLA Daily*, April 24, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-04-24&paperNumber=06&articleid=903991.

- The “five excesses” (五多), which include excessive meetings, official documents, time staying in the office, miscellaneous affairs, and general appeals and slogans;³⁴ and
- “Micro-corruption” (微腐败), such as small bribes and gifts to low-level officials, especially those responsible for recruitment and conscription.³⁵

Furthermore, China perceives itself as being “strangled” or “choked” (卡脖子) by foreign countries preventing it from acquiring core technologies needed by the military and civilian sectors. This common theme intensifies Beijing’s push for domestic innovation and self-reliance.³⁶ Though China has had some success in breaking this grip, its technology development goal is to transition from “following, to running side-by-side, to taking the lead” (从跟跑、并跑到领跑),³⁷ which is the Chinese analogue to the U.S. “pacing challenge.” However, China sees itself as currently trailing the world leaders in most aspects of military technology. It perceives itself as racing against time while its opponents are not slowing down and, in fact, sharpening their knives against China.³⁸ While they acknowledge that the military modernization process is accelerating in many areas, Chinese officials have provided no public timeline to take the lead in any given technology.

When the PLA speaks about its inability to fight a modern war, it frequently refers to problems in the integration of capabilities and systems employed by the individual services to fight a multidomain joint conflict employing system-of-systems operations. A 2023 RAND report summarized this view:

The PLA sees itself as the weaker side in the overall military balance, largely because it has made only limited progress in those key areas that will define future warfare, most importantly informatization and system-of-systems-based operations. China’s political and military leaders do recognize the qualitative and quantitative improvements in the PLA’s weapon systems and technology;

³⁴ Xu Jun, “锻造新时代打仗型党委班子” [Forge a Battle-Oriented Party Committee Group for the New Era], *PLA Daily*, November 1, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16263576.html.

³⁵ Wang Lujun, “科学把握加强基层治理的路径” [Scientifically Grasp the Path to Strengthening Grassroots Governance], *PLA Daily*, October 31, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16263279.html.

³⁶ Wang Heng, “依靠新的伟大斗争创造新的历史伟业” [Rely on New Great Struggles to Create New Historical Achievements], *PLA Daily*, February 27, 2023, http://www.81.cn/xxqj_207719/xxjt/ll/16204415.html.

³⁷ Lei Bin, Hu Danqing, and Yu Junwei, “大国巨舰从这里驶向深蓝” [Great-Power Giant Ship Sails to the Deep Blue from Here], *PLA Daily*, June 17, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/17/content_317961.htm.

³⁸ Zhang Xicheng, “掌握打仗仗的主动权, 需要在练兵备战中强化‘读秒’意识” [Master Initiative to Win Battles Requires Strengthening the Awareness of “Counting Seconds” in Training and Preparing for War], *PLA Daily*, June 29, 2022, http://www.81.cn/yw/2022-06/29/content_10167242.htm.

however, in many areas that are essential to conducting systems confrontation and systems destruction warfare, there remain significant gaps that have received the attention of Xi Jinping himself [*italics added*].³⁹

These concerns have roots across multiple areas, including personnel, leadership, training, logistics, and equipment. Common terms that the PLA uses to signify problems include “shortcomings” (短板), “weaknesses” (弱项), “bottlenecks” (瓶颈), and “skill/ability panic” (本领恐慌) among personnel that are uncomfortable with their abilities to perform their assigned responsibilities. These terms are used nearly on a daily basis and justify the generalizations found in PLA slogans.

A representative example of how PLA shortcomings are reported is found in a 2023 *PLA Daily* article that used ten paragraphs to describe technological progress at a PLA Navy comprehensive support base. However, in the penultimate paragraph, a warehouse commander observed: “Despite these achievements, we see that there still is a gap in the construction of a modern military logistics system. There are many difficulties to overcome; we must strive to catch up.”⁴⁰

Personnel Weaknesses

Senior leaders, from Xi on down, understand that cultivating high-quality, well-educated, and professional personnel is the key to developing a world-class military.⁴¹ To fill its ranks, PLA entry standards were relaxed, while pay and benefits increased. As the defense budget has grown, the PLA is committing tremendous resources to improving its soldiers’ uniforms, food, living conditions, and medical and psychological care. Yet, personnel problems continue to challenge officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), conscripts, and civilians in every service.

The percentage of college students and graduates in the force has increased but is still considered inadequate.⁴² Some recruits from colleges are assigned to units that do not utilize their skills, while other units

³⁹ Mark Cozad et al., *Gaining Victory in Systems Warfare: China’s Perspective on the U.S.-China Military Balance* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2023), vii–viii.

⁴⁰ “确保手中武器装备始终‘在状态’” [Make Sure That Weapons and Equipment in Hand Are Always “in Condition”], *PLA Daily*, May 15, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-13&paperNumber=02&articleid=905722.

⁴¹ “Xi: Build World-Class Military,” China Military Online, July 30, 2022, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/10174715.html.

⁴² Xu Tian and Zhou Yaoqiang, “用法治保障征兵工作高质量发展” [Use the Rule of Law to Ensure High-Quality Development of Conscription], *PLA Daily*, April 24, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-04-24&paperNumber=06&articleid=903990.

that require specific qualifications cannot fill those billets, resulting in retention problems.⁴³ Some directly recruited NCOs, who have not served as conscripts, have problems acclimating to the military.⁴⁴ Some “leading cadres slip into the abyss of violating discipline” because they lack integrity and self-control.⁴⁵ A “small number” of CCP members and cadres in the PLA have political problems that affect their judgment and performance.⁴⁶ The expanding contingent of non-active duty contract civilians faces its own challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel.⁴⁷

Xi and others have acknowledged that additional reform to the military academy system is required to overcome the “five incapables” and other leadership problems like peacetime malpractice.⁴⁸ The PLA believes that its military education system is not effectively educating personnel for combat.⁴⁹ Some units lament a shortage of talent due to the PLA improperly employing personnel according to their skills. Other units protect (i.e., hoard) highly educated personnel, refusing to let them transfer to other units for professional growth and development out of fear that it will make the unit less capable.⁵⁰

The *PLA Daily* is filled with articles providing educational examples of how officers, NCOs, and conscripts need to communicate better and help each other. Many articles are dedicated to teaching officers and NCOs how

⁴³ Zhu Yongjun et al., “为战选才：特长兵加速奔向战位” [Selecting Talents for War: Specialized Soldiers Go Quickly to Battle Positions], *PLA Daily*, June 13, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/13/content_317609.htm.

⁴⁴ Liu Zhuo, “定向培养军士崭露头角” [Targeted Training of Sergeants Emerges], *PLA Daily*, May 9, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-09&paperNumber=04&articleid=905230.

⁴⁵ Zhang Fangjun, “涵养廉洁自律的道德修为” [Maintain the Moral Practice of Integrity and Self-Discipline], *PLA Daily*, June 14, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/14/content_317666.htm.

⁴⁶ Jin Zexing, “增强讲政治的内在主动” [Strengthen Internal Political Initiatives], *PLA Daily*, May 9, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-09&paperNumber=06&articleid=905234.

⁴⁷ “加强新时代文职人员队伍建设的重要制度保障” [Strengthen the Important Institutional Support for the Construction of Civilian Personnel in the New Era], *PLA Daily*, January 30, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw/2023-01/30/content_10215250.htm.

⁴⁸ “Xi: Build World-Class Military”; Su, “加快推进军事教育高质量发展”; and Zhou Shibin and Chen Baihong, “建强新型军事人才培养体系” [Building a Strong New Military Talent Training System], *PLA Daily*, December 21, 2022, http://www.81.cn/yw/2022-12/21/content_10206891.htm.

⁴⁹ Wu Jihong, Wang Hao, and Zhang Chuanguo, “以战领教，战教一体育才” [Learn through Battles, and Use Battles to Teach Talented Persons], *PLA Daily*, June 27, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-27&paperNumber=01&articleid=908910.

⁵⁰ Lu Tailai and He Guancheng, “让尖子成为种子” [Let the Best Soldiers Be the Seed], *PLA Daily*, May 10, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-10&paperNumber=06&articleid=905397; and Ren Jingzhi, “使用是最好的培养” [Application Is the Best Training], *PLA Daily*, June 15, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-15&paperNumber=04&articleid=908194.

to properly interact with each other and the importance of listening to and acting on the problems of subordinates.⁵¹ The PLA seeks for units to be like families (部队大家庭) in which the officers are respected and the soldiers loved.⁵² Creating such an environment supports recruiting and retaining educated and technically savvy personnel born after the turn of the century. Grassroots leaders are encouraged to be the “most aware of shortcomings” and produce “golden ideas,” yet a general “ability panic” exists among them.⁵³ Similar problems are found in the People’s Armed Forces Department cadre responsible for PLA recruitment and the command of militia units.⁵⁴

Leadership development is a constant challenge for any military, and it is further complicated in the PLA by the requirement to maintain absolute political loyalty to the CCP. Traditional Chinese hierarchical social relationships can impair this effort, as many officers, NCOs, and conscripts must learn how to interact effectively with each other. The PLA seeks to enhance tactical proficiency, initiative, and flexibility among its junior personnel, especially political officers.⁵⁵

Training Weaknesses

The PLA undertakes individual and unit training to prepare its personnel and units to execute its evolving doctrine. The PLA is developing tactics, techniques, and procedures for many operations that other militaries have executed for decades, often in war. Structural changes since 2015 have required that units focus on establishing operational proficiency at the battalion level and below before moving on to larger, more complex exercises. Every training event, no matter the size, is intended to identify problems that

⁵¹ Zhang Huiqing, Ren Tianle, and Yan Qizhao, “让‘带走的难题’个个有答案” [Let Every “Takeaway Problem” Have Answers], *PLA Daily*, November 10, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-11-10&paperNumber=06&articleid=918978.

⁵² Wang Dan, Wang Feng, and Huang Xing, “连队就是家，战友如亲人” [“The Company Is Home, and Comrades Are Like Relatives”], *PLA Daily*, October 12, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-10-12&paperNumber=03&articleid=916876.

⁵³ Zhang Fan, “励创新，跑出建设发展加速度” [Encourage Innovation, Accelerate Construction and Development], *PLA Daily*, May 8, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-08&paperNumber=06&articleid=905134; and Hu Pu, “当一名会‘领读’的基层带兵人” [Be a Grassroots Leader Who Can “Lead the Study”], *PLA Daily*, May 9, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-09&paperNumber=08&articleid=905241.

⁵⁴ Zhang Leifeng, “学以致用，真抓实帮促发展” [Use What You Have Learned to Help Promote Development], *PLA Daily*, May 10, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-10&paperNumber=01&articleid=905415.

⁵⁵ Liu Cheng and Huang Xinzhou, “南疆军区某合成团着力提升政治干部军事素质锤炼打仗本领” [South Xinjiang Military Region Focuses on Improving the Military Quality of Political Cadres and Tempering Their Combat Skills], *PLA Daily*, May 17, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16224703.html.

need to be rectified immediately or addressed during subsequent training. As an officer at the PLA National Defense University summarized, “military training quality has hovered at a low level and stayed low for a long time.”⁵⁶

In June 2023, CMC vice chair Zhang Youxia delivered a speech about this issue at a meeting concerning basic training, citing the need to improve training content, introduce better management, and optimize training support.⁵⁷ Some junior officers responsible for training feel like they are experiencing “groundhog day”—shortly after they finish one training cycle, they must repeat the same basic tasks day after day, year after year. As a result, some PLA Army units can only achieve first-level proficiency, suggesting that they are not fully trained for larger combined arms or joint exercises.⁵⁸ Small naval units report that they encounter numerous problems when they are assigned to larger exercises with different units at various stages of combat readiness. Further, they are just learning how to “achieve the effect of ‘1+1>2’” (a common formula indicating the increased combat effects of joint and combined arms operations).⁵⁹

The PLA Strategic Support Force has reported bottlenecks in system-of-systems capabilities, causing commanders to concentrate on building systems rather than employing them. But building systems is recognized as being only half the battle.⁶⁰ This results in “contradictory problems restricting system operations, with some weaknesses remaining.”⁶¹ Because of inadequate networking, informatization, and integration, one PLA Army brigade commander declared that “second-rate units focus on performance, and first-rate units focus on gaps.”⁶² Some units avoid risks, scale back winter training, conduct highly scripted training, engage in “nanny-style”

⁵⁶ “深入推进实战化军事训练.”

⁵⁷ “全军基础训练现场会在天津召开，张又侠出席并讲话” [On-Site Military Basic Training Meeting Held in Tianjin. Zhang Youxia Attended and Delivered a Speech], *PLA Daily*, June 21, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-21&paperNumber=01&articleid=908624.

⁵⁸ Yao Lanxiang, “战斗力标准任何时候都不能降低” [The Standard of Combat Effectiveness Cannot Be Lowered at Any Time], *PLA Daily*, May 27, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-27&paperNumber=04&articleid=906743.

⁵⁹ Liu Jianwei and Qian Xiaohu, “勇敢的突围——来自海军某基地的观察报告” [Brave Breakout—Observation Report from a Naval Base], *PLA Daily*, September 21, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-09-21&paperNumber=01&articleid=915820.

⁶⁰ Liu Ruifeng and Liu Baoxu, “体系强才能打胜仗” [We Can Only Win Wars with Strong Systems], *PLA Daily*, April 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-04/19/content_337918.htm.

⁶¹ Jiang You, “在体系中练就制胜‘铁拳’” [Practice the “Winning Fist” in Integrated Operations], *PLA Daily*, March 21, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-21&paperNumber=05&articleid=901469.

⁶² Yang Xihai, “精准施策破解瓶颈问题” [Precise Policy to Solve Bottleneck Problems], *PLA Daily*, March 18, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16210267.html.

drills, and do not correct existing issues.⁶³ An article about PLA Rocket Force training concluded that “avoiding ‘small risks’ in peacetime leaves ‘big hidden dangers’ in war.”⁶⁴

Equipment Weaknesses

For the past two decades, the PLA has received innumerable new weapons and equipment, but not all units in the force have been fully modernized. New weapons have greater capabilities but are more complicated and expensive to operate and maintain than the armaments they replace. Many personnel have not been trained in schools to use new weapons, and sometimes the equipment they were trained on is not the type used in the units to which they are assigned.⁶⁵ Standardized procedures (e.g., lesson plans and operations and maintenance manuals) are unavailable for some weapons, causing leaders to improvise instead of following centrally prepared guidance.⁶⁶

Some officers and NCOs are uncomfortable using new equipment in training. Instead, they prefer to continue old practices, illustrated by the phrase “wearing new shoes, but traveling the old road” (穿新鞋走老路).⁶⁷ PLA doctrine emphasizes that the force must be able to fight with both old and new generations of equipment.⁶⁸ However, some officers and NCOs have become overly dependent on automated features and have lost proficiency in manual operations.⁶⁹ As one reconnaissance company commander commented after a 2023 training event where soldiers were not prepared

⁶³ Wei Shanghai, “冰雪也是磨‘刀石’” [Ice and Snow Are Also “Whetstones”], *PLA Daily*, January 1, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2023-01/01/content_330997.htm; Wang Xiaoqiang, “在‘变’与‘活’中寻求制胜之法” [Seeking a Winning Method in “Change” and “Live”], *PLA Daily*, April 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2023-04/19/content_337933.htm; and Feng Huahua and Liu Yu, “第七十二集团军某旅:着眼‘问题台账’筹划新年工作” [72nd Group Army Brigade: Focus on “Problem Ledger” to Plan Work in New Year], *PLA Daily*, January 8, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw/2023-01/08/content_10210475.htm.

⁶⁴ Xing Guoqing and Huang Wuxing, “一道排障题 考问应急策” [A Troubleshooting Question Examines Emergency Policies], *PLA Daily*, August 17, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2021-08/17/content_296690.htm.

⁶⁵ “确保手中武器装备始终‘在状态’”

⁶⁶ Han Zhen and Chen Shanfeng, “科学组训贵在精细” [Scientific Group Training Is Precious], *PLA Daily*, June 1, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2022-06/01/content_316832.htm.

⁶⁷ Zhang Haotian and Mao Rui, “让新型弹药打出最佳效能” [Allow New Munitions to Shoot for Optimal Performance], *PLA Daily*, April 28, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2022-04/28/content_314561.htm.

⁶⁸ Gong Xueli, “穿现有‘鞋’走胜战‘路’” [Wear Existing “Shoes” and Take the “Road” of Victory], *PLA Daily*, June 16, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2022-06/16/content_317848.htm.

⁶⁹ “大抓实战化军事训练热新闻冷思考” [Pay Attention to the Hot News and Cold Thinking of Actual Combat Military Training], Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission (PRC), March 27, 2023, available at http://www.81.cn/zt/2023nzt/gsym/zgxwjxwzltjzp/16212443_2.html.

to use new equipment, “If this were a real battlefield, I’m afraid that we wouldn’t have a chance to reflect [on our failures].”⁷⁰

“Problem Show”

Exacerbating training difficulties, once leaders know what is necessary for success, some cut corners, cheat, or falsify records—actions official Chinese media calls a “problem show” (问题秀). The PLA understands that these methods undermine the hard work of developing unit leaders and combat readiness. Knowing that discovering problems is a primary training objective and the way to please their superiors, some leaders and units develop long lists of weaknesses at the beginning of training but do not expend similar efforts to correct them.⁷¹ Others “train for show” or “train for the test.”⁷² The PLA calls such activity a “chronic illness” (沉痾顽疾).⁷³

Collectively, PLA personnel, leadership, training, and equipment weaknesses reduce readiness for conventional joint operations targeted at Taiwan. The PLA’s primary effort to address these weaknesses is through thematic training. Yet shortcomings persist in its joint combat systems capabilities, and the force is still developing procedures for joint training at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Accordingly, the PLA recognizes and routinely states that solutions will only come with time and dedication.

PLA Intangibles: Implications of Russia’s War in Ukraine

The PLA probably has interpreted the performance of the Russian Armed Forces during their invasion of Ukraine through several lenses that reflect both internal strengths and weaknesses. The PLA likely sees itself as a different system from the Russian Armed Forces, recognizes that Ukraine’s military and geographic situation are fundamentally

⁷⁰ Qian Hao, “一个侦察连的跨越之旅” [A Reconnaissance Company’s Long-Distance Journey], *PLA Daily*, July 18, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-07-18&paperNumber=05&articleid=910799.

⁷¹ Zhang Guangxuan and Tie Yannan, “调查研究不设‘问题指标’” [Survey Research Does Not Set “Problem Indicators”], *PLA Daily*, May 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-19&paperNumber=06&articleid=906158.

⁷² Wu Zhiyuan, Liu Jianchuang, and Wei Qihang, “关键训练步骤岂能‘一语带过’” [How Key Training Steps Are Skipped by “Training through One Sentence”], *PLA Daily*, April 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-04/19/content_337931.htm.

⁷³ Zhang Leifeng, “讲认真·动真格” [Be Serious and Real], *PLA Daily*, March 29, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-29&paperNumber=08&articleid=902042.

different from Taiwan's, and, as evidenced by his repeated decisions to send Russian forces into combat, believes that President Vladimir Putin is more impulsive than Chairman Xi Jinping. As Jude Blanchette and Bonnie Glaser wisely commented in November 2023, "autocrats can and do take risky and even reckless actions, as Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine clearly demonstrates...[but] there are no signs that Xi has pivoted away from Beijing's long-term strategy of isolating and strangulating Taipei in order to deter Taiwanese independence and force its government to enter into formal 'reunification' negotiations."⁷⁴

Further, the Russian military is notorious for its harsh treatment of conscripts, and disregard for their training and well-being in combat is a common theme in foreign reporting.⁷⁵ The PLA has a completely different attitude toward its conscripts, seeking to treat them like family, and no longer allows corporal punishment of its soldiers.⁷⁶ As a result, Chinese leaders probably consider that the PLA's enlisted personnel system will be more effective than the Russian model has been in preparing its soldiers for battle. This perception is rooted in the PLA's military-political dual leadership system, which is responsible for both tactical training and ideological indoctrination.

The PLA could compare Russia's logistical failures in Ukraine with its prolonged operations in Aksai Chin, along China's contested border with India. The PLA has been relatively successful in sustaining a large force (albeit much smaller than Russian numbers) in a remote border area, mostly by land transport. On the other hand, the CCP and PLA understand that Russia's problems in supplying its forces overland pale in scope to the logistical challenges of a full-scale attack on Taiwan, which would be dependent on air and sea lanes for sustainment.

⁷⁴ Jude Blanchette and Bonnie Glaser, "Taiwan's Most Pressing Challenge Is Strangulation, Not Invasion," *War on the Rocks*, November 9, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/taiwans-most-pressing-challenge-is-strangulation-not-invasion>.

⁷⁵ "The Wrongs of Passage: Inhuman and Degrading Treatment of New Recruits in the Russian Armed Forces," Human Rights Watch, October 14, 2004, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/10/19/wrongs-passage/inhuman-and-degrading-treatment-new-recruits-russian-armed-forces>; and Robyn Dixon and Natalia Abbakumova, "Angry Families Say Russian Conscripts Thrown to Front Line Unprepared," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/20/russia-military-families-conscripts-ukraine>.

⁷⁶ Yuan Ziliang, "用共同的理想凝聚兵心" [Use Common Ideals to Unite Soldiers' Hearts], *PLA Daily*, July 6, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqx/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-07-06&paperNumber=01&articleid=909722; and Tian Long and Liu Shaoping, "带兵干部骨干应做到'三多三禁' 拒绝'冷暴力'" [The Backbone of Cadres Leading Soldiers Should Implement the "Three Mores and Three Prohibits" and Refuse "Cold Violence"], *PLA Daily*, September 22, 2023, http://www.81.cn/zt/2023nzt/zyzyqrxdmqxsdgbgx/jyzf_246327/16254391.html.

Both Russian and Ukrainian combat experiences reinforce the reality that multidomain joint and combined arms operations, especially at the battalion level, are extremely difficult to execute under fire and are further complicated by urban terrain.⁷⁷ Sheer numbers do not guarantee success, and battlefield leadership is the key to tactical victory. The PLA likely sees itself on the right path by emphasizing drones for intelligence collection and attack, long-range missiles for precision strikes, and tactical air defense against both missiles and drones.

The front-line performance of Russian units, which were previously regarded as battle-tested and hardened, underscores the PLA's need (and preference) for sufficient time to prepare its own forces before being thrust into the cauldron of high-intensity warfare. While the PLA emphasizes Mao Zedong's guidance to "fight no battle unprepared" (不打无准备之仗), it has added the caveat that it is rare to fight when fully ready.⁷⁸ Accordingly, it must improve its ability to "fight tonight" (今夜准备打仗) with the forces available, reflecting the PLA's constant emphasis on the need to improve and make training more realistic.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the element that follows "fight no battle unprepared" is "fight no battle you are not sure of winning" (不打无把握之仗). This refers to the level of confidence a leader must have prior to initiating combat.⁸⁰ The body of evidence concerning the PLA's acknowledged shortcomings must affect national-level decisions about undertaking major military action. From Beijing's perspective, unless faced with a direct, imminent threat to China's sovereignty or strategic goals that requires major combat, it is best to follow the established military modernization timeline and employ the PLA in operations short of war, including aggressive deterrence operations in disputed regions on its periphery, to achieve its national objectives.

⁷⁷ "Xi Jinping Worries That China's Troops Are Not Ready to Fight," *Economist*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/11/06/xi-jinping-worries-that-chinas-troops-are-not-ready-to-fight>.

⁷⁸ Shen Hailiang, "提高指挥员战场决策能力" [Improve Commanders' Battlefield Decision-Making Ability], *PLA Daily*, April 18, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-04-18&paperNumber=07&articleid=903541.

⁷⁹ Yang Xihai, "精准施策破解瓶颈问题" [Precise Policy to Solve Bottleneck Problems], *PLA Daily*, March 18, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16210267.html.

⁸⁰ Li Hongfeng, "战略家毛泽东的道路" [The Path of Strategist Mao Zedong], *People's Daily*, August 30, 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0830/c443712-32515125.html>.

Conclusion

The PLA's dialectical process of continuously identifying and rectifying problems to make progress in all elements of military modernization is both rational for its situation and rooted in its Marxist heritage.⁸¹ Unfortunately for outside observers, most of the PLA's self-assessments are subjective in nature and difficult to measure objectively or confirm.

Not every unit in the PLA faces the same types and quantity of problems, nor does every problem exist at all times. However, the self-reported shortcomings likely are pervasive and persistent enough among some personnel and units to adversely affect the senior PLA leadership's evaluation of the force's overall combat effectiveness and readiness. Because the PLA is so large, it takes months or even years to distribute new weapons and equipment throughout the entire force and for units to assimilate the new gear. As a result, the PLA will continue to be equipped with multiple generations of weaponry, resulting in units of the same type having different capabilities depending on the type of tank, ship, aircraft, or missile assigned. Moreover, as new weapons and technologies are introduced to the force, doctrinal, training, and logistical changes frequently are required. The persistence of many of these problems suggests that the PLA educational and training systems are not meeting this challenge in preparing personnel for combat.

Whenever possible, Chinese leaders will seek to achieve their national objectives short of going to war (i.e., to win without fighting). The problems inhibiting combat capabilities that are identified in multiple formulas and slogans likely undermine the confidence senior CCP and PLA leaders would prefer to have before deciding to initiate major combat operations against Taiwan or another foreign enemy. As former CIA senior intelligence officer John Culver stated, "Taiwan remains for Xi a crisis to be avoided, not an opportunity he should seize."⁸² Yet, if deterrence fails and if ordered by the CCP, the PLA will pursue a quick victory using all elements of its armed forces, supported by a variety of civilian capabilities mobilized for the occasion.

⁸¹ Li Lei, "真刀真枪, 解决实际问题" [Real Knives and Guns, Solve Practical Problems], *PLA Daily*, October 29, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfb&paperDate=2023-10-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=918076; and Zhu Hangcheng, "善用调研成果把问题解决好" [Make Good Use of Research Results to Solve Problems], *PLA Daily*, June 2, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16228088.html.

⁸² John Culver, John Pomfret, and Matt Pottinger, "How to Read Xi Jinping," *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/how-read-xi-jinping>.

The analysis presented above supports the conclusions the *Economist* reached in a 2023 special report on PLA vulnerabilities: “Underestimating the PLA would be dangerous. But overestimating it would be too. As in the cold war, that can breed mutual insecurity and unnecessary confrontation.... A ruthlessly balanced view of the PLA is essential both to avoid war and, if necessary, to win one.”⁸³ Implying an institutional preference to avoid near-to medium-term conflict, Lieutenant General He Lei (former Academy of Military Sciences deputy commandant) told the *Economist* that “we can’t go to war to increase our combat experience, right?”⁸⁴

⁸³ “The People’s Liberation Army Is Not Yet as Formidable as the West Fears,” *Economist*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/11/06/the-peoples-liberation-army-is-not-yet-as-formidable-as-the-west-fears>.

⁸⁴ “Xi Jinping Worries That China’s Troops Are Not Ready to Fight.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and People's Republic of China (PRC) regarding Taiwan under Xi Jinping, how they are pursued through the development and use of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in extant and potential campaigns, and PRC perceptions of effectiveness and trends.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Asserting control over Taiwan has been a CCP objective since 1943. The PLA's posture and employment have strengthened, with capabilities increasing dramatically since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. Through his “centennial military building goal” of 2027, Xi seeks a full range of options to coerce or conquer Taiwan. PLA forces, training, and operations are burgeoning accordingly. China currently pursues an all-domain pressure campaign and preparatory exercises, with some timed opportunistically to punish actions by Taiwan or its supporters. Future campaign scenarios include—individually and in combination—coercion or limited force, blockade, bombardment, or invasion. PRC perceptions regarding the effectiveness of Beijing's actions and cross-strait trends vary but tend toward pessimism, thereby motivating potential use of force.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Xi is rapidly prioritizing tremendous national resources in pursuit of military options regarding Taiwan that his predecessors lacked, with rapid and concerning results.
- New patterns of activity, including pressure operations and preparatory exercises, increasingly threaten, stress, and risk demoralizing Taiwan.
- Military-informed PRC sources insinuate that Washington's and Taipei's cross-strait policies and actions are trending in an unacceptable direction, reflecting a failure thus far by Beijing and the PLA to curb them completely; however, the PLA is on track to be able to offer the necessary deterrence or compellence, potentially through CCP authorization to take harsher, more coercive approaches and even credibly threaten war.
- Taiwan and the U.S. must urgently deploy asymmetric capabilities to deter PRC aggression.

Imposing the Fate of Sisyphus? The PLA as an Instrument of National Power and Force Preparation toward Taiwan

Andrew S. Erickson

This chapter examines Xi Jinping's strategic objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan and the pursuit of those objectives through the People's Liberation Army (PLA), assesses key trends, and considers whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives these efforts as effective. Its main argument is that Xi's policies have increased military funding and capabilities, aiming to impose a Sisyphean sense of futility on Taiwan to compel unification without direct conflict. The ambition of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control Taiwan has been steadfast for decades, significantly bolstered by enhanced PLA capabilities following the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. Xi's 2027 "centennial military building goal" calls for comprehensive options to coerce or conquer Taiwan. China's military has achieved substantial growth in forces and training, aligning with Beijing's all-domain pressure campaign and strategic exercises aimed at preparing for scenarios including coercion, blockade, bombardment, and invasion. Policy implications are profound: Xi is directing tremendous resources toward military options regarding Taiwan, gravely threatening Taiwan's security and morale. CCP leaders perceive current Taiwanese and U.S. policies as adverse, necessitating harsher measures and potentially credible threats of war. To counter PRC aggression, Taiwan and the United States must urgently deploy asymmetric capabilities.

This chapter first surveys the historical context and PLA development. Following the PRC's establishment in 1949, Mao Zedong intended to invade

Andrew S. Erickson is a Professor of Strategy in the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College.

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Taiwan to conclude the Chinese Civil War on Beijing's terms. However, plans were canceled due to intelligence failures and the Korean War. Over subsequent decades, the PLA's capabilities were insufficient to challenge the U.S.-patrolled Taiwan Strait. This changed after the Cold War, with missile strikes becoming a feasible cross-strait option. Under Xi, Taiwan faces increasing danger. China's military focus has been on achieving jointness and technological sophistication to prevail in potential U.S. intervention contingencies. Xi's 2027 military goal emphasizes a toolbox of capabilities to coerce or conquer Taiwan, driven by perceived time constraints and a closing window of opportunity. Second, the chapter reviews operational posture and training. China's military posture toward Taiwan has evolved significantly, marked by the most extensive buildup since World War II, largely focused on Taiwan. Xi's military reforms from 2015 to 2016, including the strengthening of existing forces and creation of new ones, have enhanced the PLA's readiness for high-end Taiwan contingencies. Third, the chapter weighs Xi's peacetime and wartime options. Beijing employs a multifaceted strategy, leveraging military, diplomatic, informational, and economic pressure. China's military engages in frequent exercises to prepare while stressing Taiwan's defenses. Beijing's approach includes coercive activities short of full-scale war, ranging from political and disinformation operations to limited (para)military use. These efforts aim to compel Taiwan to capitulate without major combat, but more aggressive measures (e.g., blockade or bombardment) are increasingly robust options. An outright amphibious invasion, the most complex and risky, would likely be a last resort. Fourth, the chapter assesses trends of increasingly pessimistic PRC perceptions. It concludes that Xi's rapid military buildup, emphasizing coercion and potential force, increases the risk of conflict with Taiwan, the United States, and allies and makes deterrence of utmost urgency.

Taking Taiwan: CCP Goals, Preparations, and Approaches

Ensuring the capability to impose transformative coercive pressure or force on Taiwan to assert control over its political status and future has long been the CCP's leading military goal. After expelling the Chinese Nationalist Party from the mainland in 1949 and establishing the PRC, Mao envisioned an invasion of Taiwan in 1950 to end the Chinese Civil War with complete CCP domination. However, he postponed, and ultimately canceled, these plans following an overwhelming fifth column intelligence rollup and the

outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.¹ Throughout the crises in the strait that erupted in 1954–55, 1958, and 1962, Mao opted not to expend the blood and treasure and risk U.S. intervention, including potential nuclear weapons use,² to attempt to wrest the heavily fortified offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu from Chinese Nationalist Party control. Instead, he shelled them intermittently for two decades, in part because he, like Chiang Kai-shek, wanted to keep a physical link between Taiwan and the PRC—something most Taiwanese are far less interested in today. For the rest of the Cold War, and even during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, the strait was a U.S.-patrolled moat that the PLA could not hope to cross. From the end of the Cold War through the turn of the century, crude missile strikes were the only PLA option for attacking Taiwan on a significant scale.

Today, Taiwan faces great, growing danger from the PRC under Xi Jinping. For decades, a Taiwan contingency has been the PLA's lead planning scenario. China's military strategies of 1993, 2004, and 2014 focused geographically on Taiwan and its surrounding waters and emphasized achieving the jointness and technological sophistication necessary to prevail in contingencies there, potentially involving the U.S. military.³ Having concertedly invested in, developed, and deployed manifold military capabilities focused first on targeting Taiwan and second on countering U.S. and allied intervention thereto since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis and 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, the PLA now has a variety of potential military options vis-à-vis Taiwan. Soberingly, the Pentagon assesses that China's official defense budget of around \$230 billion (as of 2022) is “about 12 times larger than Taiwan's defense budget” and largely “focused on developing the capability to unify Taiwan with the PRC by force.”⁴ How these capabilities develop over the course of this critical decade and what Xi attempts to do with them loom as momentous questions of our time.

In describing Beijing's three centenaries—the CCP's in 2021, the PLA's in 2027, and the PRC's in 2049—Andrew Scobell emphasizes that “each of these commemorations serves not only as a celebration of regime

¹ Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester: Camphor Press, 2017), 35, 48–52.

² U.S. Office of the Historian, “The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises>.

³ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023), 147, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2023-China-Military-Power-Report>.

accomplishments but also as a reminder of unfinished business.”⁵ On October 26–29, 2020, the 19th CCP Central Committee’s fifth plenary session promulgated the “centennial military building goal” (建军一百年奋斗目标).⁶ As part of his efforts to build a world-class military, Xi established this goal to ensure the achievement of important aspects of that modernization by 2027, which appear geared toward providing a full toolbox of capabilities to coerce or conquer Taiwan. This is part of a growing acceptance of risk and friction and may reflect a growing urgency and impatience on Xi’s part to achieve key objectives, perhaps spurred by perceptions of a closing window of opportunity to do so and actuarial limits on his time in power. The year 2027 also marks the 21st Party Congress, which will be the beginning of Xi’s fourth term as general secretary. “All indications point to the PLA meeting [Xi’s] directive to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027,” Admiral John Aquilino stated in his final testimony as commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. “Furthermore, the PLA’s actions indicate their ability to meet Xi’s preferred timeline to unify Taiwan with mainland China by force if directed.”⁷

Alexander Huang argues cogently that “it is crucial to assess whether there is a CCP timetable for national unification,” which “has important implications for how much time Taiwan has for” defensive preparations.⁸ Much may depend on whose side Xi and other decision-makers believe time is on. Wang Wen, a researcher at the Financial Research Center for the Counsellors’ Office of the State Council, maintains that “Chinese Communists have always had rich experience and great practice in identifying and seizing strategic opportunities.” He believes that time remains on Beijing’s side overall but acknowledges that there are growing perceptions and concerns that China’s “period of strategic opportunity” is

⁵ Andrew Scobell, “China’s Calculus on the Use of Force: Futures, Costs, Benefits, Risks, and Goals,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2022), 80.

⁶ Andrew S. Erickson, “PRC Pursuit of Xi’s 2027 ‘Centennial Military Building Goal’ (建军一百年奋斗目标): Sources & Analysis,” China Analysis from Original Sources, December 19, 2021, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/12/prc-pursuit-of-2027-centennial-military-building-goal-sources-analysis>.

⁷ John C. Aquilino, “U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture,” statement to the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, March 21, 2024, 2, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/aquilino_statement.pdf.

⁸ Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, “A Net Assessment of Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 313.

already over.⁹ A PRC scholar-official contends that Beijing's 2022 military exercises following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei and the subsequent issuance of the white paper entitled *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* have transformed Beijing's "strategic ambiguity" into "strategic clarity":

Beijing has deliberately and unequivocally declared that it will not wait indefinitely for Taiwan's return to China.... Instead, it has officially launched a national reunification plan, in the hope of accelerating the national reunification process through political negotiations between the two sides on the details of the "one country, two systems" policy. Beijing has emphatically stated that, if peaceful reunification fails, non-peaceful reunification will occur. At the same time, Beijing has left it an open question whether the favorable conditions of the "one country, two systems" policy that the mainland has previously offered to Taiwan will still apply if national reunification is achieved primarily by force.¹⁰

While Xi's intentions and plans are impossible for foreign analysts to discern conclusively, a historical review of the CCP and the PLA suggests revealing patterns. Perhaps the foremost pattern is relentless determination to achieve top-priority objectives, coupled with concerted attempts to do so with the least kinetic military escalation possible. More concerning, however, the CCP and PLA have a history of proactively using what they perceive as demonstrative limited force to reset baseline conditions and thereby avert larger, longer-term negative outcomes. This is closely linked to an arguably exaggerated sense of being able to finely calibrate escalation both upward and downward while retaining first-mover advantage in doing so. Mao's striking first move in the 1969 Zhenbao Island crisis is perhaps the principal example of both elements. Partial examples involving weaker, then non-nuclear powers include the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. As Kim Fassler explains in her chapter for this volume, the CCP believes it has a superior system for diagnosing, measuring precisely, and calibrating policy responses to major international trends. The party assesses that trends regarding Taiwan are unfavorable and is urgently seeking to shift them in a favorable direction.

The CCP typically situates the ultimate threat of employing top-end kinetic military force within a comprehensive whole-of-government approach designed to achieve objectives via, ideally, primarily political

⁹ Wang Wen, "论新时代的战略机遇期: 源起、现状与未来" [On the Strategic Opportunity Period in the New Era: Origin, Status Quo, and Future], *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism* (2022), trans. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/on-the-strategic-opportunity-period-in-the-new-era-origin-status-quo-and-future>.

¹⁰ Liu Zhaojia, "中国倒逼美国对台政策走向 '战略清晰'?" [Is China Forcing the U.S. toward "Strategic Clarity" in Its Taiwan Policy?], Aisixiang, August 15, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/is-china-forcing-the-u-s-toward-strategic-clarity-in-its-taiwan-policy>.

means by expeditiously using the “three warfares”—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.¹¹ At least in theoretical potential, it can do so more seamlessly, thoroughly, and formidably than any other government is capable.¹² Here, the PLA has an important political role, which is often insufficiently understood in the United States as well as by U.S. allies and partners. A pathbreaking study by Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao on PLA political warfare details the history, roles, missions, and organizational structure of PLA “liaison work” units—a massive force multiplier for the PLA that is all too often overlooked and understudied.¹³ The PLA continuously conducts political work vis-à-vis Taiwan and the surrounding region. By its nature, the PLA’s liaison work is often covert, but in a future Taiwan scenario, it would probably prove every bit as much a threat as the PLA’s special operations, airborne, and amphibious brigades. Indeed, they are closely intertwined.

If “three warfare” activities prove insufficient to achieve China’s purposes over time, or if it perceives sufficiently adverse developments and trends, Beijing may shift its approach to more persistent, lower-intensity coercion. Such coercion could be dialed up and otherwise tailored as necessary to achieve the desired effects and channel adversaries into courses of action that PRC officials perceive as advantageous, such as bringing Taiwanese representatives to the negotiating table. Ultimately, PRC decision-makers may consider a full range of military options, most likely starting with limited conventional capabilities. These could be backstopped by the world’s largest conventional missile force and a rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and supported throughout by world-class enablers in every domain, including space and cyber. To operationalize in practice doctrine that reifies finely tailored escalation dominance for this kind of all external PLA objectives, the PRC is striving to be able to preempt or answer equivalently all conceivable U.S. and allied military capabilities and options, in addition to possessing capabilities and options for which there is no adversary equivalent.

¹¹ Yu-Jie Chen, “The CCP’s Violation of International Laws and Norms,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., May 4, 2023, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Yu-Jie_Chen_Testimony.pdf.

¹² For a hierarchy of CCP-preferred approaches applied directly to Taiwan, see the following by a prominent diplomat who was director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (2018–22) after serving as China’s permanent representative to the United Nations (2013–17): Liu Jieyi, “坚持贯彻新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略” [Adhere to the Party’s Overall Strategy for Resolving the Taiwan Issue in the New Era], *Qiushi*, December 1, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/adhere-to-the-partys-overall-strategy-for-resolving-the-taiwan-issue-in-the-new-era>.

¹³ Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, “The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics,” Project 2049 Institute, October 14, 2013, <https://project2049.net/2013/10/14/the-peoples-liberation-army-general-political-department-political-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics>.

Major questions remain concerning where Xi himself believes Taiwan contingencies to lie on this spectrum of possible operational options, to what extent he is driven by a near-term timeline, to what degree he may be abandoning his post-Mao predecessors' relative restraint, and how and in what ways he may be deterred. Overall, however, Xi appears to be concertedly pursuing PLA development that, in one way or another, overwhelms both Taiwan's attempts to resist his assertion of influence over the island and U.S. and allied efforts to help Taiwan resist. The sense of futility that Xi seeks to impose is symbolized in Greek mythology by King Sisyphus, condemned for eternity to roll a gigantic boulder up a hill, only to see it roll back down. Such expenditure of great resources and energy to no good purpose amid mounting threats that increasingly polarize and demoralize Taiwanese society while heightening U.S. and allied uncertainty and perceptions of risk is precisely the dynamic that Xi hopes can enable him to realize his political objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan without actually launching major combat operations. That said, he has ordered the PLA to prepare a full range of options to employ as necessary—in a worst-case scenario, to “fight and win.”

Relentless Ramp-Up: Forces, Training, and Operations

In recent years, the PLA's operational posture toward Taiwan has changed dramatically, to the detriment of both the island's security and the risks associated with the United States and allies coming to its aid across the full range of potential contingencies.¹⁴ Since the late 1990s, the PRC has engaged in “the most extensive and rapid buildup since World War II,”¹⁵ much of it focused on imposing credible force capabilities against Taiwan and foreign forces that might attempt to intervene to assist. Xi Jinping has significantly broadened and accelerated this buildup. In 2015–16, he promulgated sweeping military reforms designed to comprehensively enhance the PLA's ability to achieve the missions that he might order it to execute, including high-end Taiwan contingencies.¹⁶ Reforms included reorganization of the Central

¹⁴ For a dramatic documentation of this sobering sea change, see Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015).

¹⁵ Aquilino, “U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture,” 24.

¹⁶ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Crossing the Strait: PLA Modernization and Taiwan,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 17. For unparalleled coverage of this subject, see Phillip Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019).

Military Commission and its departments, offices, and bureaus; the Joint Staff Department; the theater commands; and services and support arms.

As part of the organizational dimension of Xi's reforms, to develop and employ its components more effectively, the PLA in 2015 (1) upgraded the Second Artillery Corps to the PLA Rocket Force, becoming the fourth service (after the army, navy, and air force) and (2) added two additional forces: the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF). Established in 2015, the SSF was charged with enabling PRC dominance across space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum by integrating PLA cyber, electronic warfare, and space units. On April 19, 2024, the SSF was disbanded and divided into three independent arms—the PLA Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, and Information Support Force—supporting the four services. As the PLA's fourth support arm, established in 2016, the JLSF is the backbone facilitating relationships between joint logistics units and other PLA service logistics elements while integrating civilian logistics into military operations (e.g., by “conducting C2 [command and control] of joint logistics, delivering materiel, and overseeing various support mechanisms” in a conflict against Taiwan).¹⁷ The Pentagon judges:

PLA writings suggest that the SSF would be responsible for EW [electronic warfare] and cyberspace operations during a Taiwan contingency, as one of the missions of the force is to seize and maintain information dominance.... The SSF 311 Base would be responsible for political and psychological warfare, such as disseminating propaganda against Taiwan to influence public opinion and promote the PRC's interests. The SSF would also play a strategic information and communications support role, centralizing technical intelligence collection and management and providing strategic intelligence support to theater commands involved in a Taiwan contingency.¹⁸

Among long-established PLA services, arguably the most dramatic threats to Taiwan come from the PLA Rocket Force, which has both the world's largest, most capable conventional missile forces and a rapidly growing nuclear triad that is third only to those of the United States and Russia. According to the Pentagon, China's strategic rocket force “is prepared to conduct missile attacks against high-value targets, including Taiwan's C2 facilities, air bases, and radar sites, in an attempt to degrade Taiwan's defenses, neutralize Taiwan's leadership, or break the public's will to fight,” and as of 2023, the PLA Rocket Force “is increasing its presence along the

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 146.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Taiwan Strait with new missile brigades, possibly indicating an increasing number of deployed missiles.”¹⁹

Other PLA services field potent missiles as well. The PLA Army’s PCH191 close-range ballistic missile is deployed in large numbers, can range all of Taiwan, and is directly relevant to numerous Taiwan scenarios.²⁰ Likewise, the PLA Air Force manages an extensive, formidable integrated air defense system. Its other capabilities relevant to a Taiwan contingency include large numbers of fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft whose unrefueled radius ranges to Taiwan, a small but growing number of tankers to extend the fighters’ range, and highly capable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support planes, such as the KJ-500.²¹ Three of the PLA Army’s major invasion-specific capabilities stand out: aviation, air assault, and, most importantly, the bulk of amphibious vessels capable of providing cross-strait sealift for its six amphibious combined arms brigades—four in the Eastern Theater Command and two in the Southern Theater Command.²² The army prioritizes and trains its Taiwan-relevant forces in all three of these areas.

For its part, the PLA Navy fields China’s largest amphibious vessels, including landing platform docks and amphibious assault ships (LHAs).²³ The PLA Navy has commissioned three Type 075 LHAs, with further hulls under construction. The Pentagon forecasts construction of a Type 076 LHA, which will likely “be equipped with electromagnetic catapults, which would enhance its ability to support fixed-wing aircraft and make it somewhat more like an aircraft carrier.”²⁴ In 2021 the Type 05 amphibious assault vehicle (AAV) debuted in large numbers. Now the PLA’s most advanced amphibious

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 145–46.

²⁰ Joshua Arostegui, “The PCH191 Modular Long-Range Rocket Launcher: Reshaping the PLA Army’s Role in a Cross-Strait Campaign,” U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI), China Maritime Report, no. 32, November 3, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/32>.

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 62–64, 89; and Felix K. Chang, “China’s Maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Capability in the South China Sea,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 5, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/05/chinas-maritime-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance-capability-in-the-south-china-sea>.

²² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 144–45.

²³ The abbreviation “LHA” derives from the U.S. Navy’s “landing helicopter assault” classification for helicopter-carrying amphibious assault ships.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C., November 2022), 129, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2022-China-Military-Power-Report>; and “China People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN): Recognition and Identification Guide,” April 2024, https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/China_Media/2024_Recce_Poster_PLAN_Navy_U__new2.jpg?ver=gLEmUaAttQXpV9cL9g7YA%3d%3d.

armored equipment, the Type 05 boasts “an upgrade in armor, survivability, and speed from the last-generation Type 63A,” providing “the PLA with a more capable amphibious assault platform.”²⁵

Numbers of larger PLA amphibious platforms remain modest, and there are no indications of the significant increases in the numbers of tank landing ships and medium-sized landing craft that would be needed to provide the full requisite sealift for a cross-strait invasion force to “load up, get across, and unload.”²⁶ China’s shipbuilding industry certainly has the capacity for a massive ramp-up in the number of amphibious vessels, but this would attract major foreign attention, reduce the element of surprise, and potentially trigger countermeasures. Additionally, personnel would need to train for some time with the vessels to ensure maximum effectiveness.

Currently, the PRC is pursuing the stopgap measure of incorporating its Maritime Militia personnel and ramp-retrofitted roll-on/roll-off vessels (RO-ROs), such as large ferries, into a potential landing force.²⁷ As a professor at Army Military Transportation University and an employee at the PLA Navy Logistics Department writes, “among civilian vessels, RO-RO vessels are the most ideal vessel type for unit cross-sea delivery.”²⁸ A doctoral student at Army Military Transportation University has also explored the in-depth means for RO-RO vessels to land at civilian wharves under various conditions.²⁹ As for larger platforms, the PLA Navy is rapidly improving across the board in both hardware and personnel. According to the Pentagon, “new attack submarines and modern surface combatants with anti-air capabilities and fourth-generation naval aircraft entering the force are designed to achieve maritime superiority within the [first island chain].”

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2022, 129.

²⁶ The quote is from Chen Xuanyu, Ren Cong, and Wang Fengzhong, “渡海登岛运输勤务保障面临的问题和对策” [Countermeasures for Problems in Service Support in Cross-Strait and Beach Landing Transportation], *Logistics Technology* 10 (2016): 166–69. See also U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2023, 142–45.

²⁷ Conor M. Kennedy, “Getting There: Chinese Military and Civilian Sealift in a Cross-Strait Invasion,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 223–52; and Conor M. Kennedy, “RO-RO Ferries and the Expansion of the PLA’s Landing Ship Fleet,” Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), March 27, 2023, <https://cimsec.org/ro-ro-ferries-and-the-expansion-of-the-plas-landing-ship-fleet>.

²⁸ Liu Baoxin and Dong Nan, “提高无码头卸载保障能力的对策” [Approaches to Improving Support Capabilities for Dockless Unloading], *Journal of Military Transportation* 1, no. 5 (2022): 26–29.

²⁹ Wang Xin, “民用码头建设贯彻海上战略投送要求研究” [Research on Civil Wharfs Construction Implementing Maritime Strategic Projection Requirements], *Traffic Engineering and Technology for National Defence* 20, no. 5 (2022): 7–10.

These platforms are also intended “to deter and counter any potential third-party intervention in a Taiwan conflict.”³⁰

In sum, this critical decade is already witnessing a relentless ramp-up in both PRC military force posture and “full court press” activity vis-à-vis Taiwan. PLA forces have achieved a nearly continuous presence in the waters and airspace around Taiwan, as well as a heightened operational tempo in exercises and limited operations—to impose what Xi himself terms a “new normal” (新常态).³¹ The subsequent sections consider potential scenarios of coercion or limited force against Taiwan, as well as a range of campaign scenarios involving both mainland Taiwan and its offshore islands.

