

# Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities

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The RAND Corporation

***Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities***<sup>2</sup>

**Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission**

**January 21, 2016**

Today, I will talk about the range of missions for which China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is preparing, with a focus on those of an expeditionary nature. I would like to proceed by first reviewing recent changes to China's security policy and military strategy, which I believe are among the most important in decades. I will explain how this has raised demands for a greater expeditionary focus in the military's modernization efforts and planning. I will survey the most likely missions and tasks for which the PLA can be expected to prepare. I will close by outlining some implications for the United States.

**Evolving Security Policy: The Shift Toward Peaceful Expansion**

China's national defense policy consists of an official vision of security and the associated directives issued by the central leadership to address threats to the nation's core interests and to the pursuit of national revitalization. Because China has yet to openly publish an official document outlining its national security strategy, the most authoritative sources on China's security policy remain speeches by President Xi Jinping on military- and security-related matters and the biannually published defense white papers. Chinese military leaders and scholars provide insightful expositions of the official vision of security and of key directives in official newspapers and journals such as *People's Daily (renmin ribao)*, *China Military Science (zhongguo junshi kexue)*, and the *People's Liberation Army Daily (jiefangjun bao)* and in books published by PLA academies.

These sources explain that while China nominally adheres to a "defensive" policy, the focus has shifted since around 2010 from one of homeland defense to one that I believe is best characterized as "peaceful expansion." Like its predecessors, China's most recent defense white

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

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paper, published in 2015 to highlight its evolving military strategy, upheld the “defensive nature” of the country’s national defense policy and stated China will “never seek hegemony or expansion.” However, it also acknowledged that China’s evolving situation has set “new requirements” for the military to help build a “favorable strategic posture” and “guarantee the country’s peaceful development.” It highlighted in particular the need to better protect the country’s “growing strategic interests.” To shape the international order, the paper outlined requirements to “actively expand military and security cooperation” and “promote the establishment of a regional framework for security and cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> These directives evoke an ambition to build a stable, peaceful Asian security environment in which China plays a leading role and in which countries lack the ability or motivation to militarily challenge China over its “core” interests.

Several features of the security policy shift are worth noting. First, the vision of security has expanded to include virtually all policy domains and to include the open ocean, space, and cyberspace. Second, the intermingling of military and non-military actors and policy concerns has elevated the need for centralized civilian decisionmaking. Third, the inherent tension with the United States raised by the policy shift has increased the importance for crisis management and deterrence.

*Expansion in security meaning and domains.* The recent adoption of an “overall” or “holistic” security concept exemplifies the expanding scope of the country’s security policy. According to the military strategy paper, the new concept combines both domestic and international security; security for the homeland with security for overseas citizens, enterprises, and other interests; and the interests related to the nation’s survival with those needed for its development. Security now encompasses 11 fields: political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, social, scientific and technological, informational, ecological, financial, and nuclear domains.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, security is required for the interests that have expanded into the open ocean, outer space, and cyberspace.

*Increased need for centralized control.* The changing view of security has somewhat blurred the lines between civilian and military tasks and actors. To support the broader security requirements, the military must carry out both war and non-war missions. As the military steps up its involvement in non-war activities, non-military assets have become more involved in actions formerly reserved for the military. This can be seen in the maritime domain, where the Chinese Coast Guard, created from disparate maritime agencies in 2014 in part to defend Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> “Full Text: China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, May 26, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> “Xi Jinping Speaks at Politburo Study Session on Security,” *Xinhua*, April 15, 2014.

maritime territory, has formed into a paramilitary service.<sup>5</sup> The increasing complexity of security, and of military-civilian coordination, has raised the demand for centralized security-related decisionmaking. The creation of the National Security Commission and issuance of a National Security Strategy in 2013 underscores the importance with which Chinese leaders regard the calibration of policy to balance competing security objectives and control risk.<sup>6</sup>

*Increased need for crisis management and deterrence.* The shift toward peaceful expansion inherently raises tensions with the United States and its allies because the expansion is premised, to some extent, on the contraction of influence by the United States and its allies. Military officials judge that this has elevated the likelihood of tensions with the United States. Sun Jianguo, PLA Deputy Chief of the General Staff, explained that “without struggle, it will be impossible for the United States to respect our core interests.”<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, elevates the importance of finding ways to manage bilateral relations to reduce the risk of conflict, manage crisis, and deter adversaries. In 2013, President Xi Jinping urged the United States to adopt a “new type of great power relationship” premised largely on U.S. strategic concessions as a way to reduce the risk of conflict.<sup>8</sup> Chinese willingness to establish rules for use of a military hotline, and to conclude confidence-building measures governing maritime and air-to-air military encounters similarly reflect an underlying anxiety about the potential for militarized crises.<sup>9</sup> The elevation of the strategic missile force in status similarly signals, in part, the growing importance placed on strategic deterrence to influence the response of the United States and its allies to China’s peaceful expansion.<sup>10</sup>

It may be tempting to attribute the dramatic changes in China’s policies to Xi Jinping’s personal preferences, since they have largely coincided with his ascent. But while Xi has undoubtedly played an important role in directing the policies, the principal drivers of the policy changes—in many cases, the most significant since the start of reform and opening up—lies with the changing requirements for national development within favorable domestic and international conditions of the first two decades of the 21st century labeled as the “period of strategic opportunity” by

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan Martinson, “The Militarization of China’s Coast Guard,” *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Zhao Kejin, “China’s National Security Commission,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, July 14, 2015. As of January 13, 2016:

<http://carnegietsinghua.org/2015/07/09/china-s-national-security-commission/id7i>

<sup>7</sup> Sun Jianguo, *Seeking Truth* [Qiushi], March 1, 2015. As of January 13, 2016:

[http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2015-02/28/c\\_1114428331.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2015-02/28/c_1114428331.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Jane Perlez, “China’s ‘New Type’ of Ties Fails to Persuade Obama,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Phil Stewart, “U.S., China Agree on Rules for Air-to-Air Military Encounters,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “China Establishes Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force,” web page, January 1, 2016. As of January 13, 2016:

<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/ArmedForces/second.htm>

Chinese authorities. Focused on ensuring the nation's revival as a great power and the continued elevation in the standard of living for the people, Beijing regards the second decade of the period of strategic opportunity (which also coincides roughly with Xi's ascent) as one that will require a more active, assertive set of policies.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the importance of the shift toward a defense policy of peaceful expansion, however, its limited, largely opportunistic nature deserves emphasis. China's pursuit of peaceful expansion does not seek to invade and subjugate people in the manner of classic imperialists. Nor has China signaled a desire to contest U.S. global leadership—such an ambition is infeasible in any case. Beijing's aim is to reshape elements of the regional and international order and to expand control over core national interests in the least-destabilizing manner possible, while ensuring preparation for contingencies. These new requirements have driven important changes to military strategy and to the military's missions and tasks, including the growing focus on expeditionary activities.

### **Military Strategy and the Expeditionary PLA**

China's military strategy provides general guidance for the construction and employment of military force. The military strategy consists of a number of directives that blend judgments about the nature of warfare and threat assessments with key strategic concepts and precepts drawn from the party's military thought. The military strategy also incorporates direction regarding national strategic objectives and defense policy from higher-level sources, such as Party Congress reports and military directives issued by the General Secretary, which is why it is often described as the "concentrated embodiment of the military policy of the party and the state."<sup>12</sup> To gain insight into the PLA's increasing expeditionary focus, it is thus helpful to review aspects of the military strategy, in particular the designation of threats, missions, and tasks; guidance on the construction of military forces; and guidance regarding the employment of military force.

*Threats.* China's military leadership has traditionally designated "main and secondary strategic directions" to orient the military's preparations for conflict. In the past, *strategic directions* referred principally to major threats to the nation's survival or unity. In the 1970s, for example, military authorities regarded the potential for large-scale Soviet invasion from the north as the "main strategic direction," and directed the building of large ground armies and refinement of "people's

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy Heath, "Xi's Bold Foreign Policy Agenda: Beijing's Pursuit of Global Influence and the Growing Risk of Sino-U.S. Rivalry," *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 6, March 19, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Luo Zhen, "An Interpretation of the New National Defense White Paper: Interview with Chen Zhou," *PLA Daily*, May 27, 2015, p. 5.

war” tactics accordingly.<sup>13</sup> However, the shift in defense policy toward peaceful expansion has dramatically changed the meaning of “threat.” Military leaders now view threats in terms of dangers posed to the country’s sustained development and to the realization of national revitalization. The definition of threat in these terms explains the military strategy white paper’s otherwise puzzling claim (in light of China’s strength and security) that “national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span *than any time in the country’s history* [emphasis added].” The main strategic direction should thus be regarded more as the “first among equals” among a broad menu of threats for which the PLA must prepare, rather than the near-exclusive driver of military strategy. Although official statements on the issue remain scarce, one may deduce from military writings that the main strategic direction continues to emanate from the maritime regions. An article by one PLA expert in 2009 identified the maritime southeast area as “still the main direction.”<sup>14</sup> The threat from this direction stems from potential Taiwan separatism, but also from possible clashes and crises related to maritime disputes, including Vietnam and the Philippines. The expert regarded Japan as a secondary direction, due to the festering dispute over the Senkaku Islands and other issues. Potential intervention by the United States on behalf of its allies also underscored the importance of the maritime direction.

The military strategy white paper lends support to this interpretation. In its review of threats, the paper principally focused on dangers emanating from China’s maritime direction, namely the U.S. rebalance to Asia, Taiwan, Japan, and disputes with neighbors over “China’s maritime rights and interests.” The paper also stated that preparations for military struggles now “highlight maritime military struggle.” Underscoring this point, it prioritized the development of a “modern maritime military force structure” capable of “safeguarding” China’s “national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.”<sup>15</sup> But the maritime region is not the only source of threats. Instability in the western regions poses the danger of separatism and terrorism. The diverse array of threats to economic interests abroad, including international instability, piracy, natural disasters, and international terrorism, also pose major threats to which the military must be ready to respond. Threats also appear in the cyber and space domains. China thus faces “various threats and challenges in *all* its strategic directions and security domains,” as the military strategy white paper noted.

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<sup>13</sup> David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Right Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 2007, pp. 69–140.

<sup>14</sup> Fan Zhenjiang, “A Study of Strategic Military Guidance in the New Period of the New Century,” *China Military Science*, March 2009, pp. 36–44.

<sup>15</sup> “Full Text: China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, May 26, 2015

*Missions and tasks.* The military's principal missions aim to address this broad array of threats. The military strategy white paper affirmed that the PLA's strategic role remains defined by the "historic missions of the armed forces" announced by Hu Jintao, which called on the military to "safeguard the party's consolidation of its governing status; safeguard the period of strategic opportunity; safeguard national interests; promote world peace and common development." Promulgation of the historic missions in 2004 coincided with the PLA's increasing expeditionary focus. In particular, the historic missions' directives to "safeguard national interests," including overseas interests, and "promote world peace and common development" represented a dramatic change in mission for the military. The change added impetus to early expeditionary efforts, such as the deployment of anti-piracy naval forces to the Horn of Africa in 2009.

Over time, the trend toward a greater expeditionary focus has clarified. The military strategy white paper outlined a number of strategic tasks that provide more detail about the types of responsibilities that the military has assumed. It named eight tasks, half of which require some sort of expeditionary capability. These include (1) "safeguarding China's security and interests in new domains," which includes the task of protecting interests in the open oceans as well as in cyber and outer space; (2) "safeguarding the security of China's overseas interests," which directs the military to protect assets that may be in other countries; (3) "participating in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace," which directs participation in multi-lateral efforts to promote international stability; and (4) "performing such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national and economic development," which requires the military to prepare for humanitarian missions both domestic and foreign.<sup>16</sup>

*Guidance on the construction of military forces.* While upholding the 2004 judgment about the most likely type of conflict, the military also seeks to develop capabilities to carry out the missions and tasks given to it over the intervening years. Modernization efforts emphasize qualities of power projection, rapid movement of troops, employment of networks of weapons and sensors, and joint operations. The white paper briefly described changes expected of the services accordingly. It stated that the army will "reorient from theater defense to trans-theater mobility" and "elevate its capabilities for precise, multi-dimensional, trans-theater, multi-function, and sustainable ops." The PLA Navy will "shift its focus from offshore waters defense to the combination of offshore waters defense and 'distant sea protection' and build a combined, multi-

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<sup>16</sup> Four other tasks mentioned in the paper focus on traditional homeland defense: (1) "deal with a wide range of emergencies and military threats and effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air, and sea"; (2) "resolutely safeguard the unification of the motherland"; (3) "maintain strategic deterrence and carry out nuclear counterattack"; and (4) "strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism, and terrorism to maintain political security and social stability."



function, and efficient maritime combat structure.” The PLA Air Force will shift from “territorial air defense to both defense and offensive and build an air-space defense force structure that can meet the requirements for informationalized operations.” The PLA’s strategic missile force will strengthen its capabilities for strategic deterrence and nuclear counterattack as well as medium and long-range conventional precision strikes.<sup>17</sup> More recently, authorities announced the elevation of the strategic missile force, designated the “Rocket Force,” to a status coequal to that of the other services. Authorities also announced the formation of a “Strategic Support Force” responsible for managing defense assets in space and cyberspace, reflecting China’s growing emphasis on securing its interests in those domains and the PLA’s judgment that the struggle for information dominance will be central in future wars.<sup>18</sup>

*Guidance on the employment of military force.* Guidance on how to use military power to achieve the political and strategic goals outlined by central leaders lies at the heart of China’s military strategy. The PLA articulates this guidance through an authoritative set of precepts, maxims, and guiding principles informed by key strategic concepts, the most important of which is that of “active defense.” Indeed, the military strategy white paper called the “strategic concept of active defense” the “essence of the party’s military thought.” The paper defined *active defense* as the “unity between strategic defense and operational and tactical offense,” although it also includes numerous related and subordinate precepts and principles. The Central Military Commission (CMC) codifies the guidance in the form of the “military strategic guidelines of active defense.”

China has traditionally updated its military strategic guidelines following major changes in national strategic objectives, and/or changes in judgments regarding the nature of warfare and the country’s security situation. The military strategy white paper noted that the last major change happened in 2004, when the guideline was modified principally to focus on “local war under conditions of informationization” as the most likely type of conflict. The paper acknowledged, however, that the “national security and development strategies” and new “tasks” of the military had raised requirements to “enrich” the concept of active defense and “enhance” the military strategic guidelines accordingly.

Because the principal reason for the issuance of military strategic guidelines lies in ensuring the military operates in a manner that directly supports the central leadership’s strategic objectives, one should expect changes in the guidelines to closely mirror the spirit and intent of the shift toward “peaceful expansion” in the national defense policy. The military strategy white paper

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<sup>17</sup> “Full Text: China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, May 26, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “China Establishes Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force,” web page, January 1, 2016.

validates this expectation. Changes in military guidance emphasize qualities of strategic foresight, coordination with non-military efforts to enhance security, and the military's role in peacetime shaping, crisis management, deterrence, and expeditionary activity. The white paper explained that the military strategic guidelines highlight "strategic vision" and direct the military to be "more forward looking." The guidelines underscore the importance of "subordination to and service of national strategic objectives" and direct the military to "closely coordinate political, military, economic, and diplomatic work." Reflecting the shifting focus of military activity, guidance "balances" traditional precepts with new ones designed to support peaceful expansion. The military strategy white paper noted guidance "balances war preparation and war prevention, stability maintenance and rights protection, warfighting and deterrence, operations in wartime and the employment of military force in peacetime." Underscoring the importance of expeditionary activity, it directed the military to "strengthen international security cooperation in areas crucially related to China's overseas interest to ensure the security of its interests" and called on the military to "deal with threats" in the cyber and space domains "in a manner that maintains the common security of the world."<sup>19</sup>

### **Implementation: Potential Contingencies**

The changes in national defense policy and military strategy suggest that the military's responsibilities have expanded from an exclusive focus on homeland defense to include both homeland defense duties and expeditionary duties. In addition, for each security concern, responsibilities have expanded beyond a near-exclusive focus on preparation for conflict contingencies to include a broad range of tasks spanning peacetime, crisis, and conflict. The broader range of responsibilities can be illustrated by considering potential PLA missions regarding specific threat and issue areas.

*United States.* U.S. intervention in any contingency remains the single most important threat to the realization of China's objectives. Peacetime efforts to dissuade U.S. intervention include the development of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, as well as military diplomacy and strategic deterrence in all domains. At the same time, the military seeks cooperation with the United States to address international concerns such as counterpiracy, international peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance. Planning and preparation for crises and major conflict scenarios against the United States remain principally linked to intervention in disputes involving China and key U.S. allies and partners.

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<sup>19</sup> "Full Text: China's Military Strategy," *Xinhua*, May 26, 2015.

*Taiwan.* Beijing's policy toward Taiwan has upheld the "peaceful development" of cross-Strait ties premised on incremental progress toward unification. The PLA's peacetime mission thus remains focused on deterrence of "separatist" activity as part of a broader strategy to deepen Taiwan's dependence and integration through economic and other means. For crisis situations, leaders have likely prepared military options to punish and coerce, including possibly cyber attacks and missile strikes. The PLA's combat mission principally remains that of "preventing independence," which could involve courses of action ranging from a joint firepower strike or a joint blockade. As with most other conflict scenarios, the Chinese military must anticipate and plan for the possibility of U.S. intervention.

*South China Sea.* Chinese interests in these waters span security and economic concerns. The South China Sea serves as a vital strategic region in which nuclear ballistic submarines can be expected to operate. The waters hold rich fishing grounds and potentially lucrative mineral deposits. Moreover, over 85 percent of the country's oil imports passed through the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits.<sup>20</sup> The establishment of artificial islands expands the military's ability to support the Chinese Coast Guard's efforts to consolidate control over the claimed "nine-dashed line" that covers most of the South China Sea. Naval aircraft and ships can provide patrols and enhance situational awareness through surveillance and reconnaissance. In a crisis, the military assets provide options to control escalation. For combat contingencies, the military is likely preparing options to retake island features that may have been seized by a rival claimant. However, the unfavorable geography and distances involved make outright aggression very risky, especially in light of potential U.S. involvement.

*East China Sea.* Located near the Chunxiao gas fields, the Senkaku Islands sit astride a vital strategic passageway to the Pacific Ocean. In peacetime, the PLA Navy and Air Force continue to provide deterrence and augment efforts by Chinese Coast Guard boats to sustain a regular presence near the features. The strength of Japanese forces and depth of inter-state hostility make crises especially dangerous. As a consequence, both countries have sought to improve the ability to manage crises. Combat contingencies likely focus on the denial of control of the islands or retaking the islands if seized by Japan.<sup>21</sup>

*India.* Peacetime military activities have included incremental measures to bolster ties with the Indian military. At the same time, the PLA continues to occasionally assert its presence through

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<sup>20</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, April 7, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> "China, Japan Resume Talks on Emergency Hotline After Long Hiatus," *Asahi Shimbun*, January 13, 2015.

incursions.<sup>22</sup> The main missions regarding the Indian border consist of high-altitude contingencies to retake areas that may have been seized by India. However, China's increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean is opening new areas of friction in the bilateral relationship. In the future, China may need to plan for possibilities of naval conflict against Indian forces.

*Overland trade routes.* The announcement of the "Silk Road" initiative in 2014 has coincided with growing Chinese economic and political interests in Central Asia. China has invested billions of dollars in the energy sector; contracts with Kazakhstan alone total \$30 billion.<sup>23</sup> The main threat posed concerns terrorism and political instability in bordering central Asian countries. The PLA has sought to deepen military relations with partner countries through exercises under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Contingencies could include bilateral or multilateral counterterrorism operations against cross-border groups.<sup>24</sup>

*Maritime trade routes.* The Maritime Silk Road envisions an expansion of infrastructure development throughout the Southeast Asian region, Indian Ocean, and through the Red Sea to the Middle East. China's dependence on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) have grown in recent years. Threats include piracy, insurgency, and terrorism, as well as threats to the SLOCs by rival powers. Missions to counter these threats include traditional anti-ship/air/submarine warfare, aircraft carrier operations, counterpiracy, at-sea replenishment, and counter-mine operations. To facilitate execution of such missions, China has begun to seek supply points abroad to provision deployed forces. In 2015, Chinese authorities confirmed that arrangements had been made for a military base in Djibouti, Africa.<sup>25</sup>

*Overseas resources and personnel.* China reportedly has over 5.5 million citizens working abroad and nearly 60 million travelers annually. As China expands its business presence abroad, terrorists and other violent groups have kidnapped and killed a growing number of its citizens. In 2015, Islamic State militants murdered a Chinese citizen in Syria, and an al Qaeda affiliate killed three railway workers in Mali, among other deaths.<sup>26</sup> China has increased evacuations of citizens facing such dangers. In 2011 alone, China evacuated 48,000 of its citizens from Egypt, Libya,

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<sup>22</sup> Jason Burke, "India-China Border Standoff Highlights Tensions Before Xi Visit," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Usen Suleimen, "Energy Cooperation Between Kazakhstan and China," *Astana Times*, January 15, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Chen Xianyang, "Prepare for Security Risks in Building Silk Road Economic Belt, Maritime Silk Road," *Outlook* [Liaowang], April 14, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> David Brewster, "China's First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti Likely to Be a Taste of Things to Come," *Lowy Interpreter*, December 2, 2015. As of January 14, 2016: <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/12/02/Chinas-first-overseas-military-base-in-Djibouti-likely-to-be-a-taste-of-things-to-come.aspx>

<sup>26</sup> Ting Shi, "China Pulled Further into Syrian Crisis," *Bloomberg*, November 15, 2015.

and Japan.<sup>27</sup> Chinese government forces have also sought to increase security through participation in UN peacekeeping operations. In 2012, China deployed combat troops as part of UN peacekeeping operations in Africa.<sup>28</sup> However, this limited presence addresses the needs of but a small number of Chinese firms. As a consequence, many companies have turned to private companies to provide guards and security forces.<sup>29</sup> To protect lives and assets, the military has stepped up its focus on noncombatant evacuation operations, counterterrorism, and humanitarian aid/disaster relief.

### **Potential Drivers and Constraints on Future Expeditionary Missions**

Today, China's expeditionary military capability remains limited, despite a considerable expansion in the country's economic and strategic interests abroad. However, the PLA can be expected to increase modernization efforts and operations to improve its ability to protect the country's overseas interests. China could accelerate or restrict the development of expeditionary military capabilities for a number of reasons, however.

*Potential drivers of accelerated investment in expeditionary capability.* The most important driver for a dramatically increased investment in expeditionary capability would be Beijing's perception that interests abroad had grown dangerously vulnerable. The United States could play a large role in this judgment. If U.S.-China relations deteriorated due to a deeply antagonistic rivalry, an expansion in Chinese efforts to protect overseas interests would likely reflect one part of a broader effort to improve national security, including deeper investments in counter-intervention capabilities. Conversely, a loss of confidence in the willingness or ability of the United States to lead multilateral efforts to address various threats to Chinese economic interests abroad could motivate Beijing to accelerate investments in expeditionary capabilities. For example, a major reduction in U.S. presence in the Middle East, perhaps due to a declining dependence on that region's petroleum, for example, could incentivize China to seek additional military bases and presence in that region.

Another driver could be a dramatic increase in threats from terrorists or insurgent forces in countries featuring Chinese personnel or important economic assets. In the event of a major terrorist episode in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or Central Asia, for example, the

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<sup>27</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel and Bates Gill, "Overseas Citizen Protection: A Growing Challenge for China," *SIPRI Newsletter*, February 2012. As of January 14, 2016: [www.sipri.org/media/newsletter/essay/february12](http://www.sipri.org/media/newsletter/essay/february12)

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Hartnett, "China's First Deployment of Combat Troops a UN Peacekeeping Mission—South Sudan," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2012. As of January 14, 2016: [http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/MEMO-PLA-PKO\\_final.pdf](http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/MEMO-PLA-PKO_final.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, "Enter China's Security Firms," *The Diplomat*, February 21, 2012.

Chinese government could expand efforts to intervene more directly with limited special operation activities or retaliatory drone strikes, although Beijing would seek to depict such activity as at the “invitation” of the host country.

Another potential driver might be the opening of promising, but vulnerable, economic and strategic interests. Global warming has reportedly resulted in the reduction of 40 percent of the summer ice cap in the Arctic region, raising the possibility of a northern shipping lane that could cut shipping times to European markets by 30 percent.<sup>30</sup> PLA Navy vessels could escort merchant ships to ensure safe passage. In September 2015, five Chinese military ships appeared in the Bering Strait.<sup>31</sup>

*Constraints.* While Beijing appears intent on increasing investments in expeditionary capabilities, developments constrain its ability to do so. Severe budget shortfalls could restrict the deployment of expensive capital assets, such as aircraft carriers. A major increase in domestic instability driven by a decline in the nation’s growth prospects could restrain the growth of expeditionary activity as military resources are diverted to ensure social stability. A major deterioration in relations with Russia or India could drive China to commit more resources to guard its long land and maritime border, reducing the availability of resources to support distant, expeditionary activities.

### **Implications for U.S. Interests**

The increasing expeditionary focus of PLA modernization and activity reflects but one aspect of the country’s shift in defense policy toward peaceful expansion. The change in policy ties together China’s interest in expanding cooperation with U.S. forces on some transnational threats with efforts to erode U.S. military credibility in Asia. This carries several important implications for the United States and its allies for both the near and longer terms.

In the near term (through 2020), China’s defense of its overseas interests provides opportunities for cooperation against shared threats and concerns. China seeks stability in Africa and other parts of the world to protect its considerable economic interests. As a result, Beijing has shown a growing willingness to involve itself in mediating disputes in Afghanistan, Sudan, and other

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<sup>30</sup> Robin McKie, “China’s Voyage of Discovery to Cross the Less Frozen North,” *The Guardian*, August 18, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> W. J. Hennigan, “Pentagon Spots Chinese Military Ships Off Alaska Coast,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2015.

countries.<sup>32</sup> China also remains the largest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping operations. The United States should encourage these developments and seek opportunities to work with China on shared goals of promoting international stability, responding to humanitarian disasters, and countering transnational threats such as terrorism.

At the same time, the reality of an intensifying competition with the United States, especially in Asia, means that China will seek to use knowledge and skills gained from cooperation to erode U.S. military credibility in Asia and coerce U.S. allies and partners over maritime sovereignty and other issues. And as Chinese investments in power-projection capabilities and in basing access agreements increases the permanence of its military power in areas of strategic concern for the United States, U.S. policy will have to balance an encouragement of Chinese contributions with attention to the sensitivities of U.S. security partners.

The long-term (through 2030) implications will depend on how much progress China makes in developing expeditionary capabilities, and on the dynamics of U.S.-China relations. Over the next few decades, China could employ aircraft carrier and other naval task forces, long-range strategic airlift, special operations units, and aerial-refueled strategic bombers or fighter aircraft. It may support such platforms from a handful of naval and airfield military facilities abroad, most likely in Africa and the Middle East. A PLA that has increased its capability to project power and operate confidently around the world will depend less on the United States to address transnational threats. How much this development posed a threat to U.S. interests would depend on the intensity of strategic competition between the two countries. A relationship characterized by strong cooperation could allow China to contribute needed resources against costly and destabilizing transnational threats. Conversely, an intensifying rivalry would raise the risk of a militarized crisis between Chinese and U.S. and partner states in many parts of the world, raising the risk of systemic conflict.

## **Recommendations**

Below are recommendations for the United States to respond to the evolving set of Chinese expeditionary missions.

1. Because Chinese forces pose so little a threat to U.S. forces outside Asia, the United States should generally encourage increased Chinese contributions against shared threats. So long as they do not inherently aggravate tensions or pose a threat to other

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<sup>32</sup> “China Mediates Peace Talks on South Sudan,” *Voice of America*, January 12, 2015. Link: <http://www.voanews.com/content/china-mediates-peace-talks-on-south-sudan/2595612.html>

countries, an increase in basing arrangements for Chinese forces to enable such contributions should not be opposed. Simultaneously, the United States should reinforce its own interests by increasing engagement with countries hosting Chinese military forces.

2. While seeking to promote cooperation, the United States should continue investing in capabilities to defend its interests worldwide. These investments include both political efforts to shore-up influence in such important regions as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and eastern Africa, and military efforts to project power to defend any threatened interests. The United States should also step-up engagement with any country that offers to host Chinese military forces.