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**“Developments in China’s Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities”**

## **Introduction**

*Note: The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not reflect those of CNA or CNA’s sponsors.*

The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is no longer a force that is primarily tasked with a mission to defend the Chinese homeland and support China’s claims of sovereignty over Taiwan and disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. The PLA is developing into a force that can provide the military means to defend China’s political and economic interests in the region and globally.

This can clearly be seen in the PLA Navy’s shift to a new strategy of “near seas defense and far seas protection.”<sup>1</sup> Near seas refers to the area within the first island chain and far seas to the rest of the world’s oceans. Tasks that come under the term far seas protection include protection of sea lines of communication, protections of Chinese citizens overseas, responding to non-traditional threats such as piracy and natural disasters, international cooperation, and naval diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> The PLA Navy is also acquiring a range of capabilities to enable it to carry out sustained operations far from home, including logistics ships, multi-mission destroyers, and a second carrier.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, China is beginning a major series of military reforms—to be completed by 2020—which are aimed, in part, at creating the new command and organizational relationships to conduct joint operations in the maritime domain, both in the Pacific and globally.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> China, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of. *China's Military Strategy*. Beijing 2015. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2015-05/26/content\\_4586748.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; and Military Strategy Research Department of the Academy of Military Science. *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013. (Zhanlue xue 2013 nianban; 战略学 2013 年版). Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence. *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*. Office of Naval Intelligence. 2015; Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities—Background Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 21 December 2015; and “China Building Second Aircraft Carrier with Domestic Technology,” Bloomberg News, December 31, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-31/china-building-second-aircraft-carrier-with-domestic-technology>.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the PLA reforms, see this morning’s written testimony by Dr. David Finkelstein.

## **Implications for the Security Concerns for Allies, Partners, and Regional Stability**

### *Allies, partners, and others in the region*

China's growing expeditionary and force projection capabilities are likely to impact the entire region, though the nature of that impact will vary considerably. Some countries will likely perceive an increased threat—though the nature of that threat will vary—others, however, may not. Some countries may be willing to allow Chinese forces access to port facilities.

In my view, the most important security implications are for those closest to the Chinese mainland. While the focus of this hearing is on the PLA's expeditionary capabilities, it is important to note that the same capabilities that enable Beijing to project power far from home also enhance its ability to conduct operations within and around the first island chain. A "far seas" navy is not only for use in the far seas. For example, the PLA's current organizational reforms are aimed, in part, at effective joint command and control for operations in the maritime domain. If successful, military reform will enhance the PLA's ability to bring together space, air, and maritime forces in a joint fight whether it is 100 nautical miles from shore, or 1500.

To give another example, ships with the endurance for long distance deployments also have the ability to stay out at sea longer than warships designed to operate closer to shore. And the logistics ships that sustain long-distance deployments also enhance the ability to maintain more ships at operating at sea for a longer period of time. This is especially important in the South China Sea where some of the disputed areas are over 1200 nm from the Chinese mainland.

In short, the acquisition of better power projection capabilities will further enhance China's already considerable military capabilities in and around the first island chain. That would further increase the concerns of Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, all of which have territorial disputes with China. Taiwan would also perceive a greater risk.

The key point I want to make here is that a PLA that has force projection and expeditionary capabilities is a more capable force than one that is designed to fight only close to home. The potential conflicts in the East and South China Seas are not new. But it does mean that the gap between China's capabilities and those of its maritime neighbors will likely increase. While Vietnam and Malaysia are modernizing their armed forces, they are likely to continue to more engagement with the U.S. and other countries to help counter Chinese growing capabilities. The Philippines and Japan, as treaty allies will likely to continue look for a strong commitment from the U.S. and to seek ways to enhance security cooperation with the U.S.

Looking further out, India is likely to have increased concerns over greater Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi will likely have concerns with the presence of Chinese submarines as well as surface ship activity. India is likely also to worry about any increased naval cooperation between China and Pakistan. China is also likely to seek greater access to port facilities in the Indian Ocean region. It has recently signed an agreement with Djibouti and there may be further such agreements in the coming years. Depending on the nature and scope of future Chinese deployments and the state of Sino-Indian relations, India may increase its own defense spending, especially on its naval forces. India may also engage in diplomatic efforts to dissuade other countries in the region from access to port facilities. India may also seek a closer military relationship with the U.S.

More generally, there may be some raised concerns about China's long-term intent, and some Asian subject matter experts I have talked to have raised concerns about a future in which China has a greater naval presence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific and U.S. presence is reduced. That suggests that there would be a demand signal for continued U.S. commitment and presence in the region as a balance to China. At the same time, it should be stressed that many subject matter experts in Asia are concerned about the potential for Sino-U.S. competition being a destabilizing factor.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note, however, that not all countries will see an expeditionary China as a security concern. China's far seas missions include naval diplomacy and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. An expeditionary PLA that can help with a natural disaster response would have advantages both for China and the recipient of that aid. Naval diplomacy and joint exercises offer opportunities for increased engagement with Beijing. Providing the PLA Navy with access to shore facilities could be seen as economically beneficial by some countries in the region. Djibouti's government sees its agreement with China as an advantage and other such agreements may be signed in the future.<sup>6</sup> For Pakistan, a greater Chinese naval presence may be seen as useful as a counter to India, though it remains to be seen how far Beijing may be willing to go in this regard.

