

# PLA Ground Forces and the Challenge of a Rising China

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

PLA Ground Forces and the Challenge of a Rising China, by COL James S. Powell, USA, 52 pages.

This monograph aims at sharpening the US Army's thinking about Chinese military threats and informing future research efforts that explore contingencies against the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the land domain. By looking at the interrelated factors of doctrine, personnel quality, force structure, and technological capability, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the PLA and how its ground forces have prepared to fight high-tech wars beyond China's periphery.

The pace and extent of China's rise have been unsettling for the United States, which has viewed its relations with Beijing through the lenses of cooperation and competition. This monograph provides context on the latter. Driven by a renewed sense of destiny supported by growing power, China is no longer amenable to playing strictly by America's rules, especially close to home. While pursuing its own ambitions, China has contributed to escalating regional tensions and has challenged the US-led international order. The shape and scale of its military modernization suggest the means by which this challenge might come. China's quest through asymmetric weapons to undermine what it perceives as US hegemony has been paired by a parallel effort to imitate and match US military power, notably in deterrent and power-projection capabilities.

After an overview of PLA ground forces and their course of reform since the 1950s, this monograph discusses the implications of the far-reaching set of reforms announced in late 2015. Under Mao Zedong's rule, the influential doctrine of *people's war* remained relatively unchanged, its persistence serving, along with the PLA's focus on maintaining domestic order, as a rationale for delaying modernization. During the 1980s and 1990s, the PLA gradually adapted *people's war* to "modern conditions" as its leaders shifted their attention to winning "local, limited wars." After 2000, Chinese military modernization became comprehensive and focused, addressing personnel quality, training, and weapons systems while information dominance emerged as the primary doctrinal thrust. The latest reforms target the PLA's command structure and reflect a concern about its responsiveness in crisis. With a more pronounced emphasis on quality at all levels, they aim to unify military decision-making, streamline command and control, and enhance the capacity for joint operations in a force long dominated by the ground component.

Aware of its shortcomings in technical skill, the PLA has embarked on a multigenerational effort to meet the demands of local wars under high-tech or *informationized* conditions. While it is tempting to think the Chinese armed forces will seek to close the gap with Western militaries by imitating them, it is just as likely that the PLA will try instead to compensate in some unforeseen way. Tensions and contradictions inherent in varied sources of doctrine, like Mao and Sun Zi, highlight the peril of basing predictions or explanations of Chinese behavior on a single way of war. PLA ways of war emerge, rather, as intentional and evolving blends of the old and new.

In an expeditionary campaign against a US-led coalition, PLA ground forces will likely harness networked systems to apply firepower with coordinated shock effect on critical coalition assets while employing deception, information warfare, mobility, and improved logistics in order to protect and sustain their own. But the path those forces take in seeking to close the existent capabilities gap may not be as straightforward as the Chinese army's pattern of weapons acquisition, organizational reform, and training exercises suggest.

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## Acronyms

A2/AD	anti-access / area denial
ASB	Air-Sea Battle
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DOD	Department of Defense
JAM-GC	Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NDU	National Defense University
OSC	Open Source Center
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMA	Revolution in Military Affairs
SSI	Strategic Studies Institute
SCIO	State Council Information Office
USACGSC	US Army Command and General Staff College
USAWC	US Army War College
USPACOM	United States Pacific Command

## Introduction

Can the Chinese get it all together? The short answer is probably not!

—Larry M. Wortzel, writing in 1998

The bottom line up front is that . . . the [Chinese] military will necessarily develop capabilities to secure the country's interests.

—Larry M. Wortzel, writing in 2009

In a 2012 assessment of defense priorities, Leon Panetta, the US secretary of defense at the time, formally articulated a “rebalance” of military strength toward the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> The strategic guidance highlighted China's rise to regional power as a long-term challenge to American economic and security interests, and a subsequent Defense Department annual report on China's military modernization provided a foretaste of the means by which this challenge might come.<sup>2</sup> US officials avoid classifying their government's pattern of tense and often confrontational interactions with the People's Republic of China (PRC) strictly as a competition while Chinese commentators seem less reluctant to do so.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of how one characterizes the US-China relationship, the emergence of China, along with its ambiguous strategic intentions, call for a deeper understanding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and how this force intends to safeguard and advance the interests of its political masters. The Chinese military today is over a decade into a multigenerational venture to improve the quality of its soldiers and systems and to prepare them to fight and win *informationized* wars under high-tech conditions. Although

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Defense (DOD), *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: January 2012), 2.

<sup>2</sup> US DOD, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: 2013), 5-13, 29-42.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 15-16; and Kai Liao, “The Pentagon and the Pivot,” *Survival* 55, no. 3 (June-July 2013): 95, 108-9.

American security and intelligence analysts have learned much about the PLA in recent years, it almost goes without saying that substantial gaps remain.

Books describing and analyzing the US-China competition are, of course, not in short supply. No serious scholar disputes the fact of China's current rise, but a few doubt the ability of Beijing to overcome persistent cultural, societal, and political obstacles in order to sustain it.<sup>4</sup> Others have read the proverbial "tea leaves" only to conclude that eventual Chinese domination of the world is all but assured.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, informed by a sense of contingency, an increasing number of scholars have considered the dynamics of a strategic competition that is hardly predetermined.<sup>6</sup> Of these, some take a fairly "hawkish" view, holding China's pronouncements of a "peaceful rise" with robust skepticism.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, some urge caution, declaring that arguments casting China's intentions as hostile are probably overblown and, in any case, risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies if adopted as US policy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Fenby, *Will China Dominate the 21st Century?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014); Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For a sampling of such works, see, Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal, eds., *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See, Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), especially pp. 360-411.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see, David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Is the American Century Over?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), especially pp. 46-70.

As for the PLA and its operational capability, much too has been written, with defense commentators focusing on China's air, missile, and maritime forces and the breathtaking improvements these components have achieved in recent years.<sup>9</sup> Experts emphasize the formidable challenges China poses to US air and naval power, for example, but implications for combat in the land domain have received less attention. Aside from histories, scholarly book-length treatments devoted to PLA ground forces are comparably rare, ostensibly because China lacks the power-projection capability necessary to support a distant land campaign.<sup>10</sup> Balanced and carefully researched, Dennis J. Blasko's *The Chinese Army Today* stands as a notable exception.<sup>11</sup> In his analysis of the PLA and how it fights, Blasko clarifies Chinese shortcomings in joint and combined-arms operations, as well as the long road toward modernization that lies ahead. Still, this assessment, while realistic at present, runs the risk of underestimating the predicaments potentially facing a US-led coalition should it have to confront China in a future ground campaign somewhere in the Asia-Pacific region.

How an army intends to fight is guided by a number of interrelated factors, including doctrine, training, force structure, personnel quality, technological capability, and its knowledge

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<sup>9</sup> See, Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014); Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, DC: National Defense University [NDU] Press, 2011); and Richard P. Hallion, Roger Cliff, and Phillip C. Saunders, eds., *The Chinese Air Force: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Xiaobing Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Edward L. Dreyer, *China at War, 1901-1949* (New York: Longman, 1995); and Gary J. Bjorge, *Moving the Enemy: Operational Art in the Chinese PLA's Huai Hai Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Command and General Staff College [USACGSC], 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

of potential adversaries. The US Army's development and adaptation in the latter years of the Cold War and its performance in the 1991 Gulf War serve as an example of one military organization's broad endeavor to align its warfighting capabilities with a vision of the future security environment.<sup>12</sup> Along similar lines, this monograph will explore the PLA's efforts to modernize and prepare its ground forces for high-tech wars on China's periphery and, eventually, beyond. Initial sections will provide context on the contemporary US-China strategic competition, as well as an overview of the PLA ground forces and their course of reform since the 1950s. The monograph will then discuss implications of the far-reaching set of reforms announced in late 2015, followed by a few of the historical and cultural dynamics influencing the varied strands of the PLA's way of war. The evidence presented will demonstrate the great extent to which China's military leadership thinks about future warfare, how best to conduct it, the capability shortfalls to be overcome, and how technological and qualitative improvements seek to correct those shortfalls or minimize their impact.

Changes to doctrine, organizational structure, and the conduct of training indicate that the PLA has begun to contemplate the employment of ground forces outside China's borders and across the seas to distant shores. Growing technological capability and an emphasis on qualitative improvement suggest that the PLA has the wherewithal to do so, especially in pursuit of limited aims.<sup>13</sup> As the opening quotations of this section imply, the pace of growth and improvement have persuaded longtime students of the Chinese military to adjust their views.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War* (1993; repr., Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC Press, 1994), 1-36.

<sup>13</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "A Global Expeditionary People's Liberation Army: 2025-2030," in *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and David Lai (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute [SSI], US Army War College [USAWC], 2015), 207-10, 224-27.

<sup>14</sup> Larry M. Wortzel, *China's Military Potential* (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 1998), 20; Larry M. Wortzel, "PLA 'Joint' Operational Contingencies in South Asia, Central Asia, and

though truly unknowable to Western analysts, the PRC's strategic intentions, as far as they have been articulated, offer little hint of benevolence. Indeed, China's military activity in the Western Pacific seems to be hastening the armed confrontation its diplomatic rhetoric eschews. *The US Army Operating Concept* envisions conflict in which an adversary seeks either to avoid the American military's strengths, to emulate them, or to twist them somehow into a surprising advantage.<sup>15</sup> In the eventuality of war against a US-led coalition, PLA ground forces have postured themselves to pursue all three approaches. Hoping to win strategically by presenting its enemy with "multiple dilemmas," the US Army may well find itself facing the same unenviable quandary.<sup>16</sup> This monograph will sharpen the Army's thinking about Chinese military threats and inform future research efforts that explore contingencies against the PLA in the land domain.

### **The US-China Competition**

The rise of a 5,000-year-old civilization with 1.3 billion people is not a problem to be fixed. It is a condition—a chronic condition that will have to be managed over a generation.

—Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap"

Commemorating the seventieth anniversary of China's victory over Japan in World War II, the PLA's magnificent parade on 3 September 2015 showcased thousands of sharp-looking soldiers mounted on modern tanks and assault vehicles while state-of-the-art aircraft plied the skies above.<sup>17</sup> In brief remarks, Chinese President Xi Jinping reflected on the tragedy of war and

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Korea," in *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other than Taiwan*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2009), 332-33.

<sup>15</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The US Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040* (Fort Eustis, VA: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2014), 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Dickey, "Under Xi, China Prepares for Modern Warfare," *Defense in Depth* (blog), *Council on Foreign Relations*, 3 September 2015, accessed 15 January 2016, <http://blogs.cfr.org/davidson/2015/09/03/under-xi-china-prepares-for-modern-warfare>.

sounded a call for peace. Somber sentiments notwithstanding, he noted that victory in 1945 had marked, for China, the end of “national humiliation” and had “opened up bright prospects” for “renewal” and “rebirth,” setting “our ancient country on a new journey.” Mindful of how far and how fast progress along this path had come, Xi sought to assure his audience that, regardless of its strength, China would “remain committed to peaceful development” and “never seek hegemony or expansion.” Implicitly drawing a distinction between his country and the United States, he declared, “We Chinese love peace.”<sup>18</sup>

Largely dismissing Xi’s promotions of peace, China scholar David Lai instead viewed the Victory Day speech as a thinly veiled “show of force” against the United States. For one, China had never before celebrated its 1945 triumph over Japan in such ostentatious fashion, meaning that Beijing intended this barefaced and unprecedented display of military might to send a clear and powerful signal. China’s leaders had also not shied away from scheduling the parade amid an atmosphere of steadily mounting tension, framed by territorial disputes with US regional allies, American freedom of navigation exercises contesting claims of Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea, and perceptions of a collaborative campaign spearheaded by the United States to contain China. While Lai considered China’s assertiveness understandable given its relative economic and military strength in the region, he found the pronouncement of the country’s benevolent rise—a refrain commonly voiced in Chinese media—hard to believe. “One’s intention is proportional to one’s capability,” suggested Lai. “When China was backward and underdeveloped, it talked and acted like a weak power.”<sup>19</sup> In Lai’s studied perspective, things had

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<sup>18</sup> Xi Jinping, “Address at the Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War,” *Xinhua*, 3 September 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c\\_134583870.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134583870.htm).

<sup>19</sup> David Lai, “If You Want Peace, Prepare for War: Reflections on China’s V-Day Parade,” *Strategic Insights* (blog), *SSI, USAWC*, 5 October 2015, accessed 15 January 2016,

undoubtedly changed. Though unsurprised by China's more aggressive behavior, he feared that Beijing's growing power would tempt its leaders to overreach and, despite rhetoric to the contrary, succumb to their own "hegemonic impulses" in the near future.<sup>20</sup>

#### Bucking the International Order: Who Leads in Asia?

The unremitting pace and sweeping extent of China's military rise have been unsettling and a bit confounding for the United States. In his administration's 2015 *National Security Strategy*, President Barack Obama identified a "rules-based international order advanced by US leadership" as an enduring American interest.<sup>21</sup> He acknowledged a competitor in China but emphasized the pursuit of a "constructive relationship" with Beijing, seeking cooperation on global and regional issues of importance to both countries.<sup>22</sup> Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter later reiterated the dual-tracked nature of US policy. Yet speaking in September 2015, he characterized the relationship as one of "heightened competition," accusing China of violating not only international rules and norms but also a regional consensus favoring diplomacy over coercion.<sup>23</sup> For the administration, viewing China through the lenses of cooperation and competition has become strained.<sup>24</sup> According to economist Lawrence Summers, the United States must decide whether its objective is "to see China succeed economically as a support for

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<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/If-You-Want-Peace/2015/10/05>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2015), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ashton Carter, "Remarks at the Air Force Association's Air and Space Conference," US DOD News Transcript, 16 September 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/617480/remarks-by-secretary-carter-at-the-air-force-associations-air-space-conference>.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, scholar Edward Luttwak maintains that the Obama administration has pursued no less than *three* China policies, each championed by different governmental departments. See, Luttwak, *Rise of China*, 213-47.

global prosperity and a driver of positive social and political change, or . . . to contain and weaken China economically so that it has less capacity to mount global threats.”<sup>25</sup> To declare, as Obama did, that the United States “welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China” while insisting this rise comply with the rules and norms of the existing US-led international order seems unrealistic.<sup>26</sup>

China, for its part, has opposed this arrangement with growing vehemence. Tapping into a revitalized vein of nationalism, Xi—again, speaking at 2015’s Victory Day Parade—offered a vision advocating “mutual respect, equality, peaceful development, and common prosperity.” He expressed a desire for all nations to “uphold the international order and system” outlined in the UN Charter but, in the same sentence, called for a “new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation.”<sup>27</sup> Chinese scholars account for this ambivalent view towards the world order by explaining that Beijing generally favors the status quo, with the exception of the particular country imposing it. While they consider the goal of China surpassing the United States as the preeminent global power to be achievable only over the long term, many Chinese researchers foresee, within a decade, the establishment of a Beijing-dominated economic and security arrangement across East Asia and the western half of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>28</sup> The prevalent discussion of these aims inside China’s academic and policymaking apparatus signals a deviation from Deng Xiaoping’s calculated restraint in foreign affairs and his commitment during the late

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<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Summers, “The World—Including China—Is Unprepared for the Rise of China,” *Washington Post*, 8 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-world--including-china--is-unprepared-for-the-rise-of-china/2015/11/08/70aa6c70-84ab-11e5-8ba6-cec48b74b2a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-world--including-china--is-unprepared-for-the-rise-of-china/2015/11/08/70aa6c70-84ab-11e5-8ba6-cec48b74b2a7_story.html).

<sup>26</sup> Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Xi, “Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary.”

<sup>28</sup> Yun Sun, “China’s Preferred World Order: What Does China Want?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Pacific Forum, PacNet No. 62*, 21 September 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1562.pdf>.

1970s and 1980s to find “a solution acceptable to all.”<sup>29</sup> Today, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has become—in the words of US Pacific Command (PACOM) chief Adm. Harry B. Harris—“a nation in a hurry”<sup>30</sup> that slights the era of Hu Jintao, Xi’s predecessor, as “the decade of great inaction.”<sup>31</sup> Driven by a renewed sense of destiny which, given the country’s rising economic and military might, appears increasingly within its grasp, Xi has served notice that China is no longer amenable to playing by America’s rules, especially close to home: “It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.”<sup>32</sup>

#### Fear of the Hegemon: China’s View of the Contemporary Security Environment

Following a century of “national humiliation” and decades of the Cold War, the PRC in the early twenty-first century finds itself in a strategic environment generally supportive of its continued rise. The country’s diplomatic influence, economic competitiveness, and comprehensive strength point toward “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, “from an objective military standpoint,” writes scholar David Shambaugh, “China has never been more secure.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in, Harry B. Harris, Jr., remarks at the Halifax International Security Forum, Halifax, NS, 21 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/SpeechesTestimony/tabid/6706/Article/630828/admiral-harris-addresses-the-2015-halifax-international-security-forum.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in, Sun, “China’s Preferred World Order.”

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Lai, “Reflections on China’s V-Day Parade.”

<sup>33</sup> PRC, State Council Information Office (SCIO), “China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, 26 May 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c\\_134271001.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm).

<sup>34</sup> David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China’s Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 284-85.

Yet despite this uniquely favorable setting, PLA planners assess external conditions as far from benign. “Local turmoils [*sic*] occur frequently,” they write of the modern era, and “hot-spot issues keep cropping up.”<sup>35</sup> The PRC has typically ranked terrorism, separatism, and extremism as the greatest dangers to “social harmony and stability,” and Beijing’s analysts see these “three forces” not only on the rise but becoming more difficult to manage as they “interweave and interact” with great power politics.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, proponents of Taiwan’s independence pose the most consequential threat to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) legitimacy and “peaceful development,” but similar menaces on the mainland, most notably in the ethnically and religiously distinct regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, persist as well.<sup>37</sup> On its periphery, the PRC perceives itself as beset by an array of “anti-China forces” intent on undermining its territorial integrity, maritime rights, and overseas interests, which have grown in conjunction with the country’s economy. While the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) presents opportunities for the PLA, the proliferation of “long-range, precise, smart, stealthy, and unmanned weapons and equipment” signals a shift in the form of war, ushering in a period of strategic competition that offers “new and severe challenges to China’s military security.”<sup>38</sup>

These sophisticated technological means only compound the traditional fears of a state that, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, felt victimized or marginalized as it struggled to preserve its sovereignty as part of a highly contested neighborhood. US analyst

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<sup>35</sup> PRC, SCIO, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” *Xinhua*, 16 April 2013, accessed 18 March 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c\\_132312681.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Shannon Tiezzi, “China’s ‘Protracted War’ in Xinjiang,” *Diplomat*, 3 October 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/chinas-protracted-war-in-xinjiang/>.

<sup>38</sup> PRC, SCIO, “China’s Military Strategy.”

Michael Pillsbury has probed contemporary Chinese writings to catalog sixteen “psychological factors” considered to influence defense-related decision-making in the PRC. Though not all-inclusive, Pillsbury’s selection of extensive and culturally ingrained “military fears or vulnerabilities” run the gamut—from territorial dismemberment, land invasion, and maritime blockade to aerial bombardment, cyber attack, and enemy special forces raids on PLA strategic missile units—thus shedding light on the motives behind China’s comprehensive and deliberate military buildup.<sup>39</sup> Perceived by Beijing as the chief instigator of regional tension in the Asia-Pacific, the United States is naturally viewed as the most likely agent should any of these fears materialize.

The PRC’s top defense intellectuals seem consumed by a notion of American hegemony, branding it a source of instability and potential conflict, independent of China’s rise. “The strength of the United States has intensified its lust for leading the world and its tendency of expansionism,” explains retired General Chen Kaizeng, onetime vice president of a prominent Chinese think tank. “The attempt to maintain . . . hegemonist [*sic*] status and seek a monopolar [*sic*] world has constituted an important divergence between the United States and other powers.”<sup>40</sup> Another prolific writer, Senior Colonel Li Qinggong has labeled the United States as “the biggest unstable factor of the global military situation at the turn of the century,” accusing it of “trying to reign over the world and to seek hegemony by force.”<sup>41</sup> A central pillar in preserving US hegemony, they say, requires containing China strategically and militarily or subverting it politically.<sup>42</sup> Similar characterizations have appeared in CCP policy documents, where veiled

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Pillsbury, “The Sixteen Fears: China’s Strategic Psychology,” *Survival* 54, no. 5 (October-November 2012): 150, 152-160.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in, Shambaugh, *Modernizing China’s Military*, 297.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 299-300.

references to “some country” bolstering regional alliances, expanding its military presence, meddling in South China Sea affairs, and maintaining “constant close-in air and sea surveillance” can only mean the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Viewing this mounting tension through the realist lens of great power politics, scholar John J. Mearsheimer finds it a bit ironic that China has launched this sustained critique of the US position part and parcel of its own quest for dominance in the region, an unsurprising development given the country’s economic progress and the aspiration of states toward hegemony. Indeed, if its power continues to grow, Beijing, regardless of rhetoric to the contrary, cannot help but imitate Washington. “It will try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere,” writes Mearsheimer.<sup>44</sup> He foresees an intense security competition in which China will “devise its own version of the Monroe Doctrine” and, following this “logic,” seek to “push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>45</sup> This development will lead to the formation of an “American-led balancing coalition” joined by regional states eager to check China’s rise.<sup>46</sup> While war between the two powers is not inevitable, according to Mearsheimer, he deems it probable in the decades to come.<sup>47</sup> Already a regional dynamo with untapped potential, China is ambitious, sensitive about its place in the world’s hierarchy, and looking to restore the trappings of past glory at the likely expense of the United States.<sup>48</sup> It is, therefore, not only prudent but essential to think about how the PLA might apply its

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, PRC, SCIO, “Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces”; and PRC, SCIO, “China’s Military Strategy.”

<sup>44</sup> Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 361.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 383-84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 394-95, 410-11.

<sup>48</sup> Merriden Varrall, *Chinese Worldviews and China’s Foreign Policy* (Sydney, AU: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015), 11-13.

capabilities—vastly improved since the turn of the century—toward the fulfillment of Beijing’s boldest goals.

### The Military Means to Mount a Regional Challenge

China’s burgeoning ambitions, coupled with its developing capabilities, have contributed to the escalation of tensions vis-à-vis the United States, most notably in the Asia-Pacific, prompting a review of US military posture in the region. Beijing, for example, has not hesitated to sponsor or directly carry out cyber-espionage against American citizens and private businesses.<sup>49</sup> Offshore, the government has mobilized its sizable Marine Surveillance and Fisheries Law Enforcement fleets for aggressive “maritime activism” or “low-intensity coercion” in contested waters, curtailing foreign access and protecting Chinese fishing vessels operating there.<sup>50</sup> In the East China Sea, Beijing has established an air defense identification zone to dispute Tokyo’s administrative control of the Senkaku Islands and has hinted at resurrecting centuries-old claims over former tributary states like the Ryukus while massive, unprecedented land reclamation efforts have begun to militarize the South China Sea and undermine freedom of navigation across that critical commercial thoroughfare.<sup>51</sup> Some have interpreted these moves as a

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Auslin, “Sino-US Cyber Pact Reveals Failure of US-China Policy,” *RealClear Politics*, 22 September 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/09/22/sino-us\\_cyber\\_pact\\_reveals\\_failure\\_of\\_us-china\\_policy.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/09/22/sino-us_cyber_pact_reveals_failure_of_us-china_policy.html).

<sup>50</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, “China’s Second Navy,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 14, no. 4 (April 2015), accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015-04-0/chinas-second-navy>; US DOD, OSD, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington, DC: April 2015), 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> US DOD, OSD, *PRC Military and Security Developments* (2015), 3; Gordon Chang, “Now China Wants Okinawa, Site of US Bases in Japan,” *Daily Beast*, 31 December 2015, accessed 15 January 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/31/now-china-wants-okinawa-site-of-u-s-bases-in-japan.html>; Harris, Halifax International Security Forum remarks; John Chen and Bonnie Glaser, “What China’s ‘Militarization’ of the South China Sea Would Actually Look Like,” *Diplomat*, 5 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/what-chinas-militarization-of-the-south-china-sea-would->

direct challenge to the US-led international order and regional alliance system—a security architecture that, according to the American view, has brought stability and shared prosperity.<sup>52</sup>

The shape and scale of China’s military modernization suggest the means by which this rising power might threaten US interests in the Western Pacific. The country’s defense expenditures have grown steadily for over two decades, with its annual budget in 2014 topping \$136 billion and exceeding the previous year’s spending by 9.3 percent.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, with China allegedly responsible for 30 percent of the world’s secretive military expenditures, the actual amount invested in PLA modernization is difficult to assess. One estimate indicated that Beijing’s off-the-books spending constituted nearly half of what the country officially reported.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, China’s fielding of a replenishment-at-sea capability, its acquisition of an aircraft carrier and associated deck-borne aviation, its development of heavy-lift jet transport, commencement of nuclear-armed submarine patrols, and plans to establish a military base on the Horn of Africa have strengthened Beijing’s strategic deterrent while bolstering its regional power-projection capacity.<sup>55</sup> These achievements are admittedly small and qualitatively inferior

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actually-look-like/.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Harris, Halifax International Security Forum remarks; Rod Lyon, “The US-China Relationship: War, Peace, or Just Troubled Times Ahead?” *National Interest*, 25 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-us-china-relationship-war-peace-or-just-troubled-times-14444>; and Liselotte Odgaard, “China’s Dangerous Ambiguity in the South China Sea,” *New York Times*, 10 December 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/opinion/chinas-dangerous-ambiguity.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/opinion/chinas-dangerous-ambiguity.html?_r=0).

<sup>53</sup> US DOD, OSD, *PRC Military and Security Developments* (2015), 49.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Macauley, “China Is among the World Leaders in ‘Secret’ Military Spending, Report Says,” *Defense One*, 4 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/11/china-among-world-leaders-secret-military-spending-report-says/123419/>.

<sup>55</sup> Bernard D. Cole, “China’s Navy Expands Its Replenishment-at-Sea Capability,” *The Interpreter* (blog), *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 25 August 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/08/26/Chinas-Navy-Expands-Replenishment-Capability.aspx>; Ely Ratner et al., *More Willing and Able: Charting China’s International Security Activism* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2015), 32; Bill Gertz,

alongside demonstrated US capability. Even so, China has made staggering gains since the 1990s.<sup>56</sup>

Other developments point more ominously toward undermining US military presence in the Asia-Pacific. While experts believe that the PLA's emergence as a truly global expeditionary force is decades away, China's defense industry has overseen breakthroughs in several niche areas that, when fielded collectively, may pose significant problems for the United States should it decide to intervene in the Western Pacific and, especially, near the coast of East Asia.<sup>57</sup> Enabled by a suite of capabilities that includes long-range precision strike systems, electronic warfare, undersea weapons, and integrated air and missile defenses, China can potentially prevent *movement into* a theater of operations or to impede *maneuver within* a theater.<sup>58</sup> US military planners refer to these actions as anti-access / area denial (A2/AD), and Western commentators have interpreted certain technological advances in the PLA through this lens. China, for example, has designed sophisticated unmanned aerial vehicles specifically to strip US warplanes of their advantages in stealth while the vaunted DF-21, an anti-ship ballistic missile hyperbolically described as a "carrier-killer," can (all the same) hold American surface fleets at risk up to nine hundred nautical miles from the Chinese mainland.<sup>59</sup> This quest to undermine longtime US

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"Pentagon Confirms Patrols of Chinese Nuclear Missile Submarines," *Washington Times*, 9 December 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/dec/9/inside-the-ring-chinas-nuclear-missile-submarine-p/?page=all>; Dave Majumdar, "China Is Setting Up Its First Military Base in Africa," *National Interest*, 24 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-setting-its-first-military-base-africa-14435>.

<sup>56</sup> Ratner et al., *More Willing and Able*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska, "Capacity for Innovation: Technological Drivers of China's Future Military Modernization," in *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and David Lai (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2015), 149-151.

<sup>58</sup> US DOD, Air-Sea Battle Office, *Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges* (Washington, DC: May 2013), 2.

<sup>59</sup> US DOD, OSD, *PRC Military and Security Developments* (2015), 33-36; Zachary Keck, "This Is How China and Russia Plan to Crush America's Stealth Aircraft," *National*

strengths through asymmetric means has been paired somewhat by a parallel effort to imitate American military power. In November 2014, the PLA Air Force unveiled a stealth fighter of its own—the J-31—and, soon after, the jet’s manufacturer boasted that it could “definitely take out” the F-35 designed and built for the US military by Lockheed Martin.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the PLA Navy launched more ships than any other fleet in 2013 and 2014, and its newest destroyers were armed with indigenous state-of-the-art supersonic cruise missiles, no small threat to defend against.<sup>61</sup>

Just as China’s steady economic rise has helped vault the Indo-Asia-Pacific to a position of top priority in US policy, its rapid military modernization, perceptibly oriented against American hegemony in the region, has contributed to the development of new US military approaches. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, where the “future of politics will be decided.” Signaling the Obama administration’s intent to “lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the . . . region,” Clinton expressed a desire for a balanced approach toward China.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, the Defense Department’s priorities—published in early 2012—highlighted the East Asian power’s rise as a key impetus behind the military dimension of the pivot or “rebalance” and called on China to articulate its strategic intentions with “greater clarity” in order to minimize

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*Interest*, 26 August 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/how-china-russia-plan-crush-americas-stealth-aircraft-13708>.

<sup>60</sup> Chuin-Wei Yap, “China Stealth Jet Maker Walks Back Boast It Could ‘Take Out’ F-35,” *China Real Time* (blog), *Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2014, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/12/12/china-stealth-jet-maker-walks-back-boast-it-could-take-out-f-35/>.

<sup>61</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, “Washington Contemplates the Chinese Military,” *E-Notes*, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2015/09/washington-contemplates-the-chinese-military/>.

<sup>62</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

friction.<sup>63</sup> Given the PLA's growing capability, the Pentagon developed Air-Sea Battle (ASB)—an operational concept designed, in part, to address threats emanating from foreign militaries armed with longer-range and more precise weapons. Concerned that the proliferation of A2/AD technologies could enable near-peer competitors or regional powers to “extend their coercive strength well beyond their borders,” ASB sought to maintain US freedom of action and reduce the risk to power projection.<sup>64</sup>

Although the Pentagon supplanted ASB with the more inclusive and thus more elaborately named Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), similarities between the two remain. JAM-GC retains ASB's official ambivalence: planners ostensibly developed it with no specific enemy or geographic region in mind but, rather, envisioned its application in any scenario in which A2/AD poses a problem for US forces.<sup>65</sup> Despite such neutral public stances, the first sustained analysis of ASB, written in 2010, regarded the threat presented by a rising China as the primary driver for the new operational concept. Focused exclusively on the Western Pacific, a Washington-based think tank's introduction of the concept proposed it as a response to “the PLA's unprovoked and unwarranted military buildup” and a way to offset “the PLA's rapidly improving A2/AD capabilities.”<sup>66</sup> Chinese officials and defense analysts have generally interpreted ASB in a similar manner, only situating it in a narrative that views the Pentagon's post-Cold War fixation on the PLA as years in the making.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> US DOD, “Sustaining US Global Leadership,” 2.

<sup>64</sup> US DOD, Air-Sea Battle Office, “Air-Sea Battle,” 2-4.

<sup>65</sup> Jacek Bartosiak, “As Air-Sea Battle Becomes JAM-GC . . . Don't Forget Central and Eastern Europe,” *National Interest*, 24 November 2015, accessed 18 March 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/air-sea-battle-becomes-jam-gcdont-forget-central-eastern-14429>.

<sup>66</sup> Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), ix-x.

<sup>67</sup> Liao, “The Pentagon and the Pivot,” 95, 103-6, 109. See also, Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (January-February 2016): 102, 104.

The history of China’s relationship with the West and recent US military operations have only amplified the sense of competition.

### **The Party’s Army: A Brief History of PLA Reform and Modernization**

Every Communist must grasp the truth, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party.

—Mao Zedong, writing in 1938

China is not only on the move. It is a country headed in a prescribed direction. According to its political leadership, by 2021, China will “complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects,” and, by 2049, it will realize the “Chinese Dream”: a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious.”<sup>68</sup> The thought of China existing apart from the CCP is implicitly judged as inconceivable. Indeed, the planned accomplishment of both aforementioned goals are timed to coincide with centennials—the first celebrating the CCP’s founding, the second marking the end of China’s civil war, the triumph of the party, and the subsequent establishment of the PRC. Such pronouncements may seem nothing more than rhetorical flourishes. Yet, as the primary instrument in China’s transition to a communist form of government, the PLA’s importance to the CCP extends well beyond the merely symbolic.

#### Reform in the Era of People’s War

Soon after driving Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist forces across the strait to Taiwan in 1949, the PLA consolidated the CCP’s control of the mainland and sought to extend it to the boundaries of the traditional Chinese empire. Over the next decade, Mao dispatched the army as a relentless—and, at times, violent—agent of reunification. The Soviets accepted Beijing’s

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<sup>68</sup> PRC, SCIO, “China’s Military Strategy.”

historical claim to the far western province of Xinjiang and completely withdrew forces from residual areas of Manchuria in the north. The PLA swept aside local resistance in Tibet along the southern periphery and later crushed an ethnic uprising there. To the east, China fought a war against the United States for nearly three years, maintaining at any one time over 700,000 troops in Korea to uphold a friendly regime in the North and thus preserve its influence on the peninsula.<sup>69</sup> In the 1960s, the PLA engaged in border clashes with both Indian and Soviet forces, asserting Beijing's prerogative to defend territorial claims while standing firm as a regional power willing and able to pursue its own interests.<sup>70</sup> Finally, in 1979, after Deng Xiaoping's ascension following Mao's death and amid rising Sino-Soviet tensions, the PLA launched a two-week punitive incursion into Vietnam to protest Hanoi's invasion of Cambodia and to test Moscow's alliance with a tributary from China's imperial past.<sup>71</sup> Viewing the broad sweep of Chinese history as a recurring "dynastic cycle," historian Bruce A. Elleman has categorized the CCP's authoritarian reign as a kind of imperial comeback in which China, after an extended period of decline and collapse, reemerged under the leadership of a new dynasty. The instrument of revolution in the years following its creation, the PLA has become, since 1949, an instrument of "dynastic resurgence" and the party's primary tool to maintain domestic stability as it reasserts the old empire's traditional rights over onetime client states.<sup>72</sup>

Efforts to transform the PLA into the force it has become (and, in many ways, is still becoming) began in the aftermath of the Korean War but proceeded somewhat haltingly. Combat against the Americans had showcased the complementary relationship of politically fueled

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<sup>69</sup> Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 231, 236.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-68, 279-80.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 290-91.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

motivation, tactical skill, and physical toughness. Described in a US official history as “a first-rate army when judged by its own tactical and strategic standards,” the PLA earned grudging respect. The Chinese soldier, the same account added, “could do one thing better than any soldier on earth: he could infiltrate around an enemy position in the darkness with unbelievable stealth.”<sup>73</sup> All the same, the war in Korea yielded hard lessons on the need for modernization. Consequently, in the years following the 1953 ceasefire, the Red Army dramatically reduced its ranks from five million to a number half that size. Beijing parceled out its remaining divisions to eleven new military regions organized for territorial defense, undertook a rearmament program to equip units with better weapons, and instituted a system of academies to train officers in the science of modern war.<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, the widespread social disruption of the Great Leap Forward and deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union combined to stymie the adoption of comprehensive reform during the 1950s.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, amid the chaos of the next decade’s Cultural Revolution, the PLA’s political involvement deepened immensely—initially as the epitome of sacrifice and self-reliance and, later, as a ruthless tool of suppression when CCP leaders realized they had unleashed revolutionary forces ranging far beyond their control.<sup>76</sup> By the end of this chapter in Chinese history, Mao was praising the army for its heroic role in stabilizing society, but this focus on ensuring domestic order on behalf of the party did little to further the goal of modernization.

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in, Edward C. O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 163.

<sup>74</sup> Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, 255-56.

<sup>75</sup> Ellis Joffe, “Shaping China’s Next Generation of Military Leaders: For What Kind of Army?” in *The “People” in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2008), 356.

<sup>76</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 536-37, 540, 549-50.

Indeed, under Mao's rule, *people's war*, the doctrine that had guided the Red Army since its formative years, remained influential and relatively unchanged. In the struggle against both Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Japanese invaders, Mao advised a guerrilla strategy summarized by four rules of engagement: "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."<sup>77</sup> This military approach relied on a mass mobilization of peasants and workers and envisioned a protracted conflict in which this "people's army" traded space for time as it wore down a foreign invader and set conditions for a counter-offensive. Reinforced by a view that morally superior Chinese troops could defeat a technologically advanced foe, people's war offered some rationalization for throttling back the drive to modernize. Training and equipping a mass army for defense of mainland China did not necessarily demand such urgency, and, in any case, the PLA had its hands full with maintaining internal security—a task facilitated, incidentally, by the establishment of military regional commands.<sup>78</sup> The imperial impulse to consolidate gains and unify China along the lines of its traditional territorial claims increasingly prompted CCP leaders in the 1950s and 1960s to pay heed to the borderlands, but, not until Mao passed from the scene did substantial reforms take hold in the PLA. Even then, the notion of people's war retained rhetorical—if not entirely practical—relevance.<sup>79</sup>

#### Modernization after Mao: People's War Meets Informationization

The rise of Deng Xiaoping following Mao's death ushered in a period of modernization that broadly affected Chinese society, to include the military. Dubbed the "Four Modernizations,"

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in, Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, 220.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-57; Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 354.

<sup>79</sup> Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 377.

Deng's program to forge ahead in the areas of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense reflected a shift away from class struggle and political ideology in order to pursue market reforms that carried the promise of economic development.<sup>80</sup> While it certainly benefited from the overarching trend toward modernization, the PLA had to accept a lower priority compared to other governmental entities when it came to resource allocation. Given the increasingly apparent decline of the Soviet Union and surprisingly good relations with the United States during the 1980s, the CCP could afford this risk and invest elsewhere.<sup>81</sup> The military thus undertook only modest and comparably inexpensive reforms, downsizing and reorganizing force structure and revising doctrine. Manpower reductions in the PLA coincided with the establishment of the People's Armed Police (PAP), a paramilitary force of some 600,000 responsible for internal security and maintaining public order. This initiative supported the related goals of streamlining the PLA—with thousands of transferred soldiers filling the PAP's ranks in an enormous "shell game"—while allowing it to concentrate more exclusively on preparing for external military contingencies.<sup>82</sup>

In the meantime, PLA planners adjusted their outmoded doctrine of trading space for time in a protracted war, realizing that Chinese ground forces lacked the mobility to achieve positional advantage against an invading mechanized army like that fielded by the Soviets. What is more, advances in missile technology provided potential adversaries with the capability of ranging the breadth and depth of China, thus undermining the strategy of marshaling forces in safe base areas with a view toward counterattacking. This modified version of people's war under "modern conditions" advocated a defense of key cities near the border and, in anticipation of a

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<sup>80</sup> Peter Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China: From the Manchu Conquest to Tiananmen Square* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 183, 186.

<sup>81</sup> Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 358.

<sup>82</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 25, 27-28.

short, decisive conflict, emphasized winning the first battle. Accordingly, the PLA reorganized with the aim of simplifying command and control and improving efficiency in order to mobilize quickly and respond to crises all along China's vast periphery. It reduced the number of military regions from eleven to seven, formed rapidly deployable elite units in each, and began to consider how best to professionalize a force expected to fight and win "local, limited wars" several hundred to one thousand miles beyond the nation's borders.<sup>83</sup>

The trend away from the original formulation of people's war toward local wars, limited in terms of time, space, and levels of force, continued throughout the 1990s. Deng's reforms entailed a 25 percent reduction of the PLA's budget, but, as a consolation, officers and their units were permitted to dabble in commercial enterprises as part of China's broader experimentation with the free market. Training suffered as PLA leaders mainly applied themselves to making money, but the process of managing businesses cultivated a useful—if not professional—set of skills in its own right. Exposed to foreign military technology as a result of their commercial dealings, Chinese officers grew more aware of the yawning gap between Western military capabilities and those of the PLA.<sup>84</sup> This realization prompted another conceptual—albeit subtle—shift in which planners began referring to local wars under "high-tech conditions," a shift that the 1991 US victory in the Persian Gulf confirmed. For the technologically backward PLA, the war signaled a further unraveling of once indisputable Maoist military precepts. No longer could numbers and fighting spirit compensate for categorical shortcomings in the tools of modern war. The 1990s thus saw an energized interest in weapons acquisition and development, fueled in

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<sup>83</sup> Worthing, *Military History of Modern China*, 187-88; Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 358.

<sup>84</sup> Dean Cheng, "The Business of War: The Impact of 'PLA, Inc.' on Chinese Officers," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 56 (1st Quarter, 2010): 95-96.

part by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the corresponding spike in the availability of military hardware and technical know-how.<sup>85</sup>

Reform also involved a reconsideration of the PLA's personnel composition. After decades of favoring political reliability over professional competence, military leaders affirmed the imperative of developing both.<sup>86</sup> All the same, despite a new emphasis on professionalism, the PLA has largely remained the party's army. Unleashed by Deng, it turned against "the people" in the violent 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. During the years following, Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, formalized the requirement for sustained political and ideological indoctrination with his widely disseminated "Five Sentences on Army Building."<sup>87</sup> Amid a period of reform in which the PLA adapted many of its traditions and principles to the demands of an evolving security environment, party loyalty remained nonnegotiable.

The modernization of the Chinese military gathered momentum, as well as a strategically oriented sense of urgency, in the late 1990s when relations with the United States soured over tensions in the Taiwan Strait. In 1996, when Beijing sought to intimidate Taipei and dampen the political appetite for independence in the midst of Taiwan's national elections, the PLA test-fired short-range ballistic missiles just dozens of miles from the island. Two American carrier groups steamed to the Strait in a show of force, humiliating China's leaders and impressing upon them their lack of retaliatory capability should the United States decide to aid Taiwan militarily during a future crisis. What is more, to Beijing, the US-led intervention in Kosovo three years later set an alarming precedent in the event Washington should ever face such a decision.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Worthing, *Military History of Modern China*, 189.

<sup>86</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 18.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 370-73; Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

Accelerating into the twenty-first century and fueled by CCP leaders determined to curtail Taiwan's contemplation of independence, the PLA's well-funded modernization effort became both focused and comprehensive. China's defense industry not only rolled out upgrades to weapons platforms, like tanks, fighter aircraft, and submarines, originally based on Soviet designs from the 1950s, but also procured new models. Roughly comparable to their counterparts in the American arsenal, these traditional systems—many produced domestically—supplemented an array of newly fielded asymmetric weapons, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles.<sup>89</sup> Personnel quality remained a central pillar of reform, with initiatives undertaken since 1999 to recruit and retain the best people, revamp professional military education in the officer ranks, and create a long-serving noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps capable of assuming broader leadership responsibilities. Although the PLA effected a major rebalancing of its rank structure by converting tens of thousands of officer billets to NCO positions, the implementation of such programs in a rigidly hierarchical army manned for decades through conscription has proven culturally and bureaucratically challenging, to say the least.<sup>90</sup> Training also benefited from a sharper strategic focus as regulations published in the 1980s gave way to guidance calling for more realistic exercises that involved multiple arms and services operating across greater distances under suboptimal conditions.<sup>91</sup> Finally, in the 2000s, the PLA came to view the primary thrust of its modernization in terms of *informationization*. While the mechanization of the light and truck-borne infantry force of the Maoist era proceeded apace, emphasis on achieving information dominance heavily influenced the effort as automation, networked systems of

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<sup>89</sup> Joffe, "Shaping China's Next Generation," 383; Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 11-12.

<sup>90</sup> Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 11-12; Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 25, 56-57, 60-62.

<sup>91</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 175-76; Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 12-13.

systems, and integrated joint operations became central features of the kinds of future wars Chinese planners anticipated.<sup>92</sup>

### **The 2015 Reforms: An Emerging Emphasis on Quality**

It will focus on removing systemic barriers that had constrained military development in order to boost modernization of the military, as well as cultivate the fighting capacity of troops.

—Chinese defense official, speaking in November 2015 on proposed reforms

China's rising military capability, as well as its economic growth and geopolitical ambitions, have led to a logical expansion of the PLA's basic goals and tasks. Although a CCP document elevates the prevention of "'Taiwan independence' forces from splitting the country" to a "sacred responsibility," the PRC's broader outlook has required the military to adjust its strategic gaze in a similar fashion.<sup>93</sup> The "Historic Missions of the PLA in the New Period of the New Century," articulated in 2004 by Jiang Zemin's successor, President Hu Jintao, affirmed the long-standing tasks of upholding communist party rule and defending Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet Hu also directed the armed forces to protect China's national interests from traditional and non-traditional threats and across more expansive domains, including not just land but maritime, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum. Likewise, the PRC leader called for a shift in PLA thinking that would better reflect the country's widespread integration into the global economy. It had become imperative, according to Hu, for the Chinese military to develop capabilities that not only enhanced deterrence and enabled victory in informationized wars, should they occur, but also supported overseas operations.<sup>94</sup> Modernization would thus focus on

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<sup>92</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 17, 183-84.

<sup>93</sup> PRC, SCIO, "China's National Defense in 2004," 27 December 2004, accessed 21 January 2016, [http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2005-07/28/content\\_18078.htm](http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2005-07/28/content_18078.htm).

<sup>94</sup> *China's Military and Security Activities Abroad: Hearing before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 111th Cong., 1st sess., 4 March 2009, 48-53.

eliminating the “two incompatibilities,” namely the gap between the PLA’s capabilities and its mandate to fight and win, and the shortfalls that kept it from fulfilling its responsibility to safeguard China’s interests at home and abroad.<sup>95</sup> This charter has remained in force under Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, the pressure on the PLA to embrace a broader mission set has intensified with escalating tensions in the Western Pacific, Xi’s more extensive commitment to UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations, and the announcement of a spate of organizational reforms.<sup>96</sup>

#### Implications at the Strategic Level: Shifting Power Relationships

At the strategic level, the reforms, if fully instituted, promise to be far-reaching and stand to alter the dynamics of power within the PRC’s decision-making apparatus. The PLA is one of three distinct components that constitute the Chinese armed forces, which also contain the PAP and the people’s militia. Itself comprised of different services—including naval, air, and strategic missile forces, in addition to the army—the PLA falls under the CCP’s Central Military Commission (CMC), chaired by President Xi. Until 2016, the CMC implemented policy and exercised command through four departments organized along broad functional lines—general staff, political training and indoctrination, logistics, and armaments. This structure reflected the ground force’s bureaucratic dominance of the PLA, since the departments served as a de facto army staff while the other services had discrete headquarters positioned somewhat lower in the

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<sup>95</sup> Cortez A. Cooper, *The PLA Navy’s “New Historic Missions”: Expanding Capabilities for a Re-emergent Maritime Power* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 3.

<sup>96</sup> “China Looks to Expand Its Peacekeeping Forces,” *Geopolitical Diary* (blog), *Stratfor*, 29 September 2015, accessed 19 March 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical-diary/china-looks-expand-its-peacekeeping-forces>; Minnie Chan, “China to Drastically Overhaul Its People’s Liberation Army in ‘Ambitious’ Plan to Build Modern Fighting Force on Par with the West,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 September 2015, accessed 21 January 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1854607/china-aims-modern-fighting-force-overhaul-peoples?page=all>. See also, PRC, SCIO, “Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces”; and PRC, SCIO, “China’s Military Strategy.”

hierarchy.<sup>97</sup> Figures attempting to pin down the PLA's personnel strength fluctuate, but a 2015 US estimate placed the active-duty ground forces at 1.25 million.<sup>98</sup> Significantly, the army expects to bear the brunt of Xi's announced overhaul, which, through troop reductions and restructuring, will likely rebalance total manpower from a ground:air:naval-forces ratio of 4:2:1 to 2:1:1.<sup>99</sup> This adjustment illustrates a deliberate recasting of the PLA, long considered solely a land-based force, into a military instrument capable of power projection by air and sea.

Further modifications at the strategic level threaten to undermine the army's dominance while tightening the party's grip on its increasingly powerful armed forces. Under Xi, the PLA's four general departments have been folded into a CMC staff with more bureaucratic heft and augmented capacity to monitor the military, including an invigorated anti-corruption function to keep senior commanders in line. Between itself and the upper echelons of the PLA, the CMC has inserted, for the first time, a joint command to develop and implement strategic plans while subordinate service headquarters—including a newly established army one—manage organize, train, and equip functions for their respective formations. By unifying the various services under a single command, the CMC has effectively elevated the others at the army's expense and, according to Western commentators, has replaced an antiquated stove-piped system with an organizational structure better suited for the task of applying modern weapons in a joint, integrated fashion.<sup>100</sup> Resistance to such a sweeping array of reforms has been reportedly

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<sup>97</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 22-24, 30-35.

<sup>98</sup> US DOD, OSD, *PRC Military and Security Developments* (2015), 78.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin McCauley, "PLA Transformation: Difficult Military Reforms Begin," *China Brief* 15, no. 18 (9 September 2015): 6, accessed 19 March 2016, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44349&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=36fc86d567f57eef0ebfe8ead43e6ea9#.Vu22QRlrJol](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44349&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=36fc86d567f57eef0ebfe8ead43e6ea9#.Vu22QRlrJol).

<sup>100</sup> "China's President Xi Solidifies Power with Overhaul of Military," *Bloomberg News*, 31 August 2015, accessed 19 March 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-31/china-said-to-plan-overhaul-of-military-as-xi-solidifies-power-ie043vht>; Shannon Tiezzi,

pertinacious among cliques of PLA ground force generals who have much to lose in terms of professional influence and personal privilege.<sup>101</sup> That Xi has been able to make even modest progress attests to his relatively rapid consolidation of power. Since 2012, he has chipped away at the army's entrenched position by speeding the promotions of younger handpicked officers into the senior ranks, purging over forty generals (most from the army) accused of graft and other wrongdoing, and shuffling several commanders among departments and military regions to break up factions and fiefdoms thought to rival CMC influence at the local level.<sup>102</sup>

#### Implications at the Operational Level: Unified Commands Tailored for Joint Operations

Efforts to transform the PLA into a more unified force capable of fighting jointly have begun at the operational level as well. In organizing for territorial defense, PRC officials divided the mainland into military regions and assigned field units to them in accordance with strategic priorities that evolved over time. Led by a senior ground forces officer who shared responsibility with a political commissar, each of the military regions contained—in addition to a sizable land component—its own logistical, air, and (for those with coastlines) naval elements. Yet sitting atop a multiservice hierarchy did not necessarily equate to commanding a joint formation.<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, military region chiefs tended to operate fairly independently, making coordinated

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“China’s Plan for a New, Improved Military,” *Diplomat*, 1 December 2015, accessed 19 March 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/chinas-plan-for-a-new-improved-military/>; “New Military Reforms Reveal China’s Ambition,” *Stratfor*, 14 January 2016, accessed 23 January 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/new-military-reforms-reveal-chinas-ambition>.

<sup>101</sup> Mandip Singh, “China’s Military Reforms: Is All Well with the PLA?” *Eurasia Review*, 14 March 2016, accessed 19 March 2016, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/14032016-chinas-military-reforms-is-all-well-with-the-pla-analysis/>.

<sup>102</sup> Cheng Li, “Promoting ‘Young Guards’: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA High Leadership (Part I: Purges and Reshuffles),” *China Leadership Monitor* (blog), *Brookings Institution*, 13 August 2015, accessed 23 January 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/08/13-china-pla-leadership-reshuffle-li>.

<sup>103</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 37-40.

action between them difficult and large-scale overseas contingencies nearly impossible to contemplate. Of the seven military regions, for example, five have a section of coastline under their jurisdiction. To streamline joint operations beyond China's periphery, recent reforms hint at the creation of four battle zone commands that—while still suitable for territorial defense—allow for a specific outward orientation.<sup>104</sup> To ensure these new regional commands responsively toe the CMC line, the realignment will also entail the assignment of more junior-ranking general officers to lead them.<sup>105</sup> The possibility exists of a fifth battle zone command—one that would serve as a reserve or experimental force. Even so, the elimination of numerous senior billets as a result of restructuring will likely encounter internal resistance, particularly from the army.<sup>106</sup>

If implemented, these reforms would bring organizational structure into greater alignment with doctrine. PLA writings focused on the operational level of war and on campaigns that link tactical engagements or battles to strategic objectives are extensive but have developed only in recent decades.<sup>107</sup> Chinese planners define the campaign as “an operational military action comprised of several battles under unified command, carried out by an army group in order to achieve partial or total goals of a war.”<sup>108</sup> With its growing emphasis on integrated operations, the PLA foresees many future campaigns as joint, meaning that, as one analyst describes, they will likely involve “two or more services, each contributing campaign-level military units, i.e., Fleets, Military Region Air Forces, or Group Armies” and operating “under a joint command structure”

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<sup>104</sup> Tiezzi, “China’s Plan for a New, Improved Military.”

<sup>105</sup> Dickey, “Under Xi, China Prepares for Modern Warfare.”

<sup>106</sup> McCauley, “PLA Transformation,” 6.

<sup>107</sup> David M. Finkelstein, “Thinking about the PLA’s ‘Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs,’” in *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the People’s Liberation Army*, ed. James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2005), 9-10.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in, Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 126.

to “implement a single, integrated plan.”<sup>109</sup> As complex, comprehensive, yet discrete endeavors, campaigns contain several functional features that, from the perspective of Chinese planners, reflect the military requirements of modern war: information dominance, firepower, mobility, special operations, and psychological warfare.<sup>110</sup>

Anticipated changes in force structure will also reach down below major headquarters to the PLA’s fighting units, namely its eighteen group armies—combined-arms formations consisting of two to three divisions or independent brigades positioned throughout the mainland.<sup>111</sup> Several group armies will likely be demobilized, with those facing less serious external threats along China’s northern tier among the leading candidates, while others focused southwest toward India or southeast toward Taiwan, Vietnam, and the South China Sea probably avoiding cuts. Unlike their counterparts in the north, group armies aligned against more pressing contingencies have been at the forefront of modernization as recipients not only of newly acquired equipment but also of formations new to the PLA, like special operations forces and aviation brigades.<sup>112</sup> The fielding of such tactical units provides yet another marker of the push toward informationization.

#### Implications at the Tactical Level: Posturing for Decentralized Operations

Restructuring at the tactical level has reflected the PLA’s concern for winning wars of quick decision. For decades, the Chinese army modeled its divisions on Soviet designs from the 1950s. Small by Western standards, each division contained roughly ten thousand men and one

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<sup>109</sup> Dean Cheng, “*Zhanyixue* and Joint Campaigns,” in *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the People’s Liberation Army*, ed. James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2005), 101.

<sup>110</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 127.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>112</sup> McCauley, “PLA Transformation,” 5.

thousand vehicles, along with subordinate artillery and antiaircraft regiments, as well as combat service support of various type and size. The maneuver elements consisted of tank and motorized infantry regiments, usually totaling four in number.<sup>113</sup> Since 1998, however, the PLA has downsized many divisions, establishing brigades as it upgraded weaponry and equipped units with mechanized vehicles. Intended to operate as independent combined-arms formations employed in a manner comparable to divisions, recently fielded brigades typically control five combat battalions, an artillery regiment, and organic logistical units. Furthermore, commanders at this level have a staff ostensibly manned for the tasks of controlling multiple units and managing a broad portfolio of warfighting functions.<sup>114</sup>

The proliferation of brigades reporting directly to group armies represents an attempt to create more mobile, hard-hitting formations agile enough to concentrate rapidly at decisive points and then, just as swiftly, disperse after accomplishing their mission. Such restructuring aligns with the view developing in Chinese army doctrine that “the intensive integration of combat actions and capabilities of all services and arms” can deliver war-winning power.<sup>115</sup> “The subtlety of strategy lies in the concentration of strength,” counsels the PLA’s definitive *Science of Military Strategy*.<sup>116</sup> In other words, by leveraging networked systems with an array of synergistic capabilities, the whole essentially produces more than the sum of its parts.

Doctrine also intimates that, by the same token, adhering to the traditional practice of massing larger quantities of manpower in space and time will result in only modest or insufficient

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<sup>113</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 48-49.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>115</sup> Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), 384-85.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

gains.<sup>117</sup> “When the technological component of the armed forces is fairly low, concentration of superior manpower mainly refers to the *quantitative* gathering of troops,” PLA thinkers explain. “Now, the technological component is greatly increased, so concentration of superior power mainly means the *qualitative* gathering of the combat effectiveness of the armed forces.”<sup>118</sup> *Quantity* still retains a *quality* all its own, as the old maxim says, but the PLA’s developing interest in *real* quality marks a conceptual sea change, evident in its appreciation for the implications of advanced military technology and the resulting alignment between twenty-first-century doctrine and recent reforms in unit structure.

Indications even point to the Chinese army’s interest in pushing organic combined-arms capability to the battalion level, but staffs at this echelon currently lack the depth to plan and coordinate such activities.<sup>119</sup> Still, field exercises in recent years suggest to PLA observers that, “as a basic module . . . the battalion possesses a rather strong ability to independently carry out its operational responsibilities” under informationized conditions.<sup>120</sup> And with such experiments occurring across multiple military regions, the promise of the “modularly assembled combined-arms battalion” becoming a “fundamental army combat unit” seems to have gained wider currency.<sup>121</sup> Much, of course, depends on the proficiency of the battalion staff, referred to by one

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 358-59.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 358. [emphasis added]

<sup>119</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 45-46.

<sup>120</sup> Chen Yun and Cheng Yongliang, “Battalion’s Tactical Exercise Takes to the Stage: Nanjing Military Region Group Army Explores New Ways to Adapt to Military Training Transformations,” *Jiefangjun Bao Online*, 20 July 2008, in Open Source Center (OSC) CPP20080721710006.

<sup>121</sup> Qian Zongyang and Yin Jun, “Combined Arms Battalion Command Post Has Some New Brains: A Certain 14th Group Army Brigade Keeps a Close Eye on Actual Combat Requirements in Boosting the Fighting Skills of Its Staff Officers,” *Jiefangjun Bao Online*, 20 January 2015, in OSC CHR2015012011847254.

commander as his “brains.” Not only must staff officers at the battalion level grasp long-familiar technical skills, they will also be required to “understand stratagems, be good at planning and making decisions, and be able to adapt to change.”<sup>122</sup> Chinese military reformers appear to recognize that these qualities come neither immediately nor—in many cases—naturally. Even so, such attributes have emerged as core competencies necessary for integrated joint operations.<sup>123</sup> The PLA must surmount substantial cultural obstacles and undertake years of training before its forces can expertly carry out the kinds of decentralized operations its doctrine envisions.<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, the organizational changes it has implemented in the past decade seem driven by this conceptual thrust, and the earnestness underpinning their continued pursuit reflects a desire to prevail over regional competitors, including the United States.

### **Deciphering PLA Ways of War**

You fight in your way, and we fight in ours. We will fight if there is a possibility to win, if not, we will move.

—Mao Zedong, writing in 1947 to a PLA field army commander

#### Lessons Learned: The Influence of US Combat Experience on Chinese Military Thought

The PLA has traveled its path toward modernization largely in the shadow of American presence in East Asia and the Western Pacific. To China, the United States has not only assumed the role of a hegemon seeking to maintain its grip on the world order. It is also a military power of enviable clout, with a deep well of combat experience from which would-be competitors might draw lessons to shape their own conceptions of war. The PLA’s last armed conflict against a foreign foe occurred in 1979 and, as a rather clumsy foray into Vietnam, left much to be

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Cliff, *China’s Military Power*, 58-59, 178-79.

desired.<sup>125</sup> Understandably then, the US-led coalition's defeat of Iraq during the short but sharp 1991 Gulf War stunned Chinese leaders and defense commentators, who concluded afterward that the character of war had fundamentally changed. In violently ejecting Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait through a decisive air and ground campaign, the United States had ushered in an era of "local wars under high-technology conditions," according to PLA analysts.<sup>126</sup> Gone were the days of industrial warfare in which the brute strength of mass armies mattered most. Observing the critical role of information technologies in targeting, integrating weapons systems, delivering precise firepower, and exercising command and control, the Chinese perceived a shift, with information dominance becoming "the center of gravity and the focus of war."<sup>127</sup> This "qualitative leap from mechanized fire war to high-tech local warfare with information technology as its core"<sup>128</sup> provided the basis for a sweeping doctrinal revision in 1993, titled "Military Strategic Guidelines for the *New Period*."<sup>129</sup>

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 1999 bombing campaign to thwart the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo further shaped Chinese perceptions about the character of future war. At the tactical and operational levels, the air war against the regime of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic seemed to confirm a trend away from mechanized warfare to informationized warfare as the key component to securing victory.<sup>130</sup> The slogan "Three Attacks,

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<sup>125</sup> Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, 291-93, 297; O'Dowd, *Last Maoist War*, 8-9.

<sup>126</sup> Dean Cheng, "Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars," in *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2011), 159.

<sup>127</sup> Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, 336.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Cheng, "Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars," 160. [emphasis added]

<sup>130</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, "People's Liberation Army Lessons from Foreign Conflicts: The Air War in Kosovo," in *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2011), 38.

Three Defends” has served as an intellectual framework in the PLA’s conception of war since Mao Zedong chaired the CCP. Yet, as American analyst Dean Cheng points out, its meaning shifted dramatically in the 1990s. Cheng explains,

In the 1970s, the “three attacks, three defends” referred to fighting against tanks, aircraft, and paratroopers while defending against nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. By 2001, this had evolved to fighting against cruise missiles, stealth aircraft, and attack helicopters, while defending against precision strike, electronic interference, and enemy surveillance and reconnaissance.<sup>131</sup>

Coming on the heels of Kosovo, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 more firmly established informationized warfare as the proper path to pursue.<sup>132</sup> That year, China’s CMC approved the “Three Warfares,” a concept framing the conduct of information operations and described by one US analyst as “three mutually reinforcing strategies,” involving “the coordinated use of strategic psychological operations, overt and covert media manipulation, and legal warfare designed to manipulate strategies, defense policies, and perceptions of target audiences abroad.”<sup>133</sup> To PLA observers already mindful of the growing relevance of psychological and legal warfare, as well as the struggle to shape public opinion, the US-led coalition’s rapid seizure of Baghdad illustrated just how savvy American military forces seemed to be when it came to exploiting information dominance.<sup>134</sup>

In the absence of recent PLA combat experience, the study of foreign conflicts (most prominently, those involving the United States) has deeply informed how China’s armed forces have organized and prepared for war. Generally speaking, Chinese military leaders believed that

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<sup>131</sup> Cheng, “Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars,” 162.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-165.

<sup>133</sup> Michael Raska, “Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics,” *Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentary* (blog), *Nanyang Technological University*, 2 December 2015, accessed 19 March 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co15262-hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/#.Vu3CUBIrIfE>.

<sup>134</sup> Cheng, “Chinese Lessons from the Gulf War,” 170-71, 189.

twenty-first-century conflict—especially against a technologically superior foe—would demand officers and enlisted men of much higher caliber.<sup>135</sup> The same leaders debated how such a force would fight, and three distinct schools of thought emerged. One group looked at the US military and advocated a program of improvement and reform aimed at matching that competitor’s advanced capabilities. Others rejected an approach based on imitation, equating it to “trying to break a stone with an egg.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, proponents of a second school argued instead that the Kosovo war had exposed the limitations of high-technology weapons. Better, they said, to pursue asymmetric means that could avoid enemy strengths while attacking known vulnerabilities with tailored but relatively low-cost systems.<sup>137</sup> Finally, a third school interpreted lessons derived from the distant wars in Iraq and Kosovo as validations of Maoist people’s war.<sup>138</sup> As this last grouping illustrates, the PRC has its own traditions. Still, leaders seem to make it a matter of national and cultural pride each time they refine Western ideas and processes by imbuing them with “Chinese characteristics.”<sup>139</sup> In keeping with this tendency, one prominent military intellectual in the PLA suggested a synthesis of all three schools of thought, despite their inherent incompatibility and the practical obstacles associated with actually fielding such a force.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Dreyer, “The Air War in Kosovo,” 41.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in, *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-44, 46.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. Another American scholar categorized the PLA’s forecasting of future wars along similar lines. See, Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2000), 261-64.

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Xi, “Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary”; PRC, SCIO, “China’s National Defense in 2004”; and PRC, SCIO, “Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” which mention, respectively, socialism with Chinese characteristics, the RMA with Chinese characteristics, and “modern military force structure with Chinese characteristics.”

<sup>140</sup> Dreyer, “The Air War in Kosovo,” 49; Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future*, 265-67.

## The Quest for Quality: Imitation versus Compensation

Given China's strategic aims and the character of its military modernization, what can be said of the PLA's way of war or how that force would fight? In the Chinese view, a combat environment defined by heavy attrition, advanced weapons, and fast-paced conflicts of short duration demands unprecedented levels of technical skill.<sup>141</sup> Aware of its shortcomings in this area, the PLA has embarked on a sustained effort to improve the quality of its soldiers in order to meet the demands of local wars under high-tech (or informationized) conditions. Beginning in the 1990s with modifications to the conscription policy, personnel reforms have included rebalancing the force to raise the ratio of NCOs and recruiting college graduates into the enlisted ranks. Such programs involve daunting organizational changes. Seemingly intractable problems of Chinese society—like poor education levels among rural youth, cultural barriers to individual initiative, and bureaucratic squabbling—will only delay (if not thwart) the effects of reform implementation. In light of the obstacles in its path, the PLA's long march to enhanced personnel quality will be slow but in step with the broader modernization effort now underway.<sup>142</sup>

The Chinese military has extended its push for qualitative improvement to the logistical system as well. Although the fielding of advanced arms and equipment maintains higher priority in defense spending, PLA military logistics modernization has yielded significant gains in the last decade.<sup>143</sup> Serious limitations remain, however. And they particularly affect China's ability to project power beyond its borders.<sup>144</sup> Nonetheless, one American analyst of the PLA summarizes,

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<sup>141</sup> Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, 280, 288.

<sup>142</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 56-58, 224.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 135; Susan M. Puska, "Taming the Hydra: Trends in China's Military Logistics since 2000," in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2010), 590-92.

<sup>144</sup> Abraham Denmark, "PLA Logistics, 2004-2011: Lessons Learned in the Field," in

The trends in China's military logistics modernization appear consistent with advanced capabilities that have already been mastered by the United States and other militaries. Although the PLA trails well behind more advanced military logistics systems, it does appear to be on the right track for significantly advancing China's military logistics capabilities.<sup>145</sup>

Another scholar echoes this trend toward steady improvement, finding that “strategic and doctrinal revisions in recent years all point to a rather straightforward path ahead for PLA logistics.”<sup>146</sup> As examples, he goes on to mention interservice logistical integration, the use of information system-of-systems, and the “general realization that a military being tasked with an increasingly diverse set of . . . missions requires a logistical system that is flexible, distributed, and nimble.”<sup>147</sup> Based on these assessments, one comes away with the impression that the PLA intends to model its logistical system on that of the US military and thus improve accordingly—which is to say, just as Western commentators would expect.

It is tempting to infer from recent organizational reforms that the PLA seeks to close the gap with Western militaries primarily by imitating them. Besides parallels in the area of logistics, changes in China's armed forces have largely echoed the US Army's experience with modularity and transformation. More broadly, the Chinese have sought similar benefits from adopting joint command structures.<sup>148</sup> Yet there is reason to treat this inference with skepticism, not least because such conclusions—even if true—tend to obscure substantive differences in Chinese and American conceptions of military or strategic problems.<sup>149</sup> Of course, the PLA has attempted to

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*Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2012), 316-17.

<sup>145</sup> Puska, “Taming the Hydra,” 592.

<sup>146</sup> Denmark, “PLA Logistics,” 326-27.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, William M. Donnelly, *Transforming an Army at War: Designing the Modular Force, 1991-2005* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2007).

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, the work of François Jullien, a French professor of Chinese

improve on the basis of lessons learned from other militaries, infusing those efforts with Chinese characteristics as appropriate. But rather than improve along Western lines, the PLA, mindful of its own shortfalls, may well try to compensate for them in some unforeseen way.

For example, as part of the ever-shifting interaction between tactics and technology, the US military generally assigns priority to the development of concepts and then pursues the requisite technological advances in order to enable their implementation—an approach that leverages a mature and well-resourced science and technology enterprise. In contrast, the Chinese, who in the past did not enjoy the same advantage, subscribe to the principle of “technology determines tactics,” meaning that planners typically develop tactics and doctrine suitable for the weapons and technologies on hand.<sup>150</sup> When saddled with technological deficiencies, PLA leaders have sought to offset an adversary’s material advantage by way of their soldiers’ physical toughness, deception, or adaptive tactics, like close-range combat.<sup>151</sup> The emphasis on doctrine as a driver of technology has undoubtedly grown in conjunction with China’s indigenous material capacity and the PLA’s progress on the road to informationization. Still, as analyst Dennis J. Blasko concludes, “Chinese strategists are putting more effort into incorporating existing advanced technologies into the force to fight Local Wars than they are into conjuring ideas for new weapons to fight in ways that have never been proven on contemporary battlefields.”<sup>152</sup> Even as it adopts similar organizational reforms and acquires the same kinds of

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philosophy. For a specific snapshot, see Jullien’s *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 259-65. Also see, Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xvii-xx.

<sup>150</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “‘Technology Determines Tactics’: The Relationship between Technology and Doctrine in Chinese Military Thinking,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 3 (June 2011): 358, 360.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 372-73.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

weapons systems based on a common understanding of the character of twenty-first-century conflict, the PLA may pursue doctrinal paths far different than the Western militaries whose dominance it wishes to emulate.

