

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Hearing on “China’s Military Diplomacy and Overseas Security Activities”

Panel II: Military Diplomacy for Improving Capabilities and Access

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Co-Chairs Bartholomew and Schriver, distinguished Commissioners and staff, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today’s hearing on China’s military diplomacy and overseas security activities. It is an honor to be here alongside esteemed experts on this panel. My testimony today will cover the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) overseas military exercises and port calls with foreign counterparts and their strategic and operational objectives. I will analyze specific case studies where the PLA conducts such engagements with the United States and with U.S. partners and allies. The analysis is based on an open-source National Defense University (NDU) database that tracks Chinese military diplomatic engagements to assess China’s senior-level meetings, port calls, and military exercises with foreign militaries from 2002-2021.²

The PLA defines military diplomacy as “external relationships pertaining to military and related affairs between countries and groups of countries, including military personnel exchange, military negotiations, arms control negotiations, military aid, military intelligence cooperation, military technology cooperation, international peacekeeping, military alliance activities, etc.”³ We can classify the reasons why the PLA and its foreign partners choose to engage in military diplomacy into three main dimensions: 1) to send political signals, 2) to gain experience and train in combat skills, and 3) to engage in a spectrum of common, non-traditional military operations.

The purpose of PLA military diplomacy is to project the narrative that the PLA is a cooperative and peaceful force, to support China’s foreign policy goals and help shape the global strategic environment, and to support operational goals including PLA modernization and collecting intelligence on foreign militaries. Through analyzing trends and country case studies, we can see that PLA military exercises largely play a symbolic role in demonstrating friendly political

¹All opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied in this testimony are those of the author and do not represent the views of the U.S. Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government. The author is solely responsible for all errors.

² Parts of the analysis draw upon 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, VA, November 18-19, 2022.

³ All-Military Military Affairs Management Committee [全军军事管理委员会], PLA Military Terminology [中国人民解放军军语] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2011), 1063.

relations and are used as a tool to develop bilateral relations with countries. Trends show that China prioritizes managing relations with specific countries and regions via PLA exercises that focus on non-traditional security issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-terrorism, and other non-combat relevant skills. Unlike U.S. military exercises, PLA exercises focus less on interoperability and building partner capacity and instead emphasize cooperative efforts and political signaling. PLA exercises with Russia, Pakistan, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are exceptions to this.

As the PLA's engagement with foreign countries poses security challenges to the United States, there are actions the United States can take to mitigate these risks. The following are recommendations for Congress on how the United States could respond to PLA military diplomacy:

- The United States should not discourage its allies and partners in engaging in military diplomatic activities with the PLA as a part of their broader China foreign policy, as it could cause political backlash and push our allies and partners into closer alignment with China
- The United States should insist that its allies and partners not teach the PLA any military tactics, techniques, and procedures that they have learned from the United States and to be cautious when engaging the PLA in combat exercises
- U.S. policy should focus on limiting the PLA's ability to use military exercises to improve its operational capabilities or to build strategic relationships that give it access to ports

NAVAL PORT CALLS

Port calls are one type of Chinese military diplomacy, primarily carried out by the Navy. They are generally peaceful and cooperative in nature and have included Chinese naval personnel of all ranks. Analysis of port call data reveals that functional port calls indicate China's relationship with a country is good enough that the country would allow a PLA Navy (PLAN) ship to refuel and replenish. There are a few reasons China continues this form of military diplomacy – first, to show the world that its military promotes peace and cooperation, second, to reinforce its influence in areas of strategic interest such as the Indian Ocean rim, and finally, to project naval power as the PLAN continues to seek blue-water naval capabilities.

Port calls continue to serve as another symbol of bilateral relations between two countries and are strategic and political in nature as one makes decisions on which ports to visit.⁴ Port calls can have a functional purpose (such as refueling, replenishing, and repair/overhaul activities) and a military-diplomatic purpose, such as friendly visits where an operational stop is not needed.

Although China both sends ships out to do port calls at other countries and allows ships from other countries to dock at ports in China and Hong Kong, the database only captures Chinese

⁴ Timothy R. Heath, "China Maritime Report No. 8: Winning Friends and Influencing People: Naval Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" (2020). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 8. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/8>

ships that do port calls in foreign countries because it is a bigger commitment of resources and data is more readily available. Furthermore, the data differentiates between two types of port calls, PLAN escort task forces (ETF) conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, and non-ETF ships. ETFs usually consist of two warships and a replenishment ship; they conduct replenishment port calls to support their deployments and friendly visits on the way home after a four-month operational deployment.⁵ Non-ETF port calls can involve regular PLAN warships, hospital ships, and training vessels. Most non-ETF port calls are in Asia, but some have been made to South and Central America. Finally of note, the PLA has conducted six port calls with the United States between 2000 and 2015, all of them friendly visits to either Hawaii or San Diego.

Figure 1 shows the PLAN's first global voyage in 2002, where the Qingdao DDG and a Taicang supply ship sailed to visit ten countries over a four-month deployment.⁶ The PLAN did not begin ETF deployments to the Gulf of Aden until late 2008. These deployments generated new requirements for replenishment port calls and new opportunities for friendly port calls along the Indian Ocean rim. The ports most frequently visited by PLAN ETFs are all countries along the Indian Ocean rim, including Oman, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Djibouti—where China's first overseas base is located.⁷ This reveals China's continued strategic interest in the region, which includes supporting China's economic investments, protecting key maritime trade routes, and maintaining influence and access to key ports.

In August 2017, the opening of China's Djibouti base eliminated the need for replenishment port calls elsewhere; PLAN replenishment port calls to Djibouti are not tracked in the database as they do not involve engagement with foreign militaries and are not reported by the PLA. From 2017 forward, ETF port calls were all friendly visits for diplomatic reasons after the task force completed its deployment. PLAN ETD-33 conducted port calls in the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, and Thailand in the first few months of 2020. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented any PLAN port calls other than replenishment port calls in Djibouti to support ETF anti-piracy operations.⁸

MILITARY EXERCISES

Military exercises are one type of Chinese military diplomacy that involve exercises with foreign militaries and are carried out by either the Army, Navy, Air Force, People's Armed Police, or multiple services (which the PLA calls Joint). The NDU database distinguishes between six

⁵ For full analysis, see Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

⁶ Kenneth Allen, "Trends in People's Liberation Army International Initiatives Under Hu Jintao," in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2014), 447.

⁷ Isaac B. Kardon, Wendy Leutert; Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports. *International Security* 2022; 46 (4): 9–47. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433

⁸ Of note, replenishment visits in the COVID period involve almost no interactions with host country nationals. According to PLA media, supplies are shipped from China via a COSCO ship and are transferred to the PLAN replenishment ship via forklift with minimal human interaction.

types of military exercise functions; combat, combat-support, anti-terrorism, anti-piracy, military competitions, and military operations other than war (MOOTW).⁹

The PLA seeks to use military exercises with foreign militaries to “learn from the advanced technology, operational methods, and management experience of foreign armies, focusing on the fundamental goal of seeking victory for war.”¹⁰ This objective is best achieved by combat and combat support exercises with advanced militaries and with militaries with extensive combat experience.¹¹ The data shows that starting in 2010, the PLA began to increase bilateral military exercises with foreign militaries and subsequently increased participation in multilateral exercises starting in 2014. This reflects a few factors—first, the PLA has grown more confident in its personnel and equipment to engage in more complex exercises with foreign militaries without risking failure or embarrassment. Second, military exercises allow the PLA to showcase its capabilities to the rest of the world and demonstrate that it is a formidable global military power.¹² This is particularly true of multilateral exercises which have more participants and are better vehicles for demonstrating PLA capabilities.

Moreover, the data reveals that the majority of PLA exercises focus on MOOTW (45%), anti-terrorism (25%), or anti-piracy (6%). This could reflect the fact that the PLA may be less capable of conducting combat exercises, making foreign partners less willing to engage in combat exercises. It could also mean that these are activities the PLA prefers to engage in to help demonstrate its willingness to shoulder global security responsibilities. MOOTW exercises focus on non-traditional security issues, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), evacuations, and peacekeeping missions, all which help project the image of the PLA as a reliable partner and a military with global responsibilities. Along with anti-piracy and anti-terrorism, which also focus on non-state threats, approximately 80% of all PLA military exercises with foreign militaries focus on non-traditional security issues rather than developing skills that are directly relevant to combat, as displayed in Figure 2. In fact, the data shows that only 16% of all PLA military exercises are combat exercises.

Finally, it is important to note that the PLA is willing to use a strategy of “pragmatic cooperation” that begins with high-level visits, dialogue, and non-traditional security exercises with the goal of eventually developing military relations to include cooperation on military technology and joint exercises and training more directly related to combat skills.¹³

U.S. ALLIES AND PARTNERS

⁹ See Appendix B for detailed definitions of military exercise functions.

¹⁰ Deng Bibo [邓碧波], “Major Achievements and Basic Experience in China’s Military Diplomacy in the New Era” [新时代中国军事外交的重大成就及基本经验], *China Military Science* [国军科学] 182 (February 2022), 54-63.

¹¹ Dr. Phillip Saunders discussion with PLA senior officer, 2015.

¹² Increased PLA participation in exercises with foreign militaries begins in 2010, the year that several analysts have identified as a turning point that marks a selective but significant increase in PLA transparency about military capabilities which is likely intended to shape the regional security environment. See Isaac Kardon, “China’s Emerging Debate on Military Transparency,” *China Brief* 10, Issue 18 (September 10, 2010).

¹³ Deng, “Major Achievements and Basic Experience in China’s Military Diplomacy in the New Era.”

As military exercises play a symbolic role in demonstrating friendly political relations, we can see the PLA utilizing exercises as a means of managing bilateral relationships with other countries, including U.S. allies and partners. The PLA interacts with different foreign partners in different ways, signifying differing levels of cooperation, trust, expediency, and effort between the PLA and specific foreign military diplomatic partners. A high volume of PLA engagements does not necessarily equate to high levels of PRC or PLA influence. U.S. allies and partners, especially in Southeast Asia, use military diplomacy as a means of managing their broader relationships with China and sometimes engage with the PLA to balance more substantive security cooperation with the United States.

Countries that are more willing to exercise with the PLA—even if they have territorial disputes or suspicions about China’s intentions—further exemplifies the political significance of military exercises. PLA exercises with South China Sea claimants like Vietnam and Malaysia, as well as with U.S. security allies like the Philippines and South Korea, all serve as interesting data points suggesting even countries that have significant security tensions or territorial disputes with China were willing to engage with the PLA. Most of these exercises have very limited combat or combat-support content but hold significant political symbolism.