In sum, there is a wide range of potential responses to China's future expeditionary capabilities, ranging from grave concern, to mild concern, to possibly welcoming. There is no one size fits all policy solution for the U.S. I would suggest that that implies U.S. policy-makers will need to have a good understanding of the range of perceptions across the region, and that the U.S. approach to the region will have to be very flexible.

### ***U.S. relations with allies and partners in the region***

The U.S. may experience increased pressure from allies and partners for signs of commitment to the region and that the U.S. is not deterred by increased Chinese military capabilities. This could take several forms. It is likely that some treaty allies might request greater clarity on U.S. commitments and what actions and under what circumstances would the U.S. respond to China's actions. There will likely also be greater military presence—more ships and planes on patrol, maintaining or increasing the number of forces assigned to the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific. There will likely be increased interest in more joint-exercises with the U.S. There will also likely be greater demands for help with building military capacity through training and transfer of U.S. platforms and systems.

How the U.S. responds will depend on a number of factors including the state of Sino-U.S. relations and how the Chinese conduct their "far seas protection" mission. Another important factor is what kinds of new commitments, if any, is the U.S. willing to make and will new commitments reduce flexibility in the event of a crisis? Resources can also be an important factor. Will the U.S. military have the resources to provide greater presence and/or engage in more activities with allied and partner militaries? Will demonstrating a greater military commitment to

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews

<sup>6</sup> "China Confirms Military Support Facilities in Djibouti," *China Daily*, November 27, 2015, [http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2015-11/27/content\\_37175244.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2015-11/27/content_37175244.htm).

the region require taking resources from other areas? Will grant aid be sufficient to help build partner capacity?

As China's expeditionary capabilities grow, its use of naval diplomacy and other military to military engagement is likely to expand. China may also seek agreements for greater access to facilities (places not bases) for its ships and aircraft in order to better support a presence far from home. U.S. policy towards the region should anticipate that some countries in the Indian Ocean region, Western Pacific and elsewhere will have reasons to want to expand engagement with China on security issues and be willing to grant PLA Navy ships access to facilities. China's recent agreement with Djibouti for shore facilities is part of the new reality.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. needs to think about how it will respond, or if it should respond.

### ***The U.S. relationship with China***

The U.S. relationship with China will likely face both challenges and opportunities if and when China develops greater expeditionary and force projection capabilities.

The U.S. will need to think about how to balance the needs and concerns of allies and partners with its overall approach to China. Reassuring allies, demonstrating commitments, building partner capacity, etc. are all important actions the U.S. is taking and should take in the future. However, some activities aimed at reassuring allies and partners also have the potential to raise China's perceptions of a threat for the U.S. That in turn could lead to a worsening of relations with China and, assuming it develops force projection capabilities, a more dangerous and unstable security environment. Achieving a good balance between commitments to allies and maintaining a positive working relationship with China is a challenge now and may become more difficult in future if the gap between the PLA and the militaries of neighboring countries grows in the future.

There are potential opportunities to work with China on security issues of common concern. Third party threats to shipping, whether from rogue states, extremist groups, or pirates, are a threat to the interests of both the U.S. and China. China already works with the international community in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. There may be need for more such cooperation elsewhere in the future. Both the U.S. and China may find the need to cooperate in responding to natural disasters and in providing humanitarian assistance. It is also possible that both countries may find it necessary to collaborate in evacuating our citizens from a war zone. Based on my interactions with Asian subject matter experts, I very much doubt you will ever see U.S. and Chinese soldiers working together to combat a threat like ISIS, but I would not exclude that possibility either.

There will be a need to think about relations with China in a global context. Whatever the approach the next administration takes towards China, Beijing is no longer just a security actor in the Asia-Pacific. Nor will it be just an Indo-Asia-Pacific actor. An expeditionary PLA means that Chinese military has a potential role to play wherever Beijing sees its interests at stake.

### **Implications for Military Modernization in the Region**

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<sup>7</sup> "China Confirms Military Support Facilities in Djibouti," *China Daily*, November 27, 2015, [http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2015-11/27/content\\_37175244.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2015-11/27/content_37175244.htm).

