
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and People's Republic of China (PRC) regarding Taiwan under Xi Jinping, how they are pursued through the development and use of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in extant and potential campaigns, and PRC perceptions of effectiveness and trends.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Asserting control over Taiwan has been a CCP objective since 1943. The PLA's posture and employment have strengthened, with capabilities increasing dramatically since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. Through his “centennial military building goal” of 2027, Xi seeks a full range of options to coerce or conquer Taiwan. PLA forces, training, and operations are burgeoning accordingly. China currently pursues an all-domain pressure campaign and preparatory exercises, with some timed opportunistically to punish actions by Taiwan or its supporters. Future campaign scenarios include—individually and in combination—coercion or limited force, blockade, bombardment, or invasion. PRC perceptions regarding the effectiveness of Beijing's actions and cross-strait trends vary but tend toward pessimism, thereby motivating potential use of force.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Xi is rapidly prioritizing tremendous national resources in pursuit of military options regarding Taiwan that his predecessors lacked, with rapid and concerning results.
- New patterns of activity, including pressure operations and preparatory exercises, increasingly threaten, stress, and risk demoralizing Taiwan.
- Military-informed PRC sources insinuate that Washington's and Taipei's cross-strait policies and actions are trending in an unacceptable direction, reflecting a failure thus far by Beijing and the PLA to curb them completely; however, the PLA is on track to be able to offer the necessary deterrence or compellence, potentially through CCP authorization to take harsher, more coercive approaches and even credibly threaten war.
- Taiwan and the U.S. must urgently deploy asymmetric capabilities to deter PRC aggression.

Imposing the Fate of Sisyphus? The PLA as an Instrument of National Power and Force Preparation toward Taiwan

Andrew S. Erickson

This chapter examines Xi Jinping's strategic objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan and the pursuit of those objectives through the People's Liberation Army (PLA), assesses key trends, and considers whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives these efforts as effective. Its main argument is that Xi's policies have increased military funding and capabilities, aiming to impose a Sisyphean sense of futility on Taiwan to compel unification without direct conflict. The ambition of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control Taiwan has been steadfast for decades, significantly bolstered by enhanced PLA capabilities following the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. Xi's 2027 "centennial military building goal" calls for comprehensive options to coerce or conquer Taiwan. China's military has achieved substantial growth in forces and training, aligning with Beijing's all-domain pressure campaign and strategic exercises aimed at preparing for scenarios including coercion, blockade, bombardment, and invasion. Policy implications are profound: Xi is directing tremendous resources toward military options regarding Taiwan, gravely threatening Taiwan's security and morale. CCP leaders perceive current Taiwanese and U.S. policies as adverse, necessitating harsher measures and potentially credible threats of war. To counter PRC aggression, Taiwan and the United States must urgently deploy asymmetric capabilities.

This chapter first surveys the historical context and PLA development. Following the PRC's establishment in 1949, Mao Zedong intended to invade

Andrew S. Erickson is a Professor of Strategy in the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College.

The views expressed here are the author's alone. He thanks Joshua Arostegui, Brian Davis, Ian Easton, Rob Englehardt, Julia Famularo, David Finkelstein, Conor Kennedy, Dan Kostecka, Ryan Martinson, James Mulvenon, William Murray, Adam Pace, Jeremy Rausch, and Christopher Sharman for their invaluable inputs.

Taiwan to conclude the Chinese Civil War on Beijing's terms. However, plans were canceled due to intelligence failures and the Korean War. Over subsequent decades, the PLA's capabilities were insufficient to challenge the U.S.-patrolled Taiwan Strait. This changed after the Cold War, with missile strikes becoming a feasible cross-strait option. Under Xi, Taiwan faces increasing danger. China's military focus has been on achieving jointness and technological sophistication to prevail in potential U.S. intervention contingencies. Xi's 2027 military goal emphasizes a toolbox of capabilities to coerce or conquer Taiwan, driven by perceived time constraints and a closing window of opportunity. Second, the chapter reviews operational posture and training. China's military posture toward Taiwan has evolved significantly, marked by the most extensive buildup since World War II, largely focused on Taiwan. Xi's military reforms from 2015 to 2016, including the strengthening of existing forces and creation of new ones, have enhanced the PLA's readiness for high-end Taiwan contingencies. Third, the chapter weighs Xi's peacetime and wartime options. Beijing employs a multifaceted strategy, leveraging military, diplomatic, informational, and economic pressure. China's military engages in frequent exercises to prepare while stressing Taiwan's defenses. Beijing's approach includes coercive activities short of full-scale war, ranging from political and disinformation operations to limited (para)military use. These efforts aim to compel Taiwan to capitulate without major combat, but more aggressive measures (e.g., blockade or bombardment) are increasingly robust options. An outright amphibious invasion, the most complex and risky, would likely be a last resort. Fourth, the chapter assesses trends of increasingly pessimistic PRC perceptions. It concludes that Xi's rapid military buildup, emphasizing coercion and potential force, increases the risk of conflict with Taiwan, the United States, and allies and makes deterrence of utmost urgency.

Taking Taiwan: CCP Goals, Preparations, and Approaches

Ensuring the capability to impose transformative coercive pressure or force on Taiwan to assert control over its political status and future has long been the CCP's leading military goal. After expelling the Chinese Nationalist Party from the mainland in 1949 and establishing the PRC, Mao envisioned an invasion of Taiwan in 1950 to end the Chinese Civil War with complete CCP domination. However, he postponed, and ultimately canceled, these plans following an overwhelming fifth column intelligence rollup and the

outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.¹ Throughout the crises in the strait that erupted in 1954–55, 1958, and 1962, Mao opted not to expend the blood and treasure and risk U.S. intervention, including potential nuclear weapons use,² to attempt to wrest the heavily fortified offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu from Chinese Nationalist Party control. Instead, he shelled them intermittently for two decades, in part because he, like Chiang Kai-shek, wanted to keep a physical link between Taiwan and the PRC—something most Taiwanese are far less interested in today. For the rest of the Cold War, and even during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, the strait was a U.S.-patrolled moat that the PLA could not hope to cross. From the end of the Cold War through the turn of the century, crude missile strikes were the only PLA option for attacking Taiwan on a significant scale.

Today, Taiwan faces great, growing danger from the PRC under Xi Jinping. For decades, a Taiwan contingency has been the PLA's lead planning scenario. China's military strategies of 1993, 2004, and 2014 focused geographically on Taiwan and its surrounding waters and emphasized achieving the jointness and technological sophistication necessary to prevail in contingencies there, potentially involving the U.S. military.³ Having concertedly invested in, developed, and deployed manifold military capabilities focused first on targeting Taiwan and second on countering U.S. and allied intervention thereto since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis and 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, the PLA now has a variety of potential military options vis-à-vis Taiwan. Soberingly, the Pentagon assesses that China's official defense budget of around \$230 billion (as of 2022) is “about 12 times larger than Taiwan's defense budget” and largely “focused on developing the capability to unify Taiwan with the PRC by force.”⁴ How these capabilities develop over the course of this critical decade and what Xi attempts to do with them loom as momentous questions of our time.

In describing Beijing's three centenaries—the CCP's in 2021, the PLA's in 2027, and the PRC's in 2049—Andrew Scobell emphasizes that “each of these commemorations serves not only as a celebration of regime

¹ Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester: Camphor Press, 2017), 35, 48–52.

² U.S. Office of the Historian, “The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises>.

³ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023), 147, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2023-China-Military-Power-Report>.

accomplishments but also as a reminder of unfinished business.”⁵ On October 26–29, 2020, the 19th CCP Central Committee’s fifth plenary session promulgated the “centennial military building goal” (建军一百年奋斗目标).⁶ As part of his efforts to build a world-class military, Xi established this goal to ensure the achievement of important aspects of that modernization by 2027, which appear geared toward providing a full toolbox of capabilities to coerce or conquer Taiwan. This is part of a growing acceptance of risk and friction and may reflect a growing urgency and impatience on Xi’s part to achieve key objectives, perhaps spurred by perceptions of a closing window of opportunity to do so and actuarial limits on his time in power. The year 2027 also marks the 21st Party Congress, which will be the beginning of Xi’s fourth term as general secretary. “All indications point to the PLA meeting [Xi’s] directive to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027,” Admiral John Aquilino stated in his final testimony as commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. “Furthermore, the PLA’s actions indicate their ability to meet Xi’s preferred timeline to unify Taiwan with mainland China by force if directed.”⁷

Alexander Huang argues cogently that “it is crucial to assess whether there is a CCP timetable for national unification,” which “has important implications for how much time Taiwan has for” defensive preparations.⁸ Much may depend on whose side Xi and other decision-makers believe time is on. Wang Wen, a researcher at the Financial Research Center for the Counsellors’ Office of the State Council, maintains that “Chinese Communists have always had rich experience and great practice in identifying and seizing strategic opportunities.” He believes that time remains on Beijing’s side overall but acknowledges that there are growing perceptions and concerns that China’s “period of strategic opportunity” is

⁵ Andrew Scobell, “China’s Calculus on the Use of Force: Futures, Costs, Benefits, Risks, and Goals,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2022), 80.

⁶ Andrew S. Erickson, “PRC Pursuit of Xi’s 2027 ‘Centennial Military Building Goal’ (建军一百年奋斗目标): Sources & Analysis,” *China Analysis from Original Sources*, December 19, 2021, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/12/prc-pursuit-of-2027-centennial-military-building-goal-sources-analysis>.

⁷ John C. Aquilino, “U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture,” statement to the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, March 21, 2024, 2, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/aquilino_statement.pdf.

⁸ Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, “A Net Assessment of Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 313.

already over.⁹ A PRC scholar-official contends that Beijing's 2022 military exercises following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei and the subsequent issuance of the white paper entitled *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* have transformed Beijing's "strategic ambiguity" into "strategic clarity":

Beijing has deliberately and unequivocally declared that it will not wait indefinitely for Taiwan's return to China.... Instead, it has officially launched a national reunification plan, in the hope of accelerating the national reunification process through political negotiations between the two sides on the details of the "one country, two systems" policy. Beijing has emphatically stated that, if peaceful reunification fails, non-peaceful reunification will occur. At the same time, Beijing has left it an open question whether the favorable conditions of the "one country, two systems" policy that the mainland has previously offered to Taiwan will still apply if national reunification is achieved primarily by force.¹⁰

While Xi's intentions and plans are impossible for foreign analysts to discern conclusively, a historical review of the CCP and the PLA suggests revealing patterns. Perhaps the foremost pattern is relentless determination to achieve top-priority objectives, coupled with concerted attempts to do so with the least kinetic military escalation possible. More concerning, however, the CCP and PLA have a history of proactively using what they perceive as demonstrative limited force to reset baseline conditions and thereby avert larger, longer-term negative outcomes. This is closely linked to an arguably exaggerated sense of being able to finely calibrate escalation both upward and downward while retaining first-mover advantage in doing so. Mao's striking first move in the 1969 Zhenbao Island crisis is perhaps the principal example of both elements. Partial examples involving weaker, then non-nuclear powers include the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. As Kim Fassler explains in her chapter for this volume, the CCP believes it has a superior system for diagnosing, measuring precisely, and calibrating policy responses to major international trends. The party assesses that trends regarding Taiwan are unfavorable and is urgently seeking to shift them in a favorable direction.

The CCP typically situates the ultimate threat of employing top-end kinetic military force within a comprehensive whole-of-government approach designed to achieve objectives via, ideally, primarily political

⁹ Wang Wen, "论新时代的战略机遇期: 源起、现状与未来" [On the Strategic Opportunity Period in the New Era: Origin, Status Quo, and Future], *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism* (2022), trans. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/on-the-strategic-opportunity-period-in-the-new-era-origin-status-quo-and-future>.

¹⁰ Liu Zhaojia, "中国倒逼美国对台政策走向 '战略清晰?'" [Is China Forcing the U.S. toward "Strategic Clarity" in Its Taiwan Policy?], Aisixiang, August 15, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/is-china-forcing-the-u-s-toward-strategic-clarity-in-its-taiwan-policy>.

means by expeditiously using the “three warfares”—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.¹¹ At least in theoretical potential, it can do so more seamlessly, thoroughly, and formidably than any other government is capable.¹² Here, the PLA has an important political role, which is often insufficiently understood in the United States as well as by U.S. allies and partners. A pathbreaking study by Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao on PLA political warfare details the history, roles, missions, and organizational structure of PLA “liaison work” units—a massive force multiplier for the PLA that is all too often overlooked and understudied.¹³ The PLA continuously conducts political work vis-à-vis Taiwan and the surrounding region. By its nature, the PLA’s liaison work is often covert, but in a future Taiwan scenario, it would probably prove every bit as much a threat as the PLA’s special operations, airborne, and amphibious brigades. Indeed, they are closely intertwined.

If “three warfare” activities prove insufficient to achieve China’s purposes over time, or if it perceives sufficiently adverse developments and trends, Beijing may shift its approach to more persistent, lower-intensity coercion. Such coercion could be dialed up and otherwise tailored as necessary to achieve the desired effects and channel adversaries into courses of action that PRC officials perceive as advantageous, such as bringing Taiwanese representatives to the negotiating table. Ultimately, PRC decision-makers may consider a full range of military options, most likely starting with limited conventional capabilities. These could be backstopped by the world’s largest conventional missile force and a rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and supported throughout by world-class enablers in every domain, including space and cyber. To operationalize in practice doctrine that reifies finely tailored escalation dominance for this kind of all external PLA objectives, the PRC is striving to be able to preempt or answer equivalently all conceivable U.S. and allied military capabilities and options, in addition to possessing capabilities and options for which there is no adversary equivalent.

¹¹ Yu-Jie Chen, “The CCP’s Violation of International Laws and Norms,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., May 4, 2023, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Yu-Jie_Chen_Testimony.pdf.

¹² For a hierarchy of CCP-preferred approaches applied directly to Taiwan, see the following by a prominent diplomat who was director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (2018–22) after serving as China’s permanent representative to the United Nations (2013–17): Liu Jieyi, “坚持贯彻新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略” [Adhere to the Party’s Overall Strategy for Resolving the Taiwan Issue in the New Era], *Qiushi*, December 1, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/adhere-to-the-partys-overall-strategy-for-resolving-the-taiwan-issue-in-the-new-era>.

¹³ Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, “The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics,” Project 2049 Institute, October 14, 2013, <https://project2049.net/2013/10/14/the-peoples-liberation-army-general-political-department-political-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics>.

Major questions remain concerning where Xi himself believes Taiwan contingencies to lie on this spectrum of possible operational options, to what extent he is driven by a near-term timeline, to what degree he may be abandoning his post-Mao predecessors' relative restraint, and how and in what ways he may be deterred. Overall, however, Xi appears to be concertedly pursuing PLA development that, in one way or another, overwhelms both Taiwan's attempts to resist his assertion of influence over the island and U.S. and allied efforts to help Taiwan resist. The sense of futility that Xi seeks to impose is symbolized in Greek mythology by King Sisyphus, condemned for eternity to roll a gigantic boulder up a hill, only to see it roll back down. Such expenditure of great resources and energy to no good purpose amid mounting threats that increasingly polarize and demoralize Taiwanese society while heightening U.S. and allied uncertainty and perceptions of risk is precisely the dynamic that Xi hopes can enable him to realize his political objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan without actually launching major combat operations. That said, he has ordered the PLA to prepare a full range of options to employ as necessary—in a worst-case scenario, to “fight and win.”

Relentless Ramp-Up: Forces, Training, and Operations

In recent years, the PLA's operational posture toward Taiwan has changed dramatically, to the detriment of both the island's security and the risks associated with the United States and allies coming to its aid across the full range of potential contingencies.¹⁴ Since the late 1990s, the PRC has engaged in “the most extensive and rapid buildup since World War II,”¹⁵ much of it focused on imposing credible force capabilities against Taiwan and foreign forces that might attempt to intervene to assist. Xi Jinping has significantly broadened and accelerated this buildup. In 2015–16, he promulgated sweeping military reforms designed to comprehensively enhance the PLA's ability to achieve the missions that he might order it to execute, including high-end Taiwan contingencies.¹⁶ Reforms included reorganization of the Central

¹⁴ For a dramatic documentation of this sobering sea change, see Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015).

¹⁵ Aquilino, “U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture,” 24.

¹⁶ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Crossing the Strait: PLA Modernization and Taiwan,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 17. For unparalleled coverage of this subject, see Phillip Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019).

Military Commission and its departments, offices, and bureaus; the Joint Staff Department; the theater commands; and services and support arms.

As part of the organizational dimension of Xi's reforms, to develop and employ its components more effectively, the PLA in 2015 (1) upgraded the Second Artillery Corps to the PLA Rocket Force, becoming the fourth service (after the army, navy, and air force) and (2) added two additional forces: the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF). Established in 2015, the SSF was charged with enabling PRC dominance across space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum by integrating PLA cyber, electronic warfare, and space units. On April 19, 2024, the SSF was disbanded and divided into three independent arms—the PLA Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, and Information Support Force—supporting the four services. As the PLA's fourth support arm, established in 2016, the JLSF is the backbone facilitating relationships between joint logistics units and other PLA service logistics elements while integrating civilian logistics into military operations (e.g., by “conducting C2 [command and control] of joint logistics, delivering materiel, and overseeing various support mechanisms” in a conflict against Taiwan).¹⁷ The Pentagon judges:

PLA writings suggest that the SSF would be responsible for EW [electronic warfare] and cyberspace operations during a Taiwan contingency, as one of the missions of the force is to seize and maintain information dominance.... The SSF 311 Base would be responsible for political and psychological warfare, such as disseminating propaganda against Taiwan to influence public opinion and promote the PRC's interests. The SSF would also play a strategic information and communications support role, centralizing technical intelligence collection and management and providing strategic intelligence support to theater commands involved in a Taiwan contingency.¹⁸

Among long-established PLA services, arguably the most dramatic threats to Taiwan come from the PLA Rocket Force, which has both the world's largest, most capable conventional missile forces and a rapidly growing nuclear triad that is third only to those of the United States and Russia. According to the Pentagon, China's strategic rocket force “is prepared to conduct missile attacks against high-value targets, including Taiwan's C2 facilities, air bases, and radar sites, in an attempt to degrade Taiwan's defenses, neutralize Taiwan's leadership, or break the public's will to fight,” and as of 2023, the PLA Rocket Force “is increasing its presence along the

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* 2023, 146.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Taiwan Strait with new missile brigades, possibly indicating an increasing number of deployed missiles.”¹⁹

Other PLA services field potent missiles as well. The PLA Army’s PCH191 close-range ballistic missile is deployed in large numbers, can range all of Taiwan, and is directly relevant to numerous Taiwan scenarios.²⁰ Likewise, the PLA Air Force manages an extensive, formidable integrated air defense system. Its other capabilities relevant to a Taiwan contingency include large numbers of fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft whose unrefueled radius ranges to Taiwan, a small but growing number of tankers to extend the fighters’ range, and highly capable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support planes, such as the KJ-500.²¹ Three of the PLA Army’s major invasion-specific capabilities stand out: aviation, air assault, and, most importantly, the bulk of amphibious vessels capable of providing cross-strait sealift for its six amphibious combined arms brigades—four in the Eastern Theater Command and two in the Southern Theater Command.²² The army prioritizes and trains its Taiwan-relevant forces in all three of these areas.

For its part, the PLA Navy fields China’s largest amphibious vessels, including landing platform docks and amphibious assault ships (LHAs).²³ The PLA Navy has commissioned three Type 075 LHAs, with further hulls under construction. The Pentagon forecasts construction of a Type 076 LHA, which will likely “be equipped with electromagnetic catapults, which would enhance its ability to support fixed-wing aircraft and make it somewhat more like an aircraft carrier.”²⁴ In 2021 the Type 05 amphibious assault vehicle (AAV) debuted in large numbers. Now the PLA’s most advanced amphibious

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 145–46.

²⁰ Joshua Arostegui, “The PCH191 Modular Long-Range Rocket Launcher: Reshaping the PLA Army’s Role in a Cross-Strait Campaign,” U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI), China Maritime Report, no. 32, November 3, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/32>.

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 62–64, 89; and Felix K. Chang, “China’s Maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Capability in the South China Sea,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 5, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/05/chinas-maritime-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance-capability-in-the-south-china-sea>.

²² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 144–45.

²³ The abbreviation “LHA” derives from the U.S. Navy’s “landing helicopter assault” classification for helicopter-carrying amphibious assault ships.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C., November 2022), 129, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2022-China-Military-Power-Report>; and “China People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN): Recognition and Identification Guide,” April 2024, https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/China_Media/2024_Recce_Poster_PLAN_Navy__U__new2.jpg?ver=gLEmUaAtttQXpV9cL9g7YA%3d%3d.

armored equipment, the Type 05 boasts “an upgrade in armor, survivability, and speed from the last-generation Type 63A,” providing “the PLA with a more capable amphibious assault platform.”²⁵

Numbers of larger PLA amphibious platforms remain modest, and there are no indications of the significant increases in the numbers of tank landing ships and medium-sized landing craft that would be needed to provide the full requisite sealift for a cross-strait invasion force to “load up, get across, and unload.”²⁶ China’s shipbuilding industry certainly has the capacity for a massive ramp-up in the number of amphibious vessels, but this would attract major foreign attention, reduce the element of surprise, and potentially trigger countermeasures. Additionally, personnel would need to train for some time with the vessels to ensure maximum effectiveness.

Currently, the PRC is pursuing the stopgap measure of incorporating its Maritime Militia personnel and ramp-retrofitted roll-on/roll-off vessels (RO-ROs), such as large ferries, into a potential landing force.²⁷ As a professor at Army Military Transportation University and an employee at the PLA Navy Logistics Department writes, “among civilian vessels, RO-RO vessels are the most ideal vessel type for unit cross-sea delivery.”²⁸ A doctoral student at Army Military Transportation University has also explored the in-depth means for RO-RO vessels to land at civilian wharves under various conditions.²⁹ As for larger platforms, the PLA Navy is rapidly improving across the board in both hardware and personnel. According to the Pentagon, “new attack submarines and modern surface combatants with anti-air capabilities and fourth-generation naval aircraft entering the force are designed to achieve maritime superiority within the [first island chain].”

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022*, 129.

²⁶ The quote is from Chen Xuanyu, Ren Cong, and Wang Fengzhong, “渡海登岛运输勤务保障面临的问题和对策” [Countermeasures for Problems in Service Support in Cross-Strait and Beach Landing Transportation], *Logistics Technology* 10 (2016): 166–69. See also U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 142–45.

²⁷ Conor M. Kennedy, “Getting There: Chinese Military and Civilian Sealift in a Cross-Strait Invasion,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 223–52; and Conor M. Kennedy, “RO-RO Ferries and the Expansion of the PLA’s Landing Ship Fleet,” Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), March 27, 2023, <https://cimsec.org/ro-ro-ferries-and-the-expansion-of-the-plas-landing-ship-fleet>.

²⁸ Liu Baoxin and Dong Nan, “提高无码头卸载保障能力的对策” [Approaches to Improving Support Capabilities for Dockless Unloading], *Journal of Military Transportation* 1, no. 5 (2022): 26–29.

²⁹ Wang Xin, “民用码头建设贯彻海上战略投送要求研究” [Research on Civil Wharfs Construction Implementing Maritime Strategic Projection Requirements], *Traffic Engineering and Technology for National Defence* 20, no. 5 (2022): 7–10.

These platforms are also intended “to deter and counter any potential third-party intervention in a Taiwan conflict.”³⁰

In sum, this critical decade is already witnessing a relentless ramp-up in both PRC military force posture and “full court press” activity vis-à-vis Taiwan. PLA forces have achieved a nearly continuous presence in the waters and airspace around Taiwan, as well as a heightened operational tempo in exercises and limited operations—to impose what Xi himself terms a “new normal” (新常态).³¹ The subsequent sections consider potential scenarios of coercion or limited force against Taiwan, as well as a range of campaign scenarios involving both mainland Taiwan and its offshore islands.

All-Domain Pressure Campaign

PRC forces are engaged in heightened periodic activity seemingly designed to stress Taiwanese society and wear down platforms, personnel, and readiness across its relatively small, resource-limited military. Perhaps most notably, the PLA Air Force has increased flights into Taiwan’s self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ), particularly its southwest corner. The Pentagon emphasizes both qualitative and quantitative escalation. Since September 2022, unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have accounted for roughly 10% of PLA aircraft tracked in the ADIZ. In 2022, the PLA dispatched a total of 1,737 aircraft into Taiwan’s ADIZ, a 79% increase from 972 incursions in 2021.³²

To coerce Taiwan in the direction of PRC policy preferences, Beijing will continue to employ military, diplomatic, informational, and economic pressure. Analysts foresee various combinations of national efforts across these categories, with varying levels of synchronization and effectiveness. Potential tools of economic coercion include denying commodity imports, suspending trade negotiations, boycotting Taiwanese brands or goods, encouraging mob violence, disrupting employment and the stock exchange, conducting speculative attacks on foreign exchange markets, nationalizing assets, and encouraging sovereign debt divestment.³³

³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2023, 145.

³¹ Mathieu Duchâtel, “An Assessment of China’s Options for Military Coercion of Taiwan,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 95.

³² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2023, 136.

³³ Timothy R. Heath, Sale Lilly, and Eugeniu Han, *Can Taiwan Resist a Large-Scale Military Attack by China? Assessing Strengths and Vulnerabilities in a Potential Conflict* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2023), 76–78.

Preparatory Exercises

PRC forces are increasing training to improve the ability of China's armed forces to execute various operations against Taiwan, including through island seizure drills. Both frequency and realism are mounting, with exercises encompassing more challenging times (night), weather (inclement), and domains (multiple).

Amphibious and amphibious-related exercises have been a major area of effort. In 2021 the PLA Navy conducted "more than 20 naval exercises with an island-capture element, greatly exceeding the 13 observed in 2020." It conducted more than 120 maritime exercises within three months during 2021 and incorporated Type 05 AAVs in large numbers for the first time that year.³⁴ China is also training extensively with Maritime Militia units as well as RO-RO ferries with retrofitted ramps and artificial causeways (mobilizable under the aegis of the 2016 National Defense Transportation Law) to avoid the need for port-based disembarkations and instead directly deliver AAVs.³⁵ Since July 2020, the PLA has been practicing such delivery.³⁶ In 2022, for example, it more than doubled the number of RO-ROs involved in training over the previous year.³⁷

The PLA Army has been conducting both service-level and joint amphibious assault training. According to the Pentagon, these drills "refined the tactics of rapid loading, long-distance transport and beach assault under complicated sea situations, and logistic support capabilities." The Pentagon also cites media reports of extensive PLA employment of "sea, air, and ground UAS in support of the amphibious assault operation. [PLA Army] amphibious brigades reportedly conduct realistic, large-scale amphibious operations that are almost certainly aimed at supporting a Taiwan invasion scenario."³⁸

³⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*, 107, 126.

³⁵ J. Michael Dahm, "Chinese Ferry Tales: The PLA's Use of Civilian Shipping in Support of Over-the-Shore Logistics," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 16, November 1, 2021, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/16>; and J. Michael Dahm, "More Chinese Ferry Tales: China's Use of Civilian Shipping in Military Activities, 2021–2022," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 25, January 20, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/25>.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*, 127.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 143.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

Political Pouncing and Practice

A growing PLA pattern of “reactive assertiveness” has included sharper opportunistic exercises to condemn and exploit purported political wrongs, impose costs, and practice certain sophisticated joint operations (e.g., missile strikes). The most dramatic example to date since 1995–96 is the simulated Joint Blockade/Firepower Campaign exercises on August 2–10, 2022, immediately following Pelosi’s visit. In August 2022 the PLA Air Force flew more than 250 fighter aircraft sorties into Taiwan’s ADIZ and across the Taiwan Strait median line, which no longer serves as a de facto delimitation line for PLA activities.³⁹ The PLA Navy deployed thirteen warships around Taiwan. Most dramatically, the PLA Rocket Force fired multiple ballistic missiles into impact zones in waters surrounding Taiwan on all sides, with unprecedented overflight of its mainland by at least four missiles.⁴⁰ Although Beijing’s response to President Tsai Ing-wen’s 2023 visit with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California was far more restrained, it contained a disturbing portent. On April 5, the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration announced a Taiwan Strait operation including patrols and “on-site [vessel] inspections.” While apparently unexecuted, the declaration could presage future escalation.⁴¹ Further examples of military signaling, pressure, and even operational practice will doubtless follow.

Many PLA activities support both the development of substantive combat capabilities and the signaling of resolve to use this growing potential should it prove necessary for achieving PRC objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan. It is often difficult to disaggregate the two. Retired senior captain Li Jie, a long-established and prolific expert at the PLA Navy Military Arts Research Institute, describes one such multifaceted effort:

On February 9 [2020] the Eastern Theater Command of the PLA organized sea and air forces to conduct a combat readiness patrol. In systematic fashion, it dispatched destroyers, frigates, bombers, fighters, early warning aircraft, and various other types of combat platforms and weapons to test the integrated joint combat capabilities of multiple services. Air assets transited the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait on a patrol flight and conducted targeted drills with realistic subject matter. It is extremely significant that multiple Chinese military services,

³⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2022, 126.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2023, 140.

⁴¹ Bonny Lin et al., “Analyzing China’s Escalation after Taiwan President Tsai’s Transit through the United States,” CSIS, June 29, 2023, 4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/analyzing-chinas-escalation-after-taiwan-president-tsais-transit-through-united-states>.

including naval and air forces, jointly conducted combat readiness patrols during this unusual period.⁴²

In Li's assessment, these joint patrols warned "Taiwan independence" forces, admonished their supporters, demonstrated competence and resolve to countries supporting Beijing's cross-strait policies, and reassured PRC citizens that the party, state, and military were handling national affairs well.⁴³

These patterns are likely to persist well into this decade. The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence forecasts that "Beijing will continue to apply military and economic pressure...to induce Taiwan to move toward unification.... Beijing will use even stronger measures to push back against perceived increases in U.S. support to Taiwan."⁴⁴ As PLA forces increasingly approach Xi's 2027 preparation goal, their Taiwan-adjacent exercises will grow larger, more sophisticated, and more realistic. This will heighten U.S. perceptions—and likely the actual risk—that the PLA might seek to desensitize U.S., Taiwanese, and allied intelligence and thereby reduce indications and warnings of the PLA launching an actual military operation against Taiwan.

Taiwan Scenarios

With the PLA's successful modernization, Xi Jinping already has many options to shape the security environment and to initiate various combat operations. The risks are high, but China's armed forces can initiate a variety of operations with far less warning than in the past. These options and influence will continue to grow rapidly in the coming years. Contingencies for action by China's armed forces against Taiwan comprise four categories: coercion, blockade, bombardment, and invasion. Although this chapter discusses these groupings in ascending order of intensity and overall severity, they may be employed in different sequences with overlapping aspects.

⁴² Li Jie, "中国实施战备巡航的四大宣誓" [The Four Major Declarations China Makes When Conducting Combat Readiness Patrols], *Modern Ships*, no. 07/08 (2020): 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C., March 2024), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

Coercion or Limited Force

Coercive PRC activities short of major combat operations might be divided into (1) disruptive activities, primarily involving the three warfares, and (2) limited use of force, including daily maritime gray-zone operations involving low-intensity coercion by the China Coast Guard and Maritime Militia.⁴⁵ Both forces are formally elements of China's armed forces and answer to a PLA chain of command up to Xi himself. While some extant and potential activities may span both categories, the present author opposes as analytically obfuscatory and unhelpful the generic definition of gray-zone activities to encompass all manner of problematic PRC activities. This broad conception is commonly employed in Taiwan, the United States, and much of the Western world.

At the lower-intensity end of PRC coercive activities are political and disinformation operations primarily captured by the three warfares.⁴⁶ Political activities may be overt, covert, or a combination thereof. Unlike in 1950, the PRC now has capable fifth column assets deployed in Taiwan. Cyberactivity is a major enabler of such operations and may also be used to disrupt or even disable elements of Taiwan's critical infrastructure, media, financial networks, or economic activities more broadly. The overriding, or at least initial, objective would be to demonstrate the ability to impose punishment or crippling dysfunction on Taiwan's society and reveal its leadership to be ineffective and without recourse, thereby compelling Taiwanese officials and the populace to accept Beijing's terms in order to avert catastrophe.

At the higher-intensity end of coercive activities, the PRC has a growing array of tools at its disposal.⁴⁷ For instance, extensive military exercises and the enforcement of restrictions and closure areas through Notices to Airmen would require rerouting ships and aircraft and could impose significant costs on Taiwan's economy. The 1995–96 exercises offer a model on which the PLA

⁴⁵ For an unrivaled conceptual survey of this subject, see Peter Dutton, "Conceptualizing China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," in *Maritime Gray Zone Operations: Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson (New York: Routledge, 2022), 19–34.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective>; Elsa B. Kania, "The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, August 22, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares>; and Kerry K. Gershaneck, *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting"* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2020).

⁴⁷ For an instructive background, see Duchâtel, "An Assessment of China's Options for Military Coercion of Taiwan."

might build. Additionally, “PLA special operations forces could infiltrate Taiwan and conduct attacks against infrastructure or leadership targets.”⁴⁸

Blockade

Of all major PRC military options vis-à-vis Taiwan, an air or maritime blockade is perhaps unrivaled in its potential flexibility, contingent nature, and ability to impose difficult escalation dilemmas on Taiwanese, U.S., and allied decision-makers. Accordingly, while a blockade could escalate tremendously, as well as be combined with elements of other operations (e.g., bombardment and strait-crossing), it is the next logical aspect to consider in sequence.

Among the PLA’s set of service- and joint-level missions, the Joint Blockade Campaign (联合封锁战役) generally covers such aforementioned operations. Under this operational concept, China’s armed forces would seek to interrupt or sever foreign air and maritime intercourse with Taiwan, in part to compel the island’s surrender by cutting off critical imports. The PLA Air Force and Navy would have leading roles, but the PLA Army might well also apply its unrivaled mass, and the Aerospace, Cyberspace, and Information Support Forces might simultaneously implement electronic warfare, network attacks, and information operations (e.g., “information blockade”) to heighten Taiwan’s isolation and societal fracturing. Such efforts to isolate and enervate Taiwan could be quite prolonged,⁴⁹ although the longer they continued, the greater the possibility and prospect of U.S. and allied intervention.⁵⁰ Leading analysts have expressed concerns about the United States’ ability to deter China through the imposition of costs, mismatch of goals and capabilities, ability to prevail in protracted blockade warfare, and viable war termination options.⁵¹

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2023, 141. See also John Chen and Joel Wuthnow, “Chinese Special Operations in a Large-Scale Island Landing,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 18, January 21, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/18>.

⁴⁹ For related considerations, see Gustavo F. Ferreira and Jamie A. Critelli, “Taiwan’s Food Resiliency—or Not—in a Conflict with China,” *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023): 39–60.

⁵⁰ Max Stewart, “Island Blitz: A Campaign Analysis of a Taiwan Takeover by the PLA,” CIMSEC, June 13, 2023, <https://cimsec.org/island-blitz-a-campaign-analysis-of-a-taiwan-takeover-by-the-pla>.

⁵¹ For pessimistic analyses, see Lonnie D. Henley, “PLA Operational Concepts and Centers of Gravity in a Taiwan Conflict,” testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., February 18, 2021, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Lonnie_Henley_Testimony.pdf; and Lonnie D. Henley, “Beyond the First Battle: Overcoming a Protracted Blockade of Taiwan,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, China Maritime Report, no. 26, March 8, 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/26>.

Bombardment

The Joint Firepower Strike Campaign (联合火力战役) would draw on some of the PLA's leading weapons.⁵² Precision missile and air strikes could proceed in various sequences, potentially in combination with other major PLA operations. Given their centrality to situational awareness, Taiwan's early-warning radars would likely be some of the first targets for strikes.⁵³ Other major military targets seen as pivotal to Taiwan's defenses would likely include bases and command and communications posts. Government targets seen as pivotal to Taiwan's leadership and decision-making continuity and resolve to fight would include major institutions and official facilities.⁵⁴ While Xi controls numerous and extremely capable strike assets to wage a Joint Firepower Strike Campaign, and there is no way to fully defend against them all, such a campaign would be unlikely in and of itself to realize Xi's political objectives regarding "Taiwanese compatriots" and could well backfire strategically.

Invasion

The most operationally viable effort for PLA forces at present would be an incremental victory or stepping-stone approach to seizing offshore islands, particularly the Pratas Islands and Taiping Island in the South China Sea, as well as Kinmen and the Matsu Islands in the Taiwan Strait. In a key example of operational vulnerability for Taiwan and potential opportunity for China, the Pratas Islands—which Beijing also claims—are located approximately 275 miles from Kaohsiung, the municipality in southern Taiwan that administers them, but just 170 miles from Hong Kong (within the city's flight information region). Lacking permanent inhabitants, they host a detachment of roughly 500 Taiwanese marines.⁵⁵ The Pentagon assesses:

The PLA is capable of various amphibious operations short of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan.... With few overt military preparations beyond routine training, the PRC could launch an invasion of small Taiwan-occupied islands in the SCS [South China Sea], such as Pratas or Itu Aba. A PLA invasion of a

⁵² Michael Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict," in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 113–37, especially 118–23.

⁵³ Mark Stokes and Eric Lee, "Early Warning in the Taiwan Strait," Project 2049 Institute, April 12, 2022, <https://project2049.net/2022/04/12/early-warning-in-the-taiwan-strait>.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* 2023, 141.

⁵⁵ Shahn Savino and Charles Dunst, "Will Taiwan's Dongsha Islands Be the Next Crimea?" *World Politics Review*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/a-small-island-chain-could-be-the-next-flashpoint-in-taiwan-china-relations>.

medium-sized, better-defended island, such as Matsu or Kinmen, is also within the PLA's capabilities.⁵⁶

Such a victory might be pyrrhic, however, given the cost of strategic surprise and the political opposition that it would likely galvanize in Taiwan as well as the United States and its allies. It is noteworthy that the PLA arguably had operationally viable options vis-à-vis Kinmen and the Matsu Islands as early as the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, but that Mao decided against such courses of action in order to avoid undermining the PRC's claims to Taiwan in its entirety. However, such a seizure would greatly raise the stakes and risk: if the United States failed to respond effectively, its resolve and commitment would come into question.

An outright amphibious invasion probably would be the only way for the PRC to assert control of Taiwan permanently and conclusively. It also represents one of the most complex and difficult military operations conceivable, a challenge further accentuated by its high-stakes nature. Two authors—one a naval engineer specializing in amphibious operations at the Marine Design and Research Institute of China in Shanghai—write in the PLA Navy's service newspaper: "From the perspective of past large-scale landing operations, once success is achieved, the gains are enormous. But the degree of difficulty is also large."⁵⁷ Furthermore, failure would be obvious, and no amount of CCP propaganda could portray the situation otherwise.

PLA operational concepts for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan center on the Joint Island Landing Campaign (联合登陆), which entails a coordinated combination of campaigns involving air, maritime, logistics, and electronic warfare components.⁵⁸ The objective is to achieve air and maritime superiority; circumvent, overwhelm, penetrate, or otherwise overcome Taiwanese defenses; seize ports and beaches, improvise landing methods, or otherwise establish a beachhead; accumulate combat power by rapidly building up and sustaining shore-based forces; and drive inland to seize key objectives, or even—in the most extreme of scenarios—the whole island.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 141–42.

⁵⁷ Wang Guo and Wang Xiang, "登陆作战到底难在何处" [Why Landing Operations Are Hard], *People's Navy*, December 29, 2020, 4.

⁵⁸ Cristina L. Garafola, "The PLA Airborne Corps in a Joint Island Landing Campaign," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, *China Maritime Report*, no. 19, March 10, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/19>; and Dennis J. Blasko, "The PLA Army Amphibious Force," U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, *China Maritime Report*, no. 20, April 27, 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/20>.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, 141.

A conference convened by the China Maritime Studies Institute in May 2021 found that the PLA has achieved tremendous progress in developing many of the capabilities needed for a cross-strait invasion, confronting Taiwan with an increasingly grave threat. The inherent challenges and risks remain high for Xi and the CCP, but they may desire to be “just good enough for long enough” with a hodgepodge fleet of PLA, militia, and civilian vessels.⁶⁰

Despite the PLA’s ongoing efforts to improve its capabilities to execute the Taiwan Joint Island Landing Campaign, the Pentagon is skeptical of the prospects for an amphibious invasion:

A large-scale amphibious invasion would be one of the most complicated and difficult military operations for the PLA, requiring air and maritime superiority, the rapid buildup and sustainment of supplies onshore, and uninterrupted support. It would likely strain the PRC’s armed forces and invite a strong international response. These factors, combined with inevitable force attrition, the complexity of urban warfare, and potential for an insurgency, make an amphibious invasion of Taiwan a significant political and military risk for Xi and the CCP, even assuming a successful landing and breakout past Taiwan beachhead defenses.⁶¹

Taiwan itself has a variety of means to attempt to make its ports unusable by an invading force.⁶² Furthermore, it seems doubtful that the PLA has fully prepared for the challenging city operations that might be needed to successfully conclude an invasion of Taiwan.⁶³

PRC Perceptions: Effectiveness, Capabilities, and Trends

It is unclear how well-informed (or forthright) most civilian PRC sources are regarding the current and projected state of PLA force development and Xi Jinping’s thinking regarding its use. The vast majority of sources the present author examined suggest that “peaceful reunification”

⁶⁰ “Quick Look Report: Large-Scale Amphibious Warfare in Chinese Military Strategy,” U.S. Naval War College, CMSI, June 14, 2021, available at <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/06/quick-look-cmsi-4-6-may-2021-conference-large-scale-amphibious-warfare-in-chinese-military-strategy-taiwan-strait-campaign-focus>.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 141.

⁶² Ian Easton, “Hostile Harbors: Taiwan’s Ports and PLA Invasion Plans,” Project 2049 Institute, July 22, 2021, <https://project2049.net/2021/07/22/hostile-harbors-taiwans-ports-and-pla-invasion-plans>.

⁶³ Sale Lilly, “‘Killing Rats in a Porcelain Shop’: PLA Urban Warfare in a Taiwan Campaign,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 139–57; and Elsa B. Kania and Ian Burns McCaslin, “The PLA’s Evolving Outlook on Urban Warfare: Learning, Training, and Implications for Taiwan,” Institute for the Study of War, April 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/pla-s-evolving-outlook-urban-warfare-learning-training-and-implications-taiwan>.

under some sort of “one country, two systems” framework remains Beijing’s preferred approach. Wang Yong, director of the Center for American Studies at Peking University, observes that “peaceful reunification is the least costly way to resolve the Taiwan issue.”⁶⁴ Some civilian sources appear to suggest the need for a more flexible approach than Xi’s rhetoric has reflected to date. Two professors, one affiliated with the Shenzhen Liaison Department of the Central Government Liaison Office in Hong Kong, state that policy approaches “obviously cannot ignore reactions of the Taiwan side” and call for a wide-ranging exploration of possibilities for framing one country, two systems.⁶⁵

Some writings suggest that Beijing remains cautious and could still be deterred. “Cross-strait military security crises are extremely harmful and can easily lead to intervention by external forces,” states Chen Xiancai, director of the Institute of Political Science at Xiamen University’s Taiwan Research Institute. He continues: “Coupled with its high cost, the willingness of all parties to trigger a military security crisis is reduced, such that, objectively speaking, endogenous forces can restrain the outbreak of a cross-strait military security crisis.”⁶⁶ A specialist at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations judges the probability of conflict to be relatively low, albeit with caveats:

Given the deep economic interdependence between China and the United States and the asymmetric nuclear balance of terror, the likelihood of a large-scale conflict between China and the United States is low, and the triggering of a fierce diplomatic war and severe economic sanctions are low-probability events. International politics is full of chances and drama, however, and major strategic changes often manifest themselves in unexpected ways.⁶⁷

Another scholar judges that while “the general direction of U.S. Taiwan policy may continue in a direction that is not conducive to the peaceful development of cross-strait relations for a long time,” nevertheless, “the

⁶⁴ Wang Yong, “和平统一、一国两制是解决台湾问题的最佳方案” [Peaceful Reunification and One Country, Two Systems Are the Best Solutions to the Taiwan Issue], *China Youth Daily*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/138704.html>.

⁶⁵ Huang Jichao and Jin Huanyu, “当前大陆学界 ‘一国两制’ 台湾方案相关研究述评” [A Review of Current Research in Mainland Academia on the “One Country, Two Systems” Formula for Taiwan], *Taiwan Studies*, August 1, 2021, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/a-review-of-current-research-in-mainland-academia-on-the-one-country-two-systems-formula-for-taiwan>.

⁶⁶ Chen Xiancai, “台海危机与风险管理: 1987–2017为例” [Taiwan Strait Crisis and Risk Management: The Case of 1987–2017], *Taiwan Studies*, February 20, 2018, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/taiwan-strait-crisis-and-risk-management-the-case-of-1987-2017>.

⁶⁷ Zhang Wenzong, “美国对华威慑与胁迫及中国应对” [U.S. Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy toward China and China’s Response], *Contemporary International Relations*, December 20, 2016, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/u-s-deterrence-and-coercive-diplomacy-toward-china-and-chinas-response>.

probability of China and the United States falling into great-power conflict and war confrontation due to the Taiwan issue is not high.”⁶⁸

Other specialists are far more pessimistic or hawkish. A lengthy analysis concludes that “Taiwan is increasingly likely to become a ‘tipping point’ for Sino-U.S. conflicts.”⁶⁹ In a characteristically assertive vein, Zhang Wenmu expresses certitude that Beijing can compel Washington to abandon Taiwan.⁷⁰ A similarly hard-line analysis from Leng Bo, director of the Voting Research Office in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Taiwan Research Institute, likewise suggests that things are coming to a head and that the clock is ticking. He invokes Xi and society alike to assert that the status quo is unacceptable:

Although the opportunity is not yet completely ripe for cross-strait unification, the foundation for this prospect grows increasingly solid, and we have entered “the stage where we can reach it if we stand on our tiptoes.” In his important speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the “Letter to Taiwan Compatriots,” General Secretary Xi Jinping mentioned the need to accelerate the unification process. It is no longer enough to “sit and talk”; the time has come to “stand and act.” The Mainland’s policy toward Taiwan is now more aimed at favorably shaping the unification situation. It is worth mentioning, the Mainland public’s hatred of “Taiwan independence” and its impatience with delay and the inability to resolve the Taiwan problem are all rapidly growing, while voices favoring “armed unification” are continuously rising. Even the patience of the rationalists doing research on Taiwan is decreasing.⁷¹

Military-affiliated sources tend to echo Leng’s impatient approach. Such sources would generally not be expected to acknowledge any prohibitive PLA inadequacies regarding Taiwan scenarios. Their general consensus is that Washington’s and Taipei’s cross-strait policies and actions are trending in an unacceptable direction, reflecting a failure thus far by Beijing and the PLA to curb them, but that the PLA is on track to be able to offer the necessary deterrence or compellence, potentially through CCP authorization to take harsher, more coercive approaches and even credibly threaten war. In interpreting China’s latest defense white paper (2019), researchers at China’s

⁶⁸ Li Zhenguang, “台湾问题的国际环境变化与台海局势走向” [Changes in the International Environment of the Taiwan Issue and Trends in the Taiwan Strait], *China Review*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/124382.html>.

⁶⁹ Qiu Chaobing, “中美关系新常态下的台湾问题: 走向与评估” [The Taiwan Issue under the New Situation of Sino-U.S. Relations: Direction and Assessment], *United Front Studies Research*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/124825.html>.

⁷⁰ Zhang Wenmu, “台湾问题的底线、极限、机遇” [The Bottom Line, Limits, and Opportunities of the Taiwan Issue], in 张文木战略文集 [Zhang Wenmu’s Strategic Essays] (Jinan: Shandong People’s Publishing House, 2020), chap. 1, available at <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/127566.html>.

⁷¹ Leng Bo, “百年未有之大变局下两岸关系新特征与未来趋势” [New Characteristics and Future Trends in Cross-Strait Relations in the Context of the Great Change Not Seen in a Century], *Modern Taiwan Studies*, no. 3 (2021): 14–17.

Academy of Military Science's Warfare Research Institute invoke harsh boilerplate: "It is better to lose thousands of troops than to lose an inch of soil.... The tide of history is vast and mighty. Those who submit will prosper, while those who resist shall perish. Reunification is the historical trend and the correct path."⁷²

Likely affiliated with China's military or defense industry and written under a pseudonym, one unofficial but extensive and seemingly serious analysis emphasizes that "China's Taiwan region is not Ukraine, and the PLA is certainly not the Russian Army." The report identifies the following trendlines:

[D]ue to limitations imposed by existing economic levels and available military equipment, it has not been until the last ten years that the PLA has started to gradually gain the real combat capabilities needed to use force to resolve the Taiwan issue and achieve unification of the motherland.... The PLA's launch of a campaign to resolve the Taiwan issue can generally be seen as a [devastating] attack because the Taiwan military and the PLA are not of the same class. The PLA will definitely achieve quick, decisive victory, nothing like the war of attrition currently being conducted by the Russian army.⁷³

Longtime government analyst Da Wei, who is deeply familiar with policymaking in both Beijing and Washington, offers particular insights from within China's intelligence and analytic community. He explains that "rather than saying that each party has a 'red line,' it would be better to say that each party insists on a 'red zone' with blurred boundaries and a certain degree of flexibility." While claiming that its Taiwan policy remains unchanged, Da contends that Washington has abandoned previous restrictions and restraint. This reversal, he insists, has moved the goal posts and dishonored the spirit of Washington's commitments: "It is as if the United States removed the Buddha statues from the temple, leaving only an empty structure, and then claimed that the temple was still there." Simultaneously, Da acknowledges that "despite the Chinese government's constant reaffirmation of its basic policies of 'peaceful reunification and one country, two systems,' as long as the capabilities of the Chinese military are growing, and the scope of its activities is expanding, the United States will believe that China is gradually abandoning its policy of 'peaceful reunification.'" Worryingly, he concludes that "this situation has left us with little time. If we cannot achieve strategic stability through self-restraint and mutual assurance, we may have to wait

⁷² Deng Bibo and Chen Yue, "坚定不移推进实现国家完全统一" [Firmly Push Forward Complete National Unification], *National Defense*, no. 9 (2019): 16–17.

⁷³ Long Damao, "国战于野——从俄乌战争看中国台湾问题" [Great Countries at War: Looking at the Taiwan Issue from the Perspective of the Russia-Ukraine War], *Shipborne Weapons—Defense Review*, no. 6 (2022): 8–14.

for stability to be achieved through a larger crisis, conflict, or even war. However, this path would be extremely costly for China, the United States, and the world.”⁷⁴

PRC military-informed sources are generally pessimistic about current trends, believing that Taipei and Washington are insufficiently deterred. While some civilian sources suggest caution and potential deterrence, military sources emphasize preparation and the need for more coercive measures—precisely the path Xi appears to be taking.

Conclusion: Fateful Trends

Xi Jinping has sustained rapid growth in military funding even as China’s economy continually slows. He has pursued an expensive, complex system of systems (e.g., hypersonic glide vehicles) that can only be developed and deployed through resource-intensive, high-stakes megaprojects. He has initiated and sustained an extraordinary nuclear weapons buildup with political, reputational, and strategic stability costs and risks that his predecessors all avoided. These approaches do not maximize China’s prospects for long-term development underwritten by economic growth. Rather, they are clearly designed to give Xi military options that his predecessors lacked.

Xi hopes to achieve his objectives at the lowest level of escalation, using a meteoric military buildup to impose a Sisyphean sense of futility on Taiwan as part of a whole-of-government pressure campaign to eventually compel unification and thereby “win without fighting.” However, Xi is heightening expectations and time pressure in a way that increasingly risks a collision course with intractable opposition from Taiwan, the United States, and U.S. allies and partners. Even under Ma Ying-jeou, Xi was unwilling or unable to offer conditions that Taiwanese society could accept. Subsequently, his de-emphasis of carrots and increasing emphasis on sticks make apparent offerings far less palatable. Compounding matters, his suppression of Hong Kong in contravention of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and imposition of the popularly opposed National Security Law invalidating core protections promised under the framework of one country, two systems make any offerings to Taiwan far less credible. The increasingly apparent lack

⁷⁴ Da Wei, “如何实现台湾问题的新稳定，对话、危机还是战争？” [How Can We Achieve New Stability on the Taiwan Issue—Dialogue, Crisis, or War?], China Foundation for International Studies, August 22, 2022, trans. CSIS, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/how-can-we-achieve-new-stability-on-the-taiwan-issue-dialogue-crisis-or-war>.

of a PRC-preferred pathway toward cross-strait entente could bring a range of military contingencies into play.

The PLA's transformation has fundamentally altered Taiwan's options for defending itself in a range of conceivable scenarios. Taipei can no longer counter PRC military strengths symmetrically. Instead, as William Murray cogently argues, its remaining defense options lie in emphasizing the asymmetrical advantage of being the defender, particularly of an island with favorable geography, and seeking to deny the PRC its strategic objectives rather than attempting to destroy its weapons systems.⁷⁵ Taiwan is studying and pursuing a variety of these measures, but more is needed. Sea mines represent one of the best weapons for this purpose, yet they remain underemphasized even now.⁷⁶

The prospects are sobering; the implications are bracing. Taiwan might indeed have to roll its rock up the hill (by successfully deterring)—if not endlessly, at least through this critical decade. There are indeed asymmetric “porcupine-style” ways to better pace the mounting threat while avoiding Sisyphean futility, but progress is thus far slow, and time may well be running out. As Xi himself has declared: “History never waits for those who hesitate, those who look on, those who are idle, or those who are weak.”⁷⁷ This critical decade is pivotal for Taiwan's future and the United States' security. To deter aggression, they must rapidly bolster asymmetric defenses.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ William S. Murray, “Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy,” *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (2008): 13–38.

⁷⁶ See Matthew Cancian, “An Offensive Minelaying Campaign against China,” *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 1 (2022): 71–88.

⁷⁷ David Bandurski, “95 Reasons to Celebrate: President Xi's Party Anniversary Speech and What It Might Mean,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 1, 2016, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/07/01/95-reasons-to-celebrate-president-xis-party-anniversary-speech-and-what-it-might-mean>.

⁷⁸ For recommendations, see Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, “Deterring (or Defeating) a PLA Invasion: Eight Recommendations for Taipei,” in *Chinese Amphibious Warfare: Prospects for a Cross-Strait Invasion*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson, Conor M. Kennedy, and Ryan D. Martinson (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2024), 449–61.

THE PLA IN A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

PREPARING FOR HIGH WINDS AND CHOPPY WATERS



Edited by Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch

THE PLA IN A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters



THE PLA IN A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters

Edited by Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch

With contributions from

Dennis J. Blasko, Peter Connolly, Andrew S. Erickson, Kim Fassler, Rick Gunnell,
Timothy R. Heath, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Erin Richter, Tsun-Kai Tsai,
Howard Wang, Joel Wuthnow, and Ketian Zhang

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

Published in the United States of America by
The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, WA, and Washington, D.C.
www.nbr.org

Copyright © 2025 by The National Bureau of Asian Research

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and illustration by Nate Christenson.

ISBN (electronic): 978-1-939131-93-5

NBR makes no warranties or representations regarding the accuracy of any map in this volume. Depicted boundaries are meant as guidelines only and do not represent the views of NBR or NBR's funders.

Design and publishing services by The National Bureau of Asian Research

Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>Samuel J. Paparo</i>	
Introduction: China's Military Strategy and Posture in an Increasingly Complex Security Environment	1
<i>Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch</i>	
Chapter 1 – “Profound Changes Unseen in a Century”: China Assesses Its Security Environment	15
<i>Kim Fessler</i>	
Chapter 2 – Stabilizing the Boat: Revisiting Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping	41
<i>Joel Wuthnow</i>	
Chapter 3 – China's Transition to a War-Oriented National Defense Mobilization System	65
<i>Erin Richter and Howard Wang</i>	
Chapter 4 – Lumbering toward the China Dream: The PLA's Strategic Mission Through 2049 and Beyond	91
<i>Timothy R. Heath</i>	
Chapter 5 – PRC Lessons Learned from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for a Taiwan Conflict.	111
<i>Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Tsun-Kai Tsai</i>	
Chapter 6 – Assessing the PLA's Strengths and Weaknesses for Achieving the PRC's Goals.	127
<i>Dennis J. Blasko and Rick Gunnell</i>	

**Chapter 7 – Imposing the Fate of Sisyphus? The PLA as an Instrument
of National Power and Force Preparation toward Taiwan 149**

Andrew S. Erickson

Chapter 8 – The PLA as a Part of China’s Strategy in Southeast Asia . . 175

Ketian Zhang

**Chapter 9 – Competing for Access: China’s Growing Security Interest
in the Pacific Islands 193**

Peter Connolly

About the Contributors 227

— FOREWORD —

I am honored to present *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, the latest volume from an essential conference series on the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the China Strategic Focus Group at United States Indo-Pacific Command, and the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs. This volume explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is thinking about the use of force in an increasingly complex security environment and assesses the CCP's capability to employ the PLA to achieve its strategic objectives. The superb work of the authors provides a rigorous and insightful assessment of how CCP threat assessments are driving the PLA's modernization efforts, strategy, and operational posture.

China continues its aggressive military buildup through a rising defense budget, a rapidly modernizing conventional force, an exponential increase in space-based capabilities, and an alarming nuclear weapons expansion. Beijing also continues to wage increasingly aggressive gray-zone operations against U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, significantly raising the risk of an incident or miscalculation that could lead to loss of life or spark a wider conflict. In the Taiwan Strait, Beijing is employing all elements of comprehensive national power to coerce Taiwan and the international community to accept that unification is, in fact, inevitable. Although China claims it prefers to achieve unification through peaceful means, Xi Jinping will not renounce the use of force. These actions pose an important question for the U.S. Department of Defense, interagency, and broader China-watching community: to what extent is Xi preparing China for war?

This PLA Conference volume contributes to the expanding global conversation on China strategic intentions by examining the CCP's perceptions of China's external security environment and tracing how these judgments direct whole-of-society preparations for intensifying strategic competition with the United States. It offers unique insights into the primary ideological lens through which Beijing assesses its security environment, as well as the impacts these assessments have on party-army relations. The volume then leverages this context to explore how the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture are evolving along with whole-of-society efforts to compete with the West. It also examines the lessons

the PLA may be drawing from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including how the PLA may be applying these lessons to its assessments of its own strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the volume assesses three operational theaters—Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Oceania—and the future role of the PLA in achieving its objectives in each.

This work offers insights for understanding China's strategic approach to military modernization for potential unification by force that planners, policymakers, and warfighters can leverage toward designing effective and achievable objectives. I am proud to sponsor this conference, and I commend the organizers and participants who contributed their collective discernment to make this volume possible.

Samuel J. Paparo
Commander, United States Indo-Pacific Command
May 2025

China's Military Strategy and Posture in an Increasingly Complex Security Environment

Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch

The 2023 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference, cohosted by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and the China Strategic Focus Group at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, examined how the perception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of its external security environment is shaping its use of the PLA as a tool of national power. Key questions the conference sought to address included the following:

- How do top Chinese civilian and military leaders assess the security environment of the People's Republic of China (PRC)?
- What are the key risks and opportunities these leaders believe they face in achieving their goals?
- How are the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture changing against the backdrop of a more complex external security environment?
- What role will the use of military force play in achieving the CCP's goals?
- How effectively is the CCP using the PLA in coordination with other tools of national power—diplomatic, economic, and informational—to achieve its goals?

Key findings include the following:

- The CCP is using military force and coercion with greater frequency in pursuit of the PRC's territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region and strategy to become a great global power.

Benjamin Frohman is Research Director for the People's Liberation Army Conference and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

Jeremy Rausch is Director of the Political and Security Affairs group at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

- The CCP's more prominent use of the PLA is driven by its view that the PRC's external security environment is worsening while simultaneously presenting it with historic opