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# Military Operations Other Than War in China's Foreign Policy

By James Siebens, Ryan Lucas

Military Coercion  
and Chinese Foreign  
Policy

Defense Strategy  
& Planning

The Stimson Center

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UNAMID Honour Guards Protect Borehole, UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

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First Detachment of China’s Peacekeeping Infantry Battalion Arrives in Juba, UN Photo/ UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's President Xi Jinping recently approved trial guidelines to provide a specific "legal underpinning for non-war military operations."<sup>1</sup> This announcement has drawn widespread attention to what has heretofore been an underappreciated element of China's military doctrine. In the US, such operations are more commonly known as "military operations other than war" (MOOTW). However, unlike in the US, MOOTW remain a formal component of Chinese military doctrine. What are MOOTW, and what roles do they play in China's foreign policy? According to the public outline of President Xi's order, their primary objectives are to prevent and neutralize risks and challenges to China's interests, to maintain national sovereignty and regional stability, and to standardize and regulate the PLA's planning and conduct of non-war military operations. This report examines the ways in which China has used MOOTW, in principle and in practice, to advance these objectives (and others) in recent decades.

Some of China's MOOTW ostensibly contribute to shared goals of international peace and security and have thus drawn praise from the UN and other multinational coalitions.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the PLA's growing international role has raised concerns over how these new military capabilities may affect other countries' security. Through its participation in international peacekeeping, for example, the PLA has demonstrated improved expeditionary capability in a way that may "overlap" with future warfare requirements and may make Beijing more capable of using force abroad.<sup>3</sup> As a result, MOOTW that might, in practice, be a shared point of cooperation may also contribute to increased international competition. However, China's pursuit of MOOTW also presents opportunities for China to meaningfully contribute to global security objectives in line with international norms.<sup>4</sup>

China's embrace of MOOTW remains understudied compared to other core components its military discourse and doctrine. MOOTW are essential to Beijing's understanding of the utility of military force as a means by which it can advance foreign policy objectives and shape the international security environment in the 21st century. It is essential for analysts and policymakers in the US, and globally, to discern between Chinese MOOTW that threaten regional peace and stability and those that have the potential to strengthen and contribute to the rules-based international order.

<sup>1</sup> "Fabu Jundui Feizhanzheng Junshi Xingdong Gangyao (Shixing)" 发布《军队非战争军事行动纲要（试行）》 [Release of the Outline for Military Operations Other Than War (for Trial Implementation)], *People's Daily*, June 14, 2022, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0614/c1024-32445392.html>; Hwang Chun-mei, "Chinese leader Xi Jinping signs new rules governing 'non-war' military operations," *Radio Free Asia*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/military-rules-06132022153121.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Peacekeeping, Development in Focus as UN Chief Meets Chinese Foreign Minister," *UN News*, September 22, 2013, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/449642-peacekeeping-development-focus-un-chief-meets-chinese-foreign-minister>.

<sup>3</sup> *PLA Expeditionary Capabilities and Implications for United States Asia Policy, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 114th Cong. (2016) (Statement of Kristen Gunness, Senior Policy Researcher at the RAND Corporation), 2, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT452/RAND\\_CT452.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT452/RAND_CT452.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Kristen Gunness in testimony to the USCC has described this as "Two Concerns and Two Opportunities." See: *PLA Expeditionary Capabilities and Implications for United States Asia Policy, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 3.



# INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization brought about a sudden shift in focus for the militaries of the advanced industrialized world. This shift resulted in some countries leaning away from preparation for a major conflict and toward the management of non-traditional security challenges, including transnational threats such as environmental disasters, humanitarian crises, and challenges from non-state actors.

In 1995, the US Department of Defense published JP 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (MOOTW), which articulated the ways in which the United States would use military force aside from engaging in sustained combat operations. MOOTW were understood to advance national security priorities primarily through three interrelated mechanisms: deterrence, forward presence, and crisis response capabilities.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine made explicit the use of the armed forces to help shape the security environment and diplomatic relations through persistent military presence activities such as “periodic and rotational deployments, access and storage agreements, multinational exercises, port visits, foreign military training, foreign community support and military-to-military contacts.”<sup>6</sup> Within this doctrine, the military was conceived of not just as a warfighting tool, but also as a political instrument used to shape an international environment favorable to the United States. As General John Shalikashvili – then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — wrote in the preface to the *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*, although the military has “historically focused on warfighting, our military profession is increasingly changing its focus to a complex array of military operations other than war.”<sup>7</sup>

The United States was the first country to develop a doctrinal framework for military operations other than war (MOOTW), but militaries worldwide soon began to develop their own such guidelines.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the United States abandoned its MOOTW doctrine in 2006, eliminating the formal dichotomy between war and non-war military operations. Contemporary US joint operations doctrine now describes military operations as occurring on a “conflict continuum that spans from peace to war.”<sup>9</sup>

Inspired by US MOOTW doctrine, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its People's Liberation Army (PLA) in recent years have devoted significant attention and resources to addressing non-traditional security challenges and have embraced MOOTW – sometimes translated as “non-war military activities/operations” — as an important conceptual framework.<sup>10</sup> Unlike in the US, China has maintained MOOTW as a formal component of

<sup>5</sup> U.S., Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War,” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1995), [https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3\\_07.pdf](https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3_07.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, I-4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> U.S., Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Operations,” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910).

<sup>10</sup> We have elected to use the term Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) to describe China's non-war operations (非战争军事行动). The U.S. Department of Defense has also used the term “non-war military activities” (NWMA) to describe the PLA's non-war operations. See: U.S., Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021,” (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, 2021). <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

its military doctrine. Both authoritative and quasi-authoritative Chinese military sources list MOOTW as an official category of PLA activity. For example, the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, a highly influential publication of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, lists three general strategic means for a military: acts of warfare, acts of deterrence, and military operations other than war.<sup>11</sup>

China's President Xi Jinping recently signed an order putting forth a set of trial guidelines to provide a specific “legal underpinning for non-war military operations” under China's domestic legislative framework.<sup>12</sup> According to the public outline of the order, the primary objective is to prevent and neutralize risks and challenges to China's interests, to maintain national sovereignty and regional stability, and to standardize and regulate the PLA's planning and conduct of non-war military operations. Proponents of this move consider the order to be a necessary step to clarify the formal legal scope of China's non-war military operations, ranging from disaster relief and humanitarian assistance to the limited use of force overseas in the context of maritime escorts and peacekeeping, for example. Skeptics, on the other hand, perceive the announcement as a strategic justification for China's expanding military footprint beyond its borders, and a possible allusion to potential military operations targeting Taiwan. For example, Eugene Kuo Yujen, an analyst with Taiwan's Institute for National Policy Research, has argued that the announcement seemingly replicated Vladimir Putin's description of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation” rather than a war or an invasion.<sup>13</sup>

As demonstrated by the attention generated by President Xi's recent order, China's embrace of MOOTW remains understudied compared to its discourse and doctrine around both warfare and deterrence. This report posits that China's doctrine and conduct of MOOTW are essential to understanding how Beijing understands the strategic and operational utility of its armed forces, and the means by which it aims to achieve foreign policy objectives in the 21st century. This report seeks to help fill a gap in the literature by examining China's MOOTW on its own terms as a distinct category of Chinese military activity. It is necessary to examine China's pursuit of MOOTW, and to delineate its development and deployment of different capabilities over time, to understand the important roles that MOOTW continue to play in advancing China's foreign policy objectives, and to better discern how and when American and Chinese interests may align or diverge.

At the turn of the century, China's security calculus focused principally on maintaining domestic order and ensuring stability on its periphery. But in the past two decades, the steady outflow of Chinese investments and citizens have exposed China to a broad array of non-traditional security challenges, forcing the PRC government to develop greater capacity to assert and protect overseas interests. The Belt and Road Initiative now links China's economy and citizens to dozens of countries around the world, including many

<sup>11</sup> Xiaosong Shou, Ed., *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng* 战略学教程 [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2013), 6.

<sup>12</sup> “Fabu Jundui Feizhanzheng Junshi Xingdong Gangyao (Shixing)”发布《军队非战争军事行动纲要（试行）》[Release of the Outline for Military Operations Other Than War (for Trial Implementation)], *People's Daily*, June 14, 2022, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0614/c1024-32445392.html>; Hwang Chun-mei, “Chinese leader Xi Jinping signs new rules governing ‘non-war’ military operations,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/military-rules-06132022153121.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Birtles, “Xi Jinping announces plans to allow Chinese military to undertake ‘armed forces operations’ abroad,” *ABC News*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-14/xi-jinping-expands-china-military-influence-abroad/101152154>.

in precarious security situations. Simultaneously, China has sought to portray itself as both a major power and a “responsible stakeholder” in the international community.<sup>14</sup> MOOTW, and international security cooperation more broadly, have thus become indispensable to fulfilling both of these roles. In the words of PLA strategists, China’s military operations abroad are the “soft use” of “hard power.”<sup>15</sup>

The PLA now conducts a range of peacetime operations that it lacked the capacity or political will to carry out two decades ago. The PLA patrols the Gulf of Aden as part of an international counterpiracy coalition and sends combat units to participate in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has conducted non-combatant evacuation operations in the Middle East and has established its first overseas “support base” in Djibouti. The PLA also pursues military diplomacy through combined military exercises and naval port calls around the world.<sup>16</sup> Closer to home, the PLA and the People’s Armed Police (PAP) conduct “rights protection” operations in the East and South China Seas, cooperate with Southeast Asian nations on maritime security and counter-narcotics operations, and deploy within China to respond to disasters and social unrest. As a testament to the importance of these activities, a 2017 article by Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang praised them as a series of “major military operations” conducted under the leadership of Xi Jinping, that have “effectively safeguarded national sovereignty, security, and development interests, boosted the prestige of the nation and the military, and enhanced national self-confidence and pride.”<sup>17</sup> In total, such non-war operations currently constitute a sizeable portion of the PLA’s actual activities.

Some of China’s operations ostensibly contribute to shared goals of international peace and security and have thus drawn praise from the UN and other multinational coalitions.<sup>18</sup> China is now a leading contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, and has significantly expanded its conduct of international humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.<sup>19</sup> However, China’s increasingly assertive (and arguably, illegal) MOOTW concerning its contested jurisdictional and territorial claims in the South China Sea, for example, have exacerbated longstanding disputes with its neighbors, and China’s

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Taffer, “Washington Still Wants China to Be a Responsible Stakeholder,” *Foreign Policy*, December 29, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/29/washington-china-responsible-stakeholder/>.

<sup>15</sup> Tianliang Xiao, Ed., *Zhanlue Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)* 战略学 (2020年修订) [The Science of Military Strategy (2020 Revision)], (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 2020), 312.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, “China Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications,” *China Strategic Perspectives* 11, July 2017, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-11.pdf?ver=2017-07-17-153301-093>.

<sup>17</sup> “Xu Qiliang: Laogu Queli Xi Jinping Qiangjun Sixiang Zai Guofang He Jundui Jianshe Zhong de Zhidao Diwei,” 许其亮: 牢固确立习近平强军思想在国防和军队建设中的指导地位 [Xu Qiliang: Firmly Establish the Guiding Position of Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Army in National Defense and Army Construction], *People’s Daily*, November 14, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1114/c64094-29644061.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Peacekeeping, Development in Focus as UN Chief Meets Chinese Foreign Minister,” *UN News*, September 22, 2013, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/449642-peacekeeping-development-focus-un-chief-meets-chinese-foreign-minister>.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Southerland, “The Chinese Military’s Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, July 11, 2019, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinese-militarys-role-overseas-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief-contributions>.

abusive actions in Xinjiang have drawn widespread condemnation.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, some observers of the PLA’s growing international role have raised concerns over how these new military capabilities may affect their own countries’ security. Through its participation in international peacekeeping, for example, the PLA has demonstrated improved expeditionary capability in a way that may “overlap” with future warfare requirements and may make Beijing more capable of using force abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Scholar Erik Lin-Greenberg has labeled these spirals “non-traditional security dilemmas” and argues that participation in MOOTW “exacerbates security competition by revealing military capabilities and providing states with skills that make offensive action easier.”<sup>22</sup> This is compounded by the fact that competitors are often suspicious of one another’s underlying aims for conducting MOOTW and may view these operations as a “threatening indicator of a state’s more assertive foreign and defense policy.”<sup>23</sup> For example, US policymakers have heavily scrutinized China’s first overseas base (officially a “logistics facility”) in Djibouti, which opened in 2017 with the mission of supporting the PLA’s MOOTW in the region.<sup>24</sup>

However, just as China’s pursuit of MOOTW may raise real security concerns for the US, it also presents opportunities for China to meaningfully contribute to global security objectives in line with international norms.<sup>25</sup> MOOTW may provide both shared points of cooperation as well as sources of increased international competition. Thus, separating the potential risks from the benefits requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying motives driving the PLA’s military operations other than war and the degree to which they may directly benefit China in future conflict scenarios.

This report first provides an overview of the PLA’s development of MOOTW and explains how China views them as part of a broader national security doctrine. This is followed by a summary of the PLA’s key MOOTW, citing specific examples of the doctrine in action. The report then outlines PLA development in pursuit of MOOTW and how this may support its future combat capabilities and operational concepts. Finally, the report concludes with a discussion of how policymakers and analysts can better discern between PLA activities that jeopardize, versus contribute to, international peace and security.

<sup>20</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, “How China is bending the rules in the South China Sea,” *The Interpreter*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea>; “‘Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots.’ China’s Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.

<sup>21</sup> *PLA Expeditionary Capabilities and Implications for United States Asia Policy, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2016) (Statement of Kristen Gunness, Senior Policy Researcher at the RAND Corporation), 2, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT452/RAND\\_CT452.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT452/RAND_CT452.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Non-Traditional Security Dilemmas: Can Military Operations Other Than War Intensify Security Competition in Asia?” *Asian Security* 14, no. 3 (2018): 282.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 291.

<sup>24</sup> “China Sets Up Base in Djibouti,” *Xinhua*, July 11, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c\\_136435716.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c_136435716.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Kristen Gunness in testimony to the USCC has described this as “Two Concerns and Two Opportunities.” See: *PLA Expeditionary Capabilities and Implications for United States Asia Policy, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 3.



## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND KEY OBJECTIVES

While the PLA's conduct of MOOTW is largely a 21st century phenomenon, it is rooted in a general shift that began after the Cold War. From Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping, the PRC government has grappled with how to integrate non-traditional security challenges into a broader concept of national security. This effort was driven by civilian leadership, who saw a clear role for the state in protecting China's economic development and preserving domestic stability.<sup>26</sup> This prioritization of non-traditional security subsequently created the conditions for the PLA to prioritize MOOTW and made these operations an important element of strategy within China's armed forces.

China's national security policy is guided by a set of strategic guidelines that set top-line priorities for the military. When Jiang Zemin first came to power in 1989, the strategic guideline focused principally on the threat of a Soviet invasion and the outbreak of large-scale conflict.<sup>27</sup> Within a few short years, the trifecta of Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the US victory in the Gulf War left China facing a fundamentally different security environment.<sup>28</sup> Responding to these threats, the Central Military Commission adopted an updated strategic guideline of "winning local wars under high-technology conditions" in 1993. Jiang Zemin stated that the goals of this strategy were to "defend national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, safeguard the reunification of the motherland and social stability, and provide strong security guarantees for reform and opening and modernization."<sup>29</sup> The 1993 strategic guideline does not mention MOOTW, and almost all of the doctrinal and operational focus of the PLA was centered on preparing for future military combat on China's periphery.<sup>30</sup> However, Jiang's mention of safeguarding China's continued economic development set an important precedent for the years to come.

In the late 1990s, China publicly promoted a "New Security Concept" that sought to expand traditional ideas of military and political security to better account for the rise of non-traditional security challenges.<sup>31</sup> In a March 1999 speech in Geneva, Jiang Zemin outlined that the "core of such a new concept of security should be mutual



UN\_Chinese Peacekeeping in South Sudan#1:  
Cunha, Gregorio. United Nations.

<sup>26</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, "Civil-military relations and organizational preferences regarding the use of the military in Chinese foreign policy: insights from the debate on MOOTW," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 421-442.

<sup>27</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 139.

<sup>28</sup> Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, 184.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 182-216.

<sup>31</sup> People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept," (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm>.



trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation.”<sup>32</sup> In line with this concept, China became a founding member of the Shanghai Five group in 1996, which ultimately evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. And at the 16th CCP National Congress in 2002, Jiang advocated for the concept to “preserve peace and promote development” in the face of new challenges to the international political and economic order.<sup>33</sup>

A significant shift occurred in the mid-2000s following the appointment of Hu Jintao to Chairman of the Central Military Commission. In December 2004, Hu introduced the “New Historic Mission” for the PLA.<sup>34</sup> This new mission expanded the PLA’s official tasks to encompass China’s expanding national interests and contributions to global stability and security. Specifically, the New Historic Mission called on the PLA to:

1. Provide an important guarantee of strength for the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate its ruling position;
  2. Provide a strong security guarantee for safeguarding the period of strategic opportunity for national development;
  3. Provide powerful strategic support for safeguarding national interests;
  4. Play an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development.<sup>35</sup>

The fourth task of “safeguarding world peace and promoting common development” shares similar goals to Jiang Zemin’s “New Security Concept,” but for the first time, explicitly directed the PLA to shoulder this responsibility. Subsequently, in a March 2006 speech to the PLA Delegation at the National People’s Congress, Hu Jintao instructed the PLA to complete “diversified military tasks” (多样化军事任务), including both combat and noncombat operations.<sup>36</sup> The PLA began to research

<sup>32</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Promote Disarmament Process and Safeguard World Security,” Jiang Zemin, (Geneva, Switzerland: Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations of Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, 1999), <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegv//eng/cijk/cjjblc/jhhwx/t85322.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> People’s Republic of China, “Build a Well-off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” Jiang Zemin, (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2002), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Nov/49107.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s New Historic Missions,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 27 (2009). <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Fravel, *Active Defense*, 229.

<sup>36</sup> “Hujintao zai Jiefangjun Daibiao Tuan Quanti Huiyi shang Qiangdiao Jianchi ba Kexue Fazhan Guan Zuowei Zhongyao Zhidao Fangzhen Tuidong Guofang he Jundui Jianshe you Kuai you Hao de Fazhan” 胡锦涛在解放军代表团全体会议上强调 坚持把科学发展观作为重要指导方针 推动国防和军队建设又快又好地发展 [At the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation, Hu Jintao Emphasized that the Scientific Outlook on Development is an Important Guiding Principle to Promote the Rapid and Good Development of National Defense and Army Building], *Tianjin Daily*, March 12, 2006. <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2006-03-12/09008421613s.shtml>.

MOOTW in-depth that same year.<sup>37</sup> CCP leadership further highlighted “diversified military tasks” at the 17th Party Congress in 2007 when Hu Jintao emphasized that China must “enhance the military’s capability to respond to various security threats and accomplish diverse military tasks.”<sup>38</sup>

MOOTW made their first high-level appearance in China’s official strategic discourse in the Ministry of National Defense’s 2008 White Paper, which stated that the PLA is continuously increasing “the capability of conducting MOOTW,” and that China’s military guideline “takes MOOTW as an important form of applying national military forces, and scientifically makes and executes plans for the development of MOOTW capabilities.”<sup>39</sup> The 2008 White Paper lists counterterrorism, (domestic) stability maintenance, emergency rescue, international peacekeeping, and international security cooperation operations as the non-war “diversified military tasks” carried out by the PLA.<sup>40</sup>

The PLA’s increased focus on MOOTW was made clear in a 2009 speech by Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Xu Caihou. Speaking to a largely American audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, General Xu centered his speech on MOOTW as “an increasingly important form of applying military forces,” and detailed operations like counterterrorism, disaster relief, peacekeeping, and international assistance as “the routine and constant missions” for the PLA.<sup>41</sup> General Xu also exhaustively described the PLA’s recent conduct of MOOTW and showed a video detailing the PLA’s response to the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. He explicitly stated that the “multiple military tasks” described in his speech, all of which fall under the MOOTW umbrella, “provide a broader space for Chinese-U.S. military exchanges and cooperation.”<sup>42</sup>

The Ministry of National Defense and the PLA continued to devote more attention to MOOTW in the last years under Hu Jintao. In 2010, and again in 2011, Hu told the PLA delegation at the National People’s Congress that China must “scientifically arrange the building of capabilities for MOOTW.”<sup>43</sup> Also in 2011, the PLA’s Academy of Military

<sup>37</sup> Fan Gaoyue and James Char, *Introduction to China’s Military Operations Other Than War*, (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2019), 3m [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/PR190225\\_Introduction-to-Chinas-Military-Operations-Other-than-War.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/PR190225_Introduction-to-Chinas-Military-Operations-Other-than-War.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> People’s Republic of China, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all,” (Beijing: Xinhua, 2007), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm#9>.

<sup>39</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “China’s National Defense in 2008,” (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2009), [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7060059.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7060059.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Xu Caihou, “Statesmen Forum: Gen. Xu Caihou,” (speech, Washington, DC, October 26, 2009), Center for Strategic and International Studies, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/091026csis\\_genxu\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/091026csis_genxu_0.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Hujintao Chuxi Shiyi Jie Quanguo Renda Si Ci Huiyi Jiefangjun Daibiao Tuan Quanti Huiyi” 胡锦涛出席十一届全国人大四次会议解放军代表团全体会议 [Hu Jintao Attends the Plenary Session of the PLA Delegation at the Fourth Session of the Eleventh National People’s Congress], *People’s Daily*, March 13, 2011, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/dbdhhy/11\\_4/2011-03/13/content\\_1644215.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/dbdhhy/11_4/2011-03/13/content_1644215.htm).; Chen Xin, “Hujintao Qiangdiao Quanmian Tigao Luxing Wo Jun Lishi Shiming Nengli (Tu)” 胡锦涛强调全面提高履行我军历史使命能力(图) [Hu Jintao Emphasizes Comprehensively Improving the Ability to Fulfill our Military’s Historical Mission (Photo)], *China Broadcasting Network*, March 13, 2010, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2010-03-13/1524586788.html>.

Science formally established a “Research Center for Non-War Military Operations.”<sup>44</sup> By the time Hu left office in 2012, he warned that China was facing “existential” and “developmental” problems caused by traditional and non-traditional security issues, and thus the PLA was expressly required to play a more active role during peacetime.<sup>45</sup>

Under Xi Jinping, the PLA has continued to pursue a range of MOOTW. Since assuming office, Xi has introduced an “Overall National Security Outlook” which fuses disparate elements of national power into a comprehensive approach to national security.<sup>46</sup> Xi first proposed the theory in April 2014, at the inaugural meeting of the recently established National Security Commission of the CCP Central Committee. At the meeting, Xi emphasized that the Party “must pay close attention to both traditional and non-traditional security” and view development and security in tandem, as the “former is the foundation of the latter while the latter is a precondition for the former.”<sup>47</sup> Xi drove home this point at a June 2014 Politburo collective study session on military modernization, in which he lectured that the CCP must “change the mindset of safeguarding traditional security, and establish the mindset of safeguarding national comprehensive security and the expansion of strategic interests.”<sup>48</sup>

China’s official security policy now reflects these priorities. China’s 2015 Defense White Paper lists eight “strategic tasks” for the PLA, which include: “safeguard[ing] the security of China’s overseas interests...participat[ing] in regional and international security cooperation and maintain[ing] regional and world peace...[and] perform[ing] such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national economic and social development.”<sup>49</sup> The paper further states that MOOTW are a “necessary requirement for China’s armed forces to fulfill their responsibilities and missions in the new period,” and that the PLA will “work harder to create a favorable strategic posture with more emphasis on the employment of military forces and means, provide a solid security guarantee for the country’s peaceful development...[and] actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China’s overseas interests.”<sup>50</sup> The 2019 Defense White Paper echoes these points, and makes clear that the fundamental goal of China’s national

<sup>44</sup> “Jiefangjun Junshi Kexueyuan Chengli Fei Zhanzheng Junshi Xingdong Yanjiu Zhongxin” 解放军军事科学院成立非战争军事行动研究中心 [The PLA Academy of Military Sciences Established the Research Center for Non-War Military Operations], *China News Service*, December 13, 2011, [http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2011-12/13/content\\_24139505.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2011-12/13/content_24139505.htm).

<sup>45</sup> People’s Republic of China, “Report to the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP,” (Beijing: Xinhua, 2012), [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus//eng/zt/18th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress\\_Eng/t992917.htm](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus//eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm).

<sup>46</sup> “Xi: National Security ‘a matter of prime importance,’” *Xinhua*, April 16, 2014, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2014-04/16/content\\_32104039.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2014-04/16/content_32104039.htm); Jude Blanchette, “Ideological Security as National Security,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, (2020), 1, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ideological-security-national-security>.

<sup>47</sup> Xi Jinping, “A Holistic View of National Security,” in *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 232.

<sup>48</sup> “Xi Jinping: Zhunque Bawo Shijie Junshi Fazhan Xin Qushi Yushijujin Dali Tuijin Junshi Chuangxin” 习近平:准确把握世界军事发展新趋势与时俱进大力推进军事创新 [Xi Jinping: Accurately Grasp the New Trends of World Military Development and Advance with the Times and Vigorously Promote Military Innovation], *Xinhua*, August 30, 2014, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-08/30/c\\_1112294869.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-08/30/c_1112294869.htm).

<sup>49</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “China’s Military Strategy,” (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2015), <https://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

defense is to resolutely safeguard “China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.”<sup>51</sup> And in 2020, a revision to China’s National Defense Law officially tasked the PLA with defending “overseas development interests.”<sup>52</sup>

To be clear, the PLA’s most important mission remains developing the ability to “fight and win wars.”<sup>53</sup> Xi Jinping and the PLA leadership routinely emphasize that the military “must focus on combat readiness,” and preparation for contingencies involving Taiwan and other traditional security risks will continue to guide China’s military training and development.<sup>54</sup> However, the last two decades have seen an expansion of Chinese strategic thinking about the role of MOOTW to the point that these operations are now a significant component of China’s military doctrine. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the fundamental threat posed by non-traditional security challenges, and the PLA will continue to play a key role in guaranteeing China’s national and developmental interests.

<sup>51</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2019), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c\\_138253389.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm).

<sup>52</sup> U.S., Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020,” (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, 2020), ix, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>53</sup> “Xi Focus: Xi Calls for Good Start in Strengthening Military, National Defense in 2021-2025,” *Xinhua*, March 9, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/09/c\\_139797879.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/09/c_139797879.htm).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.





UNAMID Honour Guards Protect Borehole,  
UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

# “SMALL ACTION, BIG COMMAND”: PLA THINKING ON MOOTW

While China’s official references to MOOTW can be found in broader national security concepts and strategies, China has no public authoritative doctrine on MOOTW.<sup>55</sup> However, writings by PLA strategists provide insight into how China conceptualizes and prioritizes MOOTW. Previous surveys of Chinese literature identify competing lists of MOOTW, with divergences on deterrence operations (shows of force), nuclear, biological, and chemical rescue and relief, and international military cooperation.<sup>56</sup> While not exhaustive, the latest edition of the PLA’s dictionary of military terms defines MOOTW as follows:

*Military activities that the armed forces carry out to protect the nation’s security and developmental interests, but which do not directly constitute warfare. [MOOTW] include counterterrorism and stability maintenance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, rights and interest protection, safety and security operations, international peacekeeping, and international rescue operations.*<sup>57</sup>

Quasi-authoritative military sources like the *Science of Military Strategy* — an influential textbook used by high-level PLA officers, with versions published by both the PLA’s Academy of Military Science in 2013 and National Defense University in 2020 – reflect contemporary PLA thinking on MOOTW. The 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* for the first time devoted an entire chapter to MOOTW, describing them as an “indispensable and important component of military strategy.”<sup>58</sup> The 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* also includes a comprehensive chapter on MOOTW, and both editions list the “major characteristics” and points of “strategic guidance” on MOOTW. The major characteristics and strategic guidance of MOOTW detailed in the 2020 edition are included in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

<sup>55</sup> Chinese writings reference several non-public MOOTW regulations. For example, the Central Military Commission approved a “Military Operations Other Than War Capacity Building Plan” 《军队非战争军事行动能力建设规划》 in 2009 and “Regulations on the Army’s Participation in Military Operations Other Than War” 《军队参加非战争军事行动条例》 in an unknown year. See: “Guofangbu: Jundui Niandi Jiang Jiancheng 8 Zhi Gong 5 Wan Ren Yingji Jiuyuan Budui” 国防部: 军队年底将建成8支共5万人应急救援部队 [Ministry of National Defense: The Army Will Build 8 Rescue Units With a Total of 50,000 People by the End of the Year], *Xinhua*, April 20, 2010, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-04/20/content\\_1587746.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-04/20/content_1587746.htm).

<sup>56</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, “Economic Growth, Regime Insecurity, and Military Strategy: Explaining the Rise of Noncombat Operations in China,” *Asian Security* 7, no. 3 (2011): 177-200; Fan and Char, *Introduction to China’s Military Operations Other Than War*.

<sup>57</sup> Shou, *Zhanlue Xue Jiaocheng*, 154.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 154.

Table 1: MOOTW Major Characteristics (2020 *Science of Military Strategy*)<sup>59</sup>

| Mandarin     | English Translation   |
|--------------|---|
| 使命任务重要，政治性突出 | <i>The Mission is Important, Politics is Prominent</i>                    |
| 行动日益频繁，常态性突出 | <i>Operations are Increasingly Frequent, Normality is Prominent</i>       |
| 事发突然紧急，应急性突出 | <i>Incidents are Unexpectedly Urgent, Emergency Response is Prominent</i> |
| 对抗强度较低，灵活性突出 | <i>Intensity of Conflict is Relatively Low, Flexibility is Prominent</i>  |
| 力量构成多元，联合性突出 | <i>Force Composition is Diversified, Jointness is Prominent</i>           |
| 任务差异性大，专业性突出 | <i>Mission Sets are Different, Professionalism is Prominent</i>           |
| 境外行动增多，国际性突出 | <i>Overseas Operations are Increasing, Internationalism is Prominent</i>  |
| 行动透明度高，公开性突出 | <i>Operations are Highly Transparent, Openness is Prominent</i>           |

<sup>59</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 297-302.

Table 2: Strategic Guidance for MOOTW (2020 *Science of Military Strategy*)<sup>60</sup>

| Mandarin               | English Translation  |
|------------------------|--|
| 从国家利益的高度筹划和指导非战争军事行动   | <i>Plan and Direct MOOTW with National Interests at a High Level</i>   |
| 非战争军事行动与政治，经济，外交密切配合   | <i>Closely Coordinate MOOTW with Politics, Economics, and Diplomacy</i>  |
| 统一指挥和调控非战争军事行动         | <i>Unify MOOTW Command and Control</i>   |
| 加强非战争军事行动中各种力量的联合      | <i>Strengthen Force Jointness in MOOTW</i>   |
| 精心准备与灵活运用各种专业力量        | <i>Prepare Carefully and Flexibly Employ Various Professional Forces</i>   |
| 注重提高非战争军事行动的综合保障能力     | <i>Focus on Improving Integrated Support Capabilities for MOOTW</i>  |
| 搞好非战争军事行动中的舆论法理斗争与心理攻防 | <i>Gain Advantage in Fighting Lawfare and Public Opinion as well as Psychological Offense and Defense of MOOTW</i> |

The first of these characteristics emphasizes that MOOTW are “always centered on the nation’s political goals, support economic and social development, and are launched in coordination with diplomatic struggle.”<sup>61</sup> MOOTW must be strictly controlled by politics and must be planned and directed based on national interests.<sup>62</sup> Political control ensures that MOOTW support the priorities of the CCP leadership and are subordinated to non-military tools of statecraft. The strategic guidance for MOOTW thus emphasizes that China’s national interests “plan and direct” the PLA’s conduct of MOOTW and highlights the need for a “unified command and control” to implement this close coordination between different elements of government power, meaning that all MOOTW must have “the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission make decisions.”<sup>63</sup> This political control allows higher-ranking authorities to “rationally” plan military actions while keeping in mind the strategic objectives and political requirements of any military operation. The clear top-down strategic direction of MOOTW planning has led Chinese analysts to adopt the principle of “small action, big command” for the conduct of MOOTW.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 302-311.

<sup>61</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng*, 160.

<sup>62</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 299.

<sup>63</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng*, 157.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan Clemens, “Chapter 11: PLA Thinking on Military Operations Other Than War,” in *China’s Evolving Military Strategy*, ed. Joe McReynolds, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2016), loc. 5065, Kindle.



Moreover, Chinese strategists believe that MOOTW are relatively public and transparent compared to other types of military activity. As a result, MOOTW have an outsized influence on domestic and international perceptions of China and the PLA. Domestically, MOOTW embody the CCP’s “political will in peacetime and its ability to govern in times of crisis.”<sup>65</sup> Such operations are thus intended to shore up the CCP’s continued legitimacy in securing China’s interests and realizing the “China Dream.” Conversely, MOOTW play an important role in representing China’s role in the world. Ideally, MOOTW can help portray China as a responsible stakeholder, and even “help establish a new type of military cooperative relationship with potential war adversaries and possible targets of competition.”<sup>66</sup> But the authors of the *Science of Military Strategy* also recognize that the relative transparency of MOOTW can contribute to mistrust. They write that “Western countries adopt ‘double standards’ in criticizing China’s [military] actions,” thus China must “fully consider” and minimize negative international public perceptions of its operations.<sup>67</sup> As a result, the authors assert that China should wage public opinion struggle in tandem with MOOTW and take considered “psychological offensive and defensive moves.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, MOOTW are understood to play a vital role in shaping the political environment and public perceptions of China, both at home and abroad.

The characteristics of MOOTW listed in the *Science of Military Strategy* also provide insight into the military qualities desired by the PLA. These qualities can be summarized into three primary categories: responsive, targeted, and joint. First, MOOTW require the armed forces to have a high level of responsiveness in order to act quickly and without prior planning to address unexpected crises. Second, the intensity of conflict in MOOTW is lower than in warfare and requires a “more flexible, more selective, and more targeted” use of military force.<sup>69</sup> Finally, MOOTW require strong integration between the military and other actors, including coordination with the People’s Armed Police, militia units, and civilian government agencies when responding to domestic crises, and cooperation with foreign militaries on conducting international MOOTW. The *Science of Military Strategy* authors write that as initial steps to achieve these core competencies, the PLA should develop specialized and elite professional forces, such as disaster rescue or counterterrorism units, to improve reconnaissance and early warning intelligence collection, strengthen simulation exercises and contingency planning, and continue to build joint support capabilities.<sup>70</sup>

Chinese sources do not detail the conditions under which China would be willing to use force while conducting MOOTW. *The Science of Military Strategy* acknowledges that some types of confrontational MOOTW (such as counterterrorism and counterpiracy) “require the use of a low-level of violent force,” without elaborating

<sup>65</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 297.

<sup>66</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 301, 309.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 309.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>70</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 307.

further.<sup>71</sup> One element of the “more flexible, more selective, and more targeted” use of military force described above is to have a narrow target in military operations to minimize the negative or unintended consequences of using force.<sup>72</sup> MOOTW must also firmly “act in accordance with [international and domestic] law.”<sup>73</sup> In practice, there likely remains a degree of ambiguity to the level of force the PLA is willing to use while conducting MOOTW.

While MOOTW are distinct from many deterrence operations, they can have a deterrent effect on potential adversaries. For example, PLA operations in the East and South China Seas that are meant to protect “China’s rights and interests” can also serve as demonstrations of force against competing claimants in ongoing territorial disputes. For example, the type of aerial patrols conducted by the PLAAF following China’s establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea in 2013 were simultaneously meant to assert China’s interest in the area and to deter regional rivals.<sup>74</sup>

Chinese strategists write that overseas operations in particular can “demonstrate strategic capabilities, deter hostile forces, and shape an inviolable national image.”<sup>75</sup> As noted by Morgan Clemens, the “low-intensity, high efficiency” nature of MOOTW can also “warn, pressure, or deter an enemy.”<sup>76</sup> The US Department of Defense has also stated that China’s MOOTW can “include operations in which the PLA uses coercive threats.”<sup>77</sup>

In the past decade, overseas MOOTW have usurped domestic MOOTW as the predominant focus of Chinese military strategists. As Taylor Fravel has noted, PRC concepts of MOOTW are fundamentally more inward looking than US military operations.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, a sizeable portion of PLA writing on MOOTW focuses on domestic HA/DR and social stability operations.<sup>79</sup> This is driven in part by the fact the PLA’s largest modern mobilizations have all occurred within Chinese territory. However, as China’s economic commitments have become increasingly global, its MOOTW are now largely focused on the protection of China’s overseas interests.

The PLA National Defense University’s 2015 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* includes an entire chapter on the use of military force overseas, principally pertaining

<sup>71</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 299.

<sup>72</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng*, 157.

<sup>73</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 310-311.

<sup>74</sup> U.S., Congressional Research Service, “China’s Air Defense Identification Zone,” Ian E. Rinehart and Bart Elias, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 11, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R43894.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 315.

<sup>76</sup> Morgan Clemens, “Chapter 11: PLA Thinking on Military Operations Other Than War,” loc. 5196, Kindle.

<sup>77</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021,” 35.

<sup>78</sup> Fravel, “Economic Growth, Regime Insecurity, and Military Strategy,” 196.

<sup>79</sup> For example, China put forward the *Regulation on the Army’s Participation in Disaster Rescue* (《军队参加抢险救灾条例》) in 2005, and the *Emergency Response Law of the People’s Republic of China* (《中华人民共和国突发事件应对法》) in 2007.

to MOOTW.<sup>80</sup> It posits that China's overseas operations effectively safeguard China's expanding interests, including protecting individuals, assets, and strategic Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), creating a favorable overseas investment environment, and deepening diplomatic and military ties with other nations.<sup>81</sup> Overseas operations are also intended to promote regional stability, shape a "positive national image" of China, and improve the operational capabilities of the PLA.<sup>82</sup>

Critically, MOOTW are also seen as an important way for the PLA to develop its operational capabilities. China's 2008 Defense White Paper (the first official mention of MOOTW) makes a clear distinction between the "core capability of winning local wars in conditions of informationization and the capability of conducting MOOTW."<sup>83</sup> However, the two are still seen as linked; Chinese strategists and military leaders explicitly state that MOOTW directly support China's efforts to modernize the PLA, gain practical operational experience, and prepare for future combat scenarios.

In 2009, President Hu Jintao encouraged the PLA to focus on improving "the ability to carry out military operations other than war" in addition to "building core military capabilities."<sup>84</sup> In 2011, CMC Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong emphasized that the PLA had "integrated the construction of non-war military activity capabilities into the overall planning and implementation" of military modernization reforms and preparations for "military struggle."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, PLA Navy (PLAN) Commander Wu Shengli praised the Navy's participation in escort missions in and around the Gulf of Aden as a "major exercise and a test of our ability."<sup>86</sup> The *Science of Military Strategy* highlights that war and non-war military operations "have very similar requirements in a number of areas," and that MOOTW allow the PLA to "test organizational and command capabilities...examine the forms, levels, and effectiveness of military combat preparations...and to raise level of preparation for war."<sup>87</sup> The 2015 National Defense White Paper also includes "preparing for MOOTW" as an important effort in preparation for "military struggle."<sup>88</sup>

The PLA's MOOTW receive less attention than its preparations for full-scale combat, but they remain an essential element of the PLA's global responsibilities and activities, and directly support the PLA's planning for wartime contingencies. The study of China's conduct of MOOTW thus provides insight into China's national security objectives and the operational capabilities of the PLA.

<sup>80</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 312-326.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 313-314.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2008," 12.

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, Annual Report to Congress, [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2011\\_CMPR\\_Final.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf).

<sup>85</sup> "Hujintao huijian canjia quan jun fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong yantao huodong daibiao" 胡锦涛会见参加全军非战争军事行动研讨活动代表 [Hu Jintao Meets with Representatives Participating in the Seminar on Non-Wr Military Operations of the Armed Forces] *Guangming Daily*, September 7, 2011, [https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2011-09/07/nw.D110000gmrb\\_20110907\\_5-01.htm](https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2011-09/07/nw.D110000gmrb_20110907_5-01.htm).

<sup>86</sup> Shengli Wu and Xiaojiang Liu, "Laoji Qianjun Zhongtuo Bu Fu Huhang Shiming," 牢记千钧重托不负护航使命 [Keep in Mind the Important Task of Fulfilling the Escort Mission], *Qiushi*, December 26, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue Jiaocheng*, 161.

<sup>88</sup> Ministry of National Defense, "China's Military Strategy."



## TYPES OF MOOTW

China's leaders view MOOTW as supporting three primary objectives: protecting China's national and developmental interests, projecting China's image as a "responsible" great power, and providing the PLA with opportunities to gain operational experience. However, the motivation and conduct of each type of operation varies in practice, and thus each category of MOOTW deserves its own independent examination.

As previously noted, the PLA has no consistent definition of what operations constitute MOOTW, and multiple sources provide different categories of non-war operations.<sup>89</sup> Taking these definitions as a starting point, we break down China's MOOTW into the following categories based on the characteristics of each type of action, their prominence in current PLA operations, and their relevance to a policy audience:

- Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance
- Maritime Rights and Interests Protection
- Counterpiracy and Far-Seas Escort
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR)
- Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs)
- International Peacekeeping
- International Military Exercises and Military Diplomacy

These categories largely mirror the category of activities listed in the 2011 PLA Dictionary, but do not represent an exhaustive list of China's MOOTW.<sup>90</sup> For example, Chinese strategists often include the provision of security at domestic special events, such as the 2008 Olympics, as one of the PLA's MOOTW. Such operations are relatively rare and have limited relevance to PLA posture and capabilities, and thus are not a focus of this study. The possibility that the PLA will expand its range of missions in the coming years also makes it difficult to identify a complete set of operations that constitute MOOTW. Nevertheless, the following sections detail the most important and substantial MOOTW conducted by the PLA over the past two decades.

*U.S. Army\_US-China annual disaster management exchange2: U.S. Army.*

<sup>89</sup> For a discussion of the differing categories of MOOTW, see Fan and Char, "Introduction to China's Military Operations Other Than War."

<sup>90</sup> We have also added two additional categories of MOOTW activity that differ from the 2011 PLA dictionary: "Counterpiracy and Far-Seas Escort" and "International Military Exercises and Military Diplomacy." By some definitions, "Counterpiracy and Far-Seas Escort" operations are included as "rights and interests protection" operations (e.g., Fan and Char, "Introduction to China's Military Operations Other Than War," 6). However, we believe that the objectives of counterpiracy differ from other maritime "rights and interests protection" operations, and that the prominence of the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy patrols in China's overseas MOOTW warrants their inclusion as a stand-alone category of MOOTW. Additionally, despite the fact that the majority of China's international military exercises are focused on MOOTW, we believe that international military exercises present a unique set of motivations and benefits to China that are worth highlighting as a distinct category of MOOTW.





DIA\_2019 China Military Power rep: U.S. Department of Defense.

Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance

CCP leadership has a high degree of insecurity about challenges to its sovereignty and domestic rule, and views many of its foremost threats as internal, rather than from external adversaries. China's non-war military doctrine thus places particular emphasis on domestic counterterrorism and "stability maintenance" operations, which include efforts to quell domestic unrest and combat the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>91</sup> These operations most frequently rely on the PAP, the paramilitary wing of the CCP, with the PLA playing a limited support role.<sup>92</sup> China has also taken steps to address the threat of international terrorism targeting Chinese overseas interests or supporting the "three evils" within China. However, China has largely eschewed using the PLA for significant counterterrorism operations overseas, relying instead on multilateral mechanisms and building partner nation capabilities to address the "symptom and the root cause" of terrorism.<sup>93</sup> Counterterrorism and stability maintenance operations are important missions for China to confront perceived national security challenges and project an image of China as a global security leader, but they also demonstrate the current limit of the PLA's expansion of "diversified military tasks."

<sup>91</sup> Shou, *Zhanlue Xue Jiaocheng*, 154.  
<sup>92</sup> Joel Wuthnow, "China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform," *Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives* 14, (2019), 3, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/82/China%20SP%2014%20Final%20for%20Web.pdf>.  
<sup>93</sup> People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Written Statement by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the 11th Ministerial Plenary Meeting of the Global Counterterrorism Forum," (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1913053.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1913053.shtml).

In the 1990s, a series of violent incidents in China's far-western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region posed a growing security challenge for the PRC government.<sup>94</sup> The PLA and PAP suppressed the uprisings, and in the aftermath, the CCP launched the "Strike Hard" campaign to crack down on additional violence.<sup>95</sup> As part of the "Strike Hard" campaign, Chinese authorities arrested and sentenced Uyghurs suspected of engaging in terrorist or separatist activities, even if those activities involved peaceful protests.<sup>96</sup> Chinese authorities also targeted Xinjiang newspapers, magazines, and social organizations to prevent the spread of separatist discourse.<sup>97</sup> Jiang Zemin drew attention to these "violent terrorist incidents" in international and domestic speeches and called on regional nations to "firmly oppose ethnic separatism and terrorism."<sup>98</sup> In June 2001, China, Russia, and several Central Asian states formally established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which lists among its main goals and tasks the need to "jointly counteract terrorism, separatism, and extremism in all their manifestations" and to "consolidate multidisciplinary cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security, and stability in the region."<sup>99</sup>

Following 9/11, China expanded its international outreach on counterterrorism as part of the "Global War on Terror." According to one PRC government-affiliated researcher, China "grasped the opportunity" to increase ties with the US and other countries on counterterrorism issues.<sup>100</sup> China published a white paper on "East Turkestan terrorists" and successfully lobbied the US and the UN to place the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – an overseas separatist movement advocating for an independent Xinjiang – on their official lists of terror organizations.<sup>101</sup> China also launched limited military cooperation with other countries on counterterrorism. In 2002, China conducted its first ever combined military exercise between the Kyrgyz armed forces and the PLA, simulating a counterterrorism drill, and has since conducted dozens of counterterrorism exercises with SCO nations.<sup>102</sup> A survey of China's combined military exercises found that 16% of China's international military exercises address counterterrorism, including China's largest annual combined military exercise series, *Peace Mission*.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>94</sup> James Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment," *East-West Center Policy Studies* 6, 2004, viii, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS006.pdf?file=1%26type=node%26id=32006>.  
<sup>95</sup> Center for Naval Analyses, "China's Response to Terrorism," Murray Scot Tanner and James Bellacqua (2016) 43, 74, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism\\_CNA061616.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism_CNA061616.pdf).  
<sup>96</sup> Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang," October 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/asia/china-bck1017.htm>.  
<sup>97</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>98</sup> Center for Naval Analyses, "China's Response to Terrorism," 22.  
<sup>99</sup> *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, St. Petersburg, 7 June 2002, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 2896, No. 50517, available from <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%202896/Part/volume-2896-I-50517.pdf>.  
<sup>100</sup> Tanner and Bellacqua, "China's Response to Terrorism," 23.  
<sup>101</sup> The United States removed ETIM from its terrorist list in 2020. See: Asim Kashgarian, "Uighur Diaspora Hails Removal of ETIM from US Terror List," *VOA News*, December 25, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch\\_uighur-diaspora-hails-removal-etim-us-terror-list/6200004.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_uighur-diaspora-hails-removal-etim-us-terror-list/6200004.html).  
<sup>102</sup> "Backgrounder: Major PLA-related joint anti-terror military exercises and trainings," *People's Daily*, December 21, 2007, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/6325264.html>  
<sup>103</sup> Allen, Saunders, and Chen, "China Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016," 30.



China’s counterterrorism strategy maintains a significant domestic focus, which differentiates it from the counterterrorism doctrines of other countries, such as the United States. According to Taylor Fravel, the PLA’s focus on domestic operations is a “response to internal threats to regime security that are a byproduct of rapid economic growth.”<sup>104</sup> Xi Jinping has personally emphasized the link between counterterrorism and continued development, stating in a speech that if terrorism is not adequately addressed in China, “social stability will suffer shocks...and the broad outlook for reform, development, and stability will be affected.”<sup>105</sup>

China most frequently relies on the PAP for its domestic counterterrorism and stability maintenance operations. The PAP serves as the CCP’s paramilitary arm and is directly under the authority of the Central Military Commission.<sup>106</sup> PRC Defense White Papers have referred to the PAP as “the state’s backbone and shock force in handling public emergencies and maintaining social stability,” and note that the PAP has established a “counterterrorism force structure” that includes special-duty squadrons, platoons, and emergency-response squads.<sup>107</sup> The PLA has served in a secondary position to the PAP in conducting counterterrorism operations within China. This is possibly due to the sensitive nature of domestic deployments following Tiananmen in 1989. Domestic PLA counterterrorism operations since 1989 have included short deployments to Xinjiang in the 1990s, to Lhasa in 2008, and to Urumqi in 2009.<sup>108</sup> However, the PLA’s role in responding to the 2008 and 2009 riots was largely relegated to transportation and logistics support.<sup>109</sup> While Chinese news articles sometimes document joint counterterrorism exercises between the PLA and PAP, such exercises do not appear to occur frequently.<sup>110</sup>

The PAP’s counterterrorism and domestic stability operations are inseparable from China’s ongoing crackdown in Xinjiang, which involves large-scale PAP deployments. For perspective, the PAP’s spending per capita in Xinjiang and Qinghai (a neighboring province with a large Tibetan population) are both approaching double the national

<sup>104</sup> Fravel, “Economic Growth, Regime Insecurity, and Military Strategy: Explaining the Rise of Noncombat Operations in China,” 178.

<sup>105</sup> Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detention of Muslims,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

<sup>106</sup> As of 2018; Joel Wuthnow, “China’s Other Army: The People’s Armed Police in an Era of Reform,” *Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives* 14, April 2019, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/82/China%20SP%2014%20Final%20for%20Web.pdf>, 3.

<sup>107</sup> People’s Republic of China, The State Council Information Office, “The Diversified Deployment of China’s Armed Forces,” (Beijing: The State Council Information Office, 2013), [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7181425.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm).

<sup>108</sup> Murray Scot Tanner and James Bellacqua, “China’s Response to Terrorism,” *Center for Naval Analyses*, June 2016, 75, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism\\_CNA061616.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism_CNA061616.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Tanner and Bellacqua, “China’s Response to Terrorism,” 75; Edward Cody, “Backstage Role of China’s Army in Tibet Unrest is a Contrast to 1989,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2008, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/12/AR2008041202215.html>.

<sup>110</sup> “Shouci! Xinjiang Wujing Te Zhan zhidui yu Lu Hang Lianhe Fankong Yanlian” 首次! 新疆武警特战支队与陆航联合反恐演练 [First! Joint Counterterrorism exercise between Xinjiang Armed Police Special Operations Detachment and Army Aviation], *CCTV Network*, October 27, 2021, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2021-10-27/doc-iktzscyy2051716.shtml>.

average.<sup>111</sup> The PAP maintains seven mobile detachments and a counterterrorism Special Operations unit in Xinjiang that can be quickly deployed to any unrest.<sup>112</sup> A newspaper affiliated with the PAP reported that as of 2021, the PAP’s special operations forces have conducted 31 counterterrorism missions in Xinjiang that resulted in the deaths of 91 suspects.<sup>113</sup> According to China’s 2019 Defense White Paper, the PAP has assisted in “capturing 12,995 terrorists.”<sup>114</sup> These operations have drawn broad international criticism for their heavy-handed tactics and abuses of human rights.<sup>115</sup>

The increasing number of Chinese businesses and citizens abroad has taken Chinese interests to countries and regions with significant terrorism risks, including the Middle East and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Terrorist attacks in the last fifteen years have targeted Chinese citizens in over a dozen countries, resulting in over 40 deaths.<sup>116</sup> In particular, extremists affiliated with the Baluchistan Liberation Army have repeatedly targeted China’s investment along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>117</sup> China also accuses ETIM of operating abroad in Syria and Afghanistan, and in 2017 Islamic State fighters publicly pledged to attack Chinese targets.<sup>118</sup>

In 2015, China passed a counterterrorism law that formally permitted the PLA and PAP to deploy abroad for counterterrorism missions, subject to the approval of the CMC.<sup>119</sup> But in practice, China has not consistently relied on deployments or special operations forces to conduct counterterrorism raids within foreign countries, with limited exceptions. The PAP has stationed special forces at the Chinese embassies in Afghanistan and Iraq, has conducted joint counterterrorism operations on the Sino-Afghan border, and has operated a forward base in Tajikistan.<sup>120</sup> In Tajikistan, these operations form part of a three-pronged approach that aims to provide equipment and

<sup>111</sup> Adrian Zenz, “Corralling the People’s Armed Police: Centralizing Control to Reflect Centralized Budgets,” *China Brief*, April 24, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/corralling-the-peoples-armed-police-centralizing-control-to-reflect-centralized-budgets/>.

<sup>112</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “China’s Other Army: The People’s Armed Police in an Era of Reform,” 13.

<sup>113</sup> “Heroic armed police squadron in Xinjiang lauded for counter-terrorism achievements,” *The Global Times*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228464.shtml?id=11>.

<sup>114</sup> People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in the New Era.”

<sup>115</sup> “‘Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots,’” Human Rights Watch

<sup>116</sup> United States Institute of Peace, “China’s Approach to International Terrorism,” Dawn Murphy, September 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/chinas-approach-international-terrorism>; European Council on Foreign Relations, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China’s Evolving Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” Mathieu Duchâtel, (2016), 3, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR\\_193\\_-\\_TERROR\\_OVERSEAS\\_UNDERSTANDING\\_CHINAS\\_EVOLVING\\_COUNTER\\_TERROR\\_STRATEGY.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR_193_-_TERROR_OVERSEAS_UNDERSTANDING_CHINAS_EVOLVING_COUNTER_TERROR_STRATEGY.pdf).

<sup>117</sup> Kinling Lo, “Pakistan attack targeting Chinese adds to concern over security threats,” *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3146087/pakistan-attack-targeting-chinese-adds-concern-over-security>.

<sup>118</sup> United States Institute of Peace, “China’s Approach to International Terrorism.”

<sup>119</sup> People’s Republic of China, The National People’s Congress, “Anti-Terrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China,” (Beijing: China National People’s Congress Network, 2015), [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2018-06/12/content\\_2055871.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2018-06/12/content_2055871.htm)

<sup>120</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, “Terror Overseas,” 6; “China again dismisses reports of military patrols in Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-afghanistan/china-again-dismisses-reports-of-military-patrols-in-afghanistan-idUKKBN162132>; Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’ Forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html).

facilities to Tajikistan to boost its security capabilities, conduct joint operations, and align Tajikistan's security interests with China.<sup>121</sup> There is no publicly available evidence that the PAP has conducted large-scale overseas counterterrorism operations or raids. Instead, China's efforts have focused principally on relying on and strengthening host country capabilities to address China's security concerns. One prominent example of this is Pakistan, which in 2016 established a 15,000-strong Army Division that was meant to protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor from terrorist attacks.<sup>122</sup>

The PLA's hesitancy to conduct its own counterterrorism operations abroad is driven by the nature of China's security challenges, foreign policy principles that constrain the use of overseas force, and China's limited capability to deploy and sustain forces overseas. As these factors change over time, it is possible, though still unlikely, that China may conduct more targeted counterterrorism operations abroad. China does face risks from overseas terrorist groups, but the principal focus remains domestic terror threats. Additionally, China's longstanding principle of "non-intervention" and "non-interference" precludes the PLA from conducting a unilateral intervention abroad and prioritizes the role of the UN or other multilateral channels in addressing transnational issues.<sup>123</sup> China's Ambassador to the UN, in a 2018 speech, emphasized that international counterterrorism efforts should be "in compliance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and give the central coordination role to the United Nations."<sup>124</sup> While meeting with the Afghan Taliban, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that the Taliban shouldered the burden of dealing with terrorist groups within the country and must "sever ties" with ETIM.<sup>125</sup> In theory, China could conduct counterterrorism operations abroad with either UN authorization or host-state consent, but the PLA remains untested in its ability to support sustained special forces operations outside of China's own borders.

<sup>121</sup> Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," in *Securing the Belt and Road: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, ed. Nadège Rolland (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 72.

<sup>122</sup> Raza Khan, "15,000 troops of Special Security Division to protect CPEC projects, Chinese nationals," *Dawn*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1277182>.

<sup>123</sup> "China, Russia Stress Non-Interference in Countries' Internal Affairs," *China Daily*, February 5, 2021, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/05/WS601ca8cba31024ad0baa772f.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Zhaoxu Ma, *Statement by Ambassador Ma Zhaoxu At the United Nations High-level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States*, United Nations, June 28, 2018, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/S1-China.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> Yun Sun, "A Reluctant Embrace: China's New Relationship with the Taliban," *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2021, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/a-reluctant-embrace-chinas-new-relationship-with-the-taliban/>.



US Navy\_US-China navy search rescue exercise: Flickr.

### Rights and Interests Protection

In the last two decades, China has significantly expanded the capacity and reach of its paramilitary and law enforcement operations within and near its borders to protect China's "rights and interests." Under Xi, China has undertaken several new MOOTW in disputed areas in the East and South China Seas. Attention to this activity is primarily focused on the maritime "gray zone" strategy of China's Coast Guard (CCG) and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), both of which have relied on direct coercion to deter and compel other countries' security forces and civilians to comply with China's regulations and claimed jurisdiction, and thus to exert effective control over disputed territories. At the same time, China has expanded partnerships with its neighbors in Southeast Asia to counter drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and other transnational security issues. A similar trend has occurred on China's Western border, where China has strengthened border control mechanisms with regional countries while simultaneously conducting MOOTW that arguably erode regional security and establish Chinese territorial control. These operations demonstrate China's overlapping, and at times contradictory, objectives of defending Chinese interests while improving its international image and regional influence.

In 2021, the National People's Congress adopted a "Coast Guard Law," which outlines the roles and responsibility for the CCG, which came under the jurisdiction of the PAP in 2018.<sup>126</sup> The law stipulates that the basic tasks of "maritime rights protection

<sup>126</sup> Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China, Order No. 71, 25th session of the Standing Committee of the Thirteenth National People's Congress, (January 22, 2021), <http://en.pkulaw.cn/display.aspx?id=09868c44d041e84ebdfb&lib=law>; Weishuai Sun, "海警队伍转隶武警部队没有改变其基本任务属性" Hailing Duiwu Zhuanli Wujingbudui Meiyong Gaibian Qijiben Renwu Shuxing [The Transfer of China Coast Guard to the Armed Police Force did not Change Its Basic Mission Attributes], Ministry of National Defense of The People's Republic of China, June 28, 2018, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2018-06/28/content\\_4818019.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2018-06/28/content_4818019.htm); Ministry of National Defense of The People's Republic of China, "Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on June 28," China Military, June 29, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/29/content\\_8075007.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/29/content_8075007.htm).



and law enforcement” are to “protect maritime security, maintain maritime security order, combat maritime smuggling and illegal immigration, conduct supervisory inspection of the development and utilization of marine resources, marine ecological and environmental protection, marine fishery production operations,” as well as to “prevent, stop, and punish illegal and criminal maritime activities.”<sup>127</sup> The complication of these regulations is that the “Coast Guard Law” grants the CCG authority to operate in “waters under the jurisdiction of China,” an ambiguous term that encompasses contested areas. As a result, the CCG has consistently operated around claimed maritime features spanning from the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea to James Shoal off the coast of Borneo.<sup>128</sup>

In terms of MOOTW doctrine, such patrols of disputed territory are considered “rights enforcement” operations and are a component of protecting China’s national and developmental interests. The normalization of PLAN and CCG patrols in the South China Sea has directly enabled the harassment of foreign vessels at disputed features. To this day, the routine harassment of foreign vessels occurs on “rights protection” (维权) missions carried out by the CCG. There is also evidence that efforts to prevent or curtail foreign fishing have increased in intensity in recent years, particularly the enforcement of China’s annual fishing moratorium.<sup>129</sup>

In 2013, the PLAN established “normalized combat readiness patrols” in the Spratly Islands that “safeguard national territorial sovereignty” and improve coordination with the CCG.<sup>130</sup> The same year, China’s maritime law enforcement agencies announced plans to “normalize” all “fishery protection” missions and rights defense patrols in the South China Sea.”<sup>131</sup> China’s 2013 Defense White Paper explicitly articulated that the “PLAN provides security support for China’s maritime law enforcement, fisheries, and oil and gas exploitation...[and] has established mechanisms to coordinate and cooperate with law-enforcement organs of marine surveillance and fishery administration, as well as a joint military-police-civilian defense mechanism.”<sup>132</sup> In press coverage of the changes in policy, the director of

<sup>127</sup> Coast Guard Law of the People’s Republic of China, Order No. 71, 25th session of the Standing Committee of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress.

<sup>128</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* (Newport: U.S. Naval War College, 2018), CMSI Red Books, Study No. 15, 47-53, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=cmsi-red-books>

<sup>129</sup> Kevin Varley et al., “Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea,” *Bloomberg*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-dangerous-conditions-in-depleted-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>130</sup> Yi Gao, “Zhongguo Haijun Yi Changtaihua Xunluo Nansha Zhanshi Cheng Suishi Zhunbei Zhandou” 中国海军已常态化巡逻南沙 战士称随时准备战斗 [The Chinese Navy Has Normalized Patrols of the Spratly Islands, Soldiers Say They Are Ready to Fight at Any Time], *PLA Daily*, May 16, 2013, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2013-05-16/0400724747.html>.

<sup>131</sup> “Woguo Zai Nansha Haiyu Zhengshi Qidong Changtaihua Huyu” 我国在南沙海域正式启动常态化护渔 [China Officially Launches Normalized Fisheries Protection in Spratly Island Waters], *Xinjing Bao*, May 11, 2013, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2013-03-11/031926490360.shtml>; “Haijian Dishi Zhidui Jinzhu Sansha Shi Nanhai Xunhang Jiang Changtaihua” 海监第十支队进驻三沙市 南海巡航将常态化 [CMS 10th Detachment Stationed in Sansha City, South China Sea Patrols to Be Normalized], *Reference News*, March 11, 2013, <http://china.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2013/0311/176268.shtml>.

<sup>132</sup> Government of the People’s Republic of China, State Council, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2013), [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2014/08/23/content\\_281474982986506.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474982986506.htm).

the South China Sea Branch of the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC) stated that the goal of the rights protection and fishing protection work is to focus on “Scarborough Shoal, protect Mischief Reef, strengthen supervision of the Paracel Islands and Gulf of Tonkin, and normalize fishing protection in the Spratly Islands.”<sup>133</sup>

The rise in coercive actions in the past decade accompanied the CCP leadership’s increased emphasis on the protection of China’s rights and interests.<sup>134</sup> For example, Xi Jinping stated in 2013 that China must “insist on maintain[ing] the unity of national sovereignty, security, and development interests, and maintain maritime rights and interests to match the improvement of overall national strength.”<sup>135</sup> According to Zhou Fangyin, a former researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a rise in regional tensions resulted in the Chinese government adjusting its “presumption that regional stability was of the highest importance” and instead newly prioritized the “defense of China’s sovereign interests.”<sup>136</sup>

Even as the CCG harassment of foreign vessels has degraded the regional security environment, some regional nations have demonstrated a willingness to partner with China on shared transnational security issues. For example, China and the Philippines in 2017 established a Joint Coast Guard Committee on Maritime Cooperation that pledged to combat crime, conduct search and rescue, and partner in environmental protection and emergency response.<sup>137</sup> In January 2020, a CCG vessel visited the Philippines to donate supplies and conduct bilateral maritime search and rescue exercises to “promote mutual trust and create a new channel for bilateral maritime cooperation.”<sup>138</sup>

<sup>133</sup> “Woguo Nansha...” 我国南沙展开常态化护渔 重点看好黄岩岛 [China Will Launch Normalized Fisheries Protection...], *Xinhua*

<sup>134</sup> For more on China’s use of coercion in the South China Sea, see: Andrew Chubb, “PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015.” *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2020): 79-121; Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (July 2019): 117–59. China has used coercion in its maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, despite adverse implications for its image. China is curiously selective in its timing, targets, and tools of coercion: China rarely employs military coercion, and it does not coerce all countries that pose similar threats. An examination of newly available primary documents and hundreds of hours of interviews with Chinese officials to trace the decisionmaking processes behind China’s use and nonuse of coercion reveals a new theory of when, why, and how China employs coercion against other states, especially in the South China Sea. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the findings show that China is a cautious bully that does not use coercion frequently. In addition, when China becomes stronger, it tends to use military coercion less often, choosing instead nonmilitary tools. Moreover, concerns with its reputation for resolve and with economic cost are critical elements of Chinese decisionmaking regarding the costs and benefits of coercing its neighbors. China often coerces one target to deter others—“killing the chicken to scare the monkey.” These findings have important implications for how scholars understand states’ coercive strategies and the future of Chinese behavior in the region and beyond.”,”container-title:”International Security”,”DOI:”10.1162/isec\_a\_00354”,”ISSN:”0162-2889”,”issue:”1”,”journalAbbreviation:”International Security”,”page:”117-159”,”source:”Silverchair”,”title:”Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea”,”title-short:”Cautious Bully”,”volume:”44”,”author:”[”family:”Zhang”,”given:”Ketian”]”,”issued:”[”date-parts:”[”2019”,7,1]]”]”,”schema:”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”}

<sup>135</sup> “Xi Jinping: Yao Jinyibu Guanxin Haiyang, Renshi Haiyang, Jinglüe Haiyang,” 习近平: 要进一步关心海洋, 认识海洋, 经略海洋 [Xi Jinping: We Must Further Care about the Ocean, Understand the Ocean, and Manage the Ocean], *Xinhua*, July 31, 2013, [http://www.gov.cn/jldhd/2013-07/31/content\\_2459009.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jldhd/2013-07/31/content_2459009.htm).

<sup>136</sup> Fangyin Zhou, “Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China’s South China Sea policy,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2016): 875.

<sup>137</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “What’s Behind the New China-Philippines Coast Guard Exercise?” *The Diplomat*, March 15, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/whats-behind-the-new-china-philippines-coast-guard-exercise/>.

<sup>138</sup> Jin Zhou, “China, Philippines coast guards enhance cooperation,” *China Daily*, January 15, 2020, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/15/WS5e1ef405a3101282172713b4.html>.

Similarly, China and Vietnam have consistently conducted joint patrols of their delimited border in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 2006, the PLAN and the Vietnamese Navy launched the biannual patrols, which are “aimed at strengthening the cooperation between the two navies and maintaining the stability of the fishing industry and oil exploration” in the Gulf.<sup>139</sup> The two countries’ Coast Guards have conducted the majority of the joint patrols, but in 2019, this responsibility was transferred to the PLA Southern Theater Command and the Vietnamese Navy.<sup>140</sup> Even during times of tension, the two countries have maintained the patrols as a “rare example of limited cooperation.”<sup>141</sup> The two countries stay on their own delineated sides of the Gulf, providing an outlet for cooperation while respecting each other’s sovereignty in the patrolled waters. Furthermore, Vietnam and China often organize bilateral drills after the completion of the patrols.<sup>142</sup>

The PAP also conducts monthly multilateral patrols of the Lower Mekong River. China initiated the patrols with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand in the aftermath of a piracy attack that killed thirteen Chinese sailors on the Mekong River in 2011.<sup>143</sup> In the first five years of the patrols, the partner countries arrested 10,000 criminal suspects, seized 36 metric tons of drugs, and rescued 135 commercial ships from pirates on the Mekong.<sup>144</sup> China has also established information sharing centers with the partner countries to improve intelligence analysis.<sup>145</sup> Even during the pandemic, all four nations held monthly joint patrols using remote video to direct the operations. Additionally, after the completion of a monthly patrol in 2020, one of the Chinese vessels conducted a combat drill in Laos. Both actions demonstrate the increasing closeness between China and these other three Southeast Asian nations when cooperating on regional security issues.

<sup>139</sup> “China Launches Joint Naval Patrol with Vietnam,” *Shanghai Daily*, April 29, 2006, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/Apr/167254.htm>.

<sup>140</sup> Panyue Huang, “China, Vietnam Navies Wrap up 30th Joint Patrol in Beibu Gulf,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, June 30, 2021, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-06/30/content\\_4888478.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-06/30/content_4888478.htm).

<sup>141</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “China-Vietnam Joint Patrols in the Spotlight,” *The Diplomat*, October 31, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/china-vietnam-joint-patrols-in-the-spotlight/>.

<sup>142</sup> Huang, “China, Vietnam Navies.”

<sup>143</sup> Edward Wong, “China and Neighbors Begin Joint Mekong River Patrols,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/asia/china-and-neighbors-begin-joint-mekong-river-patrols.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Yan Zhang and Yingqing Li, “Joint Action Helps to Reduce Crime,” *China Daily*, March 23, 2016, [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2016/03/23/content\\_281475312787763.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2016/03/23/content_281475312787763.htm).

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



US Navy\_Sailors visit a Chinese ship: Flickr.

## Counterpiracy and Far-Seas Escort

On December 26, 2008, three PLAN ships departed from Hainan to sail to the Gulf of Aden to combat a growing international threat of piracy. Thirteen years later, the PLAN has now completed thirty-eight counterpiracy escort task force (ETF) missions and escorted over 6,500 vessels in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>146</sup> As China’s most consistent and most distant case of MOOTW, China’s counterpiracy operations have served as a symbol of the PLA’s evolving responsibilities and its increasingly global reach.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>146</sup> “Chinese Naval Fleets Escort over 6,600 Vessels in Gulf of Aden, Somalia over 10 Years,” *Xinhua*, April 19, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/19/c\\_137990862.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/19/c_137990862.htm).

<sup>147</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden*, (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, 2013), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=cmsi-red-books>.



The Gulf of Aden, one of the world’s most important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), experienced a surge in piracy beginning in 2008. That year, pirates attacked about 20% of the 1,265 Chinese commercial ships sailing through the Gulf and hijacked seven ships flying under the Chinese flag or containing Chinese sailors or cargo.<sup>148</sup> In response to the threat, the UN Security Council unanimously voted for Resolution 1816 in June 2008, which authorized “all necessary means to repress acts of piracy and armed robbery” off the coast of Somalia.<sup>149</sup> China publicly supported international efforts to combat piracy and, after nearly a year of domestic deliberation and interagency coordination, authorized the PLAN to conduct missions itself.<sup>150</sup> The decision to deploy a PLAN ETF represented two key milestones for the PLAN: it was the first time that the PLAN had performed a distant seas MOOTW and the first time that PLAN ships participated in a multinational naval mission.<sup>151</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PLA officers publicly emphasized two key motives for the launch of the escort missions. The first was the protection of Chinese assets and the broader threat that piracy posed to “international navigation, maritime trade, and security.”<sup>152</sup> The second public justification highlighted China’s growing role as a world actor, with MFA Spokesperson Qin Gang stating that the PLAN deployment is “based on UN Security Council Resolutions and...is a reflection of [the] Chinese government’s commitment to safeguarding world peace and stability and [the] concept of ‘putting people’s interest[s] first, [and] exercising state power for the people.’”<sup>153</sup> Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLAN, similarly stated at the time that the mission “fully reflects the Chinese government’s active fulfillment of its international obligations and its image as a responsible great power.”<sup>154</sup>

An additional objective of the counterpiracy operations was for the PLAN to gain direct experience in long-distance operations.<sup>155</sup> MFA officials detailing the operations made no mention of the PLAN’s desire for experience. However,

<sup>148</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Jianchao’s Regular Press Conference on December 18, 2008,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008), <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cekp/eng/fyrth/t526955.htm>.

<sup>149</sup> UN Security Council resolution 1816, *Resolution 1816 (2008) [On Acts of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Vessels in Territorial Waters and the High Seas Off the Coast of Somalia]*, S/RES/1816 (2008), available from <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/361/77/pdf/N0836177.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>150</sup> Strange and Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, 21, 46.

<sup>151</sup> Both of these milestones are reflected in state media retrospectives on the counterpiracy escort missions. See: “Di Yi Pi Huhang Biandui: Kaichuang Zhongguo Haijun Shishang Duoxiang Diyi” 第一批护航编队: 开创中国海军史上多项第一 [The First Escort Formations: Creating a Number of Firsts in the History of the Chinese Navy], *Xinhua*, August 17, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-08/17/c\\_1121500917.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-08/17/c_1121500917.htm).

<sup>152</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Jianchao’s Regular Press Conference on December 18, 2008,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/fyrthhz/lxjzdh/t526955.htm>.

<sup>153</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on December 23, 2008,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cg-trt/eng/fyrthhz/lxjzdh/t529049.htm>.

<sup>154</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “The Ministry of National Defense Introduced the Navy’s Escort Situation in the Gulf of Aden and the War in Somalia,” (Beijing: Ministry of National Defense, 2008), [http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-12/23/content\\_1185458.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-12/23/content_1185458.htm).

<sup>155</sup> See Strange and Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, 2.

at the launch of the first ETF mission, PLAN Commander Wu Shengli stated that the patrols were “a major exercise and test for our Navy’s ability to perform missions and tasks.”<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the 2008 Ministry of National Defense White Paper highlighted the need for the PLAN to “gradually develop its capabilities of conducting cooperation in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats.”<sup>157</sup> And in 2011, an acting Party Secretary for an ETF stated that the Navy must “expand military training according to local conditions, toughen the force on all sides, [and] conscientiously raise the ability to fulfill missions [and] responsibilities.”<sup>158</sup> Based on these operations over the past thirteen years, it is possible to gauge if China has accomplished these three objectives.

As of 2021, the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden has receded dramatically, with no successful ship hijackings reported in the region since March 2017.<sup>159</sup> In line with China’s objective of demonstrating itself as a “responsible great power,” the UN and Western countries (including the US) have praised China’s contributions to counterpiracy missions.<sup>160</sup> The completion of counterpiracy patrols has also enabled military diplomacy with other countries that strengthen China’s standing as an international military power. From 2008 to 2018, PLAN ships deployed for counterpiracy missions completed 203 port calls in 62 countries.<sup>161</sup> Beginning in January 2012, China has coordinated its Gulf of Aden patrols with India and Japan and has conducted patrol exercises with the US, South Korea, the EU Combined Task Force, and NATO.<sup>162</sup>

Furthermore, the missions have provided essential training for the PLAN’s far seas operations. The Gulf of Aden escort missions were the first time the PLAN completed a long-term mission away from China’s near periphery, and the escort fleet quickly broke its record of continuous navigation time for a PLAN fleet.<sup>163</sup> They have also facilitated an unprecedented level of interagency coordination between the PLAN, the Ministry of Transportation, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>164</sup> After a decade of operation, the ETF mission now reportedly completes a “first-level counterpiracy response” five times faster than the PLAN could in 2008.<sup>165</sup> In a recent December 2019 interview, a

<sup>156</sup> Wu and Liu, “Laoji Qianjun Zhongtuo Bu Fu Huhang Shiming.”

<sup>157</sup> People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in 2008.”

<sup>158</sup> Strange and Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, 5.

<sup>159</sup> UN Security Council resolution 2554, *Resolution 2554 (2020) [On Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea Off the Coast of Somalia]*, S/RES/2554 (2020), available from [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2554\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2554(2020)).