There is some potential for Chinese expeditionary capabilities to be a driver of military modernization in some countries. Chinese military modernization and activities are already a factor in the modernization of some armed forces such as Vietnam's acquisition of Kilo class submarines.<sup>8</sup> The Philippines is also developing its maritime and air capabilities with the acquisition of cutters from the U.S., patrol vessels from Japan, and aircraft from South Korea.<sup>9</sup> Japan is in the process of reorienting its defense policy with China in mind.<sup>10</sup>

As noted above, Australia may take Chinese expeditionary capabilities into account in future defense acquisition and planning. India appears to be the country in the Indian Ocean area most likely to build up its own capabilities in response to an increased Chinese presence. For example, the Indian Navy might improve its antisubmarine warfare capabilities in response to Chinese submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is unclear how strong a reaction there will be in the region. An expeditionary China is not the only concern that could drive defense spending for many countries. In addition, most countries have limited resources cannot compete with China on defense spending even if they wanted to. As a number of Asian subject matter experts have told me, most countries in the region will rely on diplomatic efforts to counter balance China's growing presence.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen whether diplomatic efforts alone will be sufficient.

### **Implications for U.S. Interests in the Region**

The PLA is still in the process of transitioning to a military that has well-developed expeditionary and force projection capabilities and that transition period is likely to last at least to 2020 if not longer. By Beijing's own timeline it will take to 2020 to finish the current reforms and reorganization of its command and control structure that it needs in order to conduct combat operations beyond its borders.<sup>13</sup> It will take several years for China to finish building its second carrier and fully integrate it into the fleet. China's most recent white paper states that the PLA

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Thayer, "Can Vietnam's Maritime Strategy Counter China?," *The Diplomat*, September 29, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/can-vietnams-maritime-strategy-counter-china/>; Greg Torode, "Vietnamese military grows to face China threat," *Reuters*, December 15, 2015, reposted to The Japan Times website, [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/12/20/asia-pacific/vietnamese-military-grows-face-china-threat/#.Vp\\_EYXliY0](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/12/20/asia-pacific/vietnamese-military-grows-face-china-threat/#.Vp_EYXliY0); Lindsay Murdoch, "South China Sea dispute: Vietnamese subs deployed as deterrent to China," *Sidney Morning Herald*, January 7, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/vietnamese-subs-deployed-to-south-china-sea-20160107-gm0z6a.html>;

<sup>9</sup> Pedro Uchi, "Philippines shopping for arms to beef up maritime security," *Reuters*, November 28, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-philippines-military-idUSKBN0TH03O20151128>; Parasanth Parameswaran "US to Deliver Four New Patrol Vessels to the Philippines," *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/us-to-deliver-four-new-patrol-vessels-to-the-philippines/>; Manuel Mogato, "Philippines to station warplanes, frigates at former U.S. base facing disputed sea," *Reuters*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-subic-idUSKCN0PP2NN20150715>.

<sup>10</sup> Defense white paper stresses threat posed by China," *The Japan Times*, July 21, 2015, [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/07/21/national/politics-diplomacy/defense-white-paper-stresses-threat-posed-china/#.Vp\\_LMXliY0](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/07/21/national/politics-diplomacy/defense-white-paper-stresses-threat-posed-china/#.Vp_LMXliY0).

<sup>11</sup> For an example see Rajat Pandit, "To Fight China's Andaman and Nicobar Forays, India Deploys Submarine Hunters," *Times of India*, January 19, 2016. <http://timesofindia.com/india/To-fight-Chinas-Andaman-andNicobar-forays-India-deploys-submarine-hunters/articleshow/50632020.cms>.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews

<sup>13</sup> See Dr. Finkelstein's written testimony from earlier today.

Navy “will transition” to a strategy of near seas defense and far seas protection,<sup>14</sup> suggesting that naval strategy is still in development. China’s military capabilities will likely continue to grow but there will be no dramatic transformation in the short term.

By 2030, assuming the PLA is successful in its reform and modernization efforts, the strategic environment facing the United States in the region might be very different. Beijing could have significant military capability to pursue its interests not just in the Pacific and Indian Oceans but globally as well. As noted above, that capability also has the potential to threaten the interests of some U.S. allies and partners and possibly impede the ability of the U.S. to secure its own interests.

It is important to think now about how the U.S. can continue to secure its interests in the region, how it can best support its allies and partners, and how to respond to China. There is a need to develop a better understanding of what kind of expeditionary capabilities Beijing wants to build, how it may use them, and what are the challenges the PLA is facing in its military modernization efforts. Are there opportunities to influence Beijing?

### **Implications for Congress**

Meetings with counterparts from the region are always opportunities to communicate U.S. interest and commitment. As one Asian diplomat once told me, “we don’t measure the strength of your commitment by the number of ships in the Pacific, but by your economic interests.” His point being that ships and planes can easily be moved elsewhere, but economic ties show long-term interests and commitment. Meeting with legislators from the region are an opportunity to underline that the U.S. has long-term interests at stake in the region and that there is a commitment to peace and stability in the region. Meetings with counterparts in the region are also opportunities to gather insights that can help inform Congress in its oversight of defense policy.

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<sup>14</sup> China, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of. *China's Military Strategy*. Beijing 2015. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2015-05/26/content\\_4586748.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm).