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China's Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests

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The Motivations Behind China's Development of Expeditionary Military
Capabilities

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Co-chairs Commissioner Wortzel and Commissioner Fiedler, members of the commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify for this hearing on China's Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests. For my testimony, I will discuss the motivations behind China's development of expeditionary military capabilities, the influence that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has on China's development of expeditionary capabilities, legal and security frameworks that Beijing uses to justify the deployment of its military overseas, and how the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) uses participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs), humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), and counter piracy operations to gain overseas experience.

The Motivations Behind a PLA Expeditionary Force

Over the past decade, Beijing has increasingly adopted a larger military footprint to secure China's expanding interests beyond East Asia—which include protecting the millions of Chinese citizens living abroad, preserving access to energy resources, protecting economic investments and BRI infrastructure projects, and securing critical shipping lanes. Although such operations have been relatively limited to date, the PLA is steadily improving its expeditionary capabilities and has engaged in HA/DR missions, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), counter piracy operations, and peacekeeping missions abroad.

Significant questions remain as to what path China will ultimately take with its expeditionary force, overseas military infrastructure, and supporting logistical capabilities. Will the PLA keep its expeditionary capabilities modest, to be used for specific, discrete missions, or is Beijing aiming for a more ambitious force that can not only secure China's interests but also shape the security environment, project global power, and grow China's influence overseas? Examining the motivations behind why China desires an expeditionary capability is critical to assess the direction of a future PLA expeditionary force. Chinese literature and official speeches articulate several reasons why China needs expeditionary military capabilities. These can be binned into four categories: 1) Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" construct and the need for a strong military to achieve Great Power status; 2) Beijing's expanding involvement in international affairs and the desire to actively shape the security environment; 3) Domestic expectations for the protection of Chinese interests; and 4) Increased pressure on Beijing to be a security provider for the international community.

The Chinese Dream

Xi Jinping has outlined a vision to elevate China's role in the world, referred to by the terms the "Chinese Dream" and "National Rejuvenation."¹ This vision lays out policy objectives to ensure economic prosperity, social stability, and an overall higher quality of life for Chinese citizens. It also contains policy objectives related to expanding the country's national power through

¹ "Xi Jinping: Pursuing Dream for 1.3 Billion Chinese," China.org, March 17, 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2013/2013-03/17/content_28267500_3.htm

modernizing the military to protect China's interests at home and abroad.² Although Hu Jintao in 2004 directed the PLA to develop the means to protect China's interests overseas through the New Historic Missions, the Chinese Dream takes this direction further by linking Beijing's economic and security goals through policy initiatives such as the BRI. According to Chinese analysis, the BRI contributes to a more stable security environment through regional integration, improves China's energy security, and expands Beijing's influence overseas.³ With the Chinese Dream and the BRI linked to China's security goals, Beijing has provided the PLA with justification for building an expeditionary force.

Beijing's Expanding Involvement in International Affairs

A second motivation behind the PLA's development of expeditionary capabilities is China's increasing involvement in international affairs and Beijing's willingness to use political, economic, and military power to actively shape the international environment in favor of China's interests. Increased investment in United Nations PKOs is one example of Beijing's greater willingness to use its military to shape the international environment. China is now the number one contributor of peacekeeping troops to the UN, with a force consisting of 8,000 soldiers. It is also the number two funder of PKOs, contributing 15% of the UN's peacekeeping budget in 2019.⁴ Another example of China's willingness to use the military to shape the international security environment is the opening of the PLA's naval base in Djibouti, which allows the PLA to preposition resources, conduct regular maritime operations, and station a permanent troop presence—currently a contingent of PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC)—on the strategic waterways of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.⁵

Domestic Expectations

The Chinese public increasingly expects the government to be able to protect citizens when an incident occurs overseas, and these expectations create pressure on the PLA to develop and deploy the necessary expeditionary capabilities. The PLA has been caught off guard in past situations where Chinese citizens were in danger, such as when unrest swept Libya in 2011 and

² These goals were reiterated in Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress: "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

³ Yang Jian and Zheng Yingqin, "'Renlei mingyun gongtongti' sixiang yu xin jiang yu de guoji zhili" [The "Community of Common Destiny" Concept and the New Territories of International Governance], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, no. 4 (2017). "Xi Jinping: Jianchi zongti guojia anquan guan, zou Zhongguo tese guojia anquan daolu" [Xi Jinping: Commit to a Grand National Security Concept, a Roadmap for National Security with Chinese Characteristics], *Xinhua*, April 14, 2014.

