

China's Overseas Military Diplomacy and Implications for U.S. Interests

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The RAND Corporation²

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The expansion of China's global interests and the subsequent increase in its overseas security footprint have led the Chinese leadership to elevate the role of military diplomacy in supporting China's foreign policy objectives, growing the country's influence overseas, and building a strong military that can conduct and sustain missions around the world. The Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) development of expeditionary military capabilities required to protect and advance Chinese interests abroad—a mission specifically tasked to the military by the Chinese leadership nearly two decades ago—means that the PLA is now more capable of conducting military diplomacy than in the past.³ China's military frequently engages in high-level visits and professional military exchanges with counterparts overseas, and the PLA's growing naval and air capabilities have enabled it to participate in more bilateral and multilateral exercises with partners outside the Indo-Pacific region, conduct maritime patrols and port visits around the world, and provide nontraditional security services, such as counterpiracy operations, peacekeeping operations, noncombatant

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

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³ Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, National Defense University Press, China Strategic Perspectives 11, July 2017.

evacuation operations (NEOs), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and medical assistance.⁴

This testimony will address the objectives of China’s overseas military diplomacy, how China’s approach has evolved given intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, ways in which China’s military diplomacy activities could potentially challenge U.S. interests, and recommendations for U.S. policymakers. It will examine the Chinese leadership’s approach to using the PLA’s overseas engagements to further broaden Chinese foreign policy objectives and shape the international environment, analyze how military diplomacy could feature in China’s efforts to gain advantage in the U.S.-China competition outside the Indo-Pacific region, and assess how the PLA’s overseas engagements support its presence and operations abroad, particularly as the military’s expeditionary capabilities grow.

Military Diplomacy in Support of the Chinese Communist Party’s Strategic Goals

The growth in the PLA’s overseas military capabilities over the past decade, as well as the overall modernization of the force, has augmented its ability to conduct overseas engagements. China has increasingly used the military to shape the international security environment—from sending peacekeeping forces to countries in Africa where it has energy interests to conducting counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.⁵ Military diplomacy has been a key supporting element of the PLA’s overseas presence as the military’s expeditionary capabilities and mission sets have expanded. It has also become a tool that the Chinese leadership increasingly uses to support China’s strategic objectives, to include foreign policy goals such as shaping the international environment to be more conducive to Chinese interests, building influence with key partners in economically vital locations around the world, advancing and defending China’s interests in the U.S.-China competition, and building a strong military that can operate overseas.⁶

The PLA’s definition of military diplomacy includes those aspects of foreign relations pertaining to military and security affairs, both in a bilateral and multilateral context. Specific activities include military exchanges and negotiations, issues related to arms control and technology cooperation, military aid and intelligence cooperation, and international peacekeeping.⁷ China has also used military diplomacy to conduct military and political

⁴ Cristina L. Garafola, Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Meagan L. Smith, Derek Grossman, Nathan Chandler, and Stephen Watts, *The People’s Liberation Army’s Search for Overseas Basing and Access: A Framework to Assess Potential Host Nations*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1496-2, 2022, p. 25, www.rand.org/t/RR-A1496-2. The PLA has also been involved in supplying medical assistance during the Ebola outbreak in 2013 and during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Tan Yingzhi, “Team Returns Home After Fighting Ebola in Liberia,” *China Daily*, January 17, 2015). Kenneth Allen, “Early Warning Brief: The PLA’s Military Diplomacy Under COVID-19,” *China Brief* Vol. 21, issue 13.

⁵ Kristen Gunness, “The PLA’s Expeditionary Force: Current Capabilities and Future Trends,” in *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., National Defense University Press, 2021.

⁶ Garafola et al., 2022, pp. 14–17.

