

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

***Hearing on “A ‘World-Class’ Military:
Assessing China’s Global Military Ambitions”***

M. Taylor Fravel
Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science
Member, Security Studies Program
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

June 20, 2019

Commissioner Lewis, Commissioner McDevitt, members of the commission, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss China as a world-class military and its global military ambitions. I have been asked to comment on the strategy and employment of a world-class military force. My testimony will examine how authoritative and other Chinese sources define the concept of a world-class military, discuss how China's military strategic guidelines can illuminate its military strategy and how the People's Liberation Army (PLA) thinks about the use of armed force, and provide several recommendations for Congress to consider.

“World-Class Military” as a Force Development Concept

China's goal of building a “world-class” military is commonly associated with the work report delivered by general secretary Xi Jinping at the Nineteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017. In the report, Xi said the party will “strive to basically complete national defense and military modernization by 2035 and fully build the people's army into a world-class military by the middle of the century.”¹

Although Xi Jinping has used the term “world-class military” (世界一流军队) on multiple occasions, authoritative Chinese government and PLA documents do not provide a clear and accepted definition of the term.² Below, based on commentaries by PLA scholars and senior military officers, I will argue that, in a Chinese context, the idea of a “world-class military” should be viewed as a general, high-level, and overarching concept for force development, which outlines the intended outcome of PLA modernization and thus a set of benchmarks for assessing the PLA's progress toward achieving this objective. In this way, the goal of building a world-class military defines what it means to “achieve the goal of a strong army,” a goal that Xi introduced in early 2013 as part of his “China dream.”³

At the same time, the notion of building a world-class military does not reflect a comprehensive military strategy. That is, it does not identify for what ends a world-class or even modernizing PLA will be used nor does it outline the manner in which such forces will be used. It is also not a geographic concept, in so far as it does not describe a global posture or role for the PLA except in the most general sense.

Origins of “Building a World-Class Military”

The concept of a world-class military was first used in early 2016 in a series of speeches that Xi Jinping gave before military audiences. At this time, the PLA had just launched far-reaching and

¹ Xi Jinping, “决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 [Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, hereafter “Work Report”], October 18, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

² In a Chinese context, the term could also be translated as “world-class army,” as the character 军 can refer both the PLA (解放军) and a military in a general sense (军队). In other contexts, “一流 (yiliu)” means “first-class” or “top-tier.” So, the idea of a world-class military is one that belongs in the top tier of militaries around the world.

³ *Liberation Army Daily*, December 13, 2012, p. 1; *Liberation Army Daily*, March 1, 2013, p. 1.

unprecedented organizational reforms⁴ and was finalizing the five-year development outline (规划纲要) for China's armed forces, as part the government's Thirteenth Five-Plan. These development outlines provide a template for military modernization—what PLA sources often describe as “national defense and army building” (国防与军队建设).⁵ This outline would govern national defense and army building from 2016-2020.⁶ The year 2020 itself is important because it marked end of the second stage in Jiang Zemin's 1997 “three-step” modernization plan for the PLA (see below).

In this context, Xi Jinping first raised the idea of building a world-class military. Specifically, it as part of a phrase describes the high-level goals for PLA modernization: “achieving the goal of a strong army, building a world-class military” (实现强军目标，建设世界一流军队).⁷ Although no official Chinese definition of the term world-class military exists, Xi's first use of the term clearly indicates that it is a force development concept, part of Xi's goal of transforming the PLA into a strong army. The simplest interpretation is that China would achieve this goal by building a force that was world class. In addition, the goal of a strong army provided the rationale and motivation for the far-reaching reforms announced at the end of 2015 and whose implementation began in 2016. Thus, the idea of building a world-class military explained how the goal of having a strong army would be realized—when the PLA had become a world-class force.

This link between the goal of a strong army and building a world-class military appears in other speeches Xi delivered before the Nineteenth Party Congress. In a 2017 speech on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA, for example, Xi repeated similar language from 2016. As he told the assembled troops, “We must thoroughly implement the party's thought on strengthening the army, unswervingly follow the road of strengthening the army with Chinese characteristics, strive to achieve the Party's goal of a strong army under the new situation, and build our heroic people's army into a world-class military.”⁸ By describing what a strong army should be, the idea of building a world-class army is clearly a force development concept, not a strategic concept that can illuminate the future employment of the PLA.

After the initial use of the term world-class military in 2016, it peaked in 2017 and has then declined. To put use of the term in context, Figure 1 shows the number of times “strong military goal” and “world-class military” have appeared in articles published in the *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报), the PLA's official newspaper. As the figure shows, the frequency of “strong

⁴ For an excellent overview and analysis of the reforms, see Philip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019).

⁵ The PLA defines army building as “a general designation of all activities to build armed forces, maintain and improve the system of military power, and increase combat power.” See Junshi kexue yuan, ed., 中国人民解放军军语 [Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2011) p. 8.

⁶ “中央军委颁发《军队建设发展“十三五”规划纲要》 [Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for Military Building and Development],” *Xinhua*, May 12, 2016.

⁷ *Liberation Army Daily*, March 24, 2016, p. 1.

⁸ Xi Jinping, “在庆祝中国人民解放军建军90周年阅兵时的讲话 [Speech at the Military Parade Celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army],” *Xinhua*, July 30, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-07/30/c_1121403100.htm.

army goal” peaked in 2013 and 2014, after Xi began to use the term. The frequency of the term “world-class military” has never exceeded that of “strong army goal,” again suggesting the idea of building a world-class military explains how the goal of a strong army will be realized. Interestingly, the frequency of both terms has declined significantly. The data for 2019 is incomplete and includes articles published through June 15, 2019.

At the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi linked the idea of building a world-class military with a general timetable for PLA modernization. Almost twenty years earlier, back in 1997, general secretary Jiang Zemin identified three goals for PLA modernization known as the “three steps” (三步走).⁹ By 2010, the PLA would create a foundation for modernization. By 2020, it would complete mechanization and “make great progress toward informatization.” Finally, the third step was “to achieve national defense and military modernization by the middle of the 21st century.”

Xi modified Jiang’s own timetable in two ways. First, by 2049, the goal was not just to realize defense and military modernization, but to complete building a world-class military. Thus, Jiang’s goal was now described as to “fully build the people’s army into a world-class military by the middle of the century.” Second, Xi added an interim stage by which to assess the PLA’s progress, to “strive to basically complete national defense and military modernization by 2035.”¹⁰

Xi’s change raises the question of whether he altered Jiang’s original timetable for PLA modernization. However, little has been published in authoritative sources on the meaning of 2035 benchmark. One interpretation is that Xi accelerated Jiang’s original timetable for PLA modernization by fifteen years.¹¹ Another is that Xi clarified how the modernization goal for mid-century that Jiang identified would be realized, as the inclusion of “basically” in the context of 2035 suggests additional work would be required before modernization would be “fully” complete in 2049. In other words, Xi defined the completion of PLA modernization as becoming “world class,” while also adding an interim step. A manual published by the CMC Political Department described Xi’s timetable as “a grand blueprint for comprehensively advancing national defense and military modernization.”¹²

A final and perhaps simpler explanation is that the 2035 and mid-century benchmarks for PLA modernization complement development goals for the PRC. At the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi introduced a two-stage plan for China’s national development. By 2035, the work report noted, “socialist modernization” would be “basically realized.” By mid-century, China would become “a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.”¹³ Identification of 2035 as a milestone in China’s

⁹ Jiang Zemin, 江泽民文选 [*Jiang Zemin's Selected Works*], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2006), pp. 83-84.

¹⁰ Xi Jinping, “Work Report.”

¹¹ One Chinese source that makes this point is Guofang daxue dangwei lilun xuexi zhongxin zhu, “把人民军队全面建成世界一流军队 [Fully Build the People’s Army into a World-Class Military],” *Qiushi*, No. 13 (2018).

¹² “跨越，向着世界一流军队—怎么看全面推进国防和军队现代化的战略安排 [Leap toward a World-Class Military: What are the Arrangements to Comprehensively Promote National Defense and Army Modernization],” *Liberation Army Daily*, November 14, 2018, p. 7.

¹³ Xi Jinping, “Work Report.”

national development by definition carried implications for the level of military modernization that would need to be achieved at that time. As one commentary notes, PLA modernization should be “closely aligned with the strategic arrangement for national modernization.”¹⁴

In addition, the party congress work report did not limit the use of “world class” to describe only the desired outcome of PLA modernization. The report uses world class to describe the goals for transforming other parts of the state and Chinese society. These include fostering “world-class advanced manufacturing clusters,” cultivating “world-class scientists and technologists,” turning “Chinese enterprises into world-class, globally competitive firms,” and working “to build Chinese universities into world-class universities and develop world-class disciplines.”¹⁵

Commentaries on “Building a World-Class Military”

Authoritative Chinese government and PLA sources do not contain any definition of the term “world-class military.” To better understand the meaning of the term, this section reviews commentaries on the term authored by PLA officer and scholars. Most of them have appeared in party or military publications, such as *China Military Science* (中国军事科学) (the journal of the PLA’s Academy of Military Science), in the “military forum” (军事论坛) section of the *Liberation Army Daily*, and *Seeking Truth* (求是) (a party journal). These commentaries are less authoritative than leadership speeches or government statements and documents, as the authors are usually writing in their personal capacity (based on their qualifications) and not representing their organizations. These commentaries provide support for the argument that “building a world-class military” is a force development or army building concept. The commentaries revolve around how to identify what constitutes “world class” in an effort to develop benchmarks for assessing progress for the PLA’s modernization.

These commentaries describe world-class militaries in several ways. The first concerns the overall capabilities of world class militaries. Simply put, they are as capable as the best militaries in the world. One professor from the PLA’s National Defense University (NDU) describes being world class as “having the ability and strength to compete on a par with the world-class militaries” and “having the powerful strength and deterrent force to match [抗衡] the militaries of world powers [世界强国].”¹⁶ A professor from the Academy of Military Science (AMS) describes world class militaries as being able to “compete with world-class rivals [对手].”¹⁷ Elsewhere world-class militaries are viewed as “those who have the military ability to compete with the world’s strongest players.”¹⁸

The second description of world-class militaries in these commentaries concerns the characteristics of world-class militaries that makes them world class. Most of the commentators

¹⁴ “Leap toward a World-Class Military.”

¹⁵ Xi Jinping, “Work Report.”

¹⁶ Ren Tianyou, “迈向世界一流军队的战略引领[Strategic Leadership for Marching toward a World-Class Military],” *Ziguangge*, No. 8 (2018), p. 11.

¹⁷ Xiao Tiefeng, “从世界各国军队的发展经验中寻找攻玉之石—探索建设世界一流军队的特点规律 [Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World: Exploring the Characteristics of the Building of a World-Class Military],” *Liberation Army Daily*, February 27, 2018, p. 7.

¹⁸ Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World.”

agree with Cao Yimin, chief of staff of the ground forces in the Western Theater Command, who describes world-class militaries as possessing world-class operational theories, personnel, weapons and equipment, law-based management, combat power, and innovation abilities.¹⁹ Likewise, as a scholar from AMS writes, “a so-called world-class military means having world class military theories, military systems, weapons and equipment, personnel, and training levels.”²⁰

A number of the commentaries highlight the need for clear benchmarks or standards to measure the PLA’s progress toward becoming world class. These benchmarks also offer insight into how the PLA views what constitutes world class.²¹ AMS scholar Xiao Teifeng offers a lengthy description, which distinguishes between benchmarks for operations and for army building. Regarding operations, he writes:

World class militaries should have advanced military thinking and strategy and tactics, efficient and sensitive command and control, real-time or near-real-time intelligence surveillance capability, combined and integrated firepower strike capability, actual combat training, trans-regional and trans-continental force delivery capability, and comprehensive, efficient and seamless link support level.²²

Turning to army building, Xiao offers an even longer list of benchmarks:

World-class militaries should ... possess advanced leadership and management concepts, and intensive and efficient military institutions and organizations; have world-class modern equipment, especially realizing the composite development of mechanization, informatization and intelligentization; have a perfected system of military regulations and rules; possess abundant and high-quality military human resources and high comprehensive quality of military and civilian personnel; realize the deep military-civil fusion and the people and form a "whole country" and “great national defense” system; have a good international image and a high degree of internationalization.²³

Implicit and often explicit in these discussion of benchmarks is the assessment that the PLA currently falls short of what might constitute a world-class military. Many commentaries note that China’s level of military modernization lags behind the country’s economic accomplishments and significant reforms are still needed for the PLA to become world class. They also note that the goal of becoming world class underscores the imperative of

¹⁹ Cao Yimin, “把握建设世界一流军队科学内涵 [Grasp the Scientific Implications of Building a World-class Army],” *Liberation Army Daily*, January 16, 2018, p. 7.

²⁰ Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World.”

²¹ Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World’: Liu Jianguo and Han Weifeng, “关于建设世界一流军队的若干思考 [Some Thoughts on Building a World-Class Military],” *China Military Science*, No. 4 (2016), p. 24-32; Zhang Dongjiang, Wu Jun, and Xiao Tiefeng, “习主席“建设世界一流军队”重要思想的科学内涵与建设路径 [The Scientific Connotation and Construction Path of President Xi’s Important Thought of “Building a World-class Military],” *China Military Science*, No. 4 (2016), p. 1-10.

²² Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World.”

²³ Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World.”

implementing the 2016 reforms.²⁴ As one group of AMS scholars write, “Compared with the world’s first-class militaries, our army is still in the historical stage of the composite development of mechanization and informatization and many ‘shortcomings’ [短板] for development exist.”²⁵

As a world-class military, the United States looms large in Chinese discussions of what it means to be world class. Nevertheless, these commentaries do not dwell excessively on the United States. Some of them mention the US pivot or the rebalance to Asia as part of the security challenges China faces and that a world-class or at least more modernized PLA would be better able to address.²⁶ Others describe the United States as a world-class military, often along with Russia and sometimes France and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the implication of becoming world class is clear: China would be in a position to match and deter the United States.

These commentaries do not discuss the geographic characteristics or requirements of a world-class military. That is, the commentaries do not describe a world-class military as a global military that can project power around the world in the way that the United States military can today. Certainly, some degree of power projection is implied by using the United States, Russia, France and others as current examples of world-class militaries. Nevertheless, there is little discussion in these commentaries of where the Chinese military would be used beyond East Asia or what kind of global posture would be required in order to be world class. However, two exceptions exist. The first is references to China’s overseas interests, though these commentaries do not define them in detail or link them to specific military forces.²⁷ The second is international security cooperation, as these commentaries note how world-class militaries are able to participate in international security cooperation and make contributions to the international community.²⁸

The Military Strategic Guidelines

As argued above, as used by Xi Jinping and in other Chinese sources, the idea of building a world-class military is a force development concept. As such, it does not illuminate broader questions relating to China’s military strategy or force employment. Instead, a review of China’s national military strategy, contained in what the PLA calls the “strategic guidelines” (战略方针) or “military strategic guidelines” can help to answer these questions. Below, I argue that, from

²⁴ Liu Jianguo and Han Weifeng, “Some Thoughts on Building a World-Class Military,” *China Military Science*, No. 4 (2006), p. 31-32; Zhang Dongjiang, Wu Jun, Xiao Tiefeng, “The Scientific Connotation and Construction Path of President Xi’s Important Thought of “Building a World-class Military,” p. 3-4.

²⁵ Zhang Dongjiang, Wu Jun, Xiao Tiefeng, “The Scientific Connotation and Construction Path of President Xi’s Important Thought of “Building a World-class Military,” p. 3.

²⁶ Liu Jianguo and Han Weifeng, “Some Thoughts on Building a World-Class Military],” p. 3; Zhang Dongjiang, Wu Jun, Xiao Tiefeng, “The Scientific Connotation and Construction Path of President Xi’s Important Thought of “Building a World-class Military,” p. 26.

²⁷ Liu Jianguo and Han Weifeng, “Some Thoughts on Building a World-Class Military],” p. 27.

²⁸ Xiao Tiefeng, “Seeking the Stone of Jade from the Development Experience of the Armed Forces of the World”; Zhang Dongjiang, Wu Jun, Xiao Tiefeng, “The Scientific Connotation and Construction Path of President Xi’s Important Thought of “Building a World-class Military,” p. 3-4.

the standpoint of strategy and warfighting, the PLA remains focused on East Asia more than any other region.²⁹

Overview of the Strategic Guidelines

In PLA's approach to doctrine, the military strategic guidelines (sometimes called just the strategic guidelines), contain the essence of China's national military strategy at different points in time. The PLA itself describes the strategic guideline as containing the "principles and plans for preparing for and guiding the overall situation of war."³⁰ The concept of the strategic guideline has a long history in the PLA and the CCP. It was first used in the early 1930s to provide operational guidance when faced with repeated Nationalist efforts to invade the Jiangxi base area and destroy the Red Army. It was then used during the Long March, in the war against Japan, and during all phases of the civil war with the Nationalists that began in 1946.

After PRC's establishment in 1949, the concept of the strategic guideline has been used to delineate China's national military strategy. The purpose of the guidelines is to answer core questions that, in turn, shape the development of the PLA's operational doctrine, force structure, and training. As the Chief of the General Staff Zhang Wannian said when developing the 1993 strategy, the strategic guideline should answer following questions: "With whom will China fight? Where will China fight? What is the character of the war China will fight? How will China fight?"³¹

In the jargon of Chinese strategy, the guidelines identify the following:

- "With whom China will fight" identifies the primary strategic opponent (主要战略对手) and operational target or China's main adversaries
- "Where will China fight" identifies the primary strategic direction (主要战略方向), where China expects armed conflict to occur
- "What is the character of the war China will fight" identifies the basis of preparations for military struggle (军事斗争军备基点), which describes how the PLA envisions warfare will be conducted at any point in time
- "How China will fight" identifies the main form of operations (作战形态) that the PLA should be able to conduct and basic guiding thought for operations for executing such operations.

The formulation of the strategic guidelines should be viewed through the lens of the CCP's approach to policymaking in other domains. With one exception, each guideline has been formulated by the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Central Committee of the CCP, the party's top body for military affairs, with the final consent of the top party leader. In other

²⁹ This section draws from my own recent research, especially M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). For a summary of the key arguments, see M. Taylor Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity: Explaining Changes in China's Military Strategy," *International Security* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Winter 2017/2018), pp. 37-83.

³⁰ Junshi kexue yuan, ed., *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, p. 50.

³¹ Guo Xiangjie, ed. 张万年传 (下) [*Zhang Wannian's Biography* (part 2)] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2011), p. 60.

words, the strategic guideline for any period represents the consensus of the PLA high command, approved by the paramount leader. New strategic guidelines are introduced in a speech delivered at an enlarged meeting of the CMC, which gathers the most important officers in the PLA (including the heads of the services, theater commands, academies and other top-level military bodies). Such speeches are similar to the work report that the party general secretary delivers at a national party congress. The content of the strategy is then distributed through a process of “communicating documents” or “*chuanda wenjian*,” in which the contents are disseminated through lower levels of the PLA (often through meetings of party committees in different units.) Importantly—and unlike in the United States—the content of the strategic guidelines is not contained in a document that is widely accessible inside the PLA or even the civilian parts of the CCP, much less Chinese society at large.

Like high-level CCP policymaking, the adoption of a new strategic guideline represents only the beginning of the process of implementing a new military strategy. They contain the major goals to be achieved and the principles that should guide the achievement of these goals, but not a detailed plan of implementation. The expectation is that the details will be fleshed out afterward in a way consistent with the objectives and principles in the guidelines, often in the context of the development of national five-year plans and corresponding military development outlines drafted on the same schedule. Thus, the PLA can adopt a new military strategy quickly, as circumstances require, because the details will be added later.

Since 1949, the PLA has adopted nine military strategic guidelines, or roughly one every eight years. The first five strategies, adopted between 1956 and 1980, focused on how to defeat either an American or Soviet invasion of China. The last four strategies, adopted between 1988 and 2014, have addressed how to prevail in local wars over limited aims on China’s periphery, primarily in conflicts involving Chinese sovereignty such as the status of Taiwan, the border dispute with India, and maritime disputes.

Some of these nine strategic guidelines were more important than others. The strategies adopted in 1956, 1980, and 1993 constituted major changes in the PLA’s approach to strategy. By major change, these guidelines outlined a new vision of warfare that required transforming the PLA’s approach to operational doctrine, force structure, and training. The other six strategies reflected minor changes or adjustments and refinements existing strategic guidelines. Either they did not contain a new vision of warfare or did not require major organizational changes.

All of the guidelines have been based on the Chinese idea of “active defense” (积极防御). Mao Zedong defined active defense in 1936 as “offensive defense or defense through decisive engagements.” In general, active defense refers to the idea that China’s strategy is strategically defensive, but, once China is attacked, China will engage in offensive actions at the operational and tactical levels to achieve defensive goals.

“Winning Informatized Local Wars”

The PLA’s current military strategy was adopted in July 2014, with the formulation of “winning informatized local wars” (打赢信息化局部战争). It is also often described as the “military strategic guideline of the new situation” (新形势下军事战略方针) in order to link the strategy

with Xi Jinping's leadership of the party and the PLA. The 2014 strategy is the second adjustment to the 1993 strategic guideline adopted after the Gulf War, in which the PLA highlighted the role of high technology in warfighting and the shift to joint operations among the services.

The 2015 white paper lists the “strategic tasks” (战略任务) or goals for China's military:³²

- Deal with (应对) a wide range of emergencies and military threats, and effectively safeguard (有效维护) the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air and sea
- Resolutely defend (坚决捍卫) the unification of the motherland
- Safeguard (维护) China's security and interests in new domains
- Safeguard the security of China's overseas interests
- Maintain strategic deterrence and carry out nuclear counterattack
- Participate in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace
- Strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism so as to maintain China's political security and social stability
- Perform such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national economic and social development

The 2014 strategy contains important elements of continuity with China's previous military strategic guidelines, especially the 1993 and 2004 strategies. First, the 2014 strategic guideline remains premised on how to prevail in local wars on China's periphery involving Chinese sovereignty claims. China has not yet adopted a strategy that has emphasized substantially broader goals than contained in 1993 and 2004 strategic guidelines. Second, within the context of local wars, the primary strategic direction or the most important area where the PLA believes conflict will occur remains the southeast. The primary operational target remains Taiwan along with the United States to the degree it becomes involved in Taiwan's defense. Likewise, the southwest (the border with India) and the south (the South China Sea) are still secondary strategic directions or not the top priority in China's military strategy. Third, the main form of operations for the PLA to be able to conduct remains joint operations, which the PLA now conceptualizes as “integrated joint operations” (一体化联合作战) Fourth, the strategic guiding thought or strategic guidance continues to stress crisis prevention, crisis management, and escalation control if war occurs. Finally, the 2014 strategic guideline remains premised on concept of active defense. Today, the PLA defines active defense as “using proactive offensive actions to defend against the attacking enemy.”³³

Nevertheless, the 2014 strategic guideline contains several important differences with previous strategies. First, the basis of preparations of military struggle—what kind of wars the PLA should be prepared to fight—was adjusted to highlight the role of informatization in warfare. In contrast to the 2004 strategic guideline, the 2014 strategic guideline indicates that informatization is no longer just a condition of warfare, but the dominant feature or characterization. In the simplest terms, informatization refers the collection, processing, and

³² 中国的军事战略 [*China's Military Strategy*] (Beijing: Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi, 2015).

³³ Junshi kexue yuan, *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, p. 52.

utilization of information in all aspects of warfighting in order to seamlessly link individual platforms in real-time from across the services to gain leverage and advantage on the battlefield.

Second, perhaps the most important change in the 2014 strategic guideline is the emphasis on the maritime domain. Specifically, the new strategy called for “highlighting maritime military struggle and preparations for maritime military struggle.”³⁴ Thus, this marked the first time that any domain of warfare has been singled out in a strategic guideline and at the strategic level. Maritime military struggle does not refer only to naval conflict but instead it refers to the maritime domain in many of the local wars the PLA may need to fight, especially Taiwan but also of course in maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. This component of the 2014 strategy, however, appears to remain under development, as the phrase has only appeared thirty-four times in the *Liberation Army Daily* since 2014. In this way, the lack of development of this aspect of the 2014 strategy may be a victim of the organizational upheaval created by the PLA’s reorganization that began in 2016.

Third, and relatedly, the main strategic direction was expanded to include parts of the Western Pacific, as it would relate to a conflict over Taiwan. This perhaps reflects what other Chinese military sources have described as “forward defense” (前沿防卫), which seeks to push the frontline of combat away from China’s national borders.³⁵

Based on the limited sources that are available, my analysis suggests that the strategic guideline was adjusted in 2014 for two reasons. The first and most important reason was to provide an overarching rationale or justification for the reforms that were launched in 2016. The previous strategic guidelines adopted in 1993 and 2004 had called for the PLA to be able to conduct joint operations, but organizational and other reforms were never implemented to enable the PLA to be able to do so. The link between changing the strategic guideline and pursuing reform appeared in the “decision” of the third plenum in November 2013. In the preamble to the section on defense issues, the plenum’s decision called for both “improving the military strategic guideline of the new period” and “reform of the military leadership system.”³⁶ This was the first time that the decision to pursue organizational reforms was announced simultaneously with the decision to change the strategic guidelines. In December 2013, during a speech at an enlarged meeting of the CMC, Xi made this link clear: “we have extensively explored the command system for joint operations, but the problem has not been fundamentally resolved,” citing numerous “deep contradictions.”³⁷ The reforms have been unprecedented and constitute the most important organizational transformation of the PLA in over sixty years. The new strategic guideline provided a high-level rationale and justification to guide these reforms. Even though the 2014 guideline did not envision waging war in a new way, the reforms it justified are poised to have a significant effect on the PLA’s military effectiveness if implemented successfully.

³⁴ *China’s Military Strategy*.

³⁵ For more on how Chinese scholars from AMS view the concept, see M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Changing Approach to Military Strategy: The Science of Military Strategy from 2001 to 2013,” in Joe McReynolds, ed., *China’s Evolving Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2016), pp. 59-60. The concept, however, does not appear in discussions of the 2014 strategic guideline.

³⁶ “中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定 [Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform],” November 13, 2013, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content_2528179.htm.

³⁷ Fravel, *Active Defense*, p. 34.

The second reason for changing strategy in 2014 was to note the growing importance of the maritime domain for Chinese interests. As noted in the 2015 white paper on Chinese military strategy, “It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests.” Chinese sources identify growing threats in the maritime domain, including in the South China Sea as well as in a Taiwan conflict, along with potential threats to China’s growing interests overseas. The emphasis on the maritime domain also provides the naval pillar of China’s aspirations to become a maritime power, as first codified at the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012. Toward this end, the service strategy for the PLAN was altered from focusing only on the “near seas,” or defense of Chinese sovereignty interests in East Asia, to gradually combining near seas defense (近海防御) with far seas protection (远海护卫), or a focus on China’s interests beyond the region.³⁸

Implications of the Strategic Guidelines for the PLA’s Global Role

This review of China’s strategic guidelines and its current military strategy contains several implications for considering the global role of the PLA today. First, geographically, in terms of force employment and warfighting, the PLA remains focused primarily on East Asia (defined broadly to include the eastern parts of the Western Pacific). The reason is that China remains involved in disputes over its sovereignty, which are the kind of issues that could most easily escalate into armed conflict. Toward this end, the first two strategic tasks for the PLA listed in the 2015 white paper on China’s military strategy are to “effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China’s territorial land, air and sea” and “resolutely defend the unification of the motherland.”³⁹ Actions and operations outside the region, to include “protecting the security of overseas interests” and participation in international security cooperation rank fourth and sixth on this list, respectively. They are not unimportant, but they are also not the primary focus in the PLA’s current military strategy.

Second, so long as China’s major sovereignty disputes remain unresolved, especially Taiwan, its military strategy will continue to emphasize East Asia over other regions. This does not mean the PLA will not continue to explore how to operate in other regions or even increase its ability to do so—it certainly has, as the establishment of a PLA base in Djibouti in 2017 indicates. However, the PLA will likely not expand significantly beyond East Asia until its major sovereignty disputes are resolved or until it has achieved a level of military dominance in these disputes such that the final outcome of these disputes is not in doubt from China’s perspective. After all, Taiwan’s unification remains part of the preamble of the constitution of the PRC. Military dominance in these sovereignty disputes will be hard to achieve, however, especially over Taiwan, so long as the United States maintains its commitments and pledges to Taiwan’s security under the Taiwan Relations Act.

Third, the focal point of military competition between the United States and China will also be centered in East Asia. The PLA’s ongoing modernization since the late 1990s has enabled it to

³⁸ In Chinese sources, the near seas are generally defined as the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, waters to the east of Taiwan, and the South China Sea. The far seas are the waters that lie beyond the near seas.

³⁹ *China’s Military Strategy*.

project power farther from its shores than ever before, challenging the sanctuary that US forces previously enjoyed in maritime East Asia. Although distance creates challenges for US force projection into East Asia, China also faces challenges to projecting its forces farther and farther from its shores, especially beyond the range of air defenses and fighter aircraft based on mainland China that can protect naval forces at sea. Thus, competition between the United States and China will focus on a contested zone in maritime East Asia into which both sides can project power but neither may be able to dominate.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, China's current strategy is not premised on expelling or extruding the US military from the region. Nor is it, as the US National Defense Strategy suggests, a strategy "that that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term."⁴¹ Of course, China would likely prefer that the United States was not a military power in the region, but the question remains at what price China is willing to achieve that goal. So far, China is focused on diminishing the ability of the United States to play a decisive role in China's sovereignty disputes, especially Taiwan. China's strategy remains focused on how to prevail in its sovereignty disputes and how to do so if the United States if it becomes involved in these disputes.

Fourth, China's global military presence outside of East Asia will grow in the coming decade, but it is likely to be relatively modest when compared with other major military powers. The United States currently has military bases, operating locations and access points in roughly forty countries, often with multiple facilities in the same country.⁴² France and Great Britain have roughly overseas military bases in eleven countries and Russia nine.⁴³ Although much speculation surrounds where China might establish additional military bases in addition to the facility in Djibouti, they will most likely be astride the Indian Ocean. In peacetime, even if China does not establish more overseas bases, an increasingly global presence of the PLA could enable further cooperation between the United States and China. In 2017 and 2018, for example, the two governments worked together to facilitate the removal of fissile nuclear material from Ghana and Nigeria, respectively.⁴⁴ In wartime, however, in a conflict between the United States, China's bases beyond East Asia would likely be quite vulnerable if the United States chose to attack them.

Policy Recommendations

⁴⁰ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 7-48; Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015).

⁴¹ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 2.

⁴² Michael J. Lostumbo, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2103).

⁴³ Frank Jacobs, "The World's Five Military Empires," *The Big Think*, July 10, 2017, <https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/the-worlds-five-military-empires>.

⁴⁴ Aaron Mehta, "How the US and China Collaborated to Get Nuclear Material Out of Nigeria — And Away From Terrorist Groups," *Defense News*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/01/14/how-the-us-and-china-collaborated-to-get-nuclear-material-out-of-nigeria-and-away-from-terrorist-groups/>; Richard Stone, "U.S.-China Mission Rushes Bomb-grade Nuclear Fuel out of Africa," *Science Magazine*, August 31, 2017, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/08/us-china-mission-rushes-bomb-grade-nuclear-fuel-out-africa>.

The analysis above yields several recommendations for Congress:

First, Congress should increase funding for open-source analysis of issues relating to China's foreign and security policies. A tremendous amount of information is available, in Chinese, from a range of open sources. These sources include some of those cited in this testimony, such as newspapers, military journals, military textbooks, military books, among others. Much can be gleaned from these sources about how China approaches questions of strategy if they are systematically collected, analyzed, and translated into English to make them accessible to a wide audience. Since the end of the Cold War, however, support for open source analysis, and making it available as widely as possible inside and outside the government, has waned even though such sources have perhaps never been more important than they are today. Thus, Congress should consider significantly increasing funding for Open Source Enterprise and for making it as widely available as possible.

Second, Congress should examine the possibility and feasibility of a strategy of "active denial" for the US to adopt to meet the challenges posed by China's military modernization in East Asia. This strategy would seek to deny China a quick victory and force it to face the prospect a protracted contest to be able to achieve its national objectives through the use of armed force.⁴⁵ Such an approach can increase crisis stability and deterrence. The key components are to increase the resiliency and survivability of US forward-deployed forces, emphasize capabilities to counter Chinese power projection in the region, and work more closely with the allies.

⁴⁵ For an overview of such an approach, see Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, "Deterring Without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism Under Austerity," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 185-199

"Strong Army Goal" and "World-Class Military" in the *Liberation Army Daily*, 2012-2019