⁴ "Does China Contribute to the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission?" CSIS China Power, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-un-mission/>. United Nations Peacekeeping, "How we are funded," <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments of the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C., 2019), pg. 26, https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf.

Chinese oil companies were attacked. In that case, the PLA's lack of capabilities forced Beijing to dispatch civilian assets—including charter flights, China COSCO Shipping Company transport ships, and fishing boats—to rescue its citizens.⁶ Chinese citizens overseas have faced other dangerous situations such as in Mali in 2015, when 15 PRC citizens were taken hostage and 3 killed in a terrorist attack. In the aftermath of the attack, Xi Jinping promised the public that Beijing would strengthen China's ability to respond to terrorism abroad; a direct call for the PLA to hone its expeditionary capabilities.⁷ Similarly, PRC businessmen were in harm's way when a wave of unrest swept Uganda in 2018, targeting Chinese investments and forcing the Ugandan president to deploy the local military to protect Chinese citizens.⁸ As more Chinese nationals move abroad for BRI projects, the public expects that the PLA can keep them safe should a crisis arise.

Pressure to Be an International Security Provider

The use of PLA expeditionary capabilities to support disaster relief and augment international security is a rationale Beijing uses to justify both the building of an expeditionary force and overseas facilities such as the naval base in Djibouti. Xi Jinping has publicly stated that the military should play a pivotal role in “the maintenance of international security affairs” and try its best to provide more “public security products to the international community.”⁹ This includes the provision of aid to other nations and their citizens when the PLA is called upon, such as during natural disasters or conflicts. The PLA has conducted limited operations to assist foreigners abroad, including the 2015 NEO in Yemen where the PLA rescued both Chinese nationals and citizens from other countries, and HA/DR operations in Haiti, where the PLA sent a contingent of peacekeeping troops to assist following the 2011 earthquake.¹⁰

China has also come under criticism when it has failed to respond to disasters, including after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines where the U.S. provided substantial aid to the ravaged nation while China did little other than offer a small financial donation and send a relief team.¹¹ Though

⁶ Geoff Dyer and Leslie Hook, “Chinese Oil Interests Attacked in Libya,” *Financial Times*, February 24, 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/eef58d52-3fe2-11e0-811f-00144feabdc0>.

⁷ “China Condemns Mali Hotel Attack, Pledges Improved Cooperation to Fight Terrorism,” Xinhua, November 27, 2015, <http://www.focac.org/eng/zj/zj/t1318651.htm>.

⁸ Xinhua, Uganda assures Chinese investors of security after series of attacks, November 13, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201811/15/WS5bec943ba310eff303288bbd.html>

⁹ “Xi Jinping jieshou *Huaerjie Ribao* caifang” [Xi Jinping Interview with the *Wall Street Journal*], Xinhua, September 22, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/22/c_1116642032.htm. China Daily (2017). “习近平的国家安全观” (“Xi Jinping’s View of National Security”), http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-02/22/content_28299966.htm.

¹⁰ “China Sends 9th Peacekeeping Police Squad to Haiti,” *People’s Daily*, November 2, 2011.

¹¹ BBC, “Typhoon Haiyan: China Sends Relief Team to the Philippines,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24997186>.

in the past the PLA's lack of expeditionary capabilities hampered China's ability to render aid and provide security to other nations, it is building enough expeditionary maritime and air capabilities to provide at least limited assistance in the aftermath of disaster or conflict overseas, or to address threats such as piracy. Beijing will increasingly face pressure to use the PLA's expeditionary capabilities to assist with international security as China's role in the world grows.

The BRI and Development of PLA Expeditionary Capabilities

Beyond the drivers discussed above, BRI projects and investments, which are often located in unstable or vulnerable areas of the world, have heightened the operational and strategic security risks to Chinese interests. This in turn has increased the urgency for the PLA to develop the expeditionary capabilities required to address these threats to China's interests, which include:

Maritime Security

Security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and maritime trade routes. China's overseas trade relies on several major commercial shipping routes, which pass through regional hotspots such as the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait, the Bay of Bengal, the North Sea, and potentially the Arctic in the future.¹² China has long held security concerns over the vulnerability of maritime trade routes such as the Malacca Strait, a strategic chokepoint, and recently raised the security level for its civilian shipping vessels heading through the Strait.¹³ The BRI "Maritime Silk Road," which seeks to better connect China and open new trade routes through strategic access to global ports and waterways, will further create vulnerabilities in the maritime domain such as greater exposure to piracy and terrorism.¹⁴

Security for overseas ports and bases. As it expands its maritime footprint abroad, China must also consider security for overseas ports and bases. While security at Chinese-operated ports has so far been handled by a combination of local security forces and private security companies, as China's presence in the maritime realm expands it will likely attempt to negotiate dual civilian-military access agreements to be able to rely more on the PLA for protection.¹⁵ This might include establishing agreements in BRI countries for preferred access to overseas commercial

¹² For a map of the various land and maritime routes proposed by BRI, "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?" see Center for Strategic and International Studies, China Power, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹³ Bloomberg News, "China Raises Security Warning on Ships Plying Malacca Strait," July 30, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-03/china-raises-warning-for-shipping-in-malacca-strait-people-say>

¹⁴ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative" http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm

¹⁵ The 2019 version of the U.S. Department of Defense China military power report states that in 2018 China sought to expand its military basing and access in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the western Pacific, though it was constrained by the "willingness of host countries to support a PLA presence." U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, (Washington, D.C., 2019), p. 16.

ports and a limited number of PLA logistic facilities collocated with those ports.¹⁶ A significant BRI investment recipient such as Pakistan might enter into such an agreement.

Border Security

With fourteen neighbors, China has the most land borders of any country in the world.¹⁷ As China's interests have increased so too have Beijing's concerns about border security, including the threat of terrorism along the border that targets Chinese citizens or BRI infrastructure and energy projects. BRI investments in Central Asia and South Asia, including Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan are vulnerable to instability and terrorism, and China is also concerned about terrorists crossing the border via Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor.¹⁸ As a result, the PLA, or the People's Armed Police (PAP), has reportedly established a small border facility in Tajikistan, from where they can monitor the passage into Afghanistan.¹⁹ The PLA has also conducted joint border patrols with the Pakistani and Tajik militaries, as well as with Afghan security forces, though this has not been officially confirmed.²⁰

Host Country Unrest and Conflict

China has already had to confront local unrest and conflict that threaten its investments and citizens, and this is likely to be a continuing theme as BRI investments in Africa, South America, and South Asia increase. For example, in 2018 the Ugandan military was ordered to protect Chinese companies following a spate of robberies that cost Chinese investors significant sums of money.²¹ In 2015, two Chinese diplomats were shot to death in the Philippines, and that same year seven Chinese nationals were among the 170 hostages taken in Mali. The PLA has had to deploy twice to evacuate citizens, sending a frigate to safeguard evacuees in Libya in 2011, and

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access*, December 2018, p. 4, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

¹⁷ China borders North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam.

¹⁸ Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Nadege Rolland (ed.), National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019, p. 73.

¹⁹ Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops," February 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html

²⁰ Huang Panyue, ed., "China, Pakistan Conduct Joint Border Patrol," China Military Online, July 4, 2018, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-07/04/content_8079676_2.htm. Shan Jie and Huang Jingjing, "PLA Border Troops Fortified," *Global Times*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1058947.shtml>.

²¹ BBC News, "Uganda orders military to protect Chinese businesses," November 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46221236>.

conducting a larger NEO in Yemen in 2015 to evacuate more than five hundred citizens of various countries.²²

Protection of infrastructure

BRI investments include building factories, pipelines, railways, and roadways, particularly in Central and South Asia. China has so far protected these investments using local security forces and, increasingly, private security companies.²³ While the PLA is unlikely to deploy abroad only to protect these investments (barring other security threats), it is possible that in the future the PLA or the PAP might negotiate agreements to join host country security forces to protect vulnerable or critical infrastructure such as large oil and gas pipelines or facilities.