All-Domain Pressure Campaign

PRC forces are engaged in heightened periodic activity seemingly designed to stress Taiwanese society and wear down platforms, personnel, and readiness across its relatively small, resource-limited military. Perhaps most notably, the PLA Air Force has increased flights into Taiwan’s self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ), particularly its southwest corner. The Pentagon emphasizes both qualitative and quantitative escalation. Since September 2022, unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have accounted for roughly 10% of PLA aircraft tracked in the ADIZ. In 2022, the PLA dispatched a total of 1,737 aircraft into Taiwan’s ADIZ, a 79% increase from 972 incursions in 2021.³²

To coerce Taiwan in the direction of PRC policy preferences, Beijing will continue to employ military, diplomatic, informational, and economic pressure. Analysts foresee various combinations of national efforts across these categories, with varying levels of synchronization and effectiveness. Potential tools of economic coercion include denying commodity imports, suspending trade negotiations, boycotting Taiwanese brands or goods, encouraging mob violence, disrupting employment and the stock exchange, conducting speculative attacks on foreign exchange markets, nationalizing assets, and encouraging sovereign debt divestment.³³

³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 145.

³¹ Mathieu Duchâtel, “An Assessment of China’s Options for Military Coercion of Taiwan,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 95.

³² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 136.

³³ Timothy R. Heath, Sale Lilly, and Eugeniu Han, *Can Taiwan Resist a Large-Scale Military Attack by China? Assessing Strengths and Vulnerabilities in a Potential Conflict* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2023), 76–78.

Preparatory Exercises

PRC forces are increasing training to improve the ability of China's armed forces to execute various operations against Taiwan, including through island seizure drills. Both frequency and realism are mounting, with exercises encompassing more challenging times (night), weather (inclement), and domains (multiple).

Amphibious and amphibious-related exercises have been a major area of effort. In 2021 the PLA Navy conducted "more than 20 naval exercises with an island-capture element, greatly exceeding the 13 observed in 2020." It conducted more than 120 maritime exercises within three months during 2021 and incorporated Type 05 AAVs in large numbers for the first time that year.³⁴ China is also training extensively with Maritime Militia units as well as RO-RO ferries with retrofitted ramps and artificial causeways (mobilizable under the aegis of the 2016 National Defense Transportation Law) to avoid the need for port-based disembarkations and instead directly deliver AAVs.³⁵ Since July 2020, the PLA has been practicing such delivery.³⁶ In 2022, for example, it more than doubled the number of RO-ROs involved in training over the previous year.³⁷

The PLA Army has been conducting both service-level and joint amphibious assault training. According to the Pentagon, these drills "refined the tactics of rapid loading, long-distance transport and beach assault under complicated sea situations, and logistic support capabilities." The Pentagon also cites media reports of extensive PLA employment of "sea, air, and ground UAS in support of the amphibious assault operation. [PLA Army] amphibious brigades reportedly conduct realistic, large-scale amphibious operations that are almost certainly aimed at supporting a Taiwan invasion scenario."³⁸

³⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*, 107, 126.

³⁵ J. Michael Dahm, "Chinese Ferry Tales: The PLA's Use of Civilian Shipping in Support of Over-the-Shore Logistics," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 16, November 1, 2021, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/16/>; and J. Michael Dahm, "More Chinese Ferry Tales: China's Use of Civilian Shipping in Military Activities, 2021–2022," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 25, January 20, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/25/>.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*, 127.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 143.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

Political Pouncing and Practice

A growing PLA pattern of “reactive assertiveness” has included sharper opportunistic exercises to condemn and exploit purported political wrongs, impose costs, and practice certain sophisticated joint operations (e.g., missile strikes). The most dramatic example to date since 1995–96 is the simulated Joint Blockade/Firepower Campaign exercises on August 2–10, 2022, immediately following Pelosi’s visit. In August 2022 the PLA Air Force flew more than 250 fighter aircraft sorties into Taiwan’s ADIZ and across the Taiwan Strait median line, which no longer serves as a de facto delimitation line for PLA activities.³⁹ The PLA Navy deployed thirteen warships around Taiwan. Most dramatically, the PLA Rocket Force fired multiple ballistic missiles into impact zones in waters surrounding Taiwan on all sides, with unprecedented overflight of its mainland by at least four missiles.⁴⁰ Although Beijing’s response to President Tsai Ing-wen’s 2023 visit with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California was far more restrained, it contained a disturbing portent. On April 5, the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration announced a Taiwan Strait operation including patrols and “on-site [vessel] inspections.” While apparently unexecuted, the declaration could presage future escalation.⁴¹ Further examples of military signaling, pressure, and even operational practice will doubtless follow.

Many PLA activities support both the development of substantive combat capabilities and the signaling of resolve to use this growing potential should it prove necessary for achieving PRC objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan. It is often difficult to disaggregate the two. Retired senior captain Li Jie, a long-established and prolific expert at the PLA Navy Military Arts Research Institute, describes one such multifaceted effort:

On February 9 [2020] the Eastern Theater Command of the PLA organized sea and air forces to conduct a combat readiness patrol. In systematic fashion, it dispatched destroyers, frigates, bombers, fighters, early warning aircraft, and various other types of combat platforms and weapons to test the integrated joint combat capabilities of multiple services. Air assets transited the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait on a patrol flight and conducted targeted drills with realistic subject matter. It is extremely significant that multiple Chinese military services,

³⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022*, 126.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 140.

⁴¹ Bonny Lin et al., “Analyzing China’s Escalation after Taiwan President Tsai’s Transit through the United States,” CSIS, June 29, 2023, 4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/analyzing-chinas-escalation-after-taiwan-president-tsais-transit-through-united-states>.

including naval and air forces, jointly conducted combat readiness patrols during this unusual period.⁴²

In Li's assessment, these joint patrols warned "Taiwan independence" forces, admonished their supporters, demonstrated competence and resolve to countries supporting Beijing's cross-strait policies, and reassured PRC citizens that the party, state, and military were handling national affairs well.⁴³

These patterns are likely to persist well into this decade. The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence forecasts that "Beijing will continue to apply military and economic pressure...to induce Taiwan to move toward unification.... Beijing will use even stronger measures to push back against perceived increases in U.S. support to Taiwan."⁴⁴ As PLA forces increasingly approach Xi's 2027 preparation goal, their Taiwan-adjacent exercises will grow larger, more sophisticated, and more realistic. This will heighten U.S. perceptions—and likely the actual risk—that the PLA might seek to desensitize U.S., Taiwanese, and allied intelligence and thereby reduce indications and warnings of the PLA launching an actual military operation against Taiwan.

Taiwan Scenarios

With the PLA's successful modernization, Xi Jinping already has many options to shape the security environment and to initiate various combat operations. The risks are high, but China's armed forces can initiate a variety of operations with far less warning than in the past. These options and influence will continue to grow rapidly in the coming years. Contingencies for action by China's armed forces against Taiwan comprise four categories: coercion, blockade, bombardment, and invasion. Although this chapter discusses these groupings in ascending order of intensity and overall severity, they may be employed in different sequences with overlapping aspects.

⁴² Li Jie, "中国实施战备巡航的四大宣誓" [The Four Major Declarations China Makes When Conducting Combat Readiness Patrols], *Modern Ships*, no. 07/08 (2020): 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C., March 2024), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

Coercion or Limited Force

Coercive PRC activities short of major combat operations might be divided into (1) disruptive activities, primarily involving the three warfares, and (2) limited use of force, including daily maritime gray-zone operations involving low-intensity coercion by the China Coast Guard and Maritime Militia.⁴⁵ Both forces are formally elements of China's armed forces and answer to a PLA chain of command up to Xi himself. While some extant and potential activities may span both categories, the present author opposes as analytically obfuscatory and unhelpful the generic definition of gray-zone activities to encompass all manner of problematic PRC activities. This broad conception is commonly employed in Taiwan, the United States, and much of the Western world.

At the lower-intensity end of PRC coercive activities are political and disinformation operations primarily captured by the three warfares.⁴⁶ Political activities may be overt, covert, or a combination thereof. Unlike in 1950, the PRC now has capable fifth column assets deployed in Taiwan. Cyberactivity is a major enabler of such operations and may also be used to disrupt or even disable elements of Taiwan's critical infrastructure, media, financial networks, or economic activities more broadly. The overriding, or at least initial, objective would be to demonstrate the ability to impose punishment or crippling dysfunction on Taiwan's society and reveal its leadership to be ineffective and without recourse, thereby compelling Taiwanese officials and the populace to accept Beijing's terms in order to avert catastrophe.

At the higher-intensity end of coercive activities, the PRC has a growing array of tools at its disposal.⁴⁷ For instance, extensive military exercises and the enforcement of restrictions and closure areas through Notices to Airmen would require rerouting ships and aircraft and could impose significant costs on Taiwan's economy. The 1995–96 exercises offer a model on which the PLA

⁴⁵ For an unrivaled conceptual survey of this subject, see Peter Dutton, "Conceptualizing China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," in *Maritime Gray Zone Operations: Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson (New York: Routledge, 2022), 19–34.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective>; Elsa B. Kania, "The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, August 22, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares>; and Kerry K. Gershaneck, *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting"* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2020).

⁴⁷ For an instructive background, see Duchâtel, "An Assessment of China's Options for Military Coercion of Taiwan."

might build. Additionally, “PLA special operations forces could infiltrate Taiwan and conduct attacks against infrastructure or leadership targets.”⁴⁸

Blockade

Of all major PRC military options vis-à-vis Taiwan, an air or maritime blockade is perhaps unrivaled in its potential flexibility, contingent nature, and ability to impose difficult escalation dilemmas on Taiwanese, U.S., and allied decision-makers. Accordingly, while a blockade could escalate tremendously, as well as be combined with elements of other operations (e.g., bombardment and strait-crossing), it is the next logical aspect to consider in sequence.

Among the PLA’s set of service- and joint-level missions, the Joint Blockade Campaign (联合封锁战役) generally covers such aforementioned operations. Under this operational concept, China’s armed forces would seek to interrupt or sever foreign air and maritime intercourse with Taiwan, in part to compel the island’s surrender by cutting off critical imports. The PLA Air Force and Navy would have leading roles, but the PLA Army might well also apply its unrivaled mass, and the Aerospace, Cyberspace, and Information Support Forces might simultaneously implement electronic warfare, network attacks, and information operations (e.g., “information blockade”) to heighten Taiwan’s isolation and societal fracturing. Such efforts to isolate and enervate Taiwan could be quite prolonged,⁴⁹ although the longer they continued, the greater the possibility and prospect of U.S. and allied intervention.⁵⁰ Leading analysts have expressed concerns about the United States’ ability to deter China through the imposition of costs, mismatch of goals and capabilities, ability to prevail in protracted blockade warfare, and viable war termination options.⁵¹

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 141. See also John Chen and Joel Wuthnow, “Chinese Special Operations in a Large-Scale Island Landing,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 18, January 21, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/18>.

⁴⁹ For related considerations, see Gustavo F. Ferreira and Jamie A. Critelli, “Taiwan’s Food Resiliency—or Not—in a Conflict with China,” *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023): 39–60.

⁵⁰ Max Stewart, “Island Blitz: A Campaign Analysis of a Taiwan Takeover by the PLA,” CIMSEC, June 13, 2023, <https://cimsec.org/island-blitz-a-campaign-analysis-of-a-taiwan-takeover-by-the-pla>.

⁵¹ For pessimistic analyses, see Lonnie D. Henley, “PLA Operational Concepts and Centers of Gravity in a Taiwan Conflict,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., February 18, 2021, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Lonnie_Henley_Testimony.pdf; and Lonnie D. Henley, “Beyond the First Battle: Overcoming a Protracted Blockade of Taiwan,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 26, March 8, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/26>.

Bombardment

The Joint Firepower Strike Campaign (联合火力战役) would draw on some of the PLA's leading weapons.⁵² Precision missile and air strikes could proceed in various sequences, potentially in combination with other major PLA operations. Given their centrality to situational awareness, Taiwan's early-warning radars would likely be some of the first targets for strikes.⁵³ Other major military targets seen as pivotal to Taiwan's defenses would likely include bases and command and communications posts. Government targets seen as pivotal to Taiwan's leadership and decision-making continuity and resolve to fight would include major institutions and official facilities.⁵⁴ While Xi controls numerous and extremely capable strike assets to wage a Joint Firepower Strike Campaign, and there is no way to fully defend against them all, such a campaign would be unlikely in and of itself to realize Xi's political objectives regarding "Taiwanese compatriots" and could well backfire strategically.

Invasion

The most operationally viable effort for PLA forces at present would be an incremental victory or stepping-stone approach to seizing offshore islands, particularly the Pratas Islands and Taiping Island in the South China Sea, as well as Kinmen and the Matsu Islands in the Taiwan Strait. In a key example of operational vulnerability for Taiwan and potential opportunity for China, the Pratas Islands—which Beijing also claims—are located approximately 275 miles from Kaohsiung, the municipality in southern Taiwan that administers them, but just 170 miles from Hong Kong (within the city's flight information region). Lacking permanent inhabitants, they host a detachment of roughly 500 Taiwanese marines.⁵⁵ The Pentagon assesses:

The PLA is capable of various amphibious operations short of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan.... With few overt military preparations beyond routine training, the PRC could launch an invasion of small Taiwan-occupied islands in the SCS [South China Sea], such as Pratas or Itu Aba. A PLA invasion of a

⁵² Michael Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict," in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 113–37, especially 118–23.

⁵³ Mark Stokes and Eric Lee, "Early Warning in the Taiwan Strait," Project 2049 Institute, April 12, 2022, <https://project2049.net/2022/04/12/early-warning-in-the-taiwan-strait>.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 141.

⁵⁵ Shahn Savino and Charles Dunst, "Will Taiwan's Dongsha Islands Be the Next Crimea?" *World Politics Review*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/a-small-island-chain-could-be-the-next-flashpoint-in-taiwan-china-relations>.

medium-sized, better-defended island, such as Matsu or Kinmen, is also within the PLA's capabilities.⁵⁶

Such a victory might be pyrrhic, however, given the cost of strategic surprise and the political opposition that it would likely galvanize in Taiwan as well as the United States and its allies. It is noteworthy that the PLA arguably had operationally viable options vis-à-vis Kinmen and the Matsu Islands as early as the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, but that Mao decided against such courses of action in order to avoid undermining the PRC's claims to Taiwan in its entirety. However, such a seizure would greatly raise the stakes and risk: if the United States failed to respond effectively, its resolve and commitment would come into question.

An outright amphibious invasion probably would be the only way for the PRC to assert control of Taiwan permanently and conclusively. It also represents one of the most complex and difficult military operations conceivable, a challenge further accentuated by its high-stakes nature. Two authors—one a naval engineer specializing in amphibious operations at the Marine Design and Research Institute of China in Shanghai—write in the PLA Navy's service newspaper: "From the perspective of past large-scale landing operations, once success is achieved, the gains are enormous. But the degree of difficulty is also large."⁵⁷ Furthermore, failure would be obvious, and no amount of CCP propaganda could portray the situation otherwise.

PLA operational concepts for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan center on the Joint Island Landing Campaign (联合登陆), which entails a coordinated combination of campaigns involving air, maritime, logistics, and electronic warfare components.⁵⁸ The objective is to achieve air and maritime superiority; circumvent, overwhelm, penetrate, or otherwise overcome Taiwanese defenses; seize ports and beaches, improvise landing methods, or otherwise establish a beachhead; accumulate combat power by rapidly building up and sustaining shore-based forces; and drive inland to seize key objectives, or even—in the most extreme of scenarios—the whole island.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 141–42.

⁵⁷ Wang Guo and Wang Xiang, "登陆作战到底难在何处" [Why Landing Operations Are Hard], People's Navy, December 29, 2020, 4.

⁵⁸ Cristina L. Garafola, "The PLA Airborne Corps in a Joint Island Landing Campaign," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 19, March 10, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/19>; and Dennis J. Blasko, "The PLA Army Amphibious Force," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 20, April 27, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/20>.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 141.

A conference convened by the China Maritime Studies Institute in May 2021 found that the PLA has achieved tremendous progress in developing many of the capabilities needed for a cross-strait invasion, confronting Taiwan with an increasingly grave threat. The inherent challenges and risks remain high for Xi and the CCP, but they may desire to be “just good enough for long enough” with a hodgepodge fleet of PLA, militia, and civilian vessels.⁶⁰

Despite the PLA’s ongoing efforts to improve its capabilities to execute the Taiwan Joint Island Landing Campaign, the Pentagon is skeptical of the prospects for an amphibious invasion:

A large-scale amphibious invasion would be one of the most complicated and difficult military operations for the PLA, requiring air and maritime superiority, the rapid buildup and sustainment of supplies onshore, and uninterrupted support. It would likely strain the PRC’s armed forces and invite a strong international response. These factors, combined with inevitable force attrition, the complexity of urban warfare, and potential for an insurgency, make an amphibious invasion of Taiwan a significant political and military risk for Xi and the CCP, even assuming a successful landing and breakout past Taiwan beachhead defenses.⁶¹

Taiwan itself has a variety of means to attempt to make its ports unusable by an invading force.⁶² Furthermore, it seems doubtful that the PLA has fully prepared for the challenging city operations that might be needed to successfully conclude an invasion of Taiwan.⁶³

PRC Perceptions: Effectiveness, Capabilities, and Trends

It is unclear how well-informed (or forthright) most civilian PRC sources are regarding the current and projected state of PLA force development and Xi Jinping’s thinking regarding its use. The vast majority of sources the present author examined suggest that “peaceful reunification”

⁶⁰ “Quick Look Report: Large-Scale Amphibious Warfare in Chinese Military Strategy,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, June 14, 2021, available at <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/06/quick-look-cmsi-4-6-may-2021-conference-large-scale-amphibious-warfare-in-chinese-military-strategy-taiwan-strait-campaign-focus>.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 141.

⁶² Ian Easton, “Hostile Harbors: Taiwan’s Ports and PLA Invasion Plans,” Project 2049 Institute, July 22, 2021, <https://project2049.net/2021/07/22/hostile-harbors-taiwans-ports-and-pla-invasion-plans>.

⁶³ Sale Lilly, “‘Killing Rats in a Porcelain Shop’: PLA Urban Warfare in a Taiwan Campaign,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 139–57; and Elsa B. Kania and Ian Burns McCaslin, “The PLA’s Evolving Outlook on Urban Warfare: Learning, Training, and Implications for Taiwan,” Institute for the Study of War, April 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/pla-s-evolving-outlook-urban-warfare-learning-training-and-implications-taiwan>.

under some sort of “one country, two systems” framework remains Beijing’s preferred approach. Wang Yong, director of the Center for American Studies at Peking University, observes that “peaceful reunification is the least costly way to resolve the Taiwan issue.”⁶⁴ Some civilian sources appear to suggest the need for a more flexible approach than Xi’s rhetoric has reflected to date. Two professors, one affiliated with the Shenzhen Liaison Department of the Central Government Liaison Office in Hong Kong, state that policy approaches “obviously cannot ignore reactions of the Taiwan side” and call for a wide-ranging exploration of possibilities for framing one country, two systems.⁶⁵

Some writings suggest that Beijing remains cautious and could still be deterred. “Cross-strait military security crises are extremely harmful and can easily lead to intervention by external forces,” states Chen Xiancai, director of the Institute of Political Science at Xiamen University’s Taiwan Research Institute. He continues: “Coupled with its high cost, the willingness of all parties to trigger a military security crisis is reduced, such that, objectively speaking, endogenous forces can restrain the outbreak of a cross-strait military security crisis.”⁶⁶ A specialist at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations judges the probability of conflict to be relatively low, albeit with caveats:

Given the deep economic interdependence between China and the United States and the asymmetric nuclear balance of terror, the likelihood of a large-scale conflict between China and the United States is low, and the triggering of a fierce diplomatic war and severe economic sanctions are low-probability events. International politics is full of chances and drama, however, and major strategic changes often manifest themselves in unexpected ways.⁶⁷

Another scholar judges that while “the general direction of U.S. Taiwan policy may continue in a direction that is not conducive to the peaceful development of cross-strait relations for a long time,” nevertheless, “the

⁶⁴ Wang Yong, “和平统一、一国两制是解决台湾问题的最佳方案” [Peaceful Reunification and One Country, Two Systems Are the Best Solutions to the Taiwan Issue], *China Youth Daily*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/138704.html>.

⁶⁵ Huang Jichao and Jin Huanyu, “当前大陆学界 ‘一国两制’ 台湾方案相关研究述评” [A Review of Current Research in Mainland Academia on the “One Country, Two Systems” Formula for Taiwan], *Taiwan Studies*, August 1, 2021, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/a-review-of-current-research-in-mainland-academia-on-the-one-country-two-systems-formula-for-taiwan>.

⁶⁶ Chen Xiancai, “台海危机与风险管理: 1987–2017为例” [Taiwan Strait Crisis and Risk Management: The Case of 1987–2017], *Taiwan Studies*, February 20, 2018, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/taiwan-strait-crisis-and-risk-management-the-case-of-1987-2017>.

⁶⁷ Zhang Wenzong, “美国对华威慑与胁迫及中国应对” [U.S. Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy toward China and China’s Response], *Contemporary International Relations*, December 20, 2016, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/u-s-deterrence-and-coercive-diplomacy-toward-china-and-chinas-response>.

probability of China and the United States falling into great-power conflict and war confrontation due to the Taiwan issue is not high.”⁶⁸

Other specialists are far more pessimistic or hawkish. A lengthy analysis concludes that “Taiwan is increasingly likely to become a ‘tipping point’ for Sino-U.S. conflicts.”⁶⁹ In a characteristically assertive vein, Zhang Wenmu expresses certitude that Beijing can compel Washington to abandon Taiwan.⁷⁰ A similarly hard-line analysis from Leng Bo, director of the Voting Research Office in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Taiwan Research Institute, likewise suggests that things are coming to a head and that the clock is ticking. He invokes Xi and society alike to assert that the status quo is unacceptable:

Although the opportunity is not yet completely ripe for cross-strait unification, the foundation for this prospect grows increasingly solid, and we have entered “the stage where we can reach it if we stand on our tiptoes.” In his important speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the “Letter to Taiwan Compatriots,” General Secretary Xi Jinping mentioned the need to accelerate the unification process. It is no longer enough to “sit and talk”; the time has come to “stand and act.” The Mainland’s policy toward Taiwan is now more aimed at favorably shaping the unification situation. It is worth mentioning, the Mainland public’s hatred of “Taiwan independence” and its impatience with delay and the inability to resolve the Taiwan problem are all rapidly growing, while voices favoring “armed unification” are continuously rising. Even the patience of the rationalists doing research on Taiwan is decreasing.⁷¹

Military-affiliated sources tend to echo Leng’s impatient approach. Such sources would generally not be expected to acknowledge any prohibitive PLA inadequacies regarding Taiwan scenarios. Their general consensus is that Washington’s and Taipei’s cross-strait policies and actions are trending in an unacceptable direction, reflecting a failure thus far by Beijing and the PLA to curb them, but that the PLA is on track to be able to offer the necessary deterrence or compellence, potentially through CCP authorization to take harsher, more coercive approaches and even credibly threaten war. In interpreting China’s latest defense white paper (2019), researchers at China’s

⁶⁸ Li Zhengguang, “台湾问题的国际环境变化与台海局势走向” [Changes in the International Environment of the Taiwan Issue and Trends in the Taiwan Strait], *China Review*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/124382.html>.

⁶⁹ Qiu Chaobing, “中美关系新常态下的台湾问题：走向与评估” [The Taiwan Issue under the New Situation of Sino-U.S. Relations: Direction and Assessment], *United Front Studies Research*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/124825.html>.

⁷⁰ Zhang Wenmu, “台湾问题的底线、极限、机遇” [The Bottom Line, Limits, and Opportunities of the Taiwan Issue], in 张文木战略文集 [Zhang Wenmu’s Strategic Essays] (Jinan: Shandong People’s Publishing House, 2020), chap. 1, available at <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/127566.html>.

⁷¹ Leng Bo, “百年未有之大变局下两岸关系新特征与未来趋势” [New Characteristics and Future Trends in Cross-Strait Relations in the Context of the Great Change Not Seen in a Century], *Modern Taiwan Studies*, no. 3 (2021): 14–17.

Academy of Military Science's Warfare Research Institute invoke harsh boilerplate: "It is better to lose thousands of troops than to lose an inch of soil.... The tide of history is vast and mighty. Those who submit will prosper, while those who resist shall perish. Reunification is the historical trend and the correct path."⁷²

Likely affiliated with China's military or defense industry and written under a pseudonym, one unofficial but extensive and seemingly serious analysis emphasizes that "China's Taiwan region is not Ukraine, and the PLA is certainly not the Russian Army." The report identifies the following trendlines:

[D]ue to limitations imposed by existing economic levels and available military equipment, it has not been until the last ten years that the PLA has started to gradually gain the real combat capabilities needed to use force to resolve the Taiwan issue and achieve unification of the motherland.... The PLA's launch of a campaign to resolve the Taiwan issue can generally be seen as a [devastating] attack because the Taiwan military and the PLA are not of the same class. The PLA will definitely achieve quick, decisive victory, nothing like the war of attrition currently being conducted by the Russian army.⁷³

Longtime government analyst Da Wei, who is deeply familiar with policymaking in both Beijing and Washington, offers particular insights from within China's intelligence and analytic community. He explains that "rather than saying that each party has a 'red line,' it would be better to say that each party insists on a 'red zone' with blurred boundaries and a certain degree of flexibility." While claiming that its Taiwan policy remains unchanged, Da contends that Washington has abandoned previous restrictions and restraint. This reversal, he insists, has moved the goal posts and dishonored the spirit of Washington's commitments: "It is as if the United States removed the Buddha statues from the temple, leaving only an empty structure, and then claimed that the temple was still there." Simultaneously, Da acknowledges that "despite the Chinese government's constant reaffirmation of its basic policies of 'peaceful reunification and one country, two systems,' as long as the capabilities of the Chinese military are growing, and the scope of its activities is expanding, the United States will believe that China is gradually abandoning its policy of 'peaceful reunification.'" Worryingly, he concludes that "this situation has left us with little time. If we cannot achieve strategic stability through self-restraint and mutual assurance, we may have to wait

⁷² Deng Bibo and Chen Yue, "坚定不移推进实现国家完全统一" [Firmly Push Forward Complete National Unification], *National Defense*, no. 9 (2019): 16–17.

⁷³ Long Damao, "国战于野——从俄乌战争看中国台湾问题" [Great Countries at War: Looking at the Taiwan Issue from the Perspective of the Russia-Ukraine War], *Shipborne Weapons—Defense Review*, no. 6 (2022): 8–14.

for stability to be achieved through a larger crisis, conflict, or even war. However, this path would be extremely costly for China, the United States, and the world.”⁷⁴

PRC military-informed sources are generally pessimistic about current trends, believing that Taipei and Washington are insufficiently deterred. While some civilian sources suggest caution and potential deterrence, military sources emphasize preparation and the need for more coercive measures—precisely the path Xi appears to be taking.

Conclusion: Fateful Trends

Xi Jinping has sustained rapid growth in military funding even as China’s economy continually slows. He has pursued an expensive, complex system of systems (e.g., hypersonic glide vehicles) that can only be developed and deployed through resource-intensive, high-stakes megaprojects. He has initiated and sustained an extraordinary nuclear weapons buildup with political, reputational, and strategic stability costs and risks that his predecessors all avoided. These approaches do not maximize China’s prospects for long-term development underwritten by economic growth. Rather, they are clearly designed to give Xi military options that his predecessors lacked.

Xi hopes to achieve his objectives at the lowest level of escalation, using a meteoric military buildup to impose a Sisyphean sense of futility on Taiwan as part of a whole-of-government pressure campaign to eventually compel unification and thereby “win without fighting.” However, Xi is heightening expectations and time pressure in a way that increasingly risks a collision course with intractable opposition from Taiwan, the United States, and U.S. allies and partners. Even under Ma Ying-jeou, Xi was unwilling or unable to offer conditions that Taiwanese society could accept. Subsequently, his de-emphasis of carrots and increasing emphasis on sticks make apparent offerings far less palatable. Compounding matters, his suppression of Hong Kong in contravention of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and imposition of the popularly opposed National Security Law invalidating core protections promised under the framework of one country, two systems make any offerings to Taiwan far less credible. The increasingly apparent lack

⁷⁴ Da Wei, “如何实现台湾问题的新稳定，对话、危机还是战争？” [How Can We Achieve New Stability on the Taiwan Issue—Dialogue, Crisis, or War?], China Foundation for International Studies, August 22, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/how-can-we-achieve-new-stability-on-the-taiwan-issue-dialogue-crisis-or-war>.

of a PRC-preferred pathway toward cross-strait entente could bring a range of military contingencies into play.

The PLA's transformation has fundamentally altered Taiwan's options for defending itself in a range of conceivable scenarios. Taipei can no longer counter PRC military strengths symmetrically. Instead, as William Murray cogently argues, its remaining defense options lie in emphasizing the asymmetrical advantage of being the defender, particularly of an island with favorable geography, and seeking to deny the PRC its strategic objectives rather than attempting to destroy its weapons systems.⁷⁵ Taiwan is studying and pursuing a variety of these measures, but more is needed. Sea mines represent one of the best weapons for this purpose, yet they remain underemphasized even now.⁷⁶

The prospects are sobering; the implications are bracing. Taiwan might indeed have to roll its rock up the hill (by successfully deterring)—if not endlessly, at least through this critical decade. There are indeed asymmetric “porcupine-style” ways to better pace the mounting threat while avoiding Sisyphean futility, but progress is thus far slow, and time may well be running out. As Xi himself has declared: “History never waits for those who hesitate, those who look on, those who are idle, or those who are weak.”⁷⁷ This critical decade is pivotal for Taiwan's future and the United States' security. To deter aggression, they must rapidly bolster asymmetric defenses.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ William S. Murray, “Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy,” *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (2008): 13–38.

⁷⁶ See Matthew Cancian, “An Offensive Minelaying Campaign against China,” *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 1 (2022): 71–88.

⁷⁷ David Bandurski, “95 Reasons to Celebrate: President Xi's Party Anniversary Speech and What It Might Mean,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 1, 2016, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/07/01/95-reasons-to-celebrate-president-xis-party-anniversary-speech-and-what-it-might-mean>.

⁷⁸ For recommendations, see Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, “Deterring (or Defeating) a PLA Invasion: Eight Recommendations for Taipei,” in *Chinese Amphibious Warfare: Prospects for a Cross-Strait Invasion*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson, Conor M. Kennedy, and Ryan D. Martinson (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2024), 449–61.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the contribution of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to China's strategy in Southeast Asia and assesses the various means the country uses to achieve its strategic goals.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The PLA is a critical component of China's strategy in Southeast Asia. Yet when considering its role in achieving the country's strategic goals, four arguments must be taken into account. First, China has preferred nonmilitary, including gray-zone, coercion in the South China Sea in recent years. Second, the PLA is being used in conjunction with other means of statecraft to achieve China's goals in the region, including economic sanctions. Third, these goals concern not only military objectives such as deterrence and combat effectiveness but also broader economic and geopolitical goals. Fourth, the use of coercion, including nonmilitary coercion, and the presence of the PLA's capabilities in Southeast Asia cut against China's "carrots," reducing the effectiveness of the country's economic statecraft.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- China is sensitive to the geopolitical costs of military coercion in the South China Sea and remains cautious, despite the increased frequency of its use of coercion. Thus, the U.S. will send stronger signals of resolve by maintaining its military presence and making clearer statements of commitment in Southeast Asia.
- The U.S. could engage in a balancing act between signals of resolve and signals of reassurance.
- Given that China coordinates its military and nonmilitary tools, the U.S. could provide more economic incentives and alternatives to ASEAN countries.

The PLA as a Part of China's Strategy in Southeast Asia

Ketian Zhang

China has maintained a positive relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially in the economic realm. At the same time, it has maritime territorial disputes with some ASEAN countries, including Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. What is the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China's strategy in Southeast Asia? This chapter examines the PLA's contribution and assesses the various means the country uses to achieve its strategic goals.

The chapter is organized into the following sections. The first section examines changes in the PLA's operational posture and new patterns of PLA activity in Southeast Asia. The second section examines to what extent China coordinates the use of the PLA with other means of statecraft. The third section then delves deeper into an analysis of China's regional military objectives and broader strategic goals. The following section evaluates the effectiveness of PLA activities in Southeast Asia before the chapter concludes with a discussion of policy implications.

Changes in the PLA's Operational Posture and New Patterns of Activity

This section will first examine changes in the PLA's activities and then analyze the roles the PLA has increasingly undertaken in the past two decades.

Patterns of and Changes in PLA Activities

In the 1990s, China utilized the PLA to coerce Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea. The militarized seizure of Mischief

Reef serves as one example.¹ As noted by former Chinese diplomat Zhang Liangfu, from December 1994 to February 1995, China seized and built shelters (高脚屋) on the reef, which was also claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam.² The seizure of Mischief Reef constituted both military and gray-zone coercion, and the PLA Navy was involved in the construction of shelters on it. According to one naval officer who served in the South Sea fleet, China used Type 991 landing ships to transport construction materials.³ Furthermore, China used gray-zone tactics on January 17, 1995, and May 13, 1995, when Chinese fishery ships expelled Philippine vessels.⁴ Its immediate goal was to stop the Philippines from controlling Mischief Reef. As the reef lies in the eastern part of the Spratly Islands, China viewed it as a good location for controlling other land features in the South China Sea.⁵ Because Chinese-occupied land features were all in the western part of the Spratly Islands, closer to Vietnam, and most of the Vietnamese and Philippine resupply lines to land features were in the eastern part, China wanted to seize one land feature in the eastern Spratlys to “cut off their supply lines.”⁶ The broader goal, however, was to enforce a “policy of restraint” on claimants.⁷

In more recent years, however, China has preferred to use nonmilitarized coercion against South China Sea claimants, including economic sanctions and gray-zone tactics. Starting in 2007, China greatly increased its use of coercion, especially in the gray zone.⁸ In 2012, for example, it imposed economic sanctions on Philippine banana exports to China after the Philippines arrested Chinese fishers in the disputed Scarborough Shoal.⁹ In 2014, China used maritime law-enforcement vessels to ram Vietnamese vessels in response to Vietnam’s opposition to Chinese oil rigs operating in the disputed Paracel Islands.¹⁰ Yet, unlike in the early 1990s, these were all

¹ For further discussion of the specific case of the Mischief Reef, see Ketian Zhang, *China’s Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

² Quoted in *ibid.*

³ Author’s interview with a former navy officer, Nanjing, December 30, 2015.

⁴ This paragraph is adapted from Zhang, *China’s Gambit*, chap. 3.

⁵ Author’s interviews with government policy analysts and former government officials in Haikou, Guangzhou, and Beijing, April–June 2016.

⁶ Author’s interview with a Chinese scholar, Xiamen, June 13, 2016.

⁷ Author’s interview with a government policy analyst, Haikou, April 8, 2016.

⁸ For more information and data, see Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 134.

⁹ Zhang, “Cautious Bully,” 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

cases of nonmilitary coercion that were instead diplomatic and economic in nature.¹¹ Since the 1990s, China has not used brute force to directly confront other disputants in any of its maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The classic definition of coercion was provided by Thomas Schelling, who uses the term “compellence” for an “active strategy to make an adversary act in the desired way.”¹² Robert Art and Patrick Cronin further specify that the goal of compellence can be either forcing the adversary to do something it has not previously done or forcing it to stop doing something it is currently undertaking.¹³ The term “coercive diplomacy,” however, has become the convention in lieu of compellence, with even Schelling using the terms “coercion” and “coercive diplomacy.”¹⁴

In authoritative Chinese sources, deterrence (威慑) is often referred to in the strategic, military sense. For example, the PLA’s *Science of Military Strategy* defines strategic deterrence as “a method of military conflict to achieve a political goal based on military strength, a comprehensive use of various means, through clever display of strength and determination to use strength, [which] makes the other party face unworthy or even unbearable consequences, and is forced to give in, compromise, or surrender.”¹⁵ According to the *Science of Military Strategy*, strategic deterrence has two basic functions: “One is to stop the other party from doing what they don’t want to do through deterrence, and the other is to use deterrence to coerce the other party to do what they must do.”¹⁶ In a way, this articulation seems to suggest that China’s conceptualizations of deterrence and compellence are somewhat blurred or blended. As such, this chapter focuses on the compellence aspect of Chinese coercion but uses the terms “compellence” and “coercion” interchangeably, acknowledging that coercion includes both

¹¹ Zhang, “Cautious Bully,” 117.

¹² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 70.

¹³ Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin, eds., *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁴ Alexander L. George popularized the term “coercive diplomacy.” See Alexander L. George, David K. Hall, and William R. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971); Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1992); Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 3–4.

¹⁵ Xiao Tianliang, ed., 战略学 [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 26, 2022, 26, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

compellence and deterrence.¹⁷ Further, it defines “coercion” as the use or threat of negative means to demand a change in the behavior of a target state.¹⁸

One might wonder what actions count as gray-zone coercion.¹⁹ Gray-zone coercion straddles strictly nonmilitary and military coercion. Discussions regarding “gray-zone conflicts” have gained greater traction in the policy world, with the term appearing in both the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and official Japanese government documents.²⁰ Michael Mazarr argues that gray-zone conflict “pursues political objectives through coercive, integrated campaigns” and employs mostly nonmilitary or nonkinetic tools.²¹ He adds that gray-zone campaigns are “the use of civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities.”²² Mazarr’s characterization is insightful, but as with others in the gray-zone literature, his conceptualization of gray-zone actions may be too expansive because of the inclusion of military force.²³ As nonkinetic as some military actions, such as troop mobilization, might be, they are still militarized coercive tools and thus not gray-zone actions. Theoretically, gray-zone actions should be carried out strictly by civilians, however violent they might become. Similarly, economic sanctions, which analysts like Mazarr classify as gray-zone actions, are not gray-zone at all because they do not inflict physical violence or have the potential to do so. Moreover, economic sanctions are a distinct category of coercive tools and have been studied for many decades. For example, in an edited volume by Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson on China’s maritime gray-zone operations, gray-zone measures are limited to actions taken by the China Coast Guard (CCG) and Maritime Militia.²⁴ Economic sanctions and diplomatic measures are

¹⁷ This paragraph is adapted from Ketian Zhang, “China’s Military Coercion: Patterns and Rationale,” in *China’s Use of Armed Coercion: To Win without Fighting*, ed. James A. Siebens (London: Routledge, 2023), chap. 2.

¹⁸ For a more specific discussion of the definition of coercion, see Zhang, *China’s Gambit*.

¹⁹ This paragraph and the next paragraph are adapted from *ibid.*, chap. 2.

²⁰ See Frank G. Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” Heritage Foundation, October 5, 2015, <http://index.heritage.org/military/2016/essays/contemporary-spectrum-of-conflict>.

²¹ Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 58.

²² *Ibid.*, 62.

²³ For similarly expansive definitions of gray-zone actions, see Michael Green et al., “Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia>.

²⁴ Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2023).

excluded altogether from their discussion of Chinese gray-zone measures in the maritime realm.

Building on this burgeoning literature, while emphasizing the civilian aspect of gray-zone actions, this chapter defines gray-zone coercion as the physical and violent use of government organizations and agencies, or threats to use them, to force the target state to change behavior. These agencies include, but are not limited to, law enforcement, border and customs agencies, and coast guards. The logic of gray-zone coercion is to utilize civilian agencies to inflict or threaten physical pain on the target state's civilians, military personnel, or military assets. For example, in maritime territorial disputes, coercion by law-enforcement ships works by either physically damaging assets of the target state or denying the target state access to the disputed territory. A state might also use its civilian maritime forces to engage in a naval blockade of the target state to force it to adopt whatever policies the coercer desires.

Gray-zone coercion is analytically distinct from military coercion because it is conducted by civilian personnel and the instruments involved have a much lower capacity to inflict harm than military weapons. Being nonmilitarized, gray-zone coercion is also much less likely to invoke the target state's defense treaties with other powers, given that such treaties tend to stipulate that the other powers will come to the defense of the target state if it is under military attack. Gray-zone coercion reduces the likelihood of military escalation. Even with the most recent reform in March 2018 that placed the CCG under the People's Armed Police, it remains separate from the official PLA force structure.²⁵ Chinese analysts and retired military officials also indicate that CCG ships remain law-enforcement tools and are nonmilitarized.²⁶ In short, while China's gray-zone coercion is not strictly nonmilitary, it is still more "gray" than military.

The primary reason for China's shift to nonmilitary, especially gray-zone, coercion in the South China Sea is its perception of heightened geopolitical backlash since the early 2000s.²⁷ That is, as the United States strengthened its military presence in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, China became concerned that the use of direct military coercion in the South China Sea against countries such as the Philippines, which is a U.S. ally, might draw in the United States militarily. As the author's interviews with former Chinese

²⁵ See "深化党和国家机构改革方案" [The Plan Regarding Deepening the Reform of the Party and State Apparatus], *Xinhua*, March 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517_6.htm.

²⁶ Author's interview with a former government official, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2019.

²⁷ Zhang, "Cautious Bully."

naval officers, as well as internal materials from Chinese government think tanks suggest, China preferred to use nonmilitary coercive tools out of fear of escalation.²⁸ For example, one former PLA officer was particularly concerned that if China were to use military coercion, the U.S. Navy might become directly involved, admitting that the United States was still the “number one” threat.²⁹

The Role of the PLA

This change to prioritize gray-zone coercion in maritime disputes, however, does not mean that the PLA is no longer a factor in the South China Sea. Although China rarely utilizes it in direct coercive attempts against Southeast Asian countries, the PLA plays an important role in several ways. First, it emphasizes improvement in combat training as well as logistical capacity. As early as 2013, Luo Baoming, who was at the time party secretary of the Hainan provincial government, noted that the emphasis of military training should be on improving combat capability.³⁰ Similarly, as China’s 2019 defense white paper notes, the PLA Navy has increasingly expanded training, including combat training exercises, in the South China Sea.³¹ On January 2, 2017, China’s aircraft carrier battle group trained in the South China Sea, focusing on the landing of J-15 fighter aircraft.³² A month later, PLA Navy destroyers and logistical support ships trained in the area, focusing on joint air defense, patrol, coordination, and logistical support during combat.³³ Several years later, in May 2022, the navy conducted “high-intensity” and “multi-subject” comprehensive training for providing combat logistical support in the South China Sea region.³⁴

²⁸ Zhang, “Cautious Bully.”

²⁹ Author’s interview with a former PLA officer, Guangzhou, May 21, 2016, quoted in Zhang, “Cautious Bully.”

³⁰ “省军区第十次党代表大会开幕” [Hainan Provincial Military Region’s Tenth Meeting of Party Representatives], *Hainan Daily*, April 27, 2013, <https://www.hainanpc.net/hainanpc/xwzx/snyw/2021110500293416374/index.html>.

³¹ Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), 新时代的中国国防 [China’s National Defense in the New Era] (Beijing, July 2019), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/fgwx/bps/4846424.html>.

³² “中国海军航母编队在南海组织舰载机起降训练” [The Chinese Navy’s Aircraft Carrier Battle Groups Conducted Training in the South China Sea], *Hainan Daily*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.hainanpc.net/hainanpc/xwzx/snyw/2021110500451735399/index.html>.

³³ “海军南海舰队远海训练编队完成南海预定课目训练” [The Navy Conducted Far Sea Training in the South China Sea], *Xinhua*, February 17, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2017-02/17/c_129483813.htm.

³⁴ “海军某支队在南海某海域开展综合作战支援演练” [The Navy Conducted Comprehensive Combat Logistical Support Training in the South China Sea Area], *PLA Daily*, May 17, 2022, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/jt_214059/16072370.html.

Relatedly, between 2013 and 2015, China engaged in extensive reclamation of and construction on several reefs in the Spratly Island chain in the South China Sea, which has resulted in over 2,000 acres of artificial landmasses on Chinese-occupied reefs.³⁵ A specific plan for land reclamation began to emerge in 2013. In April 2013, Liu Xin, party secretary and political commissar for the Hainan provincial military region, noted that the strategic importance of the South China Sea has become salient and that China has “a long way to go in terms of strengthening maritime defense and protecting maritime rights in the South China Sea.”³⁶ Land reclamation was apparently part of this plan to strengthen maritime defense and rights. In 2013, Hainan Province governor Jiang Dingzhi indicated in a provincial government work report that Hainan would promote the development of basic infrastructure in Sansha City, the newly established city administering China’s maritime rights and occupied features in the South China Sea.³⁷ Jiang especially noted that one of the major missions for Hainan in 2013 would be to finish planning for the construction of Woody Island and Tree Island in the Paracel Islands while regulating land reclamation behavior, hinting at subsequent land reclamation activities on these land features.³⁸

Based on a document from Hainan Province, the rationale for land reclamation was threefold—military, administrative, and economic—with the aim of providing military and civilian logistical support.³⁹ Research conducted by geologists at Nanjing University, written in October 2013, noted that the strategic importance of reclaiming land features in the South China Sea was based on objective and quantifiable indicators, including levels of naval and air deterrence, protection of exclusive economic zones, and logistical support capacity.⁴⁰ The study emphasized that, based on existing indicators, Johnson Reef would be of low strategic value.⁴¹ Large-scale land reclamation, however, would significantly increase its strategic value, and the study therefore recommended this option.⁴² Logistical needs were stressed concerning not only the Spratly Islands but also the

³⁵ For more information, see Ketian Zhang, “Explaining China’s Large-Scale Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and Rationale,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 6–7 (2022): 1185–1214.

³⁶ “省军区第十次党代表大会开幕.”

³⁷ Quoted in Zhang, “Explaining China’s Large-Scale Land Reclamation in the South China Sea,” 11.

³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

Paracels.⁴³ While China's land reclamation was militarized, it was an act not of compellence but of deterrence.

The PLA also conducts military diplomacy by participating in multilateral and bilateral exercises with countries in ASEAN. For example, in October 2018, China and ASEAN held a joint maritime military exercise for the first time.⁴⁴ It was the first time that ASEAN held a military exercise with just one external country, as well as the PLA's first time conducting a military exercise with ASEAN as a whole.⁴⁵ The exercise adhered to the code of conduct for unintended encounters at sea and prioritized subjects on maritime security, including counterpiracy. China and ASEAN held a joint exercise again in April 2019.⁴⁶ Between 2005 and 2021, the PLA conducted 36 bilateral exercises with ASEAN countries, including Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Indonesia, Brunei, and Myanmar.⁴⁷ Looking to the future, one Southeast Asia expert at the PLA Information Engineering University concludes that China could conduct more defense cooperation with ASEAN in high-sensitivity areas (i.e., involving maritime and sovereignty issues) to increase trust between the militaries.⁴⁸ In addition to multilateral and bilateral exercises with ASEAN, China has increased military-to-military diplomacy with extraregional countries, including U.S. allies. In April 2023, for example, France and China released a joint statement that the PLA's Southern Theater Command will deepen engagement with its French counterpart in the Pacific region.⁴⁹

Coordination between the PLA and Other Statecraft

As mentioned in the previous section, over the last two decades, China has refrained from directly using the PLA Navy in coercive attempts against South China Sea disputants. Instead, the Chinese government uses the PLA in coordination with and in support of other means of statecraft, including diplomacy, economic sanctions, and gray-zone coercion. Gray-

⁴³ “南海存远志，实干兴三沙” [Ambitions and Development of Sansha], *Hainan Daily*, May 28, 2013, <https://www.hainanpc.net/hainanpc/xwzx/snyw/2021110500294785836/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Zhang Yan, 东盟防务外交 [ASEAN's Defense Diplomacy] (Beijing: Shishi Press, 2022), 204.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 205.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 240.

⁴⁹ “中华人民共和国和法兰西共和国联合声明 (全文)” [Full Text of the Joint Statement between China and France], *Xinhua*, April 7, 2023, http://www.news.cn/world/2023-04/07/c_1129503357.htm.

zone coercion includes the use of civilian law-enforcement ships to inflict and threaten physical damage on the target state, among other measures. According to a former Chinese diplomat based in Southeast Asia, China's gray-zone coercion can be quite petty, such as by using maritime surveillance ships to throw dried tree branches, which interrupts the seismic surveys of Vietnamese oil and gas exploration ships.⁵⁰

However, there are harsher forms of gray-zone coercion, including ramming into the vessels of other South China Sea disputants as well as blocking foreign ships from conducting oil and gas exploration. For example, during the oil rig standoff between China and Vietnam in 2014, CCG ships were directly involved. According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on May 1, 2014, an oil rig "and three oil and gas service ships from China were moving southward from the northwest of Triton Island."⁵¹ Upon noticing China's activity, Vietnam immediately used its maritime law-enforcement ships to counter.⁵² As one former Chinese diplomat admits, most of the time Chinese ships rammed Vietnamese ships to stop them from breaking China's line of defense.⁵³ For example, on June 5, "China employed from 30 to 137 escort vessels on a daily basis."⁵⁴ It constantly deployed 9 to 12 ships to closely follow Vietnamese vessels, ramming them and firing water cannons. Chinese vessels eventually damaged 24 Vietnamese law-enforcement vessels.

The fact that the CCG was at the forefront of coercion does not mean that the PLA Navy was uninvolved. When China coerces South China Sea disputants, its navy is usually on standby in the background for deterrence purposes. For example, during the oil rig standoff, PLA Navy ships loomed just over the horizon to deter Vietnam from escalating, forming what Chinese analysts call "concentric circles"—with CCG ships at the center and PLA Navy ships along the outer edge.⁵⁵ For fear of escalating the tension, China refrains from using naval ships in direct confrontation during South China Sea disputes. Chinese government analysts believe

⁵⁰ Author's interview with a former Chinese diplomat, Beijing, June 7, 2016.

⁵¹ "Vietnam's International Press Conference on 7th May 2014," Embassy of Vietnam, Berlin, Press Release, May 7, 2014, <http://www.vietnambotschaft.org/viet-nams-international-press-conference-on-7th-may-2014>.

⁵² Green et al., "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia," 208.

⁵³ Author's interview with a former Chinese diplomat, Guangzhou, May 25, 2016.

⁵⁴ "Contents of the International Press Conference on Developments in the East Sea June 5th, 2014," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vietnam), Press Release, June 5, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/tcbc/ns140609024213/view. All details below, including how many Vietnamese vessels were damaged, come from this statement.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with a Chinese analyst, Beijing, June 7, 2016.

that as long as the country's coercive actions remain controlled and nonmilitarized, the United States will not get militarily involved.⁵⁶ As such, China has been using the PLA in coordination with nonmilitary coercive attempts.

Moreover, the PLA practices military diplomacy with ASEAN countries to reduce tension, as noted in the previous section. Such diplomacy is accompanied by joint patrols between the CCG and its ASEAN counterparts. For example, the Grandview Institution, a private Chinese think tank, notes that in April 2022 Chinese and Vietnamese coast guard ships conducted a joint patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin, marking the 23rd such patrol between China and Vietnam since 2006.⁵⁷ In addition, China uses bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to reduce tensions in the South China Sea. For example, it has negotiated with ASEAN countries on the draft of a code of conduct in the South China Sea, even as it has continued bilateral conversations with disputants such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines.⁵⁸ According to Wu Shicun, the founding president of China's National Institute for South China Sea Studies, China should employ a two-pronged approach when dealing with South China Sea issues: (1) continue bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with ASEAN countries and (2) strengthen its capacity to deter certain U.S. actions in the area.⁵⁹

The issue with using gray-zone coercion in lieu of direct military coercion or confrontation is the perceptual difference between China and the United States. As noted in the first section, China's rationale for using gray-zone coercion is to reduce escalation—that is, to reduce the likelihood that an attack on U.S. allies might trigger mutual defense treaties, which in turn could get the United States militarily involved in an incident in the South China Sea. However, the United States does not necessarily consider China's gray-zone coercion de-escalatory. This perceptual difference could lead to miscommunication, exaggerated threat perceptions, and, consequently, unintended escalation.

⁵⁶ See Zhang, "Cautious Bully," 174.

⁵⁷ Lie Xiaobo, "2022年南海安全形势大事记" [Major Events in the South China Sea, 2022], Grandview Institution, December 30, 2020, <https://www.grandviewcn.com/shishipinglun/759.html>.

⁵⁸ Wu Shicun, "南海海上安全挑战, 中国需要感知什么" [What Should China Know Regarding Challenges of Maritime Security in the South China Sea], Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University, January 15, 2022, https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/4393.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

China's Regional Military Objectives and Broader Strategic Goals

China's use of the PLA and other means of statecraft aligns with its regional military objectives in Southeast Asia and broader strategic goals. China has two major military objectives regarding the South China Sea: (1) achieving deterrence in peacetime and (2) ensuring the PLA's combat effectiveness during wartime.

Official Chinese government think tank analysts and former PLA officials indicate that deterrence during peacetime is a major objective for the PLA. Xu Liping, a senior analyst at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), notes that China's military exercises in the South China Sea are intended to signal the country's resolve to defend its sovereign rights.⁶⁰ Wu Shicun suggests that China needs to strengthen the PLA's capability to achieve successful deterrence.⁶¹ Chen Feng, a retired general and president of the China International Foundation for Strategic Studies, a think tank with close ties to the PLA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicates that there are three possible scenarios leading to a conflict in the South China Sea: (1) territorial or maritime disputes with other claimants, (2) conflicts over sovereignty and maritime rights with countries outside the region, and (3) conflicts involving a U.S. presence.⁶² According to Chen, China needs to strengthen its military capacity and be prepared to deter such conflicts.⁶³ His emphasis on deterrence in the South China Sea is shared by Guan Youfei, formerly the director of the Office of International Military Cooperation in the Central Military Commission.⁶⁴ Guan stresses that the PLA needs to intensify its modernization process because it still lags behind the United States in weaponry and technology.

In addition to peacetime deterrence, official Chinese government documents such as national defense white papers and Xi Jinping's speeches also emphasize combat effectiveness during wartime as a major

⁶⁰ Zhang Baofeng, "解放军今起南海军演历时五天 禁区达10万平方公里" [The PLA Will Conduct a Five-Day Military Exercise in the South China Sea, Restricted Area Encompasses 100,000 Square Kilometers], *Ta Kung Pao*, August 6, 2021, <http://www.takungpao.com/news/232108/2021/0806/617665.html>.

⁶¹ Wu, "南海海上安全挑战, 中国需要感知什么."

⁶² Chen Fang, "对当今世界几个重大战略问题的认识与思考" [Reflecting on Major Strategic Issues of the World], in *战略态势观察 2020* [Strategic Posture Outlook 2020] (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 2022), 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁴ Guan Youfei, "加强对话协商, 聚焦危机管控: 保持中美两军关系长期稳定" [Strengthening Dialogues and Focusing on Crisis Management: Keeping a Stable Long-Term Relationship between the U.S. and Chinese Militaries], in *战略态势观察 2020*, 34.

objective. For example, the 2015 national defense white paper noted that the PLA's preparation should focus on winning local informationized wars, highlighting maritime military conflicts and their preparation.⁶⁵ During a recent visit to the Southern Theater Command, Xi asserted that in order to defend China's sovereign and maritime rights, the PLA needs to strengthen military training and combat capability to prepare for potential conflicts.⁶⁶ This is in line with his directive to PLA representatives during the 12th National People's Congress in March 2013 to build a PLA that can fight and win battles (能打胜仗).⁶⁷

Regarding China's broader strategic goals, Southeast Asia is both economically and geopolitically important to China's overall grand strategy. This is established by official documents as well as annual reports published by two Chinese government think tanks—the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) and the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS). CICIR is under the Ministry of State Security, while CIIS is under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To reduce concerns about China's entry into the World Trade Organization and expand the country's export market, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2002.⁶⁸ As CICIR's 2020–21 annual report notes, ASEAN and China had become each other's largest trading partner by 2002.⁶⁹ The 2022–23 report emphasizes economic cooperation as an important component of China's relations with ASEAN.⁷⁰ Southeast Asia has also been a valuable partner in the Belt and Road Initiative, as demonstrated by the many infrastructure projects China helped build in ASEAN countries.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Information Office of the State Council (PRC), 中国的军事战略 [China's Military Strategy] (Beijing, May 2015), http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-05/26/content_2868988.htm.

⁶⁶ “习近平在视察南部战区海军时强调：深化练兵备战，加快转型建设，全面提高部队现代化水平” [While Inspecting the Navy in the Southern Theater Command, Xi Jinping Emphasizes: Deepen Training for War Preparation and Quicken Transformation While Comprehensively Increasing the Military's Level of Modernization], Xinhua, April 12, 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/2023-04/12/c_1129516582.htm.

⁶⁷ “‘建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队’——‘十个明确’彰显马克思主义中国化新飞跃述评之八” [“To Build a PLA That Answers to the CCP and Wins Battles” —Commentary on the “Ten Clarifications” Demonstrating the New Leap of Marxism in China], Xinhua, February 20, 2022, http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-02/20/c_1128398515.htm.

⁶⁸ Ketian Zhang, “Bringing the Economy Back In: Economic Development and China's Grand Strategy,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (2022): 6.

⁶⁹ China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), 国际战略与安全形势评估 2020/2021 [Strategic and Security Review 2020/2021] (Beijing: Shishi Press, 2020), 181.

⁷⁰ CICIR, 国际战略与安全形势评估2022/2023 [Strategic and Security Review 2022/2023] (Beijing: Shishi Press, 2022), 193.

⁷¹ David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

Geopolitically, Southeast Asia is important to China's objective to increase strategic trust and not push countries toward the United States.⁷² It is true that China maintains sovereignty and maritime claims in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, it wants to maintain stability in its relations with ASEAN countries and prevent territorial disputes from escalating—a 2018 ASEAN-China statement noted as much.⁷³ In November 2021, China and ASEAN announced the establishment of a “meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership.”⁷⁴ As such, China is utilizing a whole-of-government approach by using negative tools, such as coercion, and positive tools, such as economic inducement, in coordination with each other. China's selective coercion fits its “wedge strategy” to avoid geopolitical backlash from ASEAN.⁷⁵ Chinese government policy analysts term such behavior “beating one and luring others” (一打一拉).⁷⁶

China's goals of improving economic relations with ASEAN and preventing major geopolitical backlash from member countries are in line with its overall grand strategy, which Xi characterizes as “comprehensive national security.” Political security is the key, and economic security is the foundation of this strategy.⁷⁷ Speeches from other Chinese presidents in the post-Cold War era have also confirmed the centrality of economic development in China's grand strategy.⁷⁸ Economic ties with ASEAN countries contribute to China's economic development, which, ultimately, has a positive impact on regime security. As such, it is unlikely that the PLA will be the most important instrument for China to achieve its objectives in Southeast Asia.

⁷² China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), 国际形势和中国外交蓝皮书2021/2022 [International Situation and China's Foreign Affairs 2021/2022] (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 2022), 357.

⁷³ “中国-东盟战略伙伴关系2030年愿景” [ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030], November 15, 2018, available at http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-11/15/content_5340677.htm.

⁷⁴ “中国-东盟建立对话关系30周年纪念峰会联合声明: 面向和平、安全、繁荣和可持续发展的全面战略伙伴关系 (全文)” [Joint Statement of the ASEAN-China Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of Dialogue Relations: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Security, Prosperity, and Sustainable Development (Full Text)], Xinhua, November 22, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-11/23/content_5652616.htm.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with a Chinese scholar, Xiamen, June 13, 2016.

⁷⁶ Author's interview with a Chinese government analyst, Beijing, August 19, 2015; and author's interview with a Chinese government analyst, Beijing, October 21, 2015.

⁷⁷ Zhang, “Bringing the Economy Back In.”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of PLA Activities in Southeast Asia

China's goals in Southeast Asia raise the question of whether the PLA is being effectively used. It is often difficult to establish criteria for evaluating effectiveness. This section examines two indicators: military and political effectiveness. First, military effectiveness is defined as whether the PLA could achieve the military objective of winning conflicts. Second, political effectiveness is defined as whether the use of the PLA is conducive to deterrence in the South China Sea while maintaining positive relations with ASEAN countries.

Regarding military effectiveness, as a recent Congressional Research Service report notes, despite China's military modernization effort, the PLA Navy still has weaknesses in areas such as joint operations with other parts of the military, antisubmarine warfare, at-sea resupply of combatant ships operating far from home waters, and personnel training.⁷⁹ China is well aware of these issues, which is why the PLA has been emphasizing joint combat training and logistics training in the South China Sea while perfecting land reclamation.

Political effectiveness results are also mixed. On the one hand, the use of the PLA and nonmilitary coercion has proved to be effective in the short term. CICIR's annual reports consistently indicate that China has successfully maintained a positive relationship with ASEAN and that ASEAN countries have refrained from "choosing a side" in the U.S.-China competition and pursued a hedging strategy.⁸⁰ CICIR analysts note, in particular, that the Philippines reiterated in 2022 that its relations with China are not defined by South China Sea disputes and that such disputes should not prevent bilateral cooperation.⁸¹ Similarly, one PLA analyst notes that, starting with the Duterte administration, the Chinese and Philippine coast guards engaged in meetings and signed agreements on counterpiracy and joint rescue.⁸² In January 2020 a CCG ship visited the Philippines for the first time.⁸³ CIIS analysts also emphasize that the Philippines is not willing

⁷⁹ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL33153, December 3, 2022, 4.

⁸⁰ CICIR, 国际战略与安全形势评估2022/2023, 187–88; CICIR, 国际战略与安全形势评估2020/2021, 173, 175, 184; and CICIR, 国际战略与安全形势评估2021/2022 [Strategic and Security Review 2021/2022] (Beijing: Shishi Press, 2021), 322.

⁸¹ CICIR, 国际战略与安全形势评估2022/2023, 196.

⁸² Zhang, 东盟防务外交, 139.

⁸³ Ibid., 139.

to be a pawn in the United States' containment strategy against China, citing a 2020 Duterte speech that said the Philippines will not choose sides.⁸⁴ It is important to note that these activities took place after China's use of gray-zone coercion and economic sanctions against the Philippines between 2012 and 2016. Despite increasing tensions between China and the Philippines over South China Sea disputes, current Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. reiterated in April 2023 that the Philippines will not take sides and will keep regional issues from affecting bilateral relations.⁸⁵

On the other hand, however, overusing coercion could be suboptimal and ineffective for China in the long term. For one, it further escalates tensions with the United States. For another, it could push ASEAN countries away, especially if or when China fails to provide them with economic incentives. In addition, the domestic politics within individual countries in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia or the Philippines, could reduce the effectiveness of China's coercion. For example, not all countries are equally receptive to China-backed railway projects, with Vietnam and Thailand being more cautious and Laos and Malaysia being more receptive.⁸⁶ This illustrates the inherent tension in China's grand strategy. China needs economic development, and sound relations with ASEAN countries help it maintain economic momentum. At the same time, China also has sovereignty and maritime claims in the South China Sea. The very use of coercion, including nonmilitary tactics, and the presence of the PLA in the region to enforce these claims cut against China's economic "carrots," reducing the effectiveness of its economic statecraft.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This chapter has examined the role of the PLA as part of China's strategy in Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, China utilized the PLA to coerce countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines. In more recent years, however, it has preferred to use nonmilitarized coercion against South China Sea claimants, including economic sanctions and gray-zone coercion, while using the PLA as a deterrence tool. Under this strategy, the PLA has increased its military diplomacy by participating in multilateral and bilateral exercises with

⁸⁴ CIIS, 国际形势和中国外交蓝皮书2021/2022, 266.

⁸⁵ “菲律宾总统马科斯会见秦刚” [Philippine President Marcos Met with Qin Gang], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, April 22, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjzbzhd/202304/t20230423_11063771.shtml.

⁸⁶ Lampton, Ho, and Kuik, *Rivers of Iron*.

ASEAN. The use of the PLA in China's Southeast Asia strategy has achieved mixed success. On the one hand, ASEAN countries have remained unwilling to take sides in the Sino-U.S. competition. On the other hand, overusing the PLA might escalate tensions and push ASEAN countries closer to the United States.

Looking ahead, several continuities in PLA activities in the South China Sea can be expected. First, China will most likely continue to improve the logistical and military capacities of the land features it has already reclaimed. However, barring a drastic change in U.S. posture in the region, China is unlikely to pursue additional land reclamation, such as at Scarborough Shoal. It originally planned to reclaim the shoal but was deterred by the United States in 2015.⁸⁷ Second, China will continue using gray-zone coercion against South China Sea disputants. The intensity and frequency of such cases will depend, in part, on the policies and actions of disputants and the media exposure of accidents in the South China Sea.⁸⁸ Third, the PLA will further engage in military diplomacy with ASEAN countries, including holding more joint maritime exercises, even in highly sensitive issue areas.

What, then, are the implications for U.S. force posture? For one, the United States likely needs to maintain its military presence and bases in Southeast Asia to signal its military resolve in the region. China's government agencies and think tanks have been tracking for many years U.S. actions and statements regarding the South China Sea, as seen in annual CICIR and CIIS reports. China is sensitive to any changes in U.S. statements and actions. For example, when the United States left Subic Bay in the early 1990s, China militarily seized Mischief Reef. Internal documents from CASS suggest that China viewed the U.S. withdrawal as creating a geopolitical vacuum, enabling the use of military action and coercion.⁸⁹ Beginning in the 2000s, however, China has become increasingly wary of using military coercion in the South China Sea precisely because of the U.S. presence in the region.⁹⁰ Verbalizing resolve is also an effective deterrent, as evidenced during the 2015 Scarborough Shoal standoff.

Second, the United States could engage in a balancing act between signals of resolve and signals of reassurance. As Schelling notes, deterrence works when reassurance is also involved. In the case of Sino-U.S. relations, this means reducing the media exposure of certain actions and activities

⁸⁷ See Zhang, "Explaining China's Large-Scale Land Reclamation in the South China Sea."

⁸⁸ For more details, see Zhang, "Cautious Bully."

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

in the South China Sea. Overexposure of U.S. activities might make China believe that its own resolve is on the line and that if it does not take in-kind actions, it will be viewed by others as weak and irresolute.⁹¹ Though difficult, optimal deterrence might involve both physical signals of resolve and private statements conveyed directly to Chinese leaders. In addition, just as China coordinates military and nonmilitary tools, the United States could also step up its economic statecraft in Southeast Asia. One of the reasons ASEAN prefers to remain neutral is the economic benefits its countries receive from China. The United States could provide more economic incentives to offset China's influence.

⁹¹ Zhang, "Cautious Bully."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter analyzes the significant increase in China's security engagement with the Pacific Islands since 2017 as part of a grand strategy to grow its geopolitical influence, develop geostrategic access, and accumulate resources in the region through comprehensive whole-of-nation statecraft.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has actively employed security statecraft to develop access, presence, and posture in the Pacific Islands to achieve strategic objectives in competition short of conflict. The increased employment of PRC security means in the Pacific Islands, integrated with political and economic statecraft, has intensified since 2020, demonstrating a rising strategic priority. The PRC's nontraditional security forces (including police, the China Coast Guard, and the People's Armed Police) are part of a holistic security statecraft system, alongside the People's Liberation Army. A police presence is more easily normalized than a military one, can affect the local rule of law, and can generate greater influence and access within the host nation. The expansion of China's police assistance could exacerbate unrest or cede sovereignty. Domestic instability and climate-related crises could also become vectors for Chinese security statecraft.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- All countries should understand the strategic intent behind China's efforts to achieve access in the Pacific Islands as part of its comprehensive grand strategy to control strategic space.
- All parties should recognize the growing importance of police as China's preferred means for competing in the Pacific.
- Western partners need to better understand the interests and agency of Pacific Island states to assist development, mitigate natural disasters, and build on respected programs.
- Partner nations should prepare to deal with civil unrest in a rapid, economical, flexible, and nuanced fashion, possibly in cooperation with Chinese forces, to meet Pacific needs.

Competing for Access: China's Growing Security Interest in the Pacific Islands

Peter Connolly

When Xi Jinping proposed the concept that became known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's "peaceful rise" narrative remained dominant and many believed the People's Republic of China (PRC) had no strategic interest in the Pacific Islands.¹ Some argued that China had no grand strategy at all,² while the People's Liberation Army (PLA) continued to claim China would "never establish a military base on foreign soil"³ and remained cautious of how its actions in the Pacific were perceived.⁴ Nevertheless, there had been internal developments in PLA strategy and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) planning during the previous three decades that assigned a higher strategic value to the Pacific Islands, and this became evident from 2017.

In 2001, PLA strategist Major General Liu Yazhou identified a "fragmented zone" in Southeast Asia and the Pacific (specifically mentioning Solomon Islands) and argued China must "get actively involved" in their internal affairs, "divide and place controls," "and vigorously cultivate pro-China forces" to avoid China's encirclement.⁵ Earlier still, the commander

Peter Connolly is an Adjunct Fellow at the University of New South Wales in Canberra and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at Solomon Islands National University.

¹ See, for example, Jian Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy—Small States, Big Games* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2, 136–38; and Terence Wesley-Smith, "China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives," *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2013): 360, 354.

² See, for example, Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, "Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': Beyond 'Grand Strategy' to a State Transformation Analysis," *Third World Quarterly* (2019): 5–6, 14–15; and Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.

³ Major General Zhu Chenghu (presentation at the PLA 17th International Symposium, Beijing, October 20, 2014). The conference was attended by the author.

⁴ Author's interviews at the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, Beijing, 2014 and 2017.

⁵ Liu Yazhou, "The Grand National Strategy," trans. Ted Wang, *Chinese Law and Government* 40, no. 2 (2007): 13–36, 35–36. The original article was published in 2001 as "Da guoce" in Mandarin.

of the PLA Navy, Admiral Liu Huaqing, directed the navy in 1988 to achieve force projection beyond the second island chain (“from the Aleutians to the Marianas and on to PNG [Papua New Guinea]”) by 2025.⁶ According to Admiral Sun Jianguo, the PLA has actively pursued bases to achieve this goal since 2012.⁷ More importantly, Wen Jiabao’s visit as premier to Suva in 2006 and Xi’s visits as vice president to PNG in 2009 and as president to Suva in 2014 and Port Moresby in 2018 made it clear that China’s interest in this region was significant.

Nevertheless, when BRI arrived in PNG in 2018 and spread through the Pacific after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Port Moresby, the PLA’s presence and influence remained light. When PLA defense attachés were dispatched to PNG, Fiji, and Tonga in late 2020, China’s strategic interest began to clarify. This presence was then reinforced by the arrival of permanent police advisers in Fiji in 2021, Solomon Islands in 2022, and Kiribati and Vanuatu in 2023. This security statecraft is now being reinforced by other nonmilitary means such as the China Coast Guard and the positioning of stores for disaster relief. It is increasingly difficult to argue that the PRC has no strategic interests in the Pacific.

This chapter examines how the employment of PRC military and police resources (referred to collectively as “security statecraft”) in the Pacific Islands has changed in the last decade and assesses the motives behind these changes. The first section will summarize how China’s strategy developed to enable security statecraft support for changes to its grand strategy early in the new era.⁸ The second and third sections will then demonstrate how PRC security statecraft developed in the Pacific Island countries, using the PRC’s strategic tasks of “security cooperation” and “protecting overseas interests” as a framework. Finally, the chapter will present some simple statistics that identify when and where changes in the scale of PRC security statecraft have occurred in the Pacific, suggesting an increase in strategic priority. These changes reveal China’s increasing use of police instead of the PLA to achieve security outcomes in pursuit of geostrategic access in the Pacific. Although the

⁶ Admiral Liu Huaqing, cited in Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China’s Grand Strategy*, 132. As vice chairman of the Central Military Commission in the 1990s, he continued to emphasize the strategic importance of the Pacific. Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace America’s Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 184, 195.

⁷ Sun Jianguo, “Contributing Chinese Wisdom to Leading World Peaceful Development and Win-Win Cooperation,” *Qiushi*, August 2016, trans. by Adam Ni, September 6, 2023.

⁸ “Statecraft” is the goal-oriented employment of a form of national power (political, economic, or security) to influence other states, while “grand strategy” is the comprehensive integration of statecraft to achieve long-term goals in the national interest. BRI is a geoeconomic strategy at the core of PRC grand strategy that is both essential to China’s narrative in the global South and a framework for delivering statecraft.

police of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) provide a lower profile and less confrontational vector, they are part of the same line of effort as the PLA, working toward the same strategic goals in the Pacific Islands.

China's New Security Strategies

When General Secretary Hu Jintao first tasked the PLA with protecting China's overseas interests in 2004,⁹ it led to a debate over China's military capability, force projection, and basing.¹⁰ That debate interplayed with the grand strategic discourse over whether and when to make the course correction from "keeping a low profile" to "striving for achievement," leading to an unannounced shift commencing around 2009.¹¹ This discussion demanded the protection of China's citizens and interests overseas, basing, and civil-military integration (also referred to as "military-civil fusion"). Early in this discourse, Liu Yazhou proposed China should "go west" into Eurasia and "divide and rule" the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific to expand China's geopolitical influence.¹² These ideas found their place in PRC grand strategy during Xi Jinping's new era through BRI and are salient to recent developments in the Pacific.

In 2015, *China's Military Strategy* was the first Chinese defense white paper to explain the PLA's tasks to secure overseas interests and to conduct security cooperation with foreign security forces.¹³ These outwardly focused military tasks originated from the mission assigned by Hu Jintao in 2004 and clarified by his 2009 "actively accomplish something" speech.¹⁴ The PLA's role in the broader agenda for security was enabled through "military operations other than war" and the establishment of the Central National

⁹ Hu Jintao, quoted in Daniel Hartnett, "The PLA's Domestic and Foreign Activities and Orientation," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., March 4, 2009, 1–4, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.4.09Hartnett.pdf>.

¹⁰ See the section in this chapter on "Geostrategic Access and Basing."

¹¹ See, for example, David Scott, "China and the 'Responsibilities' of a 'Responsible' Power—the Uncertainties of Appropriate Power Rise Language," *Asia-Pacific Review* 17, no. 1 (2010): 74; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2015): 147; Rush Doshi, "Hu's to Blame for China's Foreign Assertiveness?" Brookings Institution, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hu-to-blame-for-chinas-foreign-assertiveness/>; and Susan Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 86–87.

¹² Liu, "The Grand National Strategy," 35–36.

¹³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), 4, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>.

¹⁴ Hu Jintao (speech to the 11th Ambassadorial Conference, July 2009), available in Doshi, *The Long Game*, 186.

Security Commission in accordance with Xi's 2013 "comprehensive national security" concept.

The PLA's two new strategic tasks allowed security statecraft to integrate with other means on the ground through BRI. The first was "to participate in regional and international security cooperation" and generate influence through deeper military relations.¹⁵ The second was "to safeguard the security of China's overseas interests," combining the 2006 policy of overseas citizen protection with the need to secure China's expanding overseas assets under BRI. The PLA's two new roles were intended to "create a favorable strategic posture" and "seize the strategic initiative in military competition" by generating influence and access through the "close coordination of political, military, economic, and diplomatic work."¹⁶ This integration of statecraft was then enabled by legislation that reinforced civil-military integration. After 2018, military representatives were also subject to the increased coordinating power of PRC ambassadors in-country.¹⁷

These concepts of security cooperation and protecting interests have also been incorporated into the employment of nonmilitary security statecraft since 2017, a trend formalized by the 2023 Global Security Initiative.¹⁸ The initiative's concept paper refers to Xi's 2013 comprehensive national security concept, arguing that "traditional and nontraditional security threats have become intertwined," and identifies the Pacific Island countries as needing PRC nontraditional security cooperation.¹⁹ China increasingly employs internal security means, such as MPS police, the China Coast Guard, and the People's Armed Police, to project security statecraft in areas of nontraditional security with ease. This is a statecraft technique that most Western countries are not well equipped to compete with.

Security Cooperation

Security cooperation is defined as engagement with foreign security forces and institutions to build relationships that promote mutual interests;

¹⁵ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy*, 4, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4, 6.

¹⁷ Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China's Interests: Securitization and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 173; and Peter Martin, Keith Zhai, and Ting Shi, "As U.S. Culls Diplomats, China Is Empowering Its Ambassadors," Bloomberg, February 8, 2018.

¹⁸ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "China's Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia," *Parameters* 54, no. 1 (2024): 38.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," February 21, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

provide access to territory, infrastructure, information, and resources; and build capacity.²⁰ It is the primary method by which security statecraft generates influence. The PRC had initiated strategic partnerships with its Pacific Island partners and Timor-Leste in 2014,²¹ providing a framework for increased security cooperation. Some Chinese observers believe that the motivation behind Xi Jinping's offer of aid worth 2 billion yuan to eight Pacific Island nations in 2014 was to establish "port footholds" to secure BRI maritime routes and enable force projection beyond the second island chain.²²

These security relationships in the Pacific Islands are modest from a Chinese perspective but have become significant in Pacific eyes,²³ with the potential to have an impact on domestic and regional security environments. In particular, the PLA's security cooperation with the military and police forces of Timor-Leste, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji has increased significantly since 2017, including provision of weapons to Timor-Leste in 2017 and PNG in 2018 (see **Figure 1**). These bilateral relationships are directed by annual strategic-level "staff talks" and facilitated by a budget.²⁴ However, a successful relationship requires dialogue and coordination between talks, a function best filled by a defense attaché, and there were none in the Pacific until late 2020. Before that, China's security cooperation in the Pacific was more superficial, emphasizing training in China, which was generally viewed to be of lower quality than Western equivalents,²⁵ and the occasional delivery of supplies and equipment (see Figure 1).

Defense Attachés and Police Advisers

China demonstrated the priority of the Pacific in its long-term grand strategy when it changed its security adviser footprint from zero to fifteen personnel between October 2020 and January 2022. That footprint was then

²⁰ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Cooperation*, Joint Publication 3-20 (Washington, D.C., May 2017), v.

²¹ Liam Fox, "China's President Invites Pacific Island Allies to Ride the Chinese 'Express Train' of Development," ABC News (Australia), November 23, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-23/chinese-president-touts-pacific-ties-on-visit-to-fiji/5911774>. These were subsequently upgraded to comprehensive strategic partnerships.

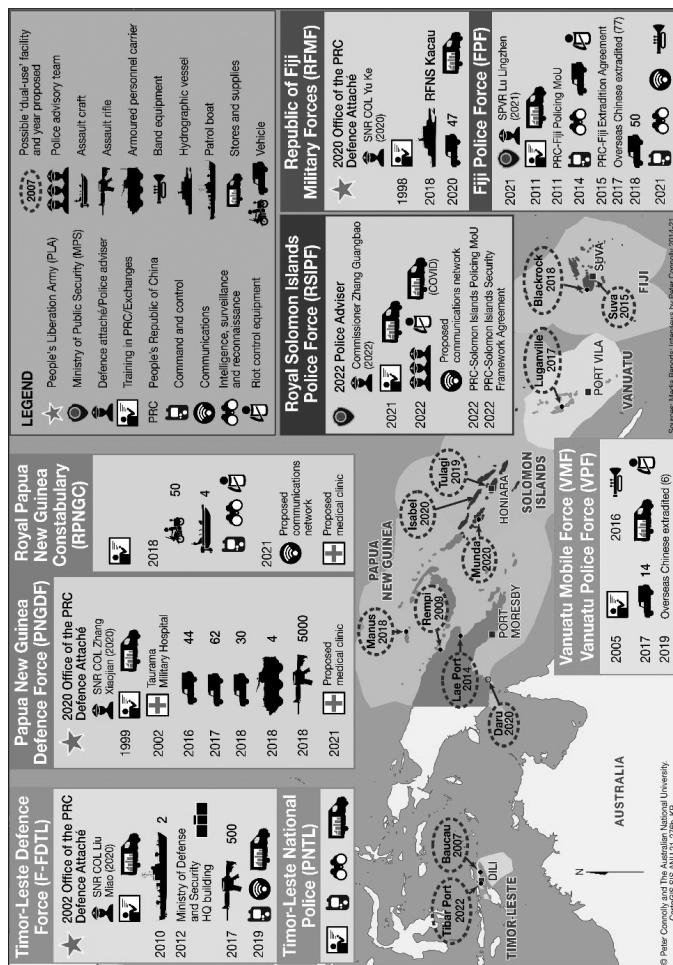
²² You Ji, *China's Military Transformation: Politics and War Preparation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 187–88.

²³ Author's interviews with Papua New Guinean and Fijian officials, 2014–21.

²⁴ For example, the PLA's budget for the Papua New Guinea Defence Force increased from \$2 million in 2017 to \$9.9 million in 2019. Interviews by the author, Port Moresby, PNG, June 2017 and July 2019.

²⁵ Military commanders perceived Western career courses to be of greater value because the Chinese courses did not align with Pacific values, doctrine, or operational needs. Author's interviews with members of the PNG Defence Force, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, and Timor-Leste Defence Force, 2014–17.

FIGURE 1 Chinese security statecraft in Melanesia, 2002–22



SOURCE: Media reports; and author's interviews. 2014–21.

doubled in the space of three months in 2023 (see **Table 1**). Given the global number of China’s defense attachés in 2020, this was a significant change.²⁶

PRC defense attachés and police advisers enable continuous engagement and relationship building with the host nation’s security forces,

TABLE 1 PRC defence attachés and security advisers in the South Pacific

Country	Defence attaché/Security adviser	Deputy defence attaché/Adviser	Other personnel
Timor-Leste	Senior Colonel Liu Miao (PLA) July 2020	Lieutenant colonel xxx	–
PNG	Senior Colonel Jiang Tuan (PLA) November 2020	Lieutenant colonel xxx September 2021	–
Fiji	Senior Colonel Yu Ke (PLA) October 2020	Lieutenant colonel xxx September 2021	Supervisor Lu Lingzhen (MPS)* September 2021
Solomon Islands	Commissioner Zhou Jingyong (MPS) January 2022	Deputy commissioner xxx (MPS) January 2022	[+10 x MPS training advisers] 6th Rotation • Surged to a total of 30 for 2024 elections
Vanuatu	Commissioner Shie Jillie (MPS) August 2023	Deputy commissioner xxx (MPS) August 2023	[+6 x MPS Training Advisers] 3rd Rotation
Tonga	Senior Colonel Wang Wei (PLA) September 2021	Lieutenant colonel xxx September 2021	–
Kiribati	Commissioner Li Tongde (MPS) July 2023	Deputy commissioner xxx (MPS) July 2023	[+6 x MPS training advisers] 3rd Rotation

SOURCE: Media reports.

NOTE: Dates are for the establishment of the position. Names are for the incumbent. Asterisk indicates the first officer to hold this position. x indicates that person remained in this role while remainder of PLT rotated and appears to be a “security adviser” to PRC embassy. xxx indicates the name of incumbent is unknown.

²⁶ China established 59 defense attaché offices globally in the early years of “opening up.” This number increased to 90 by 1998, 103 by 2002, and 110 by 2020. State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s National Defense* (Beijing, July 1998), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/5/index.htm>; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020* (Washington, D.C., August 2020), 134, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

officials, and political class to influence strategic interests.²⁷ They are trained in clandestine intelligence, counterintelligence, and influence operations and are assigned and coordinated by the Intelligence Bureau of the Joint Staff Department, which is responsible for human intelligence and reports to the Central Military Commission.²⁸ Attachés can also follow up on training and agreements, maintain capabilities, and develop access in conjunction with BRI while providing advice to the ambassador on specific threats to and opportunities for Chinese interests.

While police advisers may have different backgrounds and skills, they contribute to PRC security statecraft with other important capabilities. Advisers from China's police forces are arguably a more effective means of engaging and influencing the elite, law enforcement, the Chinese diaspora, and the grassroots population in a developing country. Furthermore, in a Pacific Island state with no military, police advisers are often the only means of delivering security statecraft.

For almost two decades the PRC embassy in Dili had a defense attaché while the Pacific Islands had none, even though Timor-Leste had a smaller defense force than PNG or Fiji. The PLA placed a defense attaché in Dili two months before Timor-Leste's independence was declared in March 2002. Senior Colonel Wu Yanren, an experienced military diplomat and talented linguist, held the role for over three years until he died of meningitis in 2005. His obituary notes the geostrategic significance of the location and that China's key concern was to prevent the new country from recognizing Taiwan.²⁹

Senior Colonel Huang Damin, the PRC's defense attaché to Dili from 2016 to 2020, sought to generate Timorese dependence on Chinese equipment as a form of influence, not just with the defense force but also with the much larger national police force.³⁰ Huang spoke good Portuguese, but unlike his predecessors, he also spoke excellent English, which he used to engage and understand other members of the Dili attaché corps.³¹

²⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021* (Washington, D.C., November 2021), 122, 138.

²⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power: Modernising a Force to Fight and Win," U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, 99; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021*, 138.

²⁹ "驻东帝汶武官: 中国总参情报部吴延仁同志殉职!" [Defense Attaché in Timor-Leste: The Intelligence Bureau of the Joint Staff Department's Wu Yanren Has Died!], October 11, 2005, trans. by Graeme Smith as "Obituary of Senior Colonel Wu Yanren," September 13, 2014.

³⁰ The Timor-Leste Defence Force has approximately 2,000 troops, while the National Police of East Timor has 5,500 members. Author's interviews in Dili, Timor-Leste, August 2017, and in Canberra, June 2021.

³¹ Author's interviews with numerous senior officials, Dili, Timor-Leste, August 2017 and Canberra, June 2021.

Huang and his ambassador were described by peers as “sharp and agile” and a “step change” in diplomatic capability. His successor, Senior Colonel Liu Miao, raised the standard of engagement further in 2020. He had outstanding English, had a disarming and diplomatic personality, and had attended the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies in Australia in 2017 with Captain Higino das Nevés from Timor-Leste.³²

PLA Defence Attachés in the Pacific Islands

Fiji established a defense attaché in its Beijing embassy in 2007, as did PNG in 2016. The delayed arrival of reciprocating PLA officers for these positions in Suva and Port Moresby reinforced the narrative that the Pacific Islands had a low strategic value for China. This changed at the end of 2020, when Senior Colonel Yu Ke was posted to Suva in October and Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaojian arrived in Port Moresby in November. They set about establishing momentum in security cooperation slowed by the pandemic, eventually publishing opinion pieces to celebrate the anniversaries of the CCP and the PLA.³³ PRC security statecraft capacity was then reinforced by the arrival of Senior Colonel Wang Wei as the defense attaché to Tonga and lieutenant colonel deputy attachés for PNG and Fiji in September 2021.

While the introduction of these statecraft capabilities indicates strategic intent, it does not mean they are effective in generating influence. To be effective, statecraft requires skill, learning, and adaptation. The exposure of efforts by the attaché in Suva and the early replacement of the PRC attaché in Port Moresby demonstrate the challenges faced by these statecraft practitioners as they seek access in the Pacific.³⁴ Approaching similar objectives from a different perspective, China's police appear to have gained superior influence and access in Pacific countries.

³² In 2017, Nevés was seen as a future commander of the Timor-Leste Defence Force. Author's interview, Canberra, June 2021.

³³ Zhang Xiaojian, “Enhance China-PNG Military,” *Post-Courier*, July 27, 2021, <https://postcourier.com.pg/enhance-china-png-military>; and Yu Ke, “OPINION: Keep in Mind the Mission of Peace, Forge Ahead Hand in Hand,” *Fiji Sun*, July 31, 2021, <https://fijisun.com.fj/2021/07/31/opinion-keep-in-mind-the-mission-of-peace-forge-ahead-hand-in-hand>.

³⁴ Kate Lyons, “Police Remove Two Chinese Defence Attaches from Pacific Islands Forum Meeting,” *Guardian*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/13/two-chinese-defence-attaches-removed-from-pacific-islands-forum-meeting>; and Andrew Greene, “China Funds Construction of New Military Hospital at Papua New Guinea's Taurama Barracks,” ABC News (Australia), December 22, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-23/china-build-military-hospital-barracks-papua-new-guinea/101794868>.

PRC Police Cooperation in the Pacific Islands

Fiji. The PRC's police presence in the Pacific had started largely unnoticed in 2011, when China and Fiji signed a police memorandum of understanding (MOU).³⁵ This agreement instituted an annual police exchange through which senior officers from provincial police forces were embedded within the Fiji Police Force for three to six months while Fijian police were trained in China.³⁶ The MOU enabled several joint operations to extradite Chinese suspects from Fiji.³⁷ It is therefore not surprising that the PRC's first permanent police advisers to the Pacific were established in Fiji. In September 2021, Lu Lingzhen became the MPS police liaison officer in Suva.³⁸ Supervisor Lu would "act as a bridge for promoting police-to-police relations and...support capability building of the Fijian Police" and raise the relationship to a "new level."³⁹ This development built on the well-established relationship between the Fiji Police Force and the MPS starting in 2011, including a sizable 2017 joint extradition operation in Nadi.⁴⁰ Having a permanent police presence in Suva established a precedent for Chinese police advisers to deliver security statecraft in Pacific nations that did not have militaries. However, this well-developed police relationship was called into question by Fiji's new prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, in 2023.

Solomon Islands. The November 2021 Honiara riots presented an opportunity to deploy PRC police, and they were on the ground within two months. China had initially been prevented from sending a plainclothes armed security detachment to protect its embassy in Honiara,⁴¹ but it succeeded in deploying a China–Solomon Islands police liaison team (PLT), which arrived in a PLA Air Force Y-20 strategic transport aircraft

³⁵ Kitione Toroca, "Fiji Reinforces Security Relations with China," *Pacific Islands Report*, December 4, 2012.

³⁶ Losirene Lacanivalu, "Chinese Attaches Boost Police Work," *Fiji Sun*, July 27, 2017, <https://fijisun.com.fj/2017/07/27/chinese-attaches-boost-police-work>.

³⁷ Cameron Hill, "China's Policing Assistance in the Pacific: A New Era?" *Pearls and Irritations*, April 6, 2018, <https://johnmenadue.com/cameron-hill-chinas-policing-assistance-in-the-pacific-a-new-era>.

³⁸ "Enhancing Collaboration," Fiji Police Force, Press Release, September 10, 2021, <http://www.police.gov.fj/view/1537>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "A Joint Statement by the Fiji Police Force and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China," *Fiji Sun*, August 8, 2017, <http://fijisun.com.fj/2017/08/08/a-joint-statement-by-the-fiji-police-force-and-the-embassy-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.

⁴¹ Evan Wasuka and Stephen Dziedzic, "China's Solomon Islands Embassy Requested Weapons After Riots Broke Out in Honiara, Leaked Documents Reveal," ABC News (Australia), April 11, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-12/chinas-solomon-islands-embassy-request-weapons/100985070>.

on January 26, 2022.⁴² Originally pledged as a team of two for three months of training, the team arrived with nine personnel and grew to twelve over a series of four six-month rotations. It was then doubled in size for the Pacific Games in October 2023.⁴³ The PLT presented equipment,⁴⁴ signed a police-to-police MOU with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF),⁴⁵ and began a series of courses for the RSIPF in March 2022. A draft of the PRC–Solomon Islands Security Framework Agreement, which appeared in March 2022 and was signed on April 19, stated that “China may, according to its own needs,” replenish and transition military forces through Solomon Islands “to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.”⁴⁶

During the PLT’s first six months on the ground, the agreement demonstrated the potential to increase domestic tensions rather than alleviate them. A potential rift developed between RSIPF elements trained by Australian police (referred to as the “police response team”) and those trained by Chinese police (referred to as the “close personal protection detachment”).⁴⁷ This concern remains apparent at the time of writing,⁴⁸ exacerbated by reports of a large shipment of weapons illegally imported by the PRC embassy in 2022.⁴⁹ The fifth rotation of the PLT is now in Honiara, and the contingent was increased to 30 personnel for the national general elections in 2024. A public letter from officers of the RSIPF claimed the Solomon Islands PLT had transferred additional Chinese police from Kiribati and Vanuatu to bolster the PRC security for the elections without the knowledge of the Solomon Islands government. The letter continued

⁴² “China Boosts RSIPF,” *Solomon Star News*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/china-boosts-rsipf>.

⁴³ Stephen Dziedzic, “China Sending More Police, Donating Equipment Including Drones to Solomon Islands for Pacific Games,” ABC News (Australia), October 31, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-01/china-sending-more-police-to-solomon-islands-for-pacific-games/103048778>.

⁴⁴ “RSIPF Receives \$12M Worth of Riot Gears from PRC,” *Solomon Star News*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/rsipf-receives-12m-worth-of-riot-gears-from-prc>.

⁴⁵ “Solomon Islands Signs Police Cooperation Agreement with China,” *Solomon Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/solomon-islands-signs-police-cooperation-agreement-with-china/11735?s=09>.

⁴⁶ The draft security cooperation agreement between China and Solomon Islands was posted on X (Twitter) by Anna Powles on March 24, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AnnaPowles/status/1506845794728837120>.

⁴⁷ Wilson Saeni, “Security Pact Could Split RSIPF,” *Solomon Star News*, April 2, 2022, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/security-pact-could-split-rsipf>.

⁴⁸ This issue was raised with the author by Solomon Islanders in 2022 and 2024.

⁴⁹ John Power and Erin Hale, “China’s ‘Replica’ Guns for Solomon Islands Likely Real, U.S. Cable Claimed,” *Al Jazeera*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/9/1/china-likely-shipped-real-guns-to-solomon-islands-not-replicas-us-claimed>.

with a warning: “To the Chinese officers who have broken our laws, we remind them that we only welcome respectful cooperation with China.... We will not be pushed around.”⁵⁰ Naturally this account was denied by the RSIPF hierarchy, which was criticized in the letter.⁵¹ The potential for friction within Solomon Islands’ only security force is a sensitive topic, given the memory of the Tensions (1998–2003).

The original leader of the PLT in Honiara, Commissioner Zhang Guangbao, acted much like a quasi–defense attaché from February 2022. His background in the Peacekeeping Police Division of the MPS, including service as a peacekeeper in Liberia, made him suitable for such a role.⁵² He engaged with senior officials and politicians, including the prime minister; established a network among local communities; and became involved with Chinese associations and the Chinese diaspora.⁵³ He accompanied the ambassador to security-related events, officiated over donations to the local force and community, and worked closely with the RSIPF hierarchy. Prime Minister Sogavare indicated the relationship required “a more permanent arrangement,” and as the PLT rotated in its third replacement team, Commissioner Zhang remained at his post.⁵⁴ He handed the position over to Commissioner Zhou Jinyong in mid-2023.⁵⁵ The commissioner, assisted by one of his deputies, effectively performs the function of a security adviser’s office to China’s Honiara embassy. Their tasks appear to be securing influence and access, shaping the environment to avoid future unrest, and mitigating its effects on PRC interests if it recurs.

Kiribati and Vanuatu. Following these security developments in Solomon Islands, police advisory group proposals were discussed with several of China’s Pacific BRI partners during Foreign Minister Wang

⁵⁰ “A Public Letter from the Officers of the RSIPF,” posted on X, May 9, 2024. A copy of the document was provided to the author by a Solomon Islands observer.

⁵¹ “Police Denied Letter Published on Media and It Is Misleading,” Solomon Islands Government, May 11, 2024, <https://solomons.gov.sb/police-denied-letter-published-on-media-and-it-is-misleading>.

⁵² Andrew Greene, “Chinese Police Begin Work in Solomon Islands to Maintain Law and Order, as Australian Officials Watch Closely,” ABC News (Australia), February 24, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-02-24/chinese-police-land-in-solomon-islands-month-after-riots/100855948>.

⁵³ “PRC Ambassador Introduces ‘China Police Liaison Team’ to PM,” Solomon Islands Government, March 6, 2022; “An Interview with Zhang Guangbao, Leader of China Police Liaison Team to Solomon Islands,” *Solomon Star News*, March 6, 2022; and Eddie Osifelo, “Police Praise Business Body for Support,” *Island Sun*, June 29, 2022.

⁵⁴ Robert Iroga, “PRC to Provide 22 Vehicles for RSIPF and Other Support Worth \$22M,” *Solomon Business Magazine*, July 1, 2022, <https://sbm.sb/prc-to-provide-22-vehicles-for-rsipf-other-support-worth-22m>.

⁵⁵ “Ambassador Li Ming Attended the Handover Ceremony of the Police Supplies and Police Storage Center,” Embassy of the PRC in Solomon Islands, Press Release, June 29, 2023, http://sb.china-embassy.gov.cn/tpxw/202306/t20230629_11105720.htm.

Yi's mid-2022 tour of the region, leading to a variety of responses.⁵⁶ The following year, Kiribati and Vanuatu received "scoping visits" from the MPS. Commissioner Li Tongde's contingent arrived in Tarawa, Kiribati, in July 2023, followed by Shi Jilie's team in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in August 2023.⁵⁷ These contingents are following the Solomon Islands PLT model. Starting with a similar size and nature, they rotated in fresh personnel in early 2024 and appear to be there to stay.⁵⁸

These recent developments in the PRC's employment of the MPS to deliver security statecraft in the Pacific Islands have demonstrated the advantages of using police over military resources for the same purpose. To Western military strategists, police are less confrontational and therefore present a lower-profile vector for achieving the same strategic security goals for China. Police can enable intelligence gathering, enable a detailed understanding of partners' security needs, deliver information operations, enable regime survival, and establish a norm of authoritarian political control over law enforcement.⁵⁹ After observing a similar set of developments in Africa, one commentator noted that the "uncritical application of China's model of absolute party control could undermine military and police professionalism and the idea of security for all citizens," with implications for human rights.⁶⁰ China's intent to employ policing in the Pacific was confirmed by Minister for Public Security Wang Xiaohong when he called for "writing a new chapter of mutually beneficial law-enforcement and security cooperation to promote the construction of a closer community with a shared future between China and the Pacific Island countries" in September 2024.⁶¹

Other PRC nontraditional security agencies are also likely to provide security cooperation in the Pacific Islands. The China Coast Guard recently registered 26 ships with the Western and Central Pacific

⁵⁶ Hu Yuwei and Bai Yunyi, "China Ready to Boost Kiribati's Law Enforcement Ability, Unaffected by Hying of 'Failed Security Deal': Envoy," *Global Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1267096.shtml>; and "Samoa PM Turns First Sod on New Police Academy," *Radio New Zealand*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/477396/samoa-pm-turns-first-sod-on-new-police-academy>.

⁵⁷ Kirsty Needham, "Chinese Police Experts Arrive in Vanuatu amid Political Crisis," *Reuters*, August 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-police-experts-arrive-vanuatu-amid-political-crisis-2023-08-26>.

⁵⁸ Kirsty Needham, "Exclusive: Chinese Police Work in Kiribati, Hawaii's Pacific Neighbour," *Reuters*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinese-police-work-kiribati-hawaiiis-pacific-neighbour-2024-02-23>.

⁵⁹ Greitens, "China's Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia," 43.

⁶⁰ Paul Nantulya, "China's Policing Models Make Inroads in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, May 22, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-policing-models-make-inroads-in-africa>.

⁶¹ "China, Pacific Island Countries Hold Dialogue on Law Enforcement," *Xinhua*, September 12, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202409/12/content_WS66e2294fc6d0868f4e8eadc6.html

Fisheries Commission to commence high-seas boarding and inspection operations from June 30, 2024.⁶² These ships represent greater capacity than many regional navies possess⁶³ and could well be used to enhance security cooperation and influence in conjunction with the policing efforts described above.

Pacific Agency

However, statecraft is not a one-way street. Speaking to senior officials from PNG, Timor-Leste, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands between 2017 and 2021, I found the majority to be cautious and clear-eyed when considering their national interests in relation to the PRC. After the 2018 APEC meeting, one senior PNG official explained, “BRI follows a similar pattern to Japanese military expansion, but Chinese expansion uses economic methods to seek control,” while a security official noted that “China is trying to make inroads into our security through money...to push the military relationship and squeeze themselves in.”⁶⁴ There was a similar awareness in Fiji, despite its closer relationship with China in the previous decade. One security official explained: “They want to secure a foothold over here in the Pacific. And they failed in Vanuatu, so what’s the next best option?”⁶⁵ This allowed them to hedge with an Australian offer to fund the Blackrock training camp. In the case of Solomon Islands, one official was concerned that the new relationship with the PRC would place the country at the “fault line of U.S.-China geopolitical competition.”⁶⁶ At the time, the potential economic benefits of BRI were particularly attractive to the political masters of these officials, but most have become experienced at strategic hedging in the last five years as the competition has intensified.⁶⁷

During the lead-up to Wang Yi’s 2022 tour, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs circulated a joint communiqué and five-year action plan proposing the integration of political, economic, and security cooperation between ten Pacific states and China. Micronesia president David Panuelo perceived that the document sought to “acquire access and control of our region” and alter

⁶² Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, Circular, no. 2024/22, May 1, 2024, available at <https://www.wcpfc.int/register-inspection-vessels>.

⁶³ The *Nansha* and the *Zhoushan* are 165 meters in length with 76mm guns, and ten others are around 130 meters in length.

⁶⁴ Author’s interviews in Canberra, and Port Moresby, PNG, 2019.

⁶⁵ Author’s interview by telephone with a Suva-based official in 2021.

⁶⁶ Author’s interviews, Canberra, and Port Moresby, PNG, 2019.

⁶⁷ Hedging is “insurance-seeking behavior” in an uncertain environment. Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective,” *China International Strategy Review* 3 (2021): 300–15, 302.

its bilateral relationships into a multilateral one.⁶⁸ The result was a lack of interest in signing China's "Common Development Vision."⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Wang proceeded to have bilateral discussions with each of China's ten Pacific partners and Timor-Leste in June 2022, and police cooperation was quietly kept on the agenda.⁷⁰

China's "Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries," which replaced the rejected "Common Development Vision," included proposals for an annual China-Pacific Islands police ministerial meeting, a disaster management cooperation forum, a climate change cooperation center, a disaster management cooperation center, and a reserve of emergency supplies, with sub-reserves held in the Pacific Islands.⁷¹ In February 2023, the China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation was opened in Jiangmen, Guangdong Province, and an installment of sub-reserves arrived in Vanuatu on the PLA Navy amphibious ship *Changbai Shan* two months later.⁷² These initiatives demonstrate PLA force-projection capabilities and could be an alternate vector for Chinese security statecraft to seek access.

Since then, PNG appears to have separated China's security initiatives from their strong bilateral economic relationship by signing a status of forces agreement with the United States in May 2023 and a bilateral security agreement with Australia in December 2023.⁷³ Between these negotiations, China sought a policing and security agreement with PNG in September

⁶⁸ Stephen Dziedzic, "China Seeks Region-Wide Pacific Islands Agreement, Federated States of Micronesia Decry Draft as Threatening 'Regional Stability,'" ABC News (Australia), May 25, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-25/china-seeks-pacific-islands-policing-security-cooperation/101099978>.

⁶⁹ Kirsty Needham, "Pacific Needs to Meet on Proposed China Pact—Samoa PM," Reuters, June 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-foreign-minister-heads-papua-new-guinea-amid-tensions-over-election-2022-06-02>.

⁷⁰ Hu and Bai, "China Ready to Boost Kiribati's Law Enforcement Ability."

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "China's Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries," May 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220531_10694923.html.

⁷² "China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation Officially Launched in Guangdong," Embassy of the PRC in the Independent State of Samoa, Press Release, February 27, 2023, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202302/t20230227_11031718.htm; and Joe Harry Karu, "Vanuatu Gavman Nius Tudei" [Vanuatu Government News Today], Facebook, April 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/308459200695488/permalink/776062487268488/?mibextid=S66gvF>.

⁷³ Rebeka Kuku, "U.S. and Papua New Guinea Sign Pact amid Pacific Militarisation Concerns," *Guardian*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/22/us-png-defence-security-agreement-papua-new-guinea-china-india-modi-pacific-militarisation-concerns>; and Kirsty Needham and Peter Hobson, "Australia, Papua New Guinea Sign Security Agreement, Hail Close Ties," Reuters, December 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-signs-security-agreement-with-papua-new-guinea-2023-12-07>.

2023, using the risk to overseas Chinese caused by riots across PNG's major population centers as a pretext for the arrangement, and continues to apply pressure.⁷⁴ Most importantly, Fiji's new prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka cut the twelve-year relationship between China's MPS and the Fiji Police Force.⁷⁵ Rabuka explained simply: "Our system of democracy and justice systems are different, so we will go back to those that have similar systems with us."⁷⁶ When the second China–Pacific Island Countries Ministerial Dialogue on Police Capacity Building and Cooperation was held in Beijing at the end of 2023, Fiji did not send a representative.⁷⁷ Although Fiji recently restored its policing relationship with China after a thirteen-month review, no Chinese police will be embedded within the Fiji Police Force, as they had been previously from 2012 to 2022.⁷⁸ Most recently, an MPS contingent visited Tonga to offer security assistance for the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting later this year and was met with a polite but subdued response.⁷⁹

Perhaps of greater significance than state-level agency in the Pacific are the interest-based responses that occur at subnational levels. In particular, pushback at the grassroots level can occur when a strong local community chooses to evict Chinese small businesses or creates laws to protect the microeconomy from domination by Chinese interests. This is a localized form of protecting interests where tribal power structures may resort to force in securing livelihoods and customary land. Such agency at the local level is often misunderstood by China (and most external actors) and is likely

⁷⁴ Kirsty Needham, "China, Papua New Guinea in Talks on Policing, Security Cooperation—Minister," Reuters, January 29, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-papua-new-guinea-talks-policing-security-cooperation-minister-2024-01-29/>; and Ben Westcott, "China Urges Papua New Guinea to Protect Its Citizens after Riots," Bloomberg, January 11, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-12/china-urges-papua-new-guinea-to-protect-its-citizens-after-riots>.

⁷⁵ Meri Radinibaravi, "PM Terminates MOU," *Fiji Times*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.fjitime.com/pm-terminates-mou/>; and "Fiji Govt Will Again Use Taiwan's Official Name," Radio New Zealand, March 29, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/486952/fiji-govt-will-again-use-taiwan-s-official-name>.

⁷⁶ "Our Systems Differ: Fiji PM Rabuka Ends MoU with China, Asks Chinese Cops to Return," News18, January 28, 2023, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/our-systems-differ-fiji-pm-rabuka-ends-mou-with-china-asks-chinese-cops-to-return-6929335.html>.

⁷⁷ Only three Pacific ministers attended, along with representatives from four other nations. Fiji and the Federated States of Micronesia did not attend at all. Stephen Dziedzic, "Pacific Island Police Ministers, Delegates Enter High-Level Security Talks with China in Beijing," ABC News (Australia), December 11, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-11/pacific-islands-police-ministers-security-talks-beijing/103213960>.

⁷⁸ Ivamere Nataro, "Fiji to Stick with China Police Deal after Review, Home Affairs Minister Says," *Guardian*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/15/fiji-china-police-exchange-intelligence-deal>.

⁷⁹ Stephen Dziedzic and Marian Kupu, "Chinese Security Delegation Visits Tonga to Provide Police 'Assistance' Ahead of Pacific Islands Forum," ABC News (Australia), April 4, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-04/china-security-group-in-tonga-ahead-of-pacific-islands-forum/103665524>.

to result in violence if handled poorly. However, the prospect of unrest is increasingly being employed as an opportunity for China's security statecraft and a vector for support from Chinese law enforcement. This invites a greater risk of instability that is not in the interest of the host nation but may be in the interest of a small elite.

Protecting Overseas Interests

The PLA's 2015 strategic task "to safeguard the security of China's overseas interests" was a well-timed response to BRI guidance delivered two months earlier.⁸⁰ The task broadened the decade-old policy of overseas citizen protection to include the assets, organizations, resources, infrastructure, and lines of communication of Chinese interests. Given that many of China's new BRI partners were developing countries experiencing some form of insecurity, a significant number of Chinese companies were operating in challenging security environments. This concerned China's Ministry of Commerce, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The intent behind BRI—to generate the influence, resources, and posture to enable China's "unimpeded rise"⁸¹—required "strategic power projection" to protect these interests. The PLA Navy's "two oceans" strategy to counter U.S. containment,⁸² "far seas protection" developed under a policy of "going out," and extant capabilities for evacuation operations all possessed a common thread: PRC strategy required force projection to protect overseas interests and counter encirclement.⁸³

China's "Indo-Pacific ambition," which You Ji described as "reverse Mahanism"—economics first, followed by military presence and access⁸⁴—

⁸⁰ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce (PRC), *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* (Beijing, March 2015), available at https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2015_NDRC%20MOFA%20and%20MEE_Vision%20and%20Actions%20on%20Jointly%20Building%20Silk%20Road%20Economic%20Belt%20and%2021st%20C%20Maritime%20Silk%20Road_E.pdf.

⁸¹ Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 119.

⁸² Ji, *China's Military Transformation*, 186.

⁸³ See, for example, Shaio H. Zerba, "China's Libya Evacuation Operation: A New Diplomatic Imperative—Overseas Citizen Protection," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 90 (2014): 1107.

⁸⁴ Ji, *China's Military Transformation*, 186–91.

has led to the development of a globally capable blue water navy.⁸⁵ These capabilities can be used for evacuation, humanitarian, or stabilization operations, but are designed for fighting wars. The capacity to project force deep into the Pacific to protect overseas interests, counter encirclement, and dominate strategic space has revealed itself over time as the PLA's highest priority in the Pacific Islands, and this requires some form of basing.

Geostrategic Access and Basing

China's debate about overseas bases was prompted by the Malacca dilemma and intensified by Hu Jintao's 2009 direction to protect overseas interests, discussed earlier.⁸⁶ Under Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "keeping a low profile," China had repeatedly pledged in its defense white papers to not build military bases abroad.⁸⁷ An internal discourse subsequently grew in which bases were often referred to with euphemisms such as "strategic strong points," "maritime stations," "support bases," and "facilities."⁸⁸ Many contributed to this debate,⁸⁹ including Shen Dingli, who argued "overseas military bases is not an idea we have to shun; on the contrary, it is our right."⁹⁰ In 2010, Rear Admiral Yin Zhou proposed the concept of "dual-use facilities."⁹¹ In 2016, the deputy chief of the Joint Staff Department stated that the PLA was "steadily advancing the construction of overseas bases" to advance China's "overseas strategic positioning" in response to Xi Jinping's

⁸⁵ The PLA's force-projection capabilities now include 9 Type-071 Yuzhao-class amphibious ships, 3 Type-075 Yushen-class landing helicopter docks, and 3 aircraft carriers, and the PLA is developing the Type-076 amphibious assault ship (unmanned combat aerial vehicle launcher) and more than 30 Xian Y-20 strategic lift aircraft. "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL33153, January 30, 2024, 30–35.

⁸⁶ Hu Jintao, quoted in Hartnett, "The PLA's Domestic and Foreign Activities and Orientation."

⁸⁷ See, for example, Information Office of the State Council (PRC), *China: Arms Control and Disarmament* (Beijing, November 1995), 3, available at http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_1995_Arms-Control_English.pdf; Information Office of the State Council (PRC), *China's National Defense* (Beijing, July 1998), 8, available at https://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_1998_English-Chinese.pdf; and Information Office of the State Council (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2000* (Beijing, October 2000), 6, available at https://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_2000_English.pdf.

⁸⁸ Doshi, *The Long Game*, 206.

⁸⁹ These included Major General Chen Zhou, Colonel Dai Xu (PLA Air Force), Professor Shen Dingli, Rear Admiral Yin Zhou, Admiral Sun Jianguo, and Major General Shou Xiaosong.

⁹⁰ Shen Dingli, "Don't Shun the Idea of Setting Up Overseas Military Bases," China.org, January 28, 2010, www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content_19324522.htm.

⁹¹ Christopher D. Yung et al., "'Not an Idea We Have to Shun': Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century," Institute for National Strategic Studies, October 1, 2014, 13, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/652894/not-an-idea-we-have-to-shun-chinese-overseas-basing-requirements-in-the-21st-ce>.

directions in late 2012.⁹² Major General Shou Xiaosong articulated the CCP's requirement as "a forward base for the deployment of military forces overseas, as well as exerting political and military influence."⁹³

Starting in 2015, the CCP's direction was applied overtly in Djibouti, Tajikistan, and the South China Sea. The PRC adopted a less direct approach in countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Cambodia (and possibly Myanmar, the United Arab Emirates, Namibia, Angola, Tanzania, Equatorial Guinea, and Kenya).⁹⁴ This is a combination of Chen Zhou's proposal to use "diplomatic and economic means" to achieve "legal access" and Yin Zhou's "dual-use facilities" to achieve Shou Xiaosong's "force projection" and "influence."⁹⁵ This subtle approach is more appropriate in the Pacific during competition.

Clearly China is not the first rising superpower to seek overseas bases for force projection.⁹⁶ However, its strategic ambitions in the Pacific are constrained by the modern norms of sovereignty, stronger Pacific agency, a competitive environment, and strategic hedging among smaller states, making the dual-use facility an attractive option.

Studies from 2014 and 2022 found that dual-use facilities best meet PRC needs.⁹⁷ A dual-use facility is a commercial port or airfield established by a Chinese company that is capable of sustaining and projecting a military contingent for low-intensity operations during competition. Such commercial investments are less likely to provoke negative reactions than military bases, but offer a path to a future military base and could protect Chinese interests.⁹⁸ In conflict, despite being easily isolated, a dual-use facility could be used to impose risk or to interdict allied lines of communication. The PRC's aims for a base might also extend to post-conflict objectives.

Viable dual-use facility proposals in the Pacific normally deliver a fundamental developmental need for the host nation. While 96 major ports are partially owned or operated by Chinese firms globally, the construction

⁹² Sun, "Contributing Chinese Wisdom to Leading World Peaceful Development and Win-Win Cooperation."

⁹³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 254, quoted in Doshi, *The Long Game*, 206.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Julian Borger, "Work on 'Chinese Military Base' in UAE Abandoned after U.S. Intervenes—Report," *Guardian*, November 20, 2021; and Lolita C. Baldor, "General: China's Africa Outreach Poses Threat from Atlantic," Associated Press, May 7, 2021.

⁹⁵ Murray Scot Tanner and Peter W. Mackenzie, *China's Emerging National Security Interests and Their Impact on the People's Liberation Army* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2015), 87.

⁹⁶ Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Basing and the Great Powers, 1200–2000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 25, 28–31, 44–59.

⁹⁷ Yung et al., "Not an Idea We Have to Shun," 12, 39; and Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (2022): 9–47.

⁹⁸ Yung et al., "Not an Idea We Have to Shun," 17, 45.

or resupply of the facility by an SOE may be sufficient.⁹⁹ This is more likely in the Pacific Islands, where the scale of operations is much smaller. The interdependence of competitors in such facilities can also be weaponized through economic coercion or denial.¹⁰⁰ A network of dual-use facilities appeals to the PLA as a “next best” solution to enabling force projection in the gray zone without geopolitical consequences.

Why China Wants Bases in the Pacific

During interviews between 2014 and 2019, Chinese academics and officials argued that the rising strategic priority of the Pacific would include some type of basing, that China had the right to have bases, and that the first base would be established before 2027.¹⁰¹ Their reasons included the need to protect BRI interests, protect “the eastern flank,” provide an alternate sea route, posture for a potential conflict, and support space development with a satellite facility. In 2018 a well-connected strategist predicted that “the South Pacific is next,” and that it “will be important to the Chinese military after 2025.”¹⁰²

There are a range of objectives that the PLA could achieve from a dual-use facility in the Pacific. These objectives can be divided into two general roles for two different environments: competition and conflict. The first role meets the priorities of the current environment as China expands its sphere of influence into the Pacific, while the second prepares for a potential war with the United States and its allies.

During competition, the facility would enable low-intensity operations such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuation operations, peacekeeping, stability operations, and gray-zone operations.¹⁰³ For these operations to succeed, the PLA and MPS require facilities and relationships that can assist with access to the region. These facilities could enable Chinese contingents to collect information for their situational awareness, project force further into the region, or maneuver within it to respond to nontraditional threats. Such a facility would then provide

⁹⁹ Kardon and Leutert, “Pier Competitor,” 10–12, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 16, 42–46.

¹⁰¹ Author’s interviews with Chinese academics in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Australia, 2017–19; with PLA officers in Beijing, 2014 and 2017; and with Pacific graduates of PLA schools, 2014–22.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with a Chinese academic in Australia, September 2018.

¹⁰³ Gray-zone operations are defined as “competitive acts between opposing states short of all-out warfare.” Geoffrey Till, “Grey Zone Operations: The Rules of the Game,” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), IDSS Paper, April 5, 2022, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IP22024.pdf>.

the administration and logistics to sustain low-intensity operations and maintain a presence to grow China's influence. Denying Western countries access could be considered even more important during this phase. In this first role, a dual-use facility directly supports the security of BRI, the propagation of China's geopolitical narrative, and the expansion of PRC influence and access in the region.

In the event of conventional conflict, which China currently seeks to avoid by competing in the gray zone, Chinese dual-use facilities could be used in warfighting despite being quite vulnerable. Such installations could enable resupply of ships and aircraft operating over great distances, collect information to enable understanding of the battlefield, and generate risk for adversaries using economy of force. This contribution to surveillance and collection could enable the targeting of allied platforms or installations by remotely operated or long-range PLA capabilities without unmasking the location of the observer. Dual-use facilities could be used to deter or deny access by holding enemy forces and sea lines of communication at risk with anti-access/area-denial capabilities. A series of facilities could interdict resupply or assistance between allied partners, or contain a smaller partner. These facilities would not be expected to participate overtly in conventional warfighting because they could be easily isolated, their capacity would be rapidly exhausted, and their survivability would be poor. However, they could be sacrificed by the PLA at a decisive point in a campaign to prevent the commitment of allied forces and resources to a higher strategic priority.

Dual-Use Facilities in the Pacific

Many have assessed China's geostrategic interest in the Pacific Islands as a component of its grand strategy over the last two decades.¹⁰⁴ These views were once described as "alarmist" or "baseless" due to China's "peaceful rise" narrative.¹⁰⁵ Confusion partly stems from different perceptions of what China wants. Is it a base in the most traditional sense, or is it access that enables the employment of dual-use facilities for force projection and influence? For now, it appears to be the latter.

¹⁰⁴ Some early examples are John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly, "Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania," *National Interest*, Summer 2003, 94–104; Susan Windybank, "The China Syndrome," *Policy* 21, no. 2 (2005): 29; and Tamara Renee Shie, "Rising Chinese Influence in the South Pacific: Beijing's Island Fever," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 2 (2007): 307–26.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy*, 136–37; Wesley-Smith, "China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives," 354; and Zhou Fangyin, "A Reevaluation of China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands," in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), 254.

If the purpose is to enable force projection during competition, does the facility need to be built by a Chinese company? The simple answer is “not necessarily.” However, there are perceived advantages from a Chinese perspective. The first is that it best contributes to the PRC’s broader narrative associated with BRI if the force projection is enabled by “BRI facilities.” The second is that a Chinese firm can create greater flexibility, operational security, or storage by maintaining control of a piece of the facility, such as a warehouse. Finally, the facility may have additional utility for conflict through its characteristics and capacity.

Table 2 summarizes China’s projects in Melanesia and Timor-Leste between 2007 and 2023 that have potential as dual-use facilities. It is not exhaustive, and it cannot be proved that facilities are designated for dual-use until they are used for security purposes. The primary obstacle is the value that Pacific countries place on their sovereignty, despite appearing to leverage it in a hedging strategy. Therefore, successful proposals normally deliver a fundamental development need for the host nation (such as Lae Port in PNG or Tibar in Timor-Leste).

During interviews, Pacific security officials were adamant that a Chinese base would be an infringement of their sovereignty and “a kind of red line” to their national interests.¹⁰⁶ Most seek to create as much freedom of choice and opportunity as possible, and hosting a Chinese base sacrifices flexibility and leverage. Beyond the opinions of officials and practitioners, there are also politicians who appear to be more prone to elite capture and can overrule officials. However, they remain wary of grassroots opinions, which frequently express negative sentiment toward Chinese interests. This is why, for now, PRC security statecraft prioritizes access through dual-use facilities rather than declared “bases” in the Pacific.

From Luganville to Honiara

Of the examples in Table 2, Vanuatu in 2017–18 is worthy of closer examination. In August 2017, Ambassador Liu Quan officially opened the new Luganville Wharf on Espiritu Santo Island.¹⁰⁷ The wharf was built by the Shanghai Construction Group with an Export-Import Bank of China loan of \$88 million.¹⁰⁸ Shortly afterward, the government of Vanuatu forced

¹⁰⁶ Author’s interviews with officials in Dili, Port Moresby, Port Vila, Honiara, and Suva, 2017–21.

¹⁰⁷ Liu Quan, “Treat It as Equals No Matter Big or Small, Rich or Poor,” Prime Minister of Vanuatu, August 12, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ The Japan International Cooperation Agency delivered a similar capability in Port Vila at the same time for \$70 million. The difference was the unused Luganville Passenger Terminal—an expensive white elephant. Author’s interview with ni-Vanuatu journalist, May 2022.

TABLE 2 Potential dual-use facilities in Melanesia

Country	Year and location	Proposed facility	Status
Timor-Leste	2007 Baucau	Radar array and control facility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only to be operated by Chinese staff • Monitoring deep-water Ombai-Wetar Strait 	Offer by PRC defense attaché • Declined 2007
PNG	2009 Rempi/Vidar (near Madang)	PMIZ (Pacific maritime industrial zone) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port facility, tuna processing/cannery/refrigeration • Fuel farm, container terminal, power plant, water facilities • Significant resistance from local population 	CSYIC contracted 2008 • China Eximbank Loan 2009 • Phase 1 “complete” 2019 • Controversy over corruption
	2014 Lae	Port facility:* Lae Tidal Basin extension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 230-m wharf, 14 m deep • Container handling facilities • Phase 2: Extend berth to 700m • Phase 3: 2x wharfs, fuel farm, dry dock, power plants, free trade zone 	Built by CHEC • Phase 1 complete 2014 • Discontinued due to quality
Fiji	2015 Suva	Naval base for RFMF	Offer by PRC ambassador • Declined 2016
	2017 Blackrock (near Nadi)	Peacekeeping and HADR training camp <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large accommodation facility • Air base 	Offer by PLA • Declined 2018
Vanuatu	2017 Luganville (Espiritu Santo Island)	Port facility and passenger terminal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 360m wharf • Passenger terminal unused • 2018 proposal by PRC ambassador for PRC SAR element 	Built by SCG • Complete 2017

Table 2 continued

Country	Year and location	Proposed facility	Status
PNG	2018 Lombrum Wharf (Manus Island)	Joint naval base <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebuild existing facility at Lombrum 	Offer claimed by PM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Declined 2018
	2019 Momote Airfield (Manus Island)	Upgrade of terminal and runway <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Runway extended to 2,010 m 	Upgrade by CHEC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete 2022
Timor-Leste	2019 Tibar Port	Port facility* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multipurpose handling facility 12 km from Dili 630-m-long pier with berth 16-m deep Connected to deep-water channel 	Built by CHEC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be completed (2022)
Solomon Islands	2019 Gold Ridge Mine (near Honiara)	Port, transport infrastructure, and power for mine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harbor, rail, road, bridges, and power Infrastructure to be built, owned and operated by SOE 	CRI Group (COVEC) and Wanguo Intl Mining Co. Ltd. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracted 2021
	2019 Tulagi Island	Special economic zone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75-year lease with exclusive rights above and below the water 	Contract with China Sam Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Denied by attorney-general
	2020 Isabel Island	"Naval infrastructure" for the PLA Navy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75-year lease with exclusive rights 	Offer by AVIC Intl and China Sam <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No response
	2020 Munda Airfield (New Georgia Island)	Upgrade to international airfield <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Munda International Terminal (CCECC) Strengthening of airfield (CHEC) 	Upgrade by CCECC and CHEC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commenced 2022 To be completed mid-2023
PNG	2020 Daru Island	Fish processing facility/city	Fujian Zhonghong Fisheries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MOFCOM and MFA supported Has not commenced
	2021 Daru Island	Harbor, airport, industrial zone	WYW Holdings Ltd & A&A Oil and Gas Corporation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announced in China

Table 2 continued

Country	Year and location	Proposed facility	Status
Vanuatu	2022 Luganville (Espiritu Santo Island)	Airfield extension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length from 2,000 to 2,600 m • Width from 30 to 45 m 	CCECC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To commence in 2022
Solomon Islands	2023 Honiara	Honiara Port* (and 3 others) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rehabilitate international port* • Build domestic port and two provincial ports 	CCECC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADB contract

SOURCE: Media reports and interviews.

NOTE: Asterisk indicates these ports are critical infrastructure but could be dual-use. CHEC = China Harbor Engineering Company; CCECC = China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation; COVEC = China Overseas Engineering Company; SCG = Shanghai Construction Group; CSYIC = Shenyang International Economic & Technical; AVIC = Aviation Industry Corporation of China; WYW Holdings and A&A Oil and Gas are registered in Hong Kong.

the World Bank to accept the proposal of the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) to rebuild Santo-Pekoa International Airport at Luganville.¹⁰⁹ After a significant delay, CCECC was contracted to extend the Luganville airport's runway in 2022.

Despite rumors that a Chinese naval base would be built in Vanuatu,¹¹⁰ the decision to build the wharf was made by the government of Vanuatu to boost tourism and create a new export and transshipment hub.¹¹¹ Two years after construction it was well short of achieving these objectives. A 2018 *Sydney Morning Herald* article identified the wharf's potential dual use by the PLA Navy,¹¹² and according to a well-placed source, there was evidence behind this concern. After securing Prime Minister Charlot

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with ni-Vanuatu journalist, May 2022.

¹¹⁰ See "Mi Harem Se," *Vanuatu Daily Post*, April 1, 2017, http://dailypost.vu/gossip/mi_harem_se/miharemse/article_b5ef6dc19dca57bfb3a9e0308f14f74b.html; and "Special Report: The Belt and Road: China's 'Project of the Century' Increasing China's Presence in Vanuatu," *Yumi Toktok Stret*, August 23, 2017, <http://www.yumitoktokstret.today/chinese-presence-vanuatu-rapidly-growing-chinese-policy-known-belt-road-chinas-project-century>.

¹¹¹ Author's interview with a port operator, Luganville, Vanuatu, February 2019.

¹¹² David Wroe, "China Eyes Vanuatu Military Base in Plan with Global Ramifications," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html>.

Salwai's support for the PRC position on the South China Sea in 2016, Liu Quan attempted to influence him again in early 2018.¹¹³ He proposed that a search-and-rescue contingent from the China Coast Guard be permanently stationed at Luganville with a "technical surveillance capability."¹¹⁴ If this proposal had eventuated, it would have been a significant development in the PLA's security presence in Melanesia.¹¹⁵ However, Liu was exposed, drawing international media attention and a denial from the government of Vanuatu. He was prematurely posted to Suriname, where his career ended. It was not the act of building the facility that demonstrated its dual use, but the attempt to secure access for security purposes that followed.

The more recent example of the security relationship between the PRC and Solomon Islands demonstrates China's interest in access even more keenly. On recognizing an opportunity, the PRC rapidly locked in four instruments of security statecraft: the PLT arrived in January to conduct training, a senior officer was established as the liaison officer with the embassy, an MOU on policing cooperation was signed in March, and the "Framework Agreement for Security Cooperation" was signed in April. The framework agreement enabled PRC "police, armed police, military personnel, and other law enforcement and armed forces" to access Solomon Islands.¹¹⁶ Several facilities now under development (such as CCECC's A\$170 million contract with the Asian Development Bank to build four ports) could be used for this access in the future.¹¹⁷

As one senior Solomon Islands official observed five months before the 2021 riots, "the friendship that has developed recently with Sogavare and the 'new friend', which is China, it can lead to him being able to call on them in a situation where he felt that his government is under threat. . . . China finds a convenient place, better than any other in the Pacific, to run its business in the Solomons."¹¹⁸ Within a year, he had been proved correct.

¹¹³ "Vanuatu Gov't Issues Position on South China Sea," *Vanuatu Daily Post*, May 26, 2016, https://www.dailypost.vu/news/vanuatu-govt-issues-position-on-south-china-sea/article_df783f0f-5a6a-50e1-b48a-54610d728c1b.html.

¹¹⁴ Author's interview with ni-Vanuatu journalist, May 2022.

¹¹⁵ The China Coast Guard is part of the People's Armed Police, which answers to the Central Military Commission and has a low-profile humanitarian purpose, but sufficient capabilities to be employed for security statecraft.

¹¹⁶ This is seen in the draft security cooperation agreement between China and Solomon Islands posted on X by Anna Powles, 4–8.

¹¹⁷ Kirsty Needham, "China Firm Wins Solomon Islands Port Project as Australia Watches On," *Reuters*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-company-wins-tender-redevelop-solomon-islands-port-official-2023-03-22>.

¹¹⁸ Author's interview with a Solomon Islands official, June 2021.

Most Chinese attempts to generate a base-like effect are dual-use and difficult to detect. These efforts have been supervised by Chinese security statecraft on the ground since 2020, supported by interagency efforts, reinforced by the BRI narrative, and integrated with economic and political statecraft to achieve China's grand strategy (see **Figure 2**).

Presence and Projection of PRC Security Forces

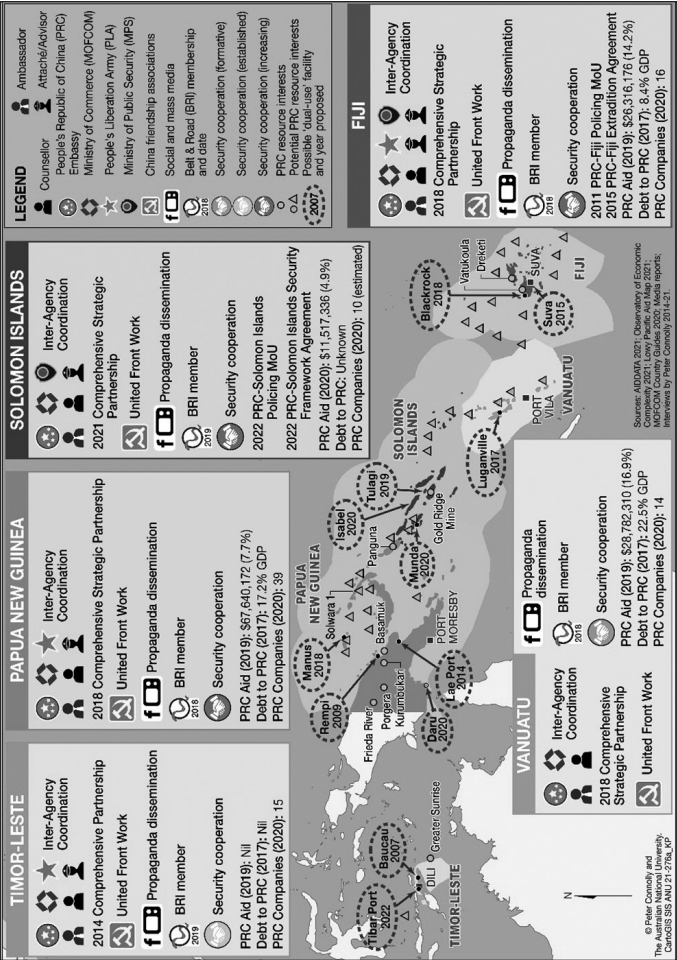
The strategic tasks of cooperation and protection provide plausible explanations for an increase in the projection and presence of PRC security statecraft in the Pacific at the time of China's 2015 defense white paper. The 2019 white paper then sought to explain further increases in operations, presence, and assistance in the context of "actively contributing to building a community with a shared future for mankind," in which China's security forces "actively provide international public security goods."¹¹⁹ However, these arguments do not fully explain the level of activity that followed.

It is unsurprising that the level of PLA and MPS engagement with their Pacific Island counterparts increased as the Pacific was integrated into BRI. Furthermore, it appears that PRC security statecraft has become far more overt, persistent, and influential in the Pacific in the last three years. While this assessment makes sense and accords with the anecdotal evidence, there does not appear to be a database of events that can be referred to as evidence. For that reason, a timeline of open-source PRC security events in Oceania from 2009 to 2023 was generated to provide additional data for this chapter. It is of limited value beyond illustrating a change in resourcing PRC security means to influence the Pacific. There is no comparative data for other regions and no internal weighting for the significance of an event.

This simple database focuses on PLA and MPS activity in the Pacific Islands region along with multilateral exercises and force-projection activities that involve Australia and New Zealand. It refers to Oceania as the Pacific beyond the second island chain. It does not include equivalent events within the PRC (such as the training of military or police members in China), except when an event is directly connected to the development of an influential capability or presence in the Pacific Islands themselves. An event is recorded in a specific category (operations, engagement, or materiel from the PLA or MPS) with a single value in a given year. A ship visiting

¹¹⁹ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019), 31, 36.

FIGURE 2 PRC integrated statecraft in Melanesia, 2022



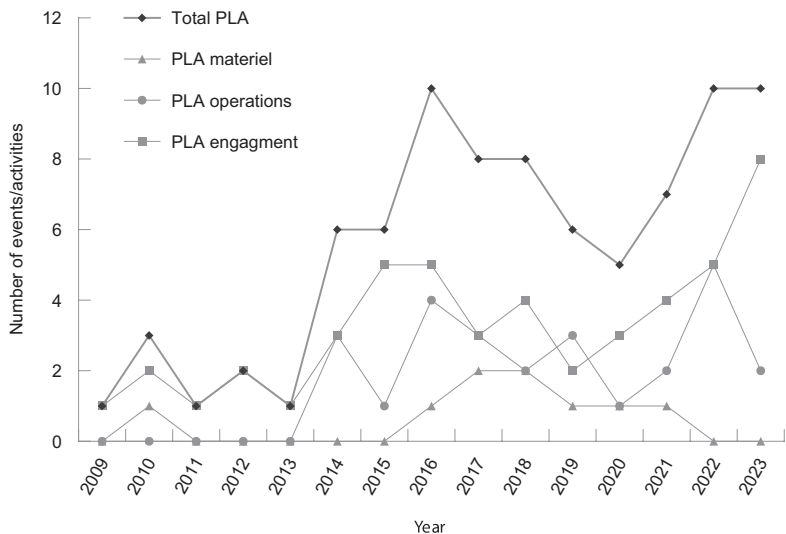
SOURCE: AIDDATA, 2021; Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2021; Lowy Pacific Aid Map, 2021; MOFCOM country guides; media reports; and author's interviews, 2014–21.

several countries is only recorded as a single event. Thus, an MPS police detachment that remains in-country for the entire year is recorded as an event with the same value as a delivery of equipment to a defense force. That said, a persistent presence is then recorded as an event for every year that it remains in place. These limitations should be borne in mind when using the database. However, the data is useful in that it indicates changes in the prioritization and employment of PRC security means in the region, signaling strategic interest and allowing the assessment of intent.¹²⁰

PLA Activity in the Pacific Islands

The PLA activity in Oceania in **Figure 3** demonstrates a consistently growing emphasis on engagement, starting with exercises and ship visits and then rising decisively in the latter years with the establishment of defense attaché offices. While engagement tends to overshadow operational activity, there are two points at which overt operations are higher than elsewhere

FIGURE 3 PLA activity in Oceania



SOURCE: Media reports and author's interviews, 2014–22.

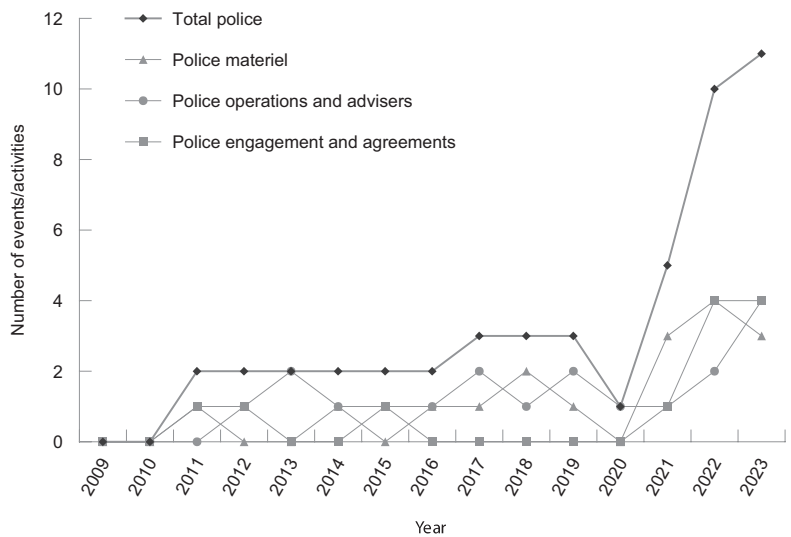
¹²⁰ David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 14–15, 39; and Doshi, *The Long Game*, 9, 16.

due to significant PLA force-projection activities in the region, leading to a spike in overall PLA activity. The first of these was in 2016, when the PLA contribution to searching for MH370 overlapped with PLA Navy surveillance in the region and several task group deployments at the same time as a high level of regional engagement, resulting in a high number of events. The second was when a series of incidents, ranging from riots in Solomon Islands to the volcanic eruption in Tonga, were met with the deployment of PLA Navy and Air Force operational capabilities, compounding with the sudden arrival of PLA defense attachés and their assistants to create high totals in 2022 and 2023. The PLA's materiel contribution to Pacific Island security forces has been modest, with its highest mark being the years leading up to the Pacific Islands joining BRI and the APEC 2018 summit.

PRC Police Activity in the Pacific Islands

By comparison, the contribution by PRC police to China's relationships in the Pacific started off modest, but constant, and largely focused on Fiji from 2011 to 2021 (see **Figure 4**). The China-Fiji Police MOU permitted small groups of Chinese provincial police to work within the Fiji Police

FIGURE 4 PRC police activity in the Pacific Islands



SOURCE: Media reports and author's interviews, 2014–22.

Force on exchange for up to six months a year and occasionally produced a favorable outcome for China, such as the extradition of Chinese nationals in 2013 and 2017. Beyond this focused presence, the PRC occasionally provided materiel to regional police forces. This pattern of behavior has changed dramatically in the last four years.

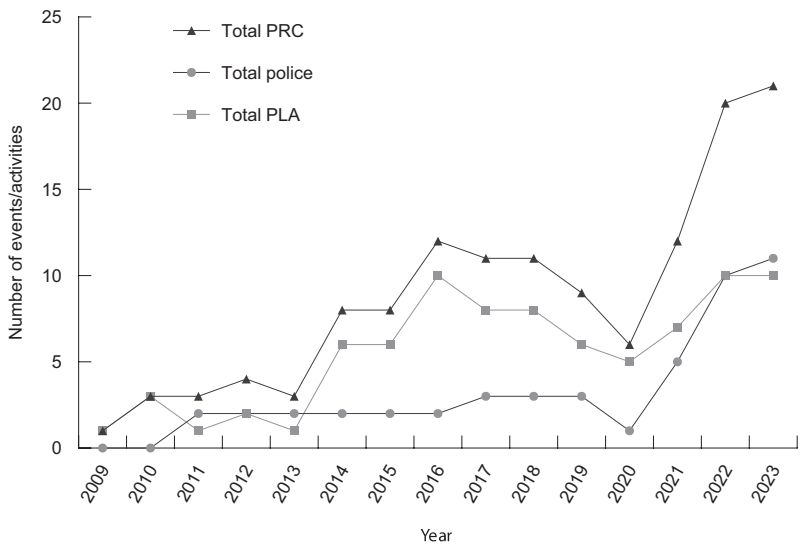
In 2021, the first police liaison office in the region was established in Suva, and equipment was provided to police forces in PNG, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. In 2022, in the wake of the Honiara riots, the MPS established access to Solomon Islands through the China–Solomon Islands Security Framework Agreement. Then, in 2023, as the police arrangements in Fiji were called into question by a new prime minister, opportunities developed to establish MPS advisory contingents in Kiribati and Vanuatu, and the PLT in Solomon Islands doubled in size for the Pacific Games. This single spike in the later years continues to build as new Chinese policing initiatives are developed and introduced. These statistics clearly reflect the engagement of opportunity with a significant investment of statecraft to meet strategic objectives.

PRC Security Activity in the Pacific Islands

The comparison of military and police statistics indicates that police involvement in the Pacific was slower to develop but is now taking the lead over PLA engagement. What the statistics do not illustrate is the additional value of this police presence for China's security statecraft in terms of greater persistence and deeper influence. The experience from Solomon Islands, now being replicated in Vanuatu and Kiribati, is that PRC police advisory groups arrive with the promise of delivering a short training package, but never leave. Furthermore, they seek to integrate with the indigenous force and affect its approach to the local rule of law. In doing so, they can assist in regime maintenance when it suits PRC interests and deal with instability when it concerns the welfare of the overseas Chinese diaspora or the narrative of how China is regarded within that country. Nevertheless, **Figure 5** demonstrates that the combined security effect of military and police cooperation has increased significantly in the Pacific over the last four years. Regardless of the magnitude of this security compared with other regions, such a change within the Pacific Islands indicates an increase in the PRC's strategic interest in them. That increased effort is seeking access with police engagement, which may be used by the PLA.

Given the strategic rationales assessed in this chapter, it appears the PRC has actively employed military and police resources to develop access,

FIGURE 5 Combined PRC security activity



SOURCE: Media reports and author's interviews, 2014–22.

presence, and posture in the Pacific Islands since 2020 to achieve five strategic objectives through competition short of conflict:

- to *penetrate* the first island chain to counter China's perceived encirclement;
- to *expand* beyond the second island chain to extend its strategic reach as a global power;
- to *displace* competing powers in the process (deny, deter, contain/encircle, or interdict);
- to *posture* for a conflict against the United States and its allies, if war eventuates; and
- to *control* the region post-conflict, or post-displacement of its competitors.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the significant increase in China's security engagement with the Pacific Islands since 2017, supported by the comprehensive, integrated, and adaptive employment of PRC political and economic statecraft. Through the enhancement of statecraft on the ground, Chinese representatives deliver the PRC's grand strategy in the Pacific Islands to enhance the country's geopolitical influence, expand its geostrategic access, and accumulate resources. Each of these interests motivates China's competition for strategic space in the geographic, human, and information terrain of Oceania. The PRC has actively employed security statecraft to develop presence, access, and posture in the Pacific Islands with the aim of penetrating the first island chain, expanding beyond the second island chain, displacing competing powers, posturing for possible conflict, and eventually controlling the region.

This intensified competition demonstrates both that the Pacific Islands are a higher strategic priority for China than it has previously acknowledged and that Western powers need to adapt their approaches to avoid being displaced, losing without fighting in the gray zone, or being forced to fight a future conflict from a position of serious disadvantage. A key adaptation that all stakeholders must recognize is the growing and effective role of China's police forces as part of a greater security statecraft system in the Pacific.

This is particularly the case in the majority of Pacific Island nations that have no military and rely completely on their police forces to safeguard their national security. The PRC offers its police forces to Pacific Island states as a "public good" without acknowledging the strategic motives behind their deployment. Because PRC police have generally been viewed by Western and Pacific governments as lower-profile or less strategically confrontational, they have become China's weapon of choice for competing in the gray zone in the Pacific Islands. Starting quietly in Fiji from 2011, but more significantly in Solomon Islands from 2022, the PRC has found its police adviser contingents capable of influencing local authorities, maintaining a persistent presence, and propagating its narrative to populations on the ground. By offering a means to support regimes against instability (which frequently involve grassroots anti-Chinese sentiment), China's PLTs are natural security partners to PRC political and economic statecraft in Pacific countries, particularly within the framework of BRI and the rationale of the Global Security Initiative. Chinese police can reinforce elite capture,

consolidate the delivery of China's grand strategy in the Pacific, and pave the way for the PLA's future access.

However, the governments and people of the Pacific Island states will ultimately decide whether China's police advisers are welcome in their countries, and whether they succeed in achieving strategic objectives. In the short term, the environment of competition could accentuate Pacific voices and reinforce hedging strategies.

About the Contributors

Dennis J. Blasko is a retired Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, with 23 years of service as a military intelligence officer and foreign area officer specializing in China. He served in infantry units in Germany, Italy, and South Korea and in Washington, D.C., at the Defense Intelligence Agency, Headquarters Department of the Army (Office of Special Operations) and the National Defense University War Gaming and Simulation Center. From 1992 to 1996, he was an army attaché in Beijing and Hong Kong. Mr. Blasko is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and the Naval Postgraduate School. He has written numerous articles and chapters on the Chinese military, along with the book *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (2012).

Peter Connolly is an Adjunct Fellow at the University of New South Wales in Canberra and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at Solomon Islands National University. In 2023, he completed a PhD at the Australian National University with a thesis entitled “Statecraft and Pushback: Delivering China’s Grand Strategy in Melanesia 2014–2022.” His research on Chinese interests in Melanesia drew on an extensive range of interviews in China, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Timor-Leste. Dr. Connolly has previously conducted academic research on international relations and strategy, including the Australia-Indonesia relationship and Australia’s whole-of-government response to terrorism. During a 33-year career as an infantry officer in the Australian Army, he commanded troops on active service in Somalia, Timor-Leste, and Afghanistan from platoon through to battalion level. Dr. Connolly also served in Parliament House, Sandhurst, and the Pentagon, and completed his service as director of international engagement—army and director of the Australian Army Research Centre. He now advises the Australian Department of Defence on the Pacific.

Andrew S. Erickson is a Professor of Strategy in the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College. He helped establish CMSI in 2006 and has played an integral role in its development. CMSI inspired the creation of other research centers, which he has advised and

supported. He is also an associate at the China Aerospace Studies Institute. His research focuses on Indo-Pacific defense, international relations, technology, and resource issues. Dr. Erickson is currently a visiting scholar in full-time residence at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, where he has been an associate in research since 2008. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute of Maritime Policy and Strategy's International Advisory Committee and serves on the editorial boards of *Naval War College Review* and *Asia Policy*. He has presented extensively at academic, private-sector, and government institutions throughout the United States and Asia. Dr. Erickson received his PhD and MA in politics from Princeton University and graduated from Amherst College. He studied Mandarin in the Princeton in Beijing program at Beijing Normal University's College of Chinese Language and Culture. His research website is www.andrewerickson.com.

Kim Fassler is a Foreign Affairs Officer at the U.S. Department of State's Office of China Coordination. Prior to joining the Department of State in 2023, she worked for twelve years at the U.S. Department of Defense, where her assignments included senior analyst at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's China Strategic Focus Group as well as posts at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing in the Office of the Defense Attaché and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Ms. Fassler has an MA from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, including graduate coursework in Mandarin at the Hopkins Nanjing Center on a David L. Boren Graduate Fellowship, and a BA from Williams College. She is from Honolulu, Hawaii, and worked in public affairs at the Hawaii State Legislature and as a reporter for Hawaii's largest newspaper before starting her career with the federal government.

Rick Gunnell is the Research Professor of China Military Studies in the U.S. Army War College's China Landpower Studies Center. He focuses on the Central Military Commission as an organization and the PLA's "land domain" people, organizations, and activities. Mr. Gunnell is proficient in Chinese and earned his BA in international business and management with a focus in East Asian studies from Dickinson College in 2006.

Timothy R. Heath is a Senior International Defense Researcher at the RAND Corporation. Prior to joining RAND in October 2014, he served as

the senior analyst for the U.S. Pacific Command China Strategic Focus Group. He has over twenty years of experience researching and analyzing military and political topics related to China. Fluent in Mandarin Chinese, he has extensive experience analyzing China's national strategy, politics, ideology, and military, as well as Asian regional security developments. He has a PhD in political science from George Mason University and an MA in Asian studies from George Washington University.

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise is Director of the China Studies Program at CNA. She has over two decades of experience directing projects and conducting research and analysis on Chinese military and strategic issues. Her research interests include Chinese military modernization, politics and foreign policy, economic statecraft, media issues, strategic communications, and information operations, as well as the South China Sea and ASEAN issues. She is the author of chapters in several edited volumes addressing Chinese security issues. Before joining CNA, Kivlehan-Wise worked for an international nonprofit organization, where she directed projects on Chinese and Mongolian affairs. She also worked in Bosnia with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in support of elections. Kivlehan-Wise holds an MA in security policy studies, with a focus on Northeast Asian security issues and Chinese foreign policy, from the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University and a BA in political science from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She is also a graduate of the Johns Hopkins–Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies and has studied Mandarin Chinese in Beijing at Capital Normal University.

Erin Richter is a Senior Analyst within the U.S. Department of Defense, where she has specialized in foreign military capabilities and civil-military interdependencies for nearly two decades. Before joining the Department of Defense, she served as a logistics officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, and she continues to serve as an intelligence officer in the Marine Corps Reserve, having completed assignments in the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Ms. Richter is a graduate of the Marine Corps Expeditionary Warfare School, the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and the Air War College. She holds an MA in international affairs from American University and a BA in anthropology from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Tsun-Kai Tsai is a Senior Research Specialist in the China Studies Program at CNA. His research interests and expertise focus on contemporary Chinese politics, contemporary Taiwanese politics, and cross-strait relations. Before joining CNA, Mr. Tsai was a research intern at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and also served in the Marine Corps for more than six years. As a native Chinese Mandarin speaker, he was able to provide language and analytic support to various missions and research projects. Mr. Tsai holds an MA in international policy from the University of Georgia (nonproliferation track) and a BA in psychology from the University of California, Irvine.

Howard Wang is a Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation. His primary research interests include China's elite politics, emerging capabilities in the People's Liberation Army, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. Before joining RAND, Dr. Wang served as a policy analyst for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, where he researched U.S.-China military competition and deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. He has also spent time at Guidehouse, the Jamestown Foundation, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Dr. Wang completed his doctorate in international affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where he was awarded distinction for his thesis research on the Chinese Communist Party's sea-power strategy. He also completed an MPP at the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy and a bachelor's degree at Boston University.

Joel Wuthnow is a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs within the Institute for the National Strategic Studies at National Defense University (NDU). He is also an Adjunct Professor in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. His research areas include Chinese foreign and security policy, Chinese military affairs, U.S.-China relations, and strategic developments in East Asia. Prior to joining NDU, Dr. Wuthnow was a China analyst at CNA, a postdoctoral fellow in the China and the World Program at Princeton University, and a predoctoral fellow at the Brookings Institution. He holds an AB from Princeton University, an MPhil from Oxford University, and a PhD from Columbia University. He is proficient in Mandarin. His recent books include *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (2022, lead editor), *Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military*

Leadership (2022), *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context* (2021, lead editor), *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* (2020), and *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform* (2019).

Ketian Zhang is an Assistant Professor of International Security in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. She studies rising powers, coercion, economic statecraft, and maritime disputes in international relations and social movements in comparative politics, with a regional focus on China and East Asia. Dr. Zhang bridges the study of international relations and comparative politics and has a broader theoretical interest in linking international security and international political economy. Her book *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* (2023) examines when, why, and how China uses coercion when faced with issues of national security, such as territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, foreign arms sales to Taiwan, and foreign leaders' reception of the Dalai Lama. Part of her research has appeared in *International Security*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the *Journal of Contemporary China*, among other venues. Dr. Zhang is currently working on her second book that explores the relationship between economic interdependence and rising power grand strategies. She received her PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2018 and her BA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters features papers from the 2023 People's Liberation Army Conference convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's China Strategic Focus Group, and the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. The volume examines how Chinese leaders assess China's external security environment, including both the opportunities and threats presented; how this assessment is driving changes to the PLA's strategy, planning, and modernization efforts; and how the PLA's posture and capabilities are evolving in key theaters of interest to the United States, including the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific.

Editors Benjamin Frohman is Research Director for the People's Liberation Army Conference and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. Jeremy Rausch is Director with the Political and Security Affairs group at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

Contributors Dennis J. Blasko, Peter Connolly, Andrew S. Erickson, Kim Fassler, Rick Gunnell, Timothy R. Heath, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Erin Richter, Tsun-Kai Tsai, Howard Wang, Joel Wuthnow, and Ketian Zhang

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ONE UNION SQUARE
600 UNIVERSITY STREET, SUITE 1012
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98101
NBR@NBR.ORG, WWW.NBR.ORG