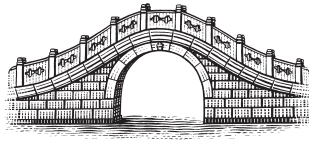


A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities

Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro



KRISTEN GUNNESS is the Chief Executive Officer of Vantage Point Asia, LLC, and an Adjunct International Policy Analyst at RAND Corporation. She can be reached at <kgunness@rand.org>.

ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO is an Assistant Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. She can be reached at <om116@georgetown.edu>.

NOTE ≈ The authors' names appear in alphabetical order. Sections of this article were presented as testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. See Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities," testimony prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2016; and Kristen Gunness, "PLA Expeditionary Capabilities and Implications for United States Asia Policy," testimony prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2016. Dr. Mastro would like to thank John Chen and Yilin Sun for their excellent research assistance.

KEYWORDS: CHINA; MILITARY; PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY; SECURITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article assesses the factors shaping whether China will develop significant military expeditionary capabilities, the conditions under which Chinese leaders may decide to use the military outside East Asia, and implications for the U.S.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Developing expeditionary capabilities for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a priority for Chinese leaders, and the Chinese public's expectation for protection while abroad further motivates such plans. Moreover, Chinese strategic thinking about the nature of such a capability suggests that the doctrinal development to support an expeditionary force is already underway. But even if China develops this capability, Beijing may not always choose to use it. The conditions under which China may employ its expeditionary capabilities can be expected to generate four types of behavior depending on the degree to which China is directly targeted and the receptivity of the international community to a larger Chinese role: activism, team play, vigilantism, and free riding. Based on this analysis, the U.S. should be open to a greater role for the PLA under most conditions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The best outcome for the U.S. is one in which China is a team player and contributes to multilateral operations even when its own interests are only peripherally threatened. Discussion among U.S. allies and partners can help mitigate operational risks.
- When Chinese interests abroad are targeted and the U.S. does not have interests at stake, Washington should try to shape China's actions to minimize unintended consequences. Depending on the situation, international pressure may be sufficient to prevent vigilantism.
- Given the PLA's expanding role, the U.S. should work to broaden military exchanges with China to include all U.S. combatant commands, connect defense and diplomatic attachés around the world, and complement global policy objectives.
- China's expeditionary capabilities create opportunities for the U.S. to develop closer military relationships in Asia—for example, by helping India patrol the Indian Ocean should Chinese naval presence there become routine.

For more than a decade, China has been developing the necessary expeditionary military capabilities to protect its interests beyond the East Asia region.¹ As China assumes a larger role in world affairs, these interests have expanded substantially and increasingly require the capacity to secure investments and business ventures around the globe, including the millions of People's Republic of China (PRC) citizens living abroad, access to energy and other natural resources, and continued access to critical shipping lanes. To this end, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has begun to engage in missions far beyond its borders, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), noncombatant evacuation operations, counterpiracy operations, and the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOC).

While hardly surprising given China's global interests, the development of military expeditionary capabilities has raised concerns both in the United States and abroad about what role the PLA will play in global affairs and how that role may affect or constrain other countries. Examples include wariness about China's intentions following the announcement of a PLA logistics base in Djibouti, anxiety in New Delhi after PLA Navy (PLAN) submarines unexpectedly surfaced in the Indian Ocean, and challenges from the United States and others to Chinese naval patrols, conducted with some of the PLAN's most advanced combatants and submarines, in the farthest reaches of the South China Sea and associated disputed waters.² Increasingly, China is able to shape the international security environment overseas with its military capabilities, posing both opportunities and challenges for U.S. leaders.

Under what conditions will China decide to employ military capabilities abroad, and will this development be positive or negative for the United States and the international order?³ Current research fails to answer this question

¹ In 2004, Hu Jintao announced the "new historic missions" rubric, which for the first time officially articulated China's need to develop capabilities to protect overseas interests. The need to develop a "far seas" military capability was also recently articulated in China's 2015 national defense white paper. On the new historic missions, see James Mulvenon, "Chairman Hu and the PLA's 'New Historic Missions,'" Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 27, January 2009 ~ <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>. For the white paper, see Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015) ~ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm.

² Jeremy Page and Gordon Lubold, "China to Build Naval Hub in Djibouti," *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2015 ~ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-build-naval-logistics-facility-in-djibouti-1448557719>; Zhang Tao, "Expert: Chinese Nuclear Submarine Enters Indian Ocean Legally to Defend 'Lifeline,'" China Military Online, January 25, 2016 ~ http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-01/25/content_6868286.htm; and Jeremy Page, "The Rapid Expansion of China's Navy in Five Charts," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2015 ~ <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/04/10/five-charts-that-show-the-rapid-expansion-of-chinas-navy>.

³ The terms "overseas," "global," and "abroad" are used interchangeably in this article to refer to expeditionary or out-of-area operations beyond a state's immediate periphery that do not involve using force for territorial reasons.

adequately because of a narrow focus on related but fundamentally different classes of behavior. For example, there is a strong scholarly tradition that evaluates Chinese thinking on the use of force but focuses exclusively on regional and border-related disputes and mainly nontraditional operations overseas.⁴ Another research agenda focuses on China's evolving participation in UN peacekeeping operations, but these are cases in which Chinese national interests are not directly at stake and therefore may not be a valid comparison.⁵ Last, scholars and practitioners often focus on how China employs its military in specific territorial disputes, such as the South China Sea—but again, how and when China utilizes its military to promote claims close to its shores provides little insight into the leadership's willingness and ability to use these military tools far from China's shores in sovereignty issues.⁶

The topic may be understudied because Chinese involvement abroad outside the confines of UN peacekeeping operations is a nascent phenomenon and presents methodological challenges. There are few cases of Chinese expeditionary operations from which to derive causal and descriptive inferences, with the Gulf of Aden deployments and select noncombatant evacuation operations being the exceptions. A recent volume brainstormed what operational capabilities China is likely to develop for its expeditionary force by 2025 but stopped short of determining the factors that would shape its deployment.⁷

This article seeks to better understand China's preferences, its strategies to achieve preferred outcomes, and the strategic setting in which Chinese leaders will be making real-time decisions. To do this, the article evaluates five main drivers of Chinese security behavior: (1) the leadership's agenda,

⁴ Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 103–31; Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003); and Thomas J. Christensen, "Windows and War: Changes in the International System and China's Decision to Use Force," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Liu Tiewa, "China and Responsibility to Protect: Maintenance and Change of Its Policy for Intervention," *Pacific Review* 25, no. 1 (2012): 153–73; Pak K. Lee and Lai-Ha Chan, "China's and India's Perspectives on Military Intervention: Why Africa but Not Syria?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (2016): 179–214; Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "China's 'Responsible Protection' Concept: Reinterpreting the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Military Intervention for Humanitarian Purposes," *Asian Journal of International Law* 6, no. 1 (2016): 89–118; and Prashant Kumar Singh, "China's 'Military Diplomacy': Investigating PLA's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Strategic Analysis* 35, no. 5 (2011): 793–818.

⁶ The recent literature on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea is too extensive to list, but one good example is a special roundtable in *Asia Policy* dedicated to the topic. See Tiffany Ma et al., "Non-claimant Perspectives on the South China Sea Disputes," *Asia Policy*, no. 21 (2016): 1–65.

⁷ Roy Kamphausen and David Lai, eds., *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015).

(2) domestic expectations for intervention, (3) the power-projection model China adopts, (4) the nature of the situation and impact on the country's security interests, and (5) global and U.S. receptivity to a larger Chinese role. The first three factors, which have strong foundations in the PLA literature, create the possibility that China will develop an expeditionary force and deploy it in overseas contingencies. Specifically, through assessing official Chinese statements, state-sponsored media, social media, and Chinese academic publications, we conclude that the ability and willingness to conduct expeditionary operations are already present in elite politics, among the domestic public, and in the military.

But these factors are not sufficient to explain the conditions under which Beijing will actually employ its new capabilities. Based on an analysis of drivers four and five, the second part of the article develops a typology of China as an activist, team player, vigilante, and free rider. We argue that the best scenario for U.S. interests and global stability is China as a team player, with China as a vigilante being the most dangerous. This finding creates specific policy recommendations for the conditions under which the United States should encourage or discourage Chinese expeditionary operations to deal with overseas challenges.

This article is based on the five key drivers of the PLA's global role and proceeds as follows:

- ≈ pp. 135–47 examine the three established drivers of China's security behavior: leadership agenda, domestic expectations, and strategic thinking on the nature of an expeditionary capability.
- ≈ pp. 147–53 consider the remaining two drivers—the nature of the threat and international receptivity—and lay out a typology of how China may employ its military beyond the Asia-Pacific.
- ≈ pp. 153–55 present four recommendations for U.S. policy given those findings.

ESTABLISHED DRIVERS OF CHINA'S SECURITY BEHAVIOR

The Chinese Leadership's Agenda

A significant body of research on Chinese decision-making points to the agenda of top leaders as a factor explaining change in PRC security policy. The uptick in U.S.-China military exchanges in 2015 is the direct result of Xi Jinping, who has highlighted that such exchanges are critical to improving

the military and realizing the “China dream.”⁸ On climate change, Chinese officials say that Xi sees U.S.-China cooperation on energy and the climate as a critical anchor for a new model of great-power relations with the United States and prioritizes deliverables on that topic, particularly presidential-level deliverables such as the 2013 Sunnylands agreement on hydrofluorocarbons and the 2014 joint announcement on climate change.⁹ Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is often attributed to the appointment of Xi as the top leader and his preference for aggressive approaches.¹⁰ In the realm of defense innovation, sustained high-level support and guidance from leadership elites are seen as essential to address entrenched bureaucratic fragmentation, chronic delays in project management, decision-making paralysis, and cost overruns.¹¹ In short, given the amount of power at the top of the system, there is often a causal link between leadership preferences and priorities and Chinese policies and state behavior.¹²

Xi has demonstrated great personal ambition to elevate China’s role in the world. He has used the terms “national rejuvenation” and “Chinese dream” to describe his desired end state for the PRC: a modern socialist country that is prosperous, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious by the mid-21st century.¹³ Xi has called for building a “community of common destiny” (*mingyun gongtongti*) featuring a high degree of economic integration through projects such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (collectively known as the One Belt, One Road project), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and proposed regional free trade agreements

⁸ Luo Zheng, “Zhongguo junshi wajiao xian daguo dandang” [Chinese Military Diplomacy Shows Big Countries Responsibility], *People’s Daily*, December 23, 2015 ~ <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2015/1223/c1011-27965344.html>; and “Xi Jinping: Jinyibu kaichuang junshi wajiao xin junmian” [Xi Jinping: Initiate the New Phase of Military Diplomacy], *Xinhua*, January 29, 2015 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/29/c_1114183775.htm.

⁹ Author’s correspondence with Melanie Hart, April 8, 2016. For the 2013 agreement, see “United States and China Agree to Work Together on Phase Down of HFCs,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 8, 2013 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/08/united-states-and-china-agree-work-together-phase-down-hfcs>. For the 2014 joint announcement, see “U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 11, 2014 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change>.

¹⁰ Irene Chan and Mingjiang Li, “New Chinese Leadership, New Policy in the South China Sea Dispute?” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2015): 35–50.

¹¹ Tai Min Cheung, “Introduction,” in *Forging China’s Military Might*, ed. Tai Ming Cheung (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 10; and Sylvia Schwaag Serger and Magnus Briedne, “China’s Fifteen-Year Plan for Science and Technology: An Assessment,” *Asia Policy*, no. 4 (2007): 134–64.

¹² Ren Xiao, “China’s Leadership Change and Its Implications for Foreign Relations,” *Asia Policy*, no. 15 (2013): 56–61.

¹³ “Xi Jinping: Pursuing Dream for 1.3 Billion Chinese,” *Xinhua*, March 17, 2013 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/17/c_124467411.htm.

such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Xi has also criticized the U.S. alliance system, stating at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia that “it is disadvantageous to the common security of the region if military alliances with third parties are strengthened.”¹⁴ China already refers to itself as a “responsible great power,” conveying a sense of leadership to justify its involvement in a wide range of international affairs as well as hinting that it will attempt to revise key parts of the current system to better serve the needs of China and other rising powers.¹⁵ As Li Keqiang articulated in a September 2014 speech, China defends the global order but also wants to reform outdated aspects of the system.¹⁶

For Xi, the modernization of the military, including the development of expeditionary capabilities, is a pivotal component of his national security strategy and desire to protect China’s overseas interests.¹⁷ These priorities are reflected in recent official documents and laws that have been passed by the Chinese legislature. For example, China’s most recent defense white paper states the following goals:

It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, to safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.¹⁸

In July 2015 the National People’s Congress passed a wide-ranging security law that specifically tasked the PLA with protecting China’s overseas interests.¹⁹

¹⁴ John Ruwitch, “China’s Xi Issues Veiled Warning to Asia over Military Alliances,” Reuters, May 21, 2014 \approx <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xi-idUSBREA4K02V20140521>.

¹⁵ The original Chinese phrase *fu zeren daguo* literally means “responsible big state.” However, the phrase is commonly translated as a “responsible great power.” Here, “great power” does not refer to a hegemonic leader but to powerful states in the region. For example, *daguo*, or great power, includes the United States, China, Russia, and Japan in the Asia-Pacific. See Yang Jiechi, “Jiji chengdan guoji zeren he yiwu” [Proactively Undertaking International Responsibility and Duty], *People’s Daily*, November 23, 2015.

¹⁶ Li Keqiang, “Zhongguo shi fuzeren de fazhanzhong daguo” [China Is a Developing Responsible Great Power], *People’s Daily*, September 9, 2014 \approx <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0909/c1024-25628524.html>.

¹⁷ “Xi Jinping chuxi zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Speech by Xi Jinping at the Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Work], Xinhua, November 29, 2014 \approx http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm; and “Xi Jinping: Jianchi zongti guojia anquan guan, zou Zhongguo tese guojia anquan daolu” [Xi Jinping: Commit to a Grand National Security Concept, a Roadmap for National Security with Chinese Characteristics], Xinhua, April 14, 2014 \approx http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm.

¹⁸ Information Office of the State Council (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy*.

¹⁹ Minnie Chan, “People’s Liberation Army Tasked with Defending China’s Overseas Interests,” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2015 \approx <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1831564/chinas-national-security-law-gives-pla-mission-protect>.

Xi's vision for the PLA seems to extend beyond the protection of Chinese interests. Xi has publicly stated that the military should play a pivotal role in "the maintenance of international security affairs"²⁰ and try its best to provide more "public security products to the international community."²¹ He has, at least in part, staked the legitimacy of his administration on a strong Chinese military that can defend all of the PRC's interests both at home and abroad. Most recently, at the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2016 Xi highlighted four areas of effective U.S.-China coordination and cooperation: climate change, Iran's nuclear weapons program, global health, and development along with peacekeeping.²²

As Chinese political involvement expands in critical areas—for example, with the first appointment of a special envoy for the crisis in Syria—a more active military role may follow in tandem.²³ Since 2008, the PLA has carried out military operations other than war beyond East Asia at an increasing pace. The PLAN has dispatched nineteen task forces to the Gulf of Aden since it first began participating in antipiracy operations in December 2008,²⁴ and in mid-2015 the PLA Ground Forces dispatched over a thousand troops to South Sudan in the PRC's first-ever peacekeeping operation.²⁵ Later that year, Xi pledged eight thousand troops for a standby UN peacekeeping force, along with \$100 million in military aid to the African Union.²⁶ PLAN ships frequently visit ports in Oman, Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Tanzania for supplies and recently initiated visits to South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Nigeria, and Namibia, among other nations.²⁷ Chinese companies have also made deals to control Gwadar port in Pakistan and lease Darwin port in Australia for 99 years, while the government announced in November 2015 that it would

²⁰ Zhou Yanbing, "Guanyu guofang he jundui jianshe de zhongyao lunshu" [An Important Discussion about National Defense and Military Construction], CPC News, July 23, 2014 ~ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0723/c68742-25329637.html>.

²¹ "Xi Jinping jieshou Huaerjie Ribao caifang" [Xi Jinping Interview with the *Wall Street Journal*], Xinhua, September 22, 2015 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/22/c_1116642032.htm.

²² "Xi Jinping Meets with President Barack Obama of U.S.," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, April 1, 2016 ~ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1353036.shtml.

²³ Ben Blanchard, "China Appoints First Special Envoy for Syria Crisis," Reuters, March 29, 2016.

²⁴ Kenneth Allen, "The Top Trends in China's Military Diplomacy," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, May 1, 2015 ~ [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=43866&no_cache=1#VviTqdIQgs](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43866&no_cache=1#VviTqdIQgs).

²⁵ Karen Allen, "What China Hopes to Achieve with First Peacekeeping Mission," BBC, December 2, 2015 ~ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34976580>.

²⁶ Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "China's Xi Says to Commit 8,000 Troops for UN Peacekeeping Force," Reuters, September 28, 2015 ~ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-china-idUSKCN0RS1Z120150929>.

²⁷ Omar Lamrani, "China: An Aspiring Global Navy," Stratfor, December 9, 2015 ~ <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/china-aspiring-global-navy>.

build its first overseas military base in Djibouti, a naval logistics point meant to sustain China's increased military involvement away from East Asia.²⁸

The PLA has also recently begun participating in military exchanges and exercises with countries outside East Asia. As of 2014, PLAN guided-missile destroyers have conducted port calls to more than 30 countries, and in 2015 the PLAN conducted large-scale joint naval exercises with Russia in both the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Japan.²⁹ Meanwhile, China's increasing emphasis on counterterrorism provided the backdrop for PLA Ground Forces counterterrorism exercises with India and Sri Lanka in 2015, and the PLA Air Force participated in Russia's Aviadarts military competition in 2014 and exercised with the Pakistan Air Force in 2015.³⁰ The PLA is developing a more robust exchange program between its National Defense University and corresponding foreign military educational institutions and also hosted the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in 2014.³¹

Xi has consequently directed the PLA leadership to pursue a major military reorganization designed to optimize leadership and command structures, streamline organizations, reform policies, enhance PLA mobility, facilitate joint operations, and allow the PLA to operate more flexibly—all necessary components for effective power projection in the region and overseas.³² The shift from seven military regions to five “battle zones” is partly inspired by China's contemporary need for a strong blue water navy to protect the country's maritime lifelines and expanding overseas interests; the previous command structure, centered on land forces, could not meet

²⁸ On Gwadar port, see Ankit Panda, “Chinese State Firm Takes Control of Strategically Vital Gwadar Port,” *Diplomat*, November 13, 2015 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/chinese-state-firm-takes-control-of-strategically-vital-gwadar-port>. On Djibouti port, see Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, “China Retools Its Military with a First Overseas Outpost in Djibouti,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2015 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/china-military-presence-djibouti-africa.html>.

²⁹ Allen, “The Top Trends in China's Military Diplomacy”; Franz Stefan-Gady, “China and Russia Conclude Naval Drill in Mediterranean,” *Diplomat*, May 22, 2015 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-and-russia-conclude-naval-drill-in-mediterranean>; and Franz Stefan-Gady, “Russia and China Kick Off Naval Exercise in Sea of Japan,” *Diplomat*, August 24, 2015 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/russia-and-china-kick-off-naval-exercise-in-sea-of-japan>.

³⁰ On India, see Franz Stefan-Gady, “China and India Hold Joint Military Exercise,” *Diplomat*, October 12, 2015 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-and-india-hold-joint-military-exercise>. On Sri Lanka, see Ankit Panda, “Sri Lanka and China Wrap Up Silk Route 2015 Military Exercise,” *Diplomat*, July 18, 2015 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/sri-lanka-and-china-wrap-up-silk-route-2015-military-exercise>. On Russia, see Allen, “The Top Trends in China's Military Diplomacy.” On Pakistan, see Zhang Yunbi, “China and Pakistan Stage Joint Air Exercise,” *China Daily USA*, September 7, 2015 ~ http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-09/07/content_21811478.htm.

³¹ Allen, “The Top Trends in China's Military Diplomacy.”

³² Andrew S. Erickson, “Sweeping Changes in China's Military: Xi's PLA Restructuring,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2015 ~ <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/09/02/sweeping-change-in-chinas-military-xis-pla-restructuring>.

those needs because it stifled mobility and joint operations.³³ Additionally, as part of the reorganization, the PLA has established the Overseas Operations Office, which the Chinese media describes as “responsible for directing and coordinating actions carried out by Chinese troops overseas. Its establishment can enhance rapid overseas response capabilities of the Chinese military.”³⁴

The reorganization is ongoing and will continue for years to come; however, the PLA clearly has taken Xi’s directive to heart and embarked on an increasing number of expeditionary missions—many of which are firsts for China. For example, the PLA sent its first overseas deployment of combat troops in a peacekeeping role to Mali in late 2013. The Gulf of Aden antipiracy operations, the first of their kind for China, have been a springboard for the PRC to considerably expand maritime security operations, taking on tasks such as evacuating its citizens from Libya and Yemen, escorting Syrian chemical weapons to their destruction, and participating in the search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.³⁵ In the Yemen operation conducted in late March and early April 2015, the PLAN evacuated 570 Chinese citizens and 225 foreign nationals from that volatile country.³⁶ Official statements and news articles praised the operation for its successful protection of Chinese citizens overseas, the scale and effectiveness of the military operation, China’s good diplomatic relations with Yemen that facilitated the evacuation, and China’s commitment to humanitarian assistance.³⁷

These developments in military diplomacy, exercises, basing arrangements, and operations, along with official statements, illustrate that there is strong high-level support for the Chinese military to be involved more routinely in operations overseas. But this is not the only necessary condition. The next section evaluates the second factor: domestic views and expectations about potential involvement.

³³ For more on the reorganization, see Kenneth Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, “The PLA’s New Organizational Structure: What Is Known, Unknown and Speculation (Part 1),” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, February 4, 2016.

³⁴ Yao Jianing, “PLA Sets Up Overseas Operations Office to Strengthen Overseas Rapid Reaction,” China Military Online, March 25, 2016 ≈ http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content_6977517.htm.

³⁵ 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, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2015).

³⁶ Eddie Linczer, “Yemen Evacuation Demonstrates China’s Growing Far-Seas Naval Capabilities,” American Enterprise Institute, April 3, 2015.

³⁷ Zhao Cheng, “Yemen cheqiao jianzheng daguo nengli yu dangang” [Evacuation of Chinese in Yemen Testifies to the Capabilities and Duties of a Powerful State], *People’s Daily*, April 10, 2015.

Evolving Domestic Expectations for International Action

Even though China is an authoritarian country, more and more research suggests that the party is responsive to public demands under certain conditions.³⁸ The leadership might even use public sentiment as a tool either to enhance the credibility of its threats through generating audience costs or to credibly signal resolve in crises by allowing popular mobilization.³⁹ This suggests that public expectations are likely to be a factor in shaping the types of expeditionary operations in which China might engage.

Increasingly, the Chinese public expects the PLA to protect Chinese citizens when an incident occurs overseas, and these expectations are creating greater pressure on the PRC government to send the military abroad. A growing number of Chinese citizens live and work overseas, with many migrating to politically unstable countries as part of an exported labor force or in search of financial gain.⁴⁰ Over the past two years, the public's demand for government protection abroad has skyrocketed as more and more Chinese nationals are being deliberately targeted because of discontent with Beijing's policies.

Fall 2015 saw an uptick in violence that created great concern in the government about appearing to be either unable or unwilling to react to global threats. A Chinese national was injured when gunmen and suicide bombers attacked a number of popular locations in Paris on November 13. A few days later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) announced it had kidnapped and executed Chinese national Fan Jinghui. These incidents caused commentators to speculate about whether China would be drawn into a conflict in the Middle East against ISIS.⁴¹ Though Xi condemned the Paris attacks and Chinese officials urged international cooperation against terrorism, China continued to be reluctant to offer support.⁴² In the following week, 7 Chinese nationals were among the 170 hostages taken in Mali, and 3 Chinese rail executives were killed in the hotel siege. Xi promised domestic

³⁸ Jidong Chen, "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 2 (2016): 383–400; Lily Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 355–72; and Gregory Distelhorst and Yue Hou, "In-Group Bias in Official Behavior: A National Field Experiment in China," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 2 (2014): 203–30.

³⁹ Jessica Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (2008): 35–64; and Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 1–35.

⁴⁰ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "China Can't Stay Home," *National Interest*, November/December 2014, 38–45.

⁴¹ Shannon Tiezzi, "ISIS: Chinese Hostage Executed," *Diplomat*, November 19, 2015.

⁴² *Ibid.*

audiences that China would strengthen international collaboration “to resolutely fight violent terrorist activities that hurt innocent lives,” and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised “in light of the new circumstances” to “come up with new proposals to ensure the security of Chinese citizens and institutions overseas.”⁴³

The government was obviously concerned about the public reaction to Fan’s execution and China’s relatively minimal response. Xi and the foreign ministry made statements condemning terrorism, promising justice, and reiterating China’s commitment to protecting its citizens abroad, most likely in an effort to placate domestic audiences.⁴⁴ The foreign ministry spokesperson also claimed that “relevant departments of the Chinese government activated emergency response mechanisms upon learning [of] the kidnapping and made all-out efforts to rescue him,”⁴⁵ though no public details were released to provide substance to the statement. One article in the *South China Morning Post* argued that China was in the process of negotiating Fan’s release, but that French and Russian airstrikes disrupted contacts, resulting in Fan’s death.⁴⁶ Official statements have not been made to this effect, however, nor has additional reporting corroborated this story.

At the same time, the government shut down discussions on social media, curtailed reporting by news outlets, and blocked searches for Fan’s name as well as the terms “Islamic State,” “hostage,” and “Muslim.”⁴⁷ Most of the posts currently on the website Weibo are official news reports, alongside a few uncensored posts that support China’s principle of nonintervention and defend the government’s actions regarding the hostage incident.⁴⁸ The bloggers whose posts remain visible on social media argue that China should prioritize stability and economic development, that the loss of one life is

⁴³ Andrew Browne, “Beijing Fears Looking Impotent in the Face of Terror,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2015 ~ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-fears-looking-impotent-in-the-face-of-terror-1448338589>.

⁴⁴ “2015 nian 11 yue 19 ri Waijiaobu Fayaren Hong Lei zhuchi lixing jizhehui” [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei Holds Regular Press Conference on November 19, 2015], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), November 19, 2015; and “Xi Jinping biaooshi qianglie qianze” [Xi Jinping Expresses Strong Condemnation], *People’s Daily*, November 20, 2015.

⁴⁵ Shannon Tiezzi, “Chinese Citizens among 170 Hostages Taken in Mali Hotel,” *Diplomat*, November 20, 2015.

⁴⁶ “Guanmeifang zhuanjia: Zhongfang cengzhi Fan Jinghui yue zai Anbaer, yingjiu bei e fa xingdong da luan” [Government Media Expert: China Knew That Fan Jinghui Was around Anbar. Rescue Mission Was Interrupted by Russian and French Activities], *South China Morning Post*, November 20, 2015.

⁴⁷ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China Censors Online Outcry after ISIS Execution,” *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2015.

⁴⁸ “Zhongguo rendun bei IS shahai” [Chinese Hostage Killed by IS], Sina Weibo, January 14, 2016 ~ http://weibo.com/p/100808b58d65f6131100b6811b644ed92ce9c2?k=?????IS?&from=501&_from_=huati_topic.

not worth involving 1.3 billion lives in a war, and that the United States and Russia are encouraging China to take part in their conflict in the Middle East.⁴⁹ But a Hong Kong website that stores censored content, Free Weibo, shows netizens openly calling for military action to retaliate against ISIS and raising concerns about Uighurs becoming extremists and training with ISIS to commit domestic terrorism.⁵⁰

Undoubtedly, a growing segment of the Chinese public supports a more proactive military approach. In a *Huanqiu Shibao* poll in 2009, 89.6% of 18,873 respondents answered “yes” to a question on whether China should establish overseas military bases.⁵¹ There was a public outcry about Fan’s execution and Beijing’s inability to respond strongly to it. The rhetoric of Chinese leaders was seen as being in stark contrast to the French declaration of war on ISIS and Russian and U.S. military action.⁵² The government’s reaction to the public outcry suggests a concern that dissatisfaction with its performance could hurt party legitimacy. The people demand a strong military that can deter aggression, or at the very least be employed in reaction to it. The party’s attempts to shape the debate show a concern with the implications of this nationalist fervor.

However, many censored posts also opposed military retaliation, warning China not to get caught up in foreign troubles. And many Chinese experts argue that China does not have the capabilities to fight terrorists in the Middle East.⁵³ The party therefore faces a challenge in balancing these two groups of public opinion, as well as the reality that such opinion could change drastically should PRC citizens be killed or wounded abroad because of a lack of security. The leadership has so far managed domestic expectations by continuing to encourage PLA involvement in multilateral efforts (such as counterterrorism operations organized under the United Nations), increasing the PLA’s presence abroad through port agreements, and enhancing operational capabilities through participation in activities such as counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. These efforts are combined with ones that do not directly involve the PLA, such as cutting off

⁴⁹ “Zhongguo rendun bei IS shahai.”

⁵⁰ “Yisilanguo” [Islamic State], Sina Weibo, discussion forum, January 14, 2016.

⁵¹ For more on the domestic public’s view, see Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, “Not an Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century,” National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives, Report, no. 7, 2014, 53.

⁵² Browne, “Beijing Fears.”

⁵³ “Guanmeifang zhuanjia: Zhongfang cengzhi Fan Jinghui yue zai Anbaer, yingjiu bei e fa xingdong da luan.”

ISIS's financial sources.⁵⁴ This approach has so far worked fairly well for PRC leaders because it supports and perhaps even motivates the development of PLA expeditionary capabilities, provides operational experience, and serves the party's interests in deploying the PLA abroad while not directly involving it in a conflict or committing to a heavy footprint.

Domestic expectations, and Beijing's need to accommodate or exploit them, thus create the possibility that China could intervene militarily beyond its own region. But the degree to which the government commits to military action abroad will largely depend on a third factor—the level and development type of the PLA's capabilities and operational know-how. The next section details Chinese thinking on the development of expeditionary capabilities and the implications for China's future force-projection model.

Chinese Thinking on Expeditionary Capabilities

While the leadership agenda and public expectations have created the prospect of overseas PLA operations, the scope of those operations is constrained by the type of capabilities and force posture under consideration. Conventional wisdom warns that when and how a country uses its military is largely constrained by pre-established characteristics and capabilities of the force—when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To date, the PLA has mainly developed pockets of expeditionary capabilities. These pockets include the ability to participate in HADR operations through its hospital ship, the use of advanced surface combatants to participate in counterpiracy and noncombatant evacuation operations, the development of power-projection capabilities such as aircraft carriers to eventually conduct SLOC protection, augmentation of at-sea replenishment capabilities—which are necessary to operate abroad on longer missions given that China lacks overseas bases—and the development of a range of space-based capabilities that include communication and navigation satellites for positioning as well as satellites for providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to the PLA.⁵⁵ Furthermore, uneven levels of operational knowledge will likely have an impact on the situations in which China feels comfortable sending

⁵⁴ “2015 nian 12 yue 3 ri Wajiaobu Fayaren Hua Chunying zhuchi lixing jizhehui” [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chun Ying Holds Regular Press Conference on December 3, 2015], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), December 3, 2015.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015* (Washington, D.C., 2015) ≈ http://defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf.

its troops, with the Chinese leadership avoiding situations where the PLA possesses a low level of operational confidence.⁵⁶

These limitations are unlikely to persist given the PLA's overall modernization efforts and increasing operational experience abroad. That said, it is still difficult to assess from observable indicators the direction of the force given China's opacity in military affairs. But Chinese writings can provide some insight into the development of expeditionary capabilities. The writings point out several complicating factors for China in developing the capability for sustaining any military operation overseas, let alone in non-permissive environments. These include China's historical aversion to alliances and overseas basing and its belief that the rejection of such perceived "hegemonic" behaviors is evidence that China will be a different, more peaceful great power. The policy of not interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries also remains an influential principle, in part because of the PRC's ongoing need to guard against international criticism, separatist movements, and calls for democracy or greater protection of human rights.⁵⁷ Pressures for continuity, such as the belief that interference is ineffective, the desire to promote China's leadership in the developing world, and the deep-rooted desire to be a different type of great power from the United States or former colonial powers, affect calculations of costs, benefits, and appropriate responses to expanding overseas interests.

However, faced with an operational imperative, PRC thinking on these and other key issues may shift—just as it did with peacekeeping operations in the 1990s. Admittedly, China is unlikely to form military alliances or establish permanent boots-on-the-ground bases overseas in the next decade or perhaps ever. Chinese thinkers consider the U.S. basing model to be an ideological anathema and strategically imprudent. But restrictions on China's military presence overseas are loosening and debate is growing about establishing areas from which to stage operations. While there are no indications that the hypothetical bases would be functionally distinct from those of other countries, such as the United States, Chinese strategists do purport to have

⁵⁶ The PLA now has significant experience in counterpiracy operations because of its participation in patrols in the Gulf of Aden. However, learning to conduct and maintain those operations took many years. See Kristen Gunness and Sam K. Berkowitz, "PLA Navy Planning for Out of Area Deployments," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015) ~ <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/PLA-contingency/PLA-Contingency-Planning-China.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Noninterference in Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy: Fact or Fiction?" in *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st Century Policy*, vol. 2, ed. Donovan Chau and Thomas Kane (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 95–114.

unique and higher principles for their use. Specifically, as one well-known Chinese international relations scholar argues, Chinese interests would have to align with those of the host nation and neighboring countries and could not be used to attack other countries.⁵⁸ Also, China's overseas access policies no doubt take into account a desire to minimize concerns that nations have with how China may use its newfound military power in the future.⁵⁹ With respect to its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, China denies intentions to establish overseas basing to extend its military reach but at the same time reiterates that Western nations should not be concerned if China does seek military outposts given that they also have them.⁶⁰ The sensitivity, both domestically and internationally, about the potential for China to develop a global expeditionary force has led to caution in action and rhetoric. State-run media has even reined back its use of the term "overseas base," instead using the terms "supply facility" and "military outpost."⁶¹

As mentioned above, Xi Jinping has already made a number of unexpected and significant organizational reforms to enhance the professionalization of the military forces, reduce corruption, and create a command structure more conducive to joint operations.⁶² The aforementioned establishment of the Overseas Operations Office represents the first step in ensuring the coordination of various PLA missions overseas, which all come with different military and political requirements. One article in the *China Daily* states:

The "Overseas Operations Office" not only requires "operational commanding capabilities," but also "policy capacity." Policy capacity refers to the ability to grasp the national security situation and bilateral relations. For example, the evacuation operation in Yemen required the assessment [of the] local security situation and diplomatic access to enter the port of Aden.⁶³

Given the ongoing need for the PLA to access ports and infrastructure when conducting overseas operations, it is possible that the Overseas Operations

⁵⁸ Shen Dingli, "Don't Shun the Idea of Setting Up Overseas Military Bases," China.org, January 28, 2010 ~ http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content_19324522.htm.

⁵⁹ Feng Chunmei, "Junshi zhuanjia jiedu Zhongguo junshi zhanlue" [Military Experts Explain Chinese Military Strategy], *People's Daily*, May 27, 2015.

⁶⁰ Ben Blanchard, "China Launches Charms Offensive for First Overseas Naval Base," Reuters, March 23, 2016 ~ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKCN0WP300>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Military Reform: Xi's New Model Army," *Economist*, January 16, 2016 ~ <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21688424-xi-jinping-reforms-chinas-armed-forcesto-his-own-advantage-xis-new-model-army>.

⁶³ Yao Jianing, "PLA Sets Up Overseas Operations Office to Strengthen Overseas Rapid Reaction," China Military Online, March 25, 2016 ~ http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content_6977517.htm.

Office might play a role in helping the PRC government leverage political clout and increase military access in various parts of the world on an as-needed basis.

A GLOBAL PLA: POSSIBILITIES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Even though Chinese operations beyond the region have been limited to date, we can infer that China is actively developing expeditionary capabilities. This progress is evident from the attention by high-level leadership, official documents and statements published in PRC-controlled media, domestic public support, and the internal strategic debate that focuses on how, not whether, to develop the necessary force posture. The means by which China will use these capabilities abroad is critical to the question of whether they will have a positive or negative impact on U.S. national security and the global order. In this section, we develop a typology based on the final two drivers in our argument: the nature of the threat and the receptivity of the international community. We treat these two drivers differently from the preceding three because there is currently not enough empirical data to determine with high confidence which path China will take. The typology provides a framework for understanding how different values of these two variables may interact to shape the nature of the PLA's global activities.

The first variable, the nature of the threat, can be conceptualized as having two values: whether Chinese interests are directly threatened or whether Chinese interests are at risk due to collateral damage when other countries are targeted. For example, Chinese nationals were injured in the Paris shootings and Mali hostage situation, but targeting Chinese citizens was not the primary goal of the assailants. Instability in Syria and Afghanistan could hurt Chinese interests in those states, but there are greater negative consequences for many other countries, including the United States. By contrast, hypotheticals like violent protests, kidnappings, or the nationalization of Chinese mining projects—such as in Zambia—would directly affect Chinese interests but not necessarily those of another country.

The second variable, international receptivity, captures the strategic setting that China faces when it conducts an overseas operation. Poor receptivity describes a situation in which there will be backlash against a PLA operation. There can be many reasons for this: countries may be wary of China rehearsing operations that could help it perform in regional contingencies; they may believe that the PLA would only exacerbate the problematic situation in question, leading to detrimental follow-on effects;

or they may be sensitive to the possibility that China could seek to shape an outcome to better align with Chinese interests at the expense of the interests of the broader international community. On the other hand, the international community could be receptive to greater Chinese military involvement when it supports broader international efforts or when no other major power has the capability or willingness to act. For example, Chinese involvement in noncombatant evacuation operations, UN peacekeeping operations, and the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy efforts was encouraged and praised.

The combination of these two factors engenders four types of Chinese military behavior out of area: activism, team play, vigilantism, and free riding (see **Table 1**).

TABLE 1
Four Types of Out-of-Area Chinese Military Behavior

		Chinese interests threatened	
		Directly	Peripherally
International receptivity	High	Activism	Team play
	Low	Vigilantism	Free riding

This typology offers a framework for evaluating how an expeditionary PLA may affect the global order and U.S. security interests. China’s ability to act is not included in the typology because it is a necessary condition and therefore does not lead to analytically useful variations. If China does not have the ability to conduct an operation abroad, it will unsurprisingly not do so. The following discussion clarifies how and when China will act when its expeditionary capabilities allow the option.

Activist China: High International Receptivity with Chinese Interests Directly Targeted

In this scenario, Chinese interests are under threat overseas, such as by a terrorist act, in a large-scale hostage situation, or due to instability in

a location where China has a unique commercial stake. For example, in Nigeria a militant group could target Chinese interests in an attempt to wrest control over natural resources from Chinese companies or the Nigerian government.⁶⁴ Beijing also has had to deal with angry unemployed protesters who blame cheap Chinese manufacturing for their circumstances.⁶⁵ China has exceptionally high FDI in Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, Tajikistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, creating a situation in which Chinese interests may be threatened even when broader foreign interests are not.⁶⁶ More and more frequently, Chinese nationals are being deliberately targeted because of discontent with Beijing's policies. In a July 2014 video, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi described China as a country where "Muslim rights are forcibly seized."⁶⁷ In September 2014, suspects in the Philippines were arrested for planning attacks against the Chinese embassy and Chinese workers in Manila. The Spratly Islands sovereignty dispute allegedly motivated the perpetrators along with resentment over what they considered to be the "monopolistic policies" of Filipino-Chinese businessmen.⁶⁸ In July 2015, Beijing issued a travel warning after Asian tourists were harassed during anti-China protests in Istanbul sparked by anger over the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang.⁶⁹

In this situation, the domestic outcry would be particularly shrill given that China's interests are clearly and directly targeted. While such uproar alone may not be enough to convince the top leadership to act, international support could tip Beijing's cost calculation in favor of action. The international community might view a PLA operation designed to combat terrorism, for example, as a positive development in China's willingness to take on some of the burden of countering terrorist activities outside the Asia-Pacific region. Or in the case of a hostage rescue, other states with similar security interests

⁶⁴ Tom Miller, "Firms Facing Risks in Foreign Hot Spots Call in the Experts," *South China Morning Post*, June 9, 2008; and Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, "Nigeria's MEND Rebels Threaten Attack on Oil Industry," *Bloomberg*, January 27, 2014 ~ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-01-27/nigeria-s-mend-rebels-threaten-future-attack-on-oil-industry>.

⁶⁵ Keith Brandsher and Adam Nossiter, "In Nigeria, Chinese Investment Comes with a Downside," *New York Times*, December 5, 2015 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/business/international/in-nigeria-chinese-investment-comes-with-a-downside.html>.

⁶⁶ "Bilateral FDI Statistics," UN Conference on Trade and Development, April 2014 ~ <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx>.

⁶⁷ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China Censors Online Outcry after ISIS Execution," *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2015.

⁶⁸ Shannon Tiezzi, "China Warns Citizens to Stay Away from Philippines," *Diplomat*, September 17, 2014.

⁶⁹ Ivan Watson and Steven Jiang, "Beijing Issues Travel Warning after Turkey Protests Target Chinese," *CNN*, July 8, 2015.

might support China in order to augment or retain their own ability to conduct such operations inside another country's borders.

This scenario presents few immediate opportunities for the United States. An activist China is still one that pursues narrow self-interest, which may or may not align with the interests of the United States and the international community. Though the international community would support China's need to protect its interests, Chinese military involvement in situations where the PLA essentially "goes it alone" also could create more tensions between the PLA, the United States, and U.S. allies and partners. Also, depending on how China operates, there is always the possibility that the insertion of foreign military forces into the equation may exacerbate instability in the target country and create spillover effects. On the other hand, these risks are less severe in this scenario given that the interests of the United States generally are not involved.

China as a Team Player: High International Receptivity and Chinese Interests Affected Peripherally

In cases where Chinese interests are part of a larger group of foreign interests under threat, China might push for PLA involvement to both boost its image as a responsible great power and show the domestic population that it is proactively protecting Chinese interests abroad. The fact that other countries' interests in involvement are likely to be as great as or greater than China's in this scenario opens up the possibility of multilateral cooperation. Participating in international operations overseas would also cater to the Chinese leadership's desire to improve the PLA's expeditionary capabilities while leaving a light footprint. Examples might include participation in HADR missions to assist overseas Chinese communities or PLA assistance in an operation where international citizens as well as Chinese nationals require evacuation. Other instances might involve PLA cooperation with foreign militaries in an international effort to combat terrorism, maintain freedom of navigation in SLOCs, or assist nonproliferation efforts. If China were to dedicate forces to fighting ISIS, for example, that would fit within this category.

In this scenario, PLA expeditionary capabilities have engendered greater opportunities for the U.S. and Chinese militaries to cooperate on issues of mutual security concern. In addition, expeditionary missions—such as counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, UN peacekeeping missions, and noncombatant evacuation operations—allow the PLA to gain critical operational experience that translates into a more experienced force at

home, potentially enabling the PLA to work alongside more technologically advanced militaries to contribute to security in Asia. Such potential regional security missions are mainly maritime in focus and include HADR, counterpiracy operations, escort operations (particularly relevant given the uptick in piracy in Southeast Asia), and contributions to countering drug and human trafficking.

These types of cooperative efforts would assist with crisis management because they would augment operational awareness and encourage dialogue. Moreover, as the recent U.S. reaction to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank shows, rejecting a reasonable role for China to provide public goods hurts the United States' international image. Welcoming China's participation in cooperative efforts as the PLA builds its expeditionary capabilities, on the other hand, would go great lengths to demonstrate the flexibility needed to sustain U.S. leadership and presence in the Asia-Pacific. Augmenting China's efforts to be a team player is broadly beneficial and helps integrate the country into the larger international order—which was the argument made in favor of China's participation in counterpiracy missions.

There are some risks, however, even if they are outweighed by the benefits. The greatest one is that China gains unintended operational and perhaps even technological knowledge from closely operating with other countries. The PLA could put such knowledge to use in future regional conflagrations that could include the United States. Also, Chinese involvement may have mixed results. In the counterpiracy example, the PLAN still has not fully integrated itself into the international coalition but rather mainly focuses on escorting Chinese merchant ships passing through the Gulf of Aden.

China as a Vigilante: Low International Receptivity with Chinese Interests Directly Targeted

This scenario paves the way for China to “go rogue” or act in a way that does not accord with either international norms or stated Chinese principles of noninterference. Potential examples include the PLA launching an operation in which it enters a foreign country without permission to rescue hostages. Another scenario might include preemptively stopping the imminent destruction of an oil pipeline or energy resource on foreign soil to avert severe consequences for Chinese economic interests. A more extreme scenario could include intervening to prop up a pro-China leader in the face of internal instability or rebellion. For China to completely defy the international community and host country preference in this manner, the level

of Chinese interests threatened would have to be such that domestic stability or party legitimacy is at stake. Given the backlash that such actions would create, potentially resulting in withdrawal of permission for existing access to foreign ports and bases, the PRC government is unlikely to undertake this type of action unless the situation is very dire.

Vigilante behavior would likely be the worst scenario for the United States, as it would pit the United States and its partners and allies against China. Also, given the minimal opportunities for consultation, China would be more likely to act in a way that is further destabilizing for the country in question, which could undermine other international efforts. Owing to the risks associated with this behavior, the United States should try to understand why Chinese leaders would feel compelled to take such action and attempt to mitigate or head off the crisis that would result.

China as a Free Rider: Low International Receptivity and Chinese Interests Affected Peripherally

In this final scenario, the international community is not particularly receptive to increased PLA involvement, yet Chinese interests are targeted alongside foreign interests and the PRC leadership feels impelled to act. With Chinese nationals in danger due to broader instability within a country, the leadership would be more likely to free ride off the security provisions of other nations, multilateral coalitions, and nongovernmental organizations. The internal debate would probably tip toward arguments about avoiding entanglements in complex and costly situations abroad, especially with other countries willing to take the burden. China already free rides to some extent through UN peacekeeping operations and the multilateral counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, which rely on other countries' logistics and port facilities. In this scenario, the PLA would continue or even expand its presence in these types of international operations. To augment its influence, the PRC government might also increase the use of political and economic incentives to build support among portions of the international community for PLA action should a security incident occur where Chinese interests are threatened.

This scenario is similar to what we see today, though international receptivity is probably moderate rather than poor at this point. The positive for the United States is that China would be forced to largely accept solutions provided by the international community to protect the country's interests, which ostensibly integrates it further into the international order.

The negatives include the potential for China to break away and exhibit vigilante behavior should it perceive serious threats to its interests that the international community is not sufficiently addressing. Another negative is that a free-riding China creates more financial burden for the United States and ties down U.S. assets at a time of increasingly constrained resources, while enabling China to more aggressively pursue its regional agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS

The above typology and associated scenarios illustrate that it is in the best interest of the United States and the international community to encourage China to be a team player and discourage the extreme action with minimal influence that is embodied in the vigilante type. There are operational risks to greater military cooperation with China. Further exposure to U.S. operations may facilitate China's attempts to steal U.S. military technology and knowledge. Also, the participation of the less-experienced, less-capable Chinese military with different tactics and caveats could severely constrain and complicate other participant countries' abilities to achieve their operational goals. The important question is under what conditions are these risks outweighed by the potential benefits. Evaluating these conditions is necessary because the United States may find itself in a world with a more active PLA regardless of its own preferences. Given this conclusion, we have four recommendations for U.S. leaders and policymakers.

First, when foreign interests collectively are threatened, the United States should encourage Chinese military involvement if China can contribute. Even with the operational risks, this is the best scenario in which to develop and practice ways to mitigate concerns. Active discussion on the topic between U.S. allies and partners can help pave the way for Chinese involvement in multilateral operations in which the PLA has not participated before or for the use of Chinese surface combatants as part of a multilateral coalition to protect key SLOCs in the event of specific threats. Combined operations could also produce positive externalities, such as increased professionalism, trust, and transparency on the part of the PLA. Welcoming China as a team player lowers the risk that the PRC will strike out on its own as a vigilante, which would likely lead to poor outcomes for the United States. Also, allowing China to free ride off the efforts and resources of others sets a bad precedent and squanders an opportunity to shape Chinese behavior in a way that better fits with the responsible stakeholder model.

Second, when Chinese interests are targeted and U.S. interests are not at stake, the United States should try to influence China's choices and actions to minimize unintended consequences or negative effects. This could include rallying U.S. allies and partners to back Chinese action to resolve a security issue, depending on the specific situation. Or it might include using the lack of foreign support for PLA involvement to attempt to tip China's calculus in the direction of pursuing nonmilitary options. The key is to understand the situation and the pressures on the PRC leadership, including domestic public opinion, well enough to shape an activist China or, if that seems unlikely, to prevent a potential vigilante China from engaging.⁷⁰

Third, the United States should broaden the scope of U.S.-China military exchanges both to reflect the PLA's increasingly routine presence abroad in new areas and to shape PLA involvement as much as possible to complement U.S. policy objectives. For example, it is likely that in the future U.S. naval forces will have greater (or even routine) interaction with the PLAN in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, and U.S. ground forces will increasingly encounter PLA ground forces through peacekeeping actions and potentially in counterterrorism and stability operations. Thus, U.S.-China military exchanges need to reflect this larger mission set by expanding beyond U.S. Pacific Command to include the combatant commanders responsible for U.S. Central Command, Africa Command, and European Command. These exchanges should focus on confidence building, awareness of operational methods to mitigate the risk of unintended consequences or crises, and military diplomacy. They should connect attachés around the world to build relationships in areas outside the Asia-Pacific region. Such interactions should also focus on helping China improve its capabilities in areas that complement U.S. policy objectives, such as counterterrorism, stability operations, and the securing and dismantling of weapons of mass destruction, which would be useful in a North Korea contingency. Cooperation between U.S. and Chinese ground forces—often less contentious than cooperation between the two states' naval and air forces—is a good place to expand military exchanges and exercises.

Fourth, the United States should take advantage of opportunities for closer international relationships as Chinese expeditionary capabilities expand. The reaction from other regional states—for example, Japan and India—illustrates that China's expeditionary capabilities are creating

⁷⁰ Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2011
~> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2011-02-21/advantages-assertive-china>.

some angst. India is certainly watching the PLAN to see if it establishes a routine naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and Japan will undoubtedly encounter the PLA under new legislation that allows the Japanese military to deploy overseas. In India's case, New Delhi might welcome a closer U.S.-India military relationship, particularly with regard to surveillance assistance in the Indian Ocean and the tracking of Chinese submarines should the PLAN continue regular deployments there. Allies such as Japan and Australia should be part of the discussion over how to react when both the PLA and the broader community are likely to become involved in a contingency, how to mitigate operational risk, and how best to encourage China to be a team player.

In conclusion, the leadership agenda, domestic public support, and emergence of relevant debate suggest that the United States should prepare for China's development and eventual employment of global expeditionary capabilities. While Chinese doctrinal development is underway, the issue of when and how China may use these capabilities is far from settled. Given this, the United States and its allies may be able to play a role in shaping China's approach to overseas operations. While the PLA conducting military operations beyond East Asia is bound to create risks, it also presents an opportunity for military cooperation and burden sharing. This article makes a first attempt to identify the factors that may determine when China will intervene abroad militarily and to systematically assess the costs and benefits to the broader community. The global landscape is changing, and by understanding the possibilities, the United States can begin to devise strategies and approaches that ensure the protection of U.S. interests while encouraging positive, responsible Chinese behavior. ◆