Security Frameworks and Legal Justifications for PLA Expeditionary Operations

China justifies the acquisition and use of its nascent expeditionary military capabilities in the following ways:

First, Beijing has worked to align the security interests of BRI countries with China's own interests through the creation of security dialogs and frameworks for security cooperation, which in turn provide a foundation for future military cooperation and expanded PLA presence. Examples include China's efforts to protect BRI projects through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has focused on counterterrorism and protection of oil and gas pipelines in Central Asia.²⁴ The Quadrennial Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), established in 2016, includes Pakistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and China, and provides a forum for military and security cooperation with between its members. It also functions as the primary security dialogue between China and Afghanistan.²⁵

Second, in 2015 China adopted a counterterrorism law that provides legal justification for the PLA to deploy overseas, stating that the PLA and the PAP "may assign people to leave the country on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission."²⁶ Notably, the law does not state that China must receive the permission of the host country prior to deploying. Furthermore, the term "counterterrorism missions" is broad and can encompass

²² Ankit Panda, "Chinese Nationals Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen," *Diplomat*, April 06, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/china-evacuates-foreign-nationals-from-yemen>.

²³ For an in-depth discussion on China's use of private security companies overseas, see Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Interests* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2271.html.

²⁴ Shi Yinglun, "Commentary: "Belt" of security and "Road" to development for SCO in challenging times," Xinhua, June 13, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/13/c_138139849.htm.

²⁵ Zhang Tao, "2nd QCCM High-level Military Leaders' Meeting kicks off," China Military Online, August 28, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/28/content_7733834.htm.

²⁶ Zhou Jian, "The armed police force has a legal basis for going abroad to fight terrorism," [Wujing Budui chujing fankong you le falu yiju], Legal Daily, January 28, 2016.

threats to citizens, infrastructure, and even China's maritime interests such as overseas ports and facilities. Given this, the PLA could hypothetically deploy overseas under the counterterrorism law to address many of the threats to BRI interests discussed above.

Third, China cultivates the narrative that PLA expeditionary capabilities contribute to international security. Beijing uses this to justify PLA participation in UN peacekeeping operations, for example, where the PLA is the largest contributor of troops and is expanding its role. The PLA Navy has for years portrayed the Gulf of Aden counter piracy operations as beneficial to international security. Chinese media hailed the opening of the Djibouti naval base as "good for regional stability," and contributing to "international obligations."²⁷ The PLA's activities overseas help to normalize China's military presence abroad, contribute to China's influence, and support the narrative that the military can be beneficial to international security.

PLA Overseas Experience and Training for Future Expeditionary Operations

PLA participation in peacekeeping operations, counter piracy efforts, and HA/DR also provide a low-risk training environment for Chinese troops. Although the PLA's expeditionary missions have expanded in recent years, only a small percentage of troops and commanders have deployed to missions abroad. Deployments by the PLA Navy Marine Corps to Djibouti, increased participation in UN PKOs, and a possible future expansion of counter piracy operations to the Middle East will augment the PLA's overseas experience. UN PKOs, for example, provide the PLA with experience working with multinational forces deployed overseas. Apart from multilateral exercises conducted under the auspices of the SCO, the PLA does not have a great deal of experience working with or commanding multinational forces in hostile environments. The UN peacekeeping operations also provide some deployment experience for the PLA's Special Forces units (SOF), which have been sent to the UN mission in Mali.²⁸ The Gulf of Aden counter piracy operations have allowed the PLA to iron out logistics and clarify command and control for the deployed task forces, although these would likely still be challenges for the PLA in a larger overseas operation.

