

China Can't Stay Home

By *Oriana Skylar Mastro*

The Chinese armed forces are on the move—but to where? For over a decade, academics, policy wonks and government officials have been engaged in a relentless debate about Beijing's military capabilities and intentions. To some, China is an expansionist country akin to Wilhelmine Germany. Others argue that while China's assertive behavior in its regional island disputes is disconcerting, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is completely focused on domestic stability and therefore lacks global ambition.

This debate about current Chinese capabilities and intentions is widespread, fervent—and beside the point. While the Chinese leadership would prefer to stay focused on internal development and regional issues, facts on the ground will increasingly compel the CCP to develop some global operational capabilities. Specifically, the burgeoning need to protect commercial assets and Chinese nationals abroad will lead the country to develop some global power-projection capabilities, regardless of its current plans. Even though the Chinese leadership will embark on this path with very limited goals in mind, Chinese thinking on how and when to use force could change once its

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strategy, doctrine and capabilities evolve to incorporate these new roles.

While the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will seek an increased global presence, this does not mean it will begin fighting major wars and stationing troops abroad. If we define global military power by the standard of the United States, no other country qualifies. Even the second tier of established military great powers—such as Russia, France or the United Kingdom—would probably not be able to sustain major combat operations outside their respective regions. The question here is not whether China would have the capacity to invade and occupy far-off countries, as only the United States can, but whether, like other second-tier powers, it will develop the capacity to project limited but meaningful force outside its immediate region.

Contrary to the extremes of the current debate, the Chinese military will be neither hollow nor a juggernaut. It will be neither a third-rate force confined to its region nor one that will embark on large-scale overseas combat adventures. Instead, over the next decade the PLA will likely develop certain capabilities designed to protect Chinese overseas interests. Personnel recovery, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), and the ability to threaten other countries' assets to coerce, deter, compel or punish will be some of the main objectives of a global PLA.

There are real obstacles—technological, political and ideological—to the Chinese

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military's capacity to operate abroad, even on a limited scale. Scholars often point to China's failure to resolve these obstacles today as proof that there will still be impediments tomorrow. True, the PLA's experience with expeditionary operations has been limited. To date, China's participation in the antipiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden is the most notable example of the PLA conducting expeditionary operations. It is true that China currently has no bases abroad, no long-range logistics capabilities and only rudimentary satellite coverage. However, if motivated, China could have all of these assets by the end of the decade. At the turn of this century, the idea of China with an aircraft carrier or Chinese participation in peacekeeping operations seemed improbable. Today, the issue of a global expeditionary capability is already on the radar of the Chinese leadership. In 2013, for the first time, China's Defense White Paper included a section on defending overseas interests—and it has already taken steps down this path. There are three big reasons Beijing is likely to pursue this course.

First, in the near future, economic motivations will drive the development of China's limited global power-projection capabilities. Approximately twenty thousand Chinese companies have a presence abroad. Chinese firms operate in more than 180 countries and regions, creating a constant demand for government protection of these assets. Furthermore, Chinese overseas investment is growing. At \$60 billion, China's annual overseas foreign di-

rect investment (OFDI) in 2011 was twenty times the 2005 amount.

Energy and real-estate assets in particular have a high risk of being seized or damaged in anti-China protests or as a result of political instability. Almost half of the total Chinese overseas investment is in the energy sector, reaching nearly \$400 billion. Chinese overseas property investment is expected to exceed \$10 billion this year, while the total value of overseas real estate owned by Chinese people is around \$3 trillion. In 2013, Chinese property developers invested \$7.6 billion in the overseas market, which was a 124 percent increase from the year before. Images of damage to individuals' property could create a public outcry in a crisis that would be hard for Beijing to ignore.

As Chinese investments increase, threats to those assets will increase in tandem. This is especially the case in politically unstable countries where nationalization or seizure is always a possibility, or in countries that have ongoing territorial conflicts where anti-China protests have often resulted in damage to Chinese-owned property. While still a fledging phenomenon, some recent examples demonstrate why China might be driven to develop limited expeditionary capabilities to augment its response options. For example, in June 2007, a Chinese company from Shandong Province was attacked in Togo, resulting in nearly 150,000 renminbi of property loss. In 2012, local mine workers at a Chinese company in Zambia protested against delays in implementing a new minimum-wage bill and killed the manager.

In February 2013, Zambia's government seized control of a Chinese-owned coal company's assets for failing to comply with safety and environmental standards. And in May 2014, Vietnamese protesters set fire to Chinese industrial parks and factories to protest against China's claim in the South China Sea. A one-thousand-strong mob

increase," and included, for the first time, a section on protecting Chinese overseas interests. This document stressed the PLA's role in safeguarding Chinese economic activity around the world, especially as "security issues [pertaining to] overseas energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and Chinese



also set fire to a Taiwanese steel mill in Ha Tinh Province (most likely thinking it was Chinese), killing sixteen Chinese workers.

These incidents are occurring more frequently and are increasingly threatening to the CCP's strategic and political interests. Statements made by Chinese political and military leaders acknowledge that China's need for stable access to natural resources has expanded its interests beyond the region, while its capabilities lag behind. Wang Yi, in his first speech as China's foreign minister, outlined trends and principles in foreign policy, highlighting the need to align China's foreign policy with its expanding global interests. China's 2013 Defense White Paper noted, "Security risks to China's overseas interests are on the

nationals and legal persons overseas" are increasingly prominent.

The difference between China and many other countries is that the majority of investment is coming from the Chinese government directly or from state-owned enterprises. As one China watcher argued, "Investments abroad are much more important to Beijing's long-term strategy than assertive posturing in long-running territorial disputes." In this way, Beijing's rapid OFDI growth has created a major political stake for China, even more so than for other countries. The close connection to the government will give the CCP an even greater incentive to develop the military capabilities necessary to protect these huge, high-stakes investments.

Second, an increasing number of Chinese citizens are going abroad, with many migrating to politically unstable countries as part of an exported labor force or in search of financial gain. In the twelve months leading up to May 2014, Chinese nationals recorded ninety-eight million overseas trips—a number that has increased by ten million a year on average for the last four years. By 2020, that figure is expected to be approximately 150 million. These overseas Chinese, referred to as *haiwai gongmin*, expect their government to provide certain guarantees for their protection, known as *haiwai gongmin baohu*.

Domestic public support for the development of expeditionary capabilities is coalescing as more and more Chinese nationals find themselves in situations of danger due to misfortune or instability in their host nations. In April 2007, nine Chinese workers were killed and an additional seven were kidnapped at an oil field in Ethiopia; in 2011, four Chinese oil workers were kidnapped in Caquetá, Colombia; Chinese workers have been abducted multiple times in Sudan, with the most recent incident occurring in January 2013; and in May 2014, Boko Haram rebels from Nigeria kidnapped ten Chinese workers in northern Cameroon. Chinese nationals are also being targeted largely because of unpopular labor practices and general anti-China sentiment. Anti-China protests are on the rise overseas, with locals from Peru to Zambia upset over Chinese mining operations in their communities or human-rights abuses back in China. According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its embassies and consulates deal with an average of one hundred incidents a day regarding overseas Chinese nationals in danger. Between 2006 and 2010, six thousand Chinese citizens were evacuated from countries in upheaval, and in 2011 alone, another forty-eight thousand were

evacuated from Egypt, Libya and Japan. More recently, in June 2014, China evacuated about a thousand workers from Iraq as Islamic State militants took control of sections of the country.

In 2006, the risks to Chinese nationals abroad fueled the domestic demand for the Department of Consular Affairs to establish a division that could facilitate the protection of legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese nationals. Chinese leaders had started developing a system of “overseas Chinese protection” after the deaths of fourteen Chinese nationals in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2004. But there are currently 190,000 Chinese citizens overseas for every Chinese consular protection officer, a ratio that is thirteen times higher than Russia's and fifteen times that of Japan. Moreover, to date, efforts have mainly been confined to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and some in China have begun to complain that the government relies too heavily on enhancing citizen awareness of dangers and diplomatic mechanisms for citizen protection, rather than using military force. Chinese nationals express both a new expectation of government protection while overseas, as well as a lack of confidence in their government's mechanism for protecting its citizens, despite the massive and successful evacuation from Libya in 2011. A prominent Chinese public intellectual noted in the aftermath of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 tragedy that “China's capacity to engage in security operations outside of its national boundary still lags far behind” that of developed countries, and argued that “China has all the reason and right to turn the crisis and challenge into an opportunity to build up its security forces' capacity to protect overseas interests.”

There is also broader support for this shift in policy within the government

bureaucracy. A senior CCP official argued that China should allow private companies to develop operational ties with local police forces and provide security services in high-risk areas the way Blackwater (now Academi) does for the United States. While U.S. operations abroad are usually criticized in Chinese media, both the 2012 Navy SEAL operation that rescued two hostages in Somalia and President Barack Obama's assertion that the kidnapping of U.S. citizens would not be tolerated received tacit approval through positive Chinese media coverage.

The PLA has also been pushing for a greater role in protection of citizens overseas; for the first time, China's 2013 Defense White Paper emphasized the need to "protect Chinese people overseas," stating specifically that "when there is a war, riot or political disturbance, the army should be able to evacuate Chinese people swiftly." An editorial in the *China Daily* by a former PLA colonel captures this sentiment:

The PLA is also responsible for rescuing Chinese hostages in the event of such crises, and this is especially pertinent at a time when pirates, terrorists and armed kidnappers are operating on a greater scale in many parts of the world. The army should also act as a deterrent against those who attempt to harm Chinese people. We will not allow any repeat of such tragedies as the May 1998 riots in Indonesia, in which some 1,200 ethnic Chinese were killed.

As more and more Chinese nationals have been exposed to risks abroad, China has begun to respond militarily, trumpeting such expeditions as evidence of its growing capabilities. But as public expectations grow even faster, the CCP's credibility will be increasingly tied to its ability to swiftly and effectively protect Chinese interests in the farthest corners of the globe. The CCP has recognized this, with Premier Li

Keqiang stating in May 2014 during a visit to Angola:

As China is becoming more open, the number of Chinese companies and citizens overseas is increasing. Their legitimate rights and interests as well as personal security have become . . . increasingly prominent issues. Safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies and citizens is not only the inherent requirement of expanding the "opening up," but also due responsibilities of the party and the government.

Third, in addition to commercial demand and domestic pressure, the Chinese leadership's desire to create a positive international image could provide additional incentives to develop global expeditionary capabilities. International pressure for China to take on more global responsibilities creates international support for PLA expeditionary operations. A Chinese military with the ability to project power globally, even if only for a short period of time in relatively permissive environments, could contribute more to peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. China has sent over twenty-two thousand peacekeepers to participate in twenty-three different UN peacekeeping missions, and provides the largest number of troops for engineering, transportation and medical support among the 115 contributing countries. However, the international community has consistently demanded more from Beijing. In response, China agreed to increase its UN peacekeeping budget from just over 3 percent of the total budget in 2013 to more than 6 percent by 2015. In June 2013, China also agreed to deploy "comprehensive security forces" to Mali, sending combat forces to a UN operation for the first time. A proclaimed desire to contribute more to the global good could provide a legitimate and

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nonthreatening rationale for the development of power-projection capabilities.

The Chinese leadership has taken a broader view of its security interests, and many Chinese strategists recognize that the ability to deploy globally to aid other countries has a positive impact on Beijing's international image. This second-order effect will create support among party officials who believe that a positive international image is necessary for China's peaceful and successful rise. To facilitate China's involvement in global HADR missions and ensure that operations are conducted effectively, the Chinese government has already set up a working mechanism to coordinate responses among the relevant actors and agencies. Arguably, nonthreatening missions like HADR operations, NEOS and peacekeeping will allow China to build a global expeditionary force while mitigating an adverse regional response.

In short, Chinese commercial interests, domestic public opinion and the international community are creating the strategic demand, domestic support and legitimacy for a more global PLA. Given these factors, China's global power-projection goals will be real, but modest. An effective global capability is not inevitable—even if Beijing responds to these pressures and assigns the PLA more global missions, the PLA will still require significant development to succeed. China has clearly demonstrated it has the material capacity to develop the PLA quickly and comprehensively, but an effective global capability will demand some very specific changes to its current pos-

ture. China is particularly weak in the key enablers required for expeditionary capability—airlift, sealift and logistics. But if China invests in the right platforms and technologies—such as large transport aircraft and tankers, amphibious combat ships, hospital ships and landing-dock platforms, and a robust, space-based ocean-surveillance system—conducting limited global operations will become more possible. Likewise, new global missions such as personnel recovery and infrastructure protection would probably encourage the development of more special-operations forces, engineers and civil-military cooperation units.

At the same time, while acquiring the requisite military platforms and units is a formidable and obvious challenge, it is only one piece of the puzzle. The PLA will also face other organizational and doctrinal impediments to realizing a global expeditionary capability. First, effective and rapid deployment outside China's immediate neighborhood will require organizational reforms to enable more jointness between the PLA's services and with civilian agencies. Unlike in most operations to date, the complexity of contested operations abroad will require capabilities from multiple services and coordination with civilian entities. More ambitious organizational reforms could address the currently cumbersome command-and-control structures. These reforms would signal growing institutional capacity for global expeditionary operations. Second, the PLA would need to improve its individual and unit training to cope with new global missions. Today, field-training

exercises are notoriously scripted and unrealistic. More effective training will be required as the PLA deploys on increasingly risky operations abroad. Third, Beijing may consider revising its overseas military footprint. Despite the fears of many, China is unlikely to seek military alliances or to establish permanent military bases overseas. It would consider such moves ideologically anathema and strategically imprudent. It could, however, make arrangements to use existing facilities—in the Indian Ocean, for example—to restock and refuel.

