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Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

SEIZING ON WEAKNESS

ALLIED STRATEGY FOR COMPETING WITH CHINA'S GLOBALIZING MILITARY



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Cover: The PLAN destroyer Haikou (R), frigate Yueyang (L), and supply ship Qiandaohu (C) are seen conducting underway replenishment in the Pacific Ocean during the Rim of the Pacific multinational naval exercises on June 13, 2014. Credit: Hu Kaibing/Xinhua/Alamy

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Executive Summary

China's military is going global. In the coming decade, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) could be well-positioned to influence events and conduct a wide range of missions, including limited warfighting, beyond the Western Pacific. The United States and its allies and partners, who have enjoyed largely unobstructed access to the world's oceans for the last three decades, will need to adjust to new military realities as the PLA makes its presence felt in faraway theaters.

Washington and allied capitals should anticipate a future when a globalized PLA renders the operational environment far less permissive than they have enjoyed in the past. A decade hence, a globally present PLA will require the United States and its allies to revise assumptions about deterrence, reassurance, and warfighting across different regional theaters. The allied militaries will need to revisit their force structures, postures, day-to-day peacetime operations, and wartime planning as the forward presence of capable Chinese forces around the world becomes a fact of life. Given the velocity of the PLA's global ascent, it behooves allied policymakers to think productively about counterstrategies based on a sound assessment of Chinese power, including its strengths and weaknesses.

This study argues that an understanding of China's weaknesses as they relate to its global ambitions is required to formulate an effective allied response. These weaknesses offer insights into the costs that Chinese leaders will have to pay to go global. Importantly, some weaknesses are severe and susceptible to external pressure. In other words, the United States and its close allies may enjoy agency over certain Chinese weaknesses, furnishing them leverage that, if exercised, could yield strategic dividends. This report shows that, as the PLA goes global, it confronts three interrelated weaknesses that could constrain or complicate its expansion. These weaknesses could, in turn, inform U.S. and allied strategies in a long-term competition.

First, as a classic land-sea power, China faces an inescapable two-front dilemma in the continental and maritime directions, imposing built-in limits on its global ambitions. Beijing must always devote adequate resources to meet its commitments on land and at sea. Costly and protracted entanglement on one front could leave Beijing overexposed on the other.

Above all, China must avoid intense simultaneous rivalries on its continental and maritime flanks. Mao Zedong's "dual adversary" strategy in the 1960s that pitted Beijing against the United States and the Soviet Union has taught his successors the grave risks of such a two-front confrontation.

Chinese strategists possess a clear-eyed sense of the limits on Beijing's geostrategic choices. They recognize that China's decisive seaward turn, a precondition for going global, has been predicated on peace on its continental front. Over the past three decades, amity with Russia freed China to go to sea. They understand that Beijing's peace dividend on land is by no means permanent. The potential for continental challenges to undo China's global ambitions casts a long shadow over its strategic calculus. China's recent skirmishes with India along the Himalayan border could serve as a test case for determining how well Beijing can manage landward tensions even as it extends its reach at sea.

Second, the PLA's need to sustain a diversified force structure for contingencies near and far precludes a concentration of effort devoted entirely to global missions. The Chinese military must meet disparate and, at times, contradictory demands arising from Beijing's local and global commitments. The PLA must be prepared for threats along China's continental periphery, in offshore areas of the Western Pacific, and across the world's oceans. Unresolved local disputes along China's continental and maritime peripheries require the PLA to stay fixated on events close to home, often at the expense of its global plans. Nearby security challenges, then, are akin to a tax on the capacity of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to act on the world stage.

Potential flashpoints in offshore areas involving Taiwan, the Senkakus, or the Spratlys tie up contingency-specific capabilities that are not transferable to global missions. For instance, short-range ballistic missiles, shore-based tactical fighters, and coastal combatants would have limited utility for expeditionary operations. Every yuan Beijing spends on the PLA for offshore dangers is one fewer yuan that can be profitably invested in power projection forces. Meanwhile, the development of power projection itself will consume a significant amount of capital, magnifying the unpalatable trade-off choices that Chinese leaders must make to meet their objectives in the near seas, the far seas, and the interior.

Third, the PLA needs to close significant gaps in its overseas logistical infrastructure to obtain a credible global military posture. While the Chinese military will pursue its own brand of global access, it will need to develop a network of basing and logistical arrangements to sustain expeditionary operations. China's defense planners recognize that a large-scale effort is required to construct military-grade bases and dual-use facilities along key sea lanes. Each new base or facility and its host nation would generate their own unique political, diplomatic, economic, and legal demands as well as operational requirements. A basing network would multiply new commitments and liabilities.

Chinese strategists acknowledge that Beijing's lack of deep relationships with its partners could severely constrain its global quest. The U.S. experience shows that close ties do not

materialize overnight: they are forged by such intangibles as trust, shared values, institutionalized interactions, and a history of close cooperation. Most of China's ties with potential host nations lack these essential qualities. China's reflexive attempts to develop stronger bonds abroad through economic inducements may only yield limited results. Beijing may be able to arrange a wide range of access agreements with its counterparts. But the quality, durability, and reliability of those overseas facilities are likely to be uneven, if not shaky, particularly in times of crisis or war when Beijing would presumably need access most.

China's geostrategic, power projection, and overseas logistical weaknesses provide a basis for devising and evaluating allied responses. To apply their counterstrategies, policymakers should consider approaching weaknesses in the PRC's globalizing military in the following ways:

- Defense planners must determine which Chinese weaknesses can be productively subjected to allied strategy to increase China's difficulty in realizing its aims. Conversely, it is critical to ascertain which Chinese weaknesses may be immune to external pressure and are best left to play out on their own.
- Not all weaknesses should necessarily be subjected to allied strategy, even if they were vulnerable to external pressure. Some Chinese weaknesses should be left alone due to the strategic risks involved in targeting them. Policymakers need to judge whether allied options against PRC weaknesses might prove counterproductive or self-defeating.
- Allied decisionmakers should discern whether direct or indirect approaches should be applied against certain Chinese weaknesses. There may be circumstances when the allies should develop approaches that chip away at weaknesses. In other cases, speedy, bold, and visible action intended for maximal effect may prove more efficacious.
- The allies should recognize that Chinese weaknesses can change over time, for better or for worse. Beijing possesses agency over some weaknesses while it may have little choice over others. Some weaknesses may be ephemeral while others may worsen over time. Choosing when to apply pressure will thus be a key ingredient to allied success.
- The close allies need to be selective and prudent as they consider their strategies. Carefully discerning, differentiating, and rank ordering Chinese weaknesses will help allied decisionmakers prioritize and sequence their options and take calculated risks.

This study finds that weaknesses in China's globalizing military can be examined in terms of costs, which measure the resistance that the PLA will encounter as it goes global. The following provides typologies of costs to help determine how allied strategy could be applied against the PRC's weaknesses:

- There are *high economic costs* to going global. A power projection force and an overseas logistical infrastructure will come with a hefty price tag. Even a modest network of bases and an extra-regional fleet confined to the Indian Ocean could be quite expensive. An

expeditionary force would likely be far more costly than those dedicated to homeland defense and missions closer to home.

- Beijing's leaders must consider *opportunity costs*. Trade-offs are built into China's geostrategic calculus. The PRC must maintain a reasonable balance between its continental, near seas, and global commitments. The shift to a global military posture could intensify competition for scarce resources as the trade-offs between near seas missions and far seas missions sharpen.
- As China goes global and encounters unfamiliar circumstances, Beijing will need to cover its *startup costs*. Beijing's geostrategic reorientation will require qualitatively different kinds of skillsets and significant increases in resources to defeat the tyranny of distance. China will be climbing a steep learning curve as it seeks to obtain mastery of global power projection and its associated demands.
- The PRC will need to manage the *psychological costs* of going global. Chinese strategists exhibit deep paranoia about encirclement and being cut off at sea. They are predisposed to believe that hostile outside powers are determined to oppose the PLA's growing global presence. China's leaders are also likely to grow ever more sensitive to risk as they invest scarce capital in power projection forces.
- Beijing must pay for the cumulative *costs of empire*. China's ambitions for an overseas basing infrastructure are likely to beget new commitments. Such a basing network, even if modest in scale, would require political, diplomatic, and financial capital. Chinese leaders could find themselves entangled in host nation disputes. The PLA would also need to invest in the defense of its overseas bases against capable adversaries.

The cost considerations above furnish the United States and its close allies with various opportunities to complicate China's global plans. The report offers the following policy recommendations:

- The United States and its allies should recognize that the territorial status quo in the Western Pacific imposes a constraint on the PRC's global ambitions. Potential contingencies in the near seas consume significant resources at the expense of China's global plans. Conversely, if China were to upend the current order in its favor, including conquest of Taiwan, Beijing could open new strategic vistas to go global.
- The close allies should acknowledge that the preservation of the status quo in maritime Asia is closely linked to the globalizing rivalry with China. A credible defense of allied interests in the Western Pacific imposes a cost on the PLA's outward orientation. Similarly, a vigorous response to Chinese expansion on the world stage could potentially dilute Beijing's attention and resources for defending vital interests close to home.
- The allies possess options to force on China costlier choices between its urgent needs in the near seas and its longer-term plans for the far seas. The United States and its

partners should pursue strategies that compel Beijing to spread scarce resources across the near seas, far seas, and, to the extent possible, the continental periphery.

- In the near seas, measures to harden the frontline states, including Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, could go far to tie up more of the PLA's resources for contingencies in its immediate neighborhood. If these states were to pursue small, dispersed, and asymmetric force structures aimed at air and sea denial, they could induce China to invest more in near seas capabilities than it would otherwise prefer.
- The United States should develop new operational concepts, postures, capabilities, and technologies to ensure that its armed forces can survive and remain lethal in heavily contested areas along China's maritime periphery. Washington should coordinate with allied and partner militaries to maximize coalitional contributions in the near seas.
- The allies should sharpen further the local-global trade-offs by making the far seas an inhospitable environment for China's expeditionary forces and overseas bases. The United States and its allies should credibly demonstrate their capacity to hold at risk China's far seas fleet, forward-deployed forces, and the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that both supply overseas PLA forces and sustain the Chinese economy.
- The United States and its allies should recognize that this is not an exclusively military competition. They must not concede an open field to China in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Rather, the close allies should actively contest China's political and economic inroads in potential host nations by waging a coordinated diplomatic and information counteroffensive.
- The allies should draw attention to Chinese attempts at breeding dependencies among targeted states as leverage for obtaining access to overseas bases and facilities. The messaging should focus on China's transactional relationships with host nations that asymmetrically benefit Beijing and play up instances of China's untrustworthiness as a partner in areas unrelated to overseas basing.
- The close allies should tap into Beijing's psychological fears while showcasing allied strengths. Multinational naval exercises in the near seas and the far seas, as well as selective revelations of leap-ahead technologies and operational concepts that target China's vulnerabilities, could go far to undercut PLA's confidence. The allies should send a clear signal that Chinese aggression would be met with a coalitional response.
- The allies should acknowledge that there are limits to U.S. and allied agency over Chinese weaknesses. For the moment, they are limited in their collective capacity to steer China's relationships with its great continental neighbors, Russia and India, in directions that favor them. The close allies may have to settle for strategic opportunism to exploit China's dilemmas as a composite land-sea power.

- Washington and allied capitals should also recognize that the PRC's overseas military bases and dual-use facilities will not be uniformly vulnerable to external pressure. Some are likely to pose nettlesome diplomatic problems for allied planners. The close allies do not have a free hand everywhere and they will need to tailor their strategies according to the peculiar conditions of each PLA overseas base or facility.
- The allies should conceive of the globalizing PLA as an integral part of a long-term comprehensive competition. Over the next decade, Beijing will struggle with the startup costs of going global. In the longer run, China will encounter stiff economic headwinds as it copes with structural problems, such as demographic decline and debt.
- The close allies should incorporate time as a planning variable because China will be vulnerable to external pressures at different times for different reasons. Charting the non-linear trajectory of the globalizing PLA over time will be key to determining when and where to exploit its weaknesses.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

China’s military is going global. In the coming decade, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could be well-positioned to influence events and conduct a wide range of missions, including limited warfighting, beyond the Western Pacific. The United States and its allies and partners, who have enjoyed largely unobstructed access to the world’s oceans for the last three decades, will need to adjust to new military realities as the PLA makes its presence felt in faraway theaters. This is the emerging consensus in the U.S. policy community.

The Pentagon’s 2020 annual report on the military power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) foresees the PLA assuming a more active role on the world stage to defend Beijing’s proliferating interests abroad. It finds that China is seeking to expand its overseas logistical and basing infrastructure—encompassing over a dozen candidate host nations—that would enable its armed forces to project power far from Chinese shores. It further contends, “A global PLA military logistics network could both interfere with U.S. military operations and support offensive operations against the United States as the PRC’s global military objectives evolve.”¹

Similarly, the Defense Intelligence Agency describes the PLA’s first overseas military base in Djibouti and “probable follow-on bases at other locations” as a “turning point in the expansion of PLA operations in the Indian Ocean and beyond.” The agency further asserts, “These bases, and other improvements to the PLA’s ability to project power during the next decade, will increase China’s ability to deter by military force and sustain operations abroad.”² The 2019 annual report to Congress by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence forecasts, “China’s leaders will try to extend the country’s global economic, political, and military reach while using China’s military capabilities and overseas infrastructure...to diminish US

1 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, 2020), p. 128.

2 Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Bethesda, MD: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), p. 29.

influence.” It, too, believes that China “probably is exploring bases, support facilities, or access agreements in Africa, Europe, Oceania, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.”³

The authoritative Congressional Research Service report on China’s naval modernization notes, “Chinese navy ships are conducting increasing numbers of operations away from China’s home waters, including the broader waters of the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the waters surrounding Europe, including the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea.”⁴ It goes on to cite Admiral Philip Davidson, the commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, who observed that, by late 2019, the Chinese navy had deployed globally more frequently in the last 30 months than the preceding 30 years. These ongoing and prospective global activities are a far cry from forecasts as recent as five years ago, attesting to how quickly the PLA has exceeded Western estimates.⁵

Why a Globalizing PLA Matters

China’s globalizing military adds a new and worrisome dimension to U.S. and allied defense planning. China’s growing military power over the past two decades was once largely a challenge to U.S. regional strategy in the Western Pacific. In that period, the PLA invested heavily in counter-intervention or anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities intended to thwart American use of and access to the global commons along China’s maritime periphery should deterrence fail. In response, Washington prioritized the Indo-Pacific as the primary theater while the U.S. military devised strategies, plans, and new operational concepts to survive and operate effectively in Asia’s increasingly contested commons. While that stage of Chinese military modernization was concerning, the PLA’s pursuit of a denial strategy and related force structure meant that it lacked the power projection forces necessary to fundamentally alter the territorial status quo, either in the Western Pacific or beyond.

The PLA’s steady progression toward faraway theaters suggests that the close allies can no longer afford to make such assumptions or stay fixated on events in the Western Pacific alone. As the PLA goes global, the United States and its close allies need to anticipate Beijing’s geopolitical and military test in distant theaters. They must think forward to a near future when the struggle for the command of the commons could take place in multiple theaters at once. Such is the brave new world that the allies will likely inhabit in the coming years.

3 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2019), p. 25.

4 Ron O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), p. 27.

5 See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, 2015), p. 43. In contrast to the 2020 report, the 2015 edition describes China’s global aims in largely benign terms. China’s power projection capabilities, it claims, are in part designed to uphold its security interests abroad as “a stakeholder in ensuring stability.” It judges that Beijing would employ forces to extend its “maritime security buffer” and to fulfill constabulary missions.

The United States and its allies have not had to think seriously about a multi-theater military problem against a single adversary since the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union's rapid rise as a major naval power, fueled by a massive buildup that began in the mid-1960s, gave rise to doubts about American global dominance of the seas. Half a century ago, the Soviet navy began to demonstrate its capacity to deploy and show its presence globally, from the Arctic to the South Atlantic and from the Mediterranean to the Pacific Ocean.⁶ The Okean '70 global naval exercise and others that followed it vividly demonstrated the Soviet navy's ability to counter its American adversary in multiple theaters simultaneously. The Soviet Union's emergence as a global naval power in the 1970s undermined fundamental assumptions about the U.S. Navy's supremacy over the world's oceans.⁷

Today, the Chinese navy is undergoing a remarkable transformation of its own that rivals, if not surpasses, the Soviet naval danger. The U.S. Defense Department now acknowledges that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy, or PLAN) is "numerically the largest navy in the world."⁸ The Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that the Chinese navy could have as many as 425 battle force ships by 2030, up from 360 in 2020.⁹ As the Chinese navy's metamorphosis continues apace, the American sea service could once again find itself on its back foot, struggling to match China's resources given U.S. global commitments. While naval power is an essential element of China's expanding operations and influence abroad, the PLA's other services are also developing capabilities to operate far from the homeland.

A globalizing PLA could pose problems in both peacetime and war. For years, Beijing has been driven by a deep yearning for respect and clout on the international stage commensurate with its growing power and interests. A global military would be one effective implement of statecraft for China to speak up for itself. Military diplomacy would burnish China's international reputation while regular training and exercises with counterparts around the world would strengthen ties with partners and friends. Such contacts could create opportunities to realign relations in critical regions, drawing states closer to the PRC's orbit. New security partnerships involving different types of understandings and even guarantees could emerge as Chinese global military power extends its reach and influence.

A capable Chinese expeditionary force could conduct latter-day gunboat diplomacy to demonstrate Beijing's resolve and to overawe local states in faraway theaters. The PLAN has already made its presence felt across the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Baltic Sea. In the not-so-distant future, the Chinese navy, along with the

6 John Lehman, *Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea* (New York: Norton, 2018), pp. 31-33 and 36-37; and Seth Cropsey, *Mayday: The Decline of American Naval Supremacy* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2013), p. 96.

7 John B. Hattendorf, ed., *U.S. Naval Strategy in the 1970s: Selected Documents* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2007), pp. xi-xii.

8 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2020, p. 44.

9 O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization*, p. 31.

other services, could engage in shows of force in extra-regional theaters, such as the Persian Gulf, to interpose China in local disputes deemed important to Beijing's interests. China's potentially hostile presence in areas that were previously the preserve of the United States would almost certainly complicate Washington's geostrategic calculus.

A global PLA would also furnish Chinese statesmen and commanders with a variety of military options hitherto unavailable to them in wartime scenarios. Chinese expeditionary forces could be used to engage in commerce raiding, harassment attacks against enemy bases, blockade and counter blockade operations, local sea denial and sea control, limited power projection ashore, and coercion against weaker powers. In a major contingency close to home, Beijing could employ its forward-deployed units elsewhere to open a new front or to maneuver around the primary theater along exterior lines to strike deep at enemy bases. Such peripheral operations or the threat to conduct them could compel China's opponent to draw, possibly substantial, resources and attention away from the main theater to cope with potential dangers in more distant areas. Indeed, Beijing could stimulate adversary responses that are disproportionate to the actual threat it is posing. The diversionary effects of the PLA's away team, even if modest in size and capabilities, could thus have an outsize impact on its adversary's strategy.

Washington and allied capitals should therefore anticipate a future when a globalized PLA renders the operational environment far less permissive than they have enjoyed in the past. A decade hence, a globally present PLA will require the United States and its allies to revise assumptions about deterrence, reassurance, and warfighting across different regional theaters. At the same time, the U.S. and allied militaries will need to revisit their force structures, postures, day-to-day peacetime operations, and wartime planning as the forward presence of capable Chinese forces around the world becomes a fact of life. Given the velocity of the PLA's global ascent, it behooves allied policymakers to think productively and creatively about countermeasures and strategies based on a sound and balanced assessment of Chinese power, including its strengths and weaknesses.

How Allied Strategy Can Leverage Chinese Weaknesses

This study argues that an intimate understanding of China's weaknesses as they relate to its global ambitions is required to formulate an effective allied response. It contends that those weaknesses offer insights into the costs, difficulties, and barriers that Chinese leaders will have to overcome to go global. Importantly, some weaknesses are severe and susceptible to external pressure. In other words, the United States and its close allies may enjoy a sufficient degree of agency over Chinese weaknesses, furnishing them leverage that, if exercised, could yield strategic dividends.

To advance the hypothesis that China's weaknesses can inform allied strategy, this study draws heavily from open-source Chinese-language literature to examine weaknesses as strategists in China understand them. By evaluating weaknesses through Chinese eyes, outside

observers can obtain a proximate view of how Beijing's leaders assess their nation's relative position in global power. Such an on-the-ground perspective could offer insights that would otherwise be unavailable in English-language sources.

This analytic focus on weakness is based on the premise that going global is universally hard. A global military posture is among the most difficult undertakings that any aspiring great power can pursue. To date, only a few powers in the world have developed the power projection capabilities and the associated infrastructure to deploy and sustain forces globally. Fewer still have achieved the world-spanning presence of the U.S. military, and the British before it, over the last two centuries.

The past is indicative of the challenges ahead for Beijing. According to one study, out of the seven continental powers that pursued maritime transformation, a precondition for going global, only two achieved partial successes while the others failed. And the qualified successes took place in antiquity. As Carnes Lord notes, if Beijing were to achieve greatness at sea, "it would be a remarkable if not singular event in the history of the last two millennia."¹⁰ China is therefore embarking on an ambitious project that will require considerable skills and resources to join the rarefied club of global military powers.

To be clear, the past does not predetermine the future. Beijing could well defy history. This study does not claim that Chinese weaknesses, even severe ones, are insuperable. This report does not argue that China's weaknesses would preclude Beijing from achieving its global ambitions. Nor does the study contend that China's weaknesses would so prolong its global project—by years, if not decades—that the United States and its allies would be afforded ample time to respond.

On the contrary, this study recognizes that Beijing has actively sought to mitigate or reverse the various weaknesses that could stand in the way of its plans to go global. Given China's record of success and progress, including its decade-long presence in the Indian Ocean, there is good reason to expect that Beijing and its armed forces will overcome the obstacles to going global. This is not the time to underestimate China or to downplay the challenges the PLA will likely pose across the world's oceans. The close allies must not take comfort in China's weaknesses. Waiting or wishing for Beijing to fail is not an option.

It is precisely because China's prospects are so worrisome that Washington and regional capitals must pay close attention to weaknesses. As this study contends, the PRC's weaknesses, some of which are structural in character, are real. They impose costs on and complicate China's strategy of globalizing its military. A better understanding of these weaknesses would help the United States and its allies diagnose Beijing's challenge. Moreover, a deep study of Chinese weaknesses would inform how U.S. and allied strategies can exploit those weaknesses.

10 Carnes Lord, "China and Maritime Transformation," in Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, eds., *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), p. 451.

These weaknesses may present opportunities to slow China's ascent in distant theaters, multiply the difficulties it might face overseas, or derail entirely some of its plans.

It is worth noting that weaknesses are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and will evolve over time as China invests the time and resources to neutralize the weaknesses or to convert those weaknesses into strengths. Time is thus of the essence. The United States and its allies must act now to leverage Chinese weaknesses while they are still susceptible to manipulation and exploitation.

This study is a preliminary step in assessing how Chinese weaknesses may inform a robust allied strategy in a long-term competition. It offers a roadmap and three case studies designed to help allied policymakers consider how they could apply strategy against weaknesses associated with a globalizing PLA. Chapter 2 surveys the existing literature on Chinese weaknesses across different disciplines. It finds that scholars and analysts from various fields offer different diagnoses of China's weaknesses and frequently recommend divergent and even contradictory policy prescriptions for dealing with those weaknesses. Chapter 3 provides an analytical framework for assessing Chinese weaknesses. It illustrates how weaknesses and their severity can be understood as impediments to Beijing's ability to achieve its long-term objectives. While the case studies that follow focus primarily on China's military weaknesses, this framework on weakness is broadly applicable to other areas of the Sino-U.S. competition, including the political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and cultural domains. This framework may be of use to policymakers in evaluating other Chinese weaknesses and determining whether and how U.S. and allied strategy can leverage those weaknesses.

Chapter 4 surveys the Chinese literature on China's geostrategic predicament as a composite land-sea power. Chinese strategists recognize that Beijing must engage constantly in a balancing act between its landward and seaward commitments. Chapter 5 assesses how Chinese analysts evaluate their nation's force structure tradeoffs in pursuit of global power projection capabilities. Due to its complex geography, China faces permanent, conflicting force structure requirements that could potentially dilute China's defense investments across differing capability areas, stressing the PLA's ability to achieve Beijing's aims. Chapter 6 unearths a growing body of work on the expected overseas logistical infrastructure challenges that the PLA will need to overcome to go global. It finds that non-material factors, such as the quality of potential host nations, could prove most problematic for China's global quest. Chapter 7 draws out the strategy implications for the close allies. In particular, it focuses on severe weaknesses that, if subjected to allied strategy, could confer significant leverage and pay strategic dividends to the allies. Chapter 8 concludes with recommendations on how future research can carry forward the study's analytical framework and preliminary findings.

CHAPTER 2

Competing Voices on Chinese Weaknesses

Thinking about China's weaknesses and their implications for U.S. and allied strategy is not straightforward. This is not because Chinese weaknesses are not well understood. On the contrary, Western analysts have puzzled over many of the PRC's weaknesses for years. Rather, the recent debates—and the assumptions underlying them—draw the discussion about Chinese weaknesses in different and frequently divergent directions. Some perspectives are indifferent to weakness while some are acutely sensitive to weakness. These conflicting views, in turn, propose policy recommendations that are at odds with each other. It therefore behooves policymakers to take stock of relevant discourse on Chinese weaknesses to understand how this study fits in the larger literature and how it adds value to policy deliberations.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a selective survey of scholarship on Chinese weaknesses. Given that analysts from many different disciplines have subjected the PRC's various weaknesses to scrutiny, an exhaustive literature review that covers all relevant fields is beyond the scope of this study.¹¹ As such, not all schools of thought or expert views are represented below. Rather, this chapter offers a small sampling of writings by leading scholars in their respective fields that are most relevant to this study.

It is important to acknowledge that the various scholarly disciplines that study the People's Republic in all its dimensions are not monoliths and defy simplistic generalizations. Members of each field hold diverse views. Some belong to more than one discipline. Scholars and analysts within the same field are often at odds over a variety of theories and findings about

11 Over the past decade, scholars have written extensively about China's socio-economic weaknesses that could derail its ascent. See Michael Pettis, *Avoiding the Fall: China's Economic Restructuring* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013); Carl Minzner, *End of An Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival is Undermining Its Rise* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018); Dinny McMahon, *China's Great Wall of Debt: Shadow Banks, Ghost Cities, Massive Loans and the End of the Chinese Miracle* (London: Abacus, 2018); and George Magnus, *Red Flags: Why Xi's China is in Jeopardy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

the PRC. Some have altered their assessments as China underwent dizzying changes and transformations over the past two decades. The literature surveyed below thus represents snapshots of individual or group perspectives at specific junctures in China's extraordinary ascent. It is possible that the analyses produced at those times no longer reflect the views of the authors today.

This study neither endorses nor rejects the scholarship summarized below, which readers should judge for themselves. Rather, the goal is to illustrate the distinctive approaches that some experts have adopted to understand and interpret Chinese weaknesses, to weigh the relative importance of Chinese weaknesses, and to consider the policy implications of Chinese weaknesses. In doing so, this chapter highlights the varying logic and assumptions that have informed the study of the PRC's weaknesses. It finds that different points of departure frequently lead to divergent diagnoses and policy prescriptions. This chapter shows the analytical pitfalls that either undersell or oversell Chinese weaknesses. It argues that analysts and policymakers should develop methodologies for thinking productively about Chinese weaknesses as an element of strategy formulation in a competitive context.

It's All About Power

Scholars primarily concerned with aggregate measures of power exhibit a proclivity to extrapolate Chinese power linearly. Such a power-based analytic approach has inclined these experts to hold an exaggerated view of China's future growth and prowess. The prominence lent to power has also predisposed leading scholars to downplay or ignore Chinese weaknesses, dismissing them as a less relevant factor compared to the role of national power behind China's ascent. Consequently, their policy prescriptions for dealing with what they predict will be a very strong China are rather extreme: either contain or appease Beijing.

John Mearsheimer argues that China's latent power—population size and wealth—promises a far more serious threat to U.S. primacy than previous great power rivals that had sought to challenge the United States. If China were to achieve per capita gross national income comparable to South Korea or Hong Kong by mid-century with a population three times larger than that of the United States, then China could “become so powerful that the United States will not be able to contain it and prevent it from dominating Asia.”¹² China's latent power would dwarf all of the other aspiring challengers to the United States in the twentieth century, including Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Even if China were to fall short economically, Beijing would still likely have accumulated enough power to attempt a shot at regional hegemony. Such is the logic of power.

In *Destined for War*, Graham Allison employs such broad measures as gross domestic product (GDP) in both purchasing power parity and current exchange rate terms, value of trade, and

12 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014), p. 388.

the size of foreign exchange reserves to compare Chinese power relative to that of the United States.¹³ Measured by purchasing power parity, China's GDP had already surpassed the United States as early as 2014 and the economic gap is expected to grow much further in the coming years. He goes on to list the various measures of Chinese power, including China's infrastructure, education, health care, innovation base, and military prowess, that demonstrate the Middle Kingdom's ascendance. Allison concludes that this "elementary arithmetic" of China's burgeoning strategic weight would make it virtually impossible for the United States "to defy the laws of economic gravity." Indeed, "China enjoys such superiority in its balance of economic power," he asserts, "that many other states have no realistic option but to comply with its demands." In short, Washington would have to reckon with a "new balance of power" underwritten by China.

To Hugh White, national power derives from "one fundamental source, and that is sheer economic scale."¹⁴ Economic prowess, particularly the enormous size of the Chinese workforce, distinguishes China from other challengers to American primacy. According to White, China's path to economic dominance, which would in turn position it to challenge the United States, rests on "a simple sum: the amount produced by each worker, multiplied by the number of workers." By this calculus, the increasing productivity of Chinese workers would have a multiplying effect on GDP size, enabling China to overtake the United States in economic heft. China could then convert its great wealth into different forms of power and influence. While he acknowledges many of China's liabilities that could slow its ascendance, White contends that "the power of numbers" would likely overcome the countervailing trends.

These power-based assessments have in turn deeply colored their predictions about the future and their prescriptions for U.S. and other Western responses to China's rise. Mearsheimer foresees an intense security competition between China and the United States and a strong American reaction to forestall China's quest for regional hegemony. He argues, "The United States will go to great lengths to contain China and do what it can to render it incapable of ruling the roost in Asia. In essence, the United States is likely to behave toward China largely the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War."¹⁵ Specifically, as core elements of a broad containment strategy, he expects Washington to forge a counterbalancing coalition akin to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to reinforce its naval dominance to blunt China's global power projection capabilities.

White, by contrast, calls for a grand bargain between the United States and China to dampen the security dilemmas and the pressures for conflict that inevitably arise from dramatic shifts in the balance of power. He urges Washington to come to an understanding with Beijing about Asia's order before Chinese power reaches a tipping point where China could dictate terms

13 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. 6.

14 Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 41.

15 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 384.

to the United States about the region's future. In his view, the best way to avoid a Chinese *fait accompli* or a great power conflict is for the United States to accommodate China's rise through a series of concessions. Such a deal would require Washington to accept the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), cede a sphere of influence to China, and acknowledge that it can no longer maintain military primacy in Asia.¹⁶

While Allison does not advocate for a specific policy response, he identifies four possible options, of which three lean toward concessions to or cooperation with China. He contends that the United States could accommodate China by ceding a sphere of influence to Beijing, including over Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. Washington could pursue *détente* with Beijing by agreeing to curtail criticism of China's human rights record and to reduce its military operations along the mainland periphery in return for certain limits on Chinese power or behavior. The United States could reorient its relationship with China by focusing on global challenges of mutual interest, such as climate change. Finally, Washington could seek to undermine Beijing by fomenting unrest or by exposing the illegitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

Beware Chinese Weaknesses

Some scholars within the China-watching community are all too aware of the PRC's many weaknesses. Their sensitivity to China's apparent fragility has conditioned them to counsel caution. They see Chinese failings as a source of danger. Beijing's insecurities about its weaknesses, they claim, would incline it to lash out at the world. Furthermore, should China succumb to those weaknesses and fall into disarray, then internal chaos could spill over into the broader international system, producing a contagion effect. As such, Western policymakers, in their view, should at minimum keep those weaknesses at arm's length or, better yet, help China shore up those weaknesses.

Susan Shirk's *Fragile Superpower* details many of the internal weaknesses that China's outward manifestations of great strength have helped to disguise. As she contends, "Although China looks like a powerhouse from the outside, to its leaders, it looks fragile, poor, and overwhelmed by internal problems."¹⁷ Her list of domestic woes includes the looming demographic crisis, the creaky banking system, the need to maintain job growth to keep a large and potentially restive population employed, the growing inequality between the rich and the poor, rampant corruption among the ruling elites, and the government's inability and unwillingness to meet the surging demands for social services and environmental protections.¹⁸ At the same time, the regime must manage unity within the Chinese Communist Party, guard against

¹⁶ White, *The China Choice*, pp. 143-149.

¹⁷ Susan Shirk, *Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 256.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-34.

mass social unrest, and maintain absolute control over its military, imperatives that sap Beijing's energies.