Although they do provide some deployment experience, the PLA's current overseas missions are relatively limited in scope and do not offer the kind of training that the military would need for more complex expeditionary operations. Lack of experience and training could hamper the PLA should it need to conduct large-scale complex expeditionary missions, such as a sustained operation to protect Chinese citizens and investments from unrest or a NEO in a hostile environment—both plausible scenarios given the expansion of BRI investments around the world. The reality is that many of the PLA's expeditionary capabilities will be tested for the first time during a crisis, and this, along with military planning, will shape the future of the PLA's expeditionary force. Finally, perhaps the greatest benefit to China of PLA participation in overseas operations is that it enables the military to build institutional ties with local forces,

²⁷ Huang Jingjing, "China's logistic hub in Djibouti to stabilize region, protect interests," Global Times, March 15, 2016, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/973900.shtml>.

²⁸ Chen Zhuo, "6th Chinese peacekeeping force to Mali returns home," China Military Online, May 27, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/27/content_9515387.htm.

increases China's influence with host country governments, and normalizes PLA presence overseas. Like the security frameworks discussed above, Beijing can use these military and security ties to expand China's overseas military footprint in the future.

Implications for the United States

The motivations described in this testimony demonstrate that the PLA has an operational imperative to develop the expeditionary capabilities to protect its overseas interests. China will continue to use the defense of its global security interests, along with security cooperation agreements like the QCCM and the counterterrorism law to justify the development and use of its expeditionary military capabilities in the coming decade.

These motivations also provide some clues as to how Beijing might choose to use its expeditionary capabilities in the future. The PLA might deploy when:

- Drivers pressure Beijing to act, such as the Chinese public's expectations to protect citizens or to prove to the international community that China can defend its interests. Examples include the 2015 NEO in Yemen and the counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.
- Chinese interests are directly threatened. Examples include infrastructure and energy projects or terrorist threats against Chinese nationals living in BRI countries.
- PLA presence can help build influence and military ties with host governments, train local security forces to protect China's interests, and lay the groundwork for future military expansion if required. PLA and PAP deployments to Tajikistan are an example of this.
- The PLA can gain overseas deployment experience and training while protecting China's interests and contributing to international security missions. The PLA's participation in UN peacekeeping operations in Sudan and Mali fall into this category.
- The PLA's expeditionary capabilities are sufficiently developed to accomplish the mission.

Finally, the United States should be prepared for China to use its overseas military power as a foreign policy tool as the PLA's expeditionary capabilities grow. This is already happening: PLA and PAP deployments to BRI countries in Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia augment China's economic and political influence in those regions. Beijing will likely continue to use its military to boost relations with key countries and shape the international security environment. Of course, this also carries some risks for China as increased use of the military overseas may alienate some countries.

Policy Recommendations for the United States Congress

- 1) **Work to deepen engagement with countries that are considering military cooperation with China.** The United States should increase engagement with potential Chinese military partners. By offering a mix of incentives and disincentives, the U.S. can limit the options Beijing has to establish and expand military presence overseas while augmenting U.S. security cooperation efforts and deepening military relationships.

- 2) **Take advantage of opportunities for closer international relationships as Chinese expeditionary capabilities expand.** A stronger expeditionary PLA will undoubtedly create some angst around the world as concerns arise about China's military objectives and influence. The United States should look for opportunities to form closer relationships with states that have these concerns and that would consider more military engagement U.S. forces. For example, India, which is worried about the PLA Navy establishing routine patrols in the Indian Ocean, might welcome a closer U.S.-India military relationship, particularly with regard to surveillance assistance in the Indian Ocean and the tracking of Chinese submarines.
- 3) **Consider options for influencing China's use of the PLA overseas.** Although Beijing might have the option of deploying the PLA to address security threats or crises, the United States should look for opportunities to shape China's use of its expeditionary military force. This could include rallying U.S. allies and partners to back Chinese action to resolve a security issue, for example. Or it might include using the lack of foreign support for PLA involvement to attempt to tip China's calculus in the direction of pursuing nonmilitary options.
- 4) **Increase dialogue on Chinese security issues between U.S. combatant commands, defense and diplomatic attachés around the world, and allies and partners.** The PLA is likely to have an increased role in shaping the international security environment and building China's influence overseas as its expeditionary capabilities improve. To prepare for this, the United States should work to better connect U.S. and allied military organizations around the world to discuss PLA expeditionary capabilities and China's overseas influence.