

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

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Commissioner Wortzel, Commissioner Fiedler, distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss how the Department of Defense views China's power-projection ambitions and the policy implications for the Department. My testimony today will briefly outline the scope of China's military power projection capabilities and aims before laying out, in clear terms, what this challenge means for reorienting the Department to strategic competition with China.

In a few short decades, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken one of the most ambitious military modernization efforts in recent history. Although this immense effort has undoubtedly accelerated under Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping, the foundation of modernization was put in place well before his tenure. In fact, its roots can be traced to the founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong, whose work *On Protracted War* called for a "People's War" centered on mass mobilization during World War II. It is the marriage of resources and strategic aims in recent years that has allowed China's military modernization ambitions to bear fruit.

Facts alone speak to the impressive growth of China's military. China now has approximately two million military personnel.¹ China's official defense budget has soared from roughly \$28 billion in 1999 to \$177 billion in 2019 – the second largest in the world behind the United States.² The PLA Navy is, by some estimates, now the world's largest in terms of total assets. And China's military is fielding an increasingly formidable array of ballistic and cruise missiles, modern fighter aircraft, autonomous systems, and a suite of cyber and space capabilities, postured to deny the U.S. military access to the Indo-Pacific Theater if called upon.

But the story of China's military power-projection goes beyond numbers and capabilities. The PRC adopts a long-term, whole-of-nation approach to military modernization nested in broader national development and security goals. China construes its military strategy as subordinate to overall PRC national development and security, which are tied to Xi Jinping's social-political goal of achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." China's five-year plans related to science, technology, and education are themselves subservient components of China's national security and military goals. Indigenous innovation and scientific development in China not only serves civilian purposes, they also feed and enrich China's military ambitions through a sophisticated network of military-civil fusion.

¹ China's official number of military personnel does not include China's Paramilitary Force, the People's Armed Police, or the Coast Guard, nor does it include the Reserve forces.

² China's published military budget omits several major categories of expenditure such as research and development. Therefore, actual PLA spending is most likely higher than its official reported budget.

Beijing's ultimate goal in governance terms is to perfect its Marxist-Leninist governance "system" to secure China's position as a respected, great power by 2049 – the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The CPC views its governance system as a strategic asset, not liability, of its overall national power, and devoted much of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee in 2019 campaigning to strengthen the CPC's socialist governance system and capabilities.

In geopolitical terms, by 2049, the CPC leadership seeks final resolution of outstanding sovereignty and territorial disputes, to include, most prominently, the unification of Taiwan with the Chinese Mainland. And in military terms, China seeks to attain "world class" military status by 2049 – at least on par with other great powers such as the United States. The military's interim 2035 goal includes achieving an "informationized" force with modernized command and control systems and a well-integrated, joint fighting force able to fuse all services and service sub-components together operationally to meet Xi's guidance to "fight and win wars."

China's global economic footprint is setting conditions for the PLA to establish a presence far from its immediate periphery. China's 2019 Defense White Paper makes this linkage increasingly clear, for example, stating that a key task of the PLA is to "safeguard China's overseas interests," including "addressing deficiencies in overseas operations and support by developing offshore forces, building overseas logistical facilities, and enhancing capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks." The Defense White Paper also highlights the PLA's role in upholding international security requirements, which it frames as "contributing to building a community of common destiny for mankind." In pushing out further, CPC strategists have created the narrative that the PLA is simply "fulfilling international obligations" by enhancing its overseas posture to secure the global commons.

China's military power projection is increasingly linked to China's overseas policy alignment and lending vehicles, such as One Belt One Road Belt (OBOR), which may serve as potential logistical platforms for a military presence. China's capability to convert OBOR-financed projects, such as ports, into strategic platforms for military access, is of increasing concern to the Department. PLA strategists have argued in open-source publications for the need to secure access points overseas for logistics and refueling hubs. In addition to the establishment of its first overseas base in Djibouti, press reports indicate that China is seeking to expand its military basing and access in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the western Pacific. Chinese civilian research organizations have been much more active in the Arctic as well, which may provide an opening for an eventual military presence there. In other words, it is not a matter of whether the PLA intends to establish another military base overseas, but when and how they plan to do it.

These trends, and China's military aims, will continue apace as long as China can maintain a stable and peaceful periphery conducive to economic growth. If the global environment remains stable, China will undoubtedly seek to use its growing economic and military power to shape the regional environment in ways advantageous to its interests. These trends will also create conditions for a globally-postured PLA, increasing interactions with U.S. and allied forces in new theaters and multi-lateral events.

The United States is not isolated in this perspective. Nearly a year ago, the European Union framed China as a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. NATO has recently started to analyze the long-term implications of China's rise for the Alliance. The Department will work with all allies and partners to build a shared understanding of the nature of systemic rivalry with China. The choices that the Department makes now, in partnership with allies and partners, will directly impact the trajectory of the rules-based international order.

Many of the above-mentioned trends and motivations of the CPC and the PLA do not align with U.S. national security interests. China's views of sovereignty, especially as they relate to unification of Taiwan by force and excessive, now militarized, maritime claims in the South China Sea, run counter to the interests of the United States and its allies and partners. China has increasingly employed coercive tactics and measures in the South China Sea to deny claimants the legitimate regulation, exploitation, and use of maritime natural resources in their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). China has dredged and reclaimed thousands of acres of land on PRC-claimed features in the South China Sea, which now host military facilities for forward-deployed military operations. The PRC views the U.S. network of alliances and the military posture in the Indo-Pacific as a strategic threat. In order to serve the CPC's domestic and international narrative, PRC propaganda organs paint the Department of Defense's presence in the region as seeking to contain China's rise.

At the geostrategic level, the Department's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) summarizes, in clear terms, the broader challenge the United States and its allies now face from China in the Indo-Pacific and globally. It reads, "China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future."

In most of the potential flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific region – the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, or the Korean Peninsula – the United States may find itself in a military crisis with China. Chinese leaders are keenly aware of this fact and are modernizing

their military forces for the explicit purpose of denying, degrading, and neutralizing U.S. power projection capabilities. The PLA will look to offset qualitative U.S. military advantages in theater by employing asymmetric counter-measures, such as degrading U.S. command and control linkages and exploiting seams in the Joint Force. The United States can expect all domains of operations to be targeted by Chinese counter-intervention activities.

The stakes of the challenge of conflict with China, in other words, are formidable, and will require fundamental adjustments within the Department to prepare itself to deter, and if necessary, prevail in a conflict with China.

The Department of Defense, and Secretary Esper, have a focused, concerted approach to re-orient the Department to meet the challenge posed by China. This approach is reflected in the 2018 NDS and centers around three lines of effort.

The first effort is to *build and deploy a more lethal, resilient joint force*. This includes renewed efforts to man, train, equip Military Services and their components by leveraging existing capabilities while fielding new platforms and technologies. The Department aims to advance the development of emerging technologies, such as hypersonic weapons, directed energy, artificial intelligence, and autonomous platforms, to stay ahead of the innovation curve in future warfare concepts. The Department also seeks further development of the Joint Warfighting Concept to keep the U.S. military agile, lethal, and adaptable.

The second line of effort is to *strengthen alliances, deepen interoperability, and attract new partners*. Our treaty allies remain a key asymmetric advantage vis-à-vis China in the Indo-Pacific region. They are integral to upholding the free and open order through diplomatic activities and combined training, exercises, and operations. At the same time, the NDS directs the Department to redouble its efforts to build new partnerships in the region through capacity-building and new exercises and training programs.

The third line of effort is to *reform the Department for greater performance and affordability*. This includes efforts to promote innovation, including leveraging our rich civilian innovation base; protecting U.S. technological advantages by fortifying the national security innovation base; promoting whole-of-government solutions across different agencies within the U.S. government; and dynamic employment of the force to build readiness while increasing global activities.

The NDS also makes clear that competition with China does not mean confrontation, nor must it lead to conflict. A key component of the NDS is to maintain a constructive, stable, and results-oriented defense relationship with China that promotes open channels of communication to

prevent and manage crisis and reduce risk of miscalculation that could escalate into conflict. Although our two nations may not always agree, we recognize it serves both our people's interests to cooperate where our interests align, which includes maintaining productive defense engagement and dialogue with the PLA.

Secretary Esper is deeply committed in both word and deed to achieving the goals laid out in the NDS. The NDS has truly become the guidepost for strategic planning throughout the Department and drives decision-making at all levels within the defense enterprise.

Finally, it is important to point out that Congress has an indispensable role to play in competition with China. Effectively resourcing and implementing the NDS through sustained, consistent funding for the Department is crucial to meeting the challenge posed by a rising China. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2020 – with its provisions for reports and briefings on the economic and security implications of China's rise – is a key component in promoting greater understanding of the various security dimensions of China's development. Continued bipartisan support in Congress to meet the China challenge will be integral going forward, as is advocacy and dialogue with legislative counterparts of our allies and partners.

The implications of China's military modernization are profound. This is a long-term challenge that will require sustained funding and strategic planning to address. It will require an increase and reallocation of regional and global investments as well as redoubling interagency efforts to maximize efficiencies. There is no zero cost solution to global competition with China.

The challenge from China is not a replica of that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The competition with China warrants approaches defined by the unique features of contemporary conditions and not legacy rivalries. It is, however, equally as consequential and therefore merits the same concentration of effort as put forth in the past. The Department of Defense will continue to assess the military implications of China's expanding global posture and access in support of these actions, and ensure the Department provides combat-credible military forces needed to fight a war and win, should deterrence fail.