The exact shape and capabilities of a global expeditionary PLA in a decade or so remain uncertain and contingent. While Beijing's motivations may be relatively narrow, such new and expansive PLA capabilities will have much wider implications for its traditional war-fighting goals as well as future articulations of strategy and interests.

Once the PLA has the ability to intervene abroad, and ideological barriers have been loosened, the Chinese leadership may become more interventionist. To date, China has been more willing to deviate from its policy of noninterference in other countries' internal affairs if it is doing so in a multilateral and permissive environment. However, as limited Chinese operations around the world become accepted as normal practice, this may open the doors for a more assertive China in its own region.

A more assertive China may be a positive development for the United States, especially if it leads to greater Chinese cooperation on issues such as energy security, stability in the Middle East and climate change. One possible future scenario is that China relaxes its noninterference principle as its interests expand and overlap with those of the United States, leading to coordination between the two

countries on global issues. But there are three reasons to question the feasibility of this ideal outcome. First, as the North Korean nuclear standoff has demonstrated, even when Chinese and American interests overlap, divergence in their preferred tactics can inhibit progress on the issue at hand. Second, China defines its core interests narrowly, in domestic terms, while the United States is more likely to view issues from the perspective of maintaining the current global order. The United States has historically attempted to influence the outside world to ensure its safety, but Chinese leaders believe that strengthening the country internally enhances its national security. This difference in strategic thinking can lead to different preference rankings for the types of international issues that need to be addressed, and which aspect of an issue is the most disconcerting. For example, both the United States and China regard North Korean denuclearization and stability as imperative, but while the United States prioritizes the former, China considers the latter to be a higher priority. Last, abandonment of the nonintervention principle to facilitate its new global expeditionary mission would mean the potential for Chinese interference in areas where the United States may prefer China's traditional hands-off approach.

Even if China develops a more robust global expeditionary capability, regional contingencies will still be the focus of Chinese war planning. However, the breadth of capabilities the PLA will acquire to conduct expeditionary operations would endow it with other options it presently lacks, and therefore may tempt China to expand the scope of those operations over time. Many of the capabilities required for HADR operations, NEOS, peacekeeping and personnel recovery missions are dual-use—that is, they will also strengthen China's

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traditional war-fighting capabilities against its weaker neighbors. Augmented sealift and airlift, advanced special-operations forces, a greater number of surface vessels and aircraft, and more experience for its troops could all encourage China to expand the scope of its interests and willingness to use force to protect those interests.

While the Chinese leadership may plan on building expeditionary forces primarily to address nontraditional threats, the increased capabilities may shape Chinese interests and preferred methods of achieving more contentious security objectives. Chinese strategists have already launched a debate about whether China should aspire to become a global military power. Currently, those debates are couched in discussions about how China should approach its territorial disputes, especially in the East and South China Seas. But influential thinkers such as Colonel Liu Mingfu, a former professor at the PLA National Defense University and author of *China Dream*, believe that China should aim to surpass the United States as the world's top military power. Additionally, in a March 2010 newspaper poll, 80 percent of those surveyed responded positively to the question "Do you think China should strive to be the world's strongest country militarily?" However, less than half of respondents approved of a policy to publicly announce such an objective.

The implications of a growth in Chinese power-projection capability for the United States and its regional partners are uncertain. China's increased military role and enhanced expeditionary capabilities

could create a balancing backlash among its Asian neighbors and contribute to instability in the region, as incentives for preventive war increase with rapid shifts in the regional balance of power. China could become confident in its ability to achieve its objectives by brute force alone, especially with domestic support. However, a global expeditionary PLA could also create a more assertive China that is positioned to provide international public goods, further enmeshing Beijing into the current world order and reducing the incentives for it to use force to resolve disputes.

Any projection about future intent and capabilities is by its nature contingent and uncertain. Current trends, if they continue, will prompt the Chinese leadership to develop a military capable of protecting Chinese interests and nationals globally, albeit on a limited scale. At the same time, a number of factors could change these trends. For example, if China were to engage in a war, even a small one, retrenchment and rebuilding might follow, which could delay the unfolding of this scenario. But as long as China persists in its double-digit annual increases in defense spending and GDP growth continues (even modestly), China should be able to simultaneously develop traditional war-fighting capabilities to address regional challenges and global expeditionary capabilities to confront threats farther from home. While flare-ups or resolutions of persistent regional issues may delay or accelerate this future scenario, they are unlikely to reverse China's course. Here comes the PLA. □