Another example that demonstrates political symbolism is the PLA’s participation in multilateral exercises. The PLA began participating in multilateral exercises in 2003, but the volume increased significantly from 2014 onward, including Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. Though the military content of PLA participation in exercises like RIMPAC was carefully limited, the invitation served as a positive signal from the United States that China could use to try to build trust with other countries. The converse of this is also true – the U.S. decision to disinvite China from RIMPAC in 2018 due to its “continued militarization” of the South China Sea was viewed as a political rebuke.¹⁴

The data shows a significant uptick since 2013 in the number of bilateral military exercises China participated in, as well as in the diversity of countries with which it did so. This next section will take a closer look at several case study countries involving U.S. allies, including Australia, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, as well as other partners in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and Vietnam.

AUSTRALIA

Figure 3 displays Australia’s military engagements with China from 2002 to 2021.¹⁵ As part of the U.S. rebalance to Asia, the United States has increased security cooperation with Australia, including rotational deployments of U.S. Marines and the trilateral AUKUS security pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced in September 2021.¹⁶ Australia has sought to balance increased security cooperation with Washington with increased military engagement with China, its largest trading partner.

¹⁴ Megan Eckstein, “China Disinvited from Participating in 2018 RIMPAC Exercise,” *USNI News*, May 23, 2018, available at <<https://news.usni.org/2018/05/23/china-disinvited-participating-2018-rimpac-exercise>>.

¹⁵ There were no military engagements between China and Australia from 2020 to 2021 due to COVID-19.

¹⁶ The White House, “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” September 15, 2021, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus/>>

Australia conducted its first military exercise with China, a naval search and rescue exercise, in 2004. However, the volume of military engagement between China and Australia began to pick up in 2012, the year after President Obama formally announced the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Around that same time, Sino-Australia diplomatic relations also began to strengthen. In 2013, the two countries agreed to establish a prime-ministerial level dialogue, which makes Australia one of the few countries to have a dialogue at this level with China. This improved bilateral relationship is mirrored in the increasing numbers of military engagements and exercises from 2014-2019.

Australia has sought to use strengthened military relations to ease Chinese concerns about its close security ties with the United States. Most of the military exercises between the two countries involve MOOTW, with a focus on survival skills, navigation drills, and friendly team-building exercises. Such examples include the Pandaroo Exercise series. In 2014, Australia also hosted the first trilateral Australia-U.S.-China Kowari survival exercise, which illustrated the country's role as a bridge between the United States and China. This annual exercise encourages military personnel from the three nations to work together in the Australian bush to promote friendship and cooperation to enhance regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Training activities include hiking, sea kayaking, mountaineering, and canyoning.¹⁷

Australia's actions demonstrate how U.S. allies and partners in the region can use military diplomacy to help manage their economic dependence on China and offset Chinese concerns about their security cooperation with the United States. This balancing act was reasonably successful until 2020, when a combination of Australian concerns about Chinese efforts to influence its elections, Australian calls for a credible international investigation of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the AUKUS security pact caused a crisis in bilateral relations. Beijing's response focused heavily on economic measures to discriminate against Australian imports, but the PLA also stopped its diplomatic engagements with the Australian military.

SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN

South Korea is another good case study of how bilateral relations with China affect military diplomacy. As depicted in Figure 4, most engagements between South Korea and China consist of military senior-level meetings, another type of engagement the NDU database tracks. South Korea and China established diplomatic relations in 1992 and maintained consistent military engagement until 2010. The break was due to an incident involving the sinking of the Cheonan, a Pohang-class corvette from South Korea in March 2010. An official investigation carried out by a team of international experts concluded the warship was sunk by a North Korean torpedo, which North Korea denied. China dismissed the evidence as not credible. Later in November 2010, tensions between North and South Korea flared into conflict, resulting in the bombardment of Yeonpyeong, killing four South Koreans and injuring 19 others. Chinese illegal fishing and the murder of a South Korean coast guard member in 2011, in addition to disputes over Socotra Rock (Jeodo) in 2012, further chilled relations between the two countries.

¹⁷ "Exercise Kowari Starts in North Queensland," Australian Department of Defence, August 28, 2019, available at <<https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2019-08-28/exercise-kowari-starts-north-queensland>>

Military engagements did not pick up again until 2013, when the PLAN conducted a port call to South Korea. In 2015, South Korea and China conducted its first and only military exercise, an anti-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden. Engagement remained steady for the next few years, indicating that bilateral relations between China and South Korea were flourishing, until July 2016 when South Korea allowed the United States to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in its territory. Beijing feared THAAD's powerful radar could penetrate into Chinese territory and potentially allow U.S. ballistic missile defenses to track and target Chinese inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). China retaliated by targeting South Korea's entertainment, tourism, and shopping industries—for example, by sanctioning major South Korean retailer Lotte. Military diplomacy was another means for China to express its displeasure, as military engagements were cut to the minimum. Only in 2019 did activity pick up again.

Even though Northeast Asia holds strategic importance to China, the PLA still has limited interactions with this region due to historical strains in relations with Japan, as shown in Figure 5, and South Korea's reluctance to engage in military exercises with the PLA. The Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) have never conducted a military exercise with China, and since 2012, Japan has had very limited military diplomatic engagements with the PLA.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

This section analyzes PLA engagements in Southeast Asia, including with select ASEAN member states: Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These countries all engage in security cooperation with the United States, yet also rely heavily on China for trade and investment. The Philippines maintains low but consistent military diplomatic engagement with China, primarily consisting of senior-level visits and a few port calls. The PLA's engagement with the Philippines also fluctuates based on the political relationship, and there was reduced engagement from 2011 to 2015 as the territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands flared up and the Philippines pursued its case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague from 2013-2016.¹⁸ Consequently, the Philippines and China had no military engagements in 2012 and from 2014-2015. Engagements resumed when Rodrigo Duterte was elected president in 2016 and sought to reorient the Philippines foreign policy away from the United States and closer toward China and Russia. In 2020, the Philippines conducted its first military exercise with the PLA, a Coast Guard exercise focused on search and rescue and combating fire at sea in the South China Sea. The two Coast Guards were given a scenario of a vessel catching fire in its cargo and needed assistance to save victims.¹⁹

Despite territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands, Malaysia conducted its first military exercise with the PLA in 2015—Peace and Friendship. This was the first-ever joint live-troop exercise,

¹⁸ See Euan Graham, "The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?" Council on Foreign Relations, August 18, 2016, available at <<https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/hague-tribunals-south-china-sea-ruling-empty-provocation-or-slow-burning-influence>>.

¹⁹ "Chinese, Philippine Coast Guards hold joint exercise to achieve interoperability at sea," January 16, 2020, available at <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-01/16/content_9718789.htm>

focused on non-war operations including joint maritime escorts, combined search and rescue of hijacked ships and HA/DR.²⁰ Malaysia and China have continued regular exercises, mostly focused on MOOTW and anti-terrorism themes. Other engagements also continued through this period, possibly due to Malaysia taking a lower key approach to its territorial dispute with China. It is also likely that new Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects in Malaysia starting in 2015 and 2016 have contributed to continuing military diplomatic engagement between the two countries.²¹

Vietnam is another country that has maintained relatively consistent engagement with China, including via PLAN port calls, despite having tensions over competing claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands.²² Vietnam conducted its first military exercise with the PLA in 2017 and has conducted three exercises with the PLA to date. All military exercises have focused on anti-terrorism and military medical cooperation. However, similar to the Philippines, engagement noticeably declined from 2012 to 2015, as the dispute over the Spratly Islands heated up.

The three aforementioned case studies serve as examples of Southeast Asian nations that have started bilateral military exercises with China despite territorial disputes. Malaysian, Vietnamese, and Philippine economies all depend on China as a trading partner and source of investment, and China wants to use military diplomacy as a tool to further bilateral relations and increase its influence within Southeast Asia. Both sides want to engage each other; however, the limited scope of military content shows that exercises play a more symbolic role as a measure of goodwill between nations regardless of tensions.

RUSSIA

To understand where the PLA is gaining a lot of combat military experience, we need to consider Russia and its military diplomatic engagements with China. PLA military exercises with U.S. allies and partners remain limited in scope as U.S. allies are more careful in engaging combat or combat-support related activities with the PLA. However, it is still important to recognize that the PLA's overall top military diplomatic partners are Russia and Pakistan. Both countries engage in combat or combat-support related military exercises with the PLA most frequently. These two countries both have combat experience, and the PLA tries to leverage bilateral ties with Russia and Pakistan to learn more military combat skills. 34% of the PLA's total combat and combat-support exercises have been with the Russian military, more than any other partner. Between 2005 and 2021, the data shows that Russia and China have engaged in 18 combat exercises, and Pakistan and China have engaged in 9 combat exercises and 2 combat-support exercises.

²⁰ Prashanth Parameswaran, "China, Malaysia to Hold First Ever Joint Live-Troop Exercise," *The Diplomat*, August 31, 2015, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/china-malaysia-to-hold-first-ever-joint-live-troop-exercise/>>

²¹ For example, Forest City was a \$100 billion mixed development project to build a smart city in Malaysia. Huawei, China Construction Steel Structure Corporation, and Bank of China all signed on to develop smart city. See: Point Bello, "The Digital Silk Road Initiative: Wiring Global IT and Telecommunications to Advance Beijing's Global Ambitions," January, 2019, available at <<https://a.storyblok.com/f/58650/x/0c5c298009/pointe-bello-digital-silk-road-2019.pdf>>

²² Vietnam is also one of the few remaining Communist countries, and the two countries maintain close and regular Party relations.

Military exercises between Russia and China began to significantly increase in 2014 onward, as depicted in Figure 6. Some examples of exercises include Joint Sea, which have been held in increasingly sensitive waters such as the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and the East China Sea/Yellow Sea. The most recent Joint Sea exercise was held in December 2022 and consisted of a Russian missile cruiser, destroyer, and two corvettes, and Chinese destroyers and a diesel submarine. Combat related activities included firing exercises and anti-submarine drills and involved Russian and Chinese aircraft as well.²³ Other combat exercises include Vostok 2018, where the PLA deployed over 3,000 troops and practiced live-fire events as well as combat-support logistics activities to move troops, equipment, and supplies.²⁴

