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Testimony Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission

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Introduction

Commissioner Kamphausen, Commissioner Lewis, and other distinguished members of the Commission, many thanks for the opportunity to participate in this important hearing focused on Chinese views of strategic competition with the United States and China's perceptions of the United States as a strategic competitor.

I have been asked to address some larger-order issues about the military dimensions of the US-China strategic competition. These include:

- How we should think about the military dimensions of US-China strategic competition
- Whether China characterizes the United States as a military adversary
- How the Chinese military assesses its performance

Four preliminary comments are in order. First, when discussing "China's perceptions," we are actually talking about the perceptions of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Second, elucidating Chinese views and perceptions does not imply endorsement or agreement. Third, some aspects of these issues cannot be answered with high levels of confidence based solely on publicly available information. And fourth, the views expressed today are strictly my own.

The military dimensions of US-China strategic competition

The Commission asked me to address how we should think about the military dimensions of the US-China strategic competition.

Key Points: There have always been military tensions in the US-PRC relationship. In recent years, these tensions have increased as mutual strategic distrust has heightened and tension points between the two governments have grown. While significant, the military dimensions are not the sole defining aspect of this rivalry, which ranges across various issue sets.

Over the course of seven decades, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States has had periods of cooperation, contention, crisis, and even conflict. Since the 1990s, relations have been characterized by cooperation in

some areas and contention and competition in others. Today, the relationship has devolved so that the competitive dimensions are more pronounced and more contentious than they have been in many years, overshadowing cooperative endeavors between the two countries.

There is an important military component to the US-PRC strategic rivalry. However, the competition between the two should not be defined solely by its military dimensions. Rather, US-PRC rivalry is taking place on several fronts: on the diplomatic front for traction in international affairs, for leadership in technological innovation, in trade and economics, and so forth. Ultimately, perhaps, the two are competing for whose institutions, whose processes, and—especially—whose values or preferences will most greatly influence the international order going forward. Moreover, this competition is taking place in the context of two economies that are still deeply intertwined.

The military component of this rivalry predates the current downturn in relations, going back decades. In retrospect, there have always been military tensions in the relationship. Sometimes the military dimensions have been in the forefront, and sometimes they have operated in the background. Recall that within one year of the founding of the PRC, the two countries were at war in Korea (1950–1953). However, during the 1980s, the US and China engaged in extensive military cooperation against two former common antagonists: the Soviet Union and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.¹

Military tensions in US-China relations have become more prominent in the past few years. This is primarily the result of increasing mutual strategic distrust on a host of issues, Chinese military modernization continuing apace, Beijing employing the military element of national power to assert itself, and the US defense establishment refocusing attention on the Indo-Pacific region. Overall, military tensions are reflective of larger strategic tensions, but are the most acute in Asia.²

Military competition in the Indo-Pacific region

Key points: US-PRC military competition is the most intense in the Indo-Pacific, where a contest between two operational visions is taking place. The Indo-Pacific is where traditional US military predominance in the maritime and aerospace domains and China's expanding offshore reach and increasing military capabilities are intersecting.

¹ During the US's conflict in Vietnam (1965–1975), Beijing provided military support to Hanoi's forces, and there have been various crises with military components, such as the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis (1954), the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958), and the two Taiwan Strait crises in 1995 and 1996. See David M. Finkelstein, *The Military Dimensions of US-China Security Cooperation: Retrospective and Future Prospects*, (Alexandria, VA: CNA, August, 2010).

² For an overview of key issues in the US-China defense and security relationship, see Phillip C. Saunders, Randall G. Schriver, and David M. Finkelstein, "The Military and Defense Dimensions of US-China Relations," in *Joint US-China Think Tank Project on the Future of US-China Relations: An American Perspective*, (Washington, DC: July 2017. Unpublished conference report, Center for Strategic and International Studies).

Operationally, US-China military competition is the most intense and most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific region. In this theater, more than in any other, the possibility of conflict, a kinetic engagement, or an unintended military incident is acknowledged by both sides. PRC forces are the most efficacious in this theater since they operate close to home under the umbrella of their land-based assets. The Indo-Pacific is also where the military forces of the two nations are operating in proximity, where mutual strategic distrust is the greatest, and where the risk of miscalculation is the highest.³

The military competition between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally a contest between two operational visions. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates put it succinctly for the American side when he stated that the US seeks “to ensure that America’s military will continue to be able to deploy, move, and strike over great distances in defense of our allies and vital interests” in the region.⁴ For its part, China’s apparent vision is to ensure that no potentially hostile foreign military—especially that of the United States—can operate in the vicinity of the PRC with impunity and that no military can engage the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) or intervene in its operations without confronting great risk.