⁷ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, 2017.

signaling and to demonstrate PLA capabilities through joint exercises, such as the PLA Navy's exercises with Russia and Iran in 2022. China also uses military-to-military relations to signal displeasure with a country's policies or actions toward China, through canceling high-level engagements, dialogues, and exercises.⁸ The use of military diplomacy to support the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) strategic goals is a relatively recent development for China. Prior to 2009, when the PLA began the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy operations, the military's limited capabilities did not allow it to conduct the full range of activities overseas that we now see it undertaking.⁹ Rather, the PLA's external engagements were primarily restricted to high-level engagements used tactically to augment or degrade bilateral relations with specific countries, as with the United States when China wanted to signal displeasure with U.S. actions, or to build military partnerships or gain operational experience, as with joint exercises and professional military exchanges with Russia. China has also used military diplomacy to support limited political objectives, such as building relationships with countries in Latin America or the Middle East to augment its arms sales or signal political support for a regime or leader, or to bolster relationships with developing countries in Africa.¹⁰

While the PLA's overseas activities will certainly continue to support these objectives, the Chinese leadership has indicated that it expects military diplomacy to play a larger role in contributing to a range of Chinese national and security interests abroad. In 2015, at an All-Military Foreign Work Conference held in Beijing, General Secretary Xi Jinping publicly highlighted the role of military diplomacy by stating that the PLA's external activities must serve China's larger foreign policy strategy, uphold China's national security and sovereignty, and promote the military's development.¹¹ Recent articles from Chinese scholars writing in authoritative PLA publications have continued to reiterate the importance of military diplomacy in achieving China's national rejuvenation, serving the country's diplomatic interests, and protecting and defending national interests overseas.¹²

⁸ "Iran, China and Russia Hold Naval Drills in North Indian Ocean," Reuters, January 21, 2022. For an overview of China's use of the military for political and deterrence signaling, see Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, Kristen Gunness, Michael S. Chase, Marigold Black, and Natalia Simmons-Thomas, *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1074-1, 2021, www.rand.org/t/RRA1074-1.

⁹ For a PLA review of historical military diplomacy, see Kong Fanzheng and Chen Zhiyong. "Outline of Our Military United Front and Foreign Military Exchanges" ["我军军事统战和对外军事交往论纲"], *Journal of Nanjing University of Political Science*, 2004–2005.

¹⁰ For examples, see Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021, www.rand.org/t/RRA444-4.

¹¹ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Meeting with Representatives of the All-Army Foreign Affairs Work Conference and the 16th Military Attaché Work Conference (January 29, 2015)," *People's Daily*, January 30, 2015. This speech was followed by the publication of several books on military diplomacy by the PLA's National Defense University.

¹² See Deng Bibo, "Major Achievements and Basic Experience in China's Military Diplomacy in the New Era," Vol. 2, No. 182, *China Military Science*, 2022. A number of authoritative books from PLA institutes, such as the National Defense University, on military diplomacy were also published around 2015, highlighting the emphasis placed on military diplomacy by the Chinese leadership. See, for example, China National Defense University,

Xi's guidance appears to have given the PLA a mandate to expand its overseas military engagements as long as they are nested within China's broader foreign policy goals. While the COVID-19 pandemic and China's zero-COVID policy led to a significant decrease in overseas PLA engagements aside from pandemic-related medical assistance, prior to 2020 the PLA had a regular schedule of foreign engagements, including PLA senior-level visits, exercises, and port calls. Since 2015, the PLA's military activities beyond the Indo-Pacific region have focused on Europe and Africa, as well as the United States and Russia.¹³

Military Diplomacy Supports China's Efforts to Shape International Perceptions

China uses military diplomacy to support its foreign policy goal of shaping the international environment to be more conducive to China's interests.¹⁴ A key element of this goal is building and maintaining the ability to control the narrative and shape global perceptions in China's favor. The concept of controlling the narrative and shaping the public discourse to sway countries to support China is not new to the PLA. Chinese military writings on the Three Warfares—psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare—discuss the importance of taking advantage of the peacetime environment to establish favorable conditions for Chinese objectives through diplomacy and shaping public opinion, persuading international actors that China's actions are “just, reasonable, and right.”¹⁵ Chinese authors also discuss the need to strengthen military discourse capabilities as a part of military diplomacy to counter what China views as a discourse system dominated by the West.¹⁶

China frequently frames overseas military engagements as promoting its peaceful rise through supporting international security and contributing to stability. China's 2019 defense white paper, for example, stated that China's security cooperation around the world supports Xi's intention to create a “community with a shared future for mankind” and “building a new-model security partnership.”¹⁷ The PLA's overseas engagements in exercises, nontraditional

Military Diplomacy of New China and International Peacekeeping [新中国军事外交与国际维和研], National Defense University Press, 2015.

