

U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission

Hearing on “China’s Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests”

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Outline

The purpose of this hearing of the USCC is to understand China’s global military ambitions, its power projection capabilities, and what they mean to the United States. As is true for most assessments of China’s future developments, there can be no certainty. However, it is possible to analyze China’s officially stated future military goals and objectives and to assess its current forces and their capability. It is possible to project the unstated but likely or possible future goals and objectives, and in addition to assess the strategic environment in the global regions where future Chinese power projection forces will be brought to bear. Finally, it is important to draw the implications for the United States and recommend actions this country needs to take to safeguard its national interests.

The Party Line

Chinese official statements and publications do not list power projection as an objective or task of the People’s Liberation Army. The closest the latest white paper, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” published in July 2019, comes to the concept of power projection is in the section headed “Protecting China’s Overseas Interests.” It says:

The PLA actively promotes international security and military cooperation and refines relevant mechanisms for protecting China’s overseas interests. *To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks.* The PLA conducts vessel protection operations, maintains the security of strategic SLOCs and carries out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations. [emphasis added]

It is unlikely that the omission of power projection from this official document is for the purpose of disguising a massive secret power projection program in the PLA. Public American and other intelligence reports do not report the development of a joint task force combining amphibious and air assault, precision fires, air defense and logistic support. In addition, Chinese official documents on strategy and force development are directed at internal as well as external audiences, and if it were setting a robust power projection capability as a near-term military objective, the Chinese government needs to tell the PLA and its public.

Chinese Overseas Missions Grow with Chinese Power

However, the absence of current official Chinese discussion of power projection capability is no guarantee that it is not a Chinese ambition and will not appear in the future in official policies and strategies. The recent history of Chinese military development has been steady progress towards ever more difficult and expansive capabilities that can be brought to bear at greater distances from China. Missions are added into official documents as the component capabilities are developed and more ambitious missions become feasible. Admiral Michael McDevitt of the Center for Naval Analyses has documented this progression in numerous articles.

Admiral McDevitt emphasized the significance of the 2004 announcement by the then-chairman of the Central Military Commission Hu Jintao of a new set of “Strategic Missions and Objectives” for the Chinese armed forces:

Chairman Hu call[ed] on all the armed forces to broaden their view of security to account for China’s growing national interests especially its growing global economic footprint, overseas investment and dramatic growth in the number Chinese civilians abroad, particularly in Africa. It [Chinese strategic guidance] also placed an emphasis on the critical importance of imported natural resources, especially oil, to feed the economy. Since the vast majority of those resources came to China by ship, sea lane of communication (SLOC) security, and maritime rights and interests shot to the top of security issues that are of direct relevance to China’s navy.

This was the first official statement directing the PLA to expand its mission set from homeland defense and to build the capability to operate beyond China’s homeland defensive zones. As Admiral McDevitt emphasized,

For the first time, the PLA (and therefore the PLA Navy) was being assigned responsibilities well beyond China and its immediate periphery. This was official recognition that China’s national interests were global and that the PLA’s missions were to be based on those expanding interests, not just geography. It was also an official announcement that Chinese leaders saw China as a global actor.¹

In the years since that 2004 announcement, the PLA building programs, force structure changes, personnel assignments, development of doctrine and exercise program have all built the military capability to carry out these newly assigned missions. In the Xi Jinping era, these ambitions have been confirmed, for example in the 2015 Chinese White Paper that stated:

In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense [the defense of China proper] and open seas protection [SLOC protection, especially in the Indian Ocean] the PLA Navy will gradually shift its *focus* from “offshore waters defense” to the

¹ These two paragraphs are drawn from Michael McDevitt and Fredrick Vellucci, “The Evolution of the People’s Liberation Army Navy: the Twin Missions of Area-Denial and Peacetime Operations,” found in *Sea Power and Asia-Pacific: The Triumph of Neptune*, edited by Geoffrey Till and Patrick C. Bratten, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p.75-92.

combination of “offshore waters defense” with “open seas protection,” and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.

In the years since 2015 China has continued taking the logical steps to develop the capability to carry out these missions.

An overseas power projection capability would be a next logical step in the development of Chinese global military power, and the current Chairman of the Central Military Committee, Xi Jinping, could announce it publicly at any time.

However, the step to developing and deploying a large-scale overseas intervention capability would be a big one for China. There is a prominent section of the 2019 Defense White Paper entitled, “Never Seeking Hegemony, Expansion or Spheres of Influence.” Some of the assertions in this section would ring hollow to Vietnamese, who have been invaded by Chinese divisions and fought battles with Chinese forces for the possession of islands, and to Philippine forces that have been bullied by Chinese warships. Nonetheless, statements like, “Though a country may become strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin,” or “History proves and will continue to prove that China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony” do reflect a set of Chinese beliefs about themselves. China is not on a runaway race to global military hegemony. Its military budgets have been controlled as a percentage of its GDP, its nuclear forces are far smaller than those of the United States or Russia, and it has used diplomacy and its new-found economic power more than it has its military power.

In summary, it is impossible to predict with certainty whether China will take the major step of developing a major overseas combined arms intervention capability similar to that of the United States. It is a next logical step in “building a fortified national defense and a strong military commensurate with the country’s international standing . . .” goals stated in the 2019 White Paper. Should the Chinese economy continue to grow at a healthy pace, the resources will be available to fund it. Chinese leaders have gone to school on American military capabilities and practices for years, and they know what would be necessary for such a capability. It would entail a major change in China’s deeply held beliefs about the defensive nature of its military capabilities, and there would be plenty of unmistakable leading indicators of its adoption as a mission, from official statements through acquisition choices, exercises and doctrine changes.

However, the lack of a high-end major overseas intervention capability as an official military mission should not provide much comfort to the world community, including the United States, about the dangers posed by a globally engaged and aggressive China. Power projection takes place across a range of actions with a range of capabilities, and China already has the units and the experience to conduct most of them.

Power Projection

Power projection is asserting political influence at distance through the use or threat of military force. Carl von Clausewitz’ insight that “war is the continuation of policy by other means,” applies to power projection. Employed by a country, power projection combines the deployment and use of military force, the implicit or explicit employment of diplomacy at the same time, and

it can be carried out by a range of forces from a single frigate making a port visit to a major invasion.

The range of Power Projection Activities

Following is a taxonomy of power projection activities, grouped and listed from the most peaceful and small-scale up to the most aggressive, military and large-scale:

1. Rescue operations, humanitarian response and peace operations: This group of activities is conducted often far from their home bases by military forces, generally acting in multilateral coalitions, and generally authorized by UN or other international organizations. The level of violence associated with these operations is generally low, the most serious being forcible intervention as a part of Chapter VII UN peacemaking operations.
2. Symbolic shows of force, political intervention and coercive threat: This group of activities can range from publicized deployments of relatively small levels of military force, even a single ship, up through operations by major task forces. The political objective of the deployment is to influence the political calculations of another government, or to support or oppose one faction in a country that is politically split, or even fighting a civil war. The deployed military force can be a signaling force, to give more weight to a diplomatic position or initiative, or the deployed forces can actually intervene in another country.
3. Protection of trade: This is a maritime power projection operation involving the escort of commercial shipping against attack by other nations or pirates. It can also involve strikes against the coastal military installations or ports where the threat to commercial shipping is based.
4. Punitive attack and economic/territorial defense and attack: These are the largest and most violent power projection operations. They involve attacks on another country in retaliation for some action, or else major military interventions to overthrow a government and occupy its territory, or else to support or oppose a government or its opposition in a large-scale civil war.

Chinese Power Projection Operations

China has actually conducted virtually all of these types of power projection activities beyond its borders:

1. Rescue operations, humanitarian response and peace operations: China now routinely conducts all these types of military power projection activities. It is quite proud of the non-combatant evacuation operations its Navy conducted in Yemen and in Libya; China contributes the largest number of troops to UN peacekeeping operations of any member of the UN Security Council (The United States sends more troops abroad, but seldom in

UN forces), and Chinese military units often participate in international disaster relief operations.

These types of operations are benign, and expected of major military powers, but they not only demonstrate China's global interests and reach, they develop logistics capabilities to sustain military forces around the world.

2. Symbolic show of force, political intervention and coercive threat:

Chinese naval vessels deploy throughout the world, making port visits in Europe, Africa, South Asia, East Asia and Latin America. While a visit of one or two PLAN vessels to their ports is not a major threat even to small countries, and is always accompanied by emollient statements about China's peaceful intentions and desire for good relations, a visit by a warship carries the implicit message that China can bring military power to bear in the country being visited. It is not the same as a visit by the Beijing Symphony Orchestra.

Chinese submarine deployments into the Indian Ocean have caused special concern among the littoral nations, especially India, because of their stealth and capability against surface ships.

Beyond Taiwan and the South China Sea, China has not deployed military forces to threaten other countries over specific policy disputes. However, the tactics used against Taiwan and other rival claimants in the South China Sea have been very aggressive and could easily be applied at greater distances as China's blue-water capabilities continue to grow.

China has fired missiles near Taiwan to warn it off activities that incurred Chinese displeasure, and with its large and growing arsenal of longer-range weapons, similar shows of "missile diplomacy" can be made throughout South, Southeast and East Asia.

In the East and South China Seas China has threatened the use of military force for coercive purposes, and on several occasions actually used military force to take and defend islands. In 1974 a Chinese naval task force fought off South Vietnamese Navy attacks in the Paracel Islands. China and Vietnam also fought in 1988, this time over the PLAN's occupation of Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands; this battle resulted in the sinking of three Vietnamese ships and the loss of over seventy Vietnamese sailors. China would go on to further expand its position into Mischief Reef in 1995, although this occurred without violence. China has isolated small Philippine military units on Second Thomas Shoal, and prevented Chinese fisherman from entering the lagoon in Scarborough Shoal. In a well-publicized and much criticized series of actions it has expanded seven reefs in the South China Sea, later arming them with missile systems.

As China's blue-water Navy grows and its logistics maritime support structure increases, it will have the capability to conduct similar operations in other regions, especially South Asia.

3. Protection of trade: The protection of sea lines of communication became an official mission for the PLA as early as 2004, and in 2008 China sent its first task force to join the US-led, UN-approved anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. It now has deployed about 30 more of these deployments. They provide an excellent example of how China sets itself a new mission, grows the capabilities for that mission, and uses those new capabilities as a basis for additional more ambitious missions. As Admiral McDevitt has written, “In retrospect it is clear that the leadership of the PLA Navy saw protecting merchant ships in the Gulf of Aden and Northern Arabian Sea as an opportunity. PLA Navy leadership embraced the mission, publicized it widely within China, and over time has acknowledged that it has been a dramatic “accelerant” in the development of the PLA Navy into a genuine open ocean global naval force.”

In 2017 the PLA established its first overseas base, in Djibouti, on the justification of supporting its anti-piracy rotations. Now as acknowledged in the 2019 White Paper quoted above, the base is part of a system to support “far seas forces.”

Protecting shipping from Somali pirates is one thing; protecting it from capable naval forces equipped with submarines and anti-ship missiles is another. China has not had the occasion to defend its merchant ships from serious threat yet, and it has yet to develop the full set of capabilities to do so.

4. Punitive attack and economic/territorial defense and attack: In 1979 China "taught Vietnam a lesson" in a one-month invasion by division-sized forces. The reasons for the military action were complicated. Vietnam and China had clashed over control of Cambodia, maritime claims in the Spratlys, and treatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. Although the tactical results of the incursion were in Vietnam's favor, China served notice that it would exact a price if Vietnam did not take into account Chinese interests in Southeast Asia.

At the highest end of power projection capability is the capability the United States has developed during World War II and maintained and used in the 75 years since from Korea and Vietnam through Afghanistan and Iraq. These operations involved moving and sustaining hundreds of thousands of combat troops thousands of miles, bringing sea- and land-based air power into the theater, and controlling the sea areas around the areas of operation. Global communications, intelligence systems and logistic networks are other key components of the capability.

China is nowhere near developing this scale of power projection capability. It has neither the necessary number of brigade-sized ground forces trained and equipped for deployment and operations at those distances, nor the deployable air power to secure air superiority against even moderate opposition nor the naval forces to secure the maritime regions around the war zone. The only robust global capability it has developed are satellite reconnaissance and communication systems, but these are also not at the scale required by high intensity combat operations at long distances.

The final and perhaps most important limitation in China's capability for high-end power projection operations is the lack of allies and partners. In all of the American major interventions overseas, for both defensive and offensive purposes, there was a nearby friendly country or ally that provided ports, airfields and marshalling areas to which the United States could deploy initially, and from which it could then move into the war zone. For the Korean War, it was South Korea and Japan; for the Vietnam War, South Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines; for Afghanistan, a combination of Pakistan, some of the Gulf States and the Central Asian republics; for Iraq it was Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and several of the other Gulf States.

In summary, Chinese leaders understand and have employed virtually all forms of power projection except large-scale military intervention in distant regions. The PLA has studied the requirements for these operations and is fully capable of developing the missing components of any of them. Whether China chooses to develop and employ power projection operations further in the future is a Chinese choice.

It is time to turn to Chinese specific regional political policies and ambitions in the context of its drive to become a world economic power with global influence.

Regional Application of China's Power Projection Capability

Chinese leaders think about the world as a series of concentric zones beginning with China itself.

1. The inner zone is formed by the countries on its land borders to the north, west and south, and its maritime borders to the east and southeast.

This zone is the most important for Chinese leaders, and for the military missions assigned to the PLA. It absorbs most of the PLA budget, planning and exercise activity. The minimum military goal for this zone is a defensive capability so strong that no other country will be able to launch an attack against China. The stretch goal is to develop such great influence over the policies of its neighboring countries that China will have a virtual veto over all their major military decisions.

China feels generally satisfied with the military defenses on all its land borders. Where it still feels insecure is on its maritime borders. It has increased the allocation of resources to its Navy, Air Force and missile forces, and developed capabilities that would make it costly for the United States to operate its armed forces in these regions in times of conflict. However, it is continually concerned that advances in military technology, not just in maritime and air forces, but also in space, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, could negate its current capabilities and leave China vulnerable from the sea, air or space.

China does not yet have what it considers adequate influence over the military decisions of its neighbors, especially those supported by the United States. It believes that Taiwan's resistance to reunification with China, South Korea's decisions like the

deployment of THAAD missile systems, and Japan's truculence over the Senkaku Islands and even Vietnam's resistance to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea are all challenges to China's influence and authority that need to be brought under control. The key, China's leadership believes, is undermining and overmatching American military capability in the region.

As described above, most of China's power projection activities are focused on this inner zone. It is capable of, and has used, demonstrated or exercised, the entire range from humanitarian response through full-scale invasion.

2. The mid-range zone and next most important region for China is central and south Asia, the region stretching from the Middle East across the Indian Ocean to southeast Asia.

This region is the focus of President Xi's signature foreign policy program, the "Belt and Road Initiative." This diplomatic/economic strategy is designed to redraw the transportation and economic map of the region so that the major transportation routes all lead from and to China, and so that the prosperity of the countries in the region is tied to China. If this strategy succeeds, China will have a very strong, if not dominant influence on the full range of policies of these countries.

Military power projection capability currently plays a supporting and relatively minor role in the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese military diplomacy is active in the region, centered on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with eight members, four observer states and six dialogue partners from the region. The PLA Navy has established a presence in the region, anchored on its new base in Djibouti, and including port visits and rudimentary exercises with some of the navies in the region.

In order for China to develop serious military influence in the region, it would have to establish a robust base structure that would support frequent, if not continuous deployments of major naval and air forces, as well as deployments of expeditionary ground forces, amphibious or air assault. Right now, Chinese air and naval deployments using international air and sea space must pass through the Singapore and Malacca Straits, where they are vulnerable. There are two links of the belt and road initiative that could potentially give China direct access to the Indian Ocean. These are the planned economic corridors through Myanmar and Pakistan. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor terminates at Khaukpyu on the Andaman Sea, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor terminates in Gwadar at the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

If China could establish military bases in both these ports, supplied from China along the two economic corridors, then these secure and sustainable bases could support robust power projection interventions throughout South Asia. However, the practical obstacles are enormous. Neither Pakistan nor Myanmar has yet granted access to nor gives any sign of welcoming powerful Chinese military forces in their countries, and it is difficult to identify the threats that would cause them to change that policy. In both countries, the corridor itself runs through regions of Myanmar and Pakistan that are under tenuous control of the government and would be vulnerable to attack or sabotage. Even if

Pakistan and Myanmar decided to host Chinese bases, the reaction of other countries in the region, especially India, would be hostile and fearful, and would cause them to consider requesting help from outside countries, notably the United States, to offset Chinese influence and capability.

Under current circumstances the development of a high-end Chinese sustained intervention capability is unlikely, but the development of ships like the mini-aircraft carriers *Liaoning* and *Shandong*, and follow-on, more capable carriers, the newly launched Type 075 amphibious vessel, and the continued measured development of the PLA Marine Corps will allow China to exert military influence in the event of regional crises in South Asia. China could increase its influence by supporting one country over another in a confrontation, or by supporting a government against opposition forces, or vice versa. It could sustain these operations unless it were opposed by India or Indonesia, both countries that could cut its access through the Singapore and Malacca Straits.

3. The third, and most distant zone in Chinese military thinking includes Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific Islands. China is putting major emphasis on stronger economic relations with these regions and often uses economic pressure when there are policy disagreements, and economic benefits to reward friendly policies. However, China does not employ nor currently aspire to use military means of influence in the region beyond basic military relations – visits, consultations and the occasional small-scale exercise.

If its military power grows, China could choose to exert more military influence in these regions. Africa is probably the most likely region for it to occur, and the most likely operations would be naval deployments.

Implications for the United States

Potential Chinese power projection capabilities in what it considers its most distant zone of interest, Europe, Latin America and Africa, pose little threat to American interests unless the United States drastically reduces its military forces or else the United States turns inward and makes a policy decision not to involve itself in these regions. Should there be a regional crisis in which the United States supports one country or faction, and China supports the other, and the United States decides to send a military task force to support its friend or ally, it could find a Chinese task force in the region. The United States found itself in situations like this in the Cold War, for example in the Middle East when it supported Israel and the Soviet Union supported Israel's Arab neighbors. Handling these crises requires a deft combination of force and diplomacy, but do not pose an unmanageable threat to American interests. The United States should have advantages of more friends and allies in these regions, experience operating there, and better developed global influence skills.

In China's mid-range zone, from the Middle East across the Indian Ocean, a more active Chinese military presence, and greater power projection capability would likely force the smaller countries of the region to accommodate China's preferences in their policies to a

greater extent than at present. However, India is another story. The Indian reaction would almost certainly be an increase in its own defense forces, a vigorous campaign to check Chinese ambitions and activities and outreach to outside maritime powers, chiefly the United States, but also others – Japan, Australia and seafaring European countries. The United States would have many options for increasing its own presence and capability in the region, as part of a group offsetting Chinese buildups.

East Asia is the crucial area in which the United States must take action if its national interests are not to be undercut by increasing Chinese power projection capabilities. In what China considers a legitimate zone of defensive influence defined by what it calls the “first and second island chains” are several of America’s most important allies. China’s diplomatic and military quest to turn the South and East China Seas and most of the Yellow Sea into territorial waters directly challenges American access to its important allies and gives China a potential chokehold on East Asian sea and airborne commerce.

The United States to protect its national interests in this important part of the world must continue to increase both the size and capability of its forces in order to offset the Chinese buildup. Because of China’s building program of advanced platforms, weapons and systems, it must increase the pace of its own modernization and force deployments to East Asia. It must keep its alliance structure strong and defuse tensions such as those between the ROK and Japan. It must go beyond its current policies in the South China Sea, of taking no position on territorial disputes, and opposing the use of force to settle disputes. It must decide what territorial settlement it supports, so that it can direct its military activities accordingly, defending the territory of its allies under treaty commitments, and insisting on high seas and air space rights. Strong policies and adequate forces in this region will not only protect American interests, but they will keep Chinese attention focused on its maritime boundary regions rather than deploying forces into other regions.