<sup>160</sup> Christopher Bodeen, “US praises China anti-piracy role off Somalia,” *San Diego Tribune*, February 28, 2009, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-china-us-022809-2009feb28-story.html>.

<sup>161</sup> China Power Team, “How is China Bolstering its Military Diplomatic Relations?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 27, 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/>.

<sup>162</sup> Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, “China’s Blue Soft Power: Antipiracy, Engagement, and Image Enhancement,” *Naval War College Review* 86, no. 1 (Winter 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26397817?seq=1>.

<sup>163</sup> “Di Yi Pi Huhang Biandui: Kaichuang Zhongguo Haijun Shishang Duo Xiang Di Yi” 第一批护航编队: 开创中国海军史上多项第一 [The First Batch of Escort Formations: Creating a Number of First in the History of the Chinese Navy], *Xinhua*, August 17, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-08/17/c\\_1121500917.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-08/17/c_1121500917.htm).

<sup>164</sup> Erickson and Strange, “No Substitute for Experience,” 1.

<sup>165</sup> “Huhang, ‘Jian’ Zhi Yading Wan” 护航, “舰”指亚丁湾 [Escort, “Ship” to the Gulf of Aden], *Xinmin Weekly*, November 30, 2018, <https://m.xinminweekly.com.cn/content/9032.html>.

commander of a PLAN ship participating in the 33rd ETF emphasized that “[just as] escorting ships happens in far seas, combat happens in far seas, training must also be carried out in far seas!”<sup>166</sup>

Even as the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden diminished, China has maintained and is likely to continue its ETF missions. The missions continue to fulfill China’s goals of strengthening its international reputation and providing operational experience to the PLAN. At the same time, China’s interests and objectives for the missions have evolved. In the earliest years of the counterpiracy patrols, the missions were largely “crisis driven” in response to the very real threat posed to Chinese shipping and economic interests transiting the Gulf of Aden.<sup>167</sup> Over time, the missions have expanded to become “multi-purpose oriented” and enable the PLAN to respond to an array of security challenges in the region.<sup>168</sup> This was made clear in February 2011 when the PLAN diverted the *Xuzhou*, a missile frigate and one of the Navy’s most modern warships, from counterpiracy patrols to the Libyan coast to support the evacuation of Chinese citizens from the country.<sup>169</sup> In March 2015, the PLAN again diverted an ETF to conduct an emergency evacuation of Chinese nationals in Yemen.<sup>170</sup> PLAN ships on a scheduled ETF have also participated in the search for MH 370, disposed of Syrian chemical weapons, and delivered fresh water to the Maldives.<sup>171</sup>

China’s counterpiracy patrols provide insight into the nature and future trajectory of China’s military operations in the Gulf of Aden. First, China’s ETF is notable for its relative independence from the multinational coalitions completing the same mission. Despite participating in bilateral exercises with several nations, China has not sailed under any of the international joint task forces also responsible for combatting piracy in the Gulf of Aden, such as the US-led Combined Task Force 151. This aligns with PLA strategists’ view that the use of overseas force is a question of sovereignty and that it must be “independently commanded.”<sup>172</sup> Thus, although China’s participation in the patrols “strictly follows the principal of international military cooperation,” China does not accept the command of other countries or regional organizations, nor will it join coalition operations led by other nations.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>166</sup> “Di 33 Pi Huhang Biandui Jin Tie Huhang Renwu Kaizhan Yuanhai Lianbing” 第33批护航编队紧贴护航任务开展远海练兵 [The 33rd Batch of Escort Formations Closely Follows Escort Missions to Carry out Far-Sea Training], *PLA Daily*, December 6, 2019, <http://military.cctv.com/2019/12/06/ARTI1rMdqKymZpiqAkfnrL5pg191206.shtml>.

<sup>167</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China’s Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 230.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>169</sup> Jeremy Page, “Libyan Turmoil Prompts Chinese Naval Firsts,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-13381>.

<sup>170</sup> “Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden,” *BBC*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32173811>.

<sup>171</sup> Minnie Chan, “Largest Ever Chinese Rescue Fleet to Join Search for Malaysia Airlines Plane,” *South China Morning Post*, March 11, 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1445152/largest-ever-chinese-rescue-fleet-join-search-malaysia-airlines-plane>; Zhou Wa, “Warships to Help Dispose of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” *China Daily*, December 26, 2013, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-12/26/content\\_17198885.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-12/26/content_17198885.htm); “China Sends Fresh Water to the Maldives,” *China Daily*, December 7, 2014, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-12/07/content\\_19037526.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-12/07/content_19037526.htm).

<sup>172</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 323.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 323.

China’s counterpiracy patrols are also notable for their relatively restrained use of force. China has followed stricter rules of engagement when operating against pirates compared to other nations conducting naval missions in the Gulf of Aden. Scholars Austin Strange and Andrew Erickson have documented the internal debates among Chinese officials about the legal rights and limitations of the PLAN’s escort patrols, and the general reluctance to detain foreign pirates.<sup>174</sup> From the onset of operations, PLAN officials have stated that the “tactics, techniques, and procedures for China are different than those for other countries,” and China has generally avoided using force beyond firing warning shots.<sup>175</sup> The PLAN detained Somali pirates for the first time in April 2017, over seven years after the first ETF patrol.<sup>176</sup> A Chinese newspaper article later detailed that the ETF’s on-board legal advisor had no established protocol for the detention of the pirates and had to work with superiors in the moment to formulate a legal strategy to authorize the PLAN’s action.<sup>177</sup>

The opening of the PLA Logistics Facility in Djibouti has further supported the PLAN’s counterpiracy missions. According to an official in the PLAN Logistics Department, the Djibouti base will shift the logistics model away from a reliance on supply ships supplemented by foreign port visits to one based on “overseas bases supplemented by foreign ports and domestic support,” which will subsequently help the PLAN “better respond to multiple security threats and complete diversified military tasks.”<sup>178</sup> A researcher at the PLAN Military Academic Research Institute in 2018 further stated that the escort missions have led the PLAN to actively explore “new models of overseas guarantees” and to adopt an “informationized, commercialized, and institutionalized far-seas comprehensive support system.”<sup>179</sup> Yet, despite these projections, it remains to be determined if China has successfully adopted these capabilities. Although PLA analysts have predicted the reduced role of supply ships in the conduct of counterpiracy missions, since 2018 the composition of each PLAN’s escort fleet has remained consistent and included a PLAN Type 903 replenishment ship.<sup>180</sup> It is likely that the PLAN will continue to rely on its existing support models for ETFs until it acquires additional far seas resupply capabilities.

<sup>174</sup> Strange and Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, 47-49.

<sup>175</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea...and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China’s Maritime Commons Presence*, (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2015), [http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Erickson-Publication\\_Anti-Piracy\\_China\\_Jamestown-Book\\_GoA-Mission\\_6-Years\\_2015\\_Final.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Erickson-Publication_Anti-Piracy_China_Jamestown-Book_GoA-Mission_6-Years_2015_Final.pdf).

<sup>176</sup> Ankit Panda, “As Somali Pirates Return, Chinese Navy Boasts of Anti-Piracy Operations,” *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/as-somali-pirates-return-chinese-navy-boasts-of-anti-piracy-operations/>.

<sup>177</sup> Ghiselli, *Protecting China’s Interests Overseas*, 222; Dong Zhuhong “Jian Hui zai Yading Wan Shanyao” 检徽在亚丁湾闪耀 [The Inspection Badge Shines in the Gulf of Aden], *Procuratorate Daily*, August 1, 2017, [http://newspaper.jcrb.com/2017/20170801/20170801\\_004/20170801\\_004\\_1.htm](http://newspaper.jcrb.com/2017/20170801/20170801_004/20170801_004_1.htm).

<sup>178</sup> “Liangjian Yading Wan” 亮剑亚丁湾 [The Bright Sword of the Gulf of Aden], *China Youth Daily*, December 24, 2018, [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2018-12/24/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20181224\\_4-03.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2018-12/24/nw.D110000zgqnb_20181224_4-03.htm)

<sup>179</sup> “Huhang Baozhang Tixi Shixian Xiaoneng Yusheng” 护航保障体系实现效能跃升 [Escort Guarantee System Achieves a Leap in Efficiency], *PLA Daily*, December 23, 2018, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1223/c1011-30482604.html>.

<sup>180</sup> Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, *Gwadar: China’s Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan* (Newport: U.S. Naval War College, 2020), CMSI China Maritime Reports, No. 7, 58, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7>.



Commemorating the ten-year anniversary of the mission in December 2018, Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Wu Qian stated that “looking ahead, the PLA Navy will continue efforts and contribute to building a community of shared future for mankind as well as world peace and stability.”<sup>181</sup> As the UN Security Council continues to unanimously extend its resolution authorizing the missions, China is likely to maintain its patrols indefinitely as a routine operation for the PLA.



UN\_Chinese Peacekeeping in South Sudan#2: Cunha, Gregorio. United Nations.

International Peacekeeping Operations

China's participation in peacekeeping operations (PKOs) predates its other foreign MOOTW, with China first dispatching five PLA military observers to the Suez as part of the UN Truce Supervision Organization in the Middle East in 1990.<sup>182</sup> Thirty years later, China touts its PKOs as serving as a “force of justice for world peace and development,” and Chinese experts refer to PKOs as “China's diplomatic calling card.”<sup>183</sup> However, in some instances, China's commitment to PKOs serves to protect Chinese overseas

<sup>181</sup> People's Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Dec. 27,” (Beijing: Ministry of National Defense, 2018), [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-12/27/content\\_9390144.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-12/27/content_9390144.htm).  
<sup>182</sup> People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office “China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations,” (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2020), <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202009/18/WS5f641de9a31024ad0ba7a5de.html>.  
<sup>183</sup> People's Republic of China, “China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations.”; “Zhao Lei: Weihe Zhengzai Chengwei Zhongguo Waijiao Mingpian” 赵磊: 维和正在成为中国外交名片 [Zhao Lei: Peacekeeping is Becoming China's Diplomatic Calling Card], *FTChinese*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001064211?full=y&archive>.

economic interests. It also provides the PLA with operational experience and exposure to a diverse set of missions, and bolsters China's image as a responsible great power and a contributor to global security.

The nature of PRC participation in PKOs has changed over time, and scholars have tended to categorize China's position on peacekeeping into distinct phases.<sup>184</sup> Beginning in 1990, China contributed several dozen technical advisors and military observers to ongoing peacekeeping missions. In 1992, China contributed nearly 400 military engineers to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, its largest deployed contingent until 2006. At the turn of the century, China for the first time supported a non-consensual peacekeeping mission in East Timor, and provided support units to UN missions in Liberia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Hu Jintao's New Historic Mission in 2004 provided greater responsibility to peacekeeping in China's national defense policy, and in that same year, the Ministry of Defense's white paper mentioned peacekeeping for the first time.<sup>185</sup>

In 2006 and 2007, China openly supported the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur, a significant milestone for the PLA's participation in PKOs. China's vote to authorize the mission came after years of backing the Sudanese government at the UN Security Council, before shifting its stance and actively pressuring Khartoum to accept UN peacekeepers.<sup>186</sup> Scholar Courtney Fung argues that China ultimately changed its position due to the “influence” of both great powers and developing nations that supported the operation.<sup>187</sup> China sent a contingent of several hundred military engineers to UNAMID and in 2007 dispatched a “self-defensive security unit” to protect its peacekeepers in Sudan.<sup>188</sup> A similar unit was deployed in 2012 in South Sudan.<sup>189</sup> As a self-defense unit, they were not officially considered under UN jurisdiction, but their deployment represented a “turning point” in how China engaged with UN PKOs.<sup>190</sup>

In 2009 and 2010, officials at the Ministry of National Defense's Peacekeeping Office stated that China would consider requests from the UN for combat troops, in line with China's “defensive” national defense policy, the response of the international community,

<sup>184</sup> Courtney J. Fung, “What explains China's deployment to UN peacekeeping operations?,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16, no. 3 (2016): 409-441; Yin He, “China Rising and Its Changing Policy on UN Peacekeeping,” in *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, eds. Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).  
<sup>185</sup> People's Republic of China, “China's National Defense in 2004,” (Beijing: The State Council Information Office, 2004). <http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004.html>.  
<sup>186</sup> Courtney J. Fung, “What explains China's deployment to UN peacekeeping operations?,” 22.  
<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 22.  
<sup>188</sup> “China Values Self-Defense in Peacekeeping Operations,” *Xinhua*, February 23, 2012, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2012-02/23/content\\_24715382.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2012-02/23/content_24715382.htm).  
<sup>189</sup> U.S., U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “China's First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission-South Sudan,” Daniel M. Hartnett, (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2012), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/MEMO-PLA-PKO\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/MEMO-PLA-PKO_final_0.pdf).  
<sup>190</sup> Ghiselli, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas*, 212; United States Institute of Peace, “China's Evolving Role as a UN Peacekeeper in Mali,” Jean-Pierre Cabestan, (2018), 1, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/chinas-evolving-role-un-peacekeeper-mali>.

and the willingness of the host country.<sup>191</sup> The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs viewed these deployments as a “natural progression” of China’s PKO responsibilities.<sup>192</sup> In 2012 and 2013, China deployed a small number of infantry troops as “security forces” in South Sudan and Mali, which would principally guard peacekeeping headquarters and living areas.<sup>193</sup> In January 2015, China sent a 700-strong infantry battalion to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>194</sup> As of 2020, PRC battalions assigned to UNMISS had completed six rotations, over 144 patrols, and 314 armed escorts.<sup>195</sup>

Official explanations for China’s participation in PKOs emphasize China’s desire to project a role as a global leader. In 2006, China’s UN Ambassador Wang Guangya stated that as “major powers are withdrawing from the peacekeeping role...China felt it is the right time for us to fill this vacuum.”<sup>196</sup> In September 2020, China’s State Council Information Office released an official white paper on China’s contribution to UN PKOs.<sup>197</sup> In a press conference for the white paper, Major General Luo Wei, Director of the Peacekeeping Affairs Center of the Ministry of National Defense, emphasized China’s objectives, in short, are to “fulfill [China’s] responsibility as a major power, maintain world peace, and work to build a community with a shared future for mankind.”<sup>198</sup> The peacekeeping white paper outlines six principles of China’s participation in PKOs: uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; follow the basic principles of UN PKOs; champion a vision of global governance based on extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits; pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; stay committed to peaceful means in settling disputes; and build stronger peacekeeping partnerships.<sup>199</sup>

China’s desire to serve as a leader in PKOs is driven both by its desired status as a major power on par with the US and its self-declared status as the world’s largest developing nation. Senior Colonel Lu Jianxin, an instructor at the Ministry of National Defense’s Peacekeeping Center, has argued that China’s simultaneous obligations as both a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a

<sup>191</sup> “Zhongguo Jiang Ying Lianheguo Qingqiu Kaolv Shifou Paiqian Weihe Zuozhan Budui” 中国将应联合国请求考虑是否派遣维和作战部队 [China Will Consider Whether to Send Peacekeeping Troops at the Request of the United Nations], *China News*, November 21, 2009, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2009-11-21/1026574644.html>; Cheng Guangjin, “Chinese Combat Troops ‘Can Join UN Peacekeeping,’” *China Daily*, July 7, 2007, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-07/07/content\\_10073171.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-07/07/content_10073171.htm).

<sup>192</sup> Courtney Fung, “Providing for global security: implications of China’s combat troop deployment to UN peace-keeping,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 25, no. 4 (2019), 516.

<sup>193</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense, “China’s First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission-South Sudan”; “2013 Nian 6 Yue Guofang Bu Li Xing Jizhe Hui” 2013年6月国防部例行记者会 [Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense in June 2013], (Beijing: Ministry of National Defense, 2013), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gbwxfbh/xwfbh/gfb/document/1333297/1333297.htm>; “China to Send Security Force for Peacekeeping Mission in Mali,” *Xinhua*, June 28, 2013, <http://en.people.cn/90786/8303006.html>.

<sup>194</sup> Dennis Blasko, “China’s Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers,” *China Brief*, December 5, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-contribution-peacekeeping-operation-understanding-numbers/>.

<sup>195</sup> People’s Republic of China, “China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations.”

<sup>196</sup> Colum Lynch, “China Filling Void Left by West in U.N. Peacekeeping,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/23/AR2006112301007.html>.

<sup>197</sup> People’s Republic of China, “China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations.”

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

“major developing country” motivate China’s contributions to PKOs.<sup>200</sup> An officer at the Ministry of Public Security’s Peacekeeping Police Training Center has further argued that “national identity” is the most important factor shaping China’s stance on PKOs.<sup>201</sup> These explanations align with scholar Courtney Fung’s findings that “identity-related concerns” drive China to participate in PKOs.<sup>202</sup> The motivating factors for these concerns, however, may have evolved over time. According to Zhao Lei, a professor at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, China participated in PKOs in the 1990s to push back against a perceived “China threat” narrative that existed in the West, while PKOs in the 21st century promote China’s “responsible great power image.”<sup>203</sup>

These motivations were made clear in President Xi Jinping’s highest-level speech on peacekeeping to date, which he delivered at the September 2015 UN Leaders’ Summit on Peacekeeping. Xi praised PKOs as an “important approach to maintaining world peace and security,” and highlighted China as a “major provider of armies and funds for peacekeeping operations.”<sup>204</sup> During his speech, Xi announced a series of measures and initiatives to underscore China’s support of PKOs, including building a peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops, joining the new UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, and pledging US\$100 million to the African Union to support the formation of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis.<sup>205</sup>

Xi Jinping’s 2015 announcement that China planned to build an 8,000-troop standby force led some analysts to believe that China planned to increase its contribution to active PKOs to 8,000 troops. In practice, the “standby force” is a non-deployed set of Chinese troops that are trained and ready to participate in PKOs if authorized. The 2020 peacekeeping white paper stated that the force has “28 units in 10 categories – infantry, engineer, transport, medical, force protection, rapid response, helicopter, transport aircraft, UAV, and surface ship units.”<sup>206</sup> The standby force is part of the UN’s Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS), a system developed in 2015 to reinforce the readiness and quick deployment of peacekeeping forces.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Jianxin Liu, “Zhongguo Jundui Canjia Lianheguo Weihe Xingdong de Chuxin he Shiming” 中国军队参加联合国维和行动的初心和使命 [The Origins and Mission of the Chinese Armed Forces’ Participation in UN Peace-keeping Operations], *Guangming Daily*, September 20, 2020, [https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2020-09/20/nw.D110000gmrb\\_20200920\\_2-07.htm](https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2020-09/20/nw.D110000gmrb_20200920_2-07.htm).

<sup>201</sup> Yin He, “China Rising and Its Changing Policy on UN Peacekeeping,” in *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, eds. Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>202</sup> Courtney J. Fung, “What explains China’s deployment to UN peacekeeping operations?,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16, no. 3 (2016): 409-441.

<sup>203</sup> Lei Zhao, “Two pillars of China’s global peace engagement strategy: UN peacekeeping and international peace-building,” *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 3 (2011), 345.

<sup>204</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Xi Jinping Attends and Addresses UN Leaders’ Summit on Peacekeeping,” (Beijing: Mission of the People’s Republic of China in the African Union, 2015), [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgauchm/eng/zgyw\\_3/t1304147.htm](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgauchm/eng/zgyw_3/t1304147.htm)

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> People’s Republic of China, “China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations.”

<sup>207</sup> “Military,” *United Nations Peacekeeping*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military>.



Standby forces are assessed based on readiness and can only be pledged to deploy when they have reached rapid deployment level (RDL), the fourth level of readiness. As of 2020, only six of China's 28 units were rated at a level 3 readiness status.<sup>208</sup> Thus, none of China's standby force may be currently eligible for 60-day deployment by the UN under PCRS; however, this might change in the future as China continues to train its standby forces. Besides a military standby force, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security also established a permanent peacekeeping police squad in 2016, which the UN upgraded to RDL status in 2019.<sup>209</sup>

Importantly, PKOs allow the PLA to participate in international military cooperation and diplomacy. The first mention of UN peacekeeping in PRC Defense White Papers was in 2004, when it was included in the objective to “carry out military exchanges and cooperation.”<sup>210</sup> China carried out its first joint exercise focused on peacekeeping in 2009, with Mongolia.<sup>211</sup> Since then, China has participated in field and table-top peacekeeping exercises with the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Brazil.<sup>212</sup> China has also launched peacekeeping training centers for foreign soldiers and police forces. In a 2013 visit to one of these training centers, then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon praised China's support for ensuring that “peacekeepers are trained and equipped to address new threats.”<sup>213</sup>

Rarely mentioned in official explanations for China's contributions to PKOs are two commonly ascribed ulterior motives: the desire to protect China's economic assets abroad, and the desire to improve the operational and combat capabilities of the PLA.<sup>214</sup> Chinese experts generally acknowledge linkages between contributions to PKOs and protecting and promoting China's economic development and overseas interests. Zhao Lei writes that China stands “to gain much from its peacekeeping contribution” and that China needs “stable overseas markets to secure its sustainable economic development,” though he notes that it is “too simplistic” to argue that PKOs are *solely* for China's economic interests.<sup>215</sup> PRC officials have similarly told UN officials that PKOs are tied to the “need to protect the country's citizens and investments in Africa.”<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, the 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* somewhat bluntly states that PKOs “lay the foundation for a favorable overseas investment environment in the future.”<sup>217</sup>

<sup>208</sup> People's Republic of China, “China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of Peacekeeping Operations.”

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> “China's National Defense in 2004,” *People's Daily*, n.d, [http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004\(2\).html](http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004(2).html).

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> United Nations, Office of the Secretary-General, “Remarks at the China Peacekeeping Military Training Centre,” Ban Ki-Moon, (Beijing: Office of the Secretary-General, 2013), <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2013-06-19/remarks-china-peacekeeping-military-training-centre>.

<sup>214</sup> Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, “China's Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2015); Brookings Institution, “China's pragmatic approach to UN peacekeeping,” Richard Gowan (2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/>.

<sup>215</sup> Zhao, “Two pillars of China's global peace engagement strategy,” 348.

<sup>216</sup> Richard Gowan, “China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping,” *Brookings Institution*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/>.

<sup>217</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 313.

Regarding an operational experience objective, PKOs do provide real but limited training for deployed troops. The Chinese expert Jiang Zhenxi told reporters in 2012 that the benefit for PLA troops participating in PKOs includes “broadening their horizons, familiarizing [themselves] with international rules, improving their quality... [and] improv[ing] [their] crisis handling capabilities.”<sup>218</sup> According to Dennis Blasko, “engineering, logistics, and medical units” perform in a similar role to what they may undertake in combat, and combat units can “conduct patrols, armed escort, and local security in a hostile environment.”<sup>219</sup> Additionally, combat units can gain operational exposure, which can give officers “experience in mapping politically devised mandates onto practical concepts of operations and rules of engagement.”<sup>220</sup> Yet, the relevancy to future combat operations is possibly overstated. These missions largely “do not replicate actual combat experience and are distributed within an extremely limited subset of the entire PLA.”<sup>221</sup> As of 2021, China's deployment of infantry troops to PKOs has not exceeded 1,000 troops in any single rotation and the responsibility of these troops is typically limited to protection and escort missions.



UN\_PLA humanitarian rescue: Schneider, Evan. United Nations

### Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR)

Since 2010, the PLA has contributed to international humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations with unprecedented frequency. In the past decade, China has deployed its military to respond to natural disasters in Nepal, the Philippines, and Japan, epidemics in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and sudden crises in

<sup>218</sup> Yun Li and Wei Qin, “Women Weishenme Yao Paichu Junshi Guanchayuan” 我们为什么要派出军事观察员 [Why Should We Deploy Military Observers?], *China Youth Daily*, September 7, 2012, [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2012-09/07/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20120907\\_3-09.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2012-09/07/nw.D110000zgqnb_20120907_3-09.htm).

<sup>219</sup> Dennis Blasko, “China's Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers.”

<sup>220</sup> Courtney Fung, “Providing for global security,” 517.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 517.

the Maldives and Indian Ocean.<sup>222</sup> According to China’s 2019 Defense White Paper, the PLA has deployed over 950,000 soldiers, 26,000 vessels, and 820 aircraft in domestic and international emergency response and disaster relief operations.<sup>223</sup> Most recently, the PLA has also participated in HA/DR missions in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These operations have enabled China to protect its overseas citizens from conflict, signaled China’s contributions to international security as a “responsible stakeholder,” furthered bilateral and multilateral military partnerships, and tested the PLA’s expeditionary capabilities.

The PLA has long played a role in domestic responses to natural disasters or humanitarian crises within China’s borders. Major rescue efforts included the mobilization of 100,000 troops in response to the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, 300,000 troops in response to the 1998 Yangtze River floods, and the 138,000 relief forces following the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.<sup>224</sup> In particular, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake directly tested the PLA’s ability to handle the type of non-traditional security challenges emphasized in Hu Jintao’s “New Historic Mission.” The PLAAF completed the “largest air transportation operation” in its history in response to the disaster, but the PLA’s operations generally underscored “continued problems with equipment, logistics, airlift capability, and joint operations [between PLA branches].”<sup>225</sup> Following the Wenchuan earthquake, China’s international HA/DR operations increased at an unprecedented rate. This trend possibly reflects a greater confidence in China’s HA/DR capabilities following the earthquake, or, to the contrary, may reflect a perceived need to gain additional experience with these kinds of operations in light of the shortcomings of the 2008 operation.<sup>226</sup>

The PLA has since gone on to contribute to an array of major international HA/DR operations in the Indo-Pacific. The PLAAF has sent some of its largest transport aircraft, the IL-76 and Y-20, to deliver emergency supplies to Mongolia, Pakistan, Thailand, and Myanmar, among other countries.<sup>227</sup> The PLAN has similarly tasked a variety of destroyers, amphibious ships, and its hospital ship, *Peace Ark*, to ongoing crises.<sup>228</sup> The largest of these operations was in 2015, when China sent 1,088 PLA and PAP personnel to Nepal to assist following an earthquake. According to the Director

<sup>222</sup> Southerland, “The Chinese Military’s Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

<sup>223</sup> Government of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2019), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c\\_138253389.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm).

<sup>224</sup> Dou Ding, “PLA’s Disaster Relief Works: Review and Reform,” *East Asian Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010): 49-57, [https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/11/Vol2No3\\_DingDou.pdf](https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/11/Vol2No3_DingDou.pdf).

<sup>225</sup> Harold M. Tanner, “The People’s Liberation Army and China’s Internal Security Challenges,” in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, eds. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 268; RAND Corporation, “The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force,” Cristina Garafola and Timothy Heath (2017), 21, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2056.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2056.html).

<sup>226</sup> RAND Corporation, “The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force,” 23.

<sup>227</sup> RAND Corporation, “The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force,” 23; Wang Xinjuan, “5th Anniversary of the Commissioning of Y-20 Transport Aircraft,” *China Military Online*, July 6, 2021. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-07/06/content\\_10058945.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-07/06/content_10058945.htm)

<sup>228</sup> Southerland, “The Chinese Military’s Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns,” 10-11.

of the PLA’s Emergency Response Office, it was the largest contingent sent abroad for a humanitarian mission since the establishment of the PRC.<sup>229</sup> Another significant operation was China’s deployment of the *Peace Ark* and the *Kunlunshan* amphibious ship in response to the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. It was the first time that the PLAN had participated in an international disaster relief operation.<sup>230</sup>

China has likewise sought to promote its international image by responding to epidemics. In 2014, as Ebola began spreading across West Africa, the PLA deployed approximately 500 personnel to Sierra Leone and Liberia to establish diagnosis and treatment centers. China also sent \$120 million in aid and 500 civilian medical personnel to the broader region. For their efforts, China received high praise from West African leaders.<sup>231</sup>

The PLA has also carried out numerous humanitarian assistance operations in response to the ongoing COVID epidemic.<sup>232</sup> China’s vaccine diplomacy has been unique in several ways. Most of the assistance was conducted via commercial sales rather than donations as implied by official statements. China’s engagement has also been established predominantly through opaque bilateral agreements linked to other foreign policy goals.<sup>233</sup> In the past year, the PLA has assisted in the delivery of PPE and vaccines to countries around the world, most of whom fit within China foreign policy priorities emphasizing Belt and Road Initiative states and South-South diplomacy. In 2020 and 2021, the PLAAF delivered medical supplies to Myanmar, Vietnam, Pakistan, and Tunisia, and dispatched PLA medical teams to Laos, Pakistan and Myanmar.<sup>234</sup> The medical team in Myanmar assisted with the construction of a COVID-19 testing lab in the Defence Services General Hospital in Yangon.<sup>235</sup>

However, some of China’s assistance has come with ulterior motives, and political interests have arguably played a key role in China’s public health diplomacy. Notably, Beijing has been reticent to cooperate with international organizations or to share epidemiological information. For example, a cover-up of the origin of SARS in 2003

<sup>229</sup> “China sends record military personnel numbers to Nepal,” *Xinhua*, May 27, 2015, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/07/content\\_20652513.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/07/content_20652513.htm).

<sup>230</sup> Southerland, “The Chinese Military’s Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns,” 7.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>232</sup> Elsa Kania and Ian Burns Mccaslin, “People’s Warfare against Covid-19: Testing China’s Military Medical and Defense Mobilization Capabilities” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, December 2020), <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20People%27s%20Warfare%20against%20COVID-19%20ISW%20China%20December%202020.pdf>; Shunguo Liu and Ren Zhou, “Xietiao Jundi Tong Zhan ‘Yi’” 协调军地同战“疫” [Coordinating the Military and Local Government to Fight the “Epidemic”], *Xinhua*, February 10, 2020, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2020-02/10/content\\_4860113.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2020-02/10/content_4860113.htm).

<sup>233</sup> China Power Team, “Is China’s Covid-19 Diplomacy Succeeding?” China Power, last modified March 17, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-medical-vaccine-diplomacy/>.

<sup>234</sup> Mercator Institute for China Studies, “The PLA’s Mask Diplomacy: China Global Security Tracker No. 7,” Helena Legarda, (2020), <https://merics.org/en/tracker/plas-mask-diplomacy>.

<sup>235</sup> “Chinese military medics assist Myanmar military in building COVID-19 testing laboratory,” *Xinhua*, May 1, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c\\_139022026.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c_139022026.htm).



prevented the discovery of the disease's source for a decade.<sup>236</sup> When African swine fever flared up in China in 2018, China refused to share information with Taiwan.<sup>237</sup> Similarly, initial statistics on the spread of COVID-19 were suppressed, and the WHO mission to determine the origins of COVID-19 was obstructed.<sup>238</sup>

Analysts, and the PLA itself, have highlighted that HA/DR operations allow the PLA to improve its operational capabilities. Jeffrey Engstrom has argued that aid provision, delivery, and distribution provide the opportunity for the PLA to gain joint coordination experience between military branches and government ministries.<sup>239</sup> Specific operations like airlifts have relevance to future combat scenarios and can also be tested in HA/DR operations.<sup>240</sup> China's 2015 Defense White Paper states that HA/DR operations provide the PLA an opportunity to "enhance their own capabilities and expertise."<sup>241</sup>

The PLA's participation in international HA/DR operations is also driven by reputational concerns and a desire to further its foreign relations with a variety of actors. China has consistently promoted its HA/DR operations as proof of its role as a responsible global actor. Following a 2015 PLA humanitarian operation in Nepal, the MFA issued a press release, commenting "it proves again that China is Nepal's most reliable friend, closest neighbor and most trustworthy partner. A friend in need is a friend indeed."<sup>242</sup>

Similarly, HA/DR operations provide an opportunity for military diplomacy. China frequently participates in joint HA/DR exercises with Thailand, Mongolia, and other Indo-Pacific nations. HA/DR is also one of the few fields in which the US and China have been able to conduct bilateral exercises, as HA/DR exercises do not conflict with US legislation restricting international cooperation in ways that may "create a national security risk."<sup>243</sup> As such, the US and China have held an annual Disaster Management Exchange, the most recent of which occurred over video in November 2020.<sup>244</sup>

Although China hopes to accrue positive benefits from its participation in international HA/DR operations, Beijing has also sparked controversy by appearing to

<sup>236</sup> Jeremy Page, Betsy McKay, and Drew Hinshaw, "How the WHO's Hunt for Covid's Origins Stumbled in China," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2021, 4, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/who-china-hunt-covid-origins-11616004512>.

<sup>237</sup> Southerland, "The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns," 7.

<sup>238</sup> Page, McKay, and Hinshaw, "How the WHO's Hunt."

<sup>239</sup> Jeffrey Engstrom, "Taking disaster seriously: East Asian military involvement in international disaster relief operations and the implications for force projection," *Asian Security* 9, no. 1 (2013): 38-61.

<sup>240</sup> Athol Yates, "China's Risk Equation: Using Military Forces in International Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Activities," Institute for Security and Development Policy (2013), 25.

<sup>241</sup> People's Republic of China, "China's Military Strategy."

<sup>242</sup> Government of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Ram Baran Yadav and Prime Minister Sushil Koirala of Nepal Meet with Wang Yi," (Beijing: 2015), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cggb/eng//xwdt/t1276306.htm>.

<sup>243</sup> Southerland, "The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns," 4.

<sup>244</sup> U.S., U.S. Army Pacific, "US and Chinese Armies Conduct Virtual Collaboration on HA/DR," (Fort Shafter: 2020), [https://www.army.mil/article/240780/us\\_and\\_chinese\\_armies\\_conduct\\_virtual\\_collaboration\\_on\\_hadr](https://www.army.mil/article/240780/us_and_chinese_armies_conduct_virtual_collaboration_on_hadr).

place politics over best practices in some instances. During the 2015 Nepal operation, the PLA only cooperated with the Nepal Army bilaterally, rather than following international best practices and coordinating through the Multinational Military Coordination Center. As a result, Nepal divided Indian, Chinese, and American efforts into individual sectors. According to a US Department of Defense official, the PLA treated their sector as "sovereign territory," refusing help from the American military even when it was clear that American vertical lift capabilities could have compensated for the PLA's shortfall in that sector.<sup>245</sup> An additional example is China's initial response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. China initially offered only \$100,000 in cash and relief supplies, drawing criticism within and outside China. Some commentators attributed the small donation — less than ten percent of what China that year pledged to Pakistan following an earthquake — to Beijing and Manila's ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. China later raised its donation amount to \$1.4 million.<sup>246</sup>



US Army\_13th annual U.S.-China Disaster Management Exchange: U.S.

### Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)

The PLA's increased focus on Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) is a logical result of China's expanding overseas economic interests. The growth of Chinese foreign trade and investment has led to the outflow of Chinese citizens, including to areas prone to conflict. From 2000 to 2010, the MFA managed the evacuation of Chinese

<sup>245</sup> Anonymous retired U.S. defense official quoted in Southerland, "The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns," 5.

<sup>246</sup> Samantha Stainburn, "China to give more disaster aid to victims of Typhoon Haiyan as the suffering continues," *The World*, November 14, 2013, <https://theworld.org/stories/2013-11-14/china-give-more-disaster-aid-victims-typhoon-haiyan-suffering-continues>.

civilians from natural disasters or social unrest. When necessary, the MFA chartered civilian aircrafts to evacuate Chinese citizens.<sup>247</sup> But in 2011, in the wake of anti-government protests in Benghazi and escalating civil war in Libya, the Central Military Commission authorized the PLA to assist in the evacuation of 30,000 Chinese citizens (and ultimately 2,100 foreign nationals) from Libya. A majority of these evacuees worked for Chinese railway, communication, and oil companies operating in the country.<sup>248</sup>

On February 25, 2011, the PLAN diverted the *Xuzhou* missile frigate from its Gulf of Aden anti-piracy patrols to support the evacuation effort.<sup>249</sup> Two days later, the PLAAF sent four IL-76 aircraft to Libya, which conducted 12 sorties to evacuate Chinese nationals to Khartoum and Beijing.<sup>250</sup> The *Xuzhou* and IL-76 aircraft operated in tandem with chartered civilian aircraft, cruise ships, and merchant ships.<sup>251</sup> During the operation, the PLA coordinated with the Ministries of Commerce, Foreign Affairs, and Public Security.<sup>252</sup> The 2011 Libyan evacuation demonstrated the PLA’s growing capacity to support some long-range operations and established a precedent for future PLA evacuation operations. Following the evacuations, PLA generals remarked that the PLA is likely to participate in more evacuations of overseas Chinese citizens.<sup>253</sup> For example, one PLA Major General stated the PLA’s performance in the evacuation showed the Chinese army’s enhanced capacity to respond to conventional and non-conventional security threats and “...has also underscored [the] Chinese army’s capacity in long-distance transportation.”<sup>254</sup> These capabilities would soon be tested further.

In March 2015, due to the rapid onset of a Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen, the PLAN North Sea fleet operating in the Gulf of Aden was diverted for four days to the city of Aden to evacuate more than 500 Chinese citizens as well as two foreign experts to Djibouti.<sup>255</sup> This action represented a number of notable firsts for the PLAN, showcasing its increased capabilities and ambition since 2011. This operation was the “first evacuation using PLAN vessels at a foreign port, the first evacuation of foreigners, and the first pause in China’s patrols in the

<sup>247</sup> “Jinnianlai Zhongguo de Zhongda Cheqiao Xingdong” 近年来中国的重大撤侨行动 [Recent Chinese Major Evacuation Operations], March 31, 2015, *Xinhua*, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJJpD9>.

<sup>248</sup> Shixiong Mei and Zurong Yang, “Diyci Dongyong Junshi Liliang Cheqiao: 2011 Nian Libiya Dacheqiao” 第一次动用军事力量撤侨: 2011年利比亚大撤侨 [The First Use of Military Force to Evacuate Overseas Chinese: The 2011 Libyan Evacuation], August 15, 2017, *Xinhua*, [http://www.xinhuanet.com//2017-08/15/c\\_1121487719.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com//2017-08/15/c_1121487719.htm).

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, “Implications of China’s Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya,” *China Brief*, March 11, 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/implications-of-chinas-military-evacuation-of-citizens-from-libya/>.

<sup>253</sup> “Chinese army likely to join more overseas evacuations after Libya mission: PLA generals,” *Global Times*, March 5, 2011, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/630167.shtml>.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “PLA Navy Used for First Time in Naval Evacuation from Yemen Conflict,” The Jamestown Foundation, April 3, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-navy-used-for-first-time-in-naval-evacuation-from-yemen-conflict/>.

Gulf of Aden.”<sup>256</sup> Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying confirmed that this evacuation was a “special action” and the first time the Chinese government evacuated foreign nationals from a dangerous zone, “a move embodying the notions of ‘putting the people first’, internationalism and humanitarianism held by the Chinese government.”<sup>257</sup>

It is worth acknowledging that China has not taken steps to launch sustained operations to protect Chinese citizens and businesses operating in dangerous environments abroad. Instead, China will likely continue to rely on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to lead civilian evacuations, and to leverage an emerging Chinese private security industry and close partnership with host countries as major components of its strategy to protect overseas citizens and commercial interests.<sup>258</sup> For example, following the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs evacuated 210 Chinese citizens from Kabul.<sup>259</sup> In 2021, China coordinated with the Ethiopian government to evacuate several hundred Chinese citizens from Tigray amidst ongoing conflict in the region.<sup>260</sup> Thus, while the PLA’s role in NEOs has clearly grown in recent years, it has not usurped the leading role of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is likely to continue to augment, rather than replace, China’s civilian capacity in such operations.

NEOs are intertwined with the PLA’s other far-seas operations, in part, to protect China’s global economic networks. The PLAN ships that assisted in the Libya and Yemen NEOs were both in the region due to China’s ongoing contribution to the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission. In this regard, China’s far-seas operations are mutually reinforcing, and allow the PLA to take on greater international responsibility. These campaigns support China’s “Belt and Road” aspirations and bolster the national sense of pride and security. After the successful Yemen operation, the state-run *Global Times* stated, “the meaning of Chinese national security is expanding from a fixed goal of territorial waters to individuals who move overseas, so it is a never-ending mission.”<sup>261</sup>

<sup>256</sup> Ibid; Yuandan Guo and Tang Li, “Zhonggguo Haijun Zhanshi Daguo Zeren Yizhou Chuangzao San Ge ‘Shouci’” 中国海军展示大国责任 一周创造三个“首次” [China’s navy Shows Great Power Responsibility, Creating Three “Firsts” in a Week], *Global Times*, April 3, 2015, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJJxu6>.

<sup>257</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on April 3, 2015,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cegv/eng/fyrth/t1251976.htm>.

<sup>258</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, “Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects,” *China Brief*, May 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-private-security-contractors-new-trends-and-future-prospects/>.

<sup>259</sup> German Marshall Fund of the United States, “China’s Bet on the Taliban Protecting its Nationals,” Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, August 26, 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/chinas-bet-taliban-protecting-its-nationals>.

<sup>260</sup> Laura Zhou, “Chinese flee northern Ethiopia as civil conflict hits region,” *South China Morning Post*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3111056/chinese-flee-northern-ethiopia-civil-conflict-hits-region>.

<sup>261</sup> Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “PLA Navy Used for First Time.”





AP\_Vostok 2018 military exercise: Grits, Sergei. Army University Press.

### International Military Exercises and Military Diplomacy

The expansion of the PLA's military missions has led to new opportunities for bilateral and multilateral partnerships. China has promoted military cooperation on shared non-traditional security challenges through senior-level visits, port calls, and combined exercises with other nations.<sup>262</sup> These operations enable China to address security concerns directly by developing the PLA's operational capabilities and indirectly by building partner capacity. China's pursuit of military diplomacy also demonstrates its commitment to security partners, bolsters its image as a global security leader, and helps manage regional geopolitics.

Until the turn of the century, the PLA historically did not engage in combined military exercises with other nations. This may have reflected China's traditional view of a limited role for the deployment of military forces abroad.<sup>263</sup> However, the emerging focus on non-traditional security threats under Jiang Zemin provided an opportunity to address shared challenges with regional nations. The establishment of the SCO in 2001 paved the way for China's first combined exercise, a counterterrorism drill between the Kyrgyz armed forces and PLA in 2002.<sup>264</sup> Since then, the SCO has

<sup>262</sup> Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "China Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications."

<sup>263</sup> Wilson Chun Hei Chau, "Explaining China's Participation in Bilateral and Multilateral Military Exercises," *Security Challenges* 7, no. 3 (2011): 51.

<sup>264</sup> "Backgrounder: Major PLA-related joint anti-terror military exercises and trainings," *People's Daily*, December 21, 2007, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/6325264.html>.

served as the most important platform for China to pursue combined exercises with Russia and several Central Asian nations, as well as Pakistan and India, both of which are recent additions to the SCO.<sup>265</sup>

The PLA's combined exercises with foreign nations do address significant shared security concerns. Combined exercises train forces in crisis response and establish bilateral relationships applicable to a range of military scenarios. For example, the SCO's annual *Peace Mission* exercises "nominally focused on counterterrorism, have included combat-related activities such as air defense, bombing, and aerial refueling."<sup>266</sup> The 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* states that the three main avenues for foreign military cooperation are intelligence sharing, command coordination, and logistics support, all of which are routinely tested in bilateral exercises and have broad utility for war and non-war operations.<sup>267</sup> China has reached agreements with Central Asian nations under the SCO framework to permit military transit through third-party countries and provide logistical support for military exercises.<sup>268</sup> Concurrently, by working with the PLA, foreign nations' militaries, especially those of smaller nations, can gain vital experience that may help prepare them to better address domestic security issues that China has an interest in mitigating, but which it may be reluctant to engage with directly.

Military diplomacy also serves explicit geopolitical objectives to build regional influence. Like other MOOTW, CCP central leadership closely coordinates and aligns military diplomacy with broader foreign policy goals. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states that cooperative military activities "strengthen strategic confidence, increase military transparency, display our military's excellent image, raise our military's international prestige, and expand our nation's international influence."<sup>269</sup> According to Rush Doshi, China established the SCO for geopolitical reasons, believing that the organization "could blunt American influence [in Central Asia] and reassure China's neighbors about Beijing's intentions."<sup>270</sup>

As a result, China has used the SCO as a platform for broader military and diplomatic cooperation beyond counterterrorism, especially with Russia. In the 2000s, the timing, location, and capabilities of several *Peace Mission* exercises indicate the drills were preparations for possible North Korea contingencies.<sup>271</sup> In the past decade, Sino-Russian military cooperation has expanded to aerial, maritime, and missile defense exercises. In 2012, China and Russia staged their first *Joint Sea* exercise in the Yellow Sea featuring a total of eight Russian combat vessels, 16 Chinese surface ships, two submarines, and 13

<sup>265</sup> Matthew Southerland, Will Green, and Sierra Janik, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 12, 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/shanghai-cooperation-organization-testbed-chinese-power-projection>.

<sup>266</sup> Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "China Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications," 3.

<sup>267</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 300-301.

<sup>268</sup> Southerland, Green, and Janik, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization," 6.

<sup>269</sup> Shou, *Zhanlüe Xue*, 120.

<sup>270</sup> Rush Doshi, *The Long Game*, 127.

<sup>271</sup> Stephen Blank, "Peace-Mission 2009: A Military Scenario Beyond Central Asia," The Jamestown Foundation, August 20, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/peace-mission-2009-a-military-scenario-beyond-central-asia/>.

aircraft to conduct counterpiracy, joint air defense, maritime search and rescue, and anti-submarine warfare drills.<sup>272</sup> In 2019 and 2020, China and Russia conducted joint aerial strategic patrols.<sup>273</sup> These exercises frequently occur in areas relevant to China and Russia's regional security interests, such as the Baltic and East China Seas.<sup>274</sup> Furthermore, China and Russia held 2016 and 2017 exercises which featured computer simulated anti-missile operations apparently in response to the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) in South Korea.<sup>275</sup> These exercises expanded the Sino-Russian defense relationship into new services, capabilities, and geopolitical hotspots, and helped to cement the relationship's evolution beyond the *Peace Mission* exercises.

Similar to Sino-Russian exercises, the nature of Sino-Pakistani exercises reveals both the depth of their security cooperation in critical areas of mutual interest. Combined naval and air exercises have taken place in areas notably close to India. Starting in 2012, the PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) have held annual combined exercises named *Shaheen* aimed at increasing interoperability in aerial combat scenarios. China and Pakistan conducted the 2020 edition of *Shaheen* in Sindh province, adjacent to India.<sup>276</sup> Additionally, since 2013, the PLA and the Pakistan Army's special forces have annually participated in the *Warrior* series of bilateral combined exercises focusing on counterterrorism. The annual naval exercises, named *Guardian*, have been held between China and Pakistan since 2014.<sup>277</sup> Similar to *Shaheen IX*'s location, the *Guardian 2020* exercise was held off India's west coast. Despite this, the PLA stated that the drills were not targeted at any third country.<sup>278</sup>

The complex nature of the Sino-Thai defense relationship demonstrates key differences between the Southeast Asian geopolitical landscape and that of Central or South Asia. Combined exercises have been a key part of the Sino-Thai military relationship for the past two decades, and since the 2014 Thai coup, have formed a key component of China's push for deeper defense cooperation.<sup>279</sup> The first Sino-Thai exercise was a mine clearance training program that the PLA held for the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in 2005.<sup>280</sup> This focus on non-traditional security threats became codified in the 2007 Sino-Thai Joint Action Plan, which would lead to the *Strike* series of exercises between

<sup>272</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises," Richard Weitz, (2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-chinese-russian-military-exercises-past-progress-and-future-trends>.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>275</sup> "China, Russia to hold further anti-missile drills after U.S. decision," *Reuters*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-russia-security-drills/china-russia-to-hold-further-anti-missile-drills-after-u-s-thaad-decision-idINKCN12B19U>.

<sup>276</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "China-Pakistan Naval Drills: More Than Just Symbolism," *The Diplomat*, July 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/china-pakistan-naval-drills-more-than-just-symbolism/>.

<sup>277</sup> Muhammad Faisal, "Pakistan-China Relations: Beyond CPEC," *Strategic Studies* 40, no. 2 (2020): 38-39

<sup>278</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "China-Pakistan Naval Drills: More Than Just Symbolism," *The Diplomat*, July 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/china-pakistan-naval-drills-more-than-just-symbolism>.

<sup>279</sup> ISEAS, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," Ian Storey, (2019) 9. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_43.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_43.pdf).

<sup>280</sup> Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 303.

the PLA and RTA special forces.<sup>281</sup> Prior to 2014, Sino-Thai exercises largely avoided conventional military objectives to avoid arousing American objections to its treaty ally's defense activities.<sup>282</sup> Since the 2014 Thai coup, combined Sino-Thai exercises have occurred on an annual basis. From 2014 to 2019, the first-ever cooperation between the PLA and RTA Air Forces came to the fore with half of their joint exercises centered on aerial warfare.<sup>283</sup> Overall, the increase in Sino-Thai combined exercises since 2014 reflects how China stepped in after the coup at a time of American political hesitancy toward Thailand and made itself a rival security partner.<sup>284</sup> Nonetheless, China's military engagement with Thailand must strike a delicate balance, not just with the US, but also other Southeast Asian countries lest they lean to the US camp because of perceptions of Chinese military preponderance. As such, non-traditional security threats like counterterrorism and HA/DR have remained a key focus of Sino-Thai exercises.<sup>285</sup> These considerations also led China to engage the US through participation in American military exercises.

China's combined exercises with the US constitute key opportunities to evaluate American military capabilities and burnish its domestic image.<sup>286</sup> China's approach to the 2014 RIMPAC exercises illustrated how it approached multilateral combined exercises with the US. Beyond studying US military capabilities by participating in the 2014 *Rim of the Pacific* (RIMPAC) exercise, China dispatched an intelligence gathering ship that remained in the international waters adjacent to the exercise.<sup>287</sup> In terms of domestic image, RIMPAC exercises are valuable opportunities for the CCP to disseminate media portraying the PLA on equal footing with their advanced military adversary.<sup>288</sup> Ultimately, the US disinvited China from RIMPAC 2018 in response to China's continued militarization of the South China Sea.

China took its first hesitant steps into combined exercises because of the growing importance of non-traditional security threats like terrorism to its core interests. However, with the decline in the terrorist threat and return of great power competition, China has abandoned its hesitancy toward exercises as they now constitute an important foundation of strategic alignments and global and regional arenas.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>282</sup> Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," 303.

<sup>283</sup> ISEAS, "Thailand's Military Relations with China," 7-8.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>286</sup> Harold, Scott W. "Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship." *Asia Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 156.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, 156.



## PLA DEVELOPMENT AND MOOTW

China has made it a priority for the PLA to improve its conduct of MOOTW, with clear implications for the PLA's development of competencies and operational capabilities. China's adoption of MOOTW has been part of a deliberate evolution of the PLA as a learning institution, transforming itself over time into a modern military capable of projecting power and advancing Chinese foreign policy. For every successful operation, China has also sought to identify shortcomings in the PLA's ability to carry out MOOTW. For example, in the aftermath of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the PLA undertook its largest deployment since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War but struggled with "mobilizing and delivering forces" and reportedly lacked "training, specialized rescue units and equipment."<sup>289</sup> In response, the Central Military Commission in 2009 released an "Armed Forces MOOTW Capabilities Development Plan," which set a goal of establishing "a smooth and efficient emergency command system, an appropriate scope of professional forces, applicable and useful equipment, solid and effective targeted training, a basic network for comprehensive support, and preliminary laws and regulations" to meet the needs of successfully conducting MOOTW.<sup>290</sup> Over a decade later, many of these objectives remain works in progress.

PLA forces have gained substantial training and real-world experience through their routinization of MOOTW, striving to become more efficient and effective through meaningful command and control reforms under Xi Jinping. The PLA has also bolstered its ability to operate far from China's shores through improved military hardware and logistical support capacity, for example with the launch of the PLA's support base in Djibouti. With this outgrowth of military activity, the PLA has set new objectives in completing their "diversified missions." Ultimately, the PLA strives to be more responsive, integrated, and targeted in its conduct of MOOTW.



*Office of President of Russia\_Vostok 2018 military exercise2: Army University Press.*

<sup>289</sup> Harold M. Tanner, "The People's Liberation Army and China's Internal Security Challenges," 268-269.

<sup>290</sup> Chen Xiujun, "Zai Feizhanzheng Junshi Xingdong Zhong Shuxie Zhongcheng – Guofang He Jundui Jianshe Chengjiu Zongshu Zhi Wu" 在非战争军事行动中书写忠诚 – 国防和军队建设成就综述之五 [Writing Loyalty into Non-War Military Activities – A Summary of 5 Achievements in National Defense and Army Construction], *Xinhua*, September 18, 2012, <https://www.chinacourt.org/article/detail/2012/09/id/587286.shtml>.



Responding to Diversified Missions

When China faced complex emergencies, such as the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake or the 2011 evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya, the PLA was unprepared or lacked the capabilities or capacity to fully complete the mission. In 2011, the PLA’s limited strategic airlift capacity hindered its ability to assist in the evacuation of Libya. The PLAAF sent only four IL-76 aircraft and civilian charter aircraft ultimately transported over 90% of the evacuated Chinese citizens.<sup>291</sup> According to Andrea Ghiselli, the Libya evacuation signaled a fundamental shift to the PLA about its role in peacetime. In the aftermath of the operation, PLA officers expressed the view that “sudden emergencies” are the “link between traditional and non-traditional security.”<sup>292</sup> The *Science of Military Strategy* similarly states that these types of emergency situations are the “focus of preparation for MOOTW.”<sup>293</sup>

The PLA has undertaken personnel reforms to support emergency response operations. The diverse nature of MOOTW require “different [types of] professional forces” to achieve a desired outcome, and as a result, the PLA has established highly specialized units that are trained to respond to emergencies.<sup>294</sup> For example, in 2010, the PLA created eight “professional emergency rescue forces” in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake, totaling 50,000 troops available for rapid emergency response.<sup>295</sup> The PLAAF has trained several elite units to manage the logistics of emergency response missions.<sup>296</sup> PLA reforms under Xi Jinping have also led to force structure adjustments that created “more independent, deployable army units capable of quickly adapting to a wide variety of missions,” suitable for MOOTW.<sup>297</sup>

Core military competencies that can assist the PLA in rapid deployment and emergency response include improved strategic airlift capabilities, advanced reconnaissance and early warning intelligence systems, and a well-developed logistics network. Indeed, PLA officers in the aftermath of the Libya evacuation identified “long-range air and sea transport and a truly global and reliable global position communication system” as critical capabilities to develop.<sup>298</sup> The completion of the *Beidou* navigational system in June 2020 now provides worldwide and reliable global position communication coverage for the PLA, but China is still

<sup>291</sup> Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, *China’s Strong Arm*, 112.

<sup>292</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, “Civil-Military Relations and Organisational Preferences Regarding the Use of the Military in Chinese Foreign Policy: Insights from the Debate on MOOTW,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020), 434.

<sup>293</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 298.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>295</sup> “Guofangbu: Jundui Niandi Jiang Jiancheng 8 Zhi Gong 5 Wan Ren Yingji Jiuyuan Budui” 国防部：军队年底将建成8支5万人应急救援部队 [Ministry of National Defense: The Army Will Build 8 Emergency Rescue Units Totaling 50,000 People By the End of the Year], April 20, 2010, *Xinhua*, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-04/20/content\\_1587746.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-04/20/content_1587746.htm); Ding, Dou. “PLA’s Disaster Relief Works: Review and Reform,” *East Asian Policy*, Volume 2, No. 3 (July/September 2010), 49-57.

<sup>296</sup> Cristina L. Garafola and Timothy R. Heath, “The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force,” *Rand Corporation*, 2017, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2056.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2056.html).

<sup>297</sup> John Chen, “Choosing the ‘Least Bad Option’: Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Forces,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, eds. Phillip C. Saunders et al., (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 91.

<sup>298</sup> Ghiselli, “Civil-Military Relations,”434.

taking steps to improve its ability to respond at a moment’s notice to crises around the world.<sup>299</sup>

The PLA has conducted military exercises and domestic missions to test its strategic airlift capabilities. These exercises have taught the PLAAF to “navigate abroad, manage issues of diplomatic access, and operate with greater autonomy.”<sup>300</sup> Furthermore, China indigenously developed the Y-20 heavy lift military cargo plane, which came into service in 2016 and in 2018 carried out its first combat training exercise.<sup>301</sup> The Y-20 also participated in the PLA’s HA/DR missions during the COVID-19 pandemic by assisting with the delivery of medical supplies and personnel to Wuhan and Southeast Asia, for example. These missions, according to Chinese experts, tested the PLAAF’s ability to coordinate the takeoff and landing of multiple Y-20s, demonstrating that they can “be deployed by air in a short time instead of being transported slowly, allowing them to form combat capabilities in the frontline very quickly.”<sup>302</sup>

The PLA has also been charged with improving its reconnaissance and early warning intelligence collection so that China can respond immediately to a growing crisis. The 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* mentions that the PLA’s deficient far-seas reconnaissance capabilities have made it “difficult to detect, identify, and deal with” pirates in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>303</sup> To remedy this shortcoming, the PLA has invested heavily in developing advanced satellite and remote sensing systems to improve global data collection.<sup>304</sup> The Djibouti support base also likely enables “early warning and intelligence gathering activities.”<sup>305</sup> The location of the base makes it well-positioned for general intelligence and reconnaissance missions, including collection on foreign militaries operating in the region and preparation for possible emergency contingencies. Recent activity at and near Djibouti has indicated that China is expanding its intelligence collection activities in the Indian Ocean region. For example, in 2021, US intelligence observed Chinese ships entering a commercial port in Abu Dhabi that are a “type typically used by the Chinese military for signals intelligence collection.”<sup>306</sup>

<sup>299</sup> “China Launches Last BDS Satellite to Complete Global Navigation Constellation,” *Xinhua*, June 23, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/23/c\\_139161359.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/23/c_139161359.htm).

<sup>300</sup> RAND Corporation, “The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force,” Cristina L. Garafola and Timothy R. Heath (2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2056.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2056.html).

<sup>301</sup> “Y-20 heavy transport aircraft conducts first airborne, air delivery training,” *Xinhua*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.ecns.cn/2018/05-08/301808.shtml>.

<sup>302</sup> Xuanzun Liu, “Chinese Air Force’s Strategic Projection Capability Proven in Epidemic: experts,” *Global Times*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202002/1179916.shtml>.

<sup>303</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 319.

<sup>304</sup> U.S., Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020,” (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense 2020), 65, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>305</sup> Peter Dutton et al., “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti,” 36.

<sup>306</sup> Katie Bo Lillis, Natasha Bertrand, and Kylie Atwood, “Construction halted on secret project at Chinese port in UAE after pressure from US, officials say,” *CNN*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/19/politics/china-uae-us-construction-port/index.html>.



In addition to the Djibouti base, the PLA has strengthened its general far seas logistics operations to support rapid deployments. In 2016, the PLA established a Joint Logistic Support Force to “unify joint logistics forces at the strategic level and support the five new joint theater commands.”<sup>307</sup> This new support system is meant to be able to “rapidly respond to emergency situations requiring large-scale logistics support.”<sup>308</sup> The PLA has supplemented its support capabilities with dual-use agreements for commercial ports, many of which are owned or operated by Chinese firms.<sup>309</sup> China has also trained its support units and partners for rapid logistics capabilities through international exercises, which have provided experience in transporting PLA units and partnering with other countries for logistics support.<sup>310</sup>

Unifying C2 and Promoting Jointness

The PLA has prioritized the development of joint operational capabilities between its different military branches since witnessing the US’ decisive performance in the Gulf War.<sup>311</sup> The ability of the military to coordinate actions between different service branches and types of units continues to be understood as essential to prevailing in an “informationized local war.”<sup>312</sup> Similarly, Chinese strategists repeatedly emphasize the need for a high degree of integration between PLA branches and non-PLA actors for the successful conduct of MOOTW. In pursuit of this goal, the PLA has taken steps to unify the command and control (C2) of MOOTW and expand joint operations training in the far seas.

The 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* thus calls for strengthening integration in MOOTW along four key lines: between the PLA branches, between the PLA and PAP, between the PLA and government ministries, and between the PLA and foreign militaries.<sup>313</sup> MOOTW require significant coordination between the PLA, PRC government agencies, and CCP leadership.<sup>314</sup> This is driven, in part, by a belief that MOOTW are inherently political, and that the CCP must therefore actively manage all military actions to ensure that they closely align with political objectives. Furthermore, MOOTW often require the participation of non-military elements of government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Transportation have both played an active role in China’s domestic and international

<sup>307</sup> *Modernization of PLA Logistics: Joint Logistic Support Force, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 115<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2018) (statement of Kevin McCauley, independent analyst), 2, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/McCauley\\_Written%20Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/McCauley_Written%20Testimony.pdf).

<sup>308</sup> McCauley, testimony on *Modernization of PLA Logistics*, 7.

<sup>309</sup> Kardon, “China’s Overseas Base, Places, and Far Seas Logistics,” 93.

<sup>310</sup> Southerland, Green, and Janik, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 6.

<sup>311</sup> *PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities, before the U.S.-China Security and Economic Review Commission*, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2016), (statement of Mark Cozad, RAND Corporation), 1, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT451/RAND\\_CT451.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT451/RAND_CT451.pdf).

<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>313</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlue Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 306-307.

<sup>314</sup> U.S. Joint Operation Doctrine distinguishes between integrated actions of the armed forces (joint operations) and unified actions, which refers to the “synchronization, coordination, and integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities.” For the purposes of this study, integrated refers to coordination between both military and non-military tools of statecraft.

MOOTW, such as in the 2011 Libya evacuation.<sup>315</sup> Finally, more complex MOOTW may require joint operations by multiple military branches, as well as coordination with foreign militaries.

Strengthening the PLA’s ability to prosecute complex joint operations will remain most relevant to large-scale domestic HA/DR missions within China or in China’s near periphery. In these scenarios, the PLA is most likely to mobilize significant forces across multiple branches on short notice, as was the case in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake response. In the future, the PLA will likely also be ready to conduct more advanced joint operations in the far seas. Doing so would “allow the PLA to handle nontraditional security challenges more effectively” while improving China’s options to respond to complex crisis scenarios.<sup>316</sup>

To facilitate and improve integration, China has made efforts to formalize a unified command structure for MOOTW under the purview of the Central Military Commission. Officially, the large majority of overseas MOOTW are now directed by the Overseas Operation Office within the Joint Staff Department, which was first established in 2016. At the time of its establishment, a Ministry of National Defense spokesperson described the Office as “responsible for the planning, preparation, and implementation of MOOTW for the entire PLA and PAP.”<sup>317</sup> A *Global Times* article detailing the Overseas Operation Office writes that it can “strengthen rapid response capabilities...[and have] more targeted planning and coordination functions.”<sup>318</sup> The PLA has also taken steps to expand joint operations training in the far seas. In 2021, the PLA’s *Zhanlan* exercises, which simulate offensive naval operations beyond the first island chain, went further than previous iterations of the drills in elevating “joint forces at the tactical level.”<sup>319</sup>

The PLA still suffers an implementation gap in conducting joint operations, particularly in the far seas. A significant portion of China’s routine MOOTW have required only minimal coordination between different branches.<sup>320</sup> Specific PLA branch headquarters still possibly manage several routine MOOTW despite the establishment of the Joint Staff Department Overseas Operation Office. For example, PLA interlocutors told researchers at the National Defense University that the PLAN

<sup>315</sup> Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, *China’s Strong Arm*, 110-113.

<sup>316</sup> Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, “PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability,” *INSS Strategic Forum* 309, (2021), 5, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-309.pdf?ver=vBGjBJXsarEsg7nATeBMBQ%3d%3d>.

<sup>317</sup> Xu Ren, “Zhongyang Junwei Lianhe Canmou Bu Zuo zhanju Chengli Haiwai Xingdongchu” 中央军委联合参谋部作战局成立海外行动处 [The Operation Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission established the Overseas Operations Office], *China Military Online*, March 31, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2016-03/31/content\\_6986671.htm](http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2016-03/31/content_6986671.htm).

<sup>318</sup> “Jiemi Jiefangjun ‘Haiwai Xingdong Chu’ Qianhua Jingwai Kuai Fan Zhineng” 解密解放军‘海外行动处’强化境外快反职能 [Uncovering the PLA’s Overseas Operations Office to strengthen Overseas Rapid Response Functions], *Global Times*, March 25, 2016, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0325/c1011-28226523.html>.

<sup>319</sup> Roderick Lee, “The PLA Navy’s Zhanlan Training Series in 2021: Growing Emphasis on Joint Operations on the High Seas,” *China Brief*, May 7, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-pla-navys-zhanlan-training-series-in-2021-growing-emphasis-on-joint-operations-on-the-high-seas/>.

<sup>320</sup> Wuthnow et al., “PLA Overseas Operations,” 4.

remains in control of the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy missions.<sup>321</sup> Other analysts have argued that the Joint Staff Department Overseas Operations Office’s “status as an administrative office and its relatively junior grade” make its command of significant overseas MOOTW unlikely.<sup>322</sup>

Targeted and Flexible Use of Force Abroad

The PLA’s willingness to use force abroad in the conduct of MOOTW is a critical question for China’s evolving role in international security. China has so far demonstrated restraint in its conduct of MOOTW. However, it remains possible that a sudden unforeseen crisis could quickly change the risk calculus of PRC government leaders around the use of force abroad to protect China’s overseas interests.<sup>323</sup> Chinese strategists acknowledge the possibility that certain operations may require kinetic military action, but that any such PLA operation would likely be small-scale and with limited goals, in part to ensure that the situation does not escalate.<sup>324</sup> To prepare for this type of contingency, the PLA is developing several core capabilities that would allow it to operate with a limited footprint and highly targeted use of force.

The 2013 and 2020 editions of the *Science of Military Strategy* note the relatively “low level of violence” typically involved in MOOTW, while acknowledging that special circumstances may require the use of armed force.<sup>325</sup> For example, counterterrorism or counterpiracy operations may require a direct confrontation with adversaries during the conduct of routine operations.<sup>326</sup> This was the case in 2017 when PLAN Special Forces soldiers completed two successful hostage rescues in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>327</sup> In one of the operations, a Somali official stated that the PLAN Special Forces killed two out of a group of nine attackers.<sup>328</sup> A crisis may also provoke heightened use of force, as demonstrated by the 2011 deaths of 13 Chinese citizens in Thailand. In that case, China’s Ministry of Public Security led the hunt for the chief suspect, a local drug kingpin named Naw Kham, in tandem with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand.<sup>329</sup> China at one point allegedly considered using a drone to strike Naw Kham’s rural hideout, before Laotian authorities ultimately captured him through more traditional methods.<sup>330</sup>

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>322</sup> Roderick Lee and Morgan Clemens, “Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas: The Chinese Navy in an Era of Military Reform,” China Maritime Studies Institute, China Maritime Report No. 9, 2020, 10.

<sup>323</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, “Continuity and Change in China’s Strategy to Protect Overseas Interests,” *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/continuity-and-change-in-chinas-strategy-to-protect-overseas-interests/>.

<sup>324</sup> Shou, *Zhanlue Xue Jiaocheng*, 164, 168.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid, 164; Xiao, *Zhanlue Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 299.

<sup>326</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlue Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 324.

<sup>327</sup> “Chinese Navy Hands Pirates Over to Somali Authorities,” *Maritime Executive*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/chinese-navy-hands-pirates-over-to-somali-authorities>.

<sup>328</sup> “Chinese Navy Hands Pirates Over to Somali Authorities.”

<sup>329</sup> Jane Perlez and Bree Feng, “Beijing Flaunts Cross-Border Clout in Search for Drug Lord,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/world/asia/chinas-manhunt-shows-sway-in-southeast-asia.html>.

<sup>330</sup> Jane Perlez, “Chinese Plan to Kill Drug Lord with Drone Highlights Military Advances,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/21/world/asia/chinese-plan-to-use-drone-highlights-military-advances.html>; Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, *China’s Strong Arm*, 97.

In both routine and crisis circumstances, China has only used or considered using limited force against a well-defined target and with a clear objective. These types of operations are regarded as best suited for highly specialized forces that can operate with a limited footprint. As a result, the PLA has invested resources in training and expanding its Marines and Special Operations Forces (SOF) in order to confront a range of non-traditional security challenges. PLA Army SOF have been involved in SCO counterterrorism exercises for nearly two decades.<sup>331</sup> Since 2008, every Gulf of Aden ETF has included a contingent of PLAN SOF, known as the “Water Dragons.”<sup>332</sup> PLA SOF units have also deployed to UN Peacekeeping Missions in Mali. The PLA base in Djibouti is home to a detachment of PLAN Marine Corps special forces that have conducted anti-piracy and hostage rescue trainings.<sup>333</sup> Since 2015, China has reformed and expanded the PLAN Marine Corps, with a possible total strength of 40,000 personnel.<sup>334</sup> This expansion indicates that the Marine Corps is likely to be “the country’s main expeditionary force in the future to man overseas bases and perform other missions on distant shores.”<sup>335</sup>

Although China is developing the capabilities to use force abroad during MOOTW operations, political and diplomatic constraints will likely continue to limit China’s willingness to use force on a consistent basis. For instance, China’s decision not to strike Naw Kham was partly due to “international and sovereignty issues.”<sup>336</sup> China’s foreign policy principle of “non-interference” constrains its ability to conduct unilateral operations abroad without host state consent. This goes beyond a mere norm, as the *Science of Military Strategy* explicitly lists political, diplomatic, and international constraints as limiting the use of military force overseas.<sup>337</sup> Any overseas use of force is thus likely to be approved by and coordinated with host nations or the UN. As such, China would be most likely to only use force abroad in a limited operation carried out by special forces, in line with China’s current and near future power projection capabilities and stated foreign policy principles.

<sup>331</sup> Southerland, Green, and Janik, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 9.

<sup>332</sup> Peter Wood, “Chinese Special Forces,” *Ashtree Analytics*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.ashtreeanalytics.com/posts/562>.

<sup>333</sup> Peter Dutton et al., “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti,” 32-33.

<sup>334</sup> Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, “The Chinese Navy’s Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization,” *China Brief*, February 1, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/>.

<sup>335</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “The PLA Army after ‘below the neck’ reforms: adjusting to China’s joint warfighting, deterrence, and MOOTW posture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, vol. 2 (2021): 171.

<sup>336</sup> Perlez and Feng, “Beijing Flaunts Cross-Border Clout.”

<sup>337</sup> Xiao, *Zhanlue Xue (2020 Nian Xiuding)*, 317.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

China's embrace of MOOTW has coincided with its ascendance as a world power. Its increasingly global economic interests have necessitated the adoption of operational concepts that align with its need to conduct military operations abroad to protect and promote those interests, while remaining consistent with its principled aversion to waging war overseas. Further, China's contributions to international peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and its participation in international military exercises have helped strengthen China's diplomatic relations with some of its neighbors and promoted China's image as a responsible great power and a strong contributor to international order. In addition to non-combatant evacuations, these operations in particular have provided Chinese forces with opportunities to gain practical field experience in areas vital to conducting a variety of overseas missions, especially logistical support and sustainment. MOOTW thus provide a valuable framework for the role of China's military in advancing its foreign policy priorities and upholding national security.

In terms of China's military strategy, MOOTW augment the traditional role of the PLA in defending China from foreign attacks and guaranteeing CCP rule in China. The adoption of the MOOTW framework has given China's military and political leadership a mandate to better delineate responsibility for combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism at home across the PAP and PLA, and to clarify the PLA's role in protecting Chinese interests and citizens abroad or conducting international missions in partnership with other countries or on behalf of the UN. By engaging in MOOTW, China can deepen its security cooperation with its partners, and can arguably exert greater influence over other states, as well as within multilateral fora like the SCO and the UN, by making itself an increasingly integral partner and contributor to international security missions.

Western analysis tends to frame China's progress in military modernization and training through a narrow "China threat" lens, interpreting any efforts by China to improve its military forces and broaden their operational capabilities as unambiguous indications of a rising danger of Chinese military aggression. While China's military remains focused on combat readiness and developing the capabilities necessary to prevail in war, especially in preparation for contingencies involving Taiwan, it is important for analysts and policymakers in the US to discern between efforts that threaten regional peace and stability, and those that have the potential to contribute to the rules-based international order. Based on the PLA's increased emphasis on MOOTW in recent decades, much of China's recent military development appears more consistent with the latter than the former, at least in terms of doctrine.

When assessing how to interpret various Chinese MOOTW for purposes of US policy, it is necessary to consider the extent to which China's actions are consistent with international norms and law, and broadly align with the priorities of the international community. As such, China's contributions to UN PKOs, its protection of international trade routes as part of multinational maritime security



*DOD\_PLA Rim of the Pacific Exercise 2014:*  
Sorensen, John. U.S. Department of Defense.

missions, and its provision of support to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations could all be regarded as net positive contributions to international order. Such contributions are essential to greater “burden-sharing” in the international system, and ideally, these efforts should be treated as potential areas for the US and its allies to deepen cooperation with China in an effort to better integrate China into the rules-based international order. Cooperating with China in these areas may allow the US to better shape China's international conduct in carrying out military operations abroad and can help ensure that China's actions are kept in line with international laws and norms.

On the other hand, some of China's domestically focused MOOTW, particularly its counterterrorism operations in Xinjiang, have raised grave concerns over human rights, and should be understood as clear challenges to international law and norms concerning responsible state conduct. Here, and in similar instances, China's evolving military capabilities may simply help make it more effective at suppressing domestic dissent, potentially in ways that could threaten regional peace and security. For example, China's efforts to employ security forces to simultaneously suppress domestic protest and deter foreign interference in Hong Kong sparked widespread concern.<sup>338</sup> Similarly, much of China's maritime rights protection and law enforcement operations have been directed at asserting Chinese jurisdiction and de facto control over international waters and disputed territories or features in the South and East China Seas. Thus, many Chinese MOOTW have exacerbated regional tensions and made friction with neighboring forces a common occurrence. At the same time, the international community has an interest in broad counterterrorism cooperation among states, as well as international collaboration around the protection of SLOC. It will be critical to bridge the gap between international law and norms and China's regularized conduct, particularly in these areas, to help ensure the stability of the international system.

Lastly, China's military assistance to, and cooperation with, regional partners should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Such cooperation is practically inevitable for such a large and wealthy country, and may help or hinder US interests in international stability, depending on the particular circumstances. In some instances, as in response to the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, China has made significant contributions to international relief efforts that were broadly aligned with the goals of the international community. In other cases, such as following the 2014 coup in Thailand, China's engagement has undermined human rights and democratic governance in direct contradiction of US interests. Thus, the US and the international community should adopt a flexible approach to Chinese MOOTW, rather than mounting universal opposition.

China's increased emphasis on MOOTW in recent years and its acknowledgment of their relevance to domestic and international politics indicates that China may be embracing a new, more internationally engaged role for itself. As one of the few countries with deep experience conducting MOOTW, and as the only other country

<sup>338</sup> Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., “Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1074-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1074-1.html).

with comparable economic and military capacity, the US has a special responsibility to understand the ways in which MOOTW are likely to be employed by China, and to appropriately calibrate its policy response. Rather than categorically opposing Chinese MOOTW, international support or condemnation should be consistently conditioned on the extent to which China's actions contribute to, or detract from, the values, norms, and laws of the UN system. China's efforts to enhance its role as a responsible great power should be assessed through this lens in good faith; to this end, the MOOTW framework provides a discrete set of activities and strategic motives upon which to focus such assessments.





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