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China's Military Rise

and the Implications for European Security

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Chapter Two

Chapter Two.

The PLA's Role under Xi's Core Interests in Great Rejuvenation: Global Power Beyond the Western Pacific

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Key Takeaways

- China is following a typical trajectory for rising great powers in terms of its increasingly willingness and ability to project power outside its region.
- China's objective of being able to project power beyond the Western Pacific is closely linked to the domestic political agenda of President Xi Jinping and the security concerns of the Chinese Communist Party, both of which will remain powerful influences on Chinese strategic thinking for the foreseeable future.
- China increasingly treats the South China Sea as its own territory; this will be a drain on Chinese defense resources, but it will also provide a foundation for projecting power outside the region.
- Chinese strategic planning assumes that China needs to project power beyond the Western Pacific to protect its economic, political, and military interests in the Indian Ocean, Middle East, and Africa.
- Chinese policymakers believe that what they view as a declining West, led by the United States, will not be able to prevent China from projecting power in the South China Sea and beyond the Western Pacific already by 2027, at which point they believe China will possess a world-class military.

This chapter analyzes the core interests that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has outlined in recent decades and which the CCP has been acting to secure since Xi has taken power. It examines the focal points of bureaucratic debates between the Party and the Chinese government as well as the role that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) may play in upholding the Party's articulated – and growing – 'core interests'.

It assesses that the CCP's *Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People* is Beijing's national goal, with military power being a means to this end. This national goal of power and influence is not limited to the Western Pacific, although success in that geographic area is a foundation for China to project broader global power that supports its economic and political engagement and enmeshment across the Indian Ocean, into Africa and the Middle East. In addition to these geographic areas, Beijing's plans are creating a PLA with increased power projection and presence in space, cyber space, and the electromagnetic spectrum, areas unconstrained by geography which provide options for exerting Chinese power globally – to 'safeguard China's security interests' and to 'safeguard China's overseas interests'. The PLA power projection is also likely to have uses 'safeguarding' its 'overseas Chinese' diaspora who are citizens of other states during times of crisis or natural disaster. The intended main use of the PLA is as a background element providing intimidatory power, helping advance and protect Beijing's political and economic interests as part of broadening China's comprehensive national power.

The chapter assesses the priorities among Xi, the Party, bureaucrats and the PLA of these 'core interests' as well as the expectation flowing from these for the PLA's role and its functions. Methodologically, this article uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing its observation on historical materials such as CCP's official documents, periodicals and newspapers related to the core interests in the name of the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People*. This article also scrutinizes the differences between interpretations from the outside world and those from inside China. The goal of this in-depth comparative analysis is to identify the root cause of the differences in policy directions and implementation within China.

Ever since Xi Jinping became the paramount leader of the PRC, there have been a series of nationalist campaigns in place. Discourses such as the over-arching *Chinese Dream*, along with the accompanying *Strong Military Dream* and *World Dream*, as well as the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People*, sow the complementary, interlocking themes. The themes denote Xi's deliberate intent to reassert Chinese status and power regionally and globally, wrapped in language intended to convey China as a benign power internationally. His international strategy has been accompanied by the so-called *Three-step Strategy* domestically. In his speech delivered in the 19th National Party Congress, CCP, in 2017, Xi publicized his blueprint to move Chinese families into the middle-class by 2020, achieve an initial stage of socialist modernization by 2035 and transform into a modernized leading power in comprehensive strength and with international influence by 2050. All these have also been inked into the *Constitution of the Communist Party of China*, which stipulates that the state government must continue with its modernization effort as well as its three historic missions—national unification, world peace and co-development with a view to successfully achieving the *Two-Hundred years Goals* and *Chinese Dream*, paving the way for *Rejuvenation of Chinese People*.¹

The so-called Two-Hundred Years Goals refer to a hundred years of building a communist party and a hundred years of building a state government. They are signposts of Beijing in pursuit of near, medium, and long-range targets. The near-term timeframe was 1 July 2021,

1 "Authorized to publish: Constitution of the Communist Party of China," (授權發佈：中國共產黨章程), *Xinhua* (新華網), October 28, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/28/c_1121870794.htm.

The CCP's *Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People* is Beijing's national goal, with military power being a means to this end.

The importance of China becoming the leading power in the world, including militarily, is obvious and is profoundly consistent with the Rejuvenation of Chinese People.

celebrated as the CCP's centenary, the medium-term timeframe is 2035, and the longer-term is 2049 – the centenary of the CCP seizing power.

Directed by the *Three-step Strategy*, the Chinese defense establishment and military sector also set their goals over these three timeframes, nested within the national goals and targets. That said, the PLA planned to achieve a 'rudimentary level of mechanization' and have a modernized version of military theories, organizations, personnel and weaponry by 2020. It expects to cross the threshold to a force with modernized defense capabilities and reformed military affairs by 2035, seeking to identify itself as a first-rate armed service among the leading powers of the world.² What deserves attention here is that the issues of territorial sovereignty were not mentioned in the *Three-step Strategy* when it came to the pragmatic part of military defense, nor a timetable to address the issues like Taiwan, despite such issues being highlighted in the *Strong Military Dream*.

Similarly, there was no hardline policy declared in Xi's speeches made in the 19th National Party Congress. Xi instead pointed out the need to refresh foreign relations among leading powers and seek a 'community of common destiny'. However, as we have seen with Xi's recent speech in Tiananmen Square on the occasion of the CCP's centenary celebrations, there is considerable fervor and stridency about Chinese power and being in a position where that power can be used to make others act in China's interests and reverse the sense of historical grievance the Party has stoked so strongly over recent years. The importance of China becoming the leading power in the world, including militarily, is obvious and is profoundly consistent with the *Rejuvenation of Chinese People*.

Despite the benign tone expressed above, the October 2020 *Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China* (CCCPC) unveiled a forthright new ambition that, in addition to the broader national goals for 2035 and 2049, 2027 would be the year to reach the 'centennial goal of army building'. In this *Communiqué*, the CCCPC proposed:

*...dutifully following Xi Jinping's thoughts on strengthening the army, strictly implementing the new era military strategy and policy guidelines, firmly proclaiming Party's absolute control of the People's Army, and insisting on political building and streamlined capabilities of the army via reforms, science and technologies, quality personnel and law-based governance. In order to ensure the achievement of the goal of this century-old army by 2027, we should accelerate the integration of mechanization, informationization and intellectualization, and should strengthen the training for readiness, thereby enhancing strategic capabilities with a view to protecting national sovereignty, social interests and economic development.*³

2 Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era---Political Report at the CPC's 19th National Congress," (決勝全面建成小康社會 奪取新時代中國特色社會主義偉大勝利—在中國共產黨第十九次全國代表大會上的報告), *Xinhua* (新華社), October 27, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

3 Shi Guanghui(石光輝), ed., "Communiqué of 5th Plenary Session of 19th CPC Central Committee" (中國共產黨第十九屆中央委員會第五次全體會議公報), *Communist Party Member Network*(共產黨員網), October 29, 2020, <http://www.12371.cn/2020/10/29/ART11603964233795881.shtml>.

The CCP has long been determined to strengthen military training and improving defense capabilities in the name of ensuring sovereignty, given its primary focus on the confrontation for power with the United States. However, to declare 2027 as the milestone for the hundred years goal of the PLA came as a bolt from the blue. One rationale for this new shorter-term goal is that it is a benchmark to be able to settle the so-called Taiwan issue. We can find the argument in the PLA Daily.⁴ This assessment might be amongst the factors leading Admiral Phil Davidson, then Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, to remark that China might solve the Taiwan issue within a six-year period.⁵

Chen Daoqin, a scholar at Fudan University in China, believes China will no longer care about the US factor, notably as it relates to Taiwan, when the Chinese military reaches the world-class level in 2027. And a PLA that is no longer in fear of the US military will enable Chinese power projection well beyond the Western Pacific, into the Indian Ocean and as part of Chinese power and influence globally – most likely with early focuses in Africa and the Middle East, given growing Chinese economic and commercial interests there.

2027 will also be the 21st Party Congress of the Communist Party of China. Xi Jinping might use this occasion to strengthen his authority and strive for continuing power.⁶

The above-mentioned goals are broad ones and so they can be used as guidelines to understand Beijing's grand strategy. Achieving these goals involves political, diplomatic, economic and military aspects, as well as concrete and feasible policies being brought forth containing these elements.

Turning to grand strategy, ends, ways and means have to be balanced (see Figure 1).⁷ Although Beijing is a one-party totalitarian regime with a history of strategic thought and action quite different to that of the United States, Beijing's judgment on strategic interests is neither unpragmatic nor irrational and can be related to the strategic elements set out in the US framework. If there is a difference from the US formulation of strategy, its essence is that China's 'national interests' are essentially the interests of the Party (Party security is state security). And it is the Party's highest leader or the group with actual power and a vested interest in maintaining it, that determines the priority of national interests. As Xi reminded his fellow Party members and the world on 1 July, it is the Party who controls the gun.

While we might be able to glean the broad aspects of policy and strategy set out above from documentation and speeches, the CCP's strategic decision-making is closed to the outside world. Many of the CCP's important strategic decisions remain puzzling to most analysts and there are still debates about the exact impetus of the CCP's decision-making chain.

4 People's Liberation Army Daily Commentor(解放軍報評論員), "Accurately Grasp The New Development Stage: Earnestly Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi's Important Speech at the Provincial and Ministerial Seminars(準確把握新發展階段：論認真學習貫徹習主席在省部級專題研討班上重要講話)," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, January 23, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2021-01/13/content_4876988.htm.

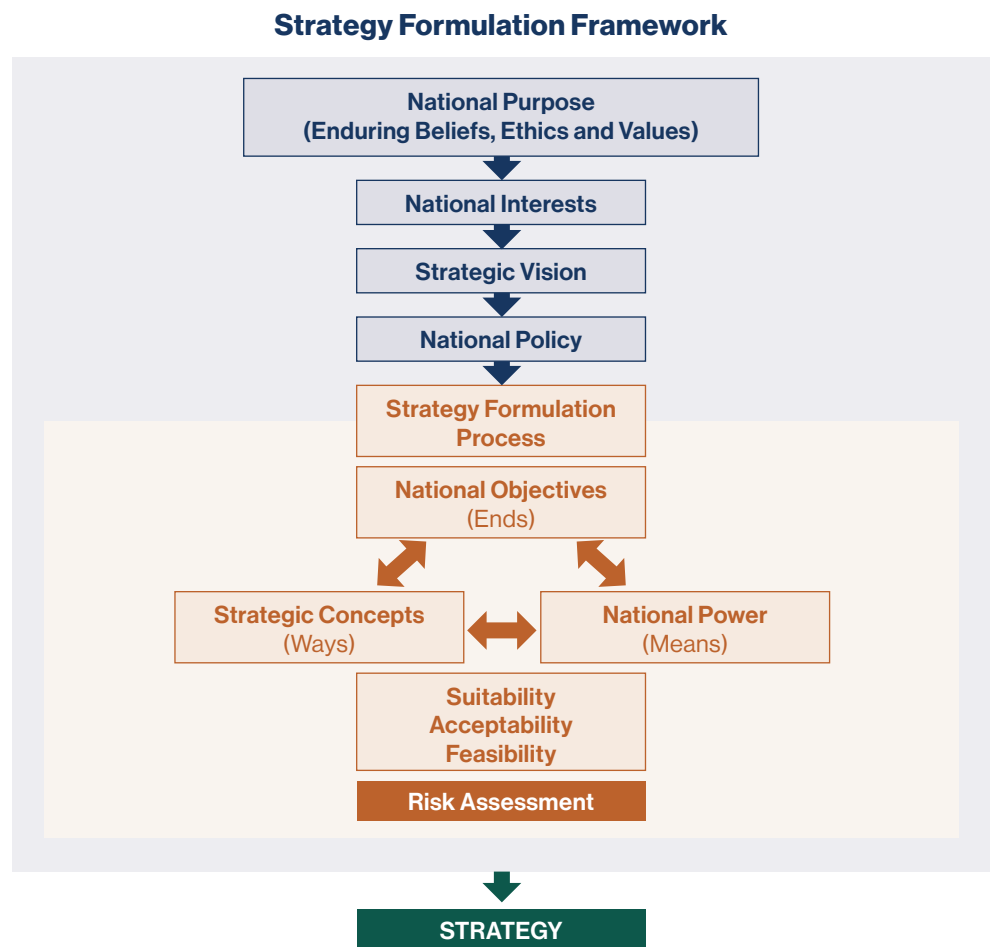
5 Mallory Shelbourne, "Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan in 'Next Six Years'," *USNI News*, March 9, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>.

6 Chen Miaoling(陳妙玲), "A Mainland Scholar Saying That The Timetable for Reuniting Taiwan The Set by Achieving the 2027 Goal of Strong Military(內地學者稱2027年達強軍目標或為武統台灣時間表)," *RTHK*, October 29, 2020, <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/ch/component/k2/1557357-20201029.htm>.

7 J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., ed., "Guidelines for Strategy Formulation," *The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues Volume II: National Security Policy and Strategy* (Carlisle, PA : Army War College, 2010), 397.

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Figure 1: Strategy Formulation Framework.



Xi's assertive foreign policy requires a positive attitude and firm support from the military—and Xi has taken clear steps to consolidate his control over the PLA to ensure they develop and operate in ways that support his vision of China's global power.

In order to consolidate his authoritarian rule at the center, Xi has been clearly conscious of the need to strengthen the Party's tradition that the key to survival is its command of the gun. On the one hand, we have seen Xi uphold "anti-corruption, integrity, and law-based governance of the army" to purge the darker sides of the PLA while also advancing his personnel choices. On the other hand, the ideology of "all subject to the command of the party" is being re-instilled in the PLA. The modus operandi of 'the military first and the party second' is clearly reflective of Xi's conscious effort of firmly controlling military power, which also proved effective in precluding other competitors from sharing the military means. Even if the newly appointed General Secretary still had opponents that controlled the State Council, they could not enjoy the separate power status within the Party when Xi was backed by the loyalty from the military. This modus operandi, mentioned above, partially explains why Xi could stabilize the regime so soon after coming into the office and why he found no objection to extend his term of office by amending the Constitution.

Under the leadership of Chairman Xi, Central Military Commission (CMC) and the PLA today are aware that the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People* is the national goal and—let us suppose at this moment—ready to fulfil the phased outcomes cited in the *Three-step Strategy* noted above. The following discussion takes this as the foundational directions for what Xi expects from the PLA.

2.1 Core interests: the PLA's goals nested within the Party's

China's National Defense in the New Era published in 2019 was taken as the defense white paper that reflected Xi's strategic guidance on the development of Chinese defense. In the risk-assessment part of the national security, this report emphasized that China was challenged by myriad and complex security threats. Among them, the primary one came from the trends and activities of Taiwanese independence. It identified Taiwan independence activities as the biggest obstacle to China's 'peaceful reunification'. In addition, the vibrant activities of what the document describes as separatist forces, such as East Turkistan, also posed a threat to China's national security and social stability. Viewed in this light, a ground reality is that the CCP regards the Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet issues as its core interests. Meanwhile, this report also identified the US, NATO, Russia, and the European Union as international strategic competitors, which the PLA must have capabilities to engage with, and deter from acting against China's interests well beyond the South China Sea, the Taiwan Straits, and the Western Pacific. Combined with a demonstrated ability to project power at long range, PLA power growth is an essential element in China's grand narrative of its rise to global dominance against a declining West, centered on the US.

Although joint exercises had been held between China and Russia for several times on the record, Beijing still has its precautions against Russia.⁸ Nevertheless, China and Russia have very close relations in military science and technology cooperation and military exchanges and cooperation. China sends troops to participate Russia's annual large-scale military exercises and Red Square parade. China-Russia joint naval exercises are regularly implemented, sometimes even inviting Iran to join, just like the anti-American alliance. In June 2021, on the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation (中俄睦邻友好合作条约), Xi Jinping and Putin issued a statement to extend the treaty and deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries.⁹ As the two countries face pressure from the United States and Western countries, the two countries have room for strategic cooperation to contain the United States from both the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe. However, to avoid becoming overt, direct enemies of the United States and so intensify competition for geostrategic interests, the two countries will not form a formal military alliance.

In addition, this white paper took note of China's homeland security threats that included the current border disputes (the Sino-Indian territorial issues), sovereignty over the islets (China-Japan Diaoyutai islands) and a different interpretation of maritime delimitation (sovereignty in the South China Sea). The 2019 defense white paper also mentioned that the aircraft and ships 'of some country' frequently spied on China's border areas and repeatedly broke into what China claims as its territorial waters as well as adjacent airspaces of islands and reefs. It complained that, despite 'some country' (the US) being outside this region, its frequent spying activities had jeopardized China's national security. Non-traditional security also entered the

8 The PRC MND (中國國防部), *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era* (新時代的中國國防) (Beijing: The PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660318/1660318.htm>.

9 China believes that Russia will not cooperate with the United States against China jointly. Under the strong pressure from the United States, Russia will not help China rashly. See Lia (莉雅), "Putin and Xi Jinping Met Online to Extend Cooperation Treaty between Russia and China" (普京与习近平视频会晤 俄中延长合作条约), June 29, 2021, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/Putin-xi-jinping-friendship-treaty-Biden-20210628/5946342.html>.

agenda in this white paper. It did call attention to some increasingly significant threats such as terrorism, piracy, electromagnetic spectrum, space and cybersecurity, as well as natural disasters and recurrent epidemics.¹⁰

To drive the point home, the main objectives of Beijing's national defense policy cited by the *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 2019, can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. to deter and resist aggression;
2. to safeguard national political security (the Party's security in power), the people's security and social stability;
3. to oppose and contain "Taiwan independence";
4. to crack down on proponents of separatist movements such as "Tibet independence" and the creation of "East Turkistan";
5. to safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security;
6. to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests;
7. to safeguard China's security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space and cyber-space;
8. to safeguard China's overseas interests; and
9. to support the sustainable development of the country.¹¹

Both Xi's public talks and official reports on many key occasions have shown that his expectations of the military are mainly focused on military capabilities (see Table 6). Strongly driven by the call to achieve Xi's *Strong Military Dream*, the PLA are constantly reminded of the need to comply with "strategic guidance for China's national defense in the new era". They are directed to respond to the Party's command, repeatedly strengthen training, earnestly hasten the reforms, effectively improve the combat skills, and readily position themselves to be the strategic support for the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People*. Xi's line of thought is straightforward: in order to achieve the national strategic goal of the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People*, the military must accelerate its readiness to safeguard the 'core interests' of this nation.

Two main themes underpinned this line of thought. First, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan could be crisis spots, where Beijing will inevitably face interference from the West. Second, the progress towards the *Great Rejuvenation of Chinese People* could be countered with checks from the West. All these uncertainties called for the need to reduce the gap in the PLA's military capabilities when compared with those of the US and other leading powers.

According to the timetable declared by the 19th National Congress, CCP, the PLA after achieving its rudimentary level of mechanization in 2020, is committed to the next stage goal, which would be a modernized version of military theories, organizations, personnel, and weaponry by 2035. Based on these claims, the PLA at this present period could be inferred that, although it may be able to execute mechanized warfare, it could be still incompetent in the conduct of digital or informationized warfare.

10 The PRC MND (中國國防部), *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era*(新時代的中國國防) (Beijing: The PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660318/1660318.htm>.

11 The PRC MND (中國國防部), *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era*(新時代的中國國防) (Beijing: The PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660318/1660318.htm>.

Xi's thinking on the PLA has hardened over his tenure, with a greater sense of the PLA being used in the 'struggle' against opposing powers.

Even if General Secretary Xi renews his term to extend his tenure, it remains less likely that he can extend his term to 2035. That said, there are still fifteen years until then, during which period uncertainties will abound. Xi almost certainly has the view that without him as the driving force, the PLA may go astray and be unable to achieve the publicly declared goal in the 19th National Congress, CCP. This partially explains why on March 9, 2021, Xi publicized the *Three-step Strategy* for the PLA in 2027, setting a new short-term goal. In the name of marking the 100th anniversary of the army coming into being, it actually helped the military build-up strategy sound more sensible and gave the PLA a clear message about priorities and urgency.¹²

Xi's thinking on the PLA has hardened over his tenure, with a greater sense of the PLA being used in the 'struggle' against opposing powers. His confidence in China's growing power and influence and assertion of a parallel deterioration in US and broader Western power is also evident over this period.

No	Date	Occasion	Context
1	2015.9.3	Commemoration of 70th Anniversary of Victory of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War	In the interest of peace, China will remain committed to peaceful development. We Chinese love peace. No matter how much stronger it may become, China will never seek hegemony or expansion. It will never inflict its past suffering on any other nation...All its officers, men and women must bear in mind their responsibility of serving the people whole-heartedly, faithfully fulfill the sacred duty of protecting the nation's security and people's well-being and carry out the noble mission of upholding world peace. ¹³
2	2017.7.30	Zhurihe Base military parade speech on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the army	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unswervingly adhere to the fundamental principles and system of the party's absolute leadership over the army; 2. Unswervingly adhere to the fundamental purpose of serving the people wholeheartedly; 3. Unswervingly adhere to the only fundamental standard of combat effectiveness, focus on preparing for war, and forging a force of elite soldiers called upon, can fight when they come, and wins when they come; 4. Unswervingly adhere to politically building the army, reforming the army, rejuvenating the army with science and technology, and governing the army according to law.¹⁴
3	2017.10.18	Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era--- Xi's Political Report at the CCP's 19th National Congress	<p>Upholding absolute Party leadership over the people's armed forces.</p> <p>Building people's forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct is strategically important to achieving the two centenary goals and national rejuvenation. To realize the Party's goal of building a powerful military in the new era, we must fully implement the fundamental principles and systems of Party leadership over the military and see that Party strategy on strengthening military capabilities for the new era guides work to build national defense and the armed forces. We must continue to enhance the political loyalty of the armed forces, strengthen them through reform and technology, and run them in accordance with law. We must place greater focus on combat, encourage innovation, build systems, increase efficacy and efficiency, and further military-civilian integration.</p> <p>We will adapt to the trend of a new global military revolution and to national security needs; we will upgrade our military capabilities, and see that, by the year 2020, mechanization is basically achieved, IT application has come a long way, and strategic capabilities have seen a big improvement. In step with our country's modernization process, we will modernize our military across the board in terms of theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry. We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the 2050 our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces.¹⁵</p>

12 Brian Hart, Bonnie S. Glaser, Matthew P. Funaiolo, "China's 2027 Goal Marks the PLA's Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization," *China Brief*, Vol. 21, No. 6, March 26, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization/>.

13 "Commemoration of 70th Anniversary of Victory of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War," (習近平在紀念中國人民抗日戰爭暨世界反法西斯戰爭勝利70周年大會上的講話), *Xinhua*(新華社), September 3, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/03/c_1116456504.htm.

14 Wang Shibin (王士彬), "Xi Jinping Inspected the Troops at Zhurihe Base and Delivered an Important Speech," (習近平在朱日和訓練基地檢閱部隊並發表重要講話), *Xinhua*(新華社), July 30, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-07/30/c_1121403719.htm.

15 Xi Jinping(習近平), "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era--- The Political Report at the CPC's 19th National Congress," (決勝全面建成小康社會 奪取新時代中國特色社會主義偉大勝利—在中國共產黨第十九次全國代表大會上的報告), *Xinhua*(新華社), October 27, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

No	Date	Occasion	Context
4	2019.1.2	Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification — Speech at the Meeting Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan	The principles of “peaceful reunification” and “one country, two systems” are the best approach to realizing national reunification. We are willing to strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with the utmost sincerity and best efforts. We make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means. This does not target compatriots in Taiwan, but the interference of external forces and the very small number of “Taiwan independence” separatists and their activities. ¹⁶
5	2019.7.24	China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era	Adhere to the path of peaceful development, adhere to a defensive national defense policy, never seek hegemony, never expand, never seek spheres of influence, and insist on an active defense military strategy ¹⁷
6	2019.10.1	Speech by General Secretary Xi at the Reception in Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China	We will continue to fully and faithfully implement the principles of “One Country, Two Systems”, “Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong”, “Macao people administering Macao” and a high degree of autonomy...Promote the peaceful development of cross-strait relations, unite all Chinese people, and continue to strive for the complete reunification of the motherland. The Chinese People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police Forces (PAP) must always preserve the nature, purpose, and true qualities of the People's Army, resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests, and resolutely safeguard world peace. ¹⁸
7	2020.1.2	Central Military Commission (CMC) Mobilization Order for the Training of the Armed Forces	Guided by Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the army, implement the military strategy of the new era, strengthen the thinking of serving as soldiers, leading soldiers in war, and training soldiers to fight wars, keep an eye on strong opponents, and focus on actual military training. Maintain a high level of alertness to ensure the mobilization in no time and readiness in all time, and victory in all battle. ¹⁹
8	2020.10.13	Xi Jinping Inspects the PLA Marine Corps	The Marine Corps is an elite amphibious combat force and shoulders important responsibilities in safeguarding national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, safeguarding national maritime rights and interests, and safeguarding national overseas interests. Grasp the characteristics and laws of the Marine Corps construction management and combat application, accelerate the transformation and construction, accelerate the improvement of combat capabilities, and forge a strong force that combines multiple capabilities, rapid response, and all-domain facilitation. ²⁰
9	2020.10.29	Communique of 5th Plenary Session of 19th CCP Central Committee	Our development environment is facing profound and complex changes and we are opening a window of strategic opportunities. The world is undergoing major changes unseen in a century. Peace and development are still the themes of the times. The international environment is becoming increasingly complex and instability and uncertainty have increased significantly. Speed up the modernization of national defense and the armed forces, and realize the unity of a prosperous country and a strong army. Implement Xi Jinping's Thought on strengthening the army, implement the military strategy of the new era, adhere to the party's absolute leadership over the People's Army, adhere to the political building of the army, reform and strengthening of the army, science and technology strengthening the army, talent strengthening the army, governing the army according to law, and accelerating the integration of mechanization, informatization, and intelligence. Comprehensively strengthen military training and preparations, improve the strategic ability to defend national sovereignty, security, and development interests, and ensure that the centennial goal of the struggle can be achieved by 2027. ²¹

16 “Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification—Speech at the Meeting Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan,” (「告臺灣同胞書」發表40周年紀念會在京隆重舉行習近平出席紀念會並發表重要講話), *Xinhua* (新華社), January 2, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-01/02/c_1123937723.htm.

17 The PRC MND (中國國防部), *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era* (新時代的中國國防) (Beijing: The PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660318/1660318.htm>.

18 “Commemoration of 70th Anniversary of Victory of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War,” (習近平在紀念中國人民抗日戰爭暨世界反法西斯戰爭勝利70周年大會上的講話), *Xinhua* (新華社), September 3, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/03/c_1116456504.htm.

19 Zhang Shimeng (張詩夢), “CMC Mobilization Order for the Training of the Armed Forces,” (中央軍委2020年開訓動員令) *Xinhua* (新華社), January 2, 2020, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/shouye/2020-01/02/content_4857907.htm.

20 Wang Shibin (王士彬), “Xi Jinping Inspects the PLA Marine Corps,” (習近平視察海軍陸戰隊並發表重要講話), *People's Liberation Army Daily* (解放軍報), October 13, 2020, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/shouye/2020-10/13/content_4872647.htm.

21 Shi Guanghui (石光輝) ed., “Communique of 5th Plenary Session of 19th CPC Central Committee,” (中國共產黨第十九屆中央委員會第五次全體會議公報), *Communist Party Member Network* (共產黨員網), October 29, 2020, <http://www.12371.cn/2020/10/29/ART11603964233795881.shtml>.

No	Date	Occasion	Context
10	2020.11.26	Xi's Speech at the military training meeting of the Central Military Commission	New changes have taken place in our country's security environment, the situation of military struggles, our military's missions, modern warfare, our military's organizational form, national defense and military modernization goals and tasks, and our military's military training has entered a new stage of comprehensive reform and overall improvement. It is necessary to grasp the new era, new situation, new tasks, and new requirements, increase the awareness of danger, strengthen mission responsibility, and accelerate the transformation and upgrading of military training. ²²
11	2021.1.4	Xi Jinping's Central Military Commission Order No. 1 of 2021 to start training the mobilized Forces	Deepen actual combat training, joint combat training, enhance training by science and technology, and form the training according to law; resolutely complete the mission and tasks assigned by the party and the people in the new era, and greet the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China with outstanding achievements. ²³
12	2021.3.9	Xi Jinping's Speech at plenary meeting of delegation of PLA and Armed Police Force.	The 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP is the beginning of the 14th Five-Year Plan and the beginning of a new journey of building a modern socialist country in an all-around way. It is also the year when the New Three Steps of modernization of national defense and the military started. The security situation is unstable and uncertain. The entire military must coordinate the construction and preparation of the relationship, be prepared to respond to various complex and difficult situations at any time, and resolutely safeguard the national sovereignty, security, and development interests, to provide strong support for the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country. ²⁴
13	2021.2.7	Xi Jinping inspected a certain division of the Air Force on the eve of the Spring Festival	In modern wars, the control of information has become the key to victory in the war. It is necessary to accelerate the development of advanced equipment, intensify the training of professional talents, strengthen targeted confrontation training, and promote the accelerated improvement of new-quality combat effectiveness. For the army, it is vital to do a good job in military training. It is necessary to implement the spirit of the Military Training Meeting of the Central Military Commission, combine with the actual conditions of the Air Force, pay close attention to actual combat military training, and continuously improve the training level and the ability to win. ²⁵
14	2021.3.27	Xi inspects the 2 nd Mobile Corps of the Armed Police Force in Fujian	Carry out the Party's idea of strengthening the army in the new era, implement the military strategic policy of the new era, do a good job of normalizing epidemic prevention and control, comprehensively strengthen military preparations, comprehensively improve the ability to perform missions and tasks, strive to create a new situation in army building, and welcome the establishment of the CCP with excellent results 100th anniversary. ²⁶
15	2021.7.1	Xi Jinping's Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China	We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves end up with heads cracked and bloodshed before the great wall of steel forged by the flesh and blood from over 1.4 billion Chinese people. ²⁷

Table 6: The Main Points of Xi Jinping's Speeches to the PLA on the National Security and Defense Strategy.

22 "Xi Jinping Emphasizing at the Military Training Meeting of the Central Military Commission to Comprehensively Strengthen Actual Combat Military Training, Comprehensively Improve the Training Level and the Ability to Win," 〈習近平在中央軍委軍事訓練會議上強調全面加強實戰化軍事訓練全面提高訓練水平和打贏能力〉 *People's Daily*, 《人民日報》, November 26, 2020, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/topnews/2020-11/25/content_4874581.htm.

23 "Xi Jinping Signed the Central Military Commission Order No. 1 of 2021 to Issue a Training Mobilization Order to the Entire Army," 〈習近平簽署中央軍委2021年1號命令向全軍發布開訓動員令〉, *Xinhua*, 《新華社》 January 4, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/shouye/2021-01/04/content_4876468.htm.

24 "Xi Jinping Emphasized the Achievement of a Good Start to the Construction of National Defense and the Armed Forces during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period When Attending the Plenary Meeting of the Delegation of the People's Liberation Army and the Armed Police Forces. (習近平在出席解放軍和武警部隊代表團全體會議時強調實現十四五時期國防和軍隊建設良好開局以優異成績迎接中國共產黨建黨100周年), *Xinhua*(新華網), March 9, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-03/09/c_1127191057.htm.

25 "To All the Officers and Soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, the Armed Police Force, the Civilian Personnel, the Militia and the Reserve Personnel of the People's Liberation Army" (向全體人民解放軍指戰員武警部隊官兵軍隊文職人員民兵預備役人員致以新春祝福), *People's Daily*(人民日報), February 7, 2021, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0207/c64094-32024555.html>.

26 "When Inspecting the Second Mobile Corps of the Armed Police Force, Xi Jinping Emphasized the Comprehensive Strengthening of Troop Training and Preparation, and the Comprehensive Improvement of the Ability to Perform Missions and Tasks," (習近平在視察武警第二機動總隊時強調全面加強練兵備戰全面提高履行使命任務能力), *People's Daily*(人民日報), March 27, 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0327/c1024-32062504.html>.

27 "Xi Jinping's Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China," (習近平慶祝中國共產黨成立100周年大會上的講話), *Xinhuanet*(新華網), July 2, 2021, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202107/02/WS60de676ca310efatbd65f4fe.html>.

2.1.1 Different interpretation of the core interests in the Party

Despite waves of frustration experienced, Xi has eventually succeeded in concentrating military power in his capacity as Chairman, CMC, enacting his policy at the state level in the name of national security. On the one hand, Xi is a standing member and General Secretary in the Political Bureau. On the other hand, as the Chairman, CMC, Xi commands the military police, to which maritime-police units are attached. In practical terms, all the directives and commands in terms of military strategy and operation are dictated by Xi at this moment. Other standing members in charge of economics, propaganda and united fronts in the Political Bureau are answerable to Xi. Their assignments are not so much relevant to national defense nor military issues, let alone foreign policy towards the US. This partially explains why there are few significant discords on core interests when it comes to the above agenda.

2.1.2 The First Island Chain as a foundation for broader power projection

Beijing used to emphasize the need to “shelving the differences and seeking joint development” on the issue of sovereignty in the South China Sea, where neighboring countries were urged to respect *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, (DOC)*. Judging from Beijing's increasingly assertive behavior, Beijing nowadays seems to take the South China Sea as a domestic sea with multi-purpose military bases strengthened by long-range runways, air defense positions, airports, and anti-ship missiles. The entire South China Sea somehow will be within a reachable range of Chinese power projection and become a quasi-Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) controlled by PLA naval and air forces. The scale of power projection and control this requires will be an abiding consumer of PLA resources, but also a foundation for PLA power projection beyond its ‘first island chain’.

In practical terms, all the directives and commands in terms of military strategy and operation are dictated by Xi at this moment.

2.2 Priorities beyond the Western Pacific and First Island Chain

2.2.1 Security analysis on the Sino-Indian border.

The historical dispute between India and China has involved periodic skirmishes on the eastern, middle, and western section along the borderlines. Recent records include the one on the western section at Ladakh in 2014, another near the border with Bhutan in 2017, and another again in Ladakh in 2020. Although there were not severe casualties, they caused tremendous impact on Sino-Indian relations as the result of tension on the borders. In *China's National Defense in the New Era*, published in 2019, only the US, EU, and Russia were mentioned in the “international security” chapter. Even when discussing security issues in the Asia Pacific, the defense white paper only mentioned it with the wording that the general situation of South Asia was stable except for occasional Indian-Pakistan conflicts. It did not mention the Doklam standoff happening in 2017,²⁸ nor the intractable border dispute between India and China. In fact, after India withdrew the autonomous status of Ladakh and Kashmir and placed them directly under a central state, New Delhi needs to give more realist concern and provide Ladakh more securities from further molestation.

28 The PRC MND (中國國防部), *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era* (新時代的中國國防) (Beijing: The PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660318/1660318.htm>.

The year 2014 witnessed border conflicts in Ladakh. Subsequent skirmishes were frequent in the area, despite the fact that they were kept at a low intensity without escalation. Since then, to maintain the status quo, the two sides have been improving infrastructure and logistical arrangements, readjusting their force deployments and pre-positioning advanced fighters and supplies. They are keen to prevent unexpected moves from the other side, given the fact that both publicly express their intention to retake lost territories. In April 2018, General Secretary Xi and Prime Minister Modi held non-official dialogue in Wuhan city, China. Perhaps predictably, General Secretary Xi reiterated his line about building a 'new type of international relations' that insist on non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, equal status and upholding justice.²⁹ This set of ideas does not appear to be affecting PLA preparations and deployments on the India-China border, however.

If we use the substance of 'core interest' as a metric to compare border issues between India and China with those across the Strait, in the East China Sea and South China Sea, we may arrive at a tentative conclusion that resolving the India-China border does not constitute itself as a core interest, nor an issue that attracts the same level of priority and resourcing. Nevertheless, the risk of conflict and escalation is real. On the one hand, India claims that Aksai Chin near Ladakh is part of Indian territory. On the other hand, China asserts that the region of South Tibet, called Arunachal Pradesh on the Indian side, belongs to China. The disputed borders extend more than 130,000 square kilometers.

Given that the international strategic environment is unfavorable to China, and territorial sovereignty on the Sino-Indian borders is not of any urgency, the priority for the PLA to resolve the disputed border by force is low. However, China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and strong demands that India should respect the "One China Principle," along with the impact of COVID-19 and border conflicts, has aroused indignation among the Indian people and reinforced Indian government determination to have effective defense capabilities available in the disputed border regions. Even so, these developments are not the main prerequisites for the outbreak of the Sino-Indian border war. No matter how powerful the military is, the use of force to resolve border issues comes with the highest risk and has no guarantee of victory.

In terms of strategic intent, India hopes to ensure the Line of Actual Control (LAC) without attempting to seize more highlands or territories. While maintaining the stability of the border, both sides restrain the conflict. Judging from the combat preparations and military balance of China and India, in the unlikely event of a misfire or accident, neither country seems assured to gain an absolute advantage. A protracted war in the mountains is likely to absorb both sides military power and be inconclusive.³⁰ In such a conflict, China is in isolation, and even Russia may not be on China's side. India's strategic cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, and other countries based on its strategic interests is actually accumulating combat advantages and strengthening its own bargaining power in handling the Sino-Indian border.

After the military reform, the number of Chinese military forces around the border has decreased, but they are part of broader PLA modernization and are also more familiar with joint operations than the Indian forces. India has a large border force, but it is not as powerful as China's maneuverability and firepower. India is strengthening the formation and training of

29 "Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Modi Held an Informal Meeting in Wuhan," (習近平同印度總理莫迪在武漢舉行非正式會晤), *People's Daily*(人民網), April 29, 2018, <http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2018/0429/c1024-29957632.html>.

30 Lai Yizhong(賴怡忠), "The Impact of the Indo-China Border Conflict on the Indo-Pacific Situation," (印中邊界衝突對印太情勢的影響), *Voicetank*(想想論壇), June 23, 2020, <https://www.voicetank.org/single-post/2020/06/23/062301>.

India is strengthening the formation and training of synthetic battle groups but at present cannot keep up with China and the United States.

synthetic battle groups but at present cannot keep up with China and the United States. This makes India likely to adopt traditional methods of war of attrition on the border to hold back China and seek US assistance. If a conflict occurred that China did win quickly, not only would this make the Sino-Indian border even more difficult to resolve, it would also reduce China's perceived power in resolving the Taiwan and South China Sea issues.

2.2.2 The Indian Ocean

Beyond the India-China land border, China has a growing interest and growing capabilities to advance those interests in the Indian Ocean. China started counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 and started sending Chinese warships to the Indian Ocean, similar to long-distance navigation to expand the size and capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) for developing into a blue water navy. In the national defense white paper issued by China, the Indian Ocean is mainly related to China's dispatch of escort fleets to the Gulf of Aden and the waters of Somalia and cooperation with other countries in escort according to United Nations resolutions. Moreover, there are also Joint exercises of the Chinese navy and the Pakistani navy in the Indian Ocean.³¹ Obviously, combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden is a non-traditional security task. Without overseas military bases, humanitarian aid motivations can be used to call at ports in countries along the route for supply, such as Gwadar Port in Pakistan and Chittagong Port in Bangladesh.

2.2.3 Broader maritime power goals

China has already proposed the goal of becoming a maritime power. The North Sea Fleet headed north, just crossing the Arctic into the Atlantic Ocean; the East China Sea Fleet crossed the first island chain into the Western Pacific but was blocked by the US and Australian navies, and its development was restricted; the South China Sea Fleet headed south across the Strait of Malacca or Indonesia and entered the Indian Ocean. As the northward route is not yet mature, and the United States and Australia restrict the eastward route to the Pacific, the Indian Ocean will become the pillar of China's maritime strategy. It will become the focus of China's long-range projection capabilities in the future.

For China to expand the PLAN to become an ocean-going navy, it must hold overseas military bases. Now that China has already established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, it will move to established military bases, or 'strategic support bases', in the east, north, and west of the Indian Ocean. This will enable the PLAN to carry out long-range force projection here, threaten India's rear and economic lifeline from the sea and protect Chinese economic interests in Africa and the Middle East.

2.2.4 National Interests – a PLA to protect overseas Chinese and Chinese economic interests in times of tension, disaster, and crisis

After China's economic reform (reform and opening-up), overseas trade has been developed through overseas corporate mergers, acquisitions, and foreign direct investment (FDI), in addition to export-oriented development. Since then, the number of PRC expatriates overseas ('overseas Chinese') has been rising due to creating an emigrant population who follows outbound Chinese companies to engage in trade or State Own Enterprises (SOEs) projects.

31 Zhao Gancheng (趙干城), "The Indian Ocean: Motivations for Re-Defining China's Maritime Strategy," (印度洋：中國海洋戰略再定義的動因), *South Asian Studies* (南亞研究), Vol.1 2013, 24-35.

China has already proposed the goal of becoming a maritime power.

In the past, China was unable to defend the interests of overseas Chinese. When turmoil occurred in a foreign country, China had to arrange civil aircraft, ships, and vehicles to evacuate the expatriates (See Table 7). When the Solomon Islands had a military coup in June 2000, it was Australia to assist China in evacuation with their naval vessels. It was not until the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Libya that China used heavy transport aircraft and warships to execute the evacuation for the first time. The two vessels had been reassigned this mission from their duty of combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden at the time.

During the 2015 Yemen Civil War, China again dispatched two naval vessels originally in charge of combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden to carry out evacuation missions and assisted in the evacuation of 225 foreign nationals. Judging from the evacuation areas in the last two decades, most of them are concentrated in the Middle East and Africa. The objects of protection mainly focus on construction employees sent by Chinese SOEs. Their work involves infrastructure construction related to minerals, petroleum, and traditional industries.

Although these overseas industries have not affected China's performance in economic development profoundly, should Beijing emphasize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and claim China a great power there will be more and more evacuation operations with heavy transport aircraft and warships.

No.	Year	Country	Region	Reason for Evacuation	Vehicle	No. Evacuated
1	1965	Indonesia	Southeast Asia	anti-Chinese unrest	ferry	60,000
2	2003	Liberia	Africa	turmoil	automobile	36
3	2006	Tonga	Oceania	turmoil	civil aircraft	193
4	2006	Lebanon	Middle East	Israel-Lebanon conflict	automobile	167
5	2006	East Timor	Southeast Asia	turmoil	civil aircraft	243
6	2006	The Solomon Islands	Oceania	turmoil	civil aircraft	310
7	2008	Chad	Africa	turmoil	automobile	411
8	2008	Thailand	Southeast Asia	anti-governmental protest	civil aircraft	3,346
9	2009	Haiti	Caribbean Sea	earthquakes	civil aircraft	48
10	2010	Kyrgyzstan	Central Asia	turmoil	civil aircraft	1,299
11	2011	Egypt	Africa	turmoil	civil aircraft	2,500
12	2011	Libya	Africa	civil war (Jasmine Revolution)	military & civil aircraft; naval vessel & ferry (utilizing military for evacuation the first time)	36,580
13	2014	Iraq	Middle East	Islamic State	ferry	10,000
14	2015	Yemen	Middle East	civil war	two naval vessels to Gulf of Aden	449 PRC citizens; 225 non-PRC

Table 7: Chinese Overseas Evacuation Operations.

In general, military capabilities are mainly considered to achieve military missions and contribute to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) purposes once the country or the people are in an emergency. Because of foreign aid and construction cooperation, China has signed many major projects with various countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has sent many engineering companies to take charge of infrastructure construction

in the local states. When a major disturbance occurs in the region or country, an evacuation operation must be carried out. After evacuating overseas Chinese from Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015, China has testified its capabilities to evacuate overseas nationals with heavy transport aircraft and warships.

So far, the number of IL-76 transport aircraft that China has purchased from Russia is insufficient to evacuation demands. In the Libyan evacuation operation, only four military aircraft were dispatched to perform twelve voyage missions in cooperation with civil aircraft. Although China does not have an overseas airbase, out of the humanitarian assistance, its military aircraft can land at the airports of countries along the route or fly directly to the destination by air refueling.

Regarding naval vessels, whether it is Libya or Yemen's evacuation of overseas Chinese, China uses warships that perform the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden to conduct evacuation missions. In fact, anti-piracy success by multinational forces has reduced the looting behavior of pirates in the Gulf of Aden, and the demand for sending warships to escort has decreased as a result. However, China can use the mission in the Gulf of Aden to train its naval ships and talents for long-distance voyages and maritime operations. Therefore, the Chinese navy will not stop its six-month-term escort missions. In addition to combating piracy, these warships can also execute long-sea navigation training, military diplomacy and international joint training. If there is a temporary need to implement evacuation, large auxiliaries or amphibious landing ships can also be deployed from the South Sea Fleet to the Middle East or Africa to perform rescue missions.

Based on the overseas deployment model of the US Marine Corps, China used the latest 075 amphibious assault ship to carry the Chinese version of the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The deployment of these forces overseas serves multiple purposes, including performing exercises, patrolling missions, joint exercises with China's regional allies, international rescue missions and combat readiness. The People's Liberation Army 075 amphibious assault ships can carry 900 PLA marines along with their equipment and weapons - on top of landing craft, hovercraft, and amphibious assault vehicles - all while carrying 30 helicopters. China can use these strategic resources to strengthen security cooperation with other neighboring countries under the nominal claim of carrying out maritime rescue and humanitarian rescue joint exercises at the same time.³²

In addition to heavy transport aircraft and naval vessels, relay bases or overseas military bases are also significant. Beijing recognizes that Djibouti is the only overseas military base that China has. However, those important infrastructures and oil pipelines built under China's BRI need to be maintained by security personnel. If a major change occurs, a force is required.

In the future, China will expand the establishment of overseas military bases, or set up military facilities in those ports under de facto control by China - such as Colombo or Hambantota in Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and Chittagong in Bangladesh - so that warships can be berthed for logistics and supply.³³ Such naval bases may also appear in those Pacific island states in Oceanian adjacent to Australia and become China's forward base for power projection the southern Pacific Ocean.

32 Grant Newsham, "Chinese Marines May Be Operating in IOR in Five Years," *Sunday Guardian*, April 18, 2020 <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/chinese-marines-may-operating-ior-five-years>.

33 Можете да прочетете текста и на български, "The Chinese String of Pearls or How Beijing is Conquering the Sea," *De Re Militari*, August 26, 2019, <https://drjournal.org/2019/08/26/the-chinese-string-of-pearls-or-how-beijing-is-conquering-the-sea/>.

So far, the number of IL-76 transport aircraft that China has purchased from Russia is insufficient to evacuation demands.

In addition, China has also sent troops to Tajikistan since 2016 to prevent Xinjiang Uyghurs from entering Afghanistan. In 2019, a joint counter-terrorism center was established as a permanent facility and actually turned into a small military base on the ground.³⁴ Given the US and NATO force withdrawals from Afghanistan, China may strengthen its military facilities in this region, although the likely level of internal violence in Afghanistan reduces the likelihood in the short and medium term. China may also establish land-based military bases in Central Asia to safeguard Beijing's geostrategic interests of Central Asia.

2.3 Conclusion

In terms of China's judgment of core interests, the authority of CCP's top leader Xi Jinping has not been challenged in the party nor the PLA because of his centralized power. Judging from Xi's Political Report at the CCP's 19th National Congress and the 2019 *China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era*, the Taiwan issue is undoubtedly the most important core interest due to its connection to national unification and rejuvenation.

China's military development goals are to achieve mechanization first, then achieve the goal of informatization and *intellectualization*, and finally become a global military power according to the near-medium and long-range plan. If the US in the 1990 Gulf War era is regarded as a model of mechanized warfare, today's PLA already has same level capability in technical terms, such as stealth fighters, stealth bombers, armed helicopters as well as aircraft carriers, cruise missiles, and medium-range missiles. Nevertheless, the question of whether China has created a culture of high-tech joint operations, with all the processes and behaviors involved in this, remains unknown.

The spokesperson of PRC's Ministry of National Defense put forward the four goals for PLA's centennial establishment by 2027, and these must be assessed and understood carefully. The goals themselves are no guarantee that China can successfully achieve mechanization, informatization and artificial *intelligence* in military affairs over this timeframe. China claims it will build three aircraft carrier strike groups by 2027 and six by 2035. As China already has two aircraft carrier strike groups, the third will need to be completed by 2027. Therefore, it appears progress is somewhat delayed - Beijing has taken seven years to build individual aircraft carriers, so completing three carriers in the next eight years looks difficult. Moreover, after the successive updates of US aircraft carriers, the technology of aircraft carriers has surpassed that of China, and growing deployment of US, Japanese, Taiwanese, and other US partner and ally anti-ship missiles and submarines can seriously threaten Chinese aircraft carrier strike groups. This balance of forces may continue to make Beijing's use of force against Taiwan too costly a move for Beijing's leadership to direct. Instead, China will try to divide US-Taiwan relations or strengthen its political control over Taiwan.

China requires the military to accelerate the integration and development of mechanization, informatization, and intellectualization. However, the US-China trade war and the technological war have exposed China's backwardness in areas like semiconductor and chip technology. Many intelligent weapon systems rely on chip technology. Should Chinese development of its own chips stagnate or lag, the design and manufacture of cutting-edge weapon

³⁴ Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 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.

China claims it will build three aircraft carrier strike groups by 2027 and six by 2035.

systems will also be delayed, which may further complicate achievement of the goals for PLA's centennial establishment by 2027.

China's current military power would have difficulties competing with the United States. It may not have the advantage even if facing Japan, Australia, and India. It will inevitably accelerate the speed of military modernization to increase its bargaining and intimidatory presence in regional territorial sovereignty issues. China has surpassed the US in some military technologies, such as anti-ballistic missiles and density of missile threat in its periphery, through its Anti-Access Area Denial Strategy. Its development of stealth fighters, hypersonic missiles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) is also catching up. However, if a war breaks out with the US due to a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, it may not be sure of victory, which remains the primary restraint that matters to the leadership in Beijing.

The new short-term goal of building Chinese military power for conflict by 2027 does seem to align with Xi's desire to resolve the Taiwan issue during his tenure. It also might reflect the fact that the balance of capabilities around Taiwan may begin to shift away from Beijing as US, partner and allied deterrent capabilities grow, even given the trajectory of PLA capability development. China also understands the military power gap between the United States and China. In addition to actively catching up with the US military capabilities with the three-step strategy, Xi Jinping's speech to the PLA has constantly demanded "the mission of daring to fight well and be determined to win" (敢战善战、矢志打赢的使命担当).³⁵ It reveals the hope of using spiritual mobilization and combat power to make up for the gap. But in this scenario, the most positive window for the use of force to unify Taiwan with the mainland would be before decisions to increase US and allied deterrent power can take effect.

This paper sets out the Chinese government's goals for developing and using the PLA within the broader Party and national strategy of returning China to the center of the international system as a political, economic, and military power that surpasses and displaces the United States – first regionally and then globally. It assesses that China's priorities for the PLA build on each other, with the earlier highest priorities establishing foundations for greater power projection and influence. Taiwan is central to the CCP's political objective of demonstrating it has achieved national unification. But Taiwan being absorbed into mainland China also then provides a platform to exert military power more easily through and outside China's 'First Island Chain' and so reinforces Beijing's drive to establish de facto sovereign and military control in the area defined by its Nine Dash Line. Consolidating this control would damage – and perhaps even destroy – the US alliance network in Asia.

Before such control is achieved, the CCP is unlikely to seek to escalate conflicts with Japan in disputed areas of the East China Sea or its longstanding border disputes with India, but instead is likely to continue to raise tensions in both areas to demonstrate its continued claims and to absorb and distract the Japanese and Indian militaries.

The paper also describes the dynamic internal tensions and debates that occur in the CCP leadership, between the Party leadership and the PLA and within factions and groups inside the PLA and the Party. These dynamics are opaque to the external world – and probably also to many of the internal Chinese participants – but do appear to result in discordant actions between national leadership intent and elements of the PLA. While Xi has consolidated control over the PLA more effectively than his predecessor Hu, this is not a one-off event and

35 People's Liberation Army Daily Commentor (解放軍報評論員), "Sing the Heroic Song and Fight Hard to Win" (唱響英雄壯歌 奮力強軍打贏), *People's Liberation Army Daily* (解放軍報), February 19, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-02/19/c_1127113833.htm.

China's current military power would have difficulties competing with the United States.

is likely to require continued leadership shifts, reforms, and anti-corruption-induced dismissal, all of which create drivers for this to continue. Assessment of PLA leadership figures and close analysis of PLA activities is required to understand some of the gaps and fissures and avoid incorrect assessments that every action is part of a larger strategic plan.

One key implication of the paper is that the 'core interests' that the PLA is a key element in protecting have expanded as Chinese economic, political and military power have grown. The core purpose of the PLA remains to maintain the Party in power within China, and this continues to have real implications for PLA focus and activity, even given the scale and capability of non-PLA internal security forces like the People's Armed Police.

However, the trajectory of Chinese interests into and across the Indian Ocean, connecting to the Middle East and to Africa is already creating momentum for greater global power projection by the PLA, and early moves to establish overseas basing and long-range sustainment capacity have been demonstrated in the Gulf of Aden and across the Indian Ocean.

This PLA role is likely to expand, particularly if Beijing's relations with sub-continental, Middle Eastern and African states deepen economically in response to growing complications in relations with the US, Japan, India, and European states. Individual Chinese offshore investments and business operations – like resource extraction activities in Africa and the deep China-Pakistan economic cooperation - are likely to be the beginning of this growing international security role for the PLA. Added to the dynamics that are leading the CCP to invest in a PLA with greater global power projection is the political objective of a world class military as part of a returned Great China at the center of world power, combined with the notion that all people of Chinese ethnicity living in other nations are connected to the Chinese state through their status as 'Overseas Chinese'.

Overall, though, Chinese ambitions for the PLA are also affected by external conditions, with CCP and PLA leaders and strategists continually assessing balances of power and the political will and capabilities of others, most particularly the US, to obstruct or oppose Chinese interests and action. This complicates any net assessment but is essential for assessments and policies relating to China and its military.

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