David Lampton is similarly mindful of China's institutional shortfalls that could derail its rise. He identifies the weaknesses in the central and local governments' capacity to meet growing domestic demands and to deliver essential public services as the nation's most decisive challenge.¹⁹ Similar to Shirk's assessment, Lampton's list of internal problems include demographics, income inequality, access to health services and education, the growth of new social classes, labor unrest, the environment, corruption, and the stability of the financial system. China's liabilities lead him to conclude that, "The PRC is most accurately understood as a developing country. While it possesses large pools of excellence, it has far larger oceans of domestic poverty and weakness that will preoccupy its leaders for a considerable period."²⁰

David Shambaugh's study weighs the CCP's institutional strengths and weaknesses, its capacity to adapt to internal and external challenges, and its prospects for maintaining its monopoly of political power. He tests whether the various factors that contributed to the collapse of communist party-states in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact are discernible in China. The economic, political, social, military, and international factors, numbering almost seventy, includes such risks as fiscal pressures on the government, corruption, growing social demands, and moral decay within society. Tellingly, Shambaugh finds, "When one examines these categories—political, social, cultural, and coercive—it is striking just how many of the intrinsic and systematic factors that led to the implosion of these former communist states *are present* [emphasis in original] in China today."²¹

When Shambaugh examines China's global ambitions and posture, he sees a "partial power."²² While he acknowledges that China is increasingly visible on the world stage, many of its weaknesses preclude it from exerting meaningful influence and from making its presence felt. As Shambaugh states, "China's global posture is beset by multiple weaknesses—not the least of which are domestic—and that the nation's strengths are not as strong as they seem on face value."²³ He contends that China's ability to fulfill global security missions is imbalanced. While he acknowledges that China's missile, space, and cyber forces possess global power projection capabilities, he sees conventional military services, such as the navy and the air force, lagging in their expeditionary roles. The Chinese air force is "many years away" from deploying the capacity to operate far from the mainland periphery while the Chinese navy

19 David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 214.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

21 David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 164.

22 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 309.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

faces “daunting” challenges to develop the logistical foundations to qualify as a genuine blue-water force.²⁴

Thomas Christensen’s analysis of the PRC’s challenge to the United States similarly draws attention to the limits on China’s rise. These barriers include constraints on innovation, demographics, the structural economic imbalance that favors trade over domestic consumption, lack of developed financial institutions, corruption, debt, absence of property rights, and lasting environmental damage. He discerns the glaring qualitative inferiority of China’s military relative to the United States. Unlike its American rival, many PLA platforms are not modern by Western standards, it lacks real-world operational and warfighting experiences, and it does not enjoy high-quality military allies.²⁵ Nevertheless, as Christensen has long argued, Beijing would still strive to deter or defeat a materially stronger adversary “through a combination of skill, timely strikes on key targets, and superior political resolve.”²⁶

Unlike scholars who rely on gross measures of power to understand the PRC’s rise, some China watchers tend to be far more sensitive to Chinese weaknesses and their constraining effects on power. This sensitivity has in turn informed their recommendations for how the United States and the West should respond to China’s ascent. Although the China experts cited above provide unique contributions to the policy debate, their works generally advocate for the longstanding “engage but hedge” strategy, which blends accommodation with balancing.²⁷

For Shirk, Chinese weakness rather than strength is the source of potential danger in Sino-American relations. Internal instability could persuade Chinese leaders to instigate an international crisis in order to galvanize public support in favor of the regime and to deflect attention away from the regime’s shortcomings. Alternatively, Beijing could feel compelled to take a much harder line against a rival than it would otherwise prefer to appear strong before domestic audiences and to satiate nationalist sentiments at home. The policy implication is that the United States should avoid undertaking actions that could inflame public passions in China, stoke Chinese fears, or heighten Beijing’s insecurities. She thus calls on Washington to dial back its objections to China’s repressive policies at home, avoid strengthening Japan’s military power, work through China to facilitate its reunion with Taiwan, show Beijing due deference and respect, and eschew ostentatious shows of military force even as the United States maintains its forward presence in Asia to deter aggression.²⁸

24 Ibid., p. 288 and p. 293.

25 Thomas Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), pp. 81-89.

26 Ibid., p. 98.

27 See Allison, *Destined for War*, p. 219; and Jonathan T. Ward, “China and the Major Powers,” *National Review*, June 25, 2019, available at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/06/china-major-powers-global-affairs-brave-new-world/>.

28 Shirk, *Fragile Superpower*, pp. 261-268.

Echoing Shirk, Lampton observes, “Even though outsiders are most vigilant about areas of PRC strength, China’s weakness requires equal or greater attention. America needs to accept that China is a poor, overloaded great power, and it needs to cooperate with China on developmental issues while treating its strengths with respect.”²⁹ Lampton expresses concern that trouble at home could induce Chinese leaders to lash out abroad. Therefore, it is incumbent on the United States to avoid exacerbating Chinese weaknesses. He is particularly skeptical about policies that would seek to coerce China based on assessments of Chinese weaknesses, judging that coercive efforts would likely be “unnecessary, infeasible, and reckless.”³⁰ He is equally doubtful about any attempts to blunt the growth of Chinese power. His skepticism rests on a longstanding proposition that a strong China is far preferable to a weak China, a condition that had wreaked havoc in the first half of the twentieth century.

Christensen, too, calls on Washington to compete with Beijing through a combination of “strength and diplomatic moderation.” He advises, “The trick for U.S. leaders is how to maintain a strong military, economic, and diplomatic presence in East Asia without triggering a defensive and destabilizing reaction in Beijing.”³¹ In his view, the United States should actively engage China economically and diplomatically while discouraging bullying behavior. American leaders should find common ground with their Chinese counterparts on global governance, including climate change, proliferation, and humanitarian crises. To Christensen, an American campaign to isolate China diplomatically and to damage the Chinese economy would be “extremely ill advised.” He repeats Lampton’s admonition that a weakened China wracked by internal problems would pose more problems than if China were strong and stable. A feeble China would likely withdraw its cooperation from global governance, become a source of global problems, such as proliferation, and “might be much more neuralgic and internationally conflict-prone.”³²

Evolving Thinking About Chinese Military Weaknesses

In the subfield of Chinese military studies, there has been no shortage of evidence that China’s armed forces have suffered from a variety of weaknesses over decades. In the early 2000s, analysts assessed that the PLA would still struggle to keep up with the West in the 2020s. Given its enduring weaknesses, the Chinese military was not perceived as an object to be feared, much less an object to be probed for its weaknesses. Rather, the budding U.S. relationship with the PLA emerged as a laboratory for military exchanges to manage mutual threat perceptions. Yet, as the PLA progressively modernized and improved its capabilities in the intervening years, recent studies have begun to consider explicitly U.S. and allied strategies tailored to exploit Chinese weaknesses. But, this area remains relatively underdeveloped.

29 Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power*, p. 266.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

31 Christensen, *The China Challenge*, p. 293.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

For decades, the PLA suffered from a terrible reputation for its backwardness relative to the West. Typifying Western attitudes about the Chinese military's qualitative inferiority in the 1990s, a familiar refrain in Washington think tanks at the time was that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be akin to a "million-man swim."³³ The West's judgments that the Chinese military would be hard-pressed to catch up persisted well into the early 2000s. An independent task force under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations asserted that the PLA "is at least two decades behind the United States in terms of military technology and capability."³⁴ Given America's superiority in maritime and aerospace power, areas of persistent Chinese weakness, the task force went on to predict that "the balance between the United States and China, both globally and in Asia, is likely to remain decisively in America's favor beyond the next twenty years."³⁵ In other words, U.S. military primacy would remain largely unchallenged well into the 2020s.

David Shambaugh, citing official and independent assessments of that period, agreed that "China's military remained at least twenty years out of date across the board."³⁶ The PLA's lackluster defense industrial base, the West's arms embargo against China, and some select arms transfers from Russia led him to conclude that "the PLA will have difficulties closing the conventional weaponry and defense technology gap with Japan and the West. Indeed, these are steadily widening."³⁷

Not surprisingly, such sanguine views inclined analysts at the time to propose a more collaborative U.S. policy toward China. The prevailing narrative was that China's military was not to be feared, much less its weaknesses targeted. Washington, so went this line of reasoning, should do more to understand the PLA better and to mitigate the unintended consequences of misunderstandings and misperceptions between the two militaries. Indeed, reflecting the mood of that era, the independent task force and Shambaugh devoted significant attention to promoting military exchanges and dialogue between the United States and China.³⁸

More recent scholarly works are equally sensitive to Chinese military weaknesses even as they acknowledge the substantial advances that China has made in modernizing its forces. Not only has the PLA closed critical qualitative gaps that separated it from the U.S. military, it has also likely reached technological parity in niche areas. And, unlike earlier studies of the preceding

33 For a corrective to this condescending view, see Lyle Goldstein, "The One Part of China's Military That Everyone Forgets (At Their Peril)," *The National Interest*, September 30, 2016, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-one-part-chinas-military-everyone-forgets-their-peril-17894>.

34 Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force, *Chinese Military Power* (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), p. 2, available at <https://www.cfr.org/report/chinese-military-power>.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

36 David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 328.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 330.

38 Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force, *Chinese Military Power*, pp. 64-73; and Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*, pp. 330-353.

decade, American analysts have begun to pay more attention to Chinese military weakness as a potential source of U.S. leverage.

Roger Cliff's comprehensive study identifies "critical weaknesses" that would serve as a drag on China's otherwise impressive strides in doctrine, hardware, personnel, and training.³⁹ In particular, the PLA's organizational structure is overly centralized and favors conformity in tactics and techniques while its organizational culture tends to discourage creativity and flexibility.⁴⁰ These two organizational traits run counter to the kinds of mobile operations PLA doctrine envisions for its future forces. Logistical weaknesses, including a heavy reliance on fixed supply facilities and the lack of transport capabilities organic to the PLA, constrains mobility, offensive operations, and power projection. Although published before the PLA's major restructuring and reforms in 2015, Cliff's analysis remains a sound reminder that the combat power of advanced weaponry relies heavily on such non-material factors as institutions and culture.

A 2015 RAND study devoted to understanding the PLA's weaknesses concurs with Cliff. It cites organizational structure and organizational culture as major impediments to the Chinese military's ability to achieve its many missions. Organizational problems include corruption, poor pay and benefits, reluctance to decentralize decision making, the lack of realistic training, and longstanding institutional dominance of the army. In terms of human capital, the PLA struggles to recruit high-quality personnel and to cultivate professionalism among its officers and troops. The study adds significant value by examining shortfalls in combat capabilities across the various operational domains. China's army, navy, and air force share deficiencies in modern equipment and weaponry, logistics, and training.⁴¹ The ground force lags in the integration of information technologies, the naval service continues to suffer from weak anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and the air force possesses insufficient numbers of specialized aircraft for reconnaissance, early warning, and aerial refueling.⁴²

Dennis Blasko highlights the PLA's "software" weaknesses in personnel, recruitment, education, training, professionalism, and doctrine. As Blasko explains, the PLA's recent self-assessments—embodied in the "Five Incapables" and "Two Inabilities" slogans—have emphasized the PLA's inability to successfully win modern wars and the leadership deficiencies of PLA officers. In addition to these general slogans, Chinese press reports cite a wide range of other problems with the PLA, including a lack of training, difficulties in properly operating advanced equipment, a lack of personnel who understand high-tech warfare, and

39 Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 244.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-59 and 174-179.

41 Michael S. Chase, et. al., *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2015), p. 136, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR893.html.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78, 93, and 104-105.

poor logistics capabilities.⁴³ These self-assessments indicate that the PLA will encounter a broader range of qualitative challenges as it attempts to master new skills in modern warfare.

These studies offer some hints about what Chinese military weaknesses imply for U.S. strategy. Cliff, for example, emphasizes the importance of maintaining or building on U.S. superiority in areas where China lags most behind the United States, especially the PLA's organizational and logistical shortcomings. His recommendations also include options to deal with Chinese capabilities that could pose substantial problems to American operations, including China's modern airpower, ballistic and cruise missile threats against U.S. and allied bases as well as surface combatants, shore- and sea-based integrated air defense systems, and anti-satellite weapons.⁴⁴

The 2015 RAND study provides tantalizing clues about how the United States could exploit Chinese military weaknesses. In peacetime, the authors recommend select U.S. revelations meant to demonstrate Chinese weaknesses that in turn serve to shore up deterrence. For example, the U.S. military could unveil research and development efforts and tests of new capabilities, reveal information about new operational concepts, and publicly report training and exercises tailored to exploit Chinese weaknesses. Each disclosure would be designed to introduce uncertainty in the minds of Chinese statesmen and commanders that their strategy would work as planned, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would think twice about using force in the first place.

In wartime, the RAND report recommends U.S. military strategies intended specifically to exacerbate Chinese weaknesses that could hamper the PLA's ability to achieve its operational objectives. The authors call on American forces to "present the PLA with challenges that are fast paced, unexpected, and intended to overload or outmaneuver a slow-moving decision system that could have difficulty keeping up with a rapidly developing situation."⁴⁵ They concur with Cliff that the PLA's organizational shortfalls, which undermine responsiveness and adaptability to the uncertainties inherent in war, can be meaningfully manipulated to the advantage of the United States.

Another oft-cited RAND study agrees that the United States should take advantage of Chinese strategic and operational weaknesses to strengthen deterrence. The United States, according to the report, should develop the capacity to engage in a protracted great power war. A long war would threaten to exhaust China's limited number of systems in key warfighting categories relative to the U.S. military and to run down its finite stocks of conventional ballistic and

43 Dennis Blasko, Independent Analyst, "Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on 'What Keeps Xi Up at Night: Beijing's Internal and External Challenges,'" February 7, 2019, pp. 2-13, available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf. See also Chase et. al., *China's Incomplete Military Transformation*, pp. 43-68.

44 Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 246-247.

45 Chase, et. al., *China's Incomplete Military Transformation*, pp. 137-138.

cruise missiles, which are one-way weapons. More importantly, protraction and the associated disruptions to commerce would have an outsize impact on the Chinese economy, given China's dependence on imported commodities, such as energy, and its proximity to the most likely locations of a Sino-American conflict, such as the Taiwan Strait. The authors speculate that a protracted struggle would also threaten China's political and social stability more than it would the U.S. political system.⁴⁶

The RAND report further calls on the United States to consider strategies that could escalate horizontally a hypothetical conflict with China. By expanding the war to geographic locations beyond China's immediate periphery, the U.S. military could exploit the PLA's relative weakness in power projection. As the authors observe, "Chinese military capabilities atrophy across even relatively modest distances."⁴⁷ New operational concepts that sought to draw the PLA "to other areas where China's ability to defend its interests might be less developed" would diffuse Chinese military power and increase the PLA's warfighting burden even as they play to U.S. and allied strengths in conducting expeditionary operations. These measures, protraction and horizontal escalation, would magnify the uncertainties in the minds of Chinese decision-makers that the PLA could pull off a quick, decisive operation, a core element of Beijing's theory of victory. Such doubts could discourage China's leaders from gambling on a war.

An Analytical Blindspot?

The various analytic approaches surveyed above possess powerful, if not overriding, logic in their understanding of Chinese weaknesses. Those wedded to raw measures of power tend to be dismissive of weaknesses or ignore weaknesses altogether. Growing power and the momentum it generates—so goes this line of reasoning—would render weaknesses irrelevant. And, if China's ascent and its surpassing of the United States are virtually preordained, then it is unsurprising that Washington's options would narrow substantially. The United States could resist mightily via containment or subversion of China to forestall Chinese hegemony, or it could accommodate Chinese power to avoid war or to shape Beijing's choices while Washington still possessed some remaining—though rapidly diminishing—leverage.

By contrast, some of those who are deeply immersed in studying China hold a radically different view. They see Chinese weaknesses as a defining feature of China's domestic system, institutions, instruments of national power, and worldview. Chinese leaders, according to this perspective, see external events through this prism of weaknesses and are conditioned to respond aggressively abroad when those weaknesses are exposed or harmed. A China that succumbed to those weaknesses, moreover, could produce instabilities that would be far worse than a strong and confident China. Some China watchers therefore view Chinese weaknesses

46 Eric Heginbotham, et. al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: The U.S.-China Military Scorecard, Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. 344-345, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf.

47 Ibid., p. 349.

as a source of danger, an area to be avoided or an area that the West should actively shore up. They are more likely to oppose recommendations that call for containment or other forms of resistance against China's rise. And they are less likely to see value in leveraging Chinese weaknesses as an element of strategy in the larger Sino-U.S. competition.

As the Chinese military dramatically improved its capabilities over the years, the PLA studies community adjusted its judgments about the PLA's weaknesses. For decades, China's military backwardness inclined the field to discount the PLA as a serious threat. Few analysts rated the PLA dangerous enough to warrant thinking about how the U.S. military should exploit the PLA's weaknesses to prevail in a war. This dismissive attitude persisted through the 1990s and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century and even beyond. But as the PLA modernized and as key elements of the military balance shifted in China's favor, Western observers began to explore the possibility of leveraging the PLA's weaknesses to gain a competitive advantage. PLA watchers have been open to considering Chinese weaknesses as a basis for devising strategies within a larger competitive context.

This brief survey shows that substantial variations exist across experts. In some cases, there appear to be powerful analytical undercurrents that tend to discourage a more systematic examination of Chinese weaknesses as a method for developing counterstrategies. Indeed, in some cases, the deep study of Chinese weaknesses for developing U.S. and allied strategies in a competitive framework risks falling through the cracks. Policymakers and strategists need to be keenly aware of the logic, assumptions, and biases behind various disciplines to avoid the blind spots that ignore or undervalue the study of rival weaknesses in strategy formulation.

This study adopts a strategy-centered approach that neither undersells nor overexaggerates China's weaknesses and aligns more closely with recent works in PLA studies. It contends that a sound understanding of Chinese weaknesses, particularly enduring ones, can play a salutary role in the formulation of allied strategies. Weaknesses are core constituents of China's national power, which in turn constrain Beijing's ability to achieve its aims, as elaborated in Chapter 3. To the extent that the close allies can leverage these weaknesses, they can influence and shape Chinese calculations about their power to fulfill their global ambitions.⁴⁸ This analytic outlook draws from scholarship in the strategic studies field that confers agency to actors that seek to exploit their opponent's weaknesses.⁴⁹ The following chapter provides a methodology for thinking productively about weaknesses in a competitive context.

48 In its November 2020 report on China, the U.S. Department of State argued that U.S. strategy must be based on an understanding of China's vulnerabilities and its ability to address them. As the report states, "Along with knowledge of China's conduct and its intellectual sources, understanding of the CCP's vulnerabilities—not least the limitations of its ability to address its vulnerabilities—must inform U.S. efforts to meet the China challenge." U.S. Department of State Policy Planning Staff, *The Elements of the China Challenge* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2020), p. 44.

49 For earlier works on applying strategy against Chinese weaknesses, see Thomas G. Mahnken, ed. *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) and Michael Pillsbury, "The Sixteen Fears: China's Strategic Psychology," *Survival* 54, no. 5, pp. 149-182. For a foundational examination of competitive strategy, which originated in the field of business strategy, see Michael Porter, *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 3

A Framework for Analyzing China's Weaknesses

All nations have strengths and weaknesses. Understanding them and discerning the asymmetries in strengths and weaknesses among nations are essential steps to assessing the strategic balance and the relative competitiveness of nations. For the purposes of strategy development, not all weaknesses are equal. Some weaknesses are susceptible to external pressure, manipulation, exploitation, and other levers, while other weaknesses are not. To advance the major objectives of this study, it is therefore necessary to subject the concept of strategic weakness to systematic analysis.

This chapter provides the methodology that is applied to a select set of case studies on China's strategic weaknesses as they relate to a globalizing PLA. First, it defines strategic weakness and strategic vulnerability in the context of strategy, understood as the relationship between a nation's aims and the means at its disposal to achieve those aims. Second, it sets out five parameters by which the study evaluates the character and severity of China's strategic weaknesses. Third, it offers a synopsis of China's looming demographic crisis to illustrate the study's methodological approach to understanding Chinese strategic weaknesses.

Defining Strategic Weakness and Strategic Vulnerability

For the purposes of this study, a strategic weakness is defined as a weakness in national power that precludes, undermines, or increases the costs to a nation's ability to achieve its objectives.⁵⁰ This definition organizes strategic weakness around the concept of strategy,

50 This report uses simple dictionary definitions as a baseline for understanding weakness. Weakness can be understood as "the state or condition of lacking strength" or as "a quality or feature regarded as a disadvantage." It should be noted that this report distinguishes weakness from vulnerability, which is defined here as "the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally." Weakness is a condition irrespective of third-party behavior whereas vulnerability entails the risk that third parties might actively harm an exposed condition.

which serves as the bridge that links policy to all instruments of national power. Weaknesses are understood as impediments to a nation's ability to reach its goals or to fulfill its ambitions, however defined. In the context of a competition, a vulnerability is a weakness that can be subjected to an adversary's strategy. In other words, this study examines weaknesses and their impacts on the interrelationships between ends and means within a long-term strategic competition.

Such a strategy-based definition is intended to provide U.S. and allied policymakers with a practical framework for identifying adversary weaknesses and for assessing how those adversary vulnerabilities can be subjected to concrete U.S. and allied strategy. As the preceding chapter explains, the distinct professional fields of strategy and regional studies frequently furnish policy recommendations that work at cross purposes. A contribution of this study is an analytic approach that may enable more constructive and seamless conversations among strategists and regional specialists, which can improve the development and implementation of tailored U.S. and allied strategies against China and other adversaries.

China's Conception of National Power and Its Strategic Goals

To assess Chinese strategic weaknesses, it is important to understand the relevant terms in wide usage among China's leaders and strategists. By learning how Beijing conceives of and describes Chinese power, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, outside observers avoid, to the extent possible, the analytical fallacy of mirror imaging. Moreover, strategy is fundamentally interactive involving a move-countermove cycle between two or more living forces. Developing strategies that target an adversary's vulnerabilities, and that sometimes seek to elicit certain adversary responses, requires an understanding of, if not intimacy with, the adversary's mindset. Chinese discourse on power and weakness can reveal inherent analytical limitations or predispositions, such as blind spots or acute sensitivities, which foreign policymakers can use to develop robust strategies that produce and anticipate particular Chinese counterreactions.

Chinese analysts use their own terminology in describing their nation's rise and in assessing the ends and means of China's ascent. They have long sought to evaluate and calculate the means by which their nation would power its rise. They have coined the phrase "comprehensive national power" as an aggregate measure of China's power.⁵¹ As the term suggests, it is a holistic understanding of power that includes all implements of statecraft, ranging from military strength to cultural attractiveness. Chinese strategists have theorized how Beijing can best sustain its ascent by tapping into power in all its variations. Indeed, many have gone to great

51 The U.S. National Defense Strategy describes an "all-of-nation long-term strategy" that informs China's rise and supports its regional and global aims. This depiction conforms to Beijing's understanding of comprehensive national power. See U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), p. 2, available at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

lengths to quantify comprehensive national power by rendering the concept into quasi-scientific equations.⁵²

In their close study of the past, Chinese analysts have learned that successful great powers invariably boasted strength across many metrics of power. By contrast, those that were strong in one or a few areas of national power, such as the Soviet Union, struggled to stay atop the international order over the long term. As David Shambaugh observes:

[Chinese strategists] have thus concluded that it is important to build and cultivate power comprehensively across a variety of spheres: the economy, science, technology, education, culture, values, military, governance, diplomacy, and other sectors. The Chinese grasp the idea that power is comprehensive and integrative, not atomistic.⁵³

This study approaches strategic weakness based on this broad understanding of national power. In other words, it seeks to understand how certain weaknesses interact with and undercut China's comprehensive national power and how that interaction, in turn, impacts Beijing's ability to achieve its goals.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, outside observers have been afforded an opportunity to glimpse China's long-term goals. Xi has famously promoted his "Chinese Dream" to realize the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." While the Chinese Dream is abstract, and likely intentionally so, Xi's dream at a minimum includes: 1) maintaining and strengthening the CCP's political monopoly within China; 2) the achievement of the two centenary goals, which are the development of a "moderately prosperous" society by 2021 and "a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful" by 2049; and 3) the unification of China and Taiwan. Elizabeth Economy describes Xi's ambitions as the "third revolution"—following those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping respectively—that "represents a reassertion of the state in Chinese political and economic life at home, and a more ambitious and expansive role for China abroad."⁵⁴

In terms of this revolution's outward orientation, Xi seeks to transform China into a world power. Over the next three decades, Xi envisions China emerging as a coequal among the great powers alongside the United States, India, Russia, and the European Union. Within this multi-polar system, China would rise to the apex of the East Asian order, reassuming its position at the region's epicenter. By implication, such a newly aligned region would see a substantial reduction of American power and influence in Asia, if not the complete displacement of the United States by China. As a key element of the Chinese Dream, Beijing would possess

52 For example, Yan Xuetong, a prominent political scientist at China's Tsinghua University, defines comprehensive national power as: comprehensive national power = (military power + economic power + cultural power) × political power. Yan sees "political power"—a kind of moral authority of the state—as a force multiplier to comprehensive national power. See Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 102.

53 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, p. 6.

54 Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 10.

a “world-class military” technologically on par with, if not superior to, its Western counterparts and capable of projecting power far beyond its shores. By the centenary of the People’s Republic, according to Xi’s plan, Taiwan’s “reunion” with China would be achieved.

In pursuit of the Chinese Dream, China is striving to become a global economic hub and a major source of innovation. Drawing its sway from its newfound economic stature, China would engage in great power diplomacy to win over friends and bring about a realignment in international relations in ways that favor Beijing’s interests. China would also use its heft to remake global norms and institutions more to its liking while establishing its own multilateral bodies, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Beijing would further extend its global reach via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the ambitious financial, economic, infrastructure, and telecommunications project that aims to connect the Chinese economy across the Eurasian landmass. This study employs the Chinese Dream as a shorthand for the external dimensions of China’s long-term goals.

The Chinese Dream and China’s comprehensive national power provide an analytical basis for diagnosing Chinese strategic weaknesses—defined here as weaknesses in China’s comprehensive national power that preclude, undermine, or increase the costs to China’s ability to achieve the Chinese Dream. As noted above, this definition structures the study of weaknesses in terms of the interrelationship between ends and means. It is not enough to understand what constitutes weakness in national power, the means by which a nation achieves its aims. It is equally important to assess the weakness’s effects on outcomes. Severe weaknesses in Chinese national power that have no bearing on the Chinese Dream are less relevant to this study. By contrast, weaknesses that could impact the trajectory or the achievement of the Chinese Dream possess significant import.

Testing China’s Strategic Weaknesses

This study tests the extent to which certain weaknesses in national power could obstruct or impede China’s ascent toward becoming a world power. To conduct such a test, this report assesses strategic weakness by applying four criteria: a weakness’ severity in absolute terms, its severity in relation to competitors, the self-perception of the weakness, and the impact of the weakness on a country’s strategy. To determine whether a strategic weakness is a vulnerability, this report evaluates a fifth criterion: whether external competitors can exploit the weakness.

First, this report focuses on severe weaknesses. Weaknesses can be conceived of as a spectrum where, at one end, weaknesses can be fixed quickly and at little cost. At the other end are what this study defines as severe weaknesses, which are difficult to alleviate or reverse without substantial, if not prohibitive, effort. A severe weakness takes a long time, one or more decades, to alleviate. It demands substantial resources and sustained effort, drawing on a nation’s financial, scientific, technological, industrial, material, political, and diplomatic prowess. Addressing a severe weakness also demands complex coordination at a

whole-of-nation scale, involving various public and private organizations that either do not normally interact or face obstacles (bureaucratic, legal, cultural, etc.) in collaborating. Moreover, efforts to address or reverse the weakness entail high risks of failure because the level of difficulty in tackling the weakness is significant and the consequences of failure could be quite grave. Indeed, failure to reverse the weakness could seriously set back, if not unravel, a nation's long-term plans. The sources of a severe weakness are often structural in character, meaning they are deeply rooted. Yet, even for the most severe weaknesses, China still usually possesses some ability to adjust to unfavorable circumstances.

Second, while some weaknesses may be worrisome independent of other external factors, other weaknesses may be more significant or meaningful in the context of competitive interactions with external actors. In such cases, the severity of a Chinese weakness can be measured relative to China's other rivals. If an adversary does not suffer from the same weakness or if the opposing side is less encumbered by the same weakness, then the competitor's more favorable disposition tends to magnify the seriousness of China's weakness. Conversely, if the competitor's weakness is as severe or more severe than that suffered by China, then that same Chinese weakness may not be as urgent or problematic in the context of the competition. How China's strategic weaknesses compare to those of the United States, for example, would offer a sense of China's relative disadvantages. Alternatively, China's weakness may be in an area that plays to its opponent's strength. The asymmetries in such a matchup could further amplify the weakness in the context of a rivalry.

Third, weakness is in the eye of the beholder. Although there are clearly objective weaknesses, their conditions are invariably intermediated by perceptions of those suffering from those weaknesses. Chinese decisionmakers, for instance, can hold an even-keeled perspective about a weakness. In another case, they may choose to ignore a weakness or may be blissfully unaware of a weakness and thus exhibit indifference to that weakness. Chinese policymakers can also be prone to exaggerate a weakness or be unduly alarmed about a weakness. The underlying reasons for those perceptions vary, ranging from China's unique historical experiences to bureaucratic pathologies to the regime's nature. Perceptions can thus be premised on deeply held beliefs and assumptions, locking policymakers into viewing weaknesses in peculiar ways. Some of these perceptions may prove immovable in harmful or harmless ways. There is thus an analytical need to take a fuller measure of China's weaknesses as the Chinese see them. A major contribution is this study's assessment of weakness through Chinese eyes by tapping into open-source writings on the mainland.

It is worth acknowledging the methodological challenges associated with the use of Chinese-language sources. Given the opacity surrounding the CCP's inner workings and the secrecy around internal debates on sensitive issues, such as China's weaknesses, it is difficult to verify whether the Chinese writings surveyed below reflect the views of decisionmakers at the highest levels. The authoritativeness and policy influence of the sources vary widely. Some works reach senior policymakers while others may be academically oriented. There have also been lingering concerns in the West that the open-source literature could be manipulated by Beijing

to misdirect, if not deceive, outside observers. Taking these considerations into account, this study identifies the institutional affiliations of the authors to lend as much transparency to the sources as possible. It also focuses primarily on areas of apparent consensus among Chinese strategists to avoid lending too much credence to any particular source.

Fourth, this report examines weaknesses that could have a discernible impact on China's ability to fulfill the external dimensions of the Chinese Dream summarized above. Chinese strategic weaknesses can thus be understood in the following ways:

- Weaknesses associated with China's comprehensive national power that completely preclude its achievement of the Chinese Dream.
- Weaknesses associated with China's comprehensive national power that entail a high risk of failure in fulfilling the Chinese Dream.
- Weaknesses associated with China's comprehensive national power that lead to suboptimal outcomes, forcing Beijing to fall short of the Chinese Dream by mid-century.
- Weaknesses associated with China's comprehensive national power that require greater exertions or higher costs to achieve the Chinese Dream than Beijing would otherwise prefer.

The severity of a weakness, then, can be judged by the degree to which that weakness affects Beijing's ability to achieve its long-term goals. These criteria for judging weakness are by no means exhaustive or comprehensive. There are other equally valid ways to test Chinese strategic weaknesses. The purpose of this study is to illustrate how outside observers can more systematically evaluate weaknesses in the context of strategy formulation. It is hoped that future research will build on this preliminary effort at profiling Chinese strategic weaknesses in a competitive context.

Finally, only some weaknesses are vulnerabilities—namely, weaknesses that can be subjected to and manipulated by an adversary's strategy. For U.S. and allied policymakers who are attempting to achieve specific national goals vis-à-vis China, it is critical to understand which Chinese weaknesses can be productively targeted through strategy in order to increase China's absolute and relative difficulty in realizing its aims. Conversely, policymakers must understand which Chinese weaknesses are relatively immune to external pressure and are best left to play out independently. Moreover, not every vulnerability should necessarily be targeted. There may be certain Chinese vulnerabilities that should be avoided at a given time due to an assessment of the strategic risks involved. Furthermore, allied decisionmakers should discern whether direct or indirect approaches should be applied against certain PRC vulnerabilities. There may be circumstances when strategists should develop options and tactics that gradually and subtly chip away at vulnerabilities. In other situations, speedy, bold, and highly visible action against select vulnerabilities to produce maximal effects may prove more efficacious. The bottom line is that the close allies need to be selective and prudent about the weaknesses they choose to inform their strategies.

Weaknesses, of course, are never static and evolve over time. Some weaknesses, even severe ones, could be ameliorated if China invested adequate resources to fix the problem. The Chinese military, for example, suffered from acute structural weaknesses in the post-Mao era. Yet, sustained investments over the past three decades have remade the PLA. A Western intelligence analyst in the 1990s would have likely struggled to imagine the impressive strides that the PLA has made since. On the other hand, other weaknesses, if left untended, could grow significantly worse over time, promising systemic risks for China. China's demographic decline, environmental problems, and hidden debt could metastasize into crisis-inducing challenges a decade hence. This study thus endeavors to take snapshots of strategic weaknesses as they appear to observers in 2020, understanding that many of these weaknesses could change, for better or for worse, in the coming years.

Weaknesses can also be apparent or invisible to observers both inside and outside of China. In some cases, unexpected shocks could expose hidden weaknesses. In other cases, weaknesses are known well in advance, but there are significant uncertainties over how policymakers will respond to those weaknesses and whether their prescriptions to those problems will produce the intended effects. This study focuses on the latter, examining some of the "usual suspects" that have been frequently held up as serious weaknesses that could hobble China's prospects.

China's Demographics: A Methodological Illustration

To illustrate briefly how this study tests China's strategic weaknesses based on the criteria above, consider China's looming demographic crisis, a well-known problem. The size and quality of a nation's population are essential ingredients to national power and the means by which a nation achieves long-term strategic success. In this regard, power-based assessments documented in Chapter 2 are right that size matters. A large population combined with increasing productivity per worker is the primary economic foundation for generating great wealth, which in turn serves as the basis for developing key elements of national power, including military power. A large population also enables a nation to field a large army, which is the only branch of military power that can achieve the most decisive effect: territorial conquest. Population size is therefore a key measure of great power status.

Conversely, population decline reflects the atrophy of an essential sinew of national power. It foreshadows both economic and military weakening. Demographic weakness fits the severity criteria of this study. Demography is the study of a structural phenomenon, largely resistant to rapid reversal. The sources of demographic change, including birth rates, death rates, infant mortality rates, life expectancy, and so forth, are relatively stable over time, making projections about population profiles far more reliable than other political science disciplines. As Nicholas Eberstadt explains, "Demography as a whole is a fairly predictable social science...since most of the people who will be living in the world of 2040, for example,

are already alive today.”⁵⁵ Short of an unimaginable cataclysm, such as a nuclear holocaust, nations are more or less locked into their demographic trajectories.

China's demographic future is no different. Indeed, it has been largely determined by policy decisions made decades ago. Deng Xiaoping's one-child policy, a coercive family planning program formally instituted in 1979 but which had been in place earlier, exerted a virtually irreversible influence on China's demographic profile. China's total fertility rate, measured as the average number of children born per woman, stood at around 2.9 in the late 1970s.⁵⁶ By the early 1990s, the fertility rate fell well below the replacement level of 2.1—the rate at which the population of a country maintains the same size from one generation to the next without immigration—and has hovered around 1.6 for the past three decades.⁵⁷ In other words, China has been stuck at sub-replacement level fertility for over a generation. Chinese women born in the years following the one-child policy are reaching or have already surpassed their peak reproductive ages. Their diminished numbers mean that there are no longer enough women to maintain China's population level.⁵⁸ Such is the structural character of demographics.

The projections are grim. China's population is expected to peak much earlier than anticipated at about 1.44 billion in the late 2020s, by which point the net population will start to decline.⁵⁹ Notably, China's working-age population began to fall in 2014 and is expected to drop by another 100 million workers two decades hence. A declining labor force would not only impose limits on economic growth, but it would also dampen domestic consumer demand and diminish the tax base for government revenues. High life expectancy—owing to improved health care—has ensured that those aged over 65, will occupy an ever-larger proportion of the overall population. By 2040, the elderly will reach 325 million from 135 million in 2015. Such graying of the population is unprecedented in human history.⁶⁰ A shrinking working-age cohort will thus be expected to support a rapidly aging society. Fiscal pressures on the government to shore up its woefully underdeveloped social welfare system will inevitably mount in the coming years. Services to the aged will increasingly compete for national resources, including those for defense, intensifying the guns versus butter debate in China.

Chinese policymakers have recognized the problem and have implemented policies to slow the adverse population trends. Beginning in 2013, the central government lifted the one-child policy and permitted a two-child policy on a selective basis. By 2015, Beijing applied the

55 Nicholas Eberstadt, “With Great Demographics Comes Great Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019, p. 148.

56 China's total fertility rate had been plummeting beginning in the mid-1960s from nearly 6.4 to below 3 in the late 1970s.

57 The World Bank, “Fertility Rate, total (births per woman) – China,” available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CN>.

58 The cultural preference for male heirs in Chinese society has exacerbated this problem, leading to a severe imbalance in the sex ratio.

59 “China's Population Set to Peak at 1.44 Billion in 2029: Government Report,” *Reuters*, January 5, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-population/chinas-population-set-to-peak-at-144-billion-in-2029-government-report-idUSKCN1OZO8A>.

60 The statistics and projections are drawn from Eberstadt, “With Great Demographics Come Great Power,” p. 150.

two-child policy to all couples.⁶¹ Yet, the evidence thus far suggests that Chinese society has not been responsive to the government's relaxed rules. After a slight increase in 2016, total births in China fell three years in a row to a historic low in 2019.⁶² Hardened social norms concerning family size, after decades of government-enforced limits, have proved resistant to change. Local governments across China have found that reproductive behaviors are difficult to dictate by fiat.⁶³ As such, it remains to be seen whether Beijing possesses enough agency, short of draconian social measures, to appreciably alter the birth rate. At the same time, the massive family planning bureaucracy with an existential institutional stake in performing its role in society will likely resist change that would undermine its mandate.

Compared to China, the United States enjoys a markedly favorable demographic profile and stands out among the developed countries. To Nicholas Eberstadt, a leading U.S. demographer, "American demographic exceptionalism" explains this unique U.S. advantage. Since the postwar era, the United States has consistently maintained healthy birth rates and immigration levels compared to its counterparts in the developed world. As Eberstadt notes:

Assuming continued levels of immigration and near replacement fertility, most demographers project that by 2040, the United States will have a population of around 380 million. It will have a younger population than almost any other rich democracy, and its working-age population will be expanding. And unlike the rest of the developed world in 2040, it will still have more births than deaths.⁶⁴

The contrasts with China's future predicament could not be sharper. Beyond mere numbers, the United States also enjoys qualitative demographic advantages. The American workforce is among the most highly educated in the world. The U.S. population has generated far more private wealth than its Chinese counterpart while its innovativeness remains unmatched globally.⁶⁵ And, as a Chinese academic study acknowledges, the United States is in a far better fiscal position to deal with its aging population than China.⁶⁶

61 "Chinese Population to Hit Negative Growth by 2030: Report," *People's Daily*, January 4, 2019, available at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0104/c90000-9534837.html>.

62 "China's Birthrate Hits Historic Low, in Looming Crisis for Beijing," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/business/china-birth-rate-2019.html>; and "China's Looming Crisis: A Shrinking Population," *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/17/world/asia/china-population-crisis.html>.

63 "Burying 'One Child' Limits, China Pushes Women to Have More Babies," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/11/world/asia/china-one-child-policy-birthrate.html>.

64 Eberstadt, "With Great Demographics Come Great Power," p. 152. Eberstadt cautions, however, that some countervailing trends could undo America's demographic exceptionalism. Fertility rates fell during the Great Recession and have yet to recover. Immigration levels are subject to political mood. Life expectancy, educational attainment, and employment for certain age groups have underperformed in recent years.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

66 朱墨葵 严明义 [Zhu Mozhen and Yan Mingyi], "人口老龄化与财政支出结构 [Population Aging and the Structure of Fiscal Expenditures]," *统计与信息论坛 [Statistics and Information Forum]*, no. 11, November 2019.

There is substantial evidence that Chinese analysts and policymakers are increasingly worried about the long-term impact of demographic decline. The authoritative *Green Book on Population and Labor* compiled by the Chinese Academy of Social Science, for example, has expressed growing concerns about the nation's population trajectory. According to the summary of the 2019 report:

Long-term population decline, especially accompanied by ever intensifying aging, will inevitably bring about extremely unfavorable socioeconomic consequences. China's negative population growth is already overwhelming, and we must begin earnestly to carry out research and proceed with policy preparations.⁶⁷

As a structural phenomenon, the looming demographic crisis and its implications for China's foreign policy have been diagnosed and understood years in advance. As Richard Jackson and Neil Howe argued over a decade ago, "The age wave is overtaking China at an awkward moment in its development—just as it is poised to become a middle-income country and assume a greater role in world affairs."⁶⁸ Within China, there has been growing recognition that the economic headwinds generated by demographic atrophy could erode the sinews of national power that are so essential to fulfilling Xi's ambitions. Indeed, two Chinese scholars explicitly link their nation's demographic future to the Chinese Dream:

In contrast to other developed countries where population aging proceeded alongside modernization, our nation is entering the era of aging when the historic mission of socialist modernization has not yet been completed. Population aging is the basic national condition of China's future development path. *It is the objective background to fulfilling the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation* [emphasis added]. Our nation's socialist modernization must be completed under the conditions of a hyper-aged society.⁶⁹

Another study similarly describes the challenge of aging as "an unavoidable social backdrop" and the "foundational proposition" to China's quest for national rejuvenation.⁷⁰ While the two reports do not render judgments about the prospects for success in achieving the Chinese Dream, they assume that China will labor under downward population pressures in the coming decades. As noted above, a more intense competition for government resources will likely emerge as China's graying accelerates.

67 时晓莉 [Shi Xiaoli], "《人口与劳动绿皮书：中国人口与劳动问题报告No.19》：发布中国人口发展面临六大趋势性重大转折 [Green Book on Population and Labor: Reports on China's Population and Labor, No. 19: Announcement that China's Population Development is Facing a Major Turning Point with Six Major Trends]," 中国社会科学网 [China Social Science Website], January 4, 2019, available at http://www.cssn.cn/zx/bwyc/201901/t20190104_4806519_1.shtml.

68 Richard Jackson and Neil Howe, *The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), p. 171.

69 陈泰昌 尤帅 [Chen Taichang and You Shuai], "新时代我国人口老龄化的发展态势和战略研究 [Research on the Development Trends of and Strategies for China's Population Aging in the New Era]," 老龄科学研究 [Scientific Research on Aging], no. 4, April 2019, p. 13.

70 方彧 郑飞 王海涛 [Fang Yan, Zheng Fei, and Wang Haitao], "新时代创新发展老龄金融服务的思考 [Thoughts on Innovative Development of Financial Services for the Aged in the New Era]," 北京金融论坛 [Beijing Finance Forum], no. 4, 2017, pp. 112 and 114.

However, uncertainties remain over the impact of population decline on China's military posture, a crucial ingredient to the PLA's plans to go global. To what extent the demands arising from care for the aged will crowd out funding for a globalizing world-class military, a key goal of the Chinese Dream, remains to be seen. Much will depend on the future trajectory of the Chinese military. The PLA is fielding a smaller but more technologically advanced military that will depend less on mass and more on high-quality human capital. Moreover, the tangible effects of a graying population on military affairs are likely to take place well beyond this decade, by which point the PLA may have achieved many, if not most, of its modernization goals. There is nothing fated in demographic decline. Beijing possesses some degree of agency to race against the population trends.

This synopsis of China's demographic challenge illustrates the criteria that are applied to the case studies on weaknesses associated with the PLA's global quest in the following chapters. Each case study will evaluate the degree to which a specific weakness is severe in character. Each will compare the weakness to that of China's competitors and rivals, particularly the United States, which Beijing considers its pacing threat. Each case will draw from the extensive Chinese open source literature to gauge how Chinese strategists assess their nation's weakness. To the extent possible, each case study will evaluate the potential impact of the specific weakness on Beijing's ability to go global. Finally, the study will evaluate the extent to which each of the weaknesses associated with going global constitutes a vulnerability that can be targeted by U.S. and allied strategists.

Rationales for Case Selection

The purpose of this study is not to discover a new or hidden weakness. Rather, it seeks to systematically assess strategic weaknesses that are well known to Western observers, and indeed to Chinese strategists themselves. The goal is to subject China's strategic weaknesses to practical, disciplined analysis structured around the concept of strategy. The three case studies below are primarily concerned with weaknesses that could obstruct or constrain the PLA's ascent as a globalized military. The report also considers whether these weaknesses are relevant to U.S. and allied policymakers in the development of strategies tailored for countering China on the world stage.

The first case study concerns China's geostrategic weaknesses. Geography is largely immutable. It is the inescapable context within which nations transact with each other. China's unfavorable geography is well known and has been held up by Western and Chinese observers alike as a major constraint on its freedom to act. Chinese leaders must constantly contend with geostrategic dangers that threaten to bog down China. China's geographic circumstances therefore represents a good test case for understanding how structural external conditions raise cost or barriers to Beijing's ability to fulfill its global ambitions. In particular, this case study surveys how Chinese observers perceive their geospatial surroundings and how geography imposes costs and constraints on China's choices.

The second case study addresses China's weakness in developing a global power projection force structure and, more broadly, in fielding a diverse force structure sufficient for mitigating its complex geographic weaknesses. Given its geography, China must prepare to defend its interests through prospective military operations on the continent, in the near seas, and in the far seas. These starkly different operating areas generate distinctive and often conflicting force structure requirements. In the future, the PLA will be required to maintain and even improve its force structure in the near seas and on the continent while developing, procuring, and maintaining a number of large, complex, and costly power projection platforms capable of operating globally under wide-ranging, difficult conditions. Particularly if economic growth rates slow and budgetary pressures rise, Beijing may face difficult tradeoffs between these three force structure types and as a result field a military force that is diluted in strength across these areas, potentially jeopardizing Beijing's ability to achieve its strategic objectives.

The third case study examines China's weaknesses in overseas logistical infrastructure, which is essential for the PLA to project power and to sustain operations from the homeland. Logistics, in general, has long been recognized as a trouble spot for the Chinese military. As Beijing looks to extend its power abroad, it will need to overcome demanding logistical challenges of going global. Constructing a network of mutually supporting bases and dual-use facilities is just one among many difficult tasks. Even a more limited overseas posture confined to the Indo-Pacific region would likely consume substantial resources. Beijing will not only need to address material and financial requirements, but it must also attend to such non-tangible factors as trust as they relate to host nations that will be home to forward-deployed PLA forces. This case study, too, draws extensively from a growing body of work in China that assesses the global project's scale and its various obstacles.

CHAPTER 4

China's Geostrategic Weaknesses

Geography is not destiny. Rather, it provides the geospatial context within which human activities, including politics and international relations, take place. As Colin Gray observed, “Physical geography can be either enabler or disabler, depending on how wisely it is exploited. Geography is a stage set by forces beyond much human control. The ability to work with it varies hugely with context, but geography is always present as a source of greater or lesser discipline that charges a price for the rewards sought through its exploitation.”⁷¹ Geography, then, sets constraints that states can attempt to overcome or furnishes opportunities that states can seek to exploit. This chapter draws from this insight to assess China’s geostrategic weaknesses and the limits they place on its ability to go global. To use Gray’s terms, it assesses the price that Beijing must pay to loosen its many geographic limits.

The chapter first identifies the geophysical, historical, cultural, ethnic, and strategic context of China’s geostrategic weaknesses. Second, it surveys the Chinese literature on the concept of “composite land-sea power,” which describes the two-front dilemma that China confronts in the continental and maritime directions. The chapter then reviews Chinese writings about the “first island chain,” the transnational offshore archipelago that many in China see as physical barrier to their nation’s rightful destiny at sea. Finally, it assesses how Chinese commentators perceive the intersection of technology and geography on the first island chain. In particular, the chapter examines Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied deployments of precision-strike missile systems on key offshore terrain.

71 Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 122.

China's Geospatial Surroundings

China's geostrategic weaknesses are well known and have long been held up in the West as enduring constraints on its ambitions.⁷² China is encircled by great powers and middle powers alike. Running counterclockwise on the contiguous continental front, China borders Russia to its north, India to its southwest, and Vietnam to its south. Beijing has clashed militarily with all three powers. Running north-south along the maritime flank to the east, China faces South Korea (a half island), Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Seoul, Tokyo, and Manila are formal treaty allies of the United States while Taipei maintains close defense ties with the United States and remains defiantly resistant to Beijing's plans for reunion. Except for the Philippines, China has fought directly against those occupying the lands of its maritime frontier at some point in the twentieth century. China shares land borders, measuring about 22,000 kilometers, with fourteen of its neighbors. Among them, India, North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, and Vietnam field active military personnel that, by size, rank in the world's top ten. Moreover, Russia, India, Pakistan, and North Korea possess nuclear weapons.

Over the past century, China has fought major wars, engaged in border clashes, or tangled in crises against Japan (1937-1945), South Korea (1950-53), India (1962), Russia (1969), Vietnam (1979), and Taiwan (1954, 1958, and 1995-96). The Second Sino-Japanese War laid waste to China's cities and countryside, the Korean War brought China face-to-face with American military might, and the Sino-Soviet border clashes drew both sides to the brink of a massive conventional war involving nuclear weapons. Since the establishment of the People's Republic, Beijing has had border and offshore territorial disputes with virtually every state along its periphery. While most landward disputes have been settled, China's borders with India and Bhutan and its many maritime claims remain hotly contested. Some countries contiguous to China in Northeast, Southeast, South, and Central Asia are unstable or ruled by unpredictable regimes, including North Korea, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

72 Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 11.

FIGURE 1: CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT



Dots indicate approximate areas where territory is disputed. U.S. flags indicate alliance relationships. Map layer courtesy of U.S. Department of State Geographer, Landsat/Copernicus, and Google Earth, 2020.

Moreover, historically rooted suspicions and animosities animate China's relations with many of its surrounding neighbors. In Chinese eyes, the great powers, including Russia and Japan were predators during the "century of humiliation," when the declining Qing dynasty fell prey to Western imperial designs. China's past dominance of the region, expressed in part by the tribute system that placed imperial China at the epicenter of regional politics, has also instilled a deeply ingrained wariness of Chinese power. Fiercely independent-minded states, such as Vietnam and the two Koreas, have had a long record of resisting Chinese hegemony and have demonstrated their willingness to stand up to China in recent years. At the same time, China does not share enough cultural and ethnic affinities to bridge the trust gap. While Japan, the Koreans, and Vietnam absorbed elements of Sinic civilization in the past, they view themselves as distinctive non-Chinese polities. Russia and India are even more culturally distant to China than its East Asian neighbors. In short, China inhabits an environment, in both power and ideational terms, that is far more likely to be resistant than cooperative to its aims.

China's interaction with its periphery is also inextricably linked to its internal security. The internationally recognized territory over which the PRC currently administers is roughly the land, excepting Mongolia, that belonged to the Qing dynasty before its collapse in 1911. China's ethnic geography—defined as the spatial distribution of ethnic groups in a state and the interactions of those groups within that state—reflects the configuration of the multiethnic empire that the Qing bequeathed to the communist regime. This ethnic geography roughly bifurcates China into two distinct spheres. The Chinese heartland runs north-south along the densely populated and fertile agricultural plains and valleys of the eastern seaboard and constitutes about 40 percent of China's landmass. The heartland is where the ethnic Han majority, more than 90 percent of the population, primarily resides. The Chinese periphery, roughly 60 percent of China's landmass, surrounds the heartland to its north and west and is home to ethnic minorities, including Tibetans, Uighurs, and Mongols.⁷³ The sharp asymmetries in size and population density between the heartland and periphery are a defining feature of China's geostrategic dilemma.

The political loyalties of those in the periphery, particularly the Tibetans and the Uighurs, have been uncertain at best. These minority groups also live far closer to their ethnic relatives in countries bordering China's west and southwest than to their ethnic Han rulers in the east. Historically, frontier disputes with foreign powers near those areas possessed significant strategic meaning to Beijing because they impinged on the restive regions' political stability.⁷⁴ As Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell observe, "Control over the minority regions is an interstate issue because of the native populations' ethnic and political ties across national borders."⁷⁵ Or, as Robert Kaplan aptly put it, "China stretches too far into the heart of Eurasia, and yet doesn't stretch far enough."⁷⁶ As such, China has had to garrison sizable military and internal security forces to maintain its grip on a vast, sparse, and inhospitable terrain. In recent years, the communist regime has committed genocide against the Uighur population, imposing measures, including mass internment, intrusive surveillance systems, and even forced birth control, sterilization, and abortion, to tighten its control.

73 M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Border Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 44-45.

74 Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 50.

75 Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 23.

76 Robert Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 203.

FIGURE 2: THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA'S PAST ARMED CONFLICTS



Dots indicate approximate areas where territory is disputed. Map layer courtesy of U.S. Department of State Geographer, Landsat/Copernicus, and Google Earth, 2020.

In terms of homeland defense, China's seaboard and interior have been exposed to external aggression and subversion throughout its history. The seas surrounding the Chinese mainland provide ample avenues of approach for amphibious forces to attack low lying coastal areas that characterize most of China's shores while the desert terrain to the north is ideal for offensive ground operations. China's experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bore out this reality. During the century of humiliation, Western powers and Japan encroached on the Qing empire by sea and by land. British and, later, Japanese command of the seas enabled them to project power onto the mainland with impunity while Tsarist Russia gobbled up massive chunks of China's northern frontier. In the early years of the People's Republic, Nationalist forces staged raids and sabotage operations along the southeastern coast while Central Intelligence Agency-supported Tibetan guerillas engaged in harassment activities out of bases in Nepal. At the height of the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the U.S. military contemplated tactical nuclear strikes against Chinese military positions near Xiamen, a coastal metropolis. During the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes, the Soviets deployed as many as 34 divisions, including those equipped with tactical nuclear weapons, near China's border. China's defenders would

have likely been hard-pressed to stop the Soviet armored columns from slicing deep into their homeland.

Nathan and Scobell aver, “All in all, China’s immediate periphery has a good claim to be the most challenging geopolitical environment in the world for a major power.”⁷⁷ Even Russia, no stranger to geostrategic weaknesses throughout its history, carries a relatively lighter geospatial burden. As Nathan and Scobell point out, a belt of smaller states in central and eastern Europe separates the Russian heartland, located west of the Urals, from the big powers that could most threaten its security. Russia has imposed its will on its neighbors through conquest and aggression more often than the other way around. And apart from China, no power geographically contiguous to Russia rivals its sheer size and strategic heft.⁷⁸

FIGURE 3: CHINA'S CURRENT MAJOR TERRITORIAL DISPUTES



Map excludes other types of ongoing disputes between China and its neighbors, such as Air Defense Identification Zone or Exclusive Economic Zone disputes. Map layer courtesy of U.S. Department of State Geographer, Landsat/Copernicus, and Google Earth, 2020.

77 Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, p. 5.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

America's favorable geographic position contrasts even more sharply than that of China's predicament. While China is surrounded by powerful and potentially hostile powers, the United States borders two friendly states, Canada and Mexico, that are far weaker than it and pose no direct threat to the American homeland. Two massive oceans separate the United States from its most likely adversaries and make the possibility of homeland invasion virtually unthinkable. As Nathan and Scobell observe:

Even though war today looks unlikely, Chinese defense planners can never rule out the possibility of war at almost any location along China's long borders. China's potential battlegrounds are not overseas, but on its own administered or claimed territory. This strategic situation is the opposite of that faced by American defense planners, whose home territory is so far from all conceivable enemies that invasion is not a concern to defense planning.⁷⁹

Indeed, this geostrategic asymmetry lies at the heart of Chinese threat perceptions of the United States (documented in greater detail below). Chinese defense planners must incorporate U.S. expeditionary forces deployed forward in the Western Pacific as a central parameter in their calculus. While the continental United States may be physically far away, American forces based in Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere in the region can directly threaten the Chinese homeland on very short notice. Yet, China's conventional military units are far removed from the lower forty-eight states and few, if any, possess the reach to directly strike the American continent. The military forces that the United States commands, then, are among the close-in threats that surround China.

Composite Land-Sea Power Concept

For the past two decades, Chinese analysts have debated the strategic implications of China's geostrategic circumstances. Geopolitically minded analysts commonly describe China as a classic "composite land-sea power (陆海复合型国家)." The term refers to countries with shorelines that face the seas and with lands contiguous to other countries, lacking few natural obstacles to block invading armies. In 2000, two scholars affiliated with the People's Liberation Army first broached the geospatial concept as it related to China's future choices. In their reading of past composite land-sea powers in Europe, including France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain, they discerned four challenges and requirements that Beijing would face in the twenty-first century.

First, composite land-sea powers cannot be very strong in the maritime and continental directions simultaneously over the long term. They must abide by the principle of strategic concentration, choosing clearly and decisively one orientation over the other. Second, land-sea powers are always in danger of being squeezed by hostile powers on the landward and seaward flanks concurrently. Indeed, two-front wars have invariably spelled disaster for past great powers. Third, land-sea powers must devote resources against liabilities and commitments

⁷⁹ Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, p. 17.

in the continental and maritime directions. As such, they constantly run the risk of diluting scarce resources. Finally, high-quality leadership is essential for composite land-sea powers to navigate the geostrategic dangers.⁸⁰

Liu Zhongmin, a professor at Shanghai International Studies University, draws similar lessons from his study of Imperial Germany, Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet Union. To him, Wilhelmine Germany's "excessive worship" and "blind development" of seapower led Berlin to turn its back on its vital interests on the European continent. The Kaiser's challenge to British naval supremacy led to the emergence of the Triple Entente between Britain, France, and Russia, a countervailing coalition on land and at sea that encircled Germany.⁸¹ Liu discerns similar strategic errors by Tsarist and Soviet leaders. Russia's quest for seapower not only added an unnecessary burden to its existing landward commitments, but it also compelled great power competitors to form counterbalancing maritime-continental coalitions.⁸² Concurring, Gu Tianjiao of Jilin University cautions that composite land-sea powers must recognize and obey the limits imposed by natural geographic conditions. Countries that exceed those constraints, like Germany and Russia in the past, are likely to bring about misfortune.⁸³

Not surprisingly, Chinese analysts are acutely attuned to the limits that geography imposes on Chinese options. In comparing China to other great powers, Zheng Yiwei of Fudan University and Zhang Jianhong of Peking University note:

Like France, China's geographic characteristic is one of a composite land-sea power. This has imposed an unavoidable constraint on the simultaneous development of landpower and seapower. The security of our land is indispensable. Our nation is unlike the United States, which has no strong neighbors on land, faces the Atlantic to its east, borders the Pacific to its west, and is distant from the troubled Eurasian continent. It is afforded the geographic conditions to focus on developing seapower. Our nation is also unlike Britain and Japan, which are surrounded by sea on all sides. As such, our nation must face reality: it cannot neglect either seapower or landpower. Both fists must be hard.⁸⁴

Zheng and Zhang make clear that the hybrid character of China's geostrategic circumstances requires Beijing to build up and maintain adequate strength on land and at sea. Chinese

- 80 邵永灵 时殿弘 [Shao Yongling and Shi Dianhong], "近代欧洲陆海复合国家的命运与当代中国的选择 [The Destiny of Modern European Composite Land-Sea Power and Contemporary China's Choices]," *世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics]*, no. 10, 2000, p. 50.
- 81 刘中民 [Liu Zhongmin], "关于海权与大国崛起问题的若干思考 [Some Thoughts on the Problems of Seapower and the Rise of Great Powers]," *世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics]*, no. 12, 2007, pp. 10-11.
- 82 刘中民 [Liu Zhongmin], "中国海洋强国建设的海权战略选择—海权与大国兴衰的经验及其启示 [Seapower Strategy Choices for the Development of China's Maritime Great Power—The Experiences and Lessons of Seapower and the Rise and Fall of Great Powers]," *太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal]*, no. 8, 2013, p. 78.
- 83 古天蛟 [Gu Tianjiao], "我国建设海洋强国的困境分析及战略选择 [An Analysis of the Dilemmas of Our Nation's Development into a Maritime Power and Our Strategic Choices]," *行政与法律 [Administration and Law]*, no. 9, 2014, p. 77.
- 84 郑义伟 张建宏 [Zheng Yiwei and Zhang Jianhong], "论陆海复合型国家发展海权的两难困境—欧洲经验对中国海权发展的启示 [On the Dual Dilemma of Developing Seapower for Composite Land-Sea Powers—Lessons from Europe's Experiences for China's Seapower Development]," *太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal]*, no. 3, 2013, p. 64.

strategists have also discerned two interrelated implications from China's continental-maritime dilemma. First, to avoid becoming trapped in a two-front rivalry, growing commitments in one direction requires China to reduce its liabilities in the other direction. In other words, if China were embroiled in seaward commitments, as it is today, then it would behoove Chinese policymakers to ensure that Beijing's relations with its landward neighbors are peaceful.

FIGURE 4: CHINESE STRATEGIC VIEW OF THE PRC'S SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

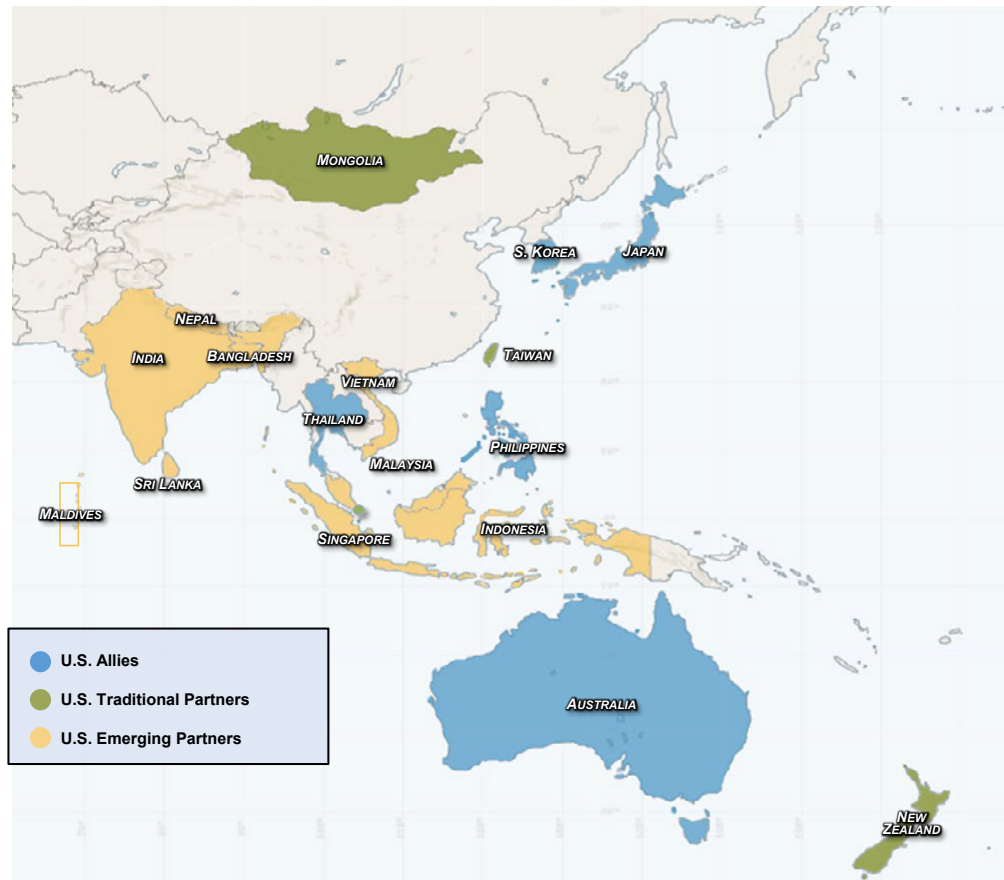


Image adapted by James Mersol based on 中国南海研究院 [National Institute for South China Sea Studies], 美国在亚太地区的军力报告 [The U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific 2020] (Haikou, Hainan: National Institute for South China Sea Studies, 2020), p. 16, available at <http://www.nanhai.org.cn/uploads/file/20200623/jlbg.pdf>. Map underlay courtesy of Mapbox.

Second, amity with China's neighbors on one flank would free Beijing to devote more resources and attention to the other flank. Cooperative relations with Russia and an uneasy peace with India since the end of the Cold War have enabled China to invest in maritime and aerospace capabilities designed largely for contingencies in the Western Pacific. Indeed, Chinese scholars over the past two decades have argued that the absence of a serious threat

along the interior has created an unprecedented opportunity in China's modern history to develop seapower.⁸⁵ As Liu Zhongmin asserts:

The security environment on the northwestern and southwestern land borders has been the most favorable since New China's founding, *if not in history* [emphasis added]. This has in turn provided a relatively beneficial period of strategic opportunity to focus our energy on developing seapower.⁸⁶

Despite this historic opening to the seas, Chinese commentators have expressed misgivings that China's rising maritime power might still trigger countervailing geopolitical responses. Wu Zhengyu of Renmin University, for example, has warned that China's seapower development could stimulate great resistance by the United States, the leading naval power, and by China's neighbors on land and at sea. He worries that such "dual pressure" could undo China's rise, just as similar burdens have derailed the ambitions of other composite land-sea powers in the past.⁸⁷ To alleviate such potential strain, some scholars have proposed the development of "limited seapower [有限海权]" to reassure the United States and China's neighbors that Beijing harbors no ambitions that would justify counterbalancing behaviors.⁸⁸ While they do not specify what such seapower would look like in terms of force structure and capabilities, they call for a navy that would clearly signal China's intent to eschew global hegemony. Wu Zhengyu argues that a Chinese navy designed to defend the global commons and to prosecute constabulary missions might persuade the United States of China's benign purpose.⁸⁹

Still others believe that China's best insurance policy against a dual-front challenge is to secure an amicable relationship with Russia, by far the most powerful actor contiguous to China. As Zheng Yiwei contends:

In the process of building China's "maritime power," it should ensure long-term stable and good ties with Russia, the strongest neighboring landpower. While China has many landward neighbors, only Russia possesses the capacity to genuinely threaten China. As long as China firmly commits to its strongest land neighbor, then China can avoid the worst situation in the

85 See 王勇 [Wang Yong], "浅析中国海权发展的若干问题 [Analysis of Several Problems of China's Seapower Development]," 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], no. 5, 2010, p. 95; and 刘新华 [Liu Xinhua], "海权优先: 当代中国的地缘战略选择 [Seapower Takes Precedence: Contemporary China's Geostrategic Choices]," 社会科学 [Journal of Social Sciences], no. 7, 2008, p. 58.

86 刘中民 [Liu Zhongmin], "中国海洋强国建设的海权战略选择 [Seapower Strategy Choices for the Development of China's Maritime Great Power]," 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], no. 8, 2013, p. 78.

87 吴征宇 [Wu Zhengyu], "海权与陆海复合型强国 [Seapower and Composite Land-Sea Great Powers], 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics], no. 2, 2012, pp. 47-50; and 吴征宇 [Wu Zhengyu], 论陆海复合型国家的战略地位—理论机理与政策选择 [On the Strategic Position of Composite Land-Sea Powers—Theoretical Mechanisms and Policy Choices], 教学与研究 [Teaching and Research], no. 7, 2010, pp. 69-70.

88 郑义炜 [Zheng Yiwei], "陆海复合型的中国发展海权的战略选择 [China's Strategic Choices for Developing Seapower as a Composite Land-Sea Power]," 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics], no. 3, 2013, p. 25; and 刘中民 [Liu Zhongmin], "中国海洋强国建设的海权战略选择 [Seapower Strategy Choices for the Development of China's Maritime Great Power]," 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], no. 8, 2013, p. 80.

89 吴征宇 [Wu Zhengyu], "海权与陆海复合型强国 [Seapower and Composite Land-Sea Great Powers]," 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics], no. 2, 2012, p. 50.

geopolitical security environment, which is being pressed on both sides by a landpower and a seapower.⁹⁰

Zheng goes on to observe that the success of China's maritime strategy—one that aims to produce the strongest seapower in East Asia—is intimately tied up with its strategic rear on land. Beijing can reduce the opportunity costs to its seaward turn by keeping its relations with Russia on a steady footing. Indeed, he sees Russia playing a salutary role in countering the “security pressures [安全压力]” that the United States could bring to bear from the sea.⁹¹

In a 2019 article, Qin Lizhi of Dalian University of Foreign Languages expresses confidence that China's grand strategy will allow it to transcend the competitive dynamics that previous composite land-sea powers had failed to escape. Qin argues that China's methodical and inclusive approach as a rising great power has gone far to avert balancing behavior by other landpowers and seapowers. Beijing adopted a low-profile posture during the initial phases of its development. As China grew even stronger over the past decade, it has proposed a new vision for global order designed to preclude rivalries. Such concepts as “new type of international relations,” “community of common destiny,” “Belt and Road Initiative” “win-win cooperation,” and “harmonious world” would, according to Qin, “reduce balancing pressures by maritime and continental great powers, reduce sources of threats, and widen the window of opportunity provided by the international system.”⁹² Qin's analysis suggests a continuing concern with potential geostrategic risks, despite China's growing national power and capacity to influence global events.

Just as Chinese strategists see an interrelationship between landward and seaward threats to their nation's security and destiny, they view in similar fashion the instruments of Chinese power on land and at sea. To them, China's ground forces, the ultimate guarantors of the nation's survival, furnish the basic security conditions for the development of seagoing forces. The navy cannot exist without the army standing guard. There is thus recognition that landpower, narrowly understood as an implement of statecraft, is the foundation for Chinese seapower.⁹³ Renmin University's Kong Xiaohui, for example, sees an interdependent relationship between landpower and seapower. Kong asserts:

There is an intrinsically dialectical relationship between landpower and seapower: Strength in landpower benefits the development of seapower while strength in seapower benefits the prowess of landpower. Landpower is the backstop to seapower while seapower is the extension

90 郑义伟 [Zheng Yiwei], “陆海复合型中国“海洋强国”战略分析 [Analysis of China's Composite Land-Sea “Maritime Power” Strategy],” 东北亚论坛 [*Northeast Asia Forum*], no. 2, 2018, p. 88.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

92 秦立志 [Qin Lizhi], “陆海复合型国家战略转型的动力机制—兼论对中国的启示 [The Dynamic Mechanism Behind the Strategic Transformation of Composite Land-Sea Powers—Implications for China],” 太平洋学报 [*Pacific Journal*], no. 2, 2019, p. 11.

93 See 李义虎 [Li Yihu], “从海陆二分到陆海统筹—对中国海陆关系的再审视 [From Land-Sea Division to Land-Sea Joint Planning—Reexamining the Land-Sea Relationship for China],” 现代国际关系 [*Contemporary International Relations*], no. 8, 2007, p. 5.

of landpower. Without seapower, China's landpower is not secure. Without landpower, China's seapower loses the foundation for its survival.⁹⁴

Echoing Kong, Colonel Hou Angyu of the Academy of Military Science argues that, "From the perspective of national defense, China's basic strategic choice is to build upon the firm foundation of landpower to comprehensively employ long-range combat power, relying on the land to turn toward the seas and using the land to control the seas."⁹⁵ Hou's depiction of Chinese landpower and seapower corresponds with key elements of China's defense posture today. The PLA employs a wide variety of shore-based capabilities, such as ground-launched anti-ship ballistic missiles, to impose costs and risks on adversary forces operating along China's maritime periphery.

A theme that runs through the discourse about China as a composite land-sea power is a clear-eyed sense of the limits on Beijing's geostrategic choices. This sensibility is firmly rooted in China's Cold War history. Mao Zedong's "dual adversary" strategy in the 1960s pitted China against both superpowers, exposing his country to the grave risks of a two-front confrontation. There is thus wide recognition that China's maritime developments are predicated on peace along its continental flank. Conversely, there is consensus that turbulence along the interior could draw resources away from China's seapower projects. In other words, Beijing cannot take for granted the peace dividend on land, which has afforded the strategic space to go to sea. Indeed, Chinese strategists are aware that the window of opportunity is not likely to stay open indefinitely and that Beijing must strive to cultivate the conditions conducive to its outward maritime orientation for as long as possible. The primacy of landpower and its potential to undo China's long-term strategic success thus cast a long shadow over its strategic calculus.

The First Island Chain

Even as conditions along the land borders have proved favorable—and sustainably advantageous thus far—for China's seaward turn, Chinese analysts recognize that Beijing's success as a maritime power is by no means assured. They understand that China's capacity to make use of the seas is intimately linked to geostrategic conditions in the oceanic direction, which appear configured to thwart Beijing's nautical ambitions. When Chinese strategists survey their nation's saltwater surroundings, they experience an acute sense of claustrophobia. To Chinese eyes the string of offshore islands—the "first island chain" enclosing Eurasia's eastern crest—resembles a barricade that imprisons China's freedom of oceangoing movement.

94 孔小惠 [Kong Xiaohui], "中国作为陆海复合国家的地缘战略选择 [The Geostrategic Choices of China as a Composite Land-Sea Power]," 国际关系学院学报 [*Journal of University of International Relations*], no. 2, 2008, p. 17.

95 侯昂好 [Hou Angyu], "经略海洋与战略统筹 [Strategic Management of the Seas and Strategic Coordination]," 国防 [*National Defense*], no. 5, 2015, p. 14.

The term *first island chain* refers to the archipelago that centers primarily on the Japanese home islands, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippine Islands. South Korea, a half-island adjoining Japan, constitutes a key component of the chain.⁹⁶ The first island chain is a geographic construct peculiar to China's vantage point, which situates the Chinese mainland at the epicenter of maritime Asia. And indeed, a seaward-looking China cannot avoid facing the islands. The island chain roughly parallels and envelopes the nation's long coastline, and no Chinese harbor outflanks it. Worse, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines constitute the "first" island chain only because a more distant, looser island group centered on Guam—dubbed the "second island chain"—forms an additional concentric ring around China. Notably, this geographic conception is integral to official lexicon and enjoys wide usage within China's strategic community.⁹⁷

To many Chinese observers, the first island chain constitutes not just a physical barrier but also a metaphor for the resistance they can expect from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Japanese and U.S. forces based there stand out as a fortified barrier to China's access to the Western Pacific, and thence to Beijing's larger maritime ambitions. Describing the Japanese islands as an "impassable maritime great wall," Liu Baoyin and Yang Xiaomei observe that Japan enjoys a commanding position over most of the sea lanes connecting Northeast Asia with the Pacific Ocean. To them, Japan not only serves as a "great gateway" to the Pacific, but it can also function as a "tremendous constraint" on China's ability to develop economically and act militarily in the oceanic direction.⁹⁸ They further contend that the archipelago's proximity to eastern Eurasia enables Japan-based military forces to project power throughout the Yellow Sea and the East China Seas or deep into the Asian continent, including the Chinese heartland.⁹⁹ Japan, then, forms a segment of a wall that commands offensive—not just defensive—potential for its holders.

In a subsequent study, Liu and Yang contend that control over the island chain confers control over access to the chokepoints and narrow seas formed by the island chain. The power to dictate commercial and military movements through the island chain is in turn a source of tremendous influence and an important ingredient to local hegemony. As Liu and Yang state, "The United States obtained its leading position over the seas surrounding China by controlling the island chain and the strait passages between those islands."¹⁰⁰ Notably, the Chinese

96 Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenges to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), pp. 90-91.

97 For the PLA's official definition of the first and second island chains, see 全军军事学术管理委员会, 军事科学院 [Armed Forces Military Terminology Management Committee, Academy of Military Science], 中国人民解放军军语 [China People's Liberation Army Military Terms] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science, 2011), pp. 952-953.

98 刘宝银 杨晓梅 [Liu Boying and Yang Xiaomei], 环中国岛链—海洋地理, 军事区位, 信息系统 [Island Chains Surrounding China—Maritime Geography, Military Positioning, Information Systems] (Beijing: Haiyang Press, 2003), p. 17.

99 Ibid., p. 17.

100 刘宝银 杨晓梅 [Liu Boying and Yang Xiaomei], 西太平洋海上通道—航天遥感 融合信息 战略区域 [Maritime Passages in the Western Pacific—Space Remote Sensing, Information Fusion, and Strategic Positioning] (Beijing: Haiyang Press, 2017), p. 15.

navy's official handbook explicitly attributes American primacy in Asia to U.S. forward presence on the two island chains and control of the waters bounded by those island chains. As the handbook observes, "After the Second World War, the United States controlled the entire Philippines Sea area and exploited the two island arcs bounding that sea area to the west and to the east by establishing a two-layered 'island chain area.'"¹⁰¹ By implication, the Chinese believe that U.S. regional dominance rests in part on occupying favorable terrain along the first and second island chains. Thus, by occupying a commanding position over the island chains, the United States possesses significant strategic leverage over China.

Lin Hongyu, a scholar at the China University of International Relations, offers a pessimistic—if not fatalistic—assessment of the nation's plight:

From the perspective of the geostrategic environment, China today *suffers from the harshest global geopolitical security situation among the great powers* [emphasis added]. China's eastward oceanic geostrategic structure is abnormally complex and unfavorable...This is because countries and regions with different political systems and ideologies obstruct the strategic corridors to the oceans. The very narrow strategic sea lanes can be easily be controlled by others. To overcome this dilemma, China must develop a strategic plan to shatter the first island chain.¹⁰²

To Lin, the first island chain deprives China of its full maritime potential. The author's reference to ideology, furthermore, reflects deep discomfort that democracies control the first island chain. Lin may also be obliquely referring to allied and semi-allied ties joining Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines to the United States, a democratic great power intent on advancing its values in Asia. Lin and like-minded strategists long to break out of this nautical cordon.

Prominent Chinese scholars and strategists continue to view the current Sino-American rivalry through this geospatial lens. Senior Captain Liang Fang at China's National Defense University argues that U.S. bases on the first island chain furnish significant strategic and operational advantages. America's forward presence there brings the United States in proximity to its main adversaries, the most important strategic straits, and key sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Access to basing on the island chain enables U.S. forces to project power, monitor rivals, and grab a chokehold on the economic lifeblood of hostile powers. America's possession of "strategic islands," such as Guam along the second island chain, provide strategic depth to the U.S. position in Asia while providing a backstop and waystation to forward-deployed forces on the first island chain. Finally, U.S. allies on the first island chain

101 杜景臣 [Du Jingchen, ed.], 中国海军军人手册 [Handbook for Officers and Enlisted of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy] (Beijing: Haichao Press, 2012), p. 95.

102 林宏宇 [Lin Hongyu], "当前中日关系与中国东海防空识别区 [Current Sino-Japanese Relations and China's East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone]," 当代国际关系 [Contemporary International Relations], no. 1, 2014, p. 10.

contribute to a range of supporting missions, including peacetime surveillance and wartime blockade operations.¹⁰³

FIGURE 5: CHINESE STRATEGIC VIEW OF U.S. POSTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

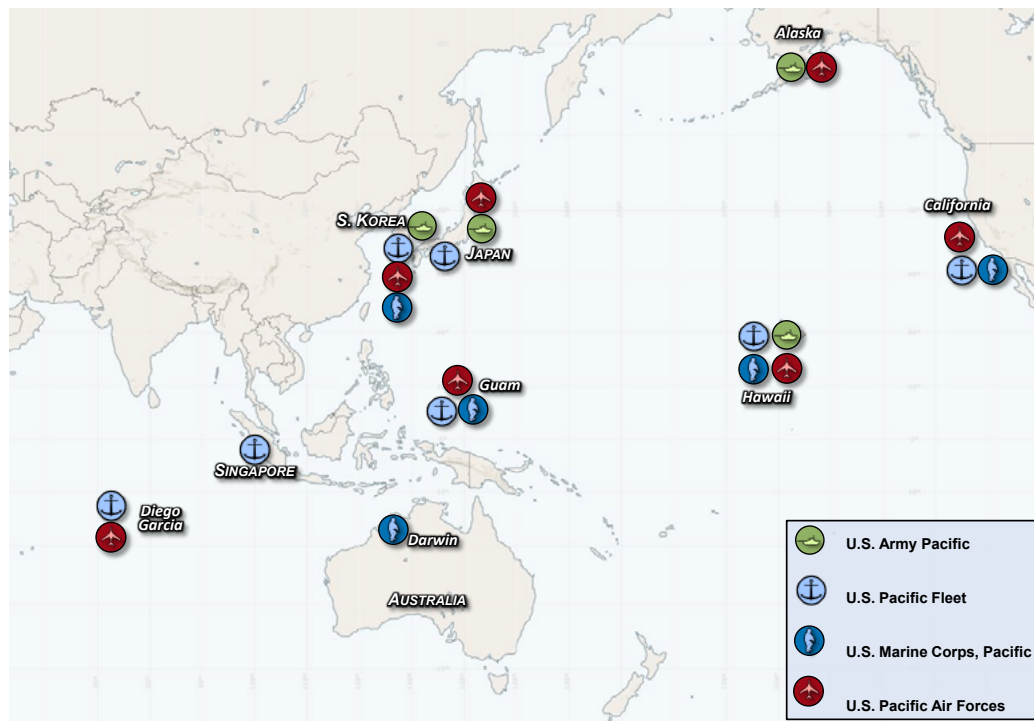


Image adapted by James Mersol based on 中国南海研究院 [National Institute for South China Sea Studies], 美国在亚太地区的军力报告 [The U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific 2020], p. 29. Map underlay courtesy of Mapbox.

Hu Bo of Peking University uses concepts derived from classical strategy to describe the Sino-American competition along the first island chain. Hu refers to the sea area bounded by the first island chain—namely, the Yellow, East, and South China Seas—as China’s “interior lines” and defines the Western Pacific and the northern Indian Ocean as China’s “exterior lines.” To him, the United States is conspiring with its allies and friends to “check China’s power along ‘exterior lines’ while implementing a full-court press along ‘interior lines.’”¹⁰⁴ Hu sees Japan, Australia, and India forming a “great triangle” around China’s most important access routes to the open oceans. These three powers, he claims, are in a good position to deny Chinese influence along the exterior lines while keeping China hemmed in behind the first island chain. Concurring, Li Yan at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations contends that the United States is seeking to form a “new island chain system (新的岛链体系)” that

103 梁芳 [Liang Fang], “美国控制海上战略通道的理论与实践与启示 [The Theory, Practice, and Implications of U.S. Control of the Strategic Sea Lanes],” 中国海洋大学学报 [Journal of Ocean University of China], no. 5, 2019, pp. 42-44.

104 胡波 [Hu Bo], “美国“印太战略”趋势与前景 [The Trends and Prospects of U.S. “Indo-Pacific Strategy],” 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], no. 10, 2019, p. 25.

would draw in Japan, Australia, and India. To Li, the U.S. strategy aims to apply “two-way compression (双向挤压)” to squeeze China’s strategic space in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁵

The first island chain remains a critical geospatial construct even as China has made impressive strides in its military modernization. China’s growing military prowess and the accompanying shift in the strategic balance against the United States have frequently been framed in terms of the transnational archipelago. According to retired major general Yao Yunzhu, a consultant to the Academy of Military Science and an influential strategist, the PLA’s long-term investment in maritime and aerospace capabilities has furnished Beijing the means to shape events across the region, defend its sovereign rights at sea and in the air, and keep reunion with Taiwan within reach. As the PLA becomes even stronger, Yao foresees the normalization of contact and friction between Chinese and American forces, leading to a “competitive coexistence [竞争性共存]” within the first island chain.¹⁰⁶ As a result of PLA’s strength, Lü Jinghua and Luo Xi foresee a “line of strategic equilibrium (战略平衡线)” emerging over the waters along the first island chain between the United States and China.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Chinese analysts see the island chain as a dividing line demarcating areas over which U.S. and Chinese forces would command the commons respectively.

The Island Chains in the Missile Age

The discourse surrounding the intensifying Sino-American rivalry along the first island chain demonstrates how Chinese strategists perceive the potential danger from the United States and its offshore allies. Chinese analysts have paid close attention to the disposition of Japan’s defense posture along the Southwest Islands, or the Ryukyu Islands, which stretches between the main island of Kyushu and the northeast coast of Taiwan. The island arc forms the eastern boundary of the East China Sea and faces a large segment of the Chinese coast, including the vital Yangtze River Economic Zone centered around Shanghai. Okinawa, the largest island of the Ryukyus, is home to major U.S and Japanese bases, including Kadena Air Base, the hub of American airpower in the Pacific.

Not surprisingly, Chinese observers see the Ryukyus as strategic terrain, a key staging area from which U.S. and Japanese forces can monitor China’s peacetime activities and interdict PLA forces in wartime at sea and in the air. Lian Degui and Jin Yongming from the Shanghai

105 李岩 [Li Yan], “美国新一轮军事转型评析 [An Analysis of America’s New Round of Military Transformation],” 现代国际关系 [Contemporary International Relations], no. 7, 2019, p. 15.

106 姚云竹 [Yao Yunzhu], “中美军事关系: 从准同盟到竞争对手? [Sino-U.S. Military Relations: From Quasi Ally to Competitor?],” 美国研究 [Chinese Journal of American Studies], no. 2, 2019, p. 14.

107 吕晶华 罗曦 [Lü Jinghua and Luo Xi], “冷战后中美西太平洋军力对比的发展演变 [The Development and Evolution of the China-U.S. Military Balance in the Western Pacific in the Post-Cold War Era],” 美国研究 [Chinese Journal of American Studies], no. 3, 2019, p. 94. See also 左希迎 [Zuo Xiying], “美国亚太联盟体系会走向瓦解吗 [Will America’s Asia-Pacific Alliance System Move Toward Disintegration?],” 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics], no. 10, 2019, p. 72.

Institute of American Studies describe Japan as “the watchdog of China’s access to the Pacific Ocean.” In reference to the Ryukyus, they claim:

From the perspective of containing China, *Japan occupies an innately superior geographical location* [emphasis added]. The Southwest Islands obstruct passage from the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea to the Pacific Ocean...In particular, the Ryukyu Islands form a perimeter that denies China’s access, giving Japan an advantageous strategic position. Sealing China behind this island chain [during conflict] would buy time for the United States to bring in reinforcements.¹⁰⁸

According to Lian Degui, Japan’s recent efforts to boost the defense of the Ryukyus are aimed at hemming in the Chinese navy’s surface fleet. Tokyo has established garrisons along the Southwest Islands, stood up rapid response amphibious forces, conducted exercises to simulate operations to retake islands seized by adversary forces, and deployed defensive systems, such as anti-ship missile units and air defense systems, to some of the Southwest Islands. Lian asserts:

The core meaning of Japan’s remote island defense strategy is to strategically stop China from breaking through the first island chain. The goal is to keep the Chinese navy in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, ensuring that it forever remains a “coastal constabulary force” unable to pose a threat to the U.S.-Japan strategy in the Western Pacific.¹⁰⁹

Chinese observers have been particularly concerned about the successive deployment of shore-based ship-killing batteries on the Ryukyus and their potential threat to their nation’s navy. In June 2014, reports that Japan had dispatched surface-to-ship missile capabilities to Miyako Island triggered the first public response from China’s foreign ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunyun.¹¹⁰ Retired senior captain Li Jie, a commentator of naval affairs, responded to the same reports. Referring to the Miyako Strait, Li noted that Japanese anti-ship missile units “would make it easy for Japan to cut off sea transport if they deployed them at both ends of the strait.”¹¹¹ Since then, Chinese media outlets and strategists have kept a running tally of Japan’s evolving defense posture along the Ryukyus.

Chinese observers have also paid close attention to U.S. and allied exercises that hold potential meaning for China’s freedom of movement through and long the first island chain. For example, the sinking exercise conducted by the United States, Japan, and Australia during

108 廉德瑰 金永明 [Lian Degui and Jin Yongming], 日本海洋战略研究 [*Research on Japan’s Maritime Strategy*] (Beijing: Shishi Press, 2016), p. 216.

109 廉德瑰 [Lian Degui], “从日本的离岛防御战略看西太平洋的海权博弈 [Understanding the Seapower Competition in the Western Pacific Through Japan’s Remote Island Defense Strategy],” 日本研究问题 [*Japanese Research*], no. 3, 2017, p. 8.

110 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on June 16, 2014,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, June 16, 2014, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1165908.shtml.

111 Jiang Jie, “Tokyo boosts missile defense,” *Global Times*, June 16, 2014, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/865828.shtml>.

the 2018 Rim of the Pacific multinational exercise was widely reported in China. That the U.S. Army and Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force employed shore-based anti-ship systems against a target at sea was not lost on Chinese strategists. To Wang Yalin and Pang Juan, engineers of a research academy affiliated with the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation, the exercise revealed a U.S.-led plan to devise a region-wide network of anti-shiping capabilities aimed at China. They conclude:

The high value that the United States and its allies attach to the development of anti-ship capabilities demonstrates the intent to provide short-, medium-, and long-range coverage of the first island chain by coordinating the various platforms and munitions among different countries across the land, sea, and air domains. By erecting this new type of anti-surface warfighting system, the goal is to strengthen command of the oceans in the Western Pacific.¹¹²

Wang and Pang single out Japan's deployment of anti-ship missiles units on Okinawa, Ishigaki, and Miyako Islands along the Ryukyus as "an attempt to form an anti-ship firepower network on the first island chain."

Beyond Japan, Chinese observers have commented extensively about missile proliferation following the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and its implications for China's security.¹¹³ Chinese commentators believe that the United States intends to deploy theater-range conventional missiles on the first and second island chains and beyond to threaten their nation's military forces in the global commons and targets on the homeland. According to Luo Xi, a researcher at the Academy of Military Science:

Geospatially, the United States could form "three lines of encirclement (三线包围圈)" around China in the future. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines would serve as the first line for the U.S. deployment of ground-based theater-range missiles. The Northern Marianas, Guam, Australia, and British-held Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean would be the second line. Alaska and Hawaii would constitute the third line.¹¹⁴

To Luo, this multi-layered long-range strike system based on offshore terrain would furnish the United States the means to threaten key targets along China's southwest coast. Liu Jie, Bao Ran, Song Zhenzhong, and Wu Kai, engineers at the Shanghai Electro-Mechanical Engineering Institute, contend that U.S. intermediate-range missiles and near-space weapons could directly harm the Chinese homeland from the second island chain. For them, the geographic asymmetry arising from American long-range precision strike is stark. The

112 王雅琳 庞娟 [Wang Yalin and Pang Juan], "日美奥环太军演中联合进行反舰打击任务分析 [An Analysis of the Joint Anti-Ship Strike Mission by Japan, the United States, and Australia during RIMPAC]," 飞航导弹 [*Aerodynamic Missile*], no. 10, 2018, p. 4.

113 See, for example, an in-depth summary of CSBA's monographs on U.S. options in the post-INF era and on U.S. operational concepts surrounding the defense of the first island chain. 张雪松 雨如啸 [Zhang Xuesong and Yu Ruxiao], "美陆军重建中导打击体系设想 [U.S. Concepts for Restoring Ground-Based Intermediate-Range Strike Systems]," 舰船知识 [*Naval and Merchant Ships*], no. 8, 2019, pp. 62-69.

114 罗曦 [Luo Xi], "美国开启退出中导条约后的'连锁进程' [The "Chain Reaction" Following U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty]," 世界知识 [*World Affairs*], no. 20, 2019, p. 53.

United States, fighting behind the safety of the vast ocean, can launch attacks from forward outposts against Beijing and China's coastal areas, which lack defensive depth on land. To cope with this challenge, the authors recommend prioritizing investments in sea-based missile interceptors that can operate offshore to buffer the exposed littorals against U.S. and allied firepower.¹¹⁵

Geography and China's Global Ambitions

Geography's effects on statecraft run in both directions. While Chinese depictions of their nation's physical surroundings seem grim, key elements of China's geostrategic conditions are conducive to its security and its outward orientation. On land, China benefits from several advantages. The harsh, high-altitude terrain along the Himalayan border ensures that neither India nor China can achieve quick decisive victories that dramatically and permanently change the territorial status quo on a large scale. Aside from India and Russia, China's other continental neighbors are relatively small and the corresponding bilateral power dynamics are lopsided in Beijing's favor. Finally, China's interior and complex topography provide a vast sanctuary for its conventional and nuclear forces to move away or hide from adversary power projection units.

In the seaward direction, the mainland coast boasts a variety of deep warm-water harbors that have been developed into a world-class port system, facilitating the rise of Chinese seapower.¹¹⁶ China's proximity to the first island chain puts America's major forward bases located in Japan and South Korea within easy reach of the PLA Air Force and Rocket Force. Indeed, China's theater-range missiles have significantly reduced Guam's value as a sanctuary previously located beyond the reach of Chinese offensive strike systems. Moreover, conquest, such as the seizure of Taiwan by force, could transform a geographic barrier into a steppingstone while outflanking U.S. and allied military bases along the East Asian littoral. The shallowness of the Yellow and East China Seas greatly limits the efficacy of U.S. and allied undersea forces, making these offshore waters a natural barrier for China against enemy anti-submarine warfare operations.

Nevertheless, the concerns many Chinese strategists express about being squeezed between potentially hostile landpowers and seapowers or the claustrophobia they feel when they look in the maritime direction offer clues about how geography could constrain China's global plans. First, Beijing's freedom to maneuver in the maritime domain is predicated on a reasonable degree of stability and peace along its continental frontiers. Otherwise, Chinese leaders could find their attention split in diametrically opposed directions, preventing them from concentrating on one main front. Thus far, China's defense burden on land has not imposed

115 刘杰 鲍然 宋振中 吴凯 [Liu Jie, Bao Ran, Song Zhenzhong, and Wu Kai], "美国退出中导条约威胁分析及我防御装备发展启示 [Threat Analysis of the U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty and Implications for Our Development of Defensive Equipment]," 空天防御 [Air and Space Defense], no. 7, 2019, p. 76.

116 Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, pp. 48-99.

difficult trade-off choices between continental and maritime missions nor has it impaired the PLA's sustained investments in its outward orientation. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Beijing has been able to maximize its peace dividend to turn decisively seaward.

Yet, a severe deterioration in the security environment along the interior could compel Beijing to divert substantial resources to cope with continental problems that it would otherwise prefer to devote to its maritime project. America's entanglement in the Middle East over the past two decades is instructive: prolonged land wars and their deleterious effects on the U.S. military's posture, readiness, and modernization have undermined deterrence and warfighting against great powers. The speed and scope of the PLA's globalizing posture thus depend in part on how well Chinese statesmen manage relations with their continental neighbors, particularly Russia and India, and how well they avoid protracted commitments in the landward direction.

Second, China inhabits an inhospitable nautical environment. While serious continental threats, such as those posed by the Soviet Union, have largely abated, significant offshore challenges remain. Beijing confronts not only unfavorable maritime geography in the form of the first island chain, but it also faces an opposing configuration of power organized around a U.S.-led alliance system. Unresolved disputes over Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas consume substantial political, diplomatic, economic, and military resources. China therefore must constantly balance its more urgent priorities in the near seas and its ambitions in the far seas. The PLA cannot devote its energies fully to global endeavors until problems closer to home are resolved or prove manageable. Or put another way, the near seas missions impose a sizeable tax on China's ability to orient toward the far seas.

Third, Chinese perceptions about geography matter. Beijing may be particularly sensitive to how external actors could leverage certain strategic terrain. For example, as the debates over U.S. and allied missile deployments on the first island chain above suggest, Chinese leaders may be predisposed to perceive island defenses as a serious threat to their maritime prerogatives. They may be inclined to lend substantial credibility to rival forces that could impede China's access to the open waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, frustrating the PLA's plan to go global. The Chinese discourse suggests that Beijing may be responsive to U.S. and allied initiatives that exploit China's geospatial disadvantages at sea. This interactive process, if followed closely, could serve as a useful basis for developing U.S. and allied strategies as China goes global.

CHAPTER 5

Weaknesses in Global Power Projection

China's continued economic growth is rooted in ever-deepening trade and investment ties with foreign markets and its broader ambitions to become a global power now depend on stable and secure access to those markets. In recent decades, Beijing has accordingly expanded its national defense aims and military strategy, charging the PLA with developing the global power projection platforms necessary for protecting China's overseas interests.

Yet, due to the geographic constraints raised in the previous chapter, China now faces a need to spread its force structure investments across three broad and, in many respects, incompatible categories: 1) land operations; 2) near seas operations; and 3) far seas (global) operations. While certain platforms and systems can be used across multiple categories, for China, these three geographic areas are so distinct that they require different force structures.

Along with balancing commitments across the continent, near seas, and far seas, China's development of global power projection forces is a related but distinct weakness. A country's procurement of substantial numbers of large, technologically advanced, and expensive power projection platforms typically calls for sustained investment over time due to high demands for resources and constraints imposed by the defense industrial base. Beyond acquiring the systems themselves, additional military-wide changes are required in doctrine, organization, recruitment, education, training, and logistics, among other areas. China thus likely faces substantial development, procurement, and operating costs in expanding its far seas force structure. Nevertheless, Beijing still possesses agency and, given sufficient time and resources, it could feasibly make dramatic progress in one of the three categories above, potentially at the expense of the other two.

This chapter first focuses on the recent global expansion of China's interests and the resulting weakness that has developed as the PLA's global power projection capabilities rush to catch up. The chapter will then address the absolute, opportunity, and psychological costs, largely

imposed by geography, that Chinese leaders face as they develop, procure, and operate these platforms. This chapter finds that Beijing's perception that it does not possess adequate power projection forces to protect its overseas interests—a longstanding weakness—is driving China to go global. Yet, the very efforts to shore up one set of weaknesses are likely to create additional requirements and open up new, related types of weaknesses.

An anticipated slowing in economic growth rates over the next decade suggests that Beijing will face increasingly difficult force structure tradeoffs as it attempts to develop capabilities for contingencies in the continental and maritime domains. These competing demands will remain strong unless China revises the geopolitical status quo in the near seas through such measures as territorial conquest or diplomatic achievement. Chinese leaders may be forced to assume risk in one or more geographic areas due to resource constraints or it could face the prospect of being weak everywhere as it dilutes resources across all three categories. China may therefore be particularly stressed and vulnerable in the 2020s as it attempts to address its security challenges before it has the ability to significantly alter that status quo in either the near seas or the far seas. Allied policymakers should therefore seize this potentially fleeting opportunity to capitalize on their present advantages and delay Beijing's strategic ambitions.

Defining Global Power Projection

Power projection is an ambiguous term that defies a precise, narrow definition. It has at times been defined so broadly as to include any military operations beyond a country's borders.¹¹⁷ A more constructive and slightly narrower definition of the term is the deployment and sustainment of military forces engaged in operations beyond a country's borders in order to achieve political objectives. Power projection operations range from deterrent or coercive operations, which can be limited in scale and duration, to large-scale and prolonged expeditionary operations against foreign states. This chapter focuses specifically on China's *global* power projection capabilities, which excludes capabilities that would be used solely for operations along its immediate periphery.

Although the above definition is quite broad, the concept of global power projection becomes more tangible when analyzing its constituent components. Global power projection fundamentally involves two elements: forces and bases. Andrew Krepinevich and Robert Work, in their study of the U.S. global posture, argue that global power projection rests on a global military posture comprising seven categories:

[A] global military posture can be envisioned as an interconnected set of components: *forward-based forces* and the permanent and temporary overseas bases and facilities that house them; *forward-deployed forces* and the permanent and temporary overseas bases and facilities that

117 Mark Gunzinger provides a brief overview of definitions of power projection. This study's generic definition of power projection builds off of the U.S.-specific one included in his study. Mark Gunzinger, *Power Projection: Making the Hard Choices* (Maxwell Airforce Base, AL: School of Advanced Airpower Studies), pp. vii, 1, 3, available at https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/29/2001861965/-1/-1/0/T_GUNZINGER_POWER_PROJECTION.PDF.

support them; *global attack forces* based in the [home country] or in space that are capable of immediate employment over intercontinental ranges; a *strategic mobility and logistics* infrastructure that links together and supports all global attack, forward-based, forward-deployed, and surge forces; those *forcible entry and rapid base construction forces* consistent with the overall strategic access environment; and a *global command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I) network*. These six physical components are supported by a seventh—*supporting security relationships and legal arrangements, such as bi-lateral or multi-lateral agreements and treaties and status of forces agreements (SOFAs)*.¹¹⁸ [emphasis in the original]

Krepinevich and Work note that *strategy and operational concepts* are the “connective tissue” that link posture to specific applications of force against prospective adversaries in order to achieve national aims.¹¹⁹

The first six categories of global military posture are so capital intensive that they can only be marshaled by a major or great power. In modern contexts, these capabilities span all military domains: land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Of particular importance are sea, amphibious, air, ground-based missile, computer network, and space capabilities, which are necessary for moving, coordinating, and supporting forces over transcontinental distances and form the backbone of most global power projection operations.¹²⁰ Specific capabilities critical to global power projection include: aircraft carriers; carrier-based fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft; large surface combatants; naval logistics vessels; amphibious lift vessels; amphibious vehicles; strategic bombers; strategic airlift; aerial refueling; airborne early warning and control aircraft; theater- and strategic-range land-based missile forces; computer network operations forces; and space-based satellite constellations for communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and positioning, navigation, and timing. Linking these dispersed, multi-domain capabilities are command, control, communications, and intelligence networks, which are necessary to coordinate the many elements of a globally oriented force.

Although Krepinevich and Work are primarily concerned with U.S. global posture, their framework is generally applicable to other aspiring powers seeking to go global. The PLA will need to develop aspects of the seven components that Krepinevich and Work identify to credibly defend and protect China’s interests abroad. A limited extra-regional posture confined to the Indian Ocean littorals would still require forward-deployed forces, bases, logistics, some capacity to project power ashore, command and control networks, and foreign basing

118 Andrew Krepinevich and Robert O. Work, *A New Global Defense Posture for the Second Transoceanic Era* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2007), p. 4. For more detail on these components, see pp. 9-35. Krepinevich and Work distinguish between forward-based forces, which are forces permanently stationed abroad (with their families), and forward-deployed forces. Forward-deployed forces are temporarily deployed from their permanent base—which can be either domestic or foreign—to a foreign location (without their families).

119 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

120 This study’s analysis of potential Chinese global power projection operations focuses primarily on forces that traverse the maritime and air domains. For instance, PLA global power projection operations could conceivably involve ground operations spanning vast distances over land across the Eurasian continent, but those are not explored in detail here since the continent is not the primary direction of China’s current defense strategy.

arrangements, even if they were modest in numbers and capabilities. Indeed, China's support base in Djibouti relies on those very seven components for its day-to-day operations. The Chinese-language sources cited below further suggest a recognition that China needs all seven elements of a global military posture. The bottom line is that the PLA must meet these inescapable universal conditions if it is to fulfill China's global ambitions. As noted in Chapter 3, there is little reason to doubt Xi Jinping's sincerity about obtaining his aims.

Importantly, the PLA does not need to match the U.S. armed forces in scale, posture, and technological sophistication for it to go global. China will acquire and deploy a force and establish bases tailored to meet its peculiar needs and interests, which will likely be more limited than America's worldwide commitments. There is little reason for Beijing to unthinkingly imitate the U.S. model, which was built on decades of investment, politico-diplomatic commitment, trial and error, and an enormous but exceedingly rare opportunity in the early years of the postwar period when America was unrivaled in power and influence. Chinese analysts recognize that America's global military posture is the product of unique historical circumstances. They understand that the foundations of modern U.S. power projection emerged from the shattered world order after the Second World War and the exigencies of the Cold War that followed.¹²¹ By contrast, China is constructing a globally oriented posture largely within the established U.S.-led peacetime order. Chinese strategists therefore expect Beijing to pursue its own "new model [新模式]" of power projection suited to its own circumstances.¹²² In short, a global PLA will not look like the U.S. military. If the recent past is any guide, Beijing will find its own way on the world stage.

This framework for a global military posture also raises an important question about China's geostrategic orientation. As noted in the previous chapter, Chinese experts view China as a composite land-sea power. The PLA's global posture will thus correspondingly take on a hybrid maritime-continental character. Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative described above conforms to this geospatial duality, which seeks transcontinental and transoceanic routes to connect China to the rest of Eurasia and beyond. A globalizing PLA will thus need to be postured in a landward and a seaward direction. Whether the Chinese military will lean more heavily toward one vector over the other will depend on Beijing's overall strategy. In theory, China could prioritize its continental prerogatives over its maritime imperatives. If this were the case, then China would bet on long-term sustained investments along its interior and immediate periphery to consolidate its position as a dominant land power. China would carve out a continental sphere of influence from which it could compete against the United States and other seapowers. Railways, roads, and pipelines, along with PLA bases and logistics facilities for landward purposes, would provide secure access to markets across Eurasia. This

121 For an excellent summary of the rise of American global military power, see 李坡 朱启超 张煌 [Li Po, Zhu Qichao, and Zhang Huang], "美军海外基地的源起于发展 [The Origins and Development of U.S. Overseas Bases]," *军事历史研究 [Military History Research]*, no. 4, 2013, pp. 108-113.

122 张弛 [Zhang Chi], "大国海外力量的布建模式及对中国的启示 [The Deployment Models of Great Power Militaries Overseas and Implications for China]," *社会科学 [Journal of Social Sciences]*, no. 6, 2018, pp. 25-26.

“continent first” strategy would limit China’s exposure to risks at sea, thereby reducing the leverage that the United States and its maritime allies hold at sea. Beijing would rely less on a global maritime posture to defend its far-flung interests and would instead count on shore-based firepower and mobility to secure its landward privileges.

Although a primarily continental orientation is possible, this study contends that China will more likely pursue a strategy that confers primacy to nautical affairs. Barring some type of revolution in land transportation, the maritime domain will remain the most viable medium for international commerce. Moreover, the political and logistical difficulties of moving forces across the Asian continent suggest that maritime and air routes will still be the main, if not the only, pathways for projecting power to the Middle East, Africa, or Europe. The Silk Road Economic Belt that would run across the Eurasian landmass may provide alternatives that offset some of China’s vulnerabilities along major sea lanes. It may be a kind of insurance policy to hedge against resistance, instability, or war at sea. But it is unlikely to supplant the Maritime Silk Road as the dominant mode for China’s future development. This study thus assesses that China cannot profitably go global via a continental strategy without incurring heavy costs or without compromising its returns on investment overseas. Even if China were to orient decisively toward land power, its comparatively more limited maritime commitments beyond its immediate neighborhood would still rest on the seven pillars of a global military posture summarized above.

China’s Proliferating Overseas Interests and Chinese Military Strategy

China’s decades of rapid economic growth have been contingent on unfettered access to global markets and robust foreign trade and investment. China’s sea lines of communication have become vital links to overseas markets, and these SLOCs are the routes over which the majority of China’s imports—including vital energy resources—and exports are transported. Beijing’s “Going Global” economic strategy, launched in 1999, has resulted in both rising levels of overseas investments by Chinese firms and a growing number of Chinese nationals residing overseas.¹²³ Since the late 1990s, Beijing has also issued several white papers and directives focused on developing the maritime economy, including the exploitation of sea-based hydrocarbons and fisheries, which have come to generate sizable economic activity.

Just as the growth of overseas economic interests in the 18th and 19th centuries led to U.S. overseas military expansion in the 19th and 20th centuries, China’s growing global economic interests presage its growth as a maritime power and its development of global power projection capabilities.¹²⁴ Former PLA Navy Commander Wu Shengli notes that the oceans now

123 李庆四 陈春雨 [Li Qingsi and Chen Chunyu], “试析中国的海外港链基地战略 [Analysis of Chinese Overseas Port String Bases Strategy],” *区域与全球发展 [Area Studies and Global Development]*, no. 2, 2019, pp. 124-128.

124 Michael Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1-108.

have critical strategic import for China's national power given the scale of its overall foreign trade, resource imports, and overseas investments.¹²⁵ Li Jiacheng and Li Puqian of Liaoning University argue that China's growing global interests require a globally oriented military and that China should become a great maritime power. In their minds, China is pursuing sea power not for its own sake but because China's development necessitates it.¹²⁶ Similarly, PLA Navy Senior Captain Zhang Wei of the PLA Naval Research Institute, ties the defense of SLOCs and maritime resources to China's own development and national rejuvenation.¹²⁷

As China's overseas interests have grown, its military strategy and defense aims have changed accordingly. General Secretary Hu Jintao's announcement in 2004 of the PLA's "New Historic Missions" marked a notable strategic shift. While the PLA had historically been charged with maintaining CCP rule, safeguarding China's development, and defending China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Hu added a clear international dimension to the PLA's tasks: "maintaining world peace and promoting common development."¹²⁸

Since 2004, official policy statements and other authoritative documents have further expanded the PLA's international mandate. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* (hereafter, *SMS*) argues that the continual expansion of China's security interests is an inherent, foundational element of its national development. The authors write, "Fully establishing a moderately-prosperous society and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese race is the national strategic objective for the first half of the 21st Century. A secure, stable, and continuous expansion of the nation's interests is the basic condition and an important channel for realizing this objective."¹²⁹ Chinese strategists are therefore augmenting the PLA's mandate to safeguard China's development, arguing that this directive necessarily has an international component. Due to these broadening interests, the authors argue that the military must expand its range of operations so that it can defend China's interests on a global scale.¹³⁰

125 吴胜利 [Wu Shengli], "深刻吸取甲午战争历史教训坚定不移走经略海洋维护海权发展海军之路 [Learn Profound Historical Lessons from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and Unswervingly Take the Path of Planning and Managing Maritime Affairs, Safeguarding Maritime Rights and Interests, and Building a Powerful Navy]," *中国军事科学* [*China Military Science*], no. 4, August 2014, p. 2.

126 李家成 李普前 [Li Jiacheng and Li Puqian], "马汉'海权论'及其对中国海权发展战略的启示 [Mahan's 'Sea Power Theory' and Its Implications for the Development of China's Sea Power Strategy]," *太平洋学报* [*Pacific Journal*], no. 10, 2013, p. 91.

127 Zhang Wei, "A General Review of the History of China's Sea-Power Theory Development," trans. Shazeda Ahmed, *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 4, 2015, pp. 90-93, available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1268&context=nwc-review>.

128 Hu Jintao, as quoted in M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 229.

129 寿晓松 [Shou Xiaosong], ed., *战略学* [*Science of Military Strategy*] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), p. 105. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* is a semi-official but authoritative strategic document published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science in Beijing. While the 2013 version is somewhat dated, many elements of its strategic outlook remain valid. Moreover, with few exceptions, similarly authoritative official and semi-official policy and strategy texts have not been produced in more recent years.

130 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

Most recently, General Secretary Xi Jinping has explicitly linked the Chinese Dream and his grand mission of national rejuvenation, addressed in Chapter 3, with the modernization of China's military. Xi's "Strong Military Dream" complements and supports his strategic ambitions, which he explained in a speech at the National Party Congress in 2017: "Building people's forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct is strategically important to achieving the two centenary goals and national rejuvenation."¹³¹ Xi specified that the PLA's modernization will be "basically completed" by 2035 and that the PLA will become "world-class forces" by 2050.¹³²

In sum, there is consensus among Chinese leaders and strategists that China's overseas interests are continually expanding. Developing a leading military that can operate overseas is essential to both protecting those interests and realizing Xi's goals of national prosperity and rejuvenation.

The PLA's Current Difficulties in Defending China's Global Interests

Although China's global interests have proliferated, it has yet to fully develop the power projection capabilities to protect them. Chinese leaders and experts feel compelled to address this divergence. With a consensus that emerged as far back as the early to mid-2000s, China's strategic community has argued that the PRC must protect its overseas interests by procuring capabilities for a wide range of overseas operations, including combat operations, protection of SLOCs and maritime resources, evacuation of personnel, counter-piracy, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Failure to effectively conduct these operations, Chinese strategists warn, could result in potentially grave harm, both from hostile international forces and domestic unrest.

The pace of China's rapid military modernization since the mid-1990s has repeatedly surprised Western observers.¹³³ In merely a few decades, the PLA has transformed from a bloated land-bound force employing obsolescent equipment to a slimmer, more balanced force that can increasingly conduct operations in all domains beyond China's borders. But the PLA has primarily focused on developing counter-intervention capabilities designed to prevent U.S. forces from operating in the Western Pacific and it has only recently begun procuring large numbers of long-range power projection platforms and systems, particularly in the air and sea domains. To address its power projection needs, the PLA has invested in key

131 "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th CPC National Congress," *China Military*, November 5, 2017, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-11/05/content_7812833.htm.

132 Ibid.

133 This surprise is likely explained by a mix of factors, including but not limited to: the desire of U.S. and allied policymakers to enjoy a peace dividend following the collapse of the Soviet Union; dismissiveness of Chinese conventional military capabilities given decades of neglect by senior Chinese political and military leaders throughout the Cold War; among Western policymakers, the perceived inevitability of China's economic liberalization leading to political liberalization, which would enable more cooperative and peaceful relations with China; a lack of sufficient Western intelligence sources and capabilities devoted to China, given Cold War reductions and decades focused on counter-terrorism operations.

capabilities, including aircraft carriers, carrier-based aircraft, fleet air defense systems, anti-submarine warfare platforms and systems, logistics vessels, amphibious lift, expeditionary ground vehicles, strategic airlift and refueling, strategic bombers, and airborne early warning and control platforms. This rapid modernization continues apace, and several categories of power projection could be adequately fielded within the next decade.

Yet Chinese analysts lament that, even with considerable achievements in military modernization since the 1990s, the PLA's power projection forces are still lacking, especially relative to the world's leading militaries. The *SMS* authors note, "Within a considerably long period of time, it will be impossible to carry out symmetrical and relatively large-scale air and naval combat against an opponent in areas distant from the homeland."¹³⁴

As China's interests expanded globally, Chinese analysts portrayed the PLA's power projection weaknesses in stark terms. Fang Xiaozhi of the PLA Institute of International Relations contends that, because the first island chain limits China's access to the world's oceans, "the security of SLOCs is currently a major national interest for China, with vital importance for China's economic development and social stability."¹³⁵ Fang's article explains that if the United States were to implement a distant naval blockade against China, the PLA's near seas naval forces would be unable to successfully counter the United States military.¹³⁶ Similarly, Li Jiacheng and Li Puqian argue that the Chinese state could collapse if foreign navies were to block China's access to overseas resources and China lacked the means to respond.¹³⁷ While the authors may overstate the effectiveness of a distant blockade, their argument still demonstrates deeply-held Chinese sensitivities to foreign encirclement. These authors and others advocate for the development of power projection forces, often including aircraft carriers and other blue-water naval forces, to address disruptions to seaborne trade.¹³⁸

Beyond their current difficulty in protecting overseas interests, the PLA's inadequacies also arise from Beijing's shift in its strategic orientation from a landward to a seaward direction. With a severe downturn in Sino-Soviet relations in the mid-to-late 1960s, China became increasingly preoccupied with defending against an overland Soviet invasion. The Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the 1970s enabled China to focus primarily on continental concerns.¹³⁹ But, with the end of the Cold War and a dramatic reduction in Russian military power, China's

134 Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 108.

135 方小智 [Fang Xiaozhi], "加强中国远洋海军建设的必要性与可行性探析 [An Analysis of the Necessity and Feasibility of Strengthening the Construction of an Ocean-Going Navy]," *中国与国际关系学刊 [Journal of China and International Relations]*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, p. 110.

136 *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

137 Li Jiacheng and Li Puqian, "Mahan's 'Sea Power Theory' and Its Implications for the Development of China's Sea Power Strategy," p. 92. The PLA's deficiencies in far seas operations were indeed a major concern in the early 2010s, as noted by these two authors, as well as Fang Xiaozhi. Yet, given the PLA Navy's rapid shipbuilding program since that time, it is possible these authors may no longer describe the PLA's deficiencies in far seas operations in such dire terms.

138 Zhang Wei, "A General Review of the History of China's Sea-Power Theory Development," pp. 82-85.

139 Fravel, *Active Defense*, pp. 128 and 135-163.

threat perceptions swung from the lands in the north and west toward the seas in the east and south. China's population centers, where economic activity is concentrated, are primarily located along its eastern coast and are vulnerable to sea-based threats.¹⁴⁰ Of great concern are U.S. long-range power projection forces, which Chinese experts fear could strike mainland China while remaining beyond the range of PLA forces. Beijing's goal now is to better protect exposed coastal areas by pushing outward China's strategic frontline far from its shores. The PLA has therefore made considerable investments in theater air and missile defense systems as well as in forces that can operate and strike in the far seas.¹⁴¹

Chinese military strategists also believe that the territorial status quo, on issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and other disputes, is unfavorable to China and that the PLA requires power projection capabilities to realize China's security objectives. The 2013 *SMS* explains this logic:

Fundamentally speaking, we cannot wait for the enemy to attack us. Only through possessing strategic attack capabilities and building a strategic attack posture for strategic attack operations at the necessary time, can we break through this unfavorable impasse and open up ways to politically resolve these issues.¹⁴²

Amplifying the strategic rationale for global power projection capabilities is China's perennial quest for major power status in the eyes of the international community. Among Chinese experts, there is a strong belief that China needs to compensate for its historical weakness against modern Western powers. This drive for external respect has contributed to the development of certain military capabilities, including nuclear weapons, and Chinese analysts use this reasoning to argue for a blue-water navy.¹⁴³

In addition to operating from the Chinese mainland, PLA power projection forces would likely be deployed to the Western Pacific and the Northern Indian Ocean. As detailed in Chapter 6, these areas are priorities in Beijing's future overseas expansion because military forces in these regions would protect China's primary SLOCs and provide greater strategic depth. Chinese strategists even suggest future Western Pacific and Northern Indian Ocean theater commands, which would presumably replace or augment the existing North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea Fleets.¹⁴⁴

140 Fang Xiaozhi, "An Analysis of the Necessity and Feasibility of Strengthening the Construction of an Ocean-Going Navy," p. 109. See also: 郑义炜 [Zheng Yiwei], "陆海复合特征下中国海洋战略的转型—兼论美国地缘战略的影响 [The Transformation of China's Maritime Strategy Under the Complex Characteristics of Land and Sea—Additional Analysis on the Influence of U.S. Geostategy]," *当代世界与社会主义* [*Contemporary World and Socialism*], no. 5, 2017, pp. 170-171.

141 Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 106.

142 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

143 Fang Xiaozhi, "An Analysis of the Necessity and Feasibility of Strengthening the Construction of an Ocean-Going Navy," p. 111.

144 Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 106-107.

Foreshadowing how China's power projection forces could be used to deter and win wars, Admiral Wu Shengli argues that China must operate in the far seas to gain sufficient strategic depth against prospective maritime opponents and that the PLA must conduct "far seas sabotage warfare (远海破袭作战)" along exterior lines in order to complement interior lines operations.¹⁴⁵ Wu's perspective is perhaps a more realistic, medium-term (10- to 20-year) PLA objective, yet he does not provide details on what far seas sabotage warfare on exterior lines would involve. Based on context, Wu could be arguing that China's naval forces should be able to conduct far seas guerilla warfare, consisting of raid, sabotage, and surprise attack operations against key adversary forces or bases in the far seas. These strikes would likely be intended to blunt an adversary's momentum and operational tempo in the far seas, thereby limiting that adversary's ability to bring substantial forces to bear closer to China's near seas. These operations could involve undersea forces, including nuclear attack submarines armed with anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles, and long-range kinetic and non-kinetic strike systems in other warfighting domains.

In the long term, Chinese strategists remain focused on developing a blue-water navy, including aircraft carriers and expeditionary strike groups, that can command the far seas, deter potential adversaries, and project power far from the Chinese mainland.¹⁴⁶ Yet Chinese experts also note that this blue-water fleet does not necessarily need to match the scale of the U.S. Navy and it only needs to meet China's strategic objectives.¹⁴⁷

The Impact of China's Force Structure Tradeoffs

Due to China's complex continental and maritime geography discussed in Chapter 4 and Beijing's expanding mix of domestic, regional, and global security interests above, the PLA will confront competing and sometimes contradictory requirements in developing its military force structure. These demands can be alleviated to some extent through diplomatic achievements and territorial conquest, but, as a whole, they constitute a long-term structural weakness.¹⁴⁸ To meet its security needs, the PLA will need to develop a diversified force structure that can function across three broad geographic areas: 1) land operations for contingencies along the borderlands and China's greater continental periphery; 2) near seas

145 Wu Shengli, "Learn Profound Historical Lessons from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895," pp. 3-4.

146 杨震 刘美武 蔡亮 [Yang Zhen, Liu Meiwu, and Cai Liang], "海权视阈下的航空母舰与中国海洋安全 [Study on Aircraft Carrier for Chinese Ocean Security from the Perspective of Seapower]," *世界地理研究 [World Regional Studies]* 28, no. 5, 2019, pp. 65-72. See also Li and Li, "Mahan's 'Sea Power Theory,'" p. 93.

147 祁怀高 [Qi Huaigao], "中美在西太平洋的海权博弈及影响 [Sino-US Maritime Competition in the Western Pacific and Its Influence]," *武汉大学学报 [Wuhan University Journal]* 72, no. 3, May 2019, p. 12.

148 For instance, two Chinese strategists at National Defense University write that China should avoid creating too many enemies, particularly among neighboring countries, so that the United States is unable to use alliance relationships against China and so that China is able to concentrate its strength against the United States. 顾玺 吕有生 [Gu Xi and Lü You-sheng], "特朗普政府对华军事战略评析及对策思考 [Analysis of the Trump Administration's Military Strategy against China and the Countermeasures]," *江南社会学院学报 [Journal of Jiangnan Social University]* 22, no. 1, March 2020, p. 21.

operations for contingencies in the East and Southeast Asian littoral areas; and 3) far seas operations for global contingencies.

An examination of these three areas below reveals that the PRC will confront three major types of costs as they construct a global power projection force structure, namely: high absolute costs due to the size and complexity of global power projection platforms; high opportunity costs given other force structure requirements; and high psychological costs based on the fear of losing capital-intensive power projection platforms. Provided that Chinese leaders are prepared to expend considerable resources and time—potentially at the expense of continental and near seas force structure—they should be able to overcome the costs of global power projection. While still a weakness, the development of global power projection forces alone is likely more manageable than Beijing’s need to meet competing force structure demands across the continent, near seas, and far seas.

Land-based threats to China have diminished substantially since the Cold War’s end, but Beijing will still need to invest substantial resources in its land forces. As noted in Chapter 4, through their study of history, Chinese strategists realize that a composite land-sea power such as the PRC can best achieve maritime power when continental threats are minimal or are manageable at relatively low costs. Zheng Yiwei of Tongji University notes, “any country’s resources are limited” and, for China specifically, preparing for landward and seaward threats simultaneously would “greatly consume valuable strategic resources during [China’s] process of rising.”¹⁴⁹ But Beijing cannot assume relatively benign land borders will persist indefinitely and Chinese analysts realize that conflicts have often occurred away from the main strategic threat over the course of the PRC’s history.¹⁵⁰ Chinese experts also warn against U.S. attempts to form an alliance of maritime and continental powers against China.¹⁵¹ The PLA must therefore continue to dedicate resources to fielding a land force that can fight and win in high-intensity land-based contingencies, including potential conflicts with India and on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁵² Moreover, given the complex geopolitical, economic, and social factors at play among its fourteen neighbors, China will need to procure and maintain ground forces capable of responding to a variety of other contingencies—ranging from humanitarian disasters to political instability to terrorist attacks sponsored by external actors—along the entire periphery, from the Korean Peninsula to Central Asia to Southeast Asia.

149 Zheng Yiwei, “The Transformation of China’s Maritime Strategy Under the Complex Characteristics of Land and Sea,” p. 174.

150 Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 102 and 117-119.

151 Zheng Yiwei, “The Transformation of China’s Maritime Strategy Under the Complex Characteristics of Land and Sea,” p. 174.

152 The Himalaya Mountains are a natural barrier that can limit the extent of a Sino-Indian conflict, as noted in Chapter 4, and Beijing most likely does not fear an Indian military invasion like it did a Soviet invasion during the mid- to late Cold War. Nevertheless, the two sides fought a war in 1962 and their still unresolved territorial disputes necessitate that the PLA prepare for a potential future Sino-Indian conflict. While Sino-Russian relations are currently warm and show little sign of deteriorating, Chinese defense planners also cannot rule out the potential that Russian threat perceptions will eventually change. A growing and more capable Chinese nuclear arsenal, or unexpected political upheaval in Moscow, for example, could lead to a reorientation of Russian defense posture toward China.

Turning to the sea, naval forces are inherently expensive. Zheng Yiwei notes that “the navy is the most resource-intensive military service” and that the development of naval forces is characterized by “large investment, long construction periods, and high technical requirements.”¹⁵³ The unique maritime geography in which a country’s navy operates can impose risks as well. As noted in Chapter 4, China inhabits a claustrophobic nautical setting. Its general-purpose blue-water navy must pass through chokepoints and narrow seas to reach the open waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. As Milan Vego explains:

A typical narrow sea...poses other challenges to the operations of large naval vessels because of the unique features of its physical environment, specifically the small size of the area involved and the correspondingly short distances, the proximity of the land, the shallowness of the water and the presence of a large number of islands and islets. These features, in turn, generally limit maneuverability, speed and the use of weapons and sensors by one’s surface ships and submarines, primarily designed for employment on the open ocean. The range of threats to the survivability of large surface combatants and submarines is greater in a typical narrow sea than on the open ocean because the weaker opponent can use land-based aircraft, small and fast surface combatants or conventional submarines, mines and even coastal anti-ship cruise missiles to contest control of a stronger navy.¹⁵⁴

Large platforms are in general easier to detect than small platforms, and large platforms run a high risk of being detected in littoral areas due to a prospective adversary’s dense and powerful land-based sensor network, supplemented by air-, sea-, and space-based sensors.

Given the dramatically different operating environments between the open ocean and the tight confines of East Asian littorals, China has developed a two-tiered force for the near seas and the far seas. The near seas force is composed of hundreds of relatively small surface combatants and conventional submarines, supplemented by land-based fighter, bomber, and special mission aircraft, cruise and ballistic missile units, and air defense units. The emerging far seas force includes aircraft carriers (with modern carrier-based fighter and other special mission aircraft), large surface combatants with theater-wide defensive and offensive capabilities, naval logistics vessels, and amphibious lift vessels (with expeditionary ground vehicles and fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft). In the future, larger numbers of land-based strategic bombers, strategic airlift, aerial refueling, and airborne early warning and control aircraft would likely support the far seas fleet.

Until the early 2010s, China’s defense modernization efforts primarily focused on the near seas force.¹⁵⁵ The procurement of substantial numbers of power projection forces only began in earnest over the last five to ten years and China’s defense industry has already proven itself

153 Zheng Yiwei, “The Transformation of China’s Maritime Strategy Under the Complex Characteristics of Land and Sea,” p. 174.

154 Milan N. Vego, *Naval Strategy and Operations in Narrow Seas* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. xv-xvi.

155 Bryan Clark and Jordan Wilson, “Strategic Competition Between the United States and China in the Maritime Realm” in Tai Ming Cheung ed., *The Gathering Pacific Storm: Emerging US-China Strategic Competition in Defense Technological and Industrial Development* (La Jolla, CA: The University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, 2017), pp. 59-64, available at <http://www.cambriapress.com/cambriapress.cfm?template=3&bid=709>.

capable of developing and producing several types of these large and complex platforms.¹⁵⁶ Yet, if procurement continues at close to its current pace, the PLA's acquisition of far seas platforms will likely be more expensive in total than the near seas force. While the technological complexity of modern military platforms has increased dramatically over the last century, a primary cost driver for most military platforms is weight. Ship costs, for instance, are primarily determined by displacement and power density.¹⁵⁷ China could continue developing new global power projection capabilities, but there will be stark opportunity costs. The procurement cost of one Chinese aircraft carrier is roughly equal to 10 frigates or 40 missile boats.¹⁵⁸ Regardless of the true absolute costs of these vessels, the acquisition of China's global forces will likely sap vast funds from China's land and near seas forces.

Operating and maintaining global power projection platforms may be an even bigger expense than manufacturing them. In general, over a platform's lifespan, operations and maintenance is often the largest cost category—compared with research and development, procurement, and disposal costs—and those annual costs rise as a platform ages. In one article, Chinese analysts highlight how China will need to reduce the operations and maintenance costs of naval platforms since those costs amount to a substantial proportion of a vessel's total life cycle cost. The authors analyze the operations and maintenance costs of U.S. aircraft carriers, noting such costs account for approximately 40 to 50 percent of an aircraft carrier's expenses over its lifespan. They suggest that China will need to invest in an aircraft carrier's development stage to find ways to reduce personnel requirements and increase reliability and maintainability, thereby reducing anticipated operations and maintenance costs.¹⁵⁹ Depending on the PLA's ability to incorporate such efficiencies in its ship designs, the cumulative

156 China's development of far seas naval platforms dates back to at least the late 1990s, in response to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-1996), and the development and procurement of near and far seas platforms has proceeded in parallel. Nevertheless, until roughly the last decade, the overall number of far seas platforms procured was relatively small, and in relative terms more resources were dedicated to developing, procuring, and operating and maintaining the near seas fleet, rather than the far seas fleet. This assertion is based in part on ongoing CSBA research on the costs of Chinese military platforms. For more on this ongoing research, see Jack Bianchi, "Cost Estimation: Understanding Resource Tradeoffs in China's Defense Modernization Efforts," *Acquisition Research: Creating Synergy for Informed Change*, April 20, 2020, https://event.nps.edu/conf/app/researchsymposium/unsecured/file/700/SYM-AM-20-080_Panel#19_Bianchi_Paper_4-20-2020.pdf.

157 Mark V. Arena, Irv Blickstein, Obaid Younossi, and Clifford A. Grammich, *Why Has the Cost of Navy Ships Risen? A Macroscopic Examination of the Trends in U.S. Naval Ship Costs Over the Past Several Decades* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), pp. 22-49.

158 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-49.

159 In general, a platform's operations and maintenance costs over its lifetime are largely set in the platform's design stage. Once a platform is manufactured, it becomes incredibly difficult to find substantial operations and maintenance efficiencies. 林名驰 王满华 刘加伟 [Lin Mingchi, Wang Manhua, and Liu Jiawei], "美国航母运行费投入规律分析及启示 [Analysis and Lessons of U.S. Aircraft Carrier Operating Expense Investment Patterns]," *军事经济研究 [Military Economic Research]*, no. 7, 2010, pp. 72-74. For a similar study, see 瞿书宇 唐宏 [Zi Shuyu and Tang Hong], "美国航母维修费的投资规律分析 [Analysis of Investment Rule of Maintenance Cost of American Aircraft Carriers]," *海军工程大学学报 [Journal of Naval University of Engineering]*, no. 4, 2012, p. 9.

operations and maintenance expenses of China's rapidly materializing far seas fleet could place great stress on the defense budget over time.¹⁶⁰

In considering China's role in the far seas, several Chinese sources caution against strategic overextension. Two writers from China's National Defense University argue that the PLA is currently unable to compete militarily with the United States in all aspects due to American superiority in capabilities and defense expenditures. For the PLA, "results will be produced only through investing limited resources in areas that truly effectively threaten the U.S. military."¹⁶¹ Attempting to compete with the U.S. military in too many areas will result in the "dilution of limited resources and even add additional burdens for the country and the military."¹⁶² They specifically cite the far seas as an area where China should limit its expenditures:

As China's overseas interests continue to increase, the security costs that China needs to pay for this are also rising. In areas far from the Chinese mainland, the U.S. military undoubtedly possesses an *absolute advantage*, therefore, on the issue of constructing overseas support points to protect overseas interests, our military cannot spread [itself] too thin. [emphasis added]¹⁶³

Another article similarly urges caution, arguing that strategic overextension, including the costs of overseas military bases and operations, has led to the fall of past empires, including the Soviet Union. The scholars observe that even the United States today is experiencing difficulties sustaining its overseas commitments.¹⁶⁴

Beyond the considerable financial costs, there will likely be psychological costs when Chinese political and military leaders begin to put expensive PLA power projection platforms in harm's way. Chinese experts do not appear to address this topic widely in their writings, possibly because they do not want to undercut their case for going global. Nevertheless, these fears will likely mount. The German calculus over the use of the High Seas Fleet in the First World War is instructive. Faced with battle against a superior naval power, Imperial Germany resisted risking its fleet for most of the war. Similarly, Chinese leaders may proceed cautiously in

160 The PLA's previous and ongoing global operations, such as counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, and other operations in the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea, have likely accustomed the PLA and senior political leaders to some of the costs of operating in the far seas. Yet, the rapid expansion of the PLA's power projection forces, together with an expanded overseas posture, as described in Chapter 6, will likely create new and more complex fiscal challenges for overseas operations and maintenance.

161 Gu Xi and Lü Yousheng, "Analysis of the Trump Administration's Military Strategy against China and the Countermeasures," p. 21.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

163 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

164 Li Qingsi and Chen Chunyu, "Analysis of Chinese Overseas Port String Bases Strategy," p. 135. For another source that warns against the costly pursuit of hegemony in the far seas, see 张晓东 [Zhang Xiaodong], "经济转型中的中国海权探索—以国家战略层面为中心 [China's Seapower under Economic Transformation—Focus on the View of National Strategy]," 亚太安全与海洋研究 [Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs], no. 1, 2020, p. 72. Zhang is nevertheless bullish about China's need to continue expanding its blue water navy in order to protect its strategic interests.

using their relatively new, capital-intensive ships and aircraft against a capable opponent in and around the confined East Asian littoral, particularly if heavy losses were expected at the conflict's outset.

Despite these anticipated costs, the open-source literature indicates that China's leaders and strategists fully intend for the PLA to go global. Many strategic writings ignore China's resource constraints. Even when these experts raise concerns about costs, they argue in relatively simplistic terms that China should not overextend itself. For example, after warning of the costs of hegemony, Zhang Xiaodong of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences writes that, for China, "in the short-term it is impossible to invest too many resources in developing seapower."¹⁶⁵ For Zhang, investing in seapower could yield national economic benefits and, similar to a business venture, "before one can engage in a long period of operations, [one must] invest considerably in the early operating phase to then generate a profit."¹⁶⁶ He continues, "Overseas investment and the construction of overseas bases, in theory, could become mutually reinforcing. But the sequence of operations and the long-term nature of investment and profit cannot be changed."¹⁶⁷ In other words, there is no shortcut to going global.

As China's economic growth rates decline and costs of social programs rise, Beijing could face stark tradeoffs between force structure and basing investments for the far seas and investments for the continent and the near seas. The PLA may be forced to dilute its investments across multiple regions, potentially leaving the PRC in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis the United States and its allies. Moreover, if China's overseas force structure, bases, and commitments are viewed as an upfront investment designed to yield future benefits, Beijing stands to overextend itself for a promise that may never materialize.

Limits of PLA Global Power Projection Platforms

The PLA is rapidly developing global power projection forces, but wholesale force structure changes will likely occur over ten or more years due to resource requirements and industrial base constraints. This section assesses the PLA Navy's current and prospective power projection platforms and systems—including aircraft carriers, carrier-based aircraft, area air defense, anti-submarine warfare—as a case study. It identifies force structure weaknesses to show the material hurdles China will need to overcome to achieve its strategic aims. While this section focuses in particular on China's current force structure deficiencies, it should be noted that the PLA continues to swiftly modernize and that Beijing is poised to address several of the shortcomings below over the next decade. Despite the challenges, the PLA of the 2030s will be

165 Zhang Xiaodong, "China's Seapower under Economic Transformation," p. 72.

166 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

167 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

substantially more lethal and effective in a high-end conventional conflict in the far seas than the PLA of today.

Aircraft carriers are the centerpiece of a modern far seas navy and could fall under several of the six physical categories above, including forward-based forces, forward-deployed forces, and strategic mobility forces. As mobile sea-based airfields, modern aircraft carriers conduct various missions critical to global power projection, including providing maritime situational awareness, conducting strike or raid operations, and establishing sea control, in addition to missions such as non-combatant evacuation operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.¹⁶⁸

Although the PLAN has now commissioned two aircraft carriers, these provide limited combat power for overseas operations. The *Liaoning* and the *Shandong* carriers are based on the Soviet *Kuznetsov*-class carrier, with a full displacement of approximately 65,000 tons. Their relatively small size reduces the number of aircraft that they can embark, which is about 40 to 44 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft.¹⁶⁹ These carriers also feature ski-jump takeoff ramps, which impose weight restrictions on aircraft to permit them to generate sufficient lift when taking off. Moreover, propeller-driven aircraft cannot take off safely from a ski-jump ramp, so the *Liaoning* and the *Shandong* will be unable to carry airborne early warning and control aircraft, hampering their situational awareness. Finally, these two flattops are conventionally powered, rather than nuclear powered, curbing their endurance in the far seas while necessitating frequent stops at friendly overseas ports for refueling when sailing far from China's shores. Senior PLA leaders are aware of these shortcomings and likely see these two vessels as critical first steps for the PLAN to gain valuable experience in operating and maintaining aircraft carriers, carrier air wings, and carrier strike groups.

China's next two carriers, the first of which has been under construction since as early as 2015, will be of a new Chinese-made design. These vessels will reportedly be larger, approximately 80,000 to 85,000 tons, and feature an electromagnetic aircraft launch system, a type of system that is being installed on the U.S. *Ford*-class aircraft carriers and which would allow these ships to launch heavier aircraft compared to ones with a ski-jump ramp. These larger ships will be able to store more aircraft, fuel, and munitions than China's first two carriers. The third carrier will likely be conventionally powered, though sources differ on whether the fourth one will be nuclear powered. The high costs of aircraft carrier procurement and maintenance and a number of technological challenges, particularly with nuclear propulsion, could constrain China's ability to produce modern supercarriers suited for blue-water operations. China's first four carriers will most likely remain in China's force structure into the 2030s. This fleet could be joined by a fifth flattop, which would likely reach initial operational

168 Angus Ross, "Rethinking the U.S. Navy's Carrier Fleet," *War on the Rocks*, July 21, 2020, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/rethinking-the-u-s-navys-carrier-fleet/>.

169 "Type 001 and Type 002 (Modified Project 1143.6) (Modified Kuznetsov/Orel) classes," *Jane's Fighting Ships*, September 21, 2020.

capability after 2030, especially if that vessel is to be nuclear powered.¹⁷⁰ Despite the inadequacies of China's first two carriers, the construction of several additional carriers over the 2020s could result in a substantial step forward in the PLAN's far seas operations in the 2030s and beyond.

China's current carrier-based fighter aircraft, the J-15, has several shortcomings. With an empty weight of approximately 40,000 pounds, the J-15 is relatively heavy for a carrier-based fighter. Heavy weight limits an aircraft's fuel and payload, and therefore range and strike capacity. These constraints are exacerbated when the J-15 operates from a carrier with a ski-jump ramp. The aircraft has also been involved in several accidents in recent years, revealing that the J-15 is potentially unstable and ill-suited to its tasks. The PLAN is reportedly seeking a new carrier-based fighter aircraft, which will likely be either a carrier-variant of the PLA Air Force's J-20 fighter or the FC-31, an aircraft that the PLA Air Force initially shunned but may now be the PLAN's only option other than the J-20. The J-15's pressing quality issues may compel the PLAN to modify an existing Chinese design for carrier operations, rather than engage in a much longer process to design and procure a new carrier-based aircraft from scratch.¹⁷¹ Even with an existing airframe, several years of design, development, and testing will be required before a carrier aircraft—based on either the J-20 or the FC-31—can reach series production and initial operational capability.¹⁷² Regardless of the specific aircraft, China still faces persistent problems in developing advanced jet engines, which hinders the reliability, performance, and stealthiness of the aircraft.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, the fielding of the

170 A fifth carrier has reportedly not yet been approved, though. Minnie Chan, "Chinese Navy Set to Build Fourth Aircraft Carrier, but Plans for a More Advanced Ship are Put on Hold," *South China Morning Post*, November 28, 2019, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3039653/chinese-navy-set-build-fourth-aircraft-carrier-plans-more>. The timing of a fifth carrier reflects ongoing CSBA estimates of PLA force structure, see Jack Bianchi, "Cost Estimation." There are a variety of other estimates on the PLA Navy's 2030 force structure, including: Office of Naval Intelligence, Farragut Technical Analysis Center Naval Platforms Department, *China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U.S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Office of Naval Intelligence, February 6, 2020), available at <https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/plan-trends.pdf>; James Fanell, "China's Global Navy Today—Today's Challenge for the United States and the U.S. Navy," *Naval War College Review* 73, No. 4, Autumn 2020, p. 25; Rick Joe, "Predicting the Chinese Navy of 2030," *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2019, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/predicting-the-chinese-navy-of-2030/>; and Christopher P. Carlson, "PLAN Force Structure Projection Conception, A Methodology for Looking Down Range," *China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College*, no. 10, November 2020, available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

171 Liu Zhen, "Could China's Unwanted FC-31 Gyr Falcon stealth fighter finally land a role in the navy?" *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2020, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3091563/could-chinas-unwanted-fc-31-gyrfalcon-stealth-fighter-finally>.

172 By comparison, China's development of the J-15 carrier aircraft, which is based off of the Su-33 and the J-11B, took approximately seven years of development and testing, starting in 2006, before reportedly reaching "mass production" (批量生产) in 2013. See "中国舰载机为何选歼15而不选歼10 并非因多了1台航发 [Why Did China Choose the J-15 and Not the J-10 for a Carrier-based Aircraft? It Really Is Not Because of the Additional Aircraft Engine]," 新浪军事 [*Sina Military*], November 26, 2018, available at <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/jssd/2018-11-26/doc-ihmutuec3635638.shtml>; and "歼-15舰载战斗机正式批量生产并交付部队 [The J-15 Carrier-Based Fighter was Officially Mass-Produced and Delivered to the Army]," *People's Daily*, December 3, 2012, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20131206145946/military.people.com.cn/n/2013/1203/c1011-23725585.html>.

173 Liu Zhen, "Could China's Unwanted FC-31 Gyr Falcon stealth fighter finally land a role in the navy?"

fifth-generation J-20 or FC-31 would be a considerable upgrade over the J-15 and full-rate production of the new fighter would still likely begin within this decade. In the 2030s then, the PLA Navy could field several aircraft carriers with air wings composed of fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

Beyond the limitations of China's aircraft carriers and carrier-based aircraft, the PLA also faces difficulties in operational areas critical to defending flattops in open waters, including in fleet air defense and anti-submarine warfare (ASW). While the PLAN has more warships than any other navy in the world, it is composed of a disproportionately high number of small surface combatants, such as frigates, corvettes, and coastal combatants, compared to other leading navies. Aircraft carriers depend on escort by large, blue-water surface combatants, which provide theater-wide counter-air and ASW capabilities. The PLAN first began to address area air defense with the procurement of two *Sovremenny*-class destroyers from Russia in 1999 and China has since focused on developing and procuring indigenous destroyers and cruisers.¹⁷⁴ In particular, the Type 052D destroyer, the first of which was commissioned in 2014, and the Type 055 cruiser, the first of which was commissioned in 2020, are major steps forward. These two classes of surface combatants each feature large numbers of vertical launch cells, endowing these vessels with a robust capacity to conduct both defensive and offensive missions in distant waters.¹⁷⁵ While the PLAN has traditionally lacked capable large surface combatants, China has now built 25 Type 052D destroyers, along with eight Type 055 cruisers.¹⁷⁶ Based on current build rates, the PLA will likely have a sufficient number of these vessels in service by the 2030 to 2035 time period to provide adequate protection for the PLAN's carriers, in addition to fulfilling other global power projection missions.

For anti-submarine warfare in blue waters, large surface combatants play a leading role in protecting the carrier by carrying shipboard ASW sensors, weapons, and rotary aircraft. While anti-submarine warfare has been a longstanding PLAN weakness, the Chinese navy has made remarkable strides over the last decade. For example, the PLAN has produced frigates, destroyers, and cruisers equipped with both variable-depth sonar and towed array sonar systems.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, embarked ASW rotary aircraft are essential for extending the ASW surveillance and engagement range around a fleet in blue waters. The PLAN's current shipboard ASW helicopters, the Z-9 and Ka-28, are ill-suited to the role. Most modern ASW aircraft tend to range from 10 to 13 tons. By contrast, the Z-9 weighs a modest four tons

174 Christopher Carlson and Jack Bianchi, "Warfare Drivers: Mission Needs and the Impact on Ship Design," in Andrew Erickson, ed., *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), pp. 31-32.

175 Chase et al., *China's Incomplete Military Transformation*, pp. 88-91. See also Clark and Wilson, *Strategic Competition Between the United States and China in the Maritime Realm*, p. 61.

176 Xavier Vavasseur, "Shipyard in China Launched The 25th Type 052D and 8th Type 055 Destroyers For PLAN," *Naval News*, August 30, 2020, available at <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/08/shipyard-in-china-launched-the-25th-type-052d-and-8th-type-055-destroyers-for-plan/>.

177 Rick Joe, "The Chinese Navy's Growing Anti-Submarine Warfare Capabilities," *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2018, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/the-chinese-surface-fleets-growing-anti-submarine-warfare-capabilities/>.

and therefore lacks adequate range, payload capacity, and endurance. The 13-ton Ka-28 is a Russian export that is reportedly difficult to modernize with newer, integrated Chinese systems. Amplifying these challenges, China lacks overseas basing to support land-based rotary- and fixed-wing ASW aircraft that could complement a far seas fleet's organic ASW capabilities.¹⁷⁸ ASW therefore continues to be a weakness for Chinese global power projection, especially against the advanced and sophisticated capabilities of the U.S. Navy's nuclear attack submarines, as well as those of other modern navies operating in distant seas. Looking ahead, China will have to develop and procure a new indigenous ASW helicopter capable of landing on existing destroyers and cruisers. But the development and procurement of new platforms require considerable time and investment. A new purpose-built ASW helicopter could be fielded on the majority of the PLAN's large surface combatants at some point in the early 2030s or later.

Once built, China's far seas naval platforms and systems will need to be integrated through advanced battle networks for command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C3ISR) to enable joint operations. The PLA plans to create a modern, networked force capable of achieving information dominance and winning "information-ized" wars. Yet, with the United States as a guide, systems integration is a grueling, costly, and time-consuming process, not just across, but even within, military services. China's rapid production of various modern platforms, its large inventory of older generations of platforms and systems, and its collection of foreign-made equipment exacerbate system integration. The PLA will also need to greatly expand its inventory of C3ISR aircraft, in addition to space communications platforms, to develop the robust theater-wide battle networks necessary for joint operations in distant regions. Chinese publications frequently describe their difficulties in achieving informatization and in catching up to the capabilities of the United States.¹⁷⁹ To command and control distant forces, the PLA will also need to establish and clarify appropriate bureaucratic command structures, as current command arrangements for forces operating beyond existing PLA theater commands appear ambiguous and underdeveloped.¹⁸⁰

For global operations, the PLA's specific C3ISR requirements will vary depending on the forces involved and the missions conducted, and the PLA could potentially find ways to simplify these requirements. For example, for specific contingencies, power projection forces could be assembled from primarily one service, reducing joint integration requirements, and these operational groupings could be composed of indigenous platforms, limiting the need for integration with foreign-built equipment.

178 Rick Joe, "Chinese Anti-Submarine Warfare: Aviation Platforms, Strategy, and Doctrine," *The Diplomat*, October 16, 2018, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/chinese-anti-submarine-warfare-aviation-platforms-strategy-and-doctrine/>.

179 "Full Text: China's Defense in the New Era," *Xinhua*, July 24, 2019, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

180 Roderick Lee and Morgan Clemens, "Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas, The Chinese Navy in an Era of Military Reform," *China Maritime Report*, no. 9, October 2020, pp. 9-11, available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

The ability to operate and sustain modern aircraft carriers in blue waters remains the most important military capability for global power projection. Beijing continues to face challenges in fielding modern aircraft carriers, carrier-based fighters, and large surface combatants with ASW and fleet air defense capabilities, and in integrating these platforms into joint theater battle networks in distant regions. To surmount these obstacles, Chinese leaders will need to continue dedicating substantial time and resources over the 2020s to produce a formidable global force. Beyond the specific platforms in this case study, China continues to face similar financial and technological hurdles in developing and procuring other forces that fall within Krepinevich and Work's framework, including long-range bombers, strategic airlift, refueling aircraft, logistics vessels, amphibious ships, amphibious vehicles, and short take-off/vertical landing aircraft. These challenges highlight the steep absolute, opportunity, and psychological costs that Beijing will confront as they continue to procure forces to engage in global operations. Nonetheless, given the direction of the PLA's modernization efforts, Beijing is poised to address most of these weaknesses over the next decade. The PLA's global power projection forces will therefore be dramatically more capable in the 2030s than today.

Confronting Difficult Choices

Despite the obstacles noted above, China's rise as a global military power should still concern U.S. and allied leaders. China's tremendous strides in shipbuilding over the last decade suggest that the PLA can overcome its weakness in global power projection. Given appropriate time and resources, Beijing could prove adept at addressing the specific challenges noted above. For the United States and its allies, the military threat posed by the PLA in the 2030s could therefore be dramatically more dangerous than in the 2020s. By that point, the PLA will likely be able to use its forces to conduct exterior lines sabotage warfare operations that Admiral Wu outlined. These operations could prove enough to realize Chinese military objectives in the Western Pacific, consolidate China's strategic position in the near seas, and thereby free up valuable resources for China's global ambitions.

Nevertheless, China's economic growth rates will likely continue to slow over the coming years, a process that could be accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing U.S.–China technology and trade disputes. At the same time, China's leaders will be forced to grapple with rising social demands, particularly from an aging population. As a result, Beijing may soon face resource constraints that are more taxing than at any time in recent decades. China's weakness in balancing force structure requirements across continental, near seas, and far seas forces, and its related weakness in developing global power projection forces, may become more obvious in future Chinese debates. How Chinese leaders perceive and act on these force structure tradeoffs could provide clues about the direction of the PLA's future force structure and Beijing's strategic intentions and objectives. Moreover, the close allies would be wise to assess how China's inescapable tradeoffs and stresses over the 2020s could be subjected to allied strategy. Approaches that complicate or delay PLA modernization could restrict Beijing's ability to accomplish its strategic objectives in the 2030s and beyond.

CHAPTER 6

China's Weaknesses in Overseas Logistical Infrastructure

Logistical infrastructure is an essential constituent of a nation's military posture. A sound posture, in turn, allows the armed forces to fight at the right place and the right time. As Krepinevich and Work observe, a well-designed military posture enables a country to position, surge, and concentrate its military in ways that maximize the chances of victory in the defense of the homeland and beyond.¹⁸¹

Global power projection forces rely on an extensive global posture to reach and operate in faraway areas, as noted in Chapter 5. The main components that enable naval, air, ground, and other combat arms to conduct expeditionary missions include: 1) permanent and temporary overseas bases and facilities, including logistical infrastructure; 2) mobility and logistics forces; 3) command and control networks; and 4) security partnerships and legal agreements that underwrite access and use of overseas bases and facilities. These parts mutually support each other to advance the entire logistical enterprise.

As the PLA strives to fulfill a wider range of missions on the world stage, it will increasingly need to adopt a globalizing military posture.¹⁸² Logistics, the sinews of power projection, is thus central to the PLA's globalizing posture and its ability to overcome the tyranny of

181 Krepinevich and Work, *A New Global Defense Posture for the Second Transoceanic Era*, p. 5.

182 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020*, pp. 128-130, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

distance.¹⁸³ A robust overseas logistical infrastructure, composed of dual-use logistics facilities and military bases, would enable the PLA to impose Beijing's will and to influence events far from the mainland.¹⁸⁴ While China has lagged the United States in modern logistics infrastructure, the Chinese military has devoted substantial resources to close the gap at an accelerated rate over the past two decades. Measuring the PLA's progress in overseas logistical infrastructure will provide clues to China's prospects for projecting credible power to distant theaters in the coming years. Conversely, persistent weaknesses in logistics would impose severe constraints on China's ability to act in service of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.

This chapter carries forward the analysis in the preceding chapter by assessing the Chinese discourse on the PLA's overseas logistical infrastructure for power projection, its limitations, and its weaknesses.¹⁸⁵ It first examines Western views of the Chinese military's logistical capabilities. The chapter then surveys the open-source literature on China's logistical infrastructure requirements and shortfalls for overseas operations.¹⁸⁶ The writings reveal that Chinese analysts have explored a variety of weaknesses, from overseas logistical infrastructure itself to related areas, including logistical platforms, host nation support, and host nation domestic politics, that would demand attention and resources.¹⁸⁷ Finally, the chapter offers some thoughts on how the United States and its allies should weigh these weaknesses.

Western Assessments of PLA Logistics

Observers in the West have long identified logistics as a major weakness and a significant constraint on PLA's ability to shape events abroad. As noted in Chapter 2, David Shambaugh describes China as a "partial power" in global military affairs. He contends that China is "far

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- 183 For earlier, in-depth studies that explore future Chinese basing and logistics requirements for overseas operations, see Christopher D. Yung, Ross Rustici, Scott Devary, and Jenny Lin, *"Not an Idea We Have to Shun": Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014); and Chad Peltier, Tate Nurkin, and Sean O'Connor, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).
- 184 In this chapter, unless specified, the terms "facilities" and "access points" are used broadly and interchangeably to refer to both commercial/dual-use infrastructure and military bases. Any commercial facilities currently or potentially used by the PLA would fall under the term "dual-use." The word "base" refers strictly to a military base.
- 185 This chapter focuses on the PLA's current and prospective overseas logistical infrastructure, including dual-use logistics facilities and military bases. Logistics forces are addressed in so far as they are pertinent to logistical infrastructure.
- 186 For an excellent article on Chinese writings about PLA's thinking on site selection of overseas military bases, see Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Where to Next?: PLA Considerations for Overseas Base Selection," *China Brief*, October 19, 2020, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/where-to-next-pla-considerations-for-overseas-base-site-selection/>. For another example of how Chinese-language sources can inform Western understanding of Beijing's intentions regarding overseas bases, see Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125, September 2020.
- 187 Host nation support is defined as "combat support and combat service support that allied countries have agreed to provide U.S. forces who may be called upon to fight on their territory." See Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger to the Congress* (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, February 4, 1985), p. 138, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1986_DOD_AR.pdf?ver=2016-02-25-102404-647.

from being a global military power or strategic actor” and that it maintains a “minimal to nonexistent” military presence overseas. Shambaugh then lists a series of capabilities and privileges that the PLA would need to acquire to become a truly global force. In addition to a full-fledged blue-water navy, the Chinese military would have to obtain:

Access to neutral ports and airfields, perhaps naval bases on foreign soil, prepositioned equipment, long logistics supply chains and communications, underway replenishment, extended deployments, access to medical facilities and care, satellite communications, supply ships, and long-range air replenishment supply.¹⁸⁸

This “daunting” set of preconditions, he argues, is “a good reminder of just how much would be required of China and the PLAN if it truly wanted to establish a global projection capability.” Since 2013, the PLA has achieved some significant milestones, such as foreign basing and sustained deployments at sea. Nevertheless, Shambaugh’s list remains a reasonable standard by which to measure the Chinese military’s progress in going global.

In a 2015 volume, Roger Cliff expresses doubt that the PLA would make substantial headway in logistics. He predicts that, “By 2020, logistics will remain a significant weakness.” The PLA would struggle to fight a major contingency far from home bases and its supply lines would be vulnerable to enemy interdiction. In the naval domain, the Chinese navy would not possess the resupply assets “to sustain large-scale naval operations outside of East Asia for a protracted period.”¹⁸⁹ Cliff anticipates that the PLA would continue to depend on commercial suppliers to sustain distant operations at sea.

A 2015 RAND report renders a similar verdict. It finds that, “Logistics support remains a key obstacle preventing the PLAN from operating more extensively beyond its coastal waters.”¹⁹⁰ While China has been able to negotiate access to commercial ports with its foreign counterparts to sustain its anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, such a civilian-based infrastructure is mainly suitable for constabulary missions and would be inadequate for high-intensity conflict scenarios. Indeed, host countries across the Indian Ocean littorals would likely deny Chinese use of their ports for combat purposes. Presumably, such access denial would hamper the PLA’s ability to resupply and repair its forces in unforgiving wartime circumstances. The report also notes that the Chinese navy’s out-of-area operations would “remain severely limited” in the absence of a much larger fleet of replenishment oilers.

To be sure, these earlier assessments of the PLA’s logistical weaknesses have been overtaken by events over the past five years, attesting to the speed with which China has improved its ability to sustain distant operations over long periods. For example, the PLAN’s out-of-area operations have not only increased in number, but their geographic scope has also expanded substantially to cover areas where the Chinese navy has not previously reached, such as the

188 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, p. 293.

189 Cliff, *China’s Military Power*, p. 161.

190 Chase, et. al., *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation*, p. 91.

Baltic Sea. Likewise, the introduction of large, state-of-the-art resupply vessels, such as the Type 903 replenishment ship and the Type 901 fast combat support ship, has significantly boosted the PLAN's seagoing capabilities. Nevertheless, these Western snapshots of the PLA's logistics provide a basis with which to compare against China's own views. The following draws extensively from writings by Chinese specialists in military logistics to gain analytical purchase of the PLA's self-appraisals. The literature surveyed below, published between 2015 and 2020, shows that Chinese experts largely concur with Western findings about the PLA's logistical weaknesses.

Limits of Self-Reliance

The PLA has learned from experience—including its ongoing anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden that began in late 2008—about the centrality of overseas facilities for sustaining long-distance deployments. Chinese analysts recognize that overseas access points, from permanent military bases to dual-use facilities, substantially enhance the staying power of forces dispatched to faraway theaters. Indeed, Chinese commentators have openly declared Beijing's intent to build more logistical facilities following the establishment of its Djibouti support base in 2017. Xu Guangyu, a retired PLA major general and a senior advisor to the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, asserts plainly that, “More overseas logistic bases will be built in the future to assist the PLA Navy to conduct operations globally.”¹⁹¹ Xu estimates, “In the future, China will need at least 10 to 20 ports around the world, in all oceans and continents.”¹⁹² Significantly, the PRC's 2019 defense white paper, the most authoritative publicly available policy document on China's defense, acknowledges the need to develop “overseas logistical facilities” that would support operations far from home.¹⁹³

Before China set up the Djibouti support base, the primary logistics model for the PLA centered on shore-based facilities at home, resupply at sea, and temporary access to foreign facilities.¹⁹⁴ Each logistical leg offered benefits and suffered from shortfalls. Logistics bases on the mainland can provide the entire range of high-quality services and material to meet an expeditionary force's every need. Yet, their distances from forward-deployed units substantially increase the transportation costs and the time required to deliver goods and services. Home bases are particularly ill-suited to support time-sensitive, high-tempo operations in

191 Yang Sheng, “More support bases to be built to assist PLA Navy: analyst,” *Global Times*, February 12, 2018, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089427.shtml>.

192 Liu Zhen, “Pakistan port on China's radar for naval base, Pentagon report says,” *South China Morning Post*, June 7, 2017, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2097215/pentagon-cites-pla-naval-base-djibouti-part-beijings>.

193 See State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2019), p. 18.

194 Officially, the PLA refers to this base as the “Chinese People's Liberation Army's Support Base in Djibouti (中国人民解放军驻吉布提保障基地).” Since China only has one overseas base, the PLA may lack an official framework or terminology to distinguish between types of overseas bases and facilities. Chinese strategists have offered their own frameworks, as noted elsewhere in this chapter.

faraway theaters.¹⁹⁵ While at-sea resupply is responsive to the immediate demands of the fleet, the accompanying logistics ships are limited in the types of services and the quantity of goods they can furnish. Foreign-controlled shore facilities not only vary widely in capabilities and quality, but they are also frequently subject to host nation restrictions.¹⁹⁶ The limits of these three resupply options became an important rationale for setting up a base in Djibouti.

One study describes the highly self-reliant approach—termed “autonomous support model [自主保障模式]”—adopted to support the Chinese navy’s anti-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean. Prior to departure, the fleet receives materiel from large to medium-sized naval ports and nearby airfields. When in transit or on escort duty, comprehensive supply ships deployed alongside the combatants conduct underway replenishment. In some circumstances, the warships rendezvous with logistics vessels at a predetermined location at sea to obtain fuel and provisions. The study contends, “It is very difficult to rely exclusively on autonomous support to fulfill the urgent needs of distant overseas operations.”¹⁹⁷

The study then lists the problems that the PLA has encountered during far seas missions. In the absence of legal mechanisms, the military has had trouble convincing commercial suppliers to fulfill their obligations to deliver critical goods. There have been instances when cargo vessels replaced their freight destined for the PLA’s Djibouti base with more profitable merchandise while in transit, leaving the displaced military items to be picked up by another incoming ship.¹⁹⁸ During complex operations, the PLA has been unable to acquire adequate quantities of certain items. The overseas base has also experienced shortages due to the temporary unavailability of goods and services or to exorbitant market prices. Finally, China’s logistics facilities and equipment remain behind those of the United States and other advanced countries. In short, the PLA has discovered various constraints to going it alone and the need to obtain more secure access overseas. Such critical self-assessments as well as others to follow in this chapter attest to China’s serious commitment to correcting problems and improving the PLA’s distant operations.

In another telling article, Guo Feng and Zhang Suqin of the Naval Aviation University confirm that China’s carrier task forces obtain logistics support in a similarly self-reliant fashion. When they are docked pier-side, shore-based military facilities provide equipment and parts. Local logistics companies in turn deliver the goods to the carrier and its escorts in port. During

195 刘大雷 于洪敏 张浩 [Liu Dalei, Yu Hongmin, and Zhang Hao], “我军海外军事行动装备保障问题研究 [Research on Equipment Support to China’s Overseas Military Operations],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 9, 2017, p. 24.

196 韩跃 [Han Yue], “中美海军远海护航行动后勤保障模式比较研究 [A Comparative Study of the Logistics Support Models of Chinese and U.S. Naval Escort Operations],” *国防 [National Defense]*, no. 6, 2017, p. 42.

197 刘俊 段志云 [Liu Jun and Duan Zhiyun], “境外行动中的军事物流保障研究 [Research on Military Logistics Support during Overseas Operations],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 5, May 2019, p. 60.

198 薛文杰 吴晓东 [Xue Wenjie and Wu Xiaodong], “海外保障基地冷藏集装箱运输动态监控系统设计 [Design of a Dynamic Monitoring System for Refrigerated Container Transportation for Overseas Support Bases],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 4, April 2019, p. 28.

sorties in the near seas, bases ashore supported by local commercial suppliers serve as the logistical backbone while accompanying logistics ships supply spare parts and repair damaged equipment. On occasion, military transport aircraft are called on to facilitate the transfer of urgently needed goods.¹⁹⁹ In general, mainland bases have been adequate for supporting transits close to home waters.

However, the authors find that the expected logistical demands of far seas missions in the northern Indian Ocean and the Northwest Pacific Ocean would far outstrip the existing capabilities of shore-based facilities and at-sea replenishment. In distant waters, the Chinese navy faces more missions, more operational modes, longer steaming times, much larger transit areas, and harsher environments. The so-called “three highs” at sea—high temperatures, high salt, and high humidity—substantially increase the repair and maintenance needs of equipment. They conclude that the rigors of expeditionary carrier operations would likely strain the PLA’s shore-based logistics infrastructure and resupply ships accompanying the fleet. The study thus calls for an overseas logistical infrastructure suitable for peacetime and wartime uses.²⁰⁰ These findings likely reflect the many lessons learned from the Chinese navy’s continuous anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden over the past decade.

Gaps in Capabilities and Infrastructure

To meet the demands of a globalizing PLA, Chinese strategists see a growing need to build more—and more capable—ships, aircraft, and overseas facilities. Three authors from the Army Military Transportation University contend that the Chinese navy’s oceangoing logistics fleet “remains at a semi-mechanized level with relatively low levels of informationization.”²⁰¹ In other words, they judge that the fleet needs to further improve automation and the digitization of information to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. They observe that high demands on the current logistics fleet to perform existing missions, including training, exercises, and anti-piracy escort duties in the Indian Ocean, have stretched existing resources thin. Another study sees a need to build more semi-submersible vessels, fast combat support ships, ammunition transport ships, large oilers, multi-purpose transports, submarine tenders, and new comprehensive supply ships.²⁰² Two PLA analysts from the Army Logistics University advocate for the development of new ships that would be bigger, faster, unmanned, stealthy, multi-purpose,

199 郭峰 张素琴 [Guo Feng and Zhang Suqin], “基于军民融合的远海防卫装备保障模式探索 [Exploration of Far Seas Defense Equipment Support Models based on Civil-Military Fusion],” *价值工程 [Value Engineering]*, no. 4, 2020, p. 26.

200 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

201 徐伟剑 吴晓东 孙大同 [Xu Weijian, Wu Xiaodong, and Sun Datong], “海外保障基地运输投送问题研究 [Research on Transportation and Projection for Overseas Support Bases],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 3, March 2020, p. 10. Following a merger with other PLA educational institutions in 2017, the PLA university provides joint education to all the services and the People’s Armed Police.

202 王天泽 齐文哲 海军 [Wang Tianze, Qi Wenzhe, and Hai Jun], “海外军事基地运输投送保障探讨 [Exploration of Transportation and Projection Support for Overseas Military Bases],” *国防交通工程与技术 [Traffic Engineering and Technology for National Defense]*, no. 1, 2018, p. 34.

and “informationized.”²⁰³ These wish lists should be viewed as early indications that the PLA intends to substantially expand its at-sea logistical capabilities.

Yet even with more capable long-range logistics vessels, a far more ambitious basing infrastructure would have to be developed to support the PLA’s future expeditionary missions in maritime theaters as wide-ranging as the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, Chinese analysts believe that a network of overseas commercial facilities and military bases would be needed to sustain such a global posture. As one study notes, China currently lacks intermediary bases to provide coverage over the 9,000 kilometers of ocean that separate Djibouti from the mainland.²⁰⁴ Another study contends that current logistical arrangements—designed largely for constabulary missions—rely too heavily on commercial suppliers and neutral ports. It argues that the PLA needs more permanent military bases that possess adequate storage space, advanced repair and maintenance capabilities, and modern transportation tools. As such, it calls for the establishment of more “overseas bases possessing theater-wide comprehensive support capabilities [具有区域综合保障的海外基地]” that would be well equipped to sustain Chinese power projection.²⁰⁵ Other analysts propose the distribution of prepositioned supply stocks on China’s manmade Spratly bases, overseas bases, and strategic sealift ships.²⁰⁶

Two authors hailing from the Army Logistics University recommend a three-pronged buildup to establish a network of prepositioned supplies. They believe that China needs to negotiate more leases and access agreements to obtain use of commercial ports and airports abroad. They also urge the PLA to open new overseas bases that would house large stocks of prepositioned equipment, ammunition, and supplies. They foresee demands for a maritime prepositioning fleet that would be forward deployed to the Spratly island bases and other locations near critical sea lanes.²⁰⁷ Their vision suggests that the PLA is contemplating an extensive and well-resourced logistical infrastructure to support global missions.

203 Liu Jun and Duan Zhiyun, “Research on Military Logistics Support during Overseas Operations,” p. 61.

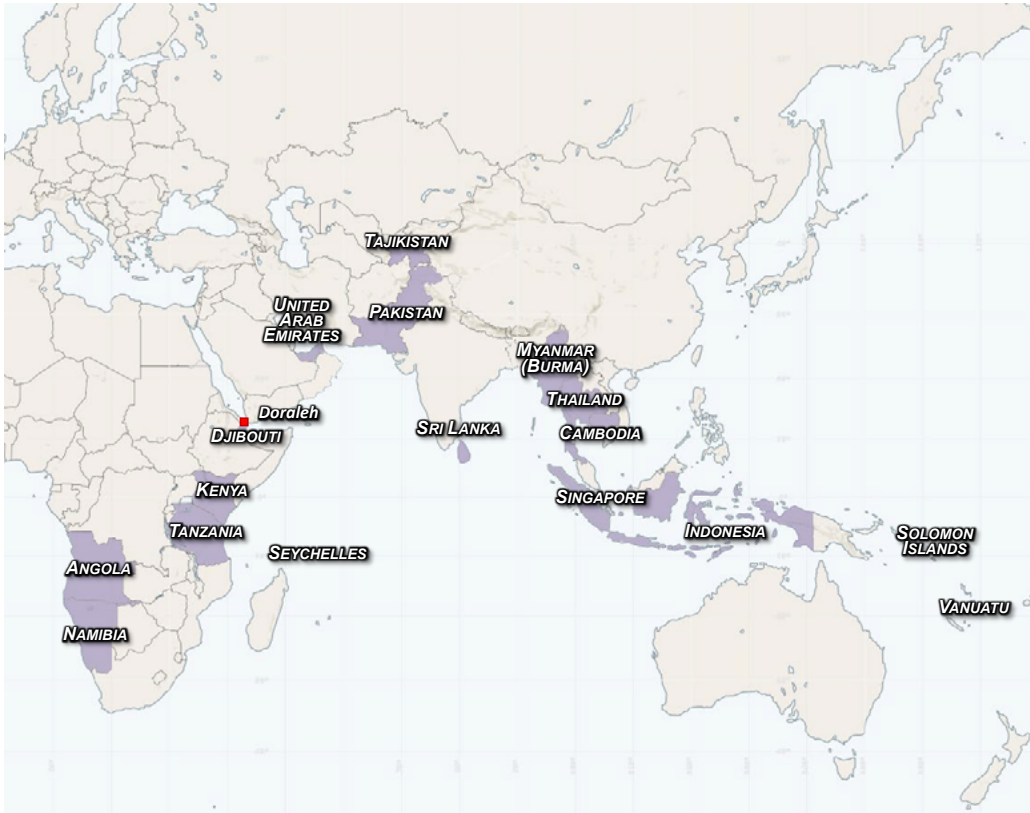
204 罗雷 吴晓东 刘宝新 乔浩伟 [Luo Lei, Wu Xiaodong, Liu Baoxin, and Qiao Haowei], “海军远海运输投送能力建设研究 [Research on Building Naval Oceanic Transportation and Projection Capabilities],” 军事交通学院学报 [*Journal of Military Transportation University*], no. 2, 2020, p. 6.

205 Guo Feng and Zhang Suqin, “Exploration of Far Seas Defense Equipment Support Model based on Civil-Military Fusion,” p. 27.

206 李守耕 陈铁祺 王丰 [Li Shougeng, Chen Tieqi, and Wang Feng], “战备物资预置储库模式研究 [Research on Pre-positioned War Materiel Storage Models],” 军事交通学院学报 [*Journal of Military Transportation University*], no. 7, 2019, pp. 58-60.

207 Liu Jun and Duan Zhiyun, “Research on Military Logistics Support in Overseas Operations,” p. 61.

FIGURE 6: LOCATIONS OF INTEREST TO THE PLA FOR OVERSEAS FACILITIES



According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China has considered or has inquired about basing or logistics facilities in the shaded countries above. China's current military base in Djibouti is also noted on the graphic. The 2020 Department of Defense report on China's military power notes, "The PRC has likely considered Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan as locations for PLA military logistics facilities. The PRC has probably already made overtures to Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Known focus areas of PLA planning are along the SLOCs from China to the Strait of Hormuz, Africa, and the Pacific Islands." The report also addresses potential PLAN interest in basing in Cambodia. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2020, p. 129-130. Map underlay courtesy of Mapbox.

Other studies hint at the scale of the PLA's future basing architecture. Two scholars envision the development of a "chain of ports [港链]" that would serve as the logistical network for the PLA. They view Gwadar in Pakistan as an "ideal anchorage [理想的锚地]" and Djibouti as a "lookout station [瞭望站]" and a "military strongpoint [军事据点]."²⁰⁸ They describe the overseas bases as dual-use in character with a greater emphasis on commerce over strictly military considerations. Facilities there would allow PLA forces to respond to events in the Malacca Strait, the Indian Ocean, the Greater Middle East, and East Africa. They similarly see value in maintaining logistical footholds in Bangladesh's Chittagong and the Maldives.

Liu Xinhua imagines the creation of three concentric rings of military bases, dual-use logistics facilities, and temporary access points comprising "central bases [中心基地]," "peripheral bases [外围基地]," and "forward bases [前沿基地]." Central bases would be large,

208 Li Qingsi and Chen Chunyu, "Analysis of China's Overseas Port Chain Base Strategy," p. 129.

comprehensive, and permanent facilities that can support a variety of roles and missions, including high-end combat. Peripheral bases would be home to non-combat technical personnel and would be responsible for early warning, patrols, reconnaissance, information gathering, and so forth. They would also serve as transit stations for the rapid deployment of personnel, equipment, and materiel in times of crisis or war. Forward bases, such as foreign ports, piers, and airports, would be accessed temporarily in times of crises or disasters. Candidate locations for central bases are Gwadar, Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port, and Tanzania's Bagamoyo port. Potential peripheral bases include Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong, Myanmar's Coco Islands, Karachi, Chabahar in Iran, and Salalah, Oman.²⁰⁹

In the South Pacific, Qi Huaigao of Fudan University contends that China should consider constructing dual-use overseas ports that are primarily for civilian use but can support military purposes. These facilities would help to counter U.S. bases along China's neighboring island chains. Qi specifically identifies San Cristobal in the Solomon Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu as potential locations for these facilities. Qi argues that China at present would not require U.S.-style military bases at these locations.²¹⁰

It is important to note that these global wish lists of facilities and bases by no means reflect Beijing's official policy.²¹¹ But they nevertheless show an appreciation among Chinese analysts for the kinds of overseas commitments that a globalizing PLA would need to uphold in the coming years. It also illustrates the distance that China must still cover to establish a network of fully functioning military bases and dual-use facilities.

Measuring Up to the United States

Chinese analysts see the U.S. military's logistical prowess as the gold standard, a benchmark against which they measure the PLA's progress and relative backwardness. One study concedes that the U.S. military's capacity to transport materiel and project power globally remains unrivaled in the world. A key element of its prowess is the very large and highly capable logistics fleet. It singles out the *Lewis and Clark*-class dry cargo ship as an exemplar.²¹² Another article draws attention to America's global basing infrastructure that provides

209 刘新华 [Liu Xinhua], “新兴国家海外基地建设模式探析 [An Exploration of Construction Models for Overseas Bases in Developing Countries],” 国际观察 [International Review], no. 5, 2018, pp. 71-73.

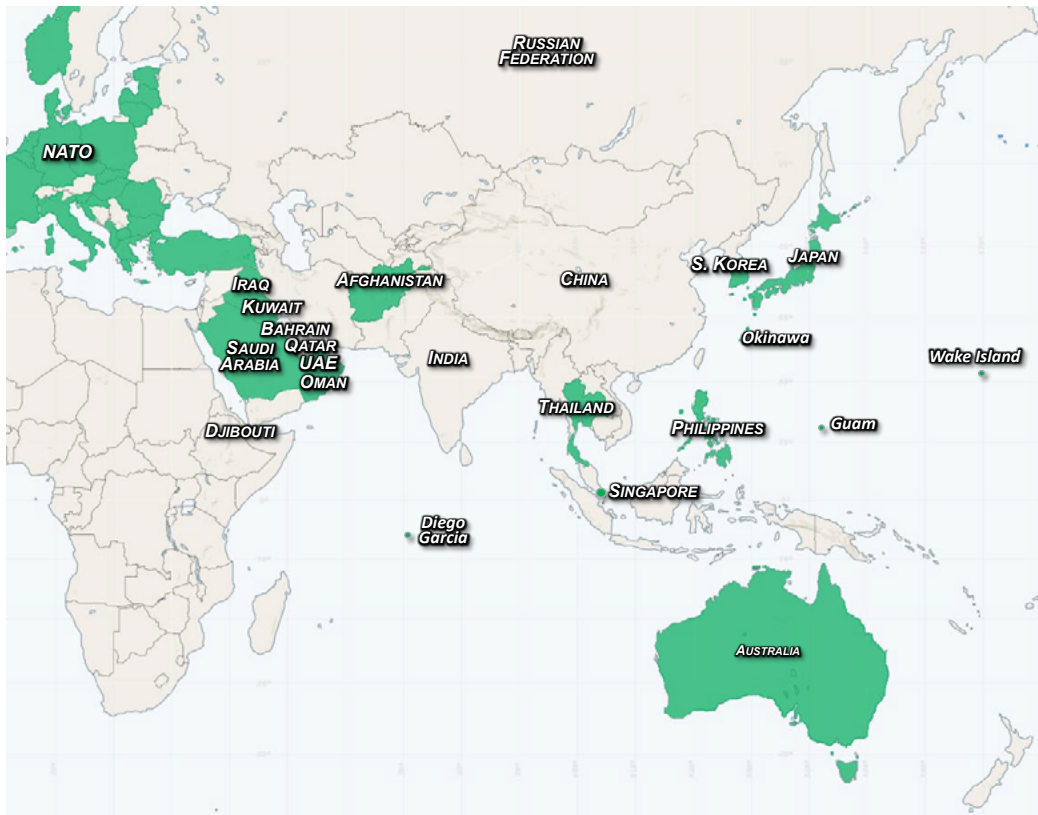
210 祁怀高 [Qi Huaigao], “中美在西太平洋的海权博弈及影响 [Sino-US Maritime Competition in the Western Pacific and Its Influence],” 武汉大学学报 [Wuhan University Journal] 72, no. 3, May 2019, p. 12.

211 On potential Chinese overseas dual-use facility and military base locations, the U.S. Department of Defense suggests in its forward-leaning 2020 report on the Chinese military: “The PRC has likely considered Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan as locations for PLA military logistics facilities. The PRC has probably already made overtures to Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Known focus areas of PLA planning are along the SLOCs from China to the Strait of Hormuz, Africa, and the Pacific Islands.” The report adds, “Cambodia may have instead accepted assistance from China or another country to develop Ream Naval Base.” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020*, pp. 128-130.

212 Wang Tianze, et. al., “Exploration of Transportation and Projection Support for Overseas Military Bases,” p. 34.

a full range of logistical support. In the Indo-Pacific theater, bases in Diego Garcia, Guam, Pearl Harbor, and Yokosuka serve as “force multipliers” that help to sustain expeditionary operations.²¹³ Capable allies and partners across the region operate common platforms that can deliver high-quality services and goods that rival those of the U.S. military. Still another analyst sees the extensive use of information technologies as a key strength of American military logistics whereas the PLA’s “informationized management [信息化管理]” of logistics remains far behind.²¹⁴

FIGURE 7: SELECT U.S. TERRITORIES, ALLIES, AND PARTNERS RELEVANT TO U.S. POSTURE



Areas depicted include U.S. territories, U.S. treaty allies, and select partners with formal and informal access agreements. This list is neither exhaustive nor all-inclusive. Taiwan, a U.S. partner, is not shaded because U.S. forces are not currently postured on its territory. Map underlay courtesy of Mapbox.

Analysts on the mainland have also subjected various aspects of U.S. military logistics and associated overseas basing to close study. They invariably conclude that the United States maintains a substantial lead over China. One study examines the entire process of deploying

213 Han Yue, “A Comparative Study of the Logistics Support Models of Chinese and U.S. Naval Escort Operations,” p. 41.

214 马方方 [Ma Fangfang], “加强我军维和行动后勤保障的几点思考 [Some Thoughts on Strengthening the Logistics Support to Our Military’s Peacekeeping Operations],” 国防 [National Defense], no. 12, 2017, pp. 34-35.

U.S. forces from home bases to ports of embarkation to staging areas to the intended destination. It evaluates the crucial role of intermediate bases located outside the continental United States, many of which are on foreign soil. It finds that PLA planners have all too often fixated on capabilities—such as strategic sealift, airlift, and prepositioned assets afloat—at the expense of infrastructure, especially overseas staging and marshaling areas. It concludes, “In the process of developing our military’s strategic projection capabilities, the importance of bases for strategic deployment should receive adequate attention.”²¹⁵

Four authors from the Army Military Transportation University assess the U.S. military’s global distribution system, including overseas bases, warehouses, host nation facilities, and terminals. They list the various bases and warehouses that serve as important distribution hubs across Japan and South Korea. Drawing from the U.S. experience, they argue that the PLA should develop its own large-scale comprehensive logistics facilities that are supported by “theater-wide land-based prepositioning and sea-based prepositioning [战区陆基预置和海上预置]” overseas that could respond rapidly and flexibly in times of crisis or war. Notably, the analysts call for an “allied strategy [盟国战略]” that would employ host nation resources to enhance the PLA’s in-theater distribution system.²¹⁶

Still another study draws attention to how the U.S. Navy fuels its fleet for global expeditionary combat operations. It shows that the naval service relies on a “massive basing network” comprising overseas facilities ashore and prepositioned sea-based assets. In the Indo-Pacific theater, some 40 naval bases and foreign ports support the fleet. Third parties play host to naval stations that receive, store, test, distribute, and replenish fuel. The study recommends that the PLA follow in America’s footsteps by establishing overseas naval bases and prepositioning ships to support high-end expeditionary operations. Intriguingly, it foresees a gradual process by which the PLA would create a global fueling network of its own that builds upon small-scale refueling stations and regional hubs. Such an arrangement would eventually enable the PLA to “strategically manage [经略]” the Pacific and Indian Oceans and, over the long term, “distribute globally [布局全球]” across the world’s oceans.²¹⁷

Another area where Chinese observers see a significant lag compared to the United States is the quality of host nation support. They recognize that the relative strengths and weaknesses of host nations will determine to a great extent the quality of logistics support China can expect to enjoy. The relatively low levels of development among the candidate countries

215 于殿祥 潘云剑 张良 [Yu Dianxiang, Pan Yunjian, and Zhang Liang], “美军兵力投送保障条件建设及启示 [The Conditions for Constructing U.S. Power Projection Support and Their Implications],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 7, 2016, p. 9.

216 石红霞 王海兰 田广才 孙静平 [Shi Hongxia, Wang Hailan, Tian Guangcai, and Sun Jingping], “美军战区物资配送系统分析及启示 [An Analysis of the Material Distribution System in the U.S. Military’s Operational Theaters and Its Implications],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 2, February 2019, pp. 60-61.

217 魏振堃 汪涛 全琪 赵素丽 [Wei Zhenkun, Wang Tao, Quan Qi, and Zhao Suli], “美军舰艇编队远洋作战油料保障现状分析 [Analysis of Fuel Support to the U.S. Surface Fleet during Open Ocean Combat Operations],” *国防科技 [National Defense Technology]*, no. 1, February 2019, p. 92.

that would be home to future Chinese bases suggest that the PLA may face certain material constraints. China's overseas base in Djibouti offers a glimpse of the possible challenges ahead. As one study acknowledges, Djibouti is one of the least developed countries in the world. It lacks natural resources and a well-educated workforce, its agricultural and industrial foundations are weak, it depends heavily on imports for foodstuffs and finished goods, and its economic development rests on foreign assistance.²¹⁸ Djibouti's relative backwardness compelled China's support base to import various goods from the international market, some of which were reportedly 20 times more expensive than equivalent items sold at home.²¹⁹ The support base has had to rely on Chinese commercial shipping to deliver material purchased in China and elsewhere. The logistical base itself, then, created its own set of logistical requirements, if not burdens.

In a revealing analysis, three scholars from the PLA Naval University of Engineering compare Singapore's Changi Naval Base and the Djibouti support base in political, economic, cultural, and technological terms. Presumably, the authors see rough equivalence between U.S. military access to Changi and China's use of its base in Djibouti. To them, Singapore is a high-quality host nation. It is a capitalist country that boasts a very stable political system and an extremely effective government. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1990 and subsequent bilateral agreements provide legal and institutional frameworks governing U.S. access and use of military facilities on the island nation. Singapore is an advanced economy and a major hub of global finance and trade as well as maritime commerce. It is an open, multicultural, Westernized, and cosmopolitan society. It possesses a world-class technological and innovation base to keep up with the latest military developments and trends.²²⁰

While Djibouti has maintained relative political stability since the late 1990s, its economic weaknesses could prove to be a liability to Chinese basing arrangements there. The authors express some concerns that the majority Muslim country could potentially raise cultural barriers to China, but they remain hopeful that Beijing's positive international image could help obtain wide social acceptance of the PLA's presence. They acknowledge that Djibouti may not be able to contribute directly to the development of naval facilities. Instead, China's financial largesse could help to accelerate investment in the African nation's deep-water port. While the study does not provide an in-depth comparative assessment of the bases, it clearly illustrates the profound differences between the two host nations. Left unstated is that superior sinews of national power make Singapore an ideal partner with which to arrange access and basing.

218 杨克 高扬 [Yang Ke and Gao Yang], “浅析吉布提保障基地建设的战略价值 [Analysis of the Strategic Value of the Djibouti Support Base],” *石家庄学院学报 [Journal of Shijiazhuang University]*, no. 2, 2018, p. 81.

219 Luo Lei, Wu Xiaodong, Liu Baoxin, and Qiao Haowei, “Research on Building Naval Oceanic Transportation and Projection Capabilities,” pp. 5-6.

220 罗朝晖 万捷 李弘扬 [Luo Chaohui, Wan Jie, and Li Hongyang], “我国海军海外基地选址因素研究 [Research on the Factors for Selecting the Locations of the Chinese Navy's Overseas Bases],” *物流技术 [Logistics Technology]*, no. 6, 2019, p. 143. The Naval University of Engineering, based in Wuhan, is a PLA graduate-level educational institution that specializes in such areas as propulsion and electrical engineering.

A study on Diego Garcia's military utility to U.S. strategy similarly highlights the importance of host nations. To Xu Ke, the special relationship that the United States enjoys with the United Kingdom confers unique strategic value to the island base in the Indian Ocean. As the author explains, "Among America's allied relationships, its ties with Britain—a special bond maintained from the Second World War to this day—are at the very core."²²¹ This closeness, unrivaled by any other U.S. alliance, allows for a far more permissive operating environment. For example, the United States regularly deploys to Diego Garcia politically sensitive weaponry, such as nuclear-powered submarines and nuclear-capable bombers. Close ties also ensure the long-term stability and sustainability of U.S. access to the base. To Xu, the lesson for China is that a reliable, high-quality strategic partner would be essential for the proper functioning of a "strategic strong point [战略支点]."

Potential Overseas Commitments and Liabilities

Chinese strategists are beginning to wrestle with potential commitments and costs, including the maintenance, operations, security, and defense of military bases, that would accompany a more substantial overseas military presence. Some analysts anticipate physical and political weaknesses associated with bases abroad that, if left unaddressed, could become significant vulnerabilities. One study identifies environmental conditions, including natural disasters, hostile armed intrusions, legal disputes with host nations, and the lack of operational security that could impose burdens on the PLA.²²² Another scholar sees domestic political transitions or financial troubles in host nations, third-party interventions designed to exclude the presence of outside powers, and wars that pass possession of foreign bases from one belligerent to another as threats to future Chinese bases.²²³ Analysts from the Research Institute for National Defense Engineering of the PLA's Academy of Military Science offer details about the likely weaknesses of physical structures on overseas bases that could be exposed to physical attack by terrorist groups or conventional armed forces. They contend that, when compared to bases on the mainland, Chinese overseas bases are likely to have more above-ground structures than underground facilities, fewer buildings designed to withstand blasts from munitions, and more structures built from locally sourced materials that do not meet domestic standards.²²⁴

221 许可 [Xu Ke], "构建“海上丝路”上的战略支点—兼议迪戈加西亚基地的借鉴作用 [Building Strategic Strong Points on the 'Maritime Silk Road'—Discussion of Diego Garcia as a Reference Point]," 亚太安全与海洋研究 [Asia Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs], no. 5, 2016, p. 14.

222 李扬 易明疆 [Li Yang and Yi Mingjiang], "海外保障基地安全管理问题初探 [A Preliminary Study of the Security Management of Overseas Support Bases]," 国防 [National Defense], no. 1, 2018, pp. 64-65.

223 Liu Xinhua, "An Exploration of Construction Models for Overseas Bases in Developing Countries," p. 70.

224 吴颺 孙桂娟 高伟亮 周松柏 王幸 张惠贤 [Wang Biao, Sun Guijuan, Gao Weiliang, Zhou Songbai, Wang Xing, and Zhang Huixian], "海外保障基地安全与防护问题研究 [Research on the Security and Protection of Overseas Support Bases]," 防护工程 [Protective Engineering], no. 1, February 2018, pp. 3-4. The Institute, located in Luoyang, Henan Province, specializes in protective engineering by studying the effects of explosions, shrapnel, shockwaves, electromagnetic pulses, and so forth.

Chinese observers recognize that the costs are not limited to the physical upkeep and safety of bases. A theme that emerges from the open-source literature is an awareness—and wariness—of the complex politics surrounding the use of foreign bases. One study observes that the management of overseas bases is not strictly a military affair. Rather, it encompasses the political, diplomatic, cultural, and religious spheres of host nations. As such, basing arrangements require Beijing to adopt an interagency approach that draws in the party-state apparatus, law enforcement, security, and intelligence agencies, and municipal governments.²²⁵ For example, China must anticipate that host nations would require: 1) agreements that underwrite the legal and jurisdictional basis for PLA presence; 2) protections and safeguards for local communities; 3) efforts to mitigate pollution, noise, and crime; and 4) measures to address the fallout from death and injury of local citizens.²²⁶ Illustrating the considerable diplomatic capital required to obtain access to foreign bases and facilities, one study identifies 21 treaties and agreements that the United States has signed with its counterparts around the world that serve as the legal foundation for overseas basing.²²⁷

Chinese observers further acknowledge that the failure to address the needs of host nations could increase China's political and diplomatic liabilities. They express concerns that serious disputes with host nations could inflict harm on Beijing's image abroad. Basing arrangements that are perceived as unfair or coercive could sow resentment among local communities, eventually turning them against the Chinese military presence on their soil. Two authors liken the social dynamics of base politics to that of an active volcano: dormancy is just temporary whereas an eruption could do permanent damage.²²⁸ One scholar thus advises Beijing to avoid repeating the mistakes of other great powers that became overly exposed to the risks of overseas basing. China should avoid power politics and the interventionist policies of the West. Instead, it should rely primarily on economic and cultural means to fulfill its basing ambitions.²²⁹ Given China's relative inexperience, it remains unclear whether Beijing would be sufficiently nimble in dealing with the messy domestic politics of other nations.

Chinese scholars have also begun to pay more attention to the legal foundations for overseas basing.²³⁰ They acknowledge that Beijing needs to do much more to investigate the

225 吴晓东 孙大同 [Wu Xiaodong and Sun Datong], “海外保障基地装备物资运输安全管理研究 [Research on Security Management of Equipment and Material Transportation for Overseas Support Bases],” *军事交通学院学报 [Journal of Military Transportation University]*, no. 1, January 2018, p. 61.

226 薛桂芳 郑洁 [Xue Guifang and Zheng Jie], “中国21世纪海外基地建设的现实需求与风险应对 [The Realistic Needs of and Risk Response to China's Overseas Base Construction in the 21st Century],” *国际展望 [Global Review]*, no. 4, 2017, p. 120.

227 吴子昊 [Wu Zihao], “美国获取海外军事基地的法律方式探析 [An Analysis of U.S. Legal Methods for Obtaining Overseas Military Bases],” *军队政工理论研究 [Theoretical Studies on PLA Political Work]*, no. 2, 2017, p. 130.

228 Li Qingsi and Chen Chunyu, “Analysis of China's Overseas Port Chain Base Strategy,” p. 135.

229 张弛 [Zhang Chi], “大国海外力量的布建模式及对中国的启示 [The Models for Deploying Power Overseas by Great Powers and Their Implications for China],” *社会科学 [Journal of Social Science]*, no. 6, 2018, pp. 25-26.

230 邹立刚 王章平 [Zou Ligang and Wang Zhangping], “我国海外军事基地安全防卫法律问题研究 [Research on Legal Issues Concerning the Security and Defense of China's Overseas Military Bases],” *中国海洋大学学报 [Journal of Ocean University of China]*, no. 3, 2020.

international legal basis upon which jurisdictional disputes and other problems would be resolved with host nations. They recognize that a failure to adjudicate issues that touch upon the host nation's sovereignty and territorial rights could have severe consequences for China's standing and credibility abroad.²³¹ Two legal experts from Dalian Maritime University raise concerns that basing arrangements that are out of step with international law could lend credence to the "China threat theory," heightening antagonisms and triggering counterbalancing behavior abroad.²³² Given Beijing's long history of defending sovereignty's sanctity and of opposing outside meddling in other countries' internal affairs, it will need to balance the operational needs of bases against the host nations' political sensitivities.

Assessing China's Self-Appraisals

The logistical weaknesses that Chinese strategists have identified above will by no means predetermine outcomes. The PLA's current shortfalls in its overseas logistical infrastructure do not necessarily preclude China from fulfilling its global ambitions in the coming years. As noted in Chapter 3, weaknesses are variable in time and intensity and they are amenable to mitigation. Provided that Beijing devotes adequate attention, resources, and time to addressing its weaknesses, the PLA could be well-positioned to overcome certain logistical constraints. Assessing the extent to which the PLA's weaknesses in overseas logistical infrastructure are resistant to improvement is thus an important analytical task.

China's logistical weaknesses are relative to Beijing's competitors and to the goals that it is trying to achieve. China is undoubtedly very far behind the United States in global logistics. But comparisons with the U.S. military may be misleading, especially if the PLA's logistical requirements fall far short of America's globe-straddling forces. As Chapter 5 shows, China's current strategic discourse suggests that Beijing's primary geographic area of interest is confined to the Indo-Pacific. As a result, over the next decade, the PLA's main missions beyond the near seas are likely to be constabulary in character, including sea lane security, noncombatant evacuations, and so forth. It is therefore more productive to think about the PLA's overseas logistical infrastructure weaknesses in the context of its distinctive aims, roles, and missions, which are likely more limited compared to the U.S. military.

The PLA could also seize its advantages as a composite land-sea power and pursue global power projection by land, sea, and air. At sea, Beijing has outlined its plans to establish three "blue economic passages" that would connect China to Europe and Africa via the Indian Ocean, link China to Oceania and the South Pacific via the South China Sea, and bridge China

231 薛茹 [Xue Ru], "国际上和平时期域外驻军的法律问题 [International Legal Issues Regarding Stationing Troops on Foreign Territories in Peacetime]," 西安政治学院学报 [*Journal of Xi'an Politics Institute*], no. 4, 2016, p. 115.

232 司玉琢 袁曾 [Si Yuzhuo and Yuan Zeng], "建立海外军事基地的国际法规制研究 [Research on International Laws and Regulations for Establishing Overseas Military Bases]," 东北大学学报 [*Journal of Northeastern University*], no. 2, March 2018, p. 195.

and Europe via the Arctic.²³³ China's land transportation infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, combined with transit agreements, could enable the PLA to rapidly project force into Southeast, Central, and South Asia, and the Middle East. Harkening back to Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theories about the heartland in Eurasia, transcontinental roads, railways, pipelines, and telecommunication networks may diminish to some extent the importance of maritime transportation.²³⁴

The PLA's logistics weaknesses can be understood in terms of gradations of severity. Material and physical weaknesses are likely the most amenable to improvement and perhaps substantial reversals. The PLAN has already deployed advanced logistics ships to meet its far seas requirements. As noted above, the Type 903 and the Type 901 resupply ships demonstrate the Chinese navy's impressive progress in at-sea replenishment. Similarly, China's accomplishments as an infrastructure superpower, including the establishment of massive manmade bases in the heart of the South China Sea, show that base construction overseas is well within its technical reach. The physical aspects of building up shipping and bases, then, are mostly matters of prioritization, time, and resources.

Without excluding the possibility that China may seek access and presence around the world's oceans, even an Indo-Pacific oriented posture comprising commercial and military facilities would still pose logistical challenges to the PLA. First, the scale of the effort would be quite significant. Military-grade bases and dual-use facilities would have to be developed across the Indian Ocean littorals. One analyst cited above lists no less than 10 foreign locations that would form a network of mutually supporting logistical infrastructure. Such a network would represent a new set of commitments and liabilities that China would be responsible for. Each new base or facility and its host nation would generate their own unique political, diplomatic, economic, and legal demands as well as operational requirements.

Second, China would have to develop the means to meet its commitments and to furnish the resources to cover its liabilities. At a minimum, Beijing would need to strike bargains with host nations in exchange for a sustainable overseas presence. The Belt and Road Initiative is one vital mechanism through which Beijing could obtain access agreements with partner countries from Asia to Europe. For example, China has already invested heavily in the Port of Piraeus, Greece to transform it into a major transit hub as an element of BRI. Similarly, in 2019, Italy became the first major European economy to sign a memorandum of understanding with China on the BRI. These inroads could set the stage for PLA access and presence in the Mediterranean. The PLA would also need the capabilities to supply and defend far-flung

233 "China Focus: China Proposes 'Blue Economic Passages' for Maritime Cooperation." *Xinhua*, June 20, 2017, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380391.htm.

234 In the 19th and 20th centuries, improvements in Eurasian rail transport diminished Britain's relative advantage in maritime transport, which threatened Britain's ability to defend distant parts of its empire and required Britain to enact changes in military posture, including increasing forward based forces abroad to more readily defend its holdings. Improvements in land-based transportation effectively increased Britain's cost of empire. This historical analogy has obvious relevance to United States today. For more historical background, see Krepinevich and Work, pp. 23-28.

commercial facilities and military bases across a range of potential risks and scenarios, including hostilities against a capable expeditionary rival. For example, PLA forces operating out of overseas bases and facilities would need to reduce the risk of being cut off and isolated in a high-end contingency against a major power.

Third, China would need high-quality, reliable, and stable allies and partners to play host to an enduring long-term network of bases. As Chinese strategists readily acknowledge, the capabilities of the Djibouti support base and other candidate bases are a far cry from those of Changi naval base and Diego Garcia that are available to U.S. forces, much less those of permanent forward bases such as Yokosuka naval base and Kadena airbase in Japan.

This is not merely a question of the economic development or political stability of host nations, which China's partner countries, such as Pakistan and others, lack. It also has much to do with the nature and quality of the relationships that Beijing shares with its counterparts. Shallow or superficial bonds of friendship are likely to prove fragile in times of duress. Unreliable host nations could withdraw support or deny access to bases or facilities to PLA forces in crisis or war. China's lack of strong allies—characterized by tight bonds forged by past wars, common causes, mutual interests, and shared values—is perhaps its greatest weakness. As Andrew Erickson rightly notes:

[Beijing] is starting significantly behind the ally curve and would be very hard-pressed to create the reliable network of alliances and access that the Soviet Nay enjoyed, let alone that which the United Kingdom and France have developed through their colonial history and the United States has achieved through decades of intensive engagement and investment.²³⁵

China thus suffers from significant weaknesses in the less tangible areas of these relationships, including trust, depth of institutional ties, long history of intimate cooperation, cultural affinities, and so forth. If Beijing cannot count on its friends and allies to keep their promises when they are essential to the survival of the PLA's overseas forces, then no amount of high-tech weaponry and modern basing infrastructure would secure China's extra-regional military posture at an acceptable cost. In sum, while China may be able to convert its material weaknesses into strengths, Beijing will likely struggle to transform largely transactional overseas relationships into durable ties that can withstand the stresses of great power competition and wars.

235 Andrew Erickson, "Power vs. Distance: China's Global Maritime Interests and Investments in the Far Seas," in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, eds. *Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), p. 262.

CHAPTER 7

Implications for Allied Strategy

This chapter synthesizes the findings from the three case studies and offers preliminary thoughts on the implications for U.S. and allied policymakers. It first assesses China's weaknesses and Beijing's efforts to mitigate them. The chapter then details the various costs China will incur as it attempts to overcome its weaknesses. It then offers guidance on how allied policymakers should conceptually approach Chinese weaknesses through strategy. Finally, this chapter offers recommendations on how the allies should adapt and retool warfighting capabilities as well as instruments of statecraft that enhance allied competitiveness as China goes global.

China's Weaknesses and Beijing's Ability to Overcome Them

Each case study highlights a strategic weakness that China must overcome in its bid to go global. Chapter 4 shows that, as a composite land-sea power, China's omni-directional threat environment imposes opportunity costs. Trade-offs between meeting landward and seaward challenges are inherent to any of Beijing's major foreign policy decisions. To concentrate in one strategic direction, Chinese leaders must always be mindful of reducing its exposure to liabilities on other geographic fronts. Chapters 5 and 6 reveal that some of China's weaknesses stem from the absence or lack of certain capabilities or skills. Until about a decade ago, the PLA did not possess significant power projection forces. Compared to the United States and other Western militaries, China remains behind as a global military power. These weaknesses have constrained Beijing's ability to influence events abroad and have left it vulnerable to overseas disruptions and emergencies in times of crisis or war. The Chinese discourse documented in the case studies above also shows Beijing's understanding of those weaknesses and determination to address and reverse them.

As repeated elsewhere in this study, these weaknesses are not new. In fact, they are the usual suspects in any discourse about the prospects of China's ascent. However, what is different about these longstanding weaknesses today, compared to a decade ago, is that China appears poised to go global. As noted in Chapter 3, the PRC's global plans are integral to Xi Jinping's

Chinese Dream, which envisions the nation vaulting to the front ranks of world powers in coming decades. Going global is neither a rash undertaking nor is going global disconnected from China's grand strategy as Xi and his lieutenants understand it. Beijing has thus exhibited the confidence to extend its reach far beyond the homeland. In other words, China is willing to actively invest time and energy to mitigate, if not reverse, the weaknesses that stand in the way of its global plans. In doing so, the Chinese leadership has signaled its commitment to assume greater risks even as it seeks the rewards that will come with achieving the Chinese Dream.

As the case studies demonstrate, weaknesses—even structural ones—are not immutable. Prudent statecraft, territorial acquisitions, good timing, and patience, in addition to favorable exogenous events, can dampen geopolitical pressures on one geographic flank and thereby free up resources for China to focus on another. Over the past three decades, Beijing cultivated amicable ties with Moscow to obtain the necessary breathing space for a decisive seaward turn. To what extent recent border tensions between China and India could compel Beijing to devote significantly more attention and resources landward than the recent past remains unclear. China nevertheless possesses the power to reduce risks on its continental front to focus on its global maritime project.

In the nautical direction, Beijing faces an unfavorable geographic configuration of power along the first and second island chains. It has sought to reshape its circumstances at sea through a comprehensive military modernization program and a massive island-building infrastructure project that literally changed geographic realities in the heart of the South China Sea. And, if China were to conquer Taiwan or to absorb the island through non-military means and thereby shatter the fetters of the first island chain, Beijing will have fundamentally transformed its geostrategic position in the Western Pacific. Chinese leaders clearly possess some degree of agency over their physical surroundings.

Similarly, the PLA's impressive buildup in past decades demonstrates that it has the power to bend weaknesses to its will. Beijing has accelerated its efforts to fill gaps in its power projection forces and the logistical infrastructure to realize its longer-term ambitions as a global power. China is already a permanent player in the Indian Ocean. Its navy has maintained a presence there for over a decade and the PLA has signaled the durability and expansion of that presence by establishing a base in Djibouti. This study finds that China is capable of meeting the strictly material requirements, such as building ships, aircraft, and bases, for going global.

It should also be noted that the weaknesses surveyed above are interrelated and interact with each other, for better or for worse. In the past, China's preoccupation with landward threats precluded a serious and sustained effort at sea. Since the end of the Cold War, an unprecedented peace along China's continental front has been an essential precondition for Beijing to go global in the maritime and aerospace domains. In other words, the alleviation of China's geostrategic weakness enabled it to address and even reverse its weaknesses in power projection and global logistical infrastructure.

The Various Costs China Must Incur to Overcome Its Weaknesses

While China's strategic weaknesses can be mitigated with time and resources, Beijing's efforts to globalize will likely incur costs in material, financial, intellectual, diplomatic, and political terms. Some of these costs could be quite prohibitive, owing to the structural character of the weaknesses. Such costs, of course, would not necessarily deter or preclude China from achieving its global aims, nor is there any reason to believe that Beijing would be unwilling or unable to absorb the costs of going global, especially given the ambitions of the Chinese Dream. The expected costs, however, suggest that China faces barriers to entry and that the PLA does not operate in a resistance-free environment. Costs are akin to friction, an accumulation of which could slow China's momentum. The following provides some typologies of costs stemming from the PRC's weaknesses, which will be helpful in determining more specifically how allied strategy can exacerbate China's strategic vulnerabilities.

First, there are *high economic costs* to going global. A far seas force structure and an overseas logistical infrastructure will come with a hefty price tag. Even a modest network of bases and an extra-regional posture of sea, air, and other forces confined to the Indian Ocean could be quite costly in absolute terms. The platforms and systems required for overseas operations would likely be more, perhaps far more, expensive than those dedicated to homeland defense and missions closer to home.