To achieve its operational vision, China is developing military capabilities that expand its strategic depth beyond its shores while seeking to degrade American military advantages. The PLA is also transforming itself to be better postured to fight as a joint force offshore. Chinese analysts focus on the maritime, aerospace, cyber, and outer space domains as playing prominent roles in this contest of capabilities.⁵

The activities associated with these two competing operational visions are currently the essence of the military competition between China and the United States. These two competing operational visions are driving force modernization decisions, deployment decisions, organizational and doctrinal developments, technological innovation, regional military diplomacy, and myriad other issues within the respective defense establishments of the US and the PRC.

³ This reality is why the Pentagon has made confidence-building measures and risk reduction the most important dimension of US-China military relations and why the PLA speaks of making US-PRC military relations a “stabilizing factor” in the overall relationship.

⁴ Robert Gates, “Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Shangri-La Dialogue, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore,” June 3, 2011, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4831>. Secretary Gates made this comment in the context of Air-Sea Battle regarding concerns about anti-access and area denial in the region.

⁵ PLA analysts also see the electromagnetic spectrum, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, hypersonics, big data, and quantum computing as playing critical roles in future warfare and, by extension, forming part of the technological dimensions of US-China military competition. *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, July 2019). Hereafter, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.

US-China military competition in the Indo-Pacific also has a significant political-military dimension. The civilian leadership in both countries is employing their militaries to support other governmental entities in shaping the region to achieve political, economic, and security objectives. This includes promoting their respective visions of how regional security affairs should be managed and organized. Cognizant of the operational (and political) advantages that accrue to the US from its alliances and defense partnerships, China is also employing political, economic, and military means to attempt to weaken those relationships. Consequently, the military competition between the Pentagon and the PLA also engenders competing military diplomacies.

The military competition in the Indo-Pacific also has a perceptual component of competing narratives. Each defense establishment is advancing its own narrative of its roles and capabilities, as well as the roles and capabilities of the other, in the region. For their parts, the countries in the region are assessing US and PRC military capabilities as well as making judgments about the political will of Washington and Beijing to stay engaged diplomatically, economically, and militarily. These assessments have the potential to affect the policy choices of third parties.

The global dimensions of US-China military competition

Key point: For the near term, the nature of US-China military competition outside the Indo-Pacific region will be predominately political-military.

The global dimension of the US-China military competition has garnered more attention over the past decade, primarily because Chinese national security interests have expanded geographically to comport with globalized economic interests. This expansion has in turn impelled the PLA's emergence as an incipient expeditionary force. The Commission's hearing on February 20, 2020, entitled "China's Military Power Projection and US National Interests" covered many of the issues and implications associated with the PLA's increasing global presence.

For the near term, the nature of US-China military rivalry outside the Indo-Pacific region will be predominately political-military. It will focus largely on issues such as securing access for military forces (places and bases), shaping regional perceptions, seeking influence, pursuing sea lane (SLOC) protection, and especially strengthening or building regional security partnerships (military diplomacy). Over the longer term, should the PLA develop the capabilities to project and sustain conventional combat power far from home (which is currently an extremely challenging proposition for Beijing), the nature of the military competition outside the Indo-Pacific could take a very different form.

A strong military for a rich nation

Key point: Beyond the issue of the US-China dynamic, the Chinese party-state views the possession of a strong and capable military as an end in itself; it is integral to the "China dream" of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Since the turn of the century, Beijing has devoted considerable resources to transforming the PLA into a military that can serve the needs of a rising China. The party-state has come to view a strong, capable PLA as a critical prerequisite for validating China's transition to major power status in the international system, and as necessary for securing interests close to home and beyond.⁶ To accompany the party's mid-century goal of becoming a fully developed nation, Beijing has declared it also aspires to field "a world-class military" by that time.⁷ The imperative of a "strong military" (强军) for a rising China is a *leitmotif* of the Xi Jinping era. The "China dream" is also the "dream of a strong military"—rhetoric reminiscent of Japan's Meiji modernizers (1868–1912) who called for a "rich nation and strong military" (*fukoku kyōhei*; 富国强兵).

In addition to the rising importance of the armed forces in general, Beijing's unprecedented emphasis on maritime security, and especially the need to build a powerful navy, represents another significant transformation in Chinese thinking about military affairs that feeds into the larger US-China competition.⁸ The increasing size, expanding operational reach, and improving capabilities of the PLA Navy provide visible symbols of potential coercive power in China's neighborhood, brings it into contact with operating US forces and those of other militaries in the region, and facilitates the PLA's presence far from home.

The US as a strategic and political challenge and potential operational adversary

The Commission asked me to address whether China "characterizes the US as a military adversary," and how such views of the US have evolved over time.

Key points: Strategically, the US has long been viewed by the party-state with suspicion; it is seen as determined to challenge a host of Beijing's

⁶ The party's evolving concepts of the role of the military can be traced over time. For example, Hu Jintao issued his "Historic Missions of the Armed Forces in the New Period of the New Century" in 2004. Among other things, it highlighted the need for an expeditionary PLA to secure China's expanding economic interests. By 2008 the PLA Navy was conducting its first anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa. By mid-decade, the PLA Navy promulgated a new naval strategy with an out of region component ("near seas defense, far seas protection" 近海防御, 远海护卫). A significant statement of intent was included in the work report of the 18th Congress of the CCP (2012), which declared, "Building a strong national defense and a powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China's international standing and meet the needs of its security and development interests is a strategic task of China's modernization drive." In 2017, the PLA Navy established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti.

⁷ The Chinese have been vague on what exactly this means, but one can surmise that the aspiration is that the PLA will be ranked among the most operationally capable militaries of the world along with the US, Russia, UK, EU, and Japan.

⁸ The 2015 edition of Beijing's defense white paper declared, "The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests." While visiting unidentified PLA Navy installations on May 24, 2017, the following was attributed to Xi Jinping: "Building a strong modern navy is an important symbol of building a world-class military, a strategic support for building [China into] a maritime power, and an important part of realizing the Chinese national dream of a great rejuvenation." <https://www.xuexi.cn/lgpage/detail/index.html?id=2886891037448290706>.

objectives at home and abroad. Operationally, PLA planners undoubtedly envision scenarios in which the two militaries could come to blows.

The US as a strategic and political challenge to PRC national objectives

Since the founding of the PRC, the United States has figured prominently in how the party-state assesses its external security as well as challenges to its political security—meaning the security of the CCP. Party-state officials have long been cognizant that few nations besides the United States possess the wherewithal and potential to either thwart or advance Beijing’s various foreign and domestic interests. This remains the case today.

For many years, long predating the current downturn in relations, the party-state’s assessments of larger-order US aims and intentions toward China have been highly cynical and predicated upon assumptions of hostility towards the CCP. Among others, these assessments include:

- The US intends to “strategically contain” China’s rise;
- The US intends to “Westernize China” and keep it divided;
- The US intends to keep Taiwan separated from the mainland;
- The US refuses to accept the legitimacy of the CCP;
- The US is instigating “color revolutions” aimed at weakening the regime;
- The US is using military alliances to encircle the PRC;
- The US is impinging on Chinese “core interests”; and
- The US is putting military pressure “on China’s doorstep.”⁹

Notably, as the PLA launched its unprecedented reform enterprise after the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in 2013, these party-sanctioned judgments, and others, were deployed and promulgated for the consumption of the Chinese armed forces as one reason among several why a very painful and dislocating set of military reforms was necessary.¹⁰ Specifically, the PLA claimed that hostile foreign forces posed a potential

⁹ PRC government officials have no problem publicly calling out the United States by name when specific policies cause displeasure, such as Taiwan arms sales or freedom of navigation operations. Traditionally, however, the public statements of PRC government officials and publicly released PRC government documents rarely mention the United States by name in connection with the judgments above. Instead, oblique references are used and euphemistic phrases are enlisted—phrases such as “hostile Western forces,” “certain Western countries,” “some large foreign countries,” “some countries from outside the region,” “some hegemonic nations,” and the like. Nevertheless, it is usually clear from context that the United States is being referred to. As US-PRC rancor over COVID-19 has ratcheted up, these diplomatic niceties seem to be breaking down.

threat to China's sovereignty, to China's aspirations for modernization, and possibly even to the regime itself.¹¹ Consequently, at a strategic and political level, the PLA leadership and the PLA political work system, following the party's lead, portray the United States to the Chinese defense establishment as having fundamentally malevolent intentions, and have done so for many years.

The United States as an operational opponent for the PLA

Key point: Publicly available materials suggest that the PLA views the US armed forces as an operational adversary mainly in the context of contingencies around China's periphery.

Beyond Beijing's larger order strategic and political concerns about the minatory intentions of the United States, one can infer from public domain materials that the PLA also views the US military as a potential operational opponent to be planned against, at least in various contingencies around China's periphery in the Indo-Pacific.

One group of PLA analysts wrote that the most likely threat of war for China is a conflict in the maritime domain, and so the PLA must prepare "to face relatively large-scale and high intensity local wars in the maritime direction under the backdrop of nuclear deterrence." Putting a finer point on this judgment, they claim the main axes for possible conflict are "in the eastern and southern maritime directions. In these directions, real and potential operational opponents are the most prominent and the threats are also the greatest, especially the existence of a powerful, adversarial military alliance."¹²

¹⁰ For a full analysis of the various catalysts motivating the ongoing reform of the PLA, see David M. Finkelstein, "Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers Behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Joel Wuthnow et al., Editors, (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), pp. 45-83.

¹¹ As examples, see: Commentator article in *Qiushi*, "Strive to Build a People's Army That Obeys the Party's Command, Is Able to Fight and Win, and Has a Good Style —Celebrate the 87th Anniversary of the Founding of the PLA," No. 5, July 31, 2014; Huanqiu Wang, "Admiral Sun Jianguo: China is in Danger of Being Invaded; Using Struggle to Seek a Win-Win for China and the United States," March 2, 2015; *Jiefangjunbao* commentator article, "Take the Endeavor for Winning at War as the Greatest Duty —Second Talk on Seriously Studying Chairman Xi's Important Speech During His Meeting with Responsible Comrades at Various Departments of the CPC Organ," January 13, 2016; *Jiefangjunbao* commentator article, "Peace Must Be Backed Up with Great Power—First Talk on Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi's Important Speech at the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation," March 15, 2014; and Jie Jinping: "Start the New March in the Course of Military Strengthening and Development—Deeply Study and Implement Chairman Xi's Important Expositions on National Defense and Armed Forces Building," *Jiefangjunbao*, February 17, 2014.

¹² PLA Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, (Beijing. Military Science Publishing House, December 2013), pp. 100-101. 中国人民解放军军事科学院军事战略部,《战略学》(北京:军事科学出版社,十二月,2013)。This volume is often cited by foreign analysts of the PLA; however, although the authors are highly credible military professionals whose views are respected within the Chinese defense establishment, the volume does not represent official PRC or PLA policy.

What “maritime direction” contingencies involving US forces might that include? Certainly these would include a Taiwan contingency, which is still considered the PLA’s priority planning scenario (the “main strategic direction,” in the parlance of the PLA).¹³ Presumably, assumptions about US military intervention factor into the PLA’s Taiwan plans.¹⁴ These contingencies would also presumably include the maritime disputes that involve China in the South China Sea and the East China Sea since two US allies are involved—the Republic of the Philippines and Japan. Of note, within the last two years, the US secretaries of state and defense have publicly stated that any attacks on those allies over contested claims in the South and East China Seas are covered under US defense treaty obligations.¹⁵ These contingencies might also include unplanned kinetic engagements between PRC and US naval or air forces in China’s near seas resulting from the escalation of a notional incident in which the two militaries operate in proximity. Beyond maritime contingencies, PLA planners likely account for the possibility of a range of contacts between Chinese and US forces—some hostile, some possibly not—in the various scenarios attendant to the Korean Peninsula, scenarios ranging from regime implosion in the north to full out north-south conflict.

Overall, the sense one gets from publicly available materials (an admittedly constrained dataset) is that the PLA views the US armed forces as an operational adversary mainly in the context of contingencies around China’s periphery, and that they view the US armed forces as both a contingency-based (scenario-specific) and capabilities-based (combat power) threat. Certainly, the types of capabilities the PLA is developing would suggest the same.

¹³ For an explanation of the PLA doctrinal concept of “strategic directions” and contingency planning, see David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines’” in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, Editors, *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, September 2007), pp. 69-141.

¹⁴ On May 20, 2020, the PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesperson made the following statement in denouncing Secretary of State Pompeo’s congratulatory message to Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on the occasion of her inauguration: “The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has the strong will, full confidence and sufficient capability to *thwart any form of external interference* and any separatist attempts for ‘Taiwan independence.’” (Emphasis added.) http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-05/20/content_4865380.htm.

¹⁵ During a visit to Manila in March 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo stated: “As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea would trigger mutual defense obligations under Article IV of our Mutual Defense Treaty.” During a visit to Tokyo in February 2017, former Defense Secretary Mattis said, “The Senkaku Islands are under the administration of the government of Japan, and fall within the scope of article five of the Japan-US Security Treaty.” See, respectively, *Financial Times*, “Pompeo Assures Philippines of Mutual Defence in South China Sea,” March 1, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/d7bee564-3bf8-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>; and “Joint Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis and Minister Inada in Tokyo, Japan,” February 4, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1071436/joint-press-briefing-by-secretary-mattis-and-minister-inada-in-tokyo-japan/>.

Chinese assessments of progress

*The Commission asked me to offer high-level comments on how the PLA assesses its progress in meeting its objectives.*¹⁶

Key points: While acknowledging its many shortcomings, the PLA seems to believe it is making progress in becoming a force capable of credibly engaging in regional conflicts around its periphery. However, the question of how the PLA assesses its own progress may be less relevant than how other countries in China's neighborhood assess PLA progress.

The PLA acknowledges it is still grappling with operational and systemic issues that have long bedeviled it as a warfighting organization and institution. At the Commission's hearing on February 7, 2019, Lieutenant Colonel Dennis Blasko (USA, Ret.) provided testimony entitled "PLA Weaknesses and Xi's Concerns about PLA Capabilities." That testimony addressed myriad problems the PLA bemoans it faces within its force.¹⁷

Challenges the PLA acknowledges it faces include (but are certainly not limited to):

- Tactical-level units ("grassroots units") whose operational capabilities are not up to standard
- Commanding officers whose operational judgments are wanting
- Problems integrating new equipment into units
- Training that is less realistic than it should be
- The quality or educational levels of some officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and the NCO system itself
- The efficacy of the Professional Military Education system
- Policies and processes that are outdated or that inhibit the generation combat power

There is no reason to believe that these or other such challenges have gone away altogether, since the PLA continues to discuss them. Yet, the PLA would argue they are working on these and other self-perceived shortcomings as part of the ongoing reform enterprise. Over the past year and a half, PRC and PLA media reports have touted redoubled efforts to improve the realism of combat training.¹⁸ In November 2019, the

¹⁶ This issue stretches the limits of public domain information, and one should be wary of reaching firm conclusions.

¹⁷ https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf.

Central Military Commission met specifically to deal with problems in “grassroots units.”¹⁹ The PLA media is currently giving coverage to the “Third Big Campaign” (第三大战役) of the military reform effort, which is aimed at making much needed changes to the “military policy system” (军事政策制度).²⁰ Although information describing these challenges and mitigating initiatives reside in the public domain, it is extremely difficult to validate either the depths of the problems or the claims of success in addressing them. Over the years, however, the PLA has shown itself to be a learning organization.

From a higher-order perspective, the PLA does not yet consider itself an across-the-board operational peer of the US armed forces, or likely of other highly advanced foreign militaries. That is the PLA’s implied objective set for mid-century. Nor has the PLA announced, at least to date, that it has achieved its key objectives set for the year 2020, which are (1) “basically achieving mechanization,” (2) “making significant progress in informatization,” and (3) enhancing “strategic capabilities.”²¹ They still have a few months to make that assessment.

