



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

TESTIMONY

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HEARING ON A “WORLD-CLASS” MILITARY: ASSESSING CHINA’S GLOBAL MILITARY AMBITIONS

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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the implications of a “World-Class” Chinese military for the United States and its allies and partners.

Gone are the days when China posed solely a regional challenge to the United States and its allies in the Western Pacific. It now poses a global challenge to world order. China is seeking not only to exert influence in the Asia-Pacific region, but across the globe. Indeed, Beijing is increasingly exerting its political, economic, and military influence to coerce U.S. allies and partners, contest international law and freedom of navigation in crucial waterways such as the South China Sea; weaken the U.S. position across the globe; and otherwise seek a position of geopolitical dominance from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and influence far beyond.¹ It is using predatory economic statecraft in an effort to weaken its geopolitical rivals, including the United States, and give it decisive strategic leverage over its neighbors.

Gone also are the days that the military challenge posed by China was confined to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s area of operations. Rather, China poses a challenge – political, economic, and military – that crosses the boundaries of the Defense Department’s geographic combatant commands and the State Department’s regional bureaus.

Four aspects of the rise of China stand out as being of particular concern to the United States and its allies.² If these features were to change, all else being equal, the United States would be much apt to view China as a competitor.

¹ Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies Against Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018).

² See the discussion in Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp, Billy Fabian, and Peter Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019) and Thomas G. Mahnken, “The Australia-US Alliance in US Strategic Policy” in Peter J. Dean, Stephan Frühling, and Brendan Taylor, eds., *Australia’s American Alliance* (Melbourne: Melbourne U P, 2016).

The first has to do with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's increasing attention to external affairs. It is axiomatic that any country's political leaders pay greater attention to domestic matters than to international affairs, and that is certainly true regarding the CCP leadership, which is highly attentive to threats to domestic stability. Nevertheless, in recent years China has become increasingly active on the international stage. China has not only exerted its weight in its neighborhood, but also doing so increasingly in areas far removed from the Asian continent, to include Africa and the Persian Gulf. This international activism, to include not only economic investment and attempts to increase political influence, but also increasingly military deployments, raises concerns in the United States and among America's allies.

The second aspect of China's rise that raises concern has to do with China's geopolitical orientation. Whereas the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was long focused on the Asian continent, in recent decades it has increasingly adopted a maritime orientation. It is thus the build-up of the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF), as well as other anti-access/area denial (or, in Chinese parlance, counter-intervention) capabilities, such as Beijing's missile and anti-satellite weapons, and not Chinese military spending in the abstract, which has stimulated a US and allied response. Similarly, China's efforts to claim sovereignty over the South China Sea and East China Sea and attempts to coerce or invade Taiwan would bring China into conflict with the United States and its allies.

A third area of concern, related to the previous two, involves China's attitude toward the international status quo: China's leadership has increasingly challenged the status quo, whether rhetorically or, increasingly, through action. Nothing illustrates this attitude more tangibly and dramatically than China's campaign of building and then militarizing new land features in the South China Sea as a means of bolstering Beijing's claim of ownership.

A final area of concern has to do with China's domestic political system. However loudly or quietly the United States and its allies seek to promote democracy abroad, China's authoritarian political system and disregard for human rights and personal freedom is a recurring source of tension with the United States, its allies, and others in the region and beyond. Whatever U.S. leaders say, the leadership of the CCP firmly believes that the United States is out to overthrow it. Moreover, under Xi Jinping the CCP has set about establishing an authoritarian alternative to the liberal international order.

A strong case can be made that if these features were to change – if China were to become more internally focused, emphasize more the Asian continent over its maritime periphery, become more supportive of the status quo, and more pluralistic – then the United States and its allies would be much less concerned about China's overall rise. Indeed, under these circumstances China would come more to resemble today's India: a rising power with growing economic strength that is internally focused, continentally focused, supportive of large parts of the international status quo, and pluralistic—indeed, a robust—democracy.

China's military modernization has been driven in large measure by a perceived set of strategic and operational challenges – strategic and operational challenges that, in the view of Beijing's leaders, we pose to them. These include the perceived need to counter (1) the attractiveness of democracy, (2) the pervasiveness of Western media, and (3) the dominance of U.S. power projection forces. China has been innovating to solve these challenges for years and even decades and have in the process developed new ways of war that range from so-called “anti-access/area denial” (or “counter intervention”) capabilities to so-called “gray-zone warfare”.

Beijing has also invested in a series of capabilities designed to demonstrate that China possesses a top-tier military. Thus, the PLA has not only built a formidable force to counter U.S. power projection capabilities (including aircraft carriers), but also pursued power projection capabilities (including aircraft carriers) of its own. China is not only developing and fielding a suite of anti-satellite weapons, but also lofting an ever-larger constellation of military satellites.

China's drive to become a world-class military is also threatening the qualitative superiority of the U.S. armed forces – something we have long taken for granted. To date, China has been most successful in innovating in a limited set of areas, to include missile and space capabilities. However, Beijing is devoting considerable resources to spur innovation in emerging areas of technology, to include artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and other areas with significant military potential. The U.S. Government needs to ensure that it is able to harvest the fruits of private sector innovation for national defense and to safeguard the national security innovation base against malign foreign influence. Doing so will be vital to maintaining our qualitative edge into the future.