Second, Beijing's leaders must consider *opportunity costs*. As noted above, trade-offs are built into China's geostrategic calculus. Chinese commanders and statesmen recognize that Beijing must maintain a reasonable balance between its continental and maritime commitments. An overcommitment to one front could leave China exposed on the other. Worse still, a strategic catastrophe on one flank, such as a great power war, would likely siphon substantial resources from the other, weakening China's position on both fronts. Moreover, China's Cold War history shows just how dangerous a two-front great power rivalry can be. As noted in Chapter 4, Mao's disastrous policy of "dual confrontation" against the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1960s left China in an extremely precarious position, one that Chinese leaders today would presumably want to avoid.

In the nautical sphere, the shifts from the near seas to the far seas and from a limited overseas logistics infrastructure to a more extensive one could multiply competing demands for resources. Every yuan spent on fulfilling the far seas mission, for example, could come at the expense of meeting the needs of near seas contingencies and vice versa. Beyond trade-offs within the defense budget itself, the opportunity costs between defense spending and non-defense spending will likely become much sharper over the coming decade. China's slowing economic growth and rising social demands will squeeze the defense budget, just as the PLA is attempting to make an expensive, resource-intensive global push. Fiscal pressures could mount further in a depressed global economy following the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if the Chinese leadership were to continue prioritizing investments in the military, the largesse that

the PLA had enjoyed over the past two decades will likely be a thing of the past. As such, the difficulty of going global will rise, perhaps precipitously, in the coming years.

Third, as China goes global, Beijing will likely need to pay for the *startup costs* that inevitably accompany any major new project. As Chapters 5 and 6 illustrate, China will be entering unfamiliar territory in many cases. Its geostrategic reorientation will require qualitatively different kinds of skillsets and sharp increases in resources dedicated to defeating the tyranny of distance. The PRC's defense industry and the PLA will face high inefficiencies as they attempt to develop and produce new types of large, technologically complex systems and operate them in demanding overseas environments. Chinese statesmen and commanders will also face new challenges in cultivating and maintaining ties with prospective host nations to obtain access to facilities and bases. In other words, some weaknesses can be understood as areas of statecraft or operational art that are less familiar—or even alien—to Beijing. For China to achieve strategic success, it must at a minimum obtain proficiency in, if not mastery of, those areas.

A rough analogy is the risk that companies assume when they go into an entirely new line of business. A new venture, even for large corporations, can be challenging. Multiple factors—from unacceptably high production costs to difficulties maintaining quality control to the entry of new competitors to distraction from its original business lines—can contribute to failure. Failure rates are depressingly high while success, measured in terms of profit, usually takes a lot of time.

Similarly, China's quest for global power is akin to going into a new line of business, an experiment by its very character. Beijing will need to wrestle with new tools, skills, environments, partners, competitors, and requirements while maintaining or advancing its position on the continental front and in the near seas. It will need time to climb the steepening learning curve, overcome inefficiencies, and achieve economies of scale. It will likely make mistakes and suffer setbacks. By no means do these challenges predict or predetermine Chinese failure. They simply illustrate the likely startup costs that Beijing would need to cover to go global. Notably, time is an important factor in startup costs. As China accumulates experience over time, the learning curve would likely flatten, reducing costs. But there is also likely a window of vulnerability when the slope of the learning curve is steepest during the initial phases of Beijing's extra-regional project.

In the intangible realm of strategy, the PRC will need to manage the *psychological costs* of going global. Beijing harbors deeply rooted fears and new concerns as it steps on the world stage. Chinese strategists exhibit longstanding paranoia about encirclement and being cut off at sea. CCP leaders are likely sensitive to significant risks to their capital-intensive power projection forces, which are important symbols of China's ascent and great power status. Such risk aversion could grow as the far seas fleet assumes an ever-larger proportion of the overall force structure. This risk sensitivity could be particularly acute owing to the complexities and uncertainties of commanding and controlling forces in faraway theaters. Chinese strategists are also inclined to believe that hostile outside powers, particularly the United States and its partners, are determined to derail their nation's rise and to oppose China's growing global

presence. Whether these insecurities are merely temporary as Beijing grows more confident over time or prove harder to shake off remains to be seen.

Finally, over the long term, Beijing must manage the cumulative *costs of empire*, which can be understood in their various subtypes.²³⁶ Consider China's ambitions for an overseas basing infrastructure. New commitments frequently beget more commitments. Even if it were confined to the Indian Ocean littorals, such basing would necessitate ongoing expenditure of political, diplomatic, and financial capital, essentially a combination of *fixed* and *variable operating costs*. China would need to maintain its positions and maneuver across a broad strategic space that would likely be contested by local and extra-regional powers alike, raising these costs further. Militarily, the PLA would need to invest in physically defending its overseas bases against capable adversaries. Moreover, to survive and remain operable in conflict, individual bases need to be part of a mutually supporting, resilient basing network. The Chinese military would need to ensure that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Otherwise, the bases risk being cut off and isolated at the outset of a war, thus losing their utility.

The *reputational costs* that come with a more visible overseas footprint could stoke regional fears while undercutting Beijing's soothing narratives about its ascent and its place in the Indo-Pacific. In negotiating access to overseas bases or facilities, China may have to pay for *hidden costs*. Host nations may expect security assurances or even guarantees as a part of the bargain. Beijing could thus face the potential risk of entrapment if host nations were to use Chinese commitments to draw China into disputes with third parties. Chinese access to Pakistan's port facilities, like Gwadar, could involve a greater risk of being dragged into the India-Pakistan rivalry.

China would also need to resist the temptations associated with *sunk costs*. The construction of bases and the supporting infrastructure is not cheap. The psychology of sunk costs suggests that once China pours resources into its global project, Beijing would likely be reluctant to abandon its overseas positions even if they were to become liabilities that significantly outweigh the benefits. Indeed, Chinese statesmen may be inclined to throw good money after bad. In practice, these costs may blend and compound each other. For instance, Beijing may need to grapple with mercurial host nation politicians who may attempt to capitalize on inevitable disputes between local communities and forward-based Chinese troops, leveraging China's reputation and sunk investments in pursuit of additional funds, commitments, or support.

In sum, the demands of a globalizing PLA could outrun the resources Beijing has at hand to meet China's continental, near seas, and overseas commitments. Third parties in and outside of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean seeking to frustrate China's plans could

236 For a Cold War-era study on the economic costs of the Soviet empire and for some useful definitions of costs, see Charles Wolf, Jr., K.C. Yeh, Edmund Brunner, Jr., Aaron Gurwitz, and Marilee Lawrence, *The Costs of the Soviet Empire* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1983), pp. 6-8.

exacerbate such a commitment-resource mismatch. It is not hard to imagine that China might fall prey to imperial overreach. Beijing's efforts to mitigate its weaknesses could create liabilities both near and far from China's borders that, in turn, undermine Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.

To be sure, the costs of going global are universal and are not unique to China. Any aspiring power seeking to acquire global influence would need to account for these costs. However, this study contends that some of these costs will likely be much higher for China due to the structural character of its weaknesses. An understanding of Chinese weaknesses thus provides clues to the especially heavy burdens that Beijing may need to shoulder in the coming years. Some sense of the severity of the burdens and Beijing's ability to mitigate them could in turn offer insight on how the United States and its allies and partners can respond to China's rise as a global power.

A Point of Departure for Allied Strategy

Assessing China's strategic weaknesses and identifying how China's vulnerabilities can be put to the test by its competitors is an important analytical goal of this study. As noted in Chapter 3, not all weaknesses are created equal. Some weaknesses may be impervious or irrelevant to external stresses, while other weaknesses may constitute vulnerabilities, that is, those weaknesses which can be subjected to outside pressure and permit the application of strategy. In other words, the United States and its allies may enjoy some degree of agency over certain Chinese weaknesses and should consider targeting those weaknesses to complicate particular Chinese strategic efforts and realize allied objectives.

Of course, Washington and allied capitals across the Indo-Pacific should prepare diligently for the possibility that China might ultimately succeed in achieving its global aims. They also need to anticipate the various strategic repercussions should Beijing construct a credible military posture beyond its immediate neighborhood. Yet, the journey to global power is as important as the destination. China's structural weaknesses suggest that the trajectory and the pathway to world power status are by no means certain or linear. China will likely encounter difficulties, experience setbacks, and even suffer failures on its way to its goals. The United States and its allies thus need to remain vigilant about the likely struggles that China could undergo as it tackles its weaknesses. More importantly, the close allies should stand ready to exploit and compound Chinese failures, if such counteractions promise strategic dividends.

In developing long-term strategies that target Chinese vulnerabilities, allied policymakers should understand the costs associated with each vulnerability through the lens of time. The various costs of going global outlined above will differ in length and severity depending on the stage of China's globalizing efforts. As the PLA continues its ambitious global push over the next ten years, its startup costs will be likely be quite high. In contrast, China's costs of empire will accumulate substantially in the 2030s and beyond. As they consider their own timelines and scarce resources, it behooves U.S. and allied policymakers to exacerbate the types of costs

that are most severe for Beijing in a given time period. For example, a technology-focused denial or cost-imposition strategy to frustrate China's attempts to indigenously develop the capabilities required to go global, including naval nuclear propulsion, modern jet engines, and advanced semiconductors, would be most fruitful in the startup phase.²³⁷ Separately, developing and selectively disclosing allied plans, concepts, and capabilities designed to target China's overseas bases would likely be most beneficial once China cements its overseas posture, as these tactics would amplify the PRC's costs of empire.

Developing strategies with time in mind will help allied policymakers develop effective ways to slow China's momentum and prolong its various stages of going global. Stymieing Beijing's technological ability to produce modern power projection platforms, for instance, could complicate China's overseas basing and facility requirements, and drag out the PLA's development of a global posture. Moreover, there may be one or more critical points in time at which China's overall costs peak. The 2020s may stand to be one such period. China will need to overcome an array of startup costs in developing far seas force structure and posture while maintaining a near seas force designed to overturn the territorial status quo close to home. Allied policymakers may be facing an imminent, crucial time period during which they have an opportunity to exacerbate Chinese threat perceptions across multiple geographic areas. Such efforts to tie down the PLA in various theaters could dilute Beijing's investments to such an extent that the Chinese military is unable to concentrate sufficient force to accomplish any of its primary goals.

The value of buying time should not be understated. Deterring China from disrupting the status quo in the Western Pacific and beyond for as long as possible can be an end in itself. Just as France's Cardinal Richelieu secured France's continental flank by effectively delaying German unification for over two hundred years, so too should U.S. and allied policymakers seek ways to prolong China's plans to overturn the existing East Asian and global security order.²³⁸ Such delays could allow for a variety of favorable events to occur, such as a severe deterioration in the external security environment along China's continental flank or the emergence of a liberal regime in Beijing that is more inward focused or more inclined to seek peaceful resolution of international disputes.²³⁹

Delaying China's military modernization could also place additional stress on the CCP's legitimacy, particularly surrounding key events, stated policy deadlines, and anniversaries. For

237 For an example of a technology cost-imposition strategy, see Jack Bianchi, "Fear Not Technological Disengagement and Competition with China," *War on the Rocks*, January 14, 2020, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/fear-not-technological-disengagement-and-competition-with-china/>.

238 On the impact of Cardinal Richelieu's efforts in Central Europe, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 65-66.

239 For an excellent report that argues the United States should buy time until China's emerging domestic challenges become fully manifest, see Gabriel B. Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, *Hold The Line through 2035: A Strategy to Offset China's Revisionist Actions and Sustain a Rules-Based Order in the Asia-Pacific* (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, November 2020).

example, if Beijing were unable to achieve unification with Taiwan by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC's founding, then the CCP could be subjected to intense criticism at home that it had failed to fulfill the Chinese Dream. Such domestic pressure could distract the CCP sufficiently to compel Beijing's leaders to turn inward, drawing their attention and resources away from external goals.

Related to the concept of time, U.S. and allied policymakers must strive to sustain the benefits they currently enjoy from the existing territorial status quo in East Asia and beyond. And they must contemplate how quickly those benefits could vanish and how stark new realities could be imposed by China if territorial boundaries were redrawn. China's complex geography, which is at the root of all three weaknesses dissected in this study, is not absolutely immutable. Conquest is always an option. Importantly, Chinese strategists see unification with Taiwan as a way to destroy the shackles of the first island chain. As two Chinese strategists argue, "the key to breaking through the island chain blockade is Taiwan."²⁴⁰ To them, Beijing must "resolve the Taiwan issue at an early date," as doing so will "open up a broad space for China's development and push China to move toward the ocean at a more solid pace."²⁴¹ Their assessment is correct. If Taiwan were to fall to the PRC, then the PLA would be well-positioned to outflank Japan's Southwest Islands, including the hub of American military power on Okinawa.²⁴² China's commanding position on Taiwan would eliminate a major security problem for Beijing and open new vistas for the PLA. The PLA could drastically downsize forces no longer needed for a Taiwan contingency, thereby freeing up funds to acquire power projection assets and overseas bases that would threaten allied objectives on a global scale.²⁴³

Targeting China's vulnerabilities will involve a shift in mindset among some U.S. and allied policymakers. As explained in Chapter 3, some experts argue that efforts to leverage Chinese vulnerabilities are inherently destabilizing and that a strong China is far more preferable to a weak China. But given the evolving threat posed by a globalizing PLA, the allies must be unapologetic in identifying and exploiting Chinese weaknesses in ways that will advance allied goals. Upholding the existing Indo-Pacific security architecture will demand a hard-nosed approach. For example, the United States has long viewed the importance of Taiwan in economic, political, ideological, and geostrategic terms. For these reasons, the United States has an undeniable security interest in keeping Taiwan free and out of Beijing's hands. As long as Taiwan itself does not wish to unify with the PRC, Washington and its allies can take steps

240 李忠杰 李兵 [Li Zhongjie and Li Bing], "抓紧制定中国在国际战略通道问题上的战略对策 [Firmly Grasp and Formulate Strategic Countermeasures for China's International SLOCs Issue]," 当代世界与社会主义 [Contemporary World and Socialism], no. 5, 2011, p. 10.

241 Ibid., p. 11.

242 Given such a dramatic shift in the territorial status quo and the balance of power, one could begin to imagine the follow-on opportunities considered in Beijing to further consolidate its control of the near seas and minimize near seas security concerns.

243 See Toshi Yoshihara, "Primary Scenarios for China's Military in 2035," in Ross Babbage, ed. *Which Way the Dragon? Sharpening Allied Perceptions of China's Strategic Trajectory* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020), pp. 99-108.

to better deter Chinese military operations against Taiwan, including through strengthening United States security guarantees to Taiwan, improving U.S.-Japanese-Taiwanese security coordination, and even exploring official and unofficial ways to rotate or station U.S. forces on Taiwan.

In choosing to leverage Chinese vulnerabilities, U.S. and allied policymakers should become comfortable with the concept of risk and calculated risk-taking. Risk is the potential for harm to result from a decision, which could be a decision either to act or to not act. Risk is inherent to strategy. Virtually all strategic-level decisions involve some degree of risk, whether acknowledged or not. Targeting certain Chinese vulnerabilities may involve some risk, in that particular allied actions may prompt unanticipated Chinese or third-party counterreactions that could trigger crisis or conflict. Yet, given China's rapidly modernizing and globalizing military forces, U.S. and allied reluctance to exploit China's vulnerabilities courts risks as well. The unwillingness to complicate the PRC's global plans could encourage an emboldened China to challenge allied interests or to instigate crisis or conflict. In evaluating whether and how to target a particular Chinese vulnerability, U.S. and allied policymakers should thus weigh the risks of action *and* inaction.

Leveraging Chinese Vulnerabilities

All three weaknesses assessed in this study are to some extent vulnerabilities that Washington and its allies and partners can exploit. This section first highlights the importance of Chinese perceptions and key asymmetries between China and the United States and its allies. It then addresses options U.S. and allied policymakers should consider that would subject Chinese vulnerabilities to allied strategy.

American and allied strategy would benefit from factoring in Chinese beliefs, narratives, and perceptions about China's weaknesses. Chinese writings exhibit a strong sense that China is surrounded or under siege. The fear that China could be closed off from the seas and the sense of claustrophobia exhibited by the open-source writings suggest that geostrategic anxieties are likely a permanent feature of the Chinese leadership's psychological profile. Suspicions that Beijing will be balked at every turn as it seeks access in the Indian Ocean show an awareness that China's sway in faraway theaters could be quite fragile and reversible. Objective weaknesses, then, could be magnified by how beholders of those weaknesses interpret them. In other words, Beijing may be predisposed to take some structural weaknesses very seriously, perhaps even to exaggerate those weaknesses in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In terms of asymmetries, the United States and its allies will likely enjoy considerable leverage over China in theaters far from the Chinese homeland for some time. Most prominently, the far seas environment plays to inherent U.S. and allied strengths. The U.S. Navy is still by far the most powerful globe-spanning blue-water navy in the world. It is programmatically

designed to fight and win across the world's oceans.²⁴⁴ Some of America's Indo-Pacific allies, including Australia and Japan, boast long and proud traditions of competing and winning in high seas rivalries. The Royal Australian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, for example, were essential elements of a U.S.-led global maritime alliance designed for a high-end fight against the Soviet Union in the Far East.

It is telling that the United States is the gold standard by which Chinese analysts compare their own nation's progress and relative position. The open-source literature surveyed above uniformly acknowledges that the United States enjoys a sizeable lead or a superior position in terms of geography, power projection, and global logistics. Indeed, Chinese observers frequently use the United States as a model for evaluating China's own weaknesses. While China may not need to replicate U.S. capabilities in size or quality, the Chinese recognize that the requirements for—and the costs of—going global are nonetheless significant.

One of the sharpest asymmetries between China and the United States is the quality of friends and allies each has. Chinese strategists acknowledge that Beijing's lack of deep relationships with potential partner countries across the Indian Ocean and elsewhere could severely constrain its quest for a robust basing network. The American experience shows that close ties do not materialize overnight: they are forged by such intangibles as trust, shared values, highly institutionalized channels of communications, regularized interactions, and a history of close cooperation in peace and in war. By contrast, most of China's ties with potential host nations lack these essential qualities, which no amount of money can buy. China's reflexive attempts to develop stronger ties abroad through economic inducements, including BRI investments, may only yield limited results in this respect. Consequently, while Beijing may be able to arrange a variety of access agreements with its counterparts across the Indo-Pacific and beyond, the quality, durability, and reliability of those overseas facilities are likely to be uneven, if not shaky, particularly in times of duress when Beijing would presumably need access most.

These variables furnish the United States and its allies with some potential opportunities to raise the costs of China's global plans. In terms of opportunity costs, there will be continuing tension between China's defense priorities closer to home, such as a major contingency over Taiwan or in the East or South China Seas, and its longer-term ambitions in extra-regional theaters. Beijing's preoccupation with dangers along the first island chain continues to consume a sizable proportion of resources that it would otherwise prefer to use for other missions farther afield. If Taiwan, the Senkakus, and the Spratlys stay out of China's hands, then the PLA would need to sustain investments in both its general-purpose blue-water force

244 That said, the U.S. Navy currently faces a number of challenges in developing, procuring, and maintaining the combat and logistics platforms necessary for future global operations. For additional information, see Timothy A. Walton, Harrison Schramm, and Ryan Boone, *Sustaining the Fight: Resilient Maritime Logistics for a New Era* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019); Bryan Clark, Adam Lemon, Peter Haynes, Kyle Libby, and Gillian Evans, *Regaining the High Ground at Sea: Transforming the U.S. Navy's Carrier Air Wing for Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018); and Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Jesse Sloman, and Timothy A. Walton, *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

and its contingency-specific near seas force in coming years. Whether this dual structure is sustainable and whether China can go global, despite the resources that Taiwan and other local disputes continue to soak up, are critical uncertainties for the Chinese leadership.

The allies thus possess options to force costlier choices on China between its urgent needs in the near seas and its plans for the far seas. The United States and its partners should pursue strategies that compel Beijing to dilute scarce resources across the near seas, far seas, and the continent. In the near seas, measures to harden the frontline states, including Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, could go far to tie up more of the PLA's resources for contingencies in its immediate neighborhood. If these states pursued small, dispersed, and asymmetric platforms and force structure units aimed at air and sea denial in a littoral environment, they could apply pressure on China to increase investment in the PLA's near seas force structure. Similarly, the U.S. military should continue its development of operational concepts designed to confront China with dispersed, lethal, and survivable units operating in the near seas. As noted above, the United States could also draw even closer to Taiwan by adopting new policies and measures that loosen the constraints on U.S. ties with the island. Such steps could induce Beijing to continue to fixate on Taiwan, diverting resources and attention away from its out-of-area plans.²⁴⁵ Subtle shifts in the U.S. official position on the South China Sea that leaned in favor of China's rival claimants could produce similar diversionary effects on the Chinese leadership's diplomatic and political capital. To be sure, China has been able to go global even as it has grown much stronger in the near seas. The allies should nevertheless seek to raise the opportunity costs for China. Otherwise, Beijing would be afforded a permissive environment within which China could develop its reach well beyond the Western Pacific.

The allies should sharpen further the local-global trade-offs by making the far seas a more inhospitable environment for China's expeditionary forces and overseas bases. Beijing's lack of high-quality, reliable friends across the Indian Ocean points to several risks that could be exploited. In peacetime, the PLA would have to shoulder the bulk of the responsibilities for maintaining, running, and defending its network of overseas facilities. In wartime, China would not likely be able to count on its host nations to adequately defend Chinese bases. As noted in Chapter 6, host nations might deny the PLA's use of and access to bases and facilities in times of hostilities and other states along key air transportation routes may deny the PLA overflight rights. Chinese forces in the far seas could thus find themselves cut off from safe havens and exposed to enemy interdiction.

The United States and its allies should therefore continue to invest in the skills and capabilities to prevail against the PLA in overseas theaters, particularly through investments in power projection forces and overseas basing. The close allies should credibly demonstrate

245 For an excellent study on how the United States could multiply the number of challenges confronting Chinese leaders in peacetime and wartime over Taiwan, see Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2020), pp. 27-33. Wuthnow argues that opening new fronts across the Indo-Pacific in peace and in war would impose competing demands on Chinese decisionmakers, exploit their weaknesses in managing multiple problems, and induce them to overextend.

their capacity to hold at risk China's far seas fleet, forward-deployed forces, and the sea lines of communication that supply overseas PLA forces and sustain the Chinese economy. Indeed, sustaining allied superiority in blue-water operations would magnify Beijing's psychological costs of going global. For example, U.S. forces could seek to exploit the CCP's penchant for centralized control and the PLA's fears of losing its command and control of forces operating in distant theaters. Although the challenges of allied distant blockade operations along China's SLOCs are considerable, Beijing's sharp sensitivity to this vulnerability may spur overreaction in terms of costly new force structure or overseas commitments.²⁴⁶ Moreover, this allied power projection force would complement the asymmetric air- and sea-denial forces of littoral Indo-Pacific partners and allies, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam. For conflicts that could involve the armed forces of frontline states and U.S. forces, the PLA would have to prepare for two starkly different types of militaries, complicating its planning and operations.

The United States and its allies should recognize that this is not an exclusively military competition. Washington and allied capitals must not concede an open diplomatic field to China in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, they should actively contest China's political and economic inroads in potential host nations by waging a coordinated information counteroffensive across the region. Such a campaign should publicize Chinese attempts at breeding financial and other dependencies among targeted littoral states as leverage for obtaining access to overseas bases and facilities. The messaging would focus on China's narrow, shallow, and sometimes corrupt transactional relationships with host nations that asymmetrically benefit Beijing. Whenever possible, the allies should highlight China's entanglements in local disputes that would inevitably arise as the PLA enhanced its presence in host nations. It would behoove allied partners to play up instances of China's untrustworthiness as a partner in areas unrelated to overseas basing and military affairs.

Washington and allied capitals should further telegraph the risks of being dragged into a future crisis or war involving China that would be largely unrelated to the host nations' interests. They should convey the possibility that PLA forces might deploy from foreign soil in response to a hypothetical conflict that erupted over Taiwan or elsewhere far away. In such a scenario, host countries in the Indian Ocean region would likely be hard-pressed to justify to their publics the danger of being drawn into a great power war not of their own making. The more that the allies can illustrate the asymmetries in interests and risks between China and host countries, the more that they can point to the inequities that the latter assumes in such partnerships with the PRC. The goal is, in part, to sow distrust and inject disharmony between China and host nations, thereby raising the PRC's startup costs and its costs of empire sufficiently to slow its momentum. Mutual suspicions may also reduce Beijing's confidence that it can reliably access foreign bases and facilities in times of crisis or war.

246 Evan Braden Montgomery, "Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4, May 2013, pp. 615-623.

The close allies should engage in political warfare to expose Chinese weaknesses and target Beijing's psychological fears while showcasing allied strengths. As noted above, selective revelations of leap-ahead technologies, capabilities, and operational concepts that target China's vulnerabilities in distant waters could go far to undercut PLA's plans and confidence. Reporting on multinational naval exercises and training in the Indian Ocean, such as a combined fleet air defense of Diego Garcia, would send a powerful signal that Chinese aggression in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere would be met with a coalitional response. Likewise, efforts to attract wide publicity of simultaneous multi-theater anti-submarine warfare exercises in the near seas and the far seas to showcase the allies' capacity to hold the PLAN at risk across the Indo-Pacific would telegraph an unmistakable message. Since Beijing is already inclined to believe that it faces hostile third parties eager to foil China's plans, it would behoove the allies to play on those fears.

In a comprehensive strategy to apply pressure against China's vulnerabilities, Washington and its allies and partners should coordinate to achieve a mutually agreeable division of labor, encompassing military, political, diplomatic, economic, and other activities. As noted above, the United States and select allies could focus on global power projection forces, complementing the investments of other littoral allies and partners in asymmetric capabilities. Allied military efforts could be further divided in terms of commitments to develop certain defense technologies or maintain proficiency in particular missions, such as anti-submarine warfare or offensive and defensive mine warfare. In political and diplomatic responsibilities, the United States and its allies will need to coordinate to stymie China's strategic inroads in foreign capitals, exclude a Chinese overseas military presence to the extent possible, and strengthen overall friendly relations between the allies and other foreign governments. Primary responsibility for handling relations with overseas third-party states could be divided among the United States and its allies and partners along geographic lines.

Of course, there are limits to U.S. and allied agency over Chinese weaknesses. For the moment, the allies are constrained in their collective capacity to steer China's relationships with its great continental neighbors, Russia and India, in directions that favor them. Geostrategic logic suggests that Sino-Russian enmity, akin to that of the Cold War rupture and ensuing hostilities in the 1960s, could draw China into a two-front rivalry. Such an outcome would be a nightmare scenario for Beijing. But, the current configuration of international politics indicates that efforts to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow would likely prove fruitless. Similarly, New Delhi's tradition of independence and non-alignment have repeatedly dashed some Western hopes that India could be persuaded to counterbalance China's ascent more overtly.

Alongside long-term strategies that target Chinese weaknesses, the close allies may sometimes have to settle for strategic opportunism to exploit China's dilemmas as a composite land-sea power. They should watch closely for developments that could complicate Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian ties. In the post-INF era, Russia's future deployment of ground-based theater-range conventional missiles would have negative ramifications for China's security. Beijing

may feel compelled to respond vigorously to a more complex geometry of conventional missile competition in the continental direction, diverting resources from the maritime front. China's quest for influence in Central Asia, especially through BRI investments, could also instigate Sino-Russian geopolitical competition.

Recent border clashes and tensions between China and India could metastasize into a more sustained and intense rivalry, drawing Beijing's attention to its southern flank. The border dispute could spur New Delhi to adopt a more hard-edged military posture and to realign its foreign policy in ways that push back against Chinese territorial encroachments. Despite fits and starts, the Quad, an informal grouping of democratic maritime powers comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, remains a promising forum for deeper cooperation between the South Asian powerhouse and allied countries.

China could well cooperate in allied plans and stumble into confrontation with its giant neighbors. In such scenarios, the allies would need to assess the opportunity costs of new landward commitments and the extent to which such additional fronts might lead to overextension. If signs of overreach were evident, then the allies would do well to apply even more pressure in the maritime domain to attenuate Chinese power. By doubling down on the maritime flank, the allies would force the PRC to compete more vigorously on both fronts while denying it relief in the near seas and the far seas. While Russia and India appear to be China's most obvious long-term continental concerns, other unforeseen contingencies, such as resumption of conflict on the Korean Peninsula or a security vacuum caused by political instability in a neighboring Central, South, or Southeast Asian country, could draw Chinese forces into a prolonged and costly landward commitment.

Washington and allied capitals should also recognize that the PRC's overseas military bases and dual-use facilities will not be uniformly vulnerable to external pressures in peacetime and in war. Indeed, some are likely to pose frustrating problems for allied planners. American and allied presence in Djibouti would likely limit coercive options against China's support base there. In a hypothetical conflict, the close allies would be reticent to target a security partner's territory, complicating efforts to disrupt PLA operations launched from Djibouti. In the future, should Beijing obtain access to other third countries that permit U.S. military access and use of facilities, such as Singapore, Washington could be similarly constrained in its options to impose costs on Chinese forces. If the PLA were to obtain basing or access rights to Gwadar, Pakistan, the United States would confront a qualitatively different kind of challenge. Given that Islamabad is currently designated a major non-NATO ally and possesses nuclear weapons, Washington and allied capitals would be hard-pressed to undertake actions that directly threaten Pakistani territory and prerogatives. The point is that the close allies do not have a free hand everywhere and they will need to tailor their strategies according to the specific status and conditions of each host nation.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This report represents an initial assessment of the weaknesses in China's globalizing military. The three case studies provide snapshots of how Chinese strategists perceive the obstacles that stand in the way of Beijing's global ambitions. As the PLA continues to modernize and as it seeks more access around the world, Chinese perceptions of their weaknesses are likely to change over time. This study thus serves as a baseline for measuring future changes in China's outlook.

The PRC's geopolitical, power projection, and logistical weaknesses are not the only factors that will determine its success on the world stage. Other variables, including its financial health, demographic profile, industrial base, and so forth, will be at work. Thus, much more analytic, interdisciplinary research will be required to fully grasp the character of Chinese weaknesses behind Beijing's global plans. Looking ahead, the policy community would benefit from in-depth research on China's globalizing military and on allied options that leverage China's weaknesses, military-related and otherwise.

First, the allies should better understand and estimate China's costs of empire. The allied strategic communities should engage in analytic efforts similar to those that studied the Soviet Union's cost of maintaining its political, economic, and military influence on a global scale. Such studies could yield insights into the potential costs, budgetary and otherwise, of China's political, economic, and military efforts abroad and the tradeoffs China's leadership will face as they attempt to expand and sustain those efforts. Allied policymakers could then use these studies to assess their own means of raising China's costs of empire to slow or complicate China's expansion.

Second, the close allies should devote more attention to Beijing's diplomatic forays. China is embarking on an effort to develop steady, reliable allies and partners so that the PLA can establish the logistical facilities and bases necessary to support China's global military operations. Historically, the PRC has largely avoided foreign alliances and its relative lack of experience in managing complex allied ties is beginning to show. In implementing the Belt

and Road Initiative, Beijing has had trouble developing and sustaining relationships with foreign governments, particularly when democratic governments change hands. Assessing the evolution of China's strategy and tactics in developing long-term foreign alliances and partnerships, and the relative success of those efforts over time, could indicate where China's efforts to develop a global military posture could fall short.

Third, Washington and allied capitals should study more closely the methods that could be employed to stress the PLA in the continental direction, the near seas, and the far seas. Research and analysis, beyond those offered in this study, are needed to devise ways to raise costs through new operational concepts, emerging technologies, new and strengthened alliances and partnerships, and other means. During the Cold War, the United States and its NATO allies spent decades developing operational concepts and technologies that leveraged Soviet weaknesses in mobilizing forces and projecting power across Europe. Operational concepts that emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s provided a framework for a long-range sensor-shooter network that could strike deep behind enemy lines against Warsaw Pact forces. The concept sought to disrupt the ability of the adversary to mobilize forces that would exploit breakthroughs along NATO's defensive perimeter. Today, the U.S. military services are grappling with how to project and sustain power along China's near seas. Years of additional analysis, including wargaming and field experimentation, will likely be necessary for those concepts to mature. A similar effort would be required to prepare the allies for a global PLA.

Fourth, as the United States and its allies and partners make a more concerted drive to exploit Chinese weaknesses, they should analyze and probe the PRC's perceptions and reactions. As evident from the U.S.-Soviet confrontation, one side's political or military actions may not always induce visible counterreactions by the other. Action-reaction dynamics are not transparent or pre-determined. Factors such as strategic culture, domestic politics, and bureaucratic competition or infighting, among many other variables, could frustrate allied attempts to pressure Beijing's weak points or to stimulate certain Chinese behaviors visible to outsiders. Real-time information and analysis on how Chinese policymakers are interpreting allied actions would be invaluable in refining allied strategies.

Fifth, this report's methodology for assessing weakness and vulnerability should be further developed and applied to areas beyond China's military. The United States and China are in a long-term strategic competition that will primarily take place in peacetime, rather than in wartime. Washington and its allies and partners will therefore need to assess China's political, economic, technological, social, and other weaknesses, and develop strategies that leverage Chinese vulnerabilities in those areas. Indeed, the non-military dimensions of the competition could prove decisive. The methodology outlined in Chapter 3 is a potential means of assessing other Chinese vulnerabilities and their relevance for allied policymakers.

Finally, defense analysts and planners must clearly communicate to policymakers the benefits of the current geopolitical status quo and the severe negative impact that would result from successful Chinese military operations to gain control of disputed territories, particularly Taiwan. Clearly conveying the value that allied capitals attach to the current order is especially

urgent given the projected fiscal constraints for the United States and other allied countries following the COVID-19 pandemic and the contentious political debates that will surround defense spending in coming years. Efforts to save relatively small amounts of funds in the 2020s by reducing the U.S. military footprint in the Indo-Pacific, reducing planned procurements, or slimming the military's size, could cede allied initiative and momentum to China. Such an outcome could create sufficient opportunity for Beijing to remake the geopolitical map in the near seas and far seas. Short-term budgetary savings are likely to pale in comparison to the long-term strategic costs if Beijing were to achieve Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
C3I	Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence
C3ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SLOC	Sea Line of Communication
SMS	<i>Science of Military Strategy</i>
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement



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