Nevertheless, the PLA seems to believe it is making progress in retooling itself— institutionally, organizationally, doctrinally, technologically, and with weapons and platforms—to become a force capable of credibly engaging in regional conflicts around its periphery, especially in an information-intensive fight in the maritime domain. At the recently held National People’s Congress (May 2020), PLA delegates acknowledged achievements to date, not just the ongoing challenges.²² Certainly, US government

¹⁸ “把学习贯彻习近平强军思想进一步引向深入”(“Furthering the Study and Implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military”), November 8, 2019, http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2019-11/08/content_9673004.htm.

¹⁹ “军队代表委员热议推动新时代基层建设全面进步全面过硬” (“Military Representatives Enthusiastically Promote the Comprehensive Progress and Mastery of the Grassroots Construction in the New Era”), May 28, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-05/28/content_9823471.htm.

²⁰ The PLA refers to the reorganization of the national- and theater-level leadership and command and control systems as the “First Big Campaign” of the reform, and the restructuring and rebalancing of the services and their units as the “Second Big Campaign.” “坚信! 军队改革“第三场战役”的胜利就在前方” (“Hold Firm! The Victory of the “Third Campaign” of Military Reform is Ahead”), November 20, 2018, http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2018-11/20/content_9351678.htm. This third major tranche of reforms is intended to update a sweeping set of policies, regulations, directives, standard operating procedures, and business practices that govern how the PLA functions both operationally and administratively. It is a huge undertaking, and PLA commentators state that changing policies and practices may actually be tougher than changing organizational structures.

²¹ *China’s National Defense in the New Era*. Coverage of comments by Xi Jinping and PLA delegates at the National People’s Congress in May 2020 suggested that the COVID pandemic may be negatively impacting progress in some areas.

²² See, for example, “打赢改革强军的攻坚战——军队代表委员热议将深化国防和军队改革进行到底” (“Fighting to Win the Arduous Battle of Reforming and Strengthening the Military——Military Representatives to Enthusiastically Carry out the Deepening National Defense and Military Reform to the

assessments of PLA capabilities in the public domain paint a picture of a force whose operational reach and overall capabilities across the services continue to improve.²³ At bottom, the PLA does not have to be an operational peer of the US military across the board to cause serious problems for the US military, especially in scenarios around China's periphery.

From the perspective of US-China strategic competition, the question of how the PLA assesses its own progress may be less relevant than how other countries in China's neighborhood assess PLA progress.²⁴ The PLA already has one of the fastest modernizing militaries in the region. It possesses the biggest navy, with some 300 ships and with a second aircraft carrier commissioned in late 2019, and it has the largest air force. If a country shares a land border with China, it is aware that ample ground force units are available to Beijing, even with the recent downsizing of the PLA Army. These realities alone already put a good deal of potential coercive power—and potential combat power—in Beijing's hands relative to most countries in the region, regardless of where the PLA is on its timetable for modernization. This is also why US reliability as a partner is being perpetually assessed by countries in the region, which brings us to the issue of allies and partners.

Alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

The Commission invited me to address any other matters I believe important to the topic of US-China strategic competition.

Key Points: As US-PRC rivalry plays out, much is at stake for the countries of the Indo-Pacific—especially for US defense partners and allies. Beijing

End”), May 18, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-05/18/content_261687.htm. “When talking about the new situation of a strong military and revitalizing military that has been set in motion since the 18th Party Congress, military representatives deeply felt that our military has made historic strides, achieved historic breakthroughs, and reaped historic results—from the scientific and efficient [nature] of the [new] leadership and command system to the optimized and highly capable [nature] of [the military’s] size, structure, and force composition, and from the comprehensive leaps in the modernization levels of weapons and equipment to the continual improvements of the policy system. The [military’s] appearance has been reshaped by reforms.”

²³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019* (May 2, 2019). See especially Chapter 2, “Force Modernization Goals and Trends.” The key judgments in this chapter include the following: “In 2018, the PLA continued to implement structural reforms, make progress on fielding indigenous systems,” and “PLA capabilities and concepts in development are strengthening China’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) and power projection capabilities.”

²⁴ In its National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), Japan assessed that China has achieved “rapid improvement in its military power in qualitative and quantitative terms” and that these improvements, along with a lack of transparency, “represent a serious security concern for the region including Japan.” *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond*, December 18, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf.

will be quick to exploit any daylight between the US and its regional partners. We need to remind ourselves that US allies and defense partners are vital and simply cannot be taken for granted.

Today, countries in the Indo-Pacific, including some US allies and partners, are watching tensions in the US-China relationship with intense interest and varying degrees of nervousness. Much is at stake for them. Some find themselves in the uncomfortable position of looking to China for their economic security while looking to the United States for their military security. Consequently, many Indo-Pacific countries are engaged in hedging, and none are keen about the prospect of having to choose between the two countries as problems between Beijing and Washington play out and potentially intensify.²⁵

Meanwhile, Beijing continues to decry US military alliances as remnants of the Cold War. It assumes the only purpose of US alliances and partnerships is to contain China. As a result, Beijing will seize on any daylight between the US and its partners to undermine confidence in the political reliability of the United States. This includes China exploiting US rhetoric and potentially contentious issues between the US and its allies. While doing so, its diplomats and other officials will continue to propound the need for “new type security partnerships.”²⁶

Beijing also seeks ways to question the efficacy of US military forces in order to degrade confidence in Washington as a security guarantor. This tactic was on full display this winter and spring in the PRC media’s portrayal of the impact of COVID on US forces in general and in the Indo-Pacific in particular.

We should assume that China will continue to put pressure on allies or partners who support US military initiatives that Beijing views as detrimental to its interests. China’s economic and political actions against Seoul in 2017 in response to its decision to allow the US to deploy THAAD²⁷ missile defense batteries in the ROK is a good example. All

²⁵ In the May/June 2020 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong underscored these dilemmas for the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. See “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 4, 2020 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>>.

²⁶ See Alice Ekman, “China’s ‘new type of security partnership’ in Asia and beyond: a challenge to the alliance system and the ‘Indo-pacific’ strategy” , March 26, 2019, El Cano Real Instituto, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari35-2019-ekmanalice-china-security-partnership-asia-and-beyond-challenge-aliance-system>

²⁷ Terminal High Altitude Area Defense

of these approaches by China will require continual whole of US government efforts to reassure allies and partners.

Concluding comments

Looking forward, it is clear that a competition-dominant dynamic will define US-China relations for some time to come. This dynamic will include a significant military component that has both operational and political-military dimensions. However, we should keep in mind that these defense dimensions will not singularly define relations between the two countries, or the contentious issues that must be managed. Military rivalry will be but one set of challenges that include economics, diplomacy, technology, innovation, and trade that will demand attention. Additionally, the possibility of US-PRC cooperation should not be dismissed when doing so serves US national interests.

Geostrategically, military issues will be the most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific. In that part of the world, it will be critical for both the US and the PRC to focus on risk-reduction and confidence-building measures in order to minimize miscalculations that could lead to unintended confrontation or conflict. In recent years, across administrations, the US Department of Defense has made risk management a mainstay of its approach to relations with the PLA. The Commission might consider assessing the range of efforts in place or underway, including their efficacy and (especially) how the PLA has engaged on these issues.

The contest between the two competing operational visions for the Indo-Pacific discussed earlier will persist. In response, the US must continue making investments, pursuing technological innovation, and adjusting operational concepts to maintain its traditional operational advantages, credible deterrence, and ability to reassure allies and partners in the face of a modernizing PLA. This imperative is captured in the 2018 *Summary of the National Defense Strategy*. The question is whether such a focus can be sustained given competing demands and constrained resources. In this regard, the inclusion of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) in the SASC version of NDAA 21 is encouraging.²⁸

Political-military issues must be given equal attention as operational concerns, especially US relations with allies and partners in the region. US allies and partners are critical to a host of strategic-level objectives shared between the US and many of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Along with key institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), US defense partners represent a network of like-minded nations that can undergird the regional order, and that can set norms and rules to provide a bulwark against challenges to that order. Operationally, allies and partners will remain critical enablers of the access and sustainment that US forces need to overcome what Pacific planners refer to as “the tyranny of distance.” The US takes allies and partners for granted

²⁸ See “Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, Senate Armed Services Committee” <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY%2021%20NDAA%20Summary.pdf>

at great risk. They must be assured that the US is a good partner for them, not just that they are good partners for the US.

Over the long term, prevailing in long-term strategic competition with China will require more than maintaining American military prowess. Among other things, it will also demand an economically strong, technologically innovative, and cohesive America at home; a respected America abroad whose values resonate; and an America that embraces its traditional leadership role in the international system.