

**Prepared Testimony of  
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Vice Chairman Shea, Senator Goodwin, and members of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. The potential for conflict in the South China Sea is a topic that is of great importance to American interests and peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese military theory and operational plans for this and other scenarios merit far greater public attention than they have in the past received. National leaders in Washington oftentimes must think tragically and prepare for the worst in order to prevent tragedy from happening.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the ultimate guarantor of the CCP's hold on absolute political power in China. The principal external mission of the PLA is to plan and prepare for the invasion of Taiwan, while simultaneously deterring or delaying American-led coalition forces from coming to Taiwan's defense. Next in terms of priority for the PLA appears to be the mission of preparing for a major border war, especially with India.<sup>1</sup> A military campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines in the South China Sea has traditionally been regarded as possible, but less stressful. Nonetheless, the probability of conflict in the South China Sea is on the rise. It is important to think through what such a conflict might look like if it was to occur.<sup>2</sup>

Detailed Chinese writings on this scenario are relatively sparse, probably in reflection of its low-level of planning priority and the perceived weakness of imagined local enemies.<sup>3</sup> Available PLA writings express the view that a military campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines would represent a relatively easy, low-to-medium scale conflict. They do not appear to envision

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<sup>1</sup> This assertion is supported by a large number of PLA writings, which appear to be either authoritative or indicative of official doctrine. For example, see Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin (eds.), *Informatized Army Operations* [信息化陆军作战] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2015); *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, 2013); and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun (eds.), *Informatized Joint Operations* [信息化联合作战] (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For important historical context, see Toshi Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle: A Campaign Appraisal," *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2016, Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 41-65, at <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/7b5ec8a0-cc48-4d9b-b558-a4f1cf92e7b8/The1974ParacelsSeaBattle.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> For a good sense of the PLA's priorities, see *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, 2013), pp. 198-236; and Zhang Yuliang (ed.), *Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2007), pp. 503-506.

this as a trigger for all-out great power conflict, although they do seem to anticipate and plan for some escalation.<sup>4</sup>

PLA writings portray the United States as a hostile force or "Strong Enemy" with no legitimate right to have a military presence in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Beijing appears to have the intention of gradually driving the U.S. out of the area using military coercion tactics, in addition to political and economic pressure. Limited combat operations against Vietnam or the Philippines would be one part of this broader strategic effort.

Chinese military writings have emphasized several operational challenges facing PLA war planners in the South China Sea. These include their own perceived weakness in the areas of command and control, intelligence, air defense, and logistics support.<sup>6</sup> Military facilities currently under construction in the Spratly Islands appear to be intended to improve upon these weaknesses. Once completed, they will significantly increase the ease with which the PLA could seize islands garrisoned by Vietnamese or Filipino forces, making use of force a more tempting option and conflict more likely. China's construction of these bases is strategically destabilizing.

### **China's War Plan**

Any attempt to predict the future should be considered a risky and speculative endeavor. It is nonetheless imperative to plan and to prepare for known, but highly uncertain, possibilities. Based on those Chinese sources we currently have access to, how might the PLA unfold a military campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines?

In the notional event that the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Military Commission in Beijing ordered the PLA to launch a military campaign to storm islands controlled by Vietnam or the Philippines, such a campaign would likely be designed to serve clear political goals. The most probable goal would be to extend China's domination of the South China Sea, while undermining the influence and prestige of the United States. An important and related secondary goal would be to erode the confidence and morale of local Southeast Asian governments, making them more likely to submit to future Chinese encroachments.

The PLA would probably design the attack to unfold in three distinct phases of operations, which would be intended to play out before the U.S. could deploy significant forces to oppose the island offensive. This would allow China to change the facts on the ground while avoiding a major war. The first phase would be island blockade and bombardment operations. The second phase would be amphibious assault operations. The third phase would be island occupation operations.<sup>7</sup> Each of these phases of operations is briefly described below.

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<sup>4</sup> Zhu Hui (ed.), *Research on Strategic Air Force Problems* [空军战略问题研究] (Beijing: Lantian Press, 2014), p. 264. Note that Lantian "Blue Sky" Press is the official publishing house of the PLA Air Force. Note also that this book was printed at the PLA Air Force Command College in Beijing.