¹³ Military-to-military engagements between the United States and China have dropped significantly with the increase in bilateral tensions (Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, “China's Military Diplomacy,” paper presented at “The PLA in a World of Strategic Competition with the United States,” CAPS-RAND-NDU-USIP-PLA Conference, Arlington, Virginia, November 18–19, 2022, publication forthcoming).

¹⁴ For a description of China's foreign policy goals, see Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. Cooper III, Sale Lilly, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, and J.D. Williams, *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, RAND Corporation, RR-2798-A, 2020, pp. 9–21, www.rand.org/t/RR2798.

¹⁵ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., Academy of Military Science Press, 2013, p. 131.

¹⁶ Chat Sbragia and Kenneth Allen, “Managing the PLA's Military Diplomacy: Key Institutions and Personnel,” Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, Vol. 22, No. 21, November 18, 2022.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, July 2019. See, also, Michael J. Mazarr, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Jonah Blank, Samuel Charap, Michael S. Chase, Beth Grill, Derek Grossman, Dara Massicot, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Lyle J. Morris, Alexander Noyes, Stephanie Pezard, Ashley L. Rhoades, Alice Shih, Mark Stalczyński, Melissa Shostak, David E. Thaler, and Dori

security operations, and other military diplomacy activities are touted in official Chinese documents and Chinese media outlets as contributing to world peace and common development. For example, the 2019 defense white paper states that China should continue to support United Nations efforts to promote peace and stability.¹⁸ Chinese media also highlights the PLA's ability to be an international security provider through overseas activities such as peacekeeping operations, counterpiracy operations, medical assistance, and contributions to disaster relief.¹⁹

Along with promoting the narrative that increasing PLA activities and presence overseas is good for global stability and security, China views military diplomacy as a tool to counter anti-China narratives and promote its own vision of global security. Beijing has used venues such as the Xiangshan Forum, to which it invites military leaders from around the world, to criticize U.S. policies and push back on perceived U.S. hegemony, while promoting China's efforts to uphold the international security order.²⁰ China has also supported these narratives by focusing military diplomacy efforts in developing countries that participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to cultivate relations with partners that are potentially willing to join it in pushing back against what it frames as a Western-led system unfair to developing nations. For example, a 2021 white paper on China-Africa cooperation states that there is a "... sharp conflict between multilateralism and unilateralism, the global governance system is facing profound and unprecedented challenges. China sees Africa as a broad stage for international cooperation rather than an arena for competition among major countries." The white paper further states that China's military cooperation with Africa is aimed at promoting security and stability while championing the principle of "African people solving African issues in their own ways."²¹ These themes echo the types of narratives that China articulates to counter U.S. statements on China, illustrating how military diplomacy supports China's foreign policy narratives and objectives and how it is nested within China's broader foreign policy apparatus.²²

Walker, *Security Cooperation in a Strategic Competition*, RAND Corporation, RR-A650-1, 2022, p. 22, www.rand.org/t/RRA650-1.

¹⁸ Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark, *China's Quest for Global Primacy*, RAND Corporation, RR-A447-1, 2021, p. 69, www.rand.org/t/RRA447-1.

¹⁹ See, for example, Jiang Chenglong, "PLA Remains a Powerful Force for World Peace," *People's Daily Online*, October 11, 2022.

²⁰ John Dotson, "The Xiangshan Forum and Emerging Themes in PRC Military Diplomacy," Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 20, November 19, 2019.

²¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*, November 2021.

²² For an example of the types of narratives that China uses to counter U.S. statements, see Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "China's Comprehensive, Systematic and Elaborate Response to Secretary Antony Blinken's China Policy Speech—Reality Check: Falsehoods in U.S. Perceptions of China," June 19, 2022.

Military Diplomacy Increasingly Features in China's Approach to the U.S.-China Competition

As the U.S.-China competition intensifies, military diplomacy is one of the tools that China could potentially use to gain advantage in the competitive environment. The PLA's foreign engagements frequently play a supporting role in China's efforts to build a network of partners that prioritize relations with China over the United States, including BRI partner countries. China participates in overseas multilateral security organizations that highlight its leadership on security issues to BRI countries and potential partners in the developing world. For example, in November 2021, Chinese and African leaders met in Senegal for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, and in July 2022, China held the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, where representatives from China and African countries discussed the implementation of several security projects, including joint military drills, training, and light weapons management for peacekeeping, as well as military aid for the African Union.²³ China has also sent military aid to the African Union to support other foreign policy objectives and develop its soft power in the region. While the Chinese media often promotes China's military aid donations, the reality is that China likely provides far less aid than it publicly pledges. China's military aid to the Philippines is an example where Beijing pledged significant aid to the Duterte administration that it did not deliver.²⁴ While PLA researchers write about the military's role in supporting the BRI and developing countries, they also note that the increase in engagements in BRI countries have led to China potentially dealing with more overseas security problems that could eventually tax the PLA's ability to respond. One article states that because of PLA support for BRI, "... overseas military operations other than war are increasing, and the demand for providing overseas support is also increasing."²⁵

China also uses military diplomacy to support efforts to degrade U.S. influence and partnerships, as well as promote its own agenda, where it perceives an opportunity to do so. A recent example is China's security engagements with the Solomon Islands, which resulted in an April 2022 agreement that allows routine visits of PLA Navy ships and training of local law enforcement. While China's efforts to grow its overall influence in the Pacific Island states have not been entirely successful, it is notable that the Chinese leadership looked to military engagements as one of its primary influence-building tools.²⁶ China's security footprint in Latin America has also been growing, though the PLA has generally prioritized military and security engagements with countries where anti-U.S. communist and populist leaders hold power, such as

²³ He Yin, "China, Africa Work to Build Security Community," *People's Daily Online*, July 29, 2022.

²⁴ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "China's Military Aid Is Probably Less Than You Think," *RAND Blog*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/07/chinas-military-aid-is-probably-less-than-you-think.html>.

²⁵ Luo Zhaohui [罗朝晖], Wan Jie [万捷], and Li Hongyang [李弘扬], "Research on Factors in Site Selection of Overseas Military Base of Chinese Navy" ["我国海军海外基地选址因素研究"], *Logistics Technology [物流技术]*, June 2019, p. 141.

²⁶ Derek Grossman, "China's Gambit in the Pacific: Implications for the United States and Its Allies and Partners," testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, RAND Corporation, CT-A2198-1, August 3, 2022, p. 6, www.rand.org/t/CTA2198-1.

Cuba, Venezuela, and Argentina. These countries, as well as others in the region, purchase arms from Chinese companies and, in Argentina's case, have provided the PLA access to develop Chinese space capabilities in the region. The PLA's Strategic Support Force now operates a telemetry, tracking, and command station in Argentina, which has raised concerns for the U.S. military.²⁷

In terms of China's efforts to build global economic power, military diplomacy also serves to help China increase its security partnerships and military access near vital economic and strategic interests. China's peacekeeping operations in Africa, for example, have led to greater Chinese security and military presence in countries where China has interests in energy and precious minerals.²⁸ China's evolving economic and security interests will potentially drive it to further prioritize security partnership-building and access with developing countries to help integrate them into Chinese-led trade networks. Many of these states, such as countries in Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia, face security threats, including domestic instability or threats from neighboring countries, and could benefit from PLA training or presence, though how ready the PLA will be to respond to potential host-country requests for military support is a challenge China will likely face in the future.²⁹ As competition continues, the PLA could use military diplomacy to build security capabilities in BRI countries sympathetic to China, which could potentially extend the range and geographic reach of China's military capabilities, as well as institutionalize and normalize Chinese military access overseas.³⁰ This is not to say that all BRI countries will agree to partner with China; certainly many countries simply would like the economic benefits promoted by BRI. However, China may seek to prioritize military diplomacy efforts in geographic areas of priority with countries near critical economic interests or that could provide access to key waterways located in the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Middle East.

China Uses Military Diplomacy to Support PLA Modernization and Overseas Missions

Military diplomacy also supports the PLA's development of expeditionary capabilities and ability to conduct overseas missions.³¹ Specifically, it enables the PLA's warfighting capabilities through expanding security partnerships and increased opportunities to build operational

²⁷ Evan Ellis, "Chinese Military and Police Engagement in Latin America," in Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen, eds., *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA: 2020 PLA Conference Papers*, U.S. Army War College Press, July 2022; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments of the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, August 2020, p. 63.

²⁸ Joel Wuthnow, "PLA Operational Lessons from UN Peacekeeping," in Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, National Defense University Press, 2021.

²⁹ Garafola et al., 2022, p. 14.

³⁰ Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, p. 157.

³¹ Authoritative Chinese texts describe the PLA's overseas missions as defending Chinese personnel living overseas and supporting the security interests of foreign governments that host Chinese companies, securing resources and sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and deepening military exchanges to support China's foreign policy priorities (Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], National Defense University Press [国防大学出版社], 2015).

experience by deploying abroad for nontraditional security operations, such as peacekeeping operations and engagements with foreign militaries for joint exercises, training, and technology cooperation. A recent Chinese article highlights the ways in which military diplomacy contributes to the PLA's warfighting mission, noting that it prepares the PLA for warfighting by starting with "pragmatic cooperation" on nontraditional security threats that can then be expanded to cooperation on joint training and greater access to knowledge of foreign military technologies and to military management and combat methods. The article highlights that the PLA's approach to military diplomacy has served to establish overseas security partnerships, but it also has assisted the PLA in operational learning through building partnerships that can lead to greater access and cooperation in operational and technological areas.³²

The PLA's counterpiracy missions are an example of the military using this building block approach to develop a specific expeditionary capability—in this case SLOC protection—and gain knowledge from foreign navies. For example, engagements and exercises between the PLA, European, and NATO forces contributed to the PLA's operational learning for counterpiracy and SLOC protection, including practicing such operational capabilities as at-sea refueling and crew transfers, joint piracy boarding operations, medical assistance and evacuation, and small-arms and helicopter exercises.³³ The PLA also learned from interactions with U.S. naval forces, including from shipboard exchanges and joint bilateral counterpiracy exercises.³⁴ The counterpiracy operations further facilitated ties with countries in Africa and the Middle East, which eventually led to the establishment of China's naval base in Djibouti, where China has completed construction of a deep-water port and is increasing the number of troops stationed at the base.³⁵

Military diplomacy could also potentially aid China in gaining access to military or dual-use technology. Chinese writings on military diplomacy note that one of the goals should be to "carry out bilateral military equipment technology exchanges ... and continuously improve China's advanced weapons and equipment research and development capabilities."³⁶ The most obvious example of China's military-to-military relations leading to PLA acquisition of military technology and platforms is with Russia, although the China-Russia relationship is unique in that Russia is one of China's closest partners and the two sides have developed a military partnership over many decades.³⁷ However, PLA professional military exchanges and collaboration with European militaries and research institutes have also been part of a broader Chinese effort to

³² Deng, 2022.

³³ Ellis, 2022, p. 8.

³⁴ U.S. Central Command, "U.S. and China Team Up for Counter-Piracy Exercise," press release, September 19, 2012; Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, "China's Blue Soft Power," Vol. 68, No. 1, *Naval War College Review*, 2015, p. 9.

³⁵ Isaac Kardon, "China's Overseas Bases, Places, and Far Seas Logistics," in Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, and Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, National Defense University, 2021.

³⁶ Deng, 2022.

³⁷ Paul N. Schwartz, "The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers to China," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 21, 2021.

obtain dual-use technology from European companies.³⁸The PLA has also covertly pursued scientific collaboration and technology acquisition with overseas research institutes and companies.³⁹

China's military diplomacy has supported other countries in gaining access to technologies to improve their military capabilities. China has long supplied Pakistan with military platforms and technologies, including tanks, frigates, fighter jets, drones, and anti-drone systems, which have the potential to be used in a conflict with India.⁴⁰ China's growing military partnership with Iran, which has included more frequent naval exercises (some of which included Russia), and joint training and education exchanges have led to the possibility of China exporting arms and military technologies to Iran.⁴¹ China's supply of military platforms and arms to Iran, should it occur, has the potential to contribute to regional instability in the Middle East. Lastly, China's external engagements, particularly those that lead to an increased PLA or Chinese People's Armed Police presence in a country or area, support the collection of intelligence on foreign militaries. China's base in Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy operations, for example, provide opportunities for the PLA to collect intelligence on U.S. facilities and operations in Djibouti and the surrounding area, as well as those of our allies. However, expanding Chinese overseas activities and presence also opens Chinese forces to greater counterintelligence risks.⁴²

Implications and Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

China's overseas military diplomacy is playing a greater role in supporting the country's foreign policy objectives and interests abroad, expanding its international influence, and building overseas military capabilities. However, despite efforts to use military diplomacy to support these goals, China and the PLA have confronted several challenges.

First, the PLA's foreign military engagements have not necessarily led to improved overseas relations and ability to achieve China's strategic goals. For example, following the Solomon Islands security pact, China brought a set of multilateral security and development proposals to the Pacific Island states, which they turned down.⁴³ Second, while the PLA's military diplomacy with BRI countries and nontraditional security engagements have allowed it to expand its military footprint, in many cases these deployments are small and are difficult to expand barring significantly more investment and a more robust system of partners and allies similar to that of the United States or other world militaries. On a related point, not all BRI countries have the

³⁸ Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Meia Nouwens, "Sino-European Military Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century: From Friends to 'Frenemies?'" in Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen, eds., *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA: 2020 PLA Conference Papers*, U.S. Army War College Press, July 2022, p. 19.

³⁹ Alex Joske, "Picking Flowers, Making Honey," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 30, 2018.

⁴⁰ Li Xuanzun, "China Displays Advanced Weapons, Equipment at Pakistani Defense Expo," *Global Times*, November 16, 2022.

⁴¹ "China, Iran, Boost Military Cooperation Amid Tensions with U.S.," Bloomberg News, April 27, 2022; "Iran, China and Russia Hold Naval Drills in North Indian Ocean," 2022.

⁴² Garafola et al., 2022, p. 76.

⁴³ Grossman, 2022, p. 1.

infrastructure or political will to host PLA presence or capabilities. While not an overseas example, China's extensive BRI efforts combined with military diplomacy with Vietnam have not led to significant expansion of security ties.⁴⁴ Third, increased PLA diplomacy and foreign engagements, particularly with potentially unstable countries with security concerns, could tax the PLA's ability to maintain overseas operations. With the PLA's still limited expeditionary capabilities, it is unclear whether the PLA would be ready for larger and longer deployments, or what capabilities it would agree to provide, should a security partner request Chinese military assistance. This could particularly be the case if China's economy significantly slows and requires the Chinese leadership to prioritize Indo-Pacific regional military operations over devoting resources to grow the PLA's presence abroad. Fourth, the success of the PLA's military diplomacy is somewhat beholden to China's overall approach to its foreign policy and how countries view that approach. A China that is perceived as coercive or an untrustworthy partner could hamper PLA efforts to build relations and gain access in key locations. We have witnessed China's reputation as an economic partner become somewhat degraded, for example, by the substantial amount of bad debt that BRI partners have incurred from Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly in developing countries where China has focused military diplomacy efforts on building security partnerships and gaining military access.⁴⁵ Fifth, many of China's military engagements are conducted for political value and therefore provide limited benefits for foreign militaries in developing new capabilities or building interoperability, for example.⁴⁶

However, China's overseas military engagements do have the potential to challenge U.S. interests in several areas. As this testimony articulates, Chinese leaders are increasingly using military diplomacy as an element of China's foreign policy. As the PLA's capabilities to conduct foreign engagements expand, they are likely to be a supporting piece of Chinese foreign policy initiatives that seek to undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships. Expanded PLA engagements and presence overseas creates more opportunities for intelligence collection, particularly in areas where PLA and U.S. forces operate in proximity or where Chinese forces can observe U.S., partner, and ally activities through increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities should more countries be willing to host such capabilities on China's behalf. Military diplomacy will also undergird China's efforts to establish more overseas bases, which could then provide a platform for extended PLA operational reach in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East, for example, depending on where China chooses to establish additional bases and what capabilities the host country agrees to house on its soil.⁴⁷

Beyond the issue of access, China's military diplomacy activities could augment its efforts to build a wider range of partners with more military capability that could challenge U.S. interests

⁴⁴ Garafola et al., 2022, pp. 4, 23–24.

⁴⁵ For a comprehensive overview of China's BRI debt and lending, see Ammar A. Malik, Bradley Parks, Brooke Russell, Joyce Jiahui Lin, Katherine Walsh, Kyra Solomon, Sheng Zhang, Thai-Binh Elston, and Seth Goodman, *Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a New Global Dataset of 13,427 Chinese Development Projects*, AidData at William & Mary, September 29, 2021.

⁴⁶ Saunders and Ha, 2022.

⁴⁷ For a discussion on locations that the PLA might consider for overseas bases, see Garafola et al., 2022.

through arms sales, technology transfer, and military training. China's provision of arms sales and military training to Pakistan, for example, could contribute to regional instability and conflict with India, and Chinese arms sales to countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America are increasing.⁴⁸

Given China's approach to overseas military diplomacy and the potential challenges to U.S. interests, U.S. policymakers might consider the following:

- **Capitalize on the United States' robust alliance and partnership network to limit China's access.** As this testimony highlights, China is still building a network of security partners focused on gaining access to economically vital and strategic locations, and in some cases, its reputation has diminished with countries that have previously supported China. The United States should capitalize on its extensive network of allies and partners to advance security cooperation with partners in areas of U.S. interest to limit their willingness to allow China to gain access to key ports and other infrastructure. This could include more security cooperation with states in the Pacific Islands, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean region.
- **Work with U.S. allies and partners to mitigate intelligence risks from Chinese military diplomacy activities.** Given the potential for China to gather intelligence as its foreign engagements increase, the United States could assist allies and partners in mitigating intelligence collection risks by leading efforts to bolster counterintelligence and information security capabilities, as well as support allies and partners in gaining a comprehensive picture of Chinese foreign military engagements and activities in their area or region.
- **Increase awareness on China's overseas military diplomacy, how it supports CCP objectives, and the implications for U.S., ally, and partner interests.** The greater emphasis placed on military diplomacy by the Chinese leadership and the evolving ways in which the PLA's overseas engagements are supporting broader CCP goals provide an opportunity for the U.S. government, in particular the Department of Defense and Congress, to increase awareness of China's actions and the ways in which they can affect U.S., ally, and partner interests. For example, the United States could consider conducting frank discussions with its allies and partners about limiting opportunities for the PLA to use military diplomacy, including professional military education exchanges, to increase operational capabilities and technical knowledge.
- **Elevate the public profile of U.S. military engagements.** Although one could debate whether China's efforts to use military diplomacy to shape international perceptions have been successful, the United States should ensure that its own engagements are visible to allies and partners, as well as to China, and that the benefits of those engagements are clearly articulated. This will reinforce U.S. military alliances and security relationships overseas and will also signal to China that the United States is focused on maintaining and growing its own network of allies and partners.
- **Consider supporting additional research on China's military diplomacy.** Because China's military diplomacy is likely to remain a feature of China's foreign policy

⁴⁸ Courtney Weinbaum, John V. Parachini, Melissa Shostak, Chandler Sachs, Tristan Finazzo, Katheryn Giglio, *China's Weapons Exports and Private Security Contractors*, RAND Corporation, TL-A2045-1, 2022.

activities related to U.S.-China competition, the subject warrants more research. Topics could include examining how military diplomacy efforts to expand security relationships are tied to the BRI, as well as China's other efforts to expand influence, such as the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative, and assessing future trends and assumptions for how the PLA might employ military diplomacy in the context of U.S.-China competition.