The PLA has also been participating in military exercises sponsored by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a multilateral organization founded by China and Russia in 2001. China plays a major role in leading and seeking to institutionalize the SCO as a means of projecting its power and influence into Central Asia without alienating Russia. In recent years, SCO has continued to gain support in Central and South Asia, with India and Pakistan officially joining as full members in 2017. The biggest multilateral military exercise SCO hosts is Peace Mission, which began in 2007 and has been held almost annually since its inception. Peace Mission 2021 was a joint exercise that involved over 4,000 military participants from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. Though the Peace Mission exercise series is branded as anti-terrorism drills, the series is classified as combat military exercises in the NDU database due to combat elements such forces conducting live-fire drills and using infantry fighting vehicles and assault vehicles against targets. In fact, Russia and China will often conduct “counterterrorism” exercises that include heavy equipment, missile launches, and massive troop numbers, which are likely used to send political messages to the United States and its allies and partners on Sino-Russia strategic cooperation.²⁵

There are two reasons why Chinese and Russian military diplomacy is increasing; first, the PLA wants to learn more combat skills from the Russian military, and second, both countries want to send a strategic message that they have formidable military capabilities and can operate together. However, increasing Sino-Russian military cooperation does not necessarily mean the two countries are allies, but rather that they have a common adversary in the United States and are cooperating in areas of common interest. China and Russia recognize each other as important strategic partners and choose to engage in military diplomacy to multiply their geopolitical influence. This is especially true as the two countries have strengthened their military cooperation since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. China has not condemned Russia over the invasion and has not participated in Western sanctions, while Russia in the meantime has supported China as tensions with the United States over Taiwan has increased. These trends in both foreign policy and military engagements indicate a deepening relationship

²³ Ellen Mitchell, “Russia and China hold joint naval exercises,” *The Hill*, December 22, 2022, available at <<https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3785363-russia-and-china-hold-joint-naval-exercises/>>

²⁴ Dave Johnson, “Vostok 2018: Ten years of Russian strategic exercises and warfare preparation,” *NATO Review*, December 20, 2018, available at <<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2018/12/20/vostok-2018-ten-years-of-russian-strategic-exercises-and-warfare-preparation/index.html>>

²⁵ National Defense University’s Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs is currently finishing a project to evaluate the military significance and political signaling value of PLA exercises with Russia, Pakistan, and the SCO.

and suggest increased cooperation in the future, especially on efforts to limit U.S. freedom of action and influence.

UNITED STATES

Finally, we examine trends and patterns between the United States and China. Figure 7 shows U.S. efforts to increase engagement with the PLA from 2011 to 2015, with a focus on negotiating rules of behavior for safe air and maritime encounters. During this period, the PLA was under orders from Xi Jinping to improve military-to-military relations with the United States.²⁶ The data tracks other academic analysis that shows a souring of U.S.-China relations beginning in 2014 and 2015, which led to a decline in U.S.-China military diplomatic engagements in the subsequent years.²⁷ The majority of military exercises between the U.S. and China consist of MOOTW, including a couple of counter-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden in 2012 and 2013.

The two countries continue to cooperate on providing aid during natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific region with the Joint Disaster Management Exercise series, which began in 2005. The field component of the exercise normally includes a disaster evaluation, search and rescue, first aid, and victim collection and evacuations.²⁸ These types of exercises serve as cooperation and confidence building exercises and are beneficial to the entire Indo-Pacific region in times of disaster and crisis. Moreover, this continuing cooperation shows that the United States and China are committed to working together where their interests align despite tension in the bilateral relationship. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe's meeting in November 2022 further reinforced this notion that the U.S. and China need to responsibly manage competition and maintain open lines of communication together to reduce any future risk.²⁹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The PLA seeks to use military diplomacy to support Chinese strategic objectives, including supporting China's overall foreign policy and shaping the security environment. PLA scholars believe that military diplomacy can be leveraged as a foreign policy tool when it is beneficial to national interests, by cutting off planned military exercises or exchanges or making military

²⁶ Discussion between Dr. Phillip Saunders and a PLA flag officer, 2015.

²⁷ See Thomas F. Lynch III and Phillip C. Saunders, "Contemporary Great Power Geostrategic Dynamics: Relations and Strategies," in Thomas F. Lynch III, ed., *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2020), 45-72 and Phillip C. Saunders, "The Military Factor in U.S.-China Strategic Competition," in Evan S. Medeiros, ed., *Managing Strategic Competition: Rethinking U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming).

²⁸ "U.S., China conduct disaster management exchange," U.S. Army Pacific Public Affairs, November 22, 2013, available at <<https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/575366/us-china-conduct-disaster-management-exchange/>>

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Meeting With People's Republic of China (PRC) Minister of National Defense General Wei Fenghe," November 22, 2022, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3225447/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-meeting-with-peoples-republ/>>

diplomatic activities a bargaining chip that Beijing can wield. The PLA also hopes to use “pragmatic cooperation” to gradually move from cooperation on non-traditional security issues to military technology transfers and combat-oriented exercises with advanced militaries that will help the PLA improve its ability to fight and win wars.

The PLA’s increasing military diplomatic engagements are a sign that China wants to engage with the world, but they do not necessarily translate into increased influence, or indicate that the PLA will achieve its strategic and operational objectives. It is important to keep in mind factors that limit the returns on PLA military diplomacy. First, all military engagements are limited by the willingness and capability of foreign countries to engage with the PLA. We can see this with South Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries, which all conduct military engagements with the PLA but are all extremely limited in scope when it comes to combat exercises. Second, the priority placed on the political value of military engagements means that many PLA visits or exercises do not build much trust or interoperability with foreign nations. Once again, this is particularly true regarding China’s bilateral military relationships with Southeast Asian countries and countries like Australia.

