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# System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?

by Joel Wuthnow



Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs  
Institute for National Strategic Studies  
National Defense University

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**Cover image:** Illustration of Chinese concerns about prosecuting a war with Taiwan while handling other domestic and regional crises  
(Marco Marchegiani/GPO Creative Services)

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## Executive Summary

- A war with Taiwan remains the primary contingency of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). While the near-term prospects of China initiating a war are low due to the enormous economic costs and military risks, the PLA must still prepare to compel Taiwan's leaders to accept unification or, barring that, to seize and occupy the island.
- At the same time, the PLA has been tasked with an array of additional missions, including deterring other regional rivals, enforcing China's territorial claims, protecting China's overseas interests, and serving as the ultimate guarantor of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) survival in the face of domestic challenges. Those missions reduce PLA resources and attention devoted to Taiwan and result in capabilities that are less relevant to cross-strait scenarios.
- Chinese strategists have long worried that China's rivals—including domestic secessionists, regional powers, or the United States—could exploit a Taiwan conflict to press their own agendas, such as launching border wars to solidify their territorial claims or even stoking a “color revolution” to overthrow the CCP. PLA analysts refer to this as “chain reaction” warfare.
- Navigating these dilemmas requires the PLA to be able to concentrate warfighting capabilities across the Taiwan Strait while simultaneously maintaining readiness in other regions, shift resources among theaters when required, and coordinate multi-theater operations. These demands have led to a number of changes in PLA force development, force distribution, command and control, logistics, and human capital.
- However, handling multiple problems remains a weakness for the PLA. Specific deficiencies include difficulties setting priorities due to interservice bargaining, a weak force posture beyond the First Island Chain, a convoluted command structure for multitheater operations, and the lack of a rotational assignment system that would give officers exposure to multiple problem sets. Latent civil-military distrust could also reduce the confidence of civilian leaders that the system will work as intended in a war.
- U.S. discussions on improving Taiwan's defenses tend to focus on selling defense articles to Taipei and enabling U.S. operations in an antiaccess/area-denial environment.

However, there is also room for a broader military strategy that strengthens Taiwan's security by exploiting China's limited ability to handle multiple challenges. U.S. strategy should aim to achieve "system overload" by expanding the range of challenges the PLA faces in other theaters and overwhelming its capacity to conduct multitheater operations.

- An effective peacetime strategy would aim to encourage the PLA to build capabilities less relevant to cross-Taiwan Strait operations and reduce its ability to concentrate resources on Taiwan. Activities that support that objective include providing advanced arms to China's other neighbors and conducting dynamic U.S. military operations throughout the region. Highly publicized upgrades in U.S.-Taiwan defense relations would negate this effect by catalyzing the PLA to focus on a single contingency. Washington should instead prioritize selling Taiwan low-profile but highly effective defensive systems.

- If deterrence fails, U.S. operations could attempt to cause delays in PLA decisionmaking and operations, buying time for U.S. forces to arrive. This supports what U.S. doctrine refers to as presenting adversaries with "multiple dilemmas" by reducing their capacity to quickly reach and execute decisions. Options that exploit stresses in China's ability to coordinate large campaigns and shift resources among theaters include attacks on China's command and control and logistics networks, information operations aggravating tensions in China's civil-military relations, conventional strikes launched from multiple directions, and a "far seas" blockade.

## Introduction

*You're diverting his attention from the real attack. Just one or two diversions and he can ignore them, but five or six, and he has no choice but to pay attention.*

—Olen Steinhauer, *An American Spy*

In his 2019 New Year's Day address, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping issued a stern warning to Taiwan: "We make no promise to abandon the use of force, and retain the option of taking all necessary measures." At the same time, he warned that force could also be used to forestall "intervention by external forces," referring to the United States.<sup>1</sup> While designed to intimidate recalcitrant Taiwan and U.S. leaders—and appeal to domestic nationalists—rather than to signal an imminent confrontation, Xi's comments underscored the very real military threats that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) poses to Taiwan. As the

U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency notes, Taiwan has been the “primary driver” of PLA modernization for decades, spurring the development of short- and long-range ballistic missiles, amphibious and airborne units, and other capabilities targeted at Taiwan and intervening U.S. forces.<sup>2</sup> Those threats have become more worrisome as the PLA conducts large-scale exercises and provocative bomber flights around the island.<sup>3</sup> The PLA’s improved warfighting capabilities have contributed to China’s near-term cross-Taiwan Strait objective—detering Taiwan independence. Understanding the costs that a war would impose on the island, few but the most die-hard Taiwan independence activists have supported overt moves toward de jure independence.<sup>4</sup>

However, China’s military buildup has not succeeded in convincing Taiwan to support the longer term CCP goal of “reunification” or even an interim step in that direction, such as dialogue on political issues or accepting a “one country, two systems” framework for cross-strait relations.<sup>5</sup> This reflects two basic problems: Taiwan’s will to resist and the limited credibility of China’s threats.<sup>6</sup> Persistent PLA limitations have contributed to the latter problem. The U.S. Department of Defense notes that island landings are among “the most complicated and difficult” operations that any military can conduct, requiring air and maritime superiority, “rapid build-up,” and logistics sustainment.<sup>7</sup> These problems are compounded by Taiwan’s difficult terrain, complex weather patterns in the Taiwan Strait, defensive weapons that could delay an invasion,<sup>8</sup> and limited Chinese sealift capabilities.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, given the importance of unification to the CCP, the PLA must continue to build the military capabilities necessary to compel Taipei to accept a new modus vivendi or, barring that, to seize and occupy the island.

Western assessments of the PLA’s prospects in a future conflict typically highlight the shifting military balance across the Taiwan Strait, PLA threats to intervening U.S. forces, and the capabilities and doctrine required to strengthen Taiwan’s defenses.<sup>10</sup> While necessary in understanding and mitigating the problem, these approaches overlook a key constraint on the Chinese system: Chinese planners not only have to assess their side’s ability to prevail in a specific campaign but also have to consider the broader implications of preparing for and conducting a war. The military advice that planners would provide to the Central Military Commission (CMC) needs to address questions such as:

- Would preparations for a Taiwan conflict come at the expense of the PLA’s ability to carry out other tasks?
  
- Would waging a war leave other parts of China’s coastal and land borders vulnerable to aggression by other adversaries?

- If a crisis did erupt in another theater, could the military handle multiple contingencies?
- Would the PLA and other forces be able to maintain domestic stability?
- What would be the implications for protecting China's global supply routes and overseas interests?

Answers to these types of questions could influence CMC decisionmaking both prior to and during a future Taiwan conflict. In peacetime, simultaneous challenges in other theaters could result in the generation of capabilities less central to cross-strait operations and reduce the PLA's ability to focus on Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> Once a decision to use force has been made, unexpected challenges in other theaters could prompt a delay in China's execution of its war plans, providing valuable time for the United States to deploy forces on Taiwan's behalf. Thus, it is worth considering how Chinese strategists have assessed this problem and the extent to which China's military has been able to build in the requisite agility to handle other problems while preparing to execute its primary contingency.

This paper assesses the PLA's ability to navigate the dilemma of preparing for a war with Taiwan while fulfilling its obligations in other theaters and derives implications for U.S. strategy during peacetime and in the early phases of a conflict. It is organized into six main sections. The first two sections explain Taiwan's role as the PLA's primary planning target and competing considerations that require attention and resources in other theaters. The next section develops an analytic framework derived from the Russian and U.S. experiences during and after the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> These cases suggest that the Chinese system needs to be able to maintain adequate capabilities within the five theater commands (TCs) to deter other rivals, quickly shift resources among theaters, and coordinate multitheater operations in exigent circumstances. These objectives have implications in five areas: force development, force distribution, command and control, logistics, and human capital.

The fourth section uses this framework to assess the PLA's ability to balance competing responsibilities. Some of the PLA's strengths include a coherent resourcing process, alignment of force distribution with operational priorities, an agile command structure at the theater level, a distributed logistics system, and combat-oriented training. Most of these strengths have undergone additional improvements as part of the recent round of military reforms led by Xi. However, a number of key vulnerabilities remain. Major weaknesses include bureaucratic rivalries, a weak force posture beyond Asia, difficulties exercising command over multitheater

operations, overreliance on information technology, and the lack of a rotational assignment system. The following section considers the confidence of China's civilian leaders in the PLA's ability to function as intended in a war, suggesting that a key intervening variable is the nature of the relationship between the CMC chairman and his key military advisers.

The sixth section considers how U.S. strategy can leverage PLA weaknesses to improve Taiwan's ability to defend itself. In peacetime, the goal should be to minimize the PLA's ability to focus on cross-strait operations by maximizing challenges in other theaters. This requires, among other things, providing effective capabilities to states along China's periphery and dynamic U.S. military operations across the region. During a conflict, the goal should be to complicate CMC decisionmaking, buying time for U.S. forces to intervene (rather than attempting to force Beijing to back down altogether). Specific options include offensive cyber operations against PLA command and control and logistics networks, information campaigns to aggravate stress in Chinese civil-military relations, conventional strikes from multiple directions, and a "far seas" blockade. The conclusion discusses how the approach developed in this paper could be utilized to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese, Russian, Indian, and U.S. militaries.

### **China's Primary Contingency**

China's preparations for the use of force against Taiwan are nested within Chinese military strategy, known formally as the "military strategic guidelines" [*junshi zhanlüe fangzhen*, 军事战略方针]. Revised periodically, this guidance provides overall direction for PLA modernization and is translated into specific objectives in areas such as weapons acquisition, operational planning, force structure, and training. As David Finkelstein notes, the guidelines incorporate both a capabilities-based analysis of the weapons, platforms, and operational concepts the PLA needs to stay ahead of global military trends, and a contingency-based assessment of the specific operational problems the PLA needs to be able to address, taking into account key threats and changes in the external security environment.<sup>13</sup>

Within the latter assessment, the southeast coast—and in particular, the Taiwan Strait—became the "main strategic direction" [*zhuyao zhanlüe fangxiang*, 主要战略方向] during the early part of Jiang Zemin's tenure as CMC chairman (1990–2005).<sup>14</sup> Some explanation of this concept is necessary to understand the significance of its application to Taiwan. Within China's military strategic guidelines, "identifying a 'Main Strategic Direction' serves as a 'worst-case scenario' planning tool for developing forces and capabilities, making force deployment decisions, and making other preparations should conflict erupt."<sup>15</sup> This contrasts with one or more

“secondary strategic direction(s)” [*ciyao zhanlüe fangxiang*, 次要战略方向] where forces would have to prepare for less severe challenges.<sup>16</sup> During the Cold War, Chinese leaders adjusted the main strategic direction several times depending on the specific regions where they anticipated a U.S. or Soviet invasion (table 1).<sup>17</sup> Placing Taiwan at the forefront of China’s planning scenarios thus represented a major turning point.

The PLA’s shift in attention to the Taiwan Strait in the early 1990s resulted from the conflux of three factors. First, the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in the late 1980s and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the threat of an incursion along China’s northern border and allowed the PLA to focus on other regional problems.<sup>18</sup> Second, there were stirrings of the Taiwan independence movement and the transition to a new generation of Kuomintang (KMT) leaders, less committed to a political union with the mainland and more focused on expanding Taiwan’s diplomatic autonomy.<sup>19</sup> Third, an expansion of unofficial U.S.-Taiwan defense relations was reflected in the sale of 150 F-16s to Taipei in September 1992. Jiang thus declared in 1993:

*At present and in the coming period, our focus in the military struggle is to prevent a major “Taiwan independence” incident and [thus] prevent harm to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The military should actively support the party and the government to enhance their attraction and influence to Taiwan*

**Table 1. Shifts in the “Main Strategic Direction” Under Mao**

Dates	Context	Main Threats	Main Strategic Direction
1949–1950	Conclusion of Chinese Civil War	Kuomintang, the United States	Southeast Coast
1950–1953	Korean War	The United States	Northeast
1953–early 1960s	Cold War	The United States and Japan	Liaodong and Shandong peninsulas
Mid-to-late 1960s	Cold War	The United States	East Coast
Late 1960s to mid-1970s	Sino-Soviet Split	Soviet Union	“Three Northerns” (Northeast, North, Northwest)

Source: Yuan Dejin and Guo Zhigang, “Mao Zedong and the Development and Adjustment of the Main Strategic Directions of New China” [毛泽东与新中国主要战略方向的确定和调整], *Military History* [军事历史] 5 (2009), 30–34.

*from political, economic, cultural, scientific and technological aspects, play a military deterrent role, curb the “Taiwan independence” separatist forces, and strive to promote peaceful reunification while at the same time making careful preparations in the military arena.<sup>20</sup>*

Developments in the 1990s and 2000s cemented the PLA’s prioritization of cross-strait operations and identified new requirements. The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which began with a controversial visit by Taiwan’s president Lee Teng-hui to the United States and culminated with the U.S. deployment of two carrier battle groups near the strait, highlighted both China’s limited ability to influence Taiwan’s leaders and the need for the PLA to be able to counter U.S. military intervention in a future conflict.<sup>21</sup> Lee’s 1999 articulation of a “special state-to-state” theory of cross-strait relations and the election of the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shui-bian in the 2000 presidential election reduced the prospects for peaceful unification, while President George W. Bush’s April 2001 declaration that the United States would do “whatever it took” to help Taiwan defend itself confirmed the assessment that U.S. intervention was likely.<sup>22</sup>

While cross-strait relations improved under the KMT administration of Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), Chinese concerns about Taiwan independence and U.S. policy did not dissipate. Chinese defense white papers during these years consistently described Taiwan independence as a looming threat that must be opposed.<sup>23</sup> Chinese officials also associated unification with China’s “core interests,” signifying the unflagging importance of that problem to the CCP.<sup>24</sup> More recently, several developments have cemented the Taiwan Strait’s status as the main strategic direction,<sup>25</sup> including the January 2016 election of DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen, weak public support for unification in Taiwan, the KMT’s weaknesses as a credible opposition party, and the election of new KMT leaders less committed to improving ties with China.<sup>26</sup>

Dimming prospects for peaceful unification and the anticipation of U.S. intervention have influenced PLA planning in various ways. Doctrinal development focused on several types of campaigns that could be conducted to compel Taiwan’s leaders to accept Beijing’s proposal for a “one country, two systems” model, including joint firepower strikes on key targets, a blockade, or a full-scale island landing (which would be preceded by a missile bombardment and a blockade).<sup>27</sup> Those operational concepts were accompanied by the rapid development of relevant combat capabilities such as short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, advanced fighters, amphibious units, and electronic and psychological warfare capabilities, many of which were initially deployed in the Nanjing Military Region (MR) opposite Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> Countering

U.S. intervention was integral to each of the major campaigns: Chinese force development thus highlighted how assets such as submarines, bombers, and long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles could be used to hold intervening U.S. forces at bay.<sup>29</sup>

## Competing Considerations

Despite its increasing focus on cross-Strait conflict since the 1990s, the PLA also faced new demands in other regions, while Chinese strategists worried that a war could invite adventurism by other adversaries. Competing obligations can be grouped into domestic, regional, and global categories. First, at the domestic level, the experience of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, the proliferation of “mass incidents” across the country in the 1990s,<sup>30</sup> riots that erupted in both Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008, and the perception of linkages between Uighur “terrorist” groups based in Central Asia and those in Xinjiang meant that the PLA and its paramilitary cousin, the People’s Armed Police (PAP), had to perform domestic “counterterrorism” missions and maintain sizable forces in western China and major cities.<sup>31</sup> The armed forces thus remained a backstop for preserving order and protecting the country from internal threats.

Second, the PLA needed to be able to deter and prepare for conflicts with other regional adversaries. China’s defense white papers illustrate the fluctuations of regional challenges confronting Beijing from 1998 to the present (table 2). Key land missions included maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula in light of Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear weapons—and the prospect of a U.S. preemptive strike—and deterring India’s adventurism along the contested border.<sup>32</sup> Frequent U.S. military operations near China’s southern and eastern coasts—the locus of Chinese economic productivity during the reform era—meant that coastal defense remained a priority.<sup>33</sup> Newer missions facing Chinese planners in the 1990s and 2000s included enforcing China’s territorial claims in the South and East China seas and securing maritime resources in light of the perceived provocative actions of other claimants.<sup>34</sup> Along with Taiwan, deterring regional rivals such as India, Japan, and Vietnam undergirded China’s “local wars” military strategy that, in the words of former CMC vice chairman Liu Huaqing, focused on “countering multiple forms of conflicts from different adversaries.”<sup>35</sup> This strategy implied that the PLA needed to be prepared for conflicts in multiple theaters, train to diverse scenarios, and be able to deploy at increasing distances.

A related concern was that threats might suddenly appear in areas where the PLA is less well prepared to respond. The 2013 *Science of Strategy* notes that neither the 1950–1953 Korean War, the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict, nor the 1979 war with Vietnam were fought in regions then designated as the main strategic direction, concluding that modern planners need



Table 2. Security Challenges Referenced in China's Defense White Papers, 1998–2019

	South Asia Instability	Afghanistan Instability	U.S. Alliances Strengthening	Korean Peninsula Instability	Taiwan Independence	Uighur/Tibetan Independence	Diaoyu/Senkaku Infringement	Japan Militarization	South China Sea Infringement	Australia Strengthening Alliances
1998	X									
2000			X	X	X			X	X	
2002	X	X	X	X	X					
2004			X	X	X			X		
2006		X	X	X	X			X		
2008			X		X	X				
2010		X	X	X	X	X				
2013			X		X	X	X			
2015			X	X	X	X		X	X	
2019			X	X	X	X		X		X

Source: <http://www.gov.cn/>

to account for “high intensity military conflicts and even local wars that may occur in other directions.”<sup>36</sup> Other scholars make a similar point by historical analogy, arguing (apocryphally) that despite the ongoing Korean War, Mao Zedong anticipated a U.S. or KMT invasion along China’s southeast coast and thus strengthened China’s coastal defenses during the war.<sup>37</sup> Some sources also argue that China’s increasing focus on maritime operations should be balanced against enduring continental missions, including domestic stability and counterterrorism.<sup>38</sup>

Third, China’s expanding overseas interests required the PLA to operate beyond the immediate periphery. One mission was protecting China’s vulnerable maritime energy supply routes, a problem known as the “Malacca Dilemma.”<sup>39</sup> Notably, the 2015 defense white paper codified a shift in naval strategy in which “near seas defense,” such as defending maritime claims and preparing for a Taiwan conflict, would have to be balanced with “far seas protection.”<sup>40</sup> Missions in this latter category included anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden beginning in December 2008 and protection of sea lines of communication. The other services also had their own overseas obligations, such as the army’s participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, the air

force's role in providing strategic airlift for noncombatant evacuations, and participation by the army, navy, and air force in overseas exercises.<sup>41</sup> These missions implied at least a nascent global expeditionary capability and training for noncombatant evacuations and other contingencies.<sup>42</sup>

Chinese strategists also worry about a horizontal escalation of a conflict in the main strategic direction due to the opportunistic behavior of China's other adversaries. For instance, a 2004 volume notes that separatists will "mutually collude with Taiwan independence forces . . . and draw upon the support and aid of Western anti-Chinese forces to create disturbances or riots, or local border rebellions."<sup>43</sup> The authors argue that, "In case something happens in the future in our main strategic direction, some neighboring countries surely will take advantage of an opportunity to nibble away weak areas which our side controls."<sup>44</sup> Western powers in particular will leverage a Taiwan conflict to "create disturbances, support . . . a border war provoked by another nation, and cause a local dispute to be internationalized."<sup>45</sup> The authors conclude that the PLA needs to maintain "basic stability and avoid the unfavorable situation of two-front operations" [*liang xian zuozhan*, 两线作战], thus controlling the "scale, intensity, and scope" of the conflict.<sup>46</sup>

Other PLA strategic writings contain similar concerns and prescriptions. The 2009 *Science of Joint Operations* argues that China's enemies will exploit "our difficulty in simultaneously attending to matters . . . to service their own ends, and thus will provoke an armed conflict or local war in the border areas."<sup>47</sup> Likewise, a 2012 instructional volume produced by the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) warns that "national secessionist forces" will collude with external "hegemonists" to force China into "two-front operations."<sup>48</sup> The author later warns about a "chain reaction" [*liansuo fanying*, 连锁反应] of wars in which another aggressor exploits a conflict in the main strategic direction to launch an offensive against Chinese interests "in our high altitude plateau border area" (implicitly referring to India).<sup>49</sup> This requires the PLA to improve its ability to conduct a "joint border area counterattack campaign" [*bianjing diqu lianhe fanji zhanyi*, 边境地区联合反击战役].<sup>50</sup>

In the Xi era, there is an even greater emphasis on preparing for threats that occur outside the main strategic direction, either by coincidence or due to the opportunistic behavior of other adversaries. Major General Chen Zhou, an AMS scholar who contributed to the development of China's military strategic guidelines, explains:

*China's geostrategic environment is complex. There are different threats and challenges in various strategic directions and security areas. We must seize the hub of the main strategic direction . . . [while taking] into account the preparations for*

*military struggle in other strategic directions . . . [and] properly respond to chain reactions.*<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, authoritative sources such as the 2015 defense white paper and speeches by CMC vice chairman Xu Qiliang and Xi Jinping emphasized the need for the military to operate effectively in “*all strategic directions*.”<sup>52</sup> This argument reflected a general sense that challenges to China’s national security increasingly flowed from many directions and took many forms, a key tenet of Xi’s “holistic national security concept” [*zongti guojia anquan guan*, 总体国家安全观] promulgated in 2014.<sup>53</sup> An article in the journal of the Central Party School notes that

*Entering a new era, with the profound changes in the content of [our] national interests, various strategic directions may have security problems that infringe on national interests, which in turn cause serious harm and consequences to the overall development of the country. This makes any strategic direction likely to be the main strategic direction. Only by scientifically coordinating the use of military forces can we effectively respond to security threats in all directions and ensure the balance and stability of the overall strategy.*<sup>54</sup>

China’s military planners thus faced a dilemma: how to adequately prepare for a conflict with Taiwan while also ensuring that the country’s interests in other regions can be maintained prior to and during a war. How can we assess the PLA’s ability to manage this dilemma?

## **Framework for Analysis**

The specific characteristics of the PLA’s Taiwan dilemma are unique, but other militaries have wrestled with the general problem of balancing responsibilities across theaters. The closest modern parallels are Russia and the United States during and after the Cold War. The Soviet Union, like China, was a continental power with adversaries at multiple points along its long frontiers. Following the Sino-Soviet split, Moscow had to consider how forces could defeat the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while retaining adequate capabilities to deter hostile Chinese forces in the east (a third front, in the southwest, opened with the 1979 revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that began the same year).<sup>55</sup> More recent Russian doctrine calls for the “deployment of groups of troops (forces) in potentially dangerous strategic directions and their readiness for combat use.”<sup>56</sup> For their part, U.S. planners during the Cold War struggled to develop the right “force-sizing” construct to deal with the primary

Soviet threat in Central Europe and confront other challenges such as China, North Vietnam, and Soviet proxy wars.<sup>57</sup> After the Cold War, the Department of Defense shifted to a standard of preparing for two “major regional conflicts,” such as Iran or North Korea.<sup>58</sup> In the absence of a superpower threat that would justify a larger force structure, the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review adopted a capabilities-based model to determine the forces that would be needed to address more diffuse challenges, but retained the requirement that U.S. forces be able to defeat aggression against U.S. allies in two separate theaters.<sup>59</sup>

The U.S. and Russian cases suggest that balancing obligations in different regions requires capable forces at the theater level, the ability to quickly reallocate forces between theaters, and a capacity to conduct multitheater operations. Achieving these goals requires planners to consider five problems. First, prioritizing challenges at the national level and, based on that assessment, generating capabilities for theater commanders. Second, distributing forces across theaters in a way that reflects those priorities. Third, having an agile command structure for multitheater operations and other large contingencies. Fourth, possessing a logistics system that can quickly redeploy forces and sustain them in distant locations. Fifth, ensuring that troops are adequately trained to operate beyond their home theaters. This section discusses each of these problems.

### **Force Development**

One characteristic of a system able to handle multiple challenges is the ability to prioritize strategic and operational requirements and, according to that assessment, develop capabilities needed by theater commanders. This implies an ability to minimize parochialism and other factors that lead to misalignments between operations and resources. In the Soviet 5-year planning cycle, the General Staff adjudicated between the competing demands of the services and, by controlling the calendar and terms of reference for key decisions, kept the “services off balance in their advocacy for certain programs.”<sup>60</sup> The U.S. process, currently known as Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution, was conceived in the early 1960s to ensure that procurement decisions reflected operational demands and not arbitrary budget constraints, while reducing development of duplicative capabilities.<sup>61</sup> The Chinese system should also be able to generate capabilities that meet the major requirements of deterring and defeating adversaries in the main strategic direction and other theaters, while minimizing bureaucratic resistance.

### **Force Distribution**

At the theater level, the distribution of combat units and modern equipment should reflect the hierarchy of operational priorities. Soviet forces were concentrated in the west to prepare

for a conflict with NATO, although, between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, forces based in the Far East tripled to deal with the Chinese threat.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. planners calibrated the ratios of forces needed in Europe and Asia, with some of the best assets reserved in the former theater to blunt a potential Soviet invasion and maintain Strategic Air Command's deterrent.<sup>63</sup> The Soviet collapse led to a major drawdown of U.S. forces in Western Europe, but challenges from China and North Korea meant that a similar reduction did not occur in the Pacific.<sup>64</sup> In recent years, the U.S. military has also begun to deploy some of its most advanced air and naval assets to Asia.<sup>65</sup> Chinese planners similarly need to consider how to allocate forces, defined in terms of number of units and advanced equipment, between the main strategic direction and other theaters.

### **Command and Control**

The problem of a multifront war, or a large campaign in which resources need to be redeployed from other regions, requires effective coordination between national and theater-level commanders. In such circumstances, the Soviet Supreme High Command would have overseen the entire war effort and approved redeployment of forces, while giving the regional theaters latitude on how to employ those forces.<sup>66</sup> Russia today has instituted a joint system based on four military districts, with coordination provided by the General Staff.<sup>67</sup> In the U.S. military, the National Command Authority (President and Secretary of Defense), supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would provide national coordination for the combatant commands and make determinations about the reallocation of forces. The PLA command structure also needs to be able to effectively coordinate among different levels, including the ability to quickly shift from peacetime to wartime operations.<sup>68</sup>

### **Logistics**

If forces within a theater prove insufficient during a conflict, the system should be able to rapidly transfer and sustain reinforcements from other regions. In the mid-1980s, the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that Soviet forces could sustain themselves during a conflict in their respective theaters for 2 to 3 months before requiring a shift in resources across theaters. This shift would primarily be accomplished along rail lines but might also require transport aircraft for lighter units.<sup>69</sup> U.S. doctrine before and after the Cold War emphasized strategic sea- and airlift to enable the transfers of troops and supplies from the homeland to overseas commands. In recent decades, U.S. forces have increasingly relied on information support to

ensure that forces can be quickly redeployed and sustained at a global level.<sup>70</sup> Chinese planners also need to consider how troops and materiel can be redeployed across theaters when required.

### **Human Capital**

In a conflict requiring forces to be redistributed among theaters, a key question is whether those supporting forces are agile enough to respond to new situations. A declassified 1982 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate judged that the specialization of Soviet forces in different regions might have reduced interoperability. For instance, forces based in the Caucasus were not well prepared for operations against NATO forces in Central Europe.<sup>71</sup> During the Cold War, U.S. plans called for a strategic reserve of general purpose forces that could be employed anywhere, although in practice most were trained for European contingencies.<sup>72</sup> The current U.S. system encourages agility by regularly transferring officers through different regional assignments. The PLA would also need to determine whether personnel are sufficiently versatile to handle new responsibilities.

### **Evaluating the Chinese System**

The assessment in this section shows that the PLA has both strengths and weaknesses in each of the categories identified above. Key strengths include a planning process that aligns resource development with operations, forces distributed according to theater needs, a coherent joint command structure within the theaters, a joint logistics system that can quickly reallocate resources among theaters, and combat-oriented joint training. Many of these strengths reflect improvements under recent reforms led by Xi. Persistent weaknesses include bureaucratic compromises and resistance that skew force development away from operational priorities, limited capabilities to conduct combat operations beyond Asia, a convoluted command structure for a multitheater war, overreliance on information systems in the logistics system, and a rigid personnel system that reduces exposure to multiple problem sets.

### **Force Development**

The PLA's ability to effectively generate and distribute capabilities across theaters rests on a coherent resourcing process. Based on the Soviet model, PLA troops, materiel, and other resources are determined through a centralized planning process, the most important component of which is the compilation of successive 5-year national defense plans.<sup>73</sup> The blueprint of the current PLA reforms, for instance, is tied to the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2016–2020).<sup>74</sup> Planning and execution of the plans has fallen to different parts of the PLA. The former General Armament

Department oversaw procurement and research and development (albeit with only a limited ability to coordinate activities of the navy, air force, and Rocket Force), while the General Staff Department's Strategic Planning Department conducted "net assessment of evolving national security challenges" and determined "future capabilities to meet challenges."<sup>75</sup> Xi-era reforms have also promoted efficient resourcing,<sup>76</sup> including through a major anti-corruption campaign designed in part to reduce graft in the acquisition system.<sup>77</sup>

However, the PLA's resourcing system contains two interrelated weaknesses that could result in misalignments between resources and operations. First, there are difficulties in making hard choices. Susan Shirk notes that, in communist systems, "drastic changes in policy direction or massive shifts in the allocation of resources are inhibited by the requirement that all agencies agree to them."<sup>78</sup> Despite the centralization of power under Xi, such tendencies likely persist in the PLA: Xi has no incentive to antagonize major interest groups within the military, as evidenced by his willingness to blunt the negative political consequences of downsizing the ground forces by offering affected officers new positions.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, PLA interlocutors suggest that there is no effective CMC mechanism to resolve disputes between competing bureaucracies.<sup>80</sup> The reforms created a new CMC Strategic Planning Office, but this office is relatively low in the PLA bureaucratic hierarchy and likely plays only an analytic and coordination role.<sup>81</sup> Such problems could reduce the PLA's ability to prioritize the main strategic direction over the other theaters when allocating resources.

Second, there are bureaucratic rivalries. Faced with declining budget growth, the services may overemphasize their specific capabilities and challenge the effectiveness of programs being pursued by other services.<sup>82</sup> The army, in particular, is under pressure to justify its status as the largest service given the PLA's emphasis on building capabilities in other domains. One option has been to highlight its central role in amphibious operations against Taiwan.<sup>83</sup> The navy and air force are each waging campaigns to stress their own unique capabilities, with the former highlighting its role in the South China Sea and the latter focusing on Taiwan.<sup>84</sup> Recent reforms, which placed a diminished army headquarters at the same bureaucratic level as the other services, and removed the service chiefs from the CMC, likely only compound these rivalries.

Competition between the TCs could involve attempts to inflate the importance of their respective missions. For instance, Eastern TC leaders have stressed their responsibilities for leading operations in the main strategic direction, implying the need for resources commensurate with this status, though it is not difficult to imagine other theaters making similar arguments based on their own primary missions.<sup>85</sup> However, the Eastern TC is not bureaucratically senior to the other theaters, who will argue why they should not be left behind.<sup>86</sup> As with the services,

this could mean demonstrating their relevance to a Taiwan scenario or explaining the urgency of other problems—for instance, the Western TC might emphasize threats on the Sino-Indian border. Mixed threat assessments that reach the CMC could lead to pressure to allocate more resources to the secondary theaters.<sup>87</sup> Bureaucratic rivalries are compounded by the aforementioned lack of a strong central mechanism to arbitrate disputes.

### Force Distribution

Despite drags on resourcing efficiency, Chinese forces are postured relatively effectively to operate in the main strategic direction while fulfilling other missions. As would be expected, forces that would participate in the primary cross-strait campaigns are arrayed along the southeast coast. A joint firepower strike would be led by China's 10 short-range ballistic missile brigades based in the Eastern and Southern TCs (figure 1). These units possess between 750 and 1,500 missiles—which could reach any of Taiwan's air bases, communications networks, leadership compounds, or other key targets—to “break the Taiwan people's resolve.”<sup>88</sup> (Longer

**Figure 1. Approximate Theater Command Boundaries**



Source: *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2016), 2.



range missiles that would target intervening U.S. forces could be deployed deeper in China's interior.<sup>89</sup>) Regarding a blockade, the nearly three-dozen diesel submarines based in the same two theaters would play an integral role in mining Taiwan's ports, while the more than 500 PLA Navy and Air Force combat aircraft located in range of Taiwan would establish air superiority and target any blockade-runners.<sup>90</sup>

The PLA has also concentrated its amphibious and airborne forces in the Eastern TC and adjacent theaters. The main landing force would be drawn from amphibious brigades under the Eastern TC's three group armies (71<sup>st</sup>, 72<sup>nd</sup>, and 73<sup>rd</sup>), and supplemented by those under the Southern TC's two group armies (74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup>), PLA Navy Marine Corps brigades (also based in the Southern TC), and airborne brigades located in the Central TC.<sup>91</sup> Recent reforms that intended to strengthen these capabilities include a shift from divisions to amphibious and airborne brigades (which promotes greater maneuverability) and the planned expansion of the marine corps from roughly 10,000 to 30,000 personnel by 2020.<sup>92</sup> These brigades would be supported by an assortment of other forces based in the Eastern TC, including the aforementioned submarines and combat aircraft, a robust integrated air defense system, psychological warfare forces, reserve and militia units,<sup>93</sup> and the PAP, which would maintain rear area security.<sup>94</sup>

The PLA's distribution of forces across the TCs means that other rivals could likely be deterred or defeated during a war with Taiwan. Domestically, the PLA continues to deploy two group armies in the Western TC as well as forces under the Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts, which—along with paramilitary forces—could be mobilized to suppress ethnic unrest.<sup>95</sup> At the regional level, all five TCs have two or three group armies and a mix of fighter and attack aircraft brigades (table 3). The shift to a standardized air force and army brigade structure, which has been mostly completed under recent reforms, increases interoperability among the TCs (though some highly specialized units, such as mountain brigades located in Tibet, would have little utility in other contexts).<sup>96</sup> The three coastal theaters have a similar number of diesel submarines and destroyers, which are augmented by the coast guard and maritime militias.<sup>97</sup> These naval assets could also be shifted among theaters relatively easily. Qualitatively, all TCs possess at least some of the most advanced weapons and equipment: each, for example, possesses Type 99 main battle tanks and fourth-generation fighters such as J-10As, J-11Bs, J-16s, and Su-30MKKs,<sup>98</sup> while all three fleets possess the latest *Luyang III* destroyers and *Jiangkai II* frigates. These capabilities would be used to deter or punish smaller rivals who might seek to exploit a Taiwan conflict for their own purposes.

If forces based in the TCs are insufficient to accomplish their respective missions, assets controlled at the national level could be deployed to support TC commanders. These include

**Table 3. Combat Capability Distribution Across Theater Commands**

	Eastern	Southern	Central	Northern	Western
PLA Army					
Group Armies	3	2	3	3	2 (+ Xinjiang and Tibet Military Districts)
PLA Navy					
Nuclear attack submarines	0	2	N/A	4	N/A
Diesel submarines	16	16	N/A	18	N/A
Destroyers	9	11	N/A	8	N/A
Frigates	20	19	N/A	12	N/A
Marine brigades	0	2	N/A	1	N/A
PLA Air Force					
Attack units	2 reg, 1 bd	0	0	2 reg, 3 bd	1 bd
Fighter ground attack brigades	6	8	3	7	0
Fighter units	1 reg, 3 bd	3 reg	4 reg, 2 bd	4 reg, 2 bd	3 reg, 4 bd
Bomber regiments	3	3	0	0	3
Airborne brigades	0	0	6	0	0
PLA Rocket Force					
Conventional SRBM brigades	6	4	0	0	0

Sources: *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 63–82; *The Military Balance 2018* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2018); Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “Assuring Assured Retaliation: China’s Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability,” *International Security* 40, no. 22 (Fall 2015), 43.

Key: bd = brigade; reg = regiment; SRBM = short-range ballistic missile

bombers, airborne, and heavy transport aircraft, which remain under PLA Air Force headquarters, and long-range conventional strike assets, such as DF-21 medium-range ballistic missiles and DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles, which are likely under CMC control.<sup>99</sup> Some national assets may not need to be physically relocated, increasing their flexible use across theaters. For instance, cyber warfare units under the Strategic Support Force, many of which are physically located in the Beijing area, could be quickly reallocated to different TCs (though it is unclear how proficient these units would be in penetrating the computer networks of different adversaries).<sup>100</sup> In theory, the PLA might also be able to shift the targets of its psychological operations without having to move personnel, although the only known unit responsible for this discipline is focused on Taiwan contingencies.<sup>101</sup>

A continuing weakness is the absence of significant combat capabilities beyond China's periphery. Current Chinese overseas deployments consist of a few thousand troops supporting UN peacekeeping operations,<sup>102</sup> three or four ships conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and a single overseas base in Djibouti.<sup>103</sup> These forces are sufficient for minor non-traditional security operations but are not well postured for larger combat operations, such as protecting Chinese maritime energy imports in the face of U.S. interdiction.<sup>104</sup> Beijing has tried to mitigate the Malacca Dilemma by diversifying maritime supply routes and building overland pipelines, but in the absence of a much larger PLA navy presence in the Indian Ocean, risks will remain that might be exploited by China's adversaries during a Taiwan conflict.<sup>105</sup> Compounding this problem is the lack of both a global command structure that could coordinate joint operations in the "far seas" and a network of allies and overseas bases that could support logistics sustainment along exterior lines.<sup>106</sup>

### **Command and Control**

The PLA's newly reformed joint command structure appears agile enough to handle smaller contingencies that occur at a regional level, but serious questions remain regarding its ability to supervise multitheater operations. Prior to 2016, the system was highly fragmented and inefficient. Seven MRs were tasked with defending different areas of the country but held peacetime control only over the ground forces. Naval, air, and conventional missile forces reported through their respective service headquarters. During a crisis, PLA doctrine envisioned that a temporary "war zone," overseeing units drawn from all the services, would be established (with some personnel seconded from the General Staff Department in Beijing).<sup>107</sup> This system reduced readiness because forces from the different services typically did not train or interact

with each other during peacetime, and this likely would have resulted in major delays in transitioning from peacetime to wartime operations.

Recent reforms have made great strides in overcoming these problems. Like the MRs, the TCs are aligned against specific regional challenges.<sup>108</sup> The difference is that TC commanders have both peacetime and wartime authority over air, land, maritime, and at least some conventional missile forces, and unlike the MRs—which doubled as an administrative headquarters for the army—focus their efforts on operational matters, including planning and joint training tailored to regional contingencies.<sup>109</sup> Each TC also operates a joint operations command center, which monitors the security environment and coordinates activities among the different services. This system is designed to ensure that theater forces can deter regional adversaries, conduct peacetime operations, and respond quickly to crises. It is especially well postured for less demanding contingencies, such as a minor border skirmish.<sup>110</sup>

During a Taiwan conflict, the other TCs would be able to continue to function with relatively limited oversight. The CMC, through its Joint Staff Department (JSD), would likely monitor the readiness of forces to respond to provocations in other theaters, but TC commanders would have the requisite authority to conduct normal operations. The emphasis would likely be on maintaining stability and reducing tensions with other adversaries so that the JSD could focus on the main strategic direction. In the event of a crisis in a secondary theater, TC commanders would execute preexisting contingency plans but would seek CMC approval before any significant escalation of tensions. The TCs would also coordinate with local PAP units to ensure that any signs of domestic upheaval could be quickly suppressed.<sup>111</sup>

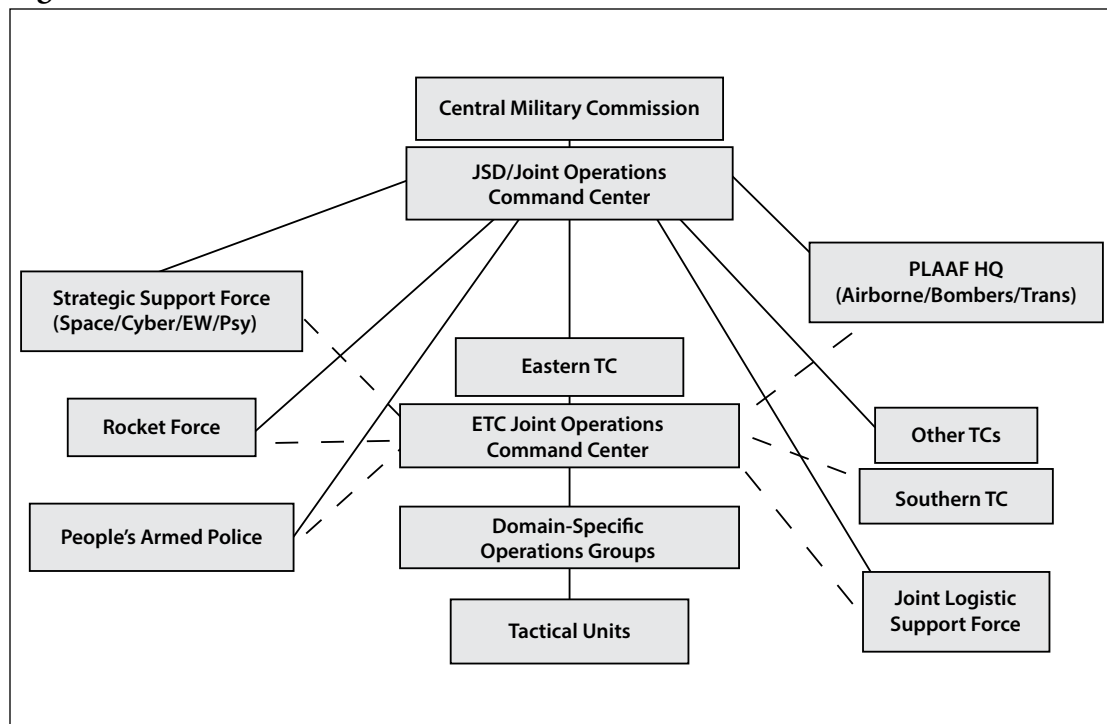
By contrast, the PLA would face far greater challenges in exercising command of large-scale operations in the main strategic direction.<sup>112</sup> One of the complications is the involvement of forces from multiple TCs and services. While the Eastern TC controls conventional forces within its geographic boundaries and would likely supervise integrated “operations groups” [*zuozhan jituan*, 作战集团] in various domains during wartime, each of the main cross-Strait campaigns would require extensive coordination with other commands.<sup>113</sup> Missile and blockade campaigns would involve both the Eastern and Southern TCs, where some participating units are based.<sup>114</sup> An island landing would also involve coordination between the Eastern TC and air force headquarters, which controls “national assets,” such as airborne, transport, and bomber units.<sup>115</sup> The other TCs might also play a role as backup command headquarters or dispatch personnel to augment the Eastern TC joint operations command center.

In all campaigns, the PLA would also need to be able to monitor and disrupt intervening U.S. forces, which would involve Chinese submarines and bombers operating beyond the First

Island Chain, long-range conventional missiles based in multiple TCs, and Strategic Support Force space, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities.<sup>116</sup> Some operations would take place beyond the geographic areas of responsibility of any of the TCs, raising questions about command and control. One possible solution is that the services, which have nominally been removed from the operational chain of command, would continue to supervise units operating far from China's coasts (such as submarines deployed to the Philippine Sea, which might report through navy headquarters). The Rocket Force, which maintains the nuclear deterrent, would also be involved.<sup>117</sup>

Given the participation of a wide array of forces operating in multiple regions, it is fair to assume that a Taiwan conflict would be supervised by the JSD, which sits above the TCs and services (figure 2).<sup>118</sup> The actual coordination of forces would likely occur through the JSD's joint operations command center in Beijing (which Xi Jinping nominally directs as "commander-in-chief").<sup>119</sup> Xi's role would likely be to ensure buy-in for critical decisions from the Politburo Standing Committee, although his stature in the system would give him greater authority than his two predecessors to propose and implement strategic decisions based on advice from his key military advisers.<sup>120</sup> That modus operandi would accord with the desire by top officials to tightly

**Figure 2. Notional PLA Command and Control for a Taiwan Conflict**



Key: solid line = command relationship; dotted line = coordination relationship

control the pace, scope, and intensity of the war given the enormous political and strategic stakes involved. Although this argument is largely inferential, it is notable that at least in one case, the JSD appears to have directly led a Taiwan-focused exercise involving all five TCs.<sup>121</sup>

Centralized control over operational decisions, however, would incur various risks. One is that the need to secure higher level authorization for battlefield maneuvers could create delays and allow China's adversaries to seize the initiative in a rapidly unfolding crisis. Another risk is that the JSD, focused on managing operational details in the main strategic direction, might not have the capacity to supervise an escalating conflict in another theater if deterrence were to fail or to properly analyze the tradeoffs of redeploying forces. Such a system would also place a heavy emphasis on the JSD's ability to maintain reliable communications with forces at the theater level and below. The PLA has attempted to address this dilemma by fielding "robust, redundant communications networks to improve commanders' situational awareness," but any disruptions in a centralized system could paralyze forces at lower levels.<sup>122</sup>

### **Logistics**

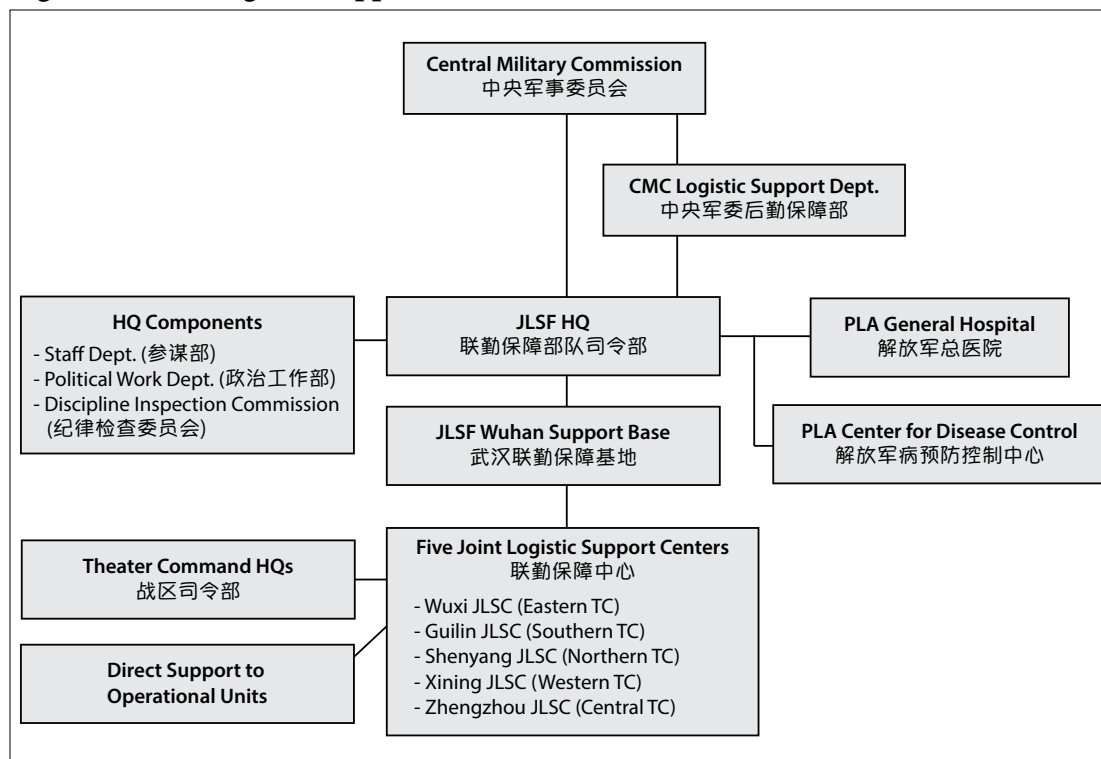
While many smaller contingencies could be handled by forces already based in the TCs, there are some situations in which the PLA would need to redeploy troops, ammunition, equipment, and other scarce resources. In an island landing, for instance, some amphibious or airborne units might need to be relocated to the Eastern TC from adjacent theaters. Anticipating potential chain reactions, some PLA forces might also be redeployed at the outset of a Taiwan conflict to increase deterrence of other regional antagonists.<sup>123</sup> For instance, Beijing might augment forces in the Southern, Western, and Northern TCs with active army and air force units under the Central TC (one of whose roles is to serve as a strategic reserve), in addition to mobilizing reserve and militia units.<sup>124</sup> Based on these kinds of scenarios, Chinese strategists highlight the need for forces to be able to quickly pivot to different "strategic directions."<sup>125</sup>

China's logistics system is relatively well postured to meet these objectives. One advantage is the ability to rely on civilian resources to transport and sustain forces. PLA troops moving among theaters would rely on interior lines, including national highways and rail systems, as well as domestic airspace (though these advantages would disappear for units operating far beyond China's coasts).<sup>126</sup> Regulations such as the 2016 National Defense Transportation Law mandate the construction of civilian transportation infrastructure to military standards, which facilitates the reallocation of PLA personnel and materiel among theaters.<sup>127</sup> New procedures for outsourcing the procurement of military supplies to civilian firms were also designed, helping to ease the burden of resupplying troops in distant field locations.<sup>128</sup>

Recent organizational reforms also remove bureaucratic impediments to the redeployment of critical resources. Prior to 2016, the logistics system was fragmented between the former General Logistics Department and the MRs, which led to poor standardization and an overly complicated system for inter-theater transfers, but Xi-era reforms have created a more centralized system under the Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF) (figure 3).<sup>129</sup> This force oversees five joint logistics support centers, each based in a different TC, which in turn manage mobile logistics brigades and fixed sites such as warehouses, refueling stations, and hospitals. During a crisis, the JLSF—likely under the JSD’s authority—would be able to reposition assets according to operational needs. This system operated relatively smoothly during the 2020 Wuhan coronavirus crisis, in which the JLSF mobilized more than 4,000 medics and thousands of units of critical medical supplies drawn from all five support centers.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, that experience likely resulted in lessons learned that could be employed during larger contingencies.

Nevertheless, several weaknesses could constrain PLA logistics during a conflict. First is a strategic airlift deficit. China’s current inventory consists of only 20 Russian-made IL-76 heavy

**Figure 3. Joint Logistic Support Force Structure**



Source: Joel Wuthnow, “Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics,” *Jamestown China Brief* 20, no. 7 (April 13, 2020).

transports and a dozen indigenous Y-20s, supported by 50 smaller Y-8s.<sup>131</sup> Those numbers fall far short of what would be required to move forces within and among theaters during a war, though Y-20 production in the coming years will reduce that challenge.<sup>132</sup> Second is the PLA's potential overreliance on information technology, such as GPS and computerized inventorying, to track supplies across a distributed network. While these systems are designed to enable "precision" logistics across long distances, they could become a vulnerability if adversaries are able to disrupt them.<sup>133</sup> Third are indications that—despite the newly centralized system—joint logistics forces could still be placed under direct TC control during wartime.<sup>134</sup> This would promote unity of command at the theater level but could complicate the transfer of resources among theaters if TC commanders argue against such decisions.

### **Human Capital**

The PLA has been working to improve the quality of its personnel through a variety of recent reforms, which will support an improving capability to operate both within and across theaters.<sup>135</sup> Chinese leaders perceive the lack of PLA combat experience as a comparative disadvantage, but are trying to bridge this gap through "combat-realistic" training, advanced wargames and simulations, more combat-oriented professional military education curricula, and parceling out experience to rising officers in real-world situations such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, UN peacekeeping operations, and anti-piracy missions.<sup>136</sup> Xi-era reforms have also led to the creation of a CMC Training and Management Department that establishes joint training standards,<sup>137</sup> conducts inspections of field exercises, and supervises the professional military education system.<sup>138</sup>

Reforms have been particularly effective in improving readiness within the theaters.<sup>139</sup> Under a streamlined set of responsibilities focused on joint forces, the TCs oversee joint training and have developed programs for cultivating joint staff officers (who, among other tasks, are responsible for operating the joint operations command centers).<sup>140</sup> Regular joint training, including "blue force" confrontation exercises and joint exercises within each of the TCs tailored to region-specific contingencies, helps increase confidence and readiness, though recent exercises have typically not been held above the brigade level.<sup>141</sup>

Improvements in PLA training and education could also help promote mobility and interoperability across theater boundaries. Cross-theater exercises held since 2009 have involved not only the ground forces, but also navy, marine corps, airborne, and other forces (and sometimes units from multiple services), and have required commanders to resolve problems such as deploying across long distances, sustaining troops far away from their home bases, coordinating



with units in different theaters, and responding to new situations.<sup>142</sup> These exercises, along with those held within the theater, have likely helped to reduce the PLA's self-assessed shortage of competent officers.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, reforms to the professional military education system that bring "joint" education to more junior officers may help to establish a common framework for planning and conducting joint operations, which would likewise help to increase interoperability in a major conflict.<sup>144</sup>

A continuing weakness is the lack of a rotational assignment system. PLA officers spend most of their careers in a single theater and do not rotate until a relatively senior level. The tradeoff is that officers gain a detailed understanding of problems within their specific regions, but have limited exposure to other challenges, which reduces their ability to quickly adapt to new situations. The personnel system also likely exacerbates problems associated with the PLA's convoluted command structure for a multitheater war, since officers in the JSD, Eastern TC, and other commands might lack strong personal relationships and an understanding of each other's responsibilities and personal strengths and weaknesses, which could frustrate quick decision-making and execution.<sup>145</sup> A rotation system has been discussed among Chinese strategists for several years but has not been implemented.<sup>146</sup> Table 4 provides a summary of the findings in the section above.

## **Political Confidence**

A logical consequence of a PLA better able to manage a Taiwan conflict while fulfilling other missions is greater confidence on the part of Chinese leaders that the system will perform as intended during wartime. Nevertheless, a key intervening variable is the nature of the relationship between the CMC chairmen and their military advisers. All of China's civilian leaders since Deng Xiaoping have used strategies such as personnel appointments and control over the budget to cultivate authority within the military.<sup>147</sup> However, the results have varied. Hu Jintao, in particular, is widely regarded as a weak leader (a problem compounded by Jiang's continued presence as CMC chairman for 2 years following Hu's arrival as party general secretary). Hu also presided over a military that was increasingly corrupt, with some of the most serious allegations levied against CMC vice chairmen appointed by Jiang, and yet had little ability to intervene.<sup>148</sup> Hu's confidence in his military advisers was thus likely diminished by his inability to rein in the PLA bureaucracy.

Under Xi Jinping, the balance of power has shifted in favor of the CMC chairman. Xi has carefully cultivated an image of a powerful military leader, one example being his campaign to restore the "CMC chairman responsibility system."<sup>149</sup> He has also used various methods to

**Table 4. Summary of Assessment**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Force Planning Goal</b>	<b>PLA Strengths</b>	<b>PLA Weaknesses</b>
Force Development	Capabilities are generated according to operational priorities	National resourcing process based on Five-Year plans	Tendency to avoid hard choices; interservice and theater rivalries
Force Distribution	Forces are distributed according to theater requirements	Well-distributed combat forces opposite Taiwan and in other theater commands; national assets that can support operations in multiple regions	Limited ability to prosecute major overseas conflict (e.g., disruption of energy supplies)
Command and Control	National command can oversee multitheater operations	Theater commanders with authority over conventional forces in their regions	Convoluting system for conducting multitheater operations/large contingency; excessive centralization; reliance on command and control networks
Logistics	Forces can be readily deployed and sustained in other theaters	Civil-military cooperation; revised joint logistics structure empowers central authorities	Limited strategic airlift; reliance on IT networks; unclear theater command responsibilities in wartime
Human Capital	Key personnel are able to respond to new situations	Cross-theater exercises and training reforms promote proficiency and readiness	Lack of a rotational assignment system leads to myopia

increase his leverage, including appointments of key commanders, the “stick” of the anti-corruption campaign, personal involvement in key decisions, structural changes that broke up fiefdoms such as the former general departments, and other factors.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Xi has installed trusted agents within the CMC General Office, which enhances his ability to control the bureaucracy.<sup>151</sup>

These factors would likely increase Xi's confidence in a military assessment that China could withstand other national security threats during a Taiwan conflict (assuming that was the assessment presented to him by his military advisers).

Nevertheless, having served as CMC vice chairman for 2 years under Hu, Xi is familiar with the PLA's pattern of obfuscation about its own activities (such as the scale of corruption).<sup>152</sup> He has also received bad advice from the military on occasion, such as the PLA Air Force's view that there would not be much negative international reaction to establishing an Air Defense Identification Zone covering the East China Sea. Thus, at least a latent distrust likely remains between Xi and his military advisers, which could become a weakness prior to and during a conflict. For instance, if Xi were to receive evidence that particular weapons or capabilities are not working as intended, or if he learns about problems related to the readiness of specific units or the loyalty of key personnel, he might decide to delay or shelve a decision to use force until the problem can be thoroughly investigated. This effect is likely to be most pronounced in cases where that information is gained outside of normal channels and despite reassuring military claims to the contrary because Xi might wonder what else the PLA might be concealing about its vulnerabilities. As discussed below, these and other weaknesses in the Chinese system may be exploited by Washington and Taipei to complicate Chinese decisionmaking and operations.

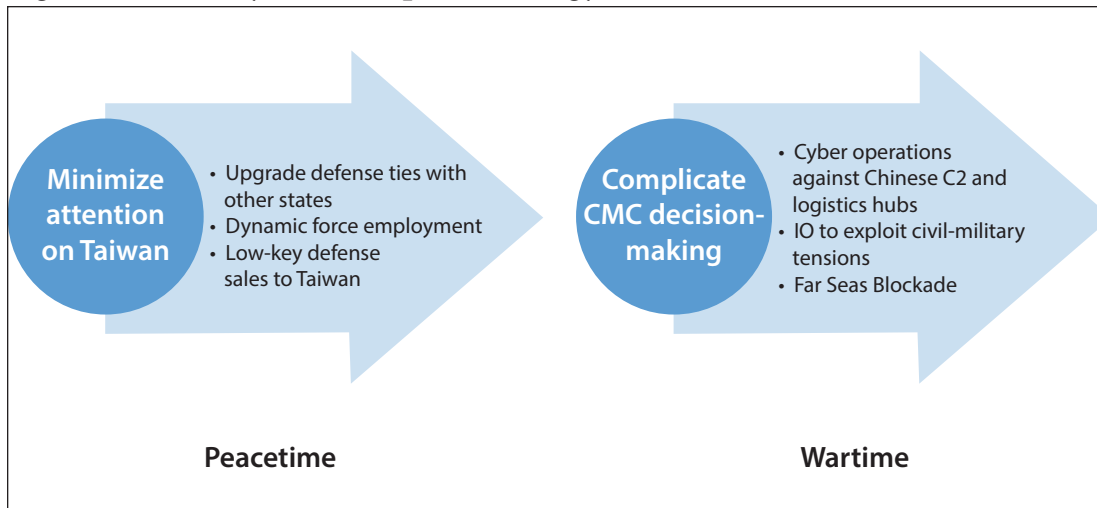
### **Implications for U.S. Defense Strategy**

Most U.S. discussions on Taiwan's defense focus on two areas: the specific equipment, training, and doctrine that Taiwan needs to bolster its defenses, and the ways in which U.S. forces can successfully continue to operate in an antiaccess/area-denial environment. However, concepts of defending Taiwan can also be discussed context of China's limited ability to handle multiple problems. The following sections explain how the United States may leverage that vulnerability to assist Taiwan by forcing Chinese strategists to overextend their resources across multiple problems in peacetime and by complicating the PLA's ability to handle multiple contingencies in wartime (figure 4).

### **Aggravating China's Dilemma During Peacetime**

A useful peacetime strategy to exploit the weaknesses identified above would minimize the PLA's ability to focus on the main strategic direction by maximizing operational problems in other theaters. This approach would compound the fundamental dilemma facing Chinese planners—deciding how much to focus on Taiwan versus other missions—while leveraging weaknesses in the PLA's resourcing system. In particular, the strategy would aim to reduce the

**Figure 4. Summary of the Proposed Strategy**



influence of the ground forces and the Eastern TC, which are the actors most invested in preparing for the PLA’s primary contingency, and play to a decisionmaking system in which the most convenient solution is often to divide up the pie with as many winners as possible.<sup>153</sup> Key components of this strategy would include continuing to strengthen U.S. defense relations with China’s neighbors, conducting dynamic U.S. military operations across the region, and maintaining a focus on U.S. defense cooperation with Taiwan.

*Stronger U.S. Defense Relations in Other Theaters*

Both the Obama administration’s “rebalance to Asia” and the current Indo-Pacific strategy have focused strongly on improving ties with a range of allies and partners around China’s borders.<sup>154</sup> That focus has included regular high-level visits to the Pacific theater, high-end combined exercises, new basing and access agreements, and arms sales. From the perspective of defending Taiwan, a virtue of these activities and operations is drawing the PLA’s resources to other problems (as referenced in Chinese discussions on the need to be prepared for conflict in “all” strategic directions, and not overly focused on a single contingency). However, sustaining that effect in light of Chinese regional countermoves, such as through the Belt and Road Initiative, requires further strengthening of relations with states at various points along China’s periphery.

In Southeast Asia, the United States should maintain a robust forward presence; strengthen alliances with the Philippines and Thailand; conduct combined exercises in the South China Sea, including combat drills with Japan, India, and Australia;<sup>155</sup> and assist China’s other rivals

(including Vietnam) to acquire advanced systems such as short-range anti-ship missiles and integrated air defenses, which would stress China's coercive capabilities.<sup>156</sup> These systems should be coordinated with higher end U.S. capabilities, such as long-range sensors and cyber weapons.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, U.S. strategic communications should find ways to effectively communicate these developments to Chinese military observers. Such activities would sustain Chinese attention on problems in the South China Sea, serve as an argument for additional resources for the navy and the Southern TC, and justify the acquisition of equipment less critical for cross-strait operations.<sup>158</sup>

U.S. leaders should also emphasize stronger defense partnerships with states along China's northern and western borders. A resumption of major U.S.–Republic of Korea exercises and other alliance upgrades, for instance, will draw China's attention to Korean Peninsula contingencies and provide a resourcing argument for the Northern TC.<sup>159</sup> Increasing U.S. defense cooperation with India, which some Chinese strategists portray as a major “secondary strategic direction,” would play into Chinese concerns about the challenges a rising India may pose to China's claims in the Himalayas and Chinese shipping in the Indian Ocean, arguments the Western TC and the navy could use to lobby for resources.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, greater cooperation with India and other regional powers at the trilateral level and through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue framework would aggravate Chinese concerns about an “Asian NATO” taking shape around China's borders.<sup>161</sup> The downside is that these activities will invite Chinese countermeasures, but a less recognized benefit is that they reduce the PLA's ability to focus on the main strategic direction.

This part of the strategy does *not* imply that Washington should encourage other states to escalate their territorial disputes with China or become more actively involved in those conflicts. It also does not support attempts to arm Chinese dissident groups, such as in Xinjiang or Tibet. One of the primary reasons why China has avoided the use of force on Taiwan thus far has been the calculation that a conflict involving the United States would impose unacceptable costs on China's economic development. A more brazen U.S. approach could undermine Chinese elites who prioritize those economic ties and lend credence to those who advocate a “decoupling” of the relationship to reduce Chinese dependence on U.S. imports and technology (voices that are already empowered as the trade war heats up). While the United States should maintain a credible deterrent posture and assist states seeking to resist Chinese coercion, Washington should also ensure that Sino-U.S. relations do not fall to such a low level that the economic constraints on the use of force become weakened.<sup>162</sup>

### *Dynamic U.S. Military Operations*

Another leg of the strategy involves refining the concept of “dynamic force employment” championed by former defense secretary James Mattis, which prioritizes operations that are hard to predict, showcase maneuverability and flexibility, and help address particular strategic challenges. Such operations should demonstrate U.S. capabilities and resolve to operate in the maritime commons and airspace across China’s littorals, leading the PLA to question its own ability to respond.<sup>163</sup> This would be the reverse of George Kennan’s more reactive containment strategy—the U.S. military, in a sense, would flex its muscles proactively at a “series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” forcing the PLA to be on high alert in multiple directions.<sup>164</sup> One example is exercising unscheduled carrier operations in the Yellow and East and South China seas, paralleling recent operations around Russia’s periphery.<sup>165</sup> Such operations would likewise complicate the problems facing Chinese planners and serve as a resourcing argument for PLA actors less central to a Taiwan campaign.

### *Focused U.S.-Taiwan Cooperation*

A visible increase in U.S.-Taiwan defense relations, such as those prescribed in recent U.S. legislation, would represent a strong response to recent patterns of Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. However, U.S. officials also need to consider that bold gestures would run the risk of overshadowing other problems in China’s security environment, provide a powerful funding argument for the Eastern TC, and make it easier for CMC leaders to justify reducing resources allocated to other theaters. To resolve this dilemma, U.S. military engagements with Taiwan should remain focused on areas most critical to Taiwan’s defense. This implies caution in activities such as high-level U.S. visits to Taiwan and the approval of the sale of high-profile weapons but supports the provision of low-profile assets, such as coastal defense cruise missiles and sea mines. Continuing to focus on such “asymmetric and innovative” areas would be consistent with Taiwan’s current military strategy and would complicate the PLA’s assessments of its prospects in a future amphibious operation against Taiwan, while avoiding a sharp increase in Chinese attention to cross-Strait contingencies.<sup>166</sup>

### **Complicating Chinese Decisionmaking in a Conflict**

A tenet in U.S. doctrine is frustrating adversary decisionmaking by overwhelming its capacity to handle multiple problems. The concept is not particularly new: the 2006 U.S. concept for major combat operations stated that joint forces will achieve success when “operational movement and maneuver . . . occur in a distributed manner to create continuous pressure and

multiple dilemmas that enemy leaders find hard to combat.”<sup>167</sup> Signaling its currency in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, a 2018 article co-authored by the U.S. Pacific Air Forces commander explains that the U.S. military can shape opponent decisions by “rapidly presenting the adversary with multiple dilemmas, degrading adversary leadership’s sense of control,” and “enhancing the complexity of the situation, instilling doubt in the adversary leadership’s mind of their own capabilities.”<sup>168</sup> Similar views are also enshrined in the U.S. Army’s concept of multidomain operations and the Air Force’s future operating concept.<sup>169</sup>

If deterrence fails, several PLA weaknesses could be exploited to present the CMC with multiple dilemmas in the early phases of a conflict. These options are primarily focused on Phase 2 (“seize the initiative”) in the U.S. planning construct, though some may also be applicable to Phase 3 (“dominate”). The options laid out below—including targeting the PLA’s command and control and logistics networks, information operations that aggravate civil-military distrust, precision strikes from multiple directions, and a “far seas” blockade—aim to exploit vulnerabilities in China’s ability to coordinate large-scale operations and shift resources among theaters, while trading on human capital deficiencies and other weaknesses. Moreover, these options attempt to follow the 2018 National Defense Strategy’s prescription of “expanding the competitive space, seizing the initiative where we possess advantages and they lack strength.”<sup>170</sup>

#### *Attacks on Critical Networks*

As discussed above, the JSD would likely supervise and potentially even micromanage a wide range of forces during wartime. Unity of command could thus become a key center of gravity that U.S. forces could target in the early stages of a Taiwan conflict.<sup>171</sup> Given that the PLA has likely already built in redundancies to address this problem, U.S. planners should consider how a range of operations could disrupt the links between different parts of the system, especially between the CMC and operational units. This could be accomplished through offensive cyber operations that disable entire networks or by creating enough doubts about the authenticity or accuracy of information that units hesitate to act<sup>172</sup> or via electronic attacks that aim to degrade adversary communications systems.<sup>173</sup> Even temporary confusion could paralyze Chinese operations and create opportunities for U.S. forces to seize the initiative. This approach would pit a Chinese deficiency (excessive centralization) against a U.S. strength (flexibility).<sup>174</sup>

Similar operations could target the PLA’s logistics system. During a conflict, the JLSF would supervise supply centers and their subordinate units, relying on *Beidou* satellites and computerized networks and databases to keep track of resources. Those systems have been tested in exercises and real-world events such as the 2020 coronavirus response, but not against

state adversaries. Cyber operations that exploit U.S. technical advantages to paralyze those systems or introduce misinformation about the whereabouts of critical resources could be the Achilles' heel of China's "informatized" logistics system, hampering the flow of resources both within and among theaters.<sup>175</sup> The PLA may be able to repair those networks or find low-tech workarounds, but the goal would be to introduce enough chaos to delay China's execution of an amphibious campaign or provide reinforcements during major combat operations.

### *Information Operations*

During the opening moves of a conflict, evidence that PLA systems are not working as intended could prompt Xi and other civilians to raise the question, "What else are they hiding"? Both of the options listed above could achieve this effect: a sudden disruption to the PLA's command and control or logistics networks—combined with information operations that expose China's senior civilians to those effects (for example, via well-timed media leaks or revelations through China's civilian intelligence system)—could raise questions about the PLA's ability to achieve its objectives and cause a delay as the CMC investigates the problem. Moreover, misinformation that points to units acting without proper authorization or commanders failing to following orders might also be sufficient to prompt a delay even if it is ultimately discounted. In a competitive environment where China is quickly making progress in the information domain, the effectiveness of these approaches would rest on U.S. investments in psychological warfare and related disciplines.<sup>176</sup>

### *Multidirectional Precision Strikes*

The effectiveness of missile strikes against Chinese targets in the early phase of a cross-strait war—which has been discussed in U.S. concepts of "AirSea Battle"—could be increased by strikes launched from multiple directions.<sup>177</sup> These include U.S. naval and air platforms operating in the East and South China seas, as well as assets located deeper in the Western Pacific. Such distributed operations would leverage U.S. strengths (jointness and coordination of widely dispersed forces) against seams and weaknesses in China's wartime command structure, which might lack the capacity to quickly coordinate defenses and responses, and human capital problems (for example, limited relationships between personnel at different echelons). Moreover, the effectiveness of these strikes might be increased if they target critical command nodes and frontline logistics hubs, which might (respectively) paralyze PLA battlefield decisionmaking and force time-consuming redeployments.



### *A “Far Seas” Blockade*

Another option would be threatening or implementing a “far seas” blockade of Chinese energy imports at the outset of a conflict (for example, as a counter to China’s declaration of a maritime exclusion zone around Taiwan). This would leverage the PLA’s weak force posture beyond Asia, difficulties in deploying naval assets through vulnerable chokepoints,<sup>178</sup> and limited command and control and logistics support for out-of-area operations, while playing to U.S. naval strengths in the maritime chokepoints beyond the Second Island Chain.<sup>179</sup> The risks of a blockade would include significant costs to the U.S. economy and Chinese retaliation, but the reward could be presenting the CMC with an unexpected challenge at a critical point in a Taiwan campaign, which may lead Beijing to delay its timeline. A more risk-acceptant approach would combine a maritime blockade with conventional precision strikes against China’s overland oil and natural gas pipelines, which would raise serious questions about the PLA’s ability to sustain a long campaign.<sup>180</sup>

A less promising application of the concept of creating multiple dilemmas would entail feints at other points along China’s periphery designed to distract CMC decisionmakers and force the PLA to deviate from its timeline. Operations on land would require the consent of third countries, which would likely want to avoid being drawn into a U.S.-China conflict. Unanticipated maneuvers in the maritime commons near China’s coasts would not suffer that constraint and might require some attention from CMC officials. However, even these operations would likely have limited utility compared to the other options because Chinese planners anticipate that the United States will seek to create trouble in other theaters during a war with Taiwan and have designed a theater system that is relatively well structured to handle those possibilities. Some maneuvers might also fail to register in a system intensely focused on the main strategic direction. This finding is consistent with the independent National Defense Strategy Commission, which argued that “it seems unlikely that the United States could force its adversary to back down by applying pressure—military or otherwise—in secondary areas.”<sup>181</sup>

## **Conclusion**

At the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping called on the armed forces to become “world-class forces” by the middle of the century.<sup>182</sup> While Xi did not explain what exactly it means to be “world-class,” one measure is the PLA’s ability to effectively handle the full range of national security obligations it is tasked with performing.<sup>183</sup> This means developing sufficient combat power to deter de jure Taiwan independence and, if necessary, achieve unification through a war with Taiwan and the United States, while also maintaining domestic

stability, deterring other rivals, and protecting overseas interests. As illustrated through the lens of Chinese military strategy, a country's ability to balance operational requirements in different theaters requires an analysis of several variables, including force development, force distribution, command and control, logistics, and human capital. A broad assessment is needed because these factors are interdependent: the optimal distribution of combat forces depends on the quality of the strategic planning process, for instance, while the ability of forces to quickly redeploy would be of limited value if commanders are not properly trained to handle new situations.

Beyond the case of China, such an approach is also applicable to other large states facing adversaries in different theaters. One example is India, which needs to maintain sufficient troop strength in Kashmir to deter Pakistan, defend against terrorist attacks from groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, and deter Chinese incursions in the Himalayas. In recent years, New Delhi has also worried about China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the prospects of a two-front conflict involving both China and Pakistan.<sup>184</sup> However, several attributes of the Indian system could hinder India's ability to juggle these requirements, including the lack of a joint command structure (which reflects an overabundance of power of the services and the failure of civilians to institute reforms),<sup>185</sup> army dominance, and budgeting and procurement shortcomings that have "a severe impact on balanced capacity building in the armed forces."<sup>186</sup>

While China and India are focused on regional threats, U.S. forces must prepare for conflicts on a global scale.<sup>187</sup> A holistic approach would stress advantages such as the versatility of U.S. commanders, forces that could be rapidly deployed or that do not depend on geographical boundaries (such as global strike, cyber assets, and special operations forces) and a distribution of combat forces that aligns with strategic and operational priorities in key regions.<sup>188</sup> However, weaknesses include the regionally defined system of combatant commands, which could limit coordinated responses to problems that bleed across theater boundaries,<sup>189</sup> and a Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution system in which "civilian planning guidance to the services is often issued very late and, as a result, becomes largely irrelevant."<sup>190</sup> Absent an effective set of interlocking systems, U.S. "globally integrated operations" could be hamstrung.

A holistic approach also points to productive questions for assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the major militaries. China's military has made important progress under Xi, notably contrasting with India's failure to reform. Russia has adapted its military through a set of recent changes closely paralleling those pursued by Xi, which will help it defend its long borders, but Moscow faces demographic and institutional challenges that do not appear as severe

in China.<sup>191</sup> By contrast, the U.S. military retains some key advantages over the PLA, including a proven ability to operate along exterior lines, a mission command philosophy that promotes operations in a communications-degraded environment, and civil-military relations that tend to promote a high level of civilian trust (even if military flaws might be more apparent to decisionmakers due to a free press, congressional oversight, and other factors). How well the United States can compete with China in the military sphere will thus depend less on its success in dazzling Beijing with unpredictable operations and more on its ability to retain and strengthen those core comparative advantages.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, “China’s Xi Threatens Taiwan with Force but Also Seeks Peaceful ‘Reunification,’” Reuters, January 1, 2019, available at <[www.reuters.com/article/us-china-taiwan/chinas-xi-threatens-taiwan-with-force-but-also-seeks-peaceful-reunification-idUSKCN1OW04K](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-taiwan/chinas-xi-threatens-taiwan-with-force-but-also-seeks-peaceful-reunification-idUSKCN1OW04K)>.

<sup>2</sup> *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Recent People’s Liberation Army (PLA) operations, including amphibious assault exercises and bomber flights around the island, have improved readiness and signaled resolve. See, respectively, James E. Fannell, “Asia Rising: China’s Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure,” *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 1 (2019), 8; Derek Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights: Drivers and Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 20–24.

<sup>4</sup> As J. Michael Cole notes, the Tsai Ing-wen administration has lowered the barriers to an independence referendum but “strategically left out plebiscites on constitutional change,” including on sovereignty issues. See J. Michael Cole, “Now Is Not the Time for a Referendum of Taiwanese Independence,” *The National Interest*, February 19, 2019, available at <<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/now-not-time-referendum-taiwanese-independence-45037>>.

<sup>5</sup> This problem for Beijing is manifested most recently in Tsai’s opposition to the “1992 Consensus,” in which both sides reputedly agreed to support “one China” but with differing interpretations of what that entails; the longer term problem is a fundamental lack of political appetite in Taiwan for “unification.” Regarding terminology, CCP authorities use the term *reunification* while the term *unification* is standard in Taiwan.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of recent cross-Taiwan Strait dynamics, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Report to Congress*, 116<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (2019), 449–458. For an excellent analysis of longer term trends in cross-strait relations, and their implications for stability, see Scott L. Kastner, “Is the Taiwan Strait Still a Flash Point? Rethinking the Prospects for Armed Conflict Between China and Taiwan,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/2016), 54–92.

<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019), 95.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000), 57–69; Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan’s Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2017); Michael J. Lostumbo et al., *Air Defense Options for Taiwan: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Operational Benefits* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 202–206; Bernard D. Cole, “The Military Instrument of Statecraft at Sea: Naval Options in an Escalatory Scenario Involving Taiwan, 2007–2016,” in *Assessing the Threat: The Chinese Military and Taiwan’s Security*, ed. Michael D. Swaine et al. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 187–189.

<sup>9</sup> However, development of the larger *Yuzhao*-class amphibious transport docks could help bridge this gap. See Fannell, “Asia Rising: China’s Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure,” 20.

<sup>10</sup> The Department of Defense’s annual reports to Congress on security developments involving China typically contain detailed information on the balance of Chinese and Taiwanese forces. For

good cross-strait balance of forces analysis in the security studies literature, see O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan"; Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*; Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 202–206; Lostumbo et al., *Air Defense Options for Taiwan*, 1–22; and Michael A. Glosny, "Strangulation from the Sea? A PRC Submarine Blockade of Taiwan," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004), 125–160. For analysis of PLA counterintervention doctrine and capabilities, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001), 21–34; Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); Toshi Yoshihara, "Chinese Missile Strategy and the U.S. Naval Presence in Japan," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 3 (2010), 1–24; Michael McDevitt, "The PLA Navy's Antiaccess Role in a Taiwan Contingency," in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2011), 191–214; M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey, "Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-Intervention," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2015), 171–187; Timothy Heath and Andrew S. Erickson, "Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?" *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2015), 147–152; Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016), 7–48.

<sup>11</sup> For good overviews on China's multifaceted regional security challenges, see Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). On China's expanding global interests, see Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift Away from Non-Interference* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014); Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> This section draws in particular from a variety of declassified U.S. intelligence assessments on Soviet military doctrine and capabilities. Particularly useful is a declassified 1982 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate that provides a detailed look at Soviet plans for operations on multiple fronts. See *Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War*, National Intelligence Estimate (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, June 1985, declassified October 1999).

<sup>13</sup> David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 132. For an excellent discussion of Chinese military strategy writ large, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). An abbreviated version of Fravel's argument is found in M. Taylor Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity: Explaining China's Changes in Military Strategy," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (Winter 2017/2018), 37–83.

<sup>14</sup> Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity," 73–74. The term *main strategic direction* is part of the larger "strategic direction" concept in Chinese military theory. The PLA's dictionary defines the term as "directions of action for the military to implement strategic tasks." *PLA Dictionary* [中国人民解放军军语] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2011), 55–56. In addition, the *PLA Encyclopedia* (Beijing:

Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, July 2007) explains that “strategic directions point toward strategic targets, possess a certain depth and breadth, and . . . include both the ground and its associated air space, maritime space, and outer space.” See Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, “Coming to a (New) Theater Near You: Command, Control, and Forces,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 251.

<sup>15</sup> Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy,” 92. Senior Colonel Ouyang Wei of China’s National Defense University similarly describes the main strategic direction in these terms: “If [our] military strategy has determined the main strategic direction, it usually is necessary to deploy fairly strong military strengths strategically, striving to achieve superiority along this direction, to give the primary operational units a fairly small [that is, well-defined] area for operations, and to carry out relatively complete battlefield preparations and strategic prepositioning, in order to facilitate the completion of the corresponding missions [that is, tasks].” Ouyang Wei, *On Strategic Disposition* [战略部署论] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2010), 208. See also Mark Cozad, “The PLA and Contingency Planning,” in *The People’s Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015), 18–21.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis J. Blasko notes that the PLA also identified a series of “important strategic directions” [zhongyao zhanlüe fangxiang, 重要战略方向] in the Northwest, Southwest, and Korean Peninsula. Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 82.

<sup>17</sup> The table is drawn from an article by two historians at the PLA Academy of Military Sciences. The periodization and substance differ somewhat from Fravel’s assessment, which argues that the main strategic direction was defined as part of three Cold War–era military strategies: the Northeast (1956 and 1960) and the North-Central (1977). Fravel, “Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity,” 50.

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Chinese planners identified a Soviet invasion in the “three northerns” [sanbei, 三北]—Northeast, North, and Northwest—as the primary warfighting scenario from the late 1960s through the end of the Cold War. See Yuan Dejin and Guo Zhigang, “Mao Zedong and the Development and Adjustment of the Main Strategic Directions of New China” [毛泽东与新中国主要战略方向的确定和调整], *Military History* [军事历史] 5 (2009), 30–34.

<sup>19</sup> T.Y. Wang, “Taiwan’s Foreign Relations Under Lee Teng-hui’s Rule, 1988–2000,” *American Asian Review* 20, no. 1 (2002), 71–106.

<sup>20</sup> Jiang Zemin, “The International Situation and Military Strategic Guidelines” [国际形势和军事战略方针], *Jiang Zemin’s Collected Works, Volume 1* [江泽民文选第一卷], January 13, 1993, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64185/180137/10818700.html#>>.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview, see Robert S. Ross, “The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000), 87–123.

<sup>22</sup> David E. Sanger, “U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2001/04/26/world/us-would-defend-taiwan-bush-says.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/26/world/us-would-defend-taiwan-bush-says.html)>.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, the 2010 white paper noted “significant and positive progress in cross-strait relations,” but argued that “the ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist force and its activities are still the biggest obstacle and threat to the peaceful development of cross-strait relations” and asserted that “the United States, in defiance of the three Sino-U.S. joint communiqués, continues to sell weapons to

Taiwan, severely impeding Sino-U.S. relations and impairing the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations.” See “The Security Situation,” in *China’s National Defense in 2010* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, March 31, 2010), available at <[www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2011-03/31/content\\_22263403.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2011-03/31/content_22263403.htm)>.

<sup>24</sup> Application of the phrase *core interests* [*hexin liyi*, 核心利益] to Taiwan (and Tibet and Xinjiang) notably contrasted with Chinese officials’ hesitance to apply that language to territorial disputes in the South and East China seas during the same timeframe, illustrating the critical importance of Taiwan to the Party. Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior—Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” *China Leadership Monitor* 34 (2011), 7–11.

<sup>25</sup> The most direct evidence is the continuing use of the terminology in authoritative PLA media reports. Recent *Jiefangjun Bao* articles that reference the main strategic direction in the context of the Eastern Theater Command (TC) (responsible for Taiwan) suggests that the main strategic direction remains focused on the Taiwan Strait. For instance, a December 2016 article praised the Eastern TC for effective financial management, which supports the operational requirements of the “joint operational command organ for the main strategic direction,” while a September 2017 article notes that the Eastern TC’s duties include “developing joint operational plans, carrying out joint campaign command exercises, and defending stability in the main strategic direction.” See, respectively, Liu Qiang and Shu Zongjian, “The Eastern Theater Command Firmly Establishes Combat Use Financial Guide to Increase Effectiveness of Expenses, Use Every Penny to Raise Combat Power” [东部战区牢固确立为战用财导向提升经费使用效益 把每一分钱花在提升战斗力上], *Jiefangjun Bao* [解放军报], December 17, 2016, 3; Dai Feng, “Every Day Is Going All Out” [每一天都在全力以赴], *Jiefangjun Bao* [解放军报], September 21, 2017, available at <[www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2017-09/21/content\\_188520.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2017-09/21/content_188520.htm)>.

<sup>26</sup> “Wang Hongguang Discusses the Two Sessions: Resolutely Regard the East China Sea as Our Main Strategic Direction” [王洪光谈两会：要坚决把东海作为主要战略方向], *Sohu Military* [搜狐军事], March 2, 2016, available at <<http://mil.sohu.com/20160302/n439166167.shtml>>. Lieutenant General Wang served as deputy commander of the Nanjing Military Region, opposite Taiwan, from 2005–2012. According to Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, in October 2019, 1.4 percent of Taiwanese residents supported “unification now,” while a further 8.9 percent supported “status quo now, unification later.” These figures have not changed much over the last decade. See “Public’s View on Cross-Strait Relations in the Republic of China,” Mainland Affairs Council, October 24, 2019, available at <[www.mac.gov.tw/en/cp.aspx?n=40448CF4A8C0FFDD](http://www.mac.gov.tw/en/cp.aspx?n=40448CF4A8C0FFDD)>.

<sup>27</sup> For one conception of how these types of operations could unfold, see Zhang Yuliang, ed., *Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), 292–330.

<sup>28</sup> On the expansion of PLA amphibious exercises, see Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 185–190.

<sup>29</sup> Specifically, PLA doctrine encouraged “key point strikes” [*zhongdian daji*, 重点打击] on U.S. bases in the Western Pacific. For instance, a 2009 PLA Air Force volume enjoins the service to be able to “carry out lethal damage to core enemy targets” out to the Second Island Chain, which includes Guam. Zhu Hui, ed., *Theory of Strategic Air Force* [战略空军论] (Beijing: Blue Sky Press, 2009), 76. See n10 for Western assessments.

<sup>30</sup> These incidents, which centered on local grievances ranging from labor disputes to environmental concerns, topped 58,000 in 2003. Thomas Lum, *Social Unrest in China*, RL33416 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 8, 2006), 1–2.

<sup>31</sup> On PLA/People's Armed Police (PAP) roles in domestic counterterrorism, see Murray Scot Tanner, *China's Response to Terrorism*, with James Bellacqua (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016), 69–75.

<sup>32</sup> On PLA planning for a Korean contingency, see Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?” *International Security* 43, no. 2 (2018), 84–116. On Himalayan contingencies, see Iskander Rehman, “A Himalayan Challenge: India's Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces Along the Sino-Indian Border,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 1 (2017), 110–112.

<sup>33</sup> On protecting China's coastal regions, one PLA source notes that “The main direction we may face in war is the oceans in the east and south. . . . The eastern and southern littoral areas are an area concentrated with China's population, cities, industries, transportation, and trade; and [China's] core areas, including the capital, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Pearl River Delta, are all in this area, which is actually where the country's strategic center of gravity lies. Meanwhile, this area faces a great uncertainty in defending against threat in the sea direction—an opponent at sea can flexibly choose any target for attack along the entire coastal area from north to south.” Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) Military Strategic Research Department, *Science of Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 101.

<sup>34</sup> On the PLA Navy's expanding missions, see Michael McDevitt, *Becoming a Great “Maritime Power”: A Chinese Dream* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016), 22–32. Fravel argues that China's attention to the South China Sea was often in response to the assertive actions of other countries. See M. Taylor Fravel, “China's Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011), 292–319.

<sup>35</sup> See Fravel, “Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity,” 73–74.

<sup>36</sup> AMS, *Science of Strategy*, 117–118.

<sup>37</sup> Yuan and Guo, “Mao Zedong and Adjustment of the Main Strategic Direction of New China,” 34. This argument was advanced by Peng Dehuai, not Mao. Thanks to Taylor Fravel for this observation.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Major General Tang Yongsheng, “Use Geographic Advantages to Strengthen the Surrounding Areas” [利用地缘优势, 强化经营周边], *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系], 8 (2012), 30–31; Wang Gang and Yang Xia, “Research on Xi Jinping's Important Lectures on Border and Coastal Defense” [习近平关于边海防战略重要论述研探], *National Defense* [国防] 11 (2016), 77–80. For a civilian appraisal of India as a rising “secondary strategic direction,” see Ye Hailin, “China's Rise and the Secondary Strategic Directions: Challenges and Responses” [中国崛起与次要战略方向挑战的应对], *World Politics and Economics* [世界经济与政治] 4 (2018), 106–128.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Lanteigne, “China's Maritime Security and the ‘Malacca Dilemma,’” *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008), 143–161. The problem applies not only to the Strait of Malacca but also to maritime chokepoints around the world where Chinese strategists perceive U.S. advantages. For instance, in one analysis, Senior Captain Liang Fang of China's NDU identifies 16 global maritime chokepoints “that the United States wants to control, which poses great threats to both China's military and economic activities.” See Liang Fang, *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2011).



<sup>40</sup> *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015), available at <<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>>.

<sup>41</sup> In more recent years, the growth of overseas infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative have led to suggestions that PLA capabilities could be mobilized in a major crisis. See Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security*; Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications*, INSS China Strategic Perspectives 12 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> For a good analysis, see Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities," *Asia Policy* 22 (2016), 131–156.

<sup>43</sup> Xu Guocheng, Feng Liang, and Zhou Zhenfeng, eds., *Research on Joint Campaigns* [联合战役研究] (Beijing: Yellow River Press, 2004), 200.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Indeed, China's literature on crisis management also warns against the "internationalization" [guojihua, 国际化] of disputes. See, for example, Alison A. Kaufman and Daniel M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016), 66; Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Evolution of Inter-State Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China," *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 1 (2016), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Xu, Feng, and Zhou, *Research on Joint Campaigns*, 207.

<sup>47</sup> Dang Chongmin and Zhang Yu, *Science of Joint Operations* [联合作战学] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2009), 239.

<sup>48</sup> Zhang Peigao, ed., *Lessons on Joint Campaign Command* [联合战役指挥教程] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2012), 206–207.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 276. For another discussion of "chain reaction" warfare in Chinese assessments, see M. Taylor Fravel, "Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, nos. 4/5 (2007), 716.

<sup>50</sup> Zhang, *Lessons on Joint Campaign Command*, 276. For a nearly identical argument, see Cheng Rongji, *Course of Instruction on Joint Battles* [联合战斗教程] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 216. The 2013 AMS version of the *Science of Strategy* likewise discusses a chain reaction of crises that could occur in other strategic directions. See *Science of Strategy*, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Chen Zhou, "Expert Explains White Paper on Chinese Military Strategy" [专家解读中国的军事战略白皮书], *National Defense* [国防], no. 6 (2015), 16–20.

<sup>52</sup> This argument can be traced as early as a 2003 article. See Jun Li, "New Developments in the Party's Military Guiding Theory" [党的军事指导理论的新发展], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学] 16, no. 1 (2003), 48. For recent usage, see *China's Military Strategy*; "Xu Qiliang: Resolutely Push Forward the Integrated Development of Economic and National Defense Construction" [许其亮: 坚定不移推动经济建设和国防建设融合发展], *People's Daily Online* [人民网], November 12, 2015, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/1112/c64094-27805738.html>>; "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress" [习近平在中国共产党十九次全国代表大会上的报告], *People's Daily Online* [人民网], October 27, 2017, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1028/c64094-29613660.html>>.

<sup>53</sup> Xi's concept highlighted the interconnectedness of threats in many issue areas. "Xi Jinping: Adhere to the Overall National Security Concept and Follow the National Security Road with Chinese

Characteristics” [习近平：坚持总体国家安全观 走中国特色国家安全道路], Xinhua, April 15, 2014, available at <[www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c\\_1110253910.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm)>. For an analysis, see Timothy Heath, “The ‘Holistic Security Concept’: The Securitization of Policy and Increasing Risk of Militarized Crisis,” *China Brief* 15, no. 12 (2015), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-holistic-security-concept-the-securitization-of-policy-and-increasing-risk-of-militarized-crisis/>>.

<sup>54</sup> Xia Hongbo, “The ‘Changed’ and ‘Unchanged’ Contained in the Preparations for a Strong Army in the New Era” [新时代强军备战蕴含的‘变’与‘不变’], *Study Times* [学习时报], November 8, 2017, available at <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1108/c40531-29633743.html>>. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Edward L. Warner, *The Defense Policy of the Soviet Union* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1989), 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (April 21, 2000), available at <[www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-05/russias-military-doctrine](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-05/russias-military-doctrine)>.

<sup>57</sup> The two-and-a-half standard developed as part of John F. Kennedy’s “flexible response” doctrine included the need to respond simultaneously to a Soviet attack in Western Europe, a Chinese attack in Asia, and a smaller scale contingency. See Maurice A. Mallin, *Tanks, Fighters & Ships: U.S. Conventional Force Planning Since WWII* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, Inc., 1990), 125–128. Later, Henry Kissinger’s belief that a simultaneous war with the Soviet Union and China was unlikely led to a “one-and-a-half war” standard under the Nixon Doctrine. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 297; Daniel Gouré, *The Measure of a Superpower: A Two Major Regional Contingency Military for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation), 7–8.

<sup>58</sup> *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 1993). See also John F. Troxell, *Force Planning in an Era of Uncertainty: Two MRCs as a Force Sizing Framework* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1997).

<sup>59</sup> *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2001), 21.

<sup>60</sup> *The Soviet General Staff: A Command Structure for Military Planning and Operations* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, 1982, declassified 2010), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Mallin, *Tanks, Fighters & Ships*, 130–132; Clark A. Murdock, *Defense Policy Formulation: A Comparative Analysis of the McNamara Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974).

<sup>62</sup> Warner, *The Defense Policy of the Soviet Union*, 26.

<sup>63</sup> William W. Kaufman, *Planning Conventional Forces 1950–80* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1982), 5–6. Moreover, General Curtis LeMay refused to allow most strategic bombers to be forward deployed to any theater, though two groups ultimately were based abroad. Thanks to Frank Hoffman for this observation. See also Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950–1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 26.

<sup>64</sup> China’s growing military power, and the sense that the United States was strategically under-invested in the region, contributed both to the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations’ decisions to increase the ratio of naval and air force capabilities to the Pacific theater. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review mandated that 60 percent of the submarine force would be allocated to the Pacific, and the Navy subsequently announced that 60 percent of all ships (up from 55 percent) would go to that theater. *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006), 47. That

goal was reconfirmed under the Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" strategy. See, for example, "Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore," U.S. Department of Defense, June 2, 2012, available at <<https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049>>.

<sup>65</sup> For a summary of current U.S. posture in the Pacific, which U.S. Defense Department leaders define as the *priority theater*, see *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019).

<sup>66</sup> *Soviet Military Power 1985* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, 1985, declassified 2009), 16–19; *Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Keir Giles, *Assessing Russia's Reorganized and Rearmed Military*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Task Force White Paper, May 3, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> The Soviet command structure originally had both peacetime and wartime variants. However, by the 1980s, the system had evolved to the point that the peacetime system closely mirrored the wartime system, enabling a quicker transition from one to the other. See *Soviet Military Power 1985*, 16–17. See also *Readiness of Soviet Forces in Central Europe: Implications for a Rapid Transition to War* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, 1987, declassified 2000).

<sup>69</sup> *Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War*, 25–26.

<sup>70</sup> The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review referred to this requirement as "focused logistics." See *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1997), 41.

<sup>71</sup> For instance, troops trained and equipped to conduct mountain warfare in the Caucasus would be "less well suited against NATO's center." *Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> Kaufman, *Planning Conventional Forces 1950–80*, 15–16.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion in the context of China's defense innovation system, see Kathleen A. Walsh, "China's Emerging Defense Innovation System: Making the Wheels Turn," in *Forging China's Military Might: A Framework for Assessing Innovation*, ed. Tai Ming Cheung (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 136–168.

<sup>74</sup> "CMC Promulgates 13<sup>th</sup> Development Plan for the Armed Forces" [中央军委颁发“军队建设发展“十三五”规划纲要”], Xinhua, May 12, 2016, available at <[www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-05/12/c\\_1118855988.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-05/12/c_1118855988.htm)>.

<sup>75</sup> Mark A. Stokes and Ian Easton, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army General Staff Department: Evolving Organizations and Missions," in *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, ed. Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth Allen (Vienna, VA: Defense Group, Inc., 2015), 153–154. In 2016, the General Armament Department was renamed the Central Military Commission (CMC) Equipment Development Department.

<sup>76</sup> The 2019 defense white paper reported that the PLA had improved procedures for "demand-planning-budgeting-execution-evaluation," including creating a "system of strategic plans and programs composed of the development strategies of the military as a whole, and its key areas, branches, and the PAP." See *China's National Defense in the New Era*.

<sup>77</sup> Xi has led a wide-ranging anti-corruption campaign, involving investigations of more than 80 generals and 4,000 officers above the rank of lieutenant colonel. Notable targets include former CMC vice chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, as well as former deputy commander of the General

Logistics Department, Gu Junshan. See Dennis J. Blasko, “Corruption in China’s Military: One of Many Problems,” *War on the Rocks*, February 16, 2015, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/corruption-in-chinas-military-one-of-many-problems/>>.

<sup>78</sup> Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reforms in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 125.

<sup>79</sup> Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 540.

<sup>80</sup> Author discussions with Chinese military officers, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> This office, which is a corps leader-grade organization, replaced the former General Staff Department Strategic Planning Department.

<sup>82</sup> In addition to declining growth, China’s defense budget has also declined as a percentage of government expenditures. For a discussion, see Phillip C. Saunders, *A “World-Class” Military: Assessing China’s Global Military Ambitions*, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 20, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> John Chen, “Choosing the ‘Least Bad Option’: Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Force,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 94–95. On bureaucratic competition between the former Second Artillery Force and the PLA Navy, see Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, “Using the Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Antiship Ballistic Missile,” *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 4 (2009), 73.

<sup>84</sup> Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, *Selling a Maritime Air Force: The PLA’s Campaign for a Bigger Maritime Role* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2019), 33.

<sup>85</sup> For instance, at a February 2016 ceremony in which Xi conferred flags on each of the five new TCs, only the Eastern TC political commissar referenced the main strategic direction. See “Eastern Theater Command Political Commissar: Firmly Carry Out Missions and Responsibilities for the Main Strategic Direction” [东部战区党委：坚定扛起主要战略方向使命担当], *Global Times* [环球时报], February 4, 2016, available at <<http://mil.huanqiu.com/world/2016-02/8504005.html?agt=2/>>. Lower level Eastern TC officers have also highlighted their theater’s connection with the main strategic direction. For instance, the political commissar of an East Sea Fleet destroyer squadron describes the fleet as “first-line troops in the main strategic direction.” Wang Qigang, “Vigorously Respond to the Leader’s Orders, Focus on Training and Strengthening the ‘Maritime Lifeline’” [大力响应领袖号令聚焦练兵备战强固‘海上生命线’], *Political Work Journal* [政工期刊] 8 (2018), 23–24.

<sup>86</sup> The Eastern TC is listed first in protocol order, but all the theaters (as well as the services) occupy the same bureaucratic grade (TC leader). Prior to the reforms, the Shenyang MR was listed first, followed by Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, reflecting their “level of importance at the time they were formed.” For a discussion, see Kenneth W. Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms: 2000–2012,” in *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, 31–32.

<sup>87</sup> Another problem is that some decisions are rooted more in a quest for prestige than in operational necessity. One example is China’s development of aircraft carriers. While these platforms may be helpful in some regional and nontraditional security missions, their value relative to the production costs is dubious. Carriers are also vulnerable targets during wartime, as exemplified in China’s targeting of U.S. carriers. Instead, carriers are more valuable as symbols of China’s Great Power status for a domestic and

international audience. In a sense, every *renminbi* devoted to carrier production is one less available for the development of strategic sealift critical to a Taiwan campaign. See Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities*, RL33153 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), 30; Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 60–65; Erickson and Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea?" 73.

<sup>88</sup> *Annual Report to Congress* (2019), 84, 117.

<sup>89</sup> These include DF-26D anti-ship ballistic missiles and DF-25 intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

<sup>90</sup> For a perspective from the U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC), see Lee Fuell, "Broad Trends in Chinese Air Force and Missile Modernization," Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 30, 2014, 7–8. See also Jim Thomas, John Stillion, and Iskander Rehman, *Hard ROC 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence Through Protraction* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [CSBA], 2014), 19–21. For earlier analyses, see Lyle Goldstein, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004), 180–181; Glosny, "Strangulation from the Sea?"

<sup>91</sup> The army also established two air-assault brigades in 2017, based in the Southern and Central TCs, which could supplement the Airborne Corps. See *Annual Report to Congress* (2019), 32.

<sup>92</sup> The PLA Navy Marine Corps is focused more on smaller scale landings in the South China Sea but could support operations by PLA Army amphibious units. See *China Military Power*, 79. See also Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization," *China Brief* 19, no. 3 (February 1, 2019), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/>>.

<sup>93</sup> Militia forces in all the provinces would likely be activated during a crisis in the main strategic direction in order to prepare for the possibility of a chain reaction of border conflicts. For the perspective of two PLA analysts, see Han Qinggui and Liu Yanyu, "Preliminary Study on Logistics Mobilization of Large-Scale Joint Operations" [大规模联合作战后勤动员初探], *National Defense* [国防] No. 12 (2016), 29. Prior to the reforms, the Jinan MR played the role of strategic reserve.

<sup>94</sup> One of the two new PAP "mobile contingents" [*jidong zongdui*, 机动总队] is based in Fuzhou and would likely play a key role in guarding interior lines during a Taiwan conflict. See Joel Wuthnow, *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform*, INSS China Strategic Perspectives 14 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>95</sup> Those forces complement the PAP, which maintains a large number of mobile response units in the western part of the country, in addition to the Beijing area. A series of recent PAP reforms, including the creation of new mobile contingents that can operate anywhere in the country with a mix of specialized capabilities, enhance China's ability to respond to protests or other problems, such as a natural disaster. See Wuthnow, *China's Other Army*.

<sup>96</sup> Thanks to Phillip C. Saunders for this insight. Prior to the reforms, group armies had variable structures, making it difficult to incorporate units or personnel on an ad hoc basis. Dennis J. Blasko, "The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army," in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 360. On the air force, see Lawrence "Sid" Trevethan, "Brigadization" of the PLA Air

*Force* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2018).

<sup>97</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, 2018); Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, *China Maritime Report No. 1: China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA* (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, 2017). Moreover, Bernard Cole argues that both the distribution of naval capabilities and the frequency of exercises underscores a desire to achieve balance across the fleet, which are needed to respond to a range of contingencies. See Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 84–85, 134–135.

<sup>98</sup> *The Military Balance 2018* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2018), 256–258. Aircraft generations are based on U.S. definitions. See *China Military Power*, 86.

<sup>99</sup> The reason is that these types of conventional platforms have unique ability to create strategic effects on the battlefield. According to a NASIC assessment, China has more than 16 of four types of medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, which are primary focused on antiaccess/area-denial missions against the United States. See *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee, 2017), 22–25.

<sup>100</sup> John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, INSS China Strategic Perspectives 13 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2018), 23–25.

<sup>101</sup> This is Base 311, which has been placed under the SSF. See Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049, 2013), 29; Costello and McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force*, 17.

<sup>102</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “China's Contributions to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers,” *China Brief* 16, no. 18 (December 5, 2016), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-contribution-peacekeeping-operation-understanding-numbers/>>.

<sup>103</sup> Joel Wuthnow, *The PLA Beyond Asia: China's Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region*, INSS Strategic Forum 303 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2020).

<sup>104</sup> In addition to the anti-piracy escorts, PLA Navy submarines have participated in sea lane security outside of China's near abroad, but this has only involved a handful of vessels. See Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security*, 35–36.

<sup>105</sup> On the strategic rationale behind China's overland pipeline construction, see Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 111–113.

<sup>106</sup> While the TCs handle regional contingencies, overseas training and operational missions are nominally coordinated by the Joint Staff Department (JSD) Overseas Operations Office. “PLA Sets Up Overseas Operations Office to Strengthen Overseas Rapid Reaction,” *China Military Online*, March 25, 2016, available at <[http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content\\_6977517.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content_6977517.htm)>. In practice, since these deployments typically only involve forces from a single service, the JSD likely delegates authority to the relevant service headquarters. For instance, marines stationed at the PLA's base in Djibouti and ships conducting nearby anti-piracy patrols are likely supervised by navy headquarters. More complex operations may require a joint task force-like system involving a joint commander and embedded logistics, planning, and other func-

tions, or a TC commander empowered to supervise joint operations overseas. For an analysis, see Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, “PLA Joint Operations in the Far Seas,” forthcoming (2020).

<sup>107</sup> Dean Cheng, “The PLA’s Wartime Structure,” in *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, 458–461.

<sup>108</sup> A People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense spokesman stated that the TCs “shoulder the responsibility for addressing security threats within their respective strategic directions.” See “Transcript of a Ministry of National Defense Special Press Conference” [国防部专题新闻发布会文字实录], PRC Ministry of National Defense, February 1, 2016, available at <[www.mod.gov.cn/info/2016-02/01/content\\_4642553.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2016-02/01/content_4642553.htm)>.

<sup>109</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, nos. 1–2 (2017), 169–195.

<sup>110</sup> Reforms have also placed the China coast guard, which previously reported through a civilian ministry within the military command structure, aiming to improve interoperability and coordination with the navy. This could facilitate more effective responses to regional conflicts below the threshold of armed conflict. Lyle J. Morris, “China Welcomes Its Newest Armed Force: The Coast Guard,” *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/china-welcomes-its-newest-armed-force-the-coast-guard/>>.

<sup>111</sup> Coordination between the TCs and PAP provincial units is likely enhanced by recent reforms that placed the PAP under sole military authority, whereas prior to 2017, the PAP reported through a dual chain of command to both the State Council and the CMC. However, the nature of coordination at the TC level has not been clarified. See Wuthnow, *China’s Other Army*.

<sup>112</sup> This also applies to other multitheater operations, such as a multifront war with India or a campaign on the Korean Peninsula that also requires countering U.S. intervention.

<sup>113</sup> For a detailed discussion on the operations groups, see Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 33–36. Chinese sources suggest that groups could be established in the following areas: land, air, missile, information, joint landing, maritime, space, airborne, special operations, and support. *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>114</sup> There have been occasional joint exercises involving both TCs that likely aim to reduce coordination problems. For instance, in May 2018, the Eastern TC’s joint operations command center organized an air force exercise involving units from both theaters. See *Annual Report to Congress* (2019), 69.

<sup>115</sup> For a detailed discussion of applying national assets in a Taiwan contingency, see Mark A. Stokes, “Employment of National-Level PLA Assets in a Contingency: A Cross-Strait Conflict as Case Study,” in Scobell et al., *The People’s Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, 135–155.

<sup>116</sup> The best treatment of the Strategic Support Force is Costello and McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force*.

<sup>117</sup> Command of nonnuclear strategic systems such as anti-ship ballistic missiles is unclear. Although TC commanders nominally have control over conventional missile forces, it is possible that control over particularly sensitive systems could be retained by the JSD.

<sup>118</sup> This is because the JSD is led by a CMC member (currently General Li Zuocheng) while the TC commanders and service chiefs are one bureaucratic grade lower.

<sup>119</sup> Austin Ramzy, “China’s President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief” *New York Times*, April 21, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/world/asia/china-xi-jin-ping-military-commander.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/world/asia/china-xi-jin-ping-military-commander.html)>.

<sup>120</sup> By contrast, the decisionmaking process during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was more focused on collective decisionmaking. See Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Decision-Making Regarding Taiwan, 1979–2000,” in *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000*, ed. David Lampton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 289–336.

<sup>121</sup> “National Military Exercise Led by CMC Joint Operations Command Center Involves Five Theaters Moving Together, Maneuvers to North and South of Taiwan” [全國大軍演 軍委聯指中心牽頭 五大戰區齊動 包括對台南北雙演習], *Ming Pao* [明報], August 2, 2019, available at <<https://news.mingpao.com/pns/中國/article/20190802/s00013/1564684863915>>.

<sup>122</sup> *China Military Power*, 27.

<sup>123</sup> For instance, India could exploit a cross-strait conflict to dislodge Chinese forces from Doklam or other contested border areas, precipitating a wider conflict along China’s western frontier. Similarly, Vietnam could try to challenge Chinese military outposts in the South China Sea or obstruct Chinese civilian activities in disputed areas.

<sup>124</sup> Reserves and militia include all the services as well as logistics and other specialized troops. They report through local people’s armed forces departments, to provincial military districts, and in most cases to the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department. However, Xinjiang- and Tibet-based reserves appear to report to army headquarters. See Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 355–356. During wartime, TCs “would likely assume a commanding role for militia forces within their areas of geographic responsibility.” Kennedy and Erickson, *China Maritime Report No. 1*, 7.

<sup>125</sup> For instance, Senior Colonel Ouyang Wei writes that a key aspect of maintaining stability in the secondary strategic directions is the availability of “mobile strengths that are able to move towards these directions when necessary.” See Ouyang, *On Strategic Disposition*, 208.

<sup>126</sup> *China Military Power*, 102–104.

<sup>127</sup> LeighAnn Luce and Erin Richter, “Handling Logistics in a Reformed PLA,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 268.

<sup>128</sup> Procurement of goods from the local economy was a theme of various joint exercises held since 2009, such as Stride and Mission Action. Mark R. Cozad, “PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities,” Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 21, 2016, 9–10.

<sup>129</sup> The services continue to operate their own supply chains for service-specific items, such as specialized parts.

<sup>130</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics,” *Jamestown China Brief* 20, no. 7 (April 13, 2020).

<sup>131</sup> “Jane’s—China Air Force,” *Jane’s World Air Forces*, May 29, 2020, available, with proper access, at <<https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/JWAF053-JWAF>>.

<sup>132</sup> A 2014 PLA National Defense University report projected a need for 400 Y-20s, while an Aviation Industry Corporation of China report stated that 1,000 heavy transport aircraft would be required. *Ibid.*



<sup>133</sup> 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: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 592–594; Kevin McCauley, “Modernization of PLA Logistics: Joint Logistic Support Force,” Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 15, 2018, 4.

<sup>134</sup> A professor at the PLA Logistics Academy claims that in wartime the CMC could refer the joint logistics support centers and their subordinate units to the TCs, which would then provide support to frontline troops. See “Expert Explains the Relationship Between the CMC Logistic Support Department and the CMC Joint Logistic Support Force” [专家详解军委联勤保障部队与军委后勤保障部是何种关系], *Pengpai* [澎湃], November 27, 2016, available at <[www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1569162](http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1569162)>.

<sup>135</sup> For a general discussion on PLA human capital challenges, see Michael S. Chase et al., *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 43–60.

<sup>136</sup> In the PLA Navy, many senior leaders have had experience leading escort task forces in the Gulf of Aden. That service has apparently become a promotion criterion. See Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . And Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China’s Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2015), 104–105. On wargames and simulations, see Elsa Kania, *Battlefield Singularity: Artificial Intelligence, Military Revolution, and China’s Future Military Power* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security [CNAS], 2017), 28–29. On professional military education reforms, see Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “A Modern Major General: Building Joint Commanders in the PLA,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 304–306.

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of updates to those systems, see Mark R. Cozad, “Toward a More Joint, Combat-Ready PLA?” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 216–218.

<sup>138</sup> “CMC Intensifies Supervision Over Military Training,” *China Military Online*, March 21, 2017, available at <[http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/21/content\\_7534230.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/21/content_7534230.htm)>.

<sup>139</sup> On definitions of readiness, see Laura J. Junor, *Managing Military Readiness*, INSS Strategic Perspectives 23 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>140</sup> Wuthnow and Saunders, “A Modern Major General,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 308–309.

<sup>141</sup> The 2019 defense white paper revealed that each TC conducts eponymous annual joint training exercises tailored to regional scenarios (for example, the Northern TC conducts “the North” [*beibu*, 北部]. *China’s National Defense in the New Era*).

<sup>142</sup> Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 197–199; Dennis J. Blasko, “Clarity of Intentions: PLA Trans-Regional Exercises to Defend China’s Borders,” in *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 171–212; Dennis J. Blasko, “PLA Exercises March Toward Trans-Regional Joint Training,” *China Brief* 9, no. 22 (November 4, 2009), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/pla-exercises-march-toward-trans-regional-joint-training/>>.

<sup>143</sup> PLA media have used the label of the “five incapables” [*wuge buneng*, 五个不能] to critique incompetent officers. The term *five incapables* refers to the PLA’s officers who cannot judge situations,

understand the intentions of higher authorities, make operational decisions, deploy troops, and deal with unexpected situations. Dennis J. Blasko, “PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns about PLA Capabilities,” Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 7, 2019.

<sup>144</sup>In the past, the PLA’s professional military education system did not expose officers to joint operations concepts until the senior level (typically corps leader), but interviews with PLA officers in 2017–2018 suggest that the intent is to provide joint education at the mid-career level, including new courses at the PLA National Defense University.

<sup>145</sup>Only a few current Eastern TC leaders have experience at the CMC level or in similar positions in adjacent theaters. See Rachel Burton, *The People’s Liberation Army Theater Command Leadership: The Eastern Theater Command* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, August 13, 2018), available at <<https://project2049.net/2018/08/13/the-peoples-liberation-army-theater-command-leadership-the-eastern-theater-command/>>. Current JSD director Li Zuocheng spent most of his career in the Chengdu MR, meaning that the bulk of his expertise is in Southeast Asia contingencies.

<sup>146</sup>Wuthnow and Saunders, “A Modern Major General,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 301–302.

<sup>147</sup>Nan Li, “Top Leaders and the PLA: The Different Styles of Jiang, Hu, and Xi,” in *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 120–137.

<sup>148</sup>Another problem was Hu’s “hands-off” approach to the PLA, which created an environment in which he was likely not kept informed about specific details of PLA operations. See Andrew Scobell, “Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China’s Peaceful Rise?” *Parameters* 39, no. 2 (2009), 4–22.

<sup>149</sup>James C. Mulvenon, “The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the ‘CMC Chairman Responsibility System,’” *China Leadership Monitor* 47 (2015), available at <[www.hoover.org/research/yuan-stops-here-xi-jinping-and-cmc-chairman-responsibility-system](http://www.hoover.org/research/yuan-stops-here-xi-jinping-and-cmc-chairman-responsibility-system)>.

<sup>150</sup>Saunders and Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Thanks to Phillip C. Saunders for this observation.

<sup>153</sup>The assumptions are that these approaches will not lead to a drastic increase in the size of the PLA defense budget, which has to compete with many domestic priorities, nor will they prompt Beijing to act preemptively on Taiwan.

<sup>154</sup>*Indo-Pacific Strategy Report; A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2019).

<sup>155</sup>Combined exercises such as Malabar, along with diplomatic activities such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and various trilateral dialogues, play into Chinese concerns about facing a future “Asian NATO.” For a discussion, see Joel Wuthnow, “U.S. ‘Minilateralism’ in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019), 133–150.

<sup>156</sup>In principle, as Michael Beckley argues, U.S. assistance should “turn China’s neighbors into prickly ‘porcupines,’ capable of denying territory to China but not of taking and holding territory themselves.” Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansionism,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017), 117. However, in practice it is often unclear where this line is drawn.

<sup>157</sup>Terrence K. Kelly, David Gompert, and Duncan Long, *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Volume I* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), xvii; Timothy M. Bonds et al., *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area-Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 77–82.

<sup>158</sup>For instance, China has prioritized developing sealift focused on “smaller scale expeditionary missions” that would be relevant for South China Sea operations, rather than a large-scale amphibious assault. See *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), 100–101.

<sup>159</sup>The 2017 deployment of a theater high-altitude area defense system in South Korea, for instance, consumed significant PLA attention. See Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on South Korea’s Deployment of THAAD,” *China Leadership Monitor* 52 (2017), 1–15.

<sup>160</sup>Senior Colonel Liang Fang of China’s NDU, for instance, cautions that U.S.-India military cooperation could threaten China’s access to the Indian Ocean. Liang Fang, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Will Likely Share the Same Fate as Rebalance to Asia-Pacific,” *Global Times* (Beijing), December 3, 2017, available at <[www.globaltimes.cn/content/1078470.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1078470.shtml)>. From a civilian perspective, Ye Hailin, director of South Asia studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, provides an even darker assessment, warning that China will have to divide its attention between the U.S.-Japan alliance (on its Eastern flank) and a stronger U.S.-India defense partnership to the West. Ye Hailin, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and China’s Counter-Strategy” [‘印太’ 概念的前景与中国的应对策略], *Indian Ocean Political and Economic Review* [印度洋经济体研究] 2 (2018), 10–11.

<sup>161</sup>PLA and Chinese civilian analysts have placed significant attention on “Quad” developments during the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy. See Joel Wuthnow, *Just Another Paper Tiger? Chinese Perspectives on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy*, INSS Strategic Forum 305 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2020).

<sup>162</sup>Thanks to Scott Kastner for this insight.

<sup>163</sup>For a perspective from one U.S. planner, see Tyler Wetzel, “Dynamic Force Employment: A Vital Tool in Winning Strategic Global Competitions,” *The Strategy Bridge*, September 18, 2018, available at <<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/9/18/dynamic-force-employment-a-vital-tool-in-winning-strategic-global-competitions>>.

<sup>164</sup>George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947), 576.

<sup>165</sup>“Strike Group’s Dynamic Force Employment Draws to Close, Departs European Waters,” U.S. Naval Forces Europe, December 11, 2018, available at <[www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=108074](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=108074)>.

<sup>166</sup>This is a point made consistently by U.S. officials. See, for example, “Upgrading U.S.-Taiwan Relations for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Prepared Remarks of David Helvey, Global Taiwan Institute, September 14, 2017. For analysis, see William S. Murray, “Revisiting Taiwan’s Defense Strategy,” *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (2008), 2–27; Thomas, Stillion, and Rehman, *Hard ROC 2.0*; Lostumbo et al., *Air Defense Options for Taiwan*. For its part, the Tsai administration has advocated increased defense spending and indigenous production of critical systems, such as submarines, in addition to partnering closely with Washington. See David An, Matt Schrader, and Ned Collins-Chase, *Taiwan’s Indigenous Defense Industry: Centralized Control of Abundant Suppliers* (Washington, DC: Global Taiwan Institute, 2017).

Ironically, the planned sale of \$223 million in Stingers was the least expensive component of a recent \$2.2 billion arms package to Taiwan, which focused more heavily on tanks and fighter jets.

<sup>167</sup> *Major Combat Operations Joint Operating Concept*, Ver. 2 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006), 19.

<sup>168</sup> Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, Matthew D. Strohmeier, and Christopher D. Forrest, "Strategic Shaping: Expanding the Competitive Space," *Joint Force Quarterly* 90 (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 2018), 11. The authors acknowledge that the "movement of military forces during a crisis to an unexpected or threatening location may not create a significant deterrent effect" unless combined with "a host of whole-of-government actions and synchronized with U.S. resolve," but do not consider the adversary's ability to preempt or defeat those operations. *Ibid.*, 14. Such thinking appears to have continued under O'Shaughnessy's successor, General Charles Q. Brown. See Marcus Weisgerber, "U.S. Military Should Deepen Its Use of Deception, Pacific Air Forces General Says," *Defense One*, December 18, 2019, available at <[www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/12/us-military-should-add-deception-its-playbook-pacific-air-forces-general-says/161982/](http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/12/us-military-should-add-deception-its-playbook-pacific-air-forces-general-says/161982/)>. Similarly, U.S. Army Pacific Commander General Robert Brown states, "We must interrupt enemy decision cycles and present enemies with multiple dilemmas that create uncertainty and paralyze their efforts." See Robert Brown, "The Indo-Asia Pacific and the Multi-Domain Battle Concept," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, March 21, 2017, available at <[www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1125682/the-indo-asia-pacific-and-the-multi-domain-battle-concept/](http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1125682/the-indo-asia-pacific-and-the-multi-domain-battle-concept/)>.

<sup>169</sup> *Air Force Future Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the U.S. Air Force, 2015), 7; *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2018), 46–47.

<sup>170</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 4.

<sup>171</sup> This would represent a page from China's own operational playbook, which emphasizes the need to disrupt critical U.S. information systems during a crisis.

<sup>172</sup> *Annual Report to Congress* (2019), 63–64.

<sup>173</sup> See, for example, Northrop Grumman, "Electronic Warfare," available at <[www.northrop-grumman.com/sea/electronic-warfare/](http://www.northrop-grumman.com/sea/electronic-warfare/)>.

<sup>174</sup> This is often called "mission command" in U.S. doctrine. See Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2018), II-1–2.

<sup>175</sup> In targeting PLA networks, the U.S. military *may* be able to rely on "a much better foundation" in operational cyberwarfare than China can muster. However, as RAND analysts point out, "China's cyberwarfare capabilities are improving faster, and U.S. efforts cannot slacken." See Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*, 259.

<sup>176</sup> Some recent progress in this area has been made. See, for example, Sean Kimmons, "Army to Build Three Multi-Domain Task Forces Using Lessons from Pilot," Army News Service, October 15, 2019, available at <[www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1989387/army-to-build-three-multi-domain-task-forces-using-lessons-from-pilot/](http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1989387/army-to-build-three-multi-domain-task-forces-using-lessons-from-pilot/)>.

<sup>177</sup> Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2010).

<sup>178</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *Archipelagic Defense: The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Preserving Peace and Stability in the Western Pacific* (Tokyo: Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2017).

<sup>179</sup> The idea was initially captured in T.X. Hammes's concept of "offshore control," which contrasted with other (more escalatory) depictions of "air-sea battle." See T.X. Hammes, *Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict*, INSS Strategic Forum 278 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2012). Gabriel Collins argues that a blockade would be technically feasible but would involve other problems, such as economic risks and lulling U.S. leaders into a sense of complacency. Gabriel Collins, "A Maritime Oil Blockade against China—Tactically Tempting but Strategically Flawed," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 2 (2018), 1–30.

<sup>180</sup> On the limitations of pipeline construction in reducing China's dependence on seaborne oil shipments, see Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, "China's Oil Security Pipe Dream," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (2010), 91; Steven Stashwick, "China's Security Gambit in the Indian Ocean," *EastWest Institute*, May 7, 2018, available at <[www.eastwest.ngo/idea/china%E2%80%99s-security-gambit-indian-ocean](http://www.eastwest.ngo/idea/china%E2%80%99s-security-gambit-indian-ocean)>.

<sup>181</sup> National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2018), 20.

<sup>182</sup> "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress."

<sup>183</sup> This is how one Chinese defense scholar put it (interview, 2019). Despite its size, he regarded Israel as "world-class" due to that country's ability to effectively manage all of its national security tasks. However, other explanations of the term also abound. For a discussion of how "world-class military" [*shijie yiliu de jundui*, 世界一流的军队] has been interpreted in PLA circles, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's 'World-Class Military' Ambitions: Origins and Implications," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2020), 85–99.

<sup>184</sup> On the problem of two-front operation, see Harsh V. Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, "India's National Security: Challenges and Dilemmas," *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2019), 844–845. For one Indian defense scholar's views on Chinese naval challenges in the Indian Ocean, see Abhijit Singh, "Deciphering China's Submarine Deployments in the Indian Ocean Region," *IDSA Comment*, July 8, 2015, available at <[https://idsa.in/idsacomments/DecipheringChinasSubmarineDeploymentsintheIndianOceanRegion\\_asingh\\_080715](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/DecipheringChinasSubmarineDeploymentsintheIndianOceanRegion_asingh_080715)>.

<sup>185</sup> Anit Mukherjee, "Fighting Separately: Jointness and Civil-Military Relations in India," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, nos. 1–2 (2016), 6–34. However, India has announced plans to rectify this problem by 2022. See Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "Work on Establishing Theatre Commands to Begin Next Year and Be Completed Within Three Years," *Economic Times*, February 4, 2020, available at <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/looking-to-create-air-defence-logistics-and-peninsula-theatre-commands-cds/articleshow/73939344.cms?from=mdr>>. India has also created a chief of general staff to encourage unified command. See Sanjeev Miglani, "Indian PM Announces Chief of Defense Staff Post to Improve Military Integration," Reuters, August 15, 2019, available at <[www.reuters.com/article/us-india-independenceday/indian-pm-modi-announces-chief-of-defense-staff-post-to-improve-military-integration-idUSKCN1V50E5](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-independenceday/indian-pm-modi-announces-chief-of-defense-staff-post-to-improve-military-integration-idUSKCN1V50E5)>.

<sup>186</sup> Anjan Mukherjee, "Defense Budget: Optimising Planning and Utilisation—I," in *Defence Reforms: A National Imperative*, ed. Gurmeet Kanwal and Neha Kohli (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2018), 152.

<sup>187</sup> The 2018 National Defense Strategy stressed that U.S. forces need to be able to deter and defeat aggression in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and Middle East regions, while also defending U.S. interests from challenges “below the level of armed conflict.” *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 4–5.

<sup>188</sup> *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>189</sup> William O. Odom and Christopher D. Hayes, “Cross-Domain Synergy: Advancing Jointness,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, 2014), 123–128; Celeste Ward Gventer, “A Commanding Problem: Historical Insights for Military Organizational Reform,” *War on the Rocks*, December 4, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/12/a-commanding-problem-historical-insights-for-military-organizational-reform/>>.

<sup>190</sup> Michelle Shevin-Coetzee, *The Labyrinth Within: Reforming the Pentagon’s Budgeting Process* (Washington, DC: CNAS, 2016), 4.

<sup>191</sup> Russia has a much smaller population, supported by a smaller economic base, to resource its system. One consequence is that “many brigades are only at 60 to 80 percent of their nominal strength.” Jonas Gratz, “Russia’s Military Reform: Progress and Hurdles,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 152 (2014), 3.

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