Beyond additional defense spending, developing innovative operational concepts and fielding new organizations and capabilities to overcome the challenges posed by China should become the urgent focus of Defense Department investment.³ In an era of constrained resources, those concepts and capabilities that offer the greatest strategic and operational leverage should receive preferential funding over those that do not.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff should lead the development of joint operational concepts, including efforts both to use existing capabilities in new and innovative ways as well as to craft roles for truly new capabilities. Today as in the past, Congress can spark the development of innovative operational concepts by requiring and funding experiments and demonstrations and demanding realistic assessments of them.

Potential innovative programs where the Department of Defense can begin these experiments include:

Neutralizing Anti-Access/Area-Denial Threats through Long-Range, Multi-Dimensional Strike. Several subordinate efforts appear particularly promising.

First, the U.S. government purchased two X-47B stealthy unmanned aerial system (UAS) technology demonstrator aircraft before terminating the program. The Defense Department could use the aircraft to develop innovative concepts of operations for stealthy land- and sea-based unmanned systems, to include the value of autonomy in such systems as well as the use of innovative logistical concepts to extend their range.

Second, the Navy is procuring three DDG-1000 Zumwalt class surface vessels. The attributes of these ships, to include their stealth, large displacement, and electric propulsion, make them both unique as surface combatants as well as potentially valuable assets for experimentation. The Defense Department could use the ships to develop concepts of operations for operating within range of an adversary's anti-access/area-denial capabilities. Specifically, they could be used to determine the value of stealthy surface combatants for conducting anti-air, anti-surface, and strike warfare in denied environments.

³ See Thomas G. Mahnken, Grace B. Kim, and Adam Lemon, *Piercing the Fog of Peace: Developing Innovative Operational Concepts for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019)

Third, the Defense Department is currently procuring a new Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), which should provide a highly capable weapon against enemy ships. However, current plans call for the missile to be carried by three aircraft, the B-1B, F/A-18E/F, and F-35, which will be increasingly challenged to operate in the Western Pacific due to growing threats to aircraft, tankers, and bases in that region. Accordingly, the Defense Department should develop concepts to integrate LRASM onto the B-2 stealth bomber, which has the range and survivability that may be needed to reach Chinese or Russian shipping in defended waters. Should the concept prove successful, LRASM could subsequently be integrated onto the forthcoming B-21 bomber, which should be available in greater numbers than the B-2 for missions such as maritime strike.

Creating Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges for Competitors. Each of the Services is developing capabilities that could be used to create anti-access challenges for competitors. The Army and Marine Corps are both exploring deploying land-based anti-ship missiles such as LRASM, the Naval Strike Missile, and Maritime Strike Tomahawk; the Navy is modernizing its anti-ship and land-attack capabilities; and, as described above, the Air Force plans to equip some of its aircraft with anti-ship missiles. Deployed in the First and Second Island Chains and fed by ISR and targeting information from UASs such as the MQ-9, such capabilities could reassure allies and deter China from committing aggression. Further experiments and demonstrations could yield innovative operational concepts for linking U.S. and allied forward-based and expeditionary land-based precision strike systems with sea-based munitions and tactical aircraft. Such experiments could yield new concepts for projecting and sustaining forces in A2/AD environments as well as reinforcing and sustaining forward engaged forces.

Protecting Critical Bases of Operations Against Salvo Attacks. The United States should develop innovative operational concepts for defending those bases. Such defenses could include medium-range high-energy lasers (HEL), high-power microwave (HPM) systems, guided projectiles launched by rapid-ring guns, and low-cost surface-to-air missiles. Unmanned and manned aircraft carrying extended-range air-to-air missiles and equipped with wide-area surveillance sensors, HELs, and possibly HPM systems could further extend the range and increase the threat engagement capacity of a base salvo defense complex.⁴

Establishing Survivable C4ISR Networks. The Defense Department should develop innovative operational concepts and business practices to allow it to develop rapidly new space capabilities, and to launch them on relatively short notice. Such an approach could include not just the development of innovative practices, but also relationships with civilian space industry. It should also explore alternatives to space for services such as communications; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and precision navigation. For example, the Defense Department should experiment with the use of UASs such as the MQ-9 to provide such services in a space-denied environment. Indeed, UASs can provide these capabilities at much lower cost than launching new satellites. Such initiatives would yield insight into the capabilities needed to enhance the capability and survivability of space systems and the services they provide, as well as new ways to leverage interoperable joint C4ISR in the face of adversary threats.

The development of new concepts and conclusion of experiments are not ends in and of themselves. Too often, Defense Department experiments have been side projects that create a façade of innovation without actually having any substantial impact. As a result, the forces and capabilities we have today—and are

⁴ Mark Gunzinger and Carl Rehberg, *Air and Missile Defense at a Crossroads: New Concepts and Technologies to Defend America's Overseas Bases* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018).

currently procuring—are out of alignment with the world of 2019 and beyond. The objective of concept development and experimentation must be to inform major shifts in investment and force structure toward the forces and capabilities that can bring the U.S. military back into alignment with the operational challenges it faces.

About the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.