#### Sun Zi versus Mao: A Blend of the Old and New

To the well-known error of mirror-imaging, one must add its equally precarious inverse: the notion that a unique and unitary Chinese way of war exists. Dispelling several myths believed to define how the PLA would fight (or not fight), scholar Andrew R. Wilson argues for an approach that takes into consideration the tensions and contradictions inherent in Chinese military thought.<sup>153</sup> CCP documents, for example, enshrine active defense as the traditional overarching concept of China's strategy, which adheres to "the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense."<sup>154</sup> The PRC articulates a clear-cut stance: "We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked."<sup>155</sup> Yet the sharpness of this distinction masks a troubling fluidity once concept blurs into application.<sup>156</sup> In the same vein, commentators identify the Great Wall as a historical artifact that supposedly embodies China's posture of defensiveness but overlook a history of relentless imperial expansion as the means for ensuring security and prosperity, not to mention upholding regime legitimacy. "The Great Wall seen from the north reveals the power that created it," writes Wilson. "By analogy, Hadrian's Wall [in the British Isles] does not represent the modest or defensive traditions of Imperial Rome."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Andrew R. Wilson, "The Chinese Way of War," in *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 123-25.

<sup>154</sup> PRC, SCIO, "China's Military Strategy."

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Michael P. Flaherty, "Red Wings Ascendant: The Chinese Air Force Contribution to Antiaccess," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 60 (1st Quarter, 2011): 97.

<sup>157</sup> Wilson, "Chinese Way of War," 110.

Likewise, Sun Zi's precept of winning without fighting seems sensible, but, as a characteristic that underpins the entire Chinese logic for waging war, the idea has been overblown, with observers neglecting the fact that much of the ancient sage's compendium of advice actually pertains to obtaining victory in violent battle.<sup>158</sup> "For Mao," Wilson pointedly notes, "the idea of winning without fighting was inconceivable."<sup>159</sup> Finally, the classical-era notion of *shi*, whereby strategy is explained as the continual maneuvering for relative advantage, obviously draws on a Chinese term but, as a concept, is not uniquely Chinese. Elevating *shi* as the dominant factor in Chinese military thought unduly minimizes the deep influence that Western theorists like Clausewitz, Marx, and Lenin had on Mao.<sup>160</sup>

Indeed, it seems best to view the Chinese way of war as an intentional and evolving mixture of old and new that, in addition, accounts for persistent features like geography, demographics, and the availability of natural resources. Consider, for example, the lingering use of people's war as a framework for PLA doctrine despite shifting strategic circumstances and the emergence of novel technologies. Mao not only remains a respected military thinker, but foundational ideas, such as the importance of mobilizing the masses, reliance on man over weapons, and the requirement for detailed war planning and preparation, continue to hold sway. The application of principles like speed, deception, and initiative, combined with a fluid conditions-driven adoption of mobile, positional, or guerrilla warfare bring victory in people's war, along with a knowledge of one's comparative strengths and weaknesses.<sup>161</sup> To be sure, people's war carries great rhetorical weight, but its utility goes far beyond rhetoric—even during

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 111-12.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 120-22. In his chapter on the Chinese way of war, Wilson—in addition to the three myths referred to above—also undermines views that the Chinese people possess a weak martial ethos and that China lacks a tradition of overseas colonization or "gunboat diplomacy."

<sup>161</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 116, 119-21.

a period in which high-tech conditions of the RMA predominate, and particularly at the strategic and operational levels. It is a way to win, as *Science of Military Strategy* explains:

The war China has to fight in [the] future is still people's war. This basic character will never change. . . . In the past, the PLA greatly depended on the superiority of mass mobilization, strategic depth, and protracted wars. Things are different now. The central role of the military forces is further strengthened, and the people provide support mainly by economic, scientific, cultural, and moral means. . . . Unity of the masses to support the war and their sharing bitter hatred against the enemy are still the decisive factors to gain victory. The deep-rooted source of the sinews of war will remain in the masses of people forever.<sup>162</sup>

The influence of Sun Zi persists as well, with military thought from ancient China at times reinforcing or, alternatively, standing in nuanced contradiction to other sources of doctrine. Sun Zi's preference for swift, decisive wars over protracted battles and his admonition to avoid besieging enemy-held fortifications conceptually pulls against the counsel of Mao, who adopted prolonged guerrilla war when it seemed necessary or advantageous and considered it prudent in a contest for popular support to eliminate an adversary's strongpoints or to wrest lightly defended cities from his control.<sup>163</sup> Dual traditions like this color doctrine with ambivalence. The PLA, for example, seeks to fight "wars of quick decision" but maintains the capability to wage protracted conflicts if required.<sup>164</sup> Still, classical Chinese military thought, lessons of the civil war, and contemporary observations of twenty-first-century combat offer much guidance that overlaps. The role of deception, speed, and careful planning, for instance, find credence in the writings of Sun Zi, as well as Mao. The former might advise a sophisticated approach of attacking an enemy's strategy or his alliances before committing forces to destroy his army, but the imperative of annihilating the opponent by way of superior concentration would resonate with both.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, 376.

<sup>163</sup> Sun Zi, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 57-58, 70-72; Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 120-21.

<sup>164</sup> Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, 356-57.

<sup>165</sup> Sun Zi, *Art of War*, 49, 59, 107, 152; Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 120.

These tensions and apparent contradictions highlight the peril of basing predictions or explanations of Chinese behavior on a single way of war. Western minds may find it difficult to rationalize how the PLA manages to venerate the notion of stringent political reliability while pursuing ways of fostering initiative throughout its ranks, to somehow canonize its Maoist heritage while adapting to the changing character of war and the demands of informationization. Analyst Dennis J. Blasko captures this paradox well. “In a Chinese-style blending of the old with the new,” he explains, “there is no contradiction in the PLA’s collective mind today about employing advanced weapons developed as part of the RMA to prosecute ‘local war’ using principles of ‘people’s war.’”<sup>166</sup> Illustrations of this timeless yet adaptive blending are evident in Chinese tactical doctrine, to include PLA writings on the types of campaigns it envisions fighting in the future.

### Conclusion

By 2030, the Chinese will likely have multiple aircraft carrier strike groups, facilitating the overawing of lesser powers, enhanced regional prestige, and the demonstration effect of near-constant presence. For rival claimants in the South China Sea, this is a game changer. . . . Whether they have seized territory or negotiated a resource-sharing scheme with some or all of the other claimants, the South China Sea will be virtually a Chinese lake, as the Caribbean or the Gulf of Mexico is for the United States today.

—Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025”

The PLA has made great strides in acquiring high-technology weapons systems comparable to those of the United States, as well as notably troublesome asymmetric capabilities, while wrestling with the challenge of adapting doctrine and organization to employ both. It continues the learning process, harnessing an extensive network of military and academic institutions to study a broad swath of security issues but paying particular attention to US armed

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<sup>166</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 18.

forces headquartered in the Pacific.<sup>167</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, the PLA engaged with PACOM to gain an understanding of the American combatant command's organization, equipment, and training so that its own forces might improve.<sup>168</sup>

Indeed, the set of reforms announced by Xi Jinping in late 2015 reflect an imitative impulse energized at one time by such engagements. The plan to cut the Chinese military's strength by 300,000 troops attracted the most media attention, but the implications of other reforms were far more suggestive. Targeting the PLA's stove-piped regional command structure and concerned about its responsiveness in a time of crisis, Xi aimed to unify military decision-making at the strategic level, streamline command and control, and enhance the capacity for joint operations in a force long dominated by the ground component. Commentators interpreted the reforms and their programmed implementation by 2020 as an indicator of China's pursuit of a nimble yet lethal force capable of dealing with a diverse array of threats, presumably beyond its borders.<sup>169</sup> The similarities to the US military's transformation since the 1980s, as well as the perceived appeal of the US model seemed striking to seasoned China analysts.<sup>170</sup>

Yet with its increasing economic and military power and the corresponding rise in regional tensions, China's purpose for engaging PACOM in visits and exchanges has shifted. As "the face of the strongest military China sees every day," PACOM, explains one US analyst, is no longer viewed as "a source for cooperation" but as "the potential enemy whose mission is

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<sup>167</sup> Frank Miller, "The People's Liberation Army Lessons Learned from Recent Pacific Command Operations and Contingencies," in *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2011), 204-6.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, 214-15, 222-23.

<sup>169</sup> Tiezzi, "China's Plan for a New, Improved Military"; "China's President Xi Solidifies Power."

<sup>170</sup> "China's President Xi Solidifies Power."

surrounding and containing China's peaceful development."<sup>171</sup> Today, the PLA studies and, when possible, engages with PACOM, arguably, in order to learn how best to defeat it.

In an expeditionary campaign against a US-led coalition, PLA ground forces will likely harness networked systems to apply firepower with coordinated shock effect on critical coalition assets while employing deception, information warfare, mobility, and improved logistics in order to protect and sustain their own. But the path those forces take in seeking to close the existent capabilities gap may not be as straightforward as the Chinese army's pattern of weapons acquisition, organizational reform, and training exercises suggest. Rather than simply imitate the US military in an effort to match its strength, the PLA may adopt a course that looks to compensate for weaknesses it sees as too daunting to overcome. And it may do so in unexpected ways. The diverse strands that comprise PLA military thought and the inherent contradictions it contains indicate as much.

Embroided with the United States in a strategic competition that appears to escalate by the day, a rising China, by its own account, hopes to unseat a hegemon and assume the dominant position in the Western Pacific. Should the competition morph into war, the contest would likely be decided by air, maritime, and missile forces. The geographical reality of the theater, more than any other factor, keeps ajar the US Army's door to engagement with the PLA. The chances seem remote that ground troops of the two potential adversaries will fight each other over contested terrain. It is perhaps prudent, though, to recall the inconvenient and unanticipated developments of wars past. Neither the US Army nor the Imperial Army of Japan during the interwar years, for example, contemplated slugging it out amid the rugged jungles of New Guinea's northern coast in 1944.<sup>172</sup> As the US competition with China intensifies, a more focused look at the understudied

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<sup>171</sup> Miller, "Pacific Command Operations and Contingencies," 204, 225.

<sup>172</sup> Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*

topic of how PLA ground forces intend to fight may ward off surprise of the most unpleasant kind.

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(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 32-33; Stephen R. Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 34, 111.

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