<sup>5</sup> Zhu Hui (ed.), pp. 263-264; and Zhang Yuliang (ed.), pp. 503-506.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

### *Blockade and Bombardment*

PLA island landing doctrine calls for executing surprise attacks to quickly seize control over the local electromagnetic, air, and sea domains at the outset of conflict to gain the operational initiative. In practice, this means that the opening acts of war would be the sudden, rapid deployment of naval and air force assets to encircle and strike targeted Vietnamese or Filipino-controlled islands. The objective would be to swiftly isolate defense forces by cutting off their communications networks and supply lines, while simultaneously suppressing their air defenses and sinking their ships.<sup>8</sup>

### *Amphibious Assault*

Once targeted island garrisons had been sufficiently softened up for invasion, amphibious assault groups would storm ashore under cover of ship and air fires.<sup>9</sup> Chinese studies indicate that each marine battalion would be notionally supported by four attack helicopters.<sup>10</sup> Assault groups would likely land at multiple points and quickly fight inland to secure their tactical objectives, which would include command and control centers, air defense sites, and artillery positions. For larger islands, the PLA may conduct air assaults to land special operations forces on island airstrips (or other open landing zones, if available) using helicopters. It is also theoretically possible that airborne assaults might be conducted to land paratroopers. Air or airborne assaults would most likely occur in the early morning hours, just prior to amphibious landings. They would be intended to neutralize key targets and sow confusion behind enemy lines.<sup>11</sup>

### *Island Occupation*

The targeted islands would be cleared of defenders and rapidly built up to withstand potential counterattacks organized by the armed forces of Vietnam or the Philippines, potentially in concert with U.S. forces. The most probable sea lines of approach would be sowed with sea mines and patrolled with submarines to intercept any counterattacking naval forces. Air defense batteries would probably be landed on the targeted islands, and fighter jets would conduct combat air patrols to provide overhead cover. Defensive infrastructure on occupied islands would be repaired and refurbished to protect against counter invasion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zhang Yuliang (ed.), pp. 505-506.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Jia Ziyang, Chen Songhui, and Wen Rui, "Analysis of Troop Unit Effectiveness During Systemized Landing Operations Based on Data Field (基于数据场的登陆作战体系兵力编组效能分析)," *Zhihui Kongzhi yu Fangzhen* (Command Control & Simulation Journal), Vol. 36, No. 6, December 2014, pp. 92-95; and Wang Yinlai, Chen Songhui, and Jia Ziyang, "Analysis of Troops Unit Effectiveness During Landing Operations Based on Complex Networks (基于复杂网络的登陆作战兵力编组效能分析)," *Huoli yu Zhihu Kongzhi* (Fire Control & Command Control Journal), Vol. 39, No. 8, August 2014, pp. 87-90.

<sup>11</sup> For a good sense of PLA air assault doctrine as it applies to small islands, see Zhang Zhiwei and Huang Chuanxian (eds.), *Research on Army Aviation Troop Operations Theory* [陆军航空兵作战理论研究] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014), pp. 105-135.

<sup>12</sup> Zhang Yuliang (ed.), pp. 505-506.

It seems likely that martial law would be declared on the occupied islands. Available sources do not discuss what would happen to the Vietnamese or Filipino personnel (both military and civilian) who were captured. However, there are several options which would be available to the Chinese. They could organize them into labor teams, needed for repairing battle damage, keep them on the islands in makeshift prisoner of war camps, or lock them aboard nearby ships offshore. They could also transport them to a Chinese-controlled island elsewhere in the South China Sea, or to prisons or labor camps in mainland China.

It seems likely that the Chinese authorities would use captured personnel to maximize political leverage. Prisoners might be quickly returned to their home country in return for political and military gestures of restraint, or to signal the de-escalation or cessation of hostilities. As an alternative, prisoners of war might be kept for an indefinite period of time and used as bargaining chips in prolonged political negotiations.

One internal PLA source discusses the possibility of American intervention in the South China Sea and advocates for using air force bombers to launch long-range cruise missile attacks on Guam in reprisal. The PLA Rocket Force in this scenario could conduct medium and intermediate range missile strikes on American and Japanese naval facilities and air bases using conventional (not nuclear) warheads. The source states that missile strikes would be intended to deter the U.S. from further intervening in the local conflict, while at the same time destroying forward deployed forces.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems far more likely that aggression of this nature would ignite a much larger great power war.

## Indications and Warning

As is often the case, the outcome of this scenario is very sensitive to warning time. A key question to consider is how far in advance the U.S. and its allies and partners might know the PLA was about to launch an attack, and what they might do with that information. Indications and warning is the art of avoiding surprise and judging when a crisis or conflict is coming. According to a seminal work on the subject, *Anticipating Surprise*, written by an American intelligence expert, Cynthia Grabo, an indicator is something the adversary (in this case China) is known or expected to have to do in preparation for hostilities.<sup>14</sup>

Strategic warning, according to Ms. Grabo, is more long-term in nature and can be issued well in advance of attack. Strategic warning would come "if a large-scale deployment of forces is under way, or the adversary has made known his political commitment to some course of action involving the use of force." This type of warning "may be possible only when enemy action is imminent, but it also may be possible long before that."<sup>15</sup> Strategic warnings are generally issued to national-level leaders such as presidents and prime ministers. Tactical warning, on the other hand, is more of an operational concern, and something available to generals with access to radar

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<sup>13</sup> Zhu Hui (ed.), p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia M. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning* (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2002), pp. 3-4, available online at [http://www.niu.edu/ni\\_press/pdf/Anticipating\\_Surprise\\_Analysis.pdf](http://www.niu.edu/ni_press/pdf/Anticipating_Surprise_Analysis.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

pictures and other sensor networks that provide timely indications that an enemy attack is under way.<sup>16</sup>

According to PLA writings, amphibious landing exercises would be conducted by the units which were about to go into combat. These exercises would be as realistic and difficult as possible. Intelligence gathering operations against both the targeted islands and U.S. forces in the region would surge.<sup>17</sup> Patrols with intelligence gathering aircraft, drones, ships, and submarines would almost certainly become much more frequent and invasive. In addition to technical intelligence capabilities, satellites might conduct orbital maneuvers to provide greater coverage, and reserve satellites might be launched with little warning.

Naval (including marine) and air force units would mobilize and deploy to staging areas on Hainan Island, the Paracel Islands, and the Spratly Islands. To prepare for possible U.S. intervention, PLA Rocket Force units may move from their garrisons to prepared launching grounds in the mountain valleys of Southeastern China. It should further be expected that maritime militia units may be mobilized and deployed to forward operating areas in the Spratly Islands to support the coming operations.<sup>18</sup> Additional indicators would be the stockpiling of supplies and the movement of key CCP/PLA leaders from Beijing to PLA command posts in the South China Sea area.

According to PLA writings, deception operations would be conducted to hide China's strategic intentions and operational and tactical plans. Pre-war preparations would take place in an environment of strict secrecy.<sup>19</sup> It should be expected that diplomatic, people-to-people, and media messaging channels would be used to lower the targeted countries' sense of impending danger. Voices expressing concern or alarm in Washington, Tokyo, Hanoi, and/or Manila would be drowned out or discredited and minimized through the application of political warfare tactics. It is highly likely that China would attempt to launch the attack with minimal or no warning. To maintain the element of surprise, the PLA may seek to limit the number of forces mobilized and deployed to the area. It is likely to disguise other preparations as part of routine exercises.

## Theater Assets

Distinguished PLA expert, Roger Cliff, provides us with the best available order of battle for 2020. In his book, *China's Military Power*, Dr. Cliff anticipates that the PLA could deploy one aircraft carrier and 80 percent of its local naval and air forces. These would be supplemented by

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Zhang Yuliang (ed.), pp. 504-505.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent study on China's maritime militia, see Conner M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA," *China Maritime Report*, No. 1, (March 2017), at [http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Naval-War-College\\_CMSI\\_China-Maritime-Report\\_No-1\\_People%E2%80%99s-Armed-Forces-Maritime-Militia-Tethered-to-the-PLA\\_Kennedy-Erickson\\_201703.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Naval-War-College_CMSI_China-Maritime-Report_No-1_People%E2%80%99s-Armed-Forces-Maritime-Militia-Tethered-to-the-PLA_Kennedy-Erickson_201703.pdf). For important additional readings, see the authors', "Hainan's Maritime Militia: China Builds a Standing Vanguard, Pt. 1," *Center for International Maritime Security*, March 26, 2017, at <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2017/03/hainans-maritime-militia-china-builds-a-standing-vanguard-pt-1/>; and Andrew S. Erickson and Conner M. Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia," *CNA Corporation*, March 7, 2016, at <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2016/03/chinas-maritime-militia-our-most-extensive-detailed-analysis-yet/>.

<sup>19</sup> Zhang Yuliang (ed.), p. 504.

Chinese military forces from other theaters, as needed. He envisions a high-end, simultaneous attack on the nine islands and reefs occupied by the Philippines. In this scenario, China would employ its two Marine brigades, embarking them aboard two flat-deck amphibious assault ships and 27 smaller landing ships. These would be supported by a notional task force of eight destroyers, 13 frigates, 18 missile fast attack craft, 14 attack submarines, approximately 250 fighter jets, and 24 medium bombers. Operating in a supporting role might be 18 ballistic missile launchers with reloads, for a total of 108 missiles.<sup>20</sup>

Depending on the assumptions one used, the attacking task force could be considerably smaller than the one Dr. Cliff envisions, especially if the objectives of the campaign were more limited in scope and surprise was the priority. Conversely, the PLA's future objectives may be more ambitious than previously anticipated, and the task force could be much larger, especially once out-of-theater assets, maritime militia, and coast guard units were included. By 2020, the PLA will almost certainly have sufficient infrastructure in the Spratly Islands to accommodate Air Force paratrooper and/or Army helicopter assault units, which could support amphibious attacks. A high-end future campaign in the South China Sea might provide the local commander with the assets listed in Table 1.

### **Theater Command and Control**

The PLA's Southern Theater Command in Guangzhou is likely to receive support from the Eastern Theater Command in Nanjing, and possibly other theater commands, if the campaign becomes a prolonged operation against U.S. forces. Such support would include naval ships and submarines and air force fighters and bombers. The Southern Theater Command may also receive support from the Rocket Force, in the form of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, and the Strategic Support Force, in the form of space assets and electronic/cyber warfare assets.

To de-conflict any overlapping responsibilities that may arise, it seems possible that the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and Central Military Commission may appoint senior officials in Beijing and attach them to theater and forward command posts in Guangzhou, Zhanjiang, and aboard forward deployed flagships. To the extent communications channels allowed, it seems probable that the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, and his top political advisors, would attempt to micro-manage operations. Nonetheless, as is typical practice in authoritarian systems, lines of responsibility in the PLA at the operational level might be kept vague and subject to interpretation. A speculative assessment suggests this practice would be used to control escalation and protect the top leadership from political fallout in the event of military defeat.

The PLA's ongoing reform and reorganization effort to build a smaller, joint force will probably not have a major impact on this scenario unless the U.S. intervened and it escalated into a major war. According to Chinese military writings, a campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines in the South China Sea would be designed as a small-to-medium scale naval campaign, not a far more stressful joint campaign.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese military reform program appears to be driven by

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<sup>20</sup> Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 225-227.

<sup>21</sup> Zhu Hui (ed.), p. 264; and Zhang Yuliang (ed.), pp. 503-506.

internal factors. To the extent that there is an external objective, that objective is almost certainly preparing for a future invasion of Taiwan. Nonetheless, future joint capabilities developed with Taiwan in mind could make attacks on islands and coral reefs in the South China Sea less difficult.

### **Vietnam or Philippines?**

From the Chinese perspective, islands controlled by Vietnam and the Philippines represent tempting targets. Tactically speaking, Vietnamese islands may appear better defended, but Hanoi, unlike Manila, has little hope of receiving direct U.S. military support. Vietnam is therefore in a much weaker position strategically. However, any naval operation launched against Vietnamese islands could theoretically escalate and turn into a major border conflict. The outcome of a modern land war along the Sino-Vietnamese border is difficult to predict. Memories of the 1979 conflict may convince Chinese leaders to avoid such an eventuality, but there may be some in the PLA who want to settle an old score.

On the other hand, it may be judged in Beijing that a successful campaign against an island or islands held by the Philippines could have outsized strategic effects, since such a campaign would be interpreted as having falsified a U.S. treaty commitment. If Washington failed to satisfy its perceived treaty obligations to Manila in the South China Sea, the likely impact would be serious. Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei would undoubtedly become convinced that they could easily become the next one to be "sold-out" by Washington. According to the Commander of the Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, China's objective is to become a regional hegemon.<sup>22</sup> As such, undermining the prestige and influence of the U.S. along China's maritime littoral is a key foreign policy goal. It seems likely that the Philippines, not Vietnam, will be China's main target in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, both are at risk of attack, and the risk is rising rapidly as China builds up its military bases in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

### **Recommendations**

The United States has not yet responded to recent Chinese provocations in the South China Sea in a manner that is likely to maintain American interests in regional peace and stability. China's expansionism and militarism are destabilizing. If nothing major changes, if Washington continues on its current path, China could soon be in a position to dominate the South China Sea and undermine the current American-led regional order. Fortunately, there are several options available for Congress and the Trump Administration to consider, which could help offset much of the damage China has done.

First, the United States government should increase its presence and its engagement with countries affected by China's behavior, to include Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Strategic and economic dialogues, and nongovernmental people-to-people

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew Pennington, "US-China tensions persist despite progress on NKorea," *Associated Press*, February 23, 2016, at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/4e0a8c6d263d4aad897fb5464d4f1f72/top-diplomats-meet-fraught-time-between-us-china>.

exchange mechanisms, should be established with these countries and funded by Congress. Naval ship visits, bilateral and multilateral exercises, and related programs should be expanded.

Second, Congress should greatly increase funding for security assistance to the Philippines. The current level of funding, despite recent increases, is still woefully inadequate. Dual-use infrastructure investments into airfields, ports, roads, and radars should be expanded. It is imperative that Manila is made less vulnerable to Chinese coercion.

Third, Congress should fund the construction of additional U.S. submarines, destroyers, stealth fighters, stealth bombers, long range missiles, and theater ballistic missile defense systems. Congress should also provide the resources needed for the services to increase their readiness levels in the Asia-Pacific.

Fourth, Congress should advise the Trump administration to not invite China to the next Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) multinational maritime exercise in Hawaii. In addition, Congress should ensure that strict limits are maintained in senior-level official trips to China, navy ship visits, and other military-to-military exchanges with China, pursuant to the spirit of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000. It should be the policy of the United States to develop a cost imposing strategy specific to China, making sure that bad behavior is not rewarded, but rather punished. Reconsidering bilateral defense contacts should be one aspect of a broader policy review.

Many other instruments of statecraft are available to oppose and delegitimize the CCP's actions in the South China Sea. Individually, the four recommendations above would have important and positive, but limited, effects. Taken collectively alongside other actions, they could help mitigate rising risks of conflict and better ensure peace and stability in the South China Sea.



**TABLE 1: Main Force Assets Immediately Available to PLA Commander for South China Sea Campaign in 2020\***

<i>Unit (Home Garrison)</i>	<i>Composition</i>	<i>Number</i>
41st Group Army (Liuzhou, Guangxi)	Mountain Infantry Brigade, Mechanized Infantry Division, Mechanized Infantry Brigade, Armored Brigade, Artillery Brigade Air Defense Brigade, Army Aviation Brigade	<u>Totals (very rough estimate)</u> 8,000 amphibious infantry 75,000-120,000 regular infantry 3,000-5,000 special forces 1,000-3,000 tanks 1,000-3,000 artillery pieces 150-200 helicopters
42nd Group Army (Huizhou, Guangdong)	Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Division, Infantry Division, Armored Brigade, Air Defense Brigade, Long-range Artillery Brigade Army Aviation Brigade, Special Operations Brigade	
14th Group Army (Kunming, Yunnan)	Mechanized Infantry Brigades (2), Motorized Infantry Brigade (2), Artillery Brigade, Air Defense Brigade, Armor Brigade	
PLA Navy South Sea Fleet HQ (Zhanjiang)	Destroyer Group Landing Ship Group Marine Brigades (2) Combat Support Ship Group	<u>Totals (very rough estimate)</u> 1 aircraft carrier 2 flat deck amphibious ships 27 landing ships 8 destroyers 13 frigates 18 missile fast attack craft 14 attack submarines 50 helicopters 8,000 marines 1,000 special forces 50 multirole fighters 24 medium bombers 7 maritime patrol, ELINT
Major PLAN Base (Haikou)	Naval Air Division Naval Radar Brigade Missile Fastboat Group	
Major PLAN Base (Sanya)	Destroyer Group Submarine Group	
Major PLAN Base (Shantou)	Frigate Base	
Major PLAN Base (Lingshui)	Naval Air Division	
Forward PLAN Bases (Paracel and Spratly Islands)	Air Defense Brigade, Observation and Communications Brigade, Special Operations Regiment, Electronic Countermeasures Regiment, Shore-to-Ship Missile Regiment	
PLA Air Force HQ (Guangzhou)	Fighter Divisions (4), Bomber Division, Fighter Brigades (3), Surface-to-air missile Brigade	
PLA Rocket Force (under control of theater commander for conventional operations)	Intermediate Range Missile Brigade Medium Range Missile Brigade Medium Range Anti-Ship Missile Brigade	

\* Note that this table does not account for additional assets that could be assigned from eastern or northern China if the campaign escalated and/or became a prolonged operation. These could include additional ships, submarines, strategic missiles, air attack units, air defense units, army aviation units, and special operations units. It could further include paratrooper units and strategic units for electronic warfare, cyber, and space operations. Large numbers of reserve and militia units could also be mobilized.

Sources: Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power*; Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*; Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief*; *The Directory of PRC Military Personalities* (2016 and 2014 editions); DGL, *The PLA as an Organization, Volume 2.0*.