The PLA is strengthening bilateral relations with some developing countries through its efforts to help build their military capacity, especially in MOOTW areas. Other countries such as Australia, Singapore, and Vietnam use military diplomacy as a means of maintaining communications channels with the PLA and balancing their more substantive security cooperation with the United States. Individual case studies of countries and analysis of China’s participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises show that most PLA exercises focus heavily on less-sensitive non-traditional security issues; PLA exercises with Russia, Pakistan, and the SCO are an exception to this general rule. Increasingly assertive PLA behavior is also likely to undercut the political effectiveness of its efforts to use military diplomacy to assure countries of its peaceful intentions.

Finally, it is not practical to assume that U.S. allies and partners will cease engagement with China due to their own self-interests. U.S. policymakers should not seek to dissuade allies and partners from engaging with the PLA as a part of their broader China policy. If U.S. policy seeks to enforce a no-engagement policy, it poses risk of political backlash by U.S. allies and partners. This could potentially push our allies and partners into closer alignment with China. Instead, U.S. policy should focus on limiting the PLA’s ability to use military diplomacy to improve its operational capabilities or build strategic relationships that give it access to overseas ports and bases.

Moreover, the United States should also insist that allies and partners be careful to not teach PLA tactics, techniques, and procedures that they have learned from the United States and take caution when conducting combat exercises with PLA counterparts. In fact, the United States should take extra effort to remind its allies and partners that under the U.S. Department of State’s Directorate of Defense Trade Controls (DDTC), any defense articles that are in any way developed or produced from U.S.-origin defense services are subject to U.S. export controls, even when completely overseas, and that the provision of such technical data to anyone in China

is strictly prohibited.³⁰ In addition, DDTTC should canvass key U.S. allies to ensure their domestic export control systems adequately enforce their arms embargoes and other controls against China to ensure that they are effectively understood and enforced.

While it is impossible to completely mitigate all security risks, there are several things Washington can do. First, the United States can include discussions about managing military activities involving China in its bilateral and multilateral security dialogues and alliance consultations. Second, in some cases the United States might take part in multilateral exercises with its allies and partners and the PLA. A good example of this is the trilateral Kowari Exercises with Australia and China – U.S. participation gives the U.S. the capability to shape the manner and the degree of the activities and knowledge featured in these exercises. This would also depend on the PLA’s willingness to engage in multilateral exercises with the United States, expressing a positive willingness to engage and undercutting Chinese talking points that claim the U.S. military is a destabilizing factor in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, the United States can provide its allies and partners more incentives or alternatives for learning and training military skills with the U.S. military while simultaneously emphasizing other symbolic activities such as senior military visits they can engage in with the PLA to showcase political signaling and diplomacy. Other high-level activities can achieve the same effect of managing the bilateral relationship with China and demonstrate communication and cooperation without the risk of transferring military skills or intelligence.

Fourth, the United States can put effort into increasing awareness among allies and partners on the risks associated with engaging with PLA, including but not limited to PLA collecting intelligence on foreign militaries or practicing combat maneuvers. For instance, we see that the PLA sometimes masquerades combat exercises as “anti-terrorism” with partners. In these cases, it’s important that the United States help clarify that distinction and raise awareness on what security risks these types of activities pose.

Many U.S. allies and partners in and beyond the Indo-Pacific region are concerned about balancing their economic relations with China and their security relations with the United States. Since the PLA uses military exercises and port calls as political indicators of its bilateral relationships, the United States should continue to allow countries like Australia to use symbolic military engagements with the PLA to balance their substantive security cooperation with the United States. Consequently, the United States should strive to continue building partner capacity and stress interoperability with allies and partners. These are areas where the United States has a substantial comparative advantage over the PLA and should be emphasized as Washington considers how to best leverage its own military diplomacy as an asset in the strategic competition with China.

³⁰ Defense services is defined as, “Military training of foreign units and forces, regular and irregular, including formal or informal instruction of foreign persons in the United States or abroad or by correspondence courses, technical, educational, or information publications and media of all kinds, training aid, orientation, training exercise, and military advice.” See: [58 FR 39305](#), July 22, 1993, as amended at [76 FR 28177](#), May 16, 2011; [81 FR 35616](#), June 3, 2016; [81 FR 54736](#), Aug. 17, 2016] available at <[<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-22/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-124/section-124.8#p-124.8\(a\)\(5\)>](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-22/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-124/section-124.8#p-124.8(a)(5))>

APPENDIX A: FIGURES

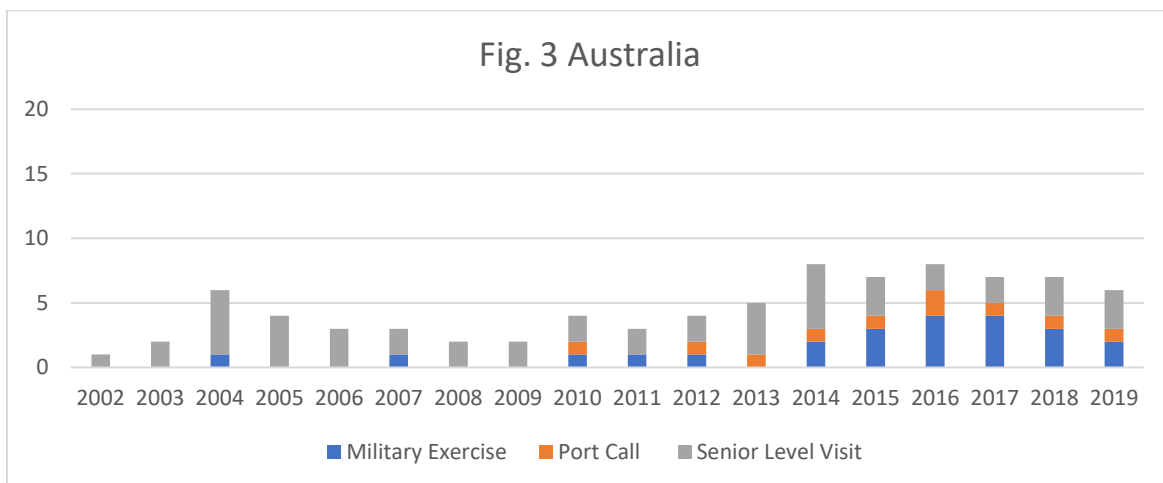
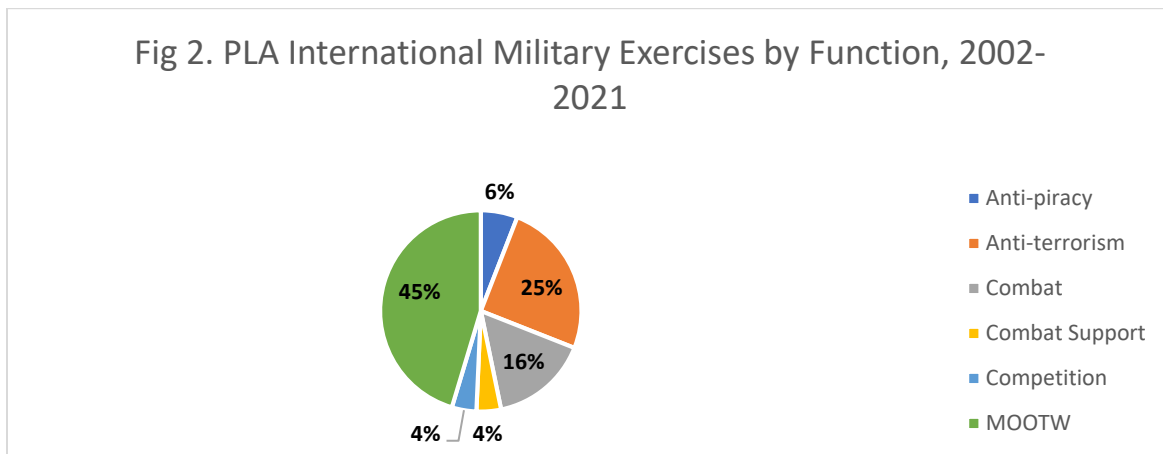
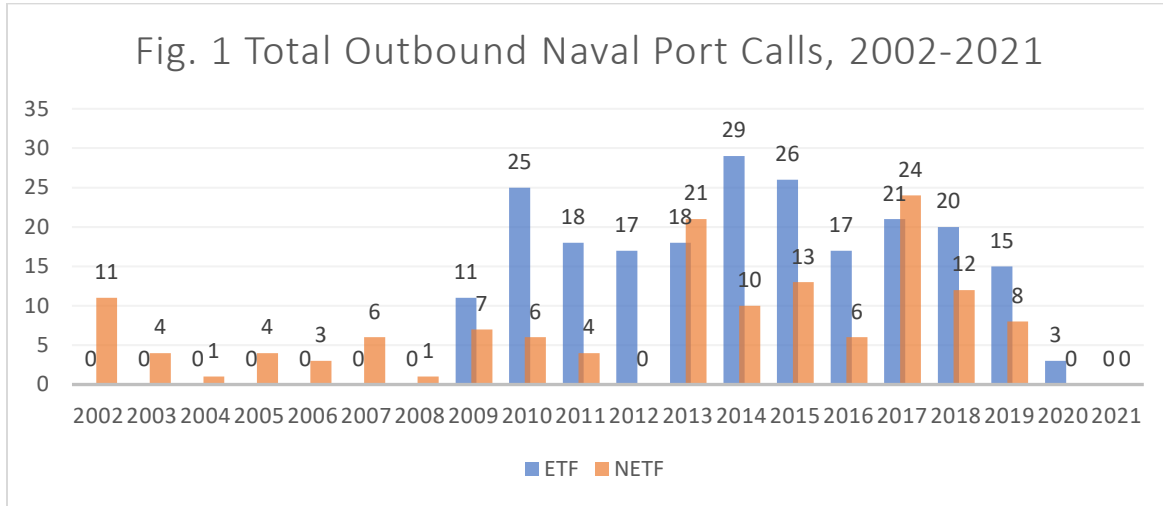


Fig. 4 South Korea



Figure 5: Japan

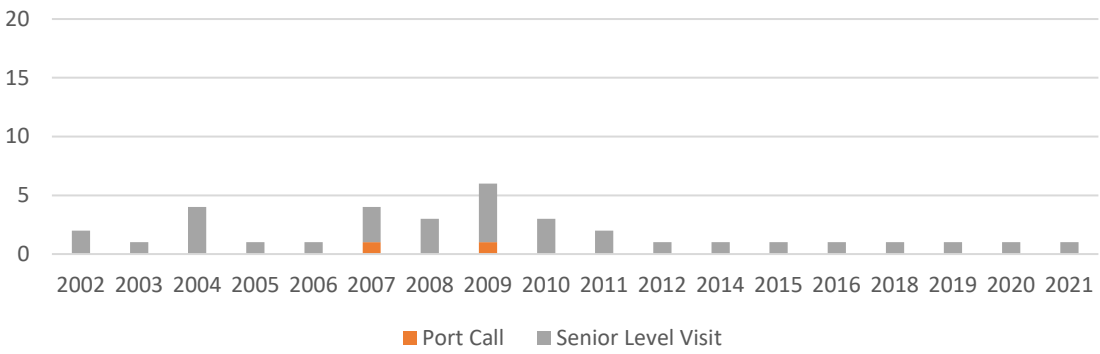


Fig. 6 Russia

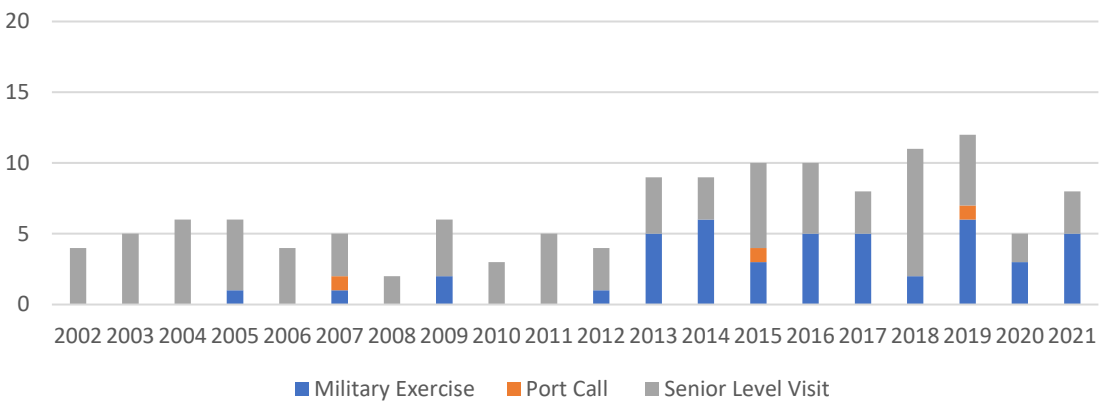
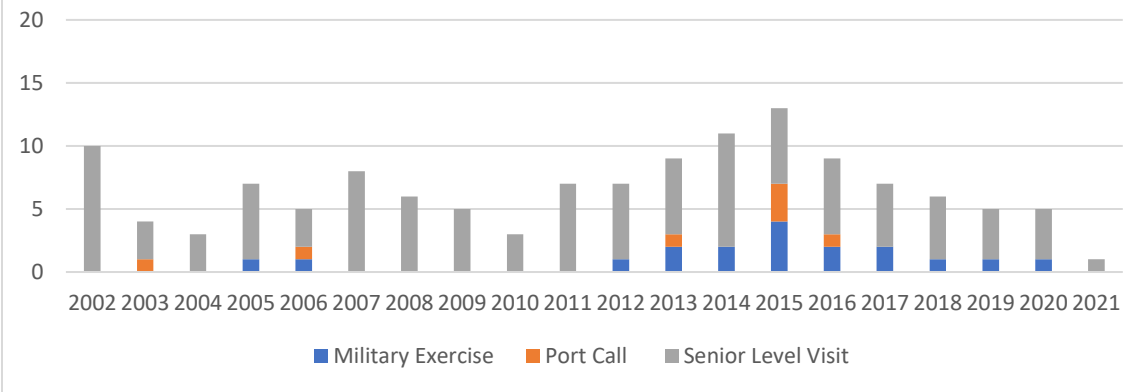


Fig. 7: United States



APPENDIX B: MILITARY EXERCISE FUNCTIONS

Military Exercise Function	Definition
Combat	Typically involve standard military units operating doing traditional military tasks against notional adversary militaries. This often includes a live fire component against traditional military targets.
Combat Support	Typically involve logistics, intelligence, minesweeping and explosive ordnance disposal, surveillance or other capabilities that support traditional combat operations against a notional adversary military.
Anti-terrorism	Specifically focus against terrorist or infiltration threats; exercises that involve small-arms firing can still fit in this category. The distinction between combat exercises and anti-terrorism exercises would be classified by the notional targets, which are traditional military and terrorists respectively.
Anti-piracy	Specifically focus against pirates and may include convoy operations, boarding drills, or hostage rescue; exercises that involve small-arms firing can still fit in this category.
Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW)	Include a range of activities that are focused on non-traditional security threats. This may include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR); search and rescue (SAR); peacekeeping; non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO); medical/infectious disease cooperation; and other similar activities. Activities involving basic military skills, such as navigational training, military survival training, and team-building engagements can also be classified as MOOTW exercises.
Military Competitions	Involve formal competitions between militaries to evaluate specific military skills; examples include Russia's Aviadarts air force skills competition. These are typically multilateral events that involve individual teams or platforms performing specific tasks and receiving grades based on speed or accuracy (tanks completing an obstacle course; transports air dropping supplies close to a target, etc.). If a competition involves combat training (e.g. fighter dog-fights or dissimilar aircraft combat training), it would be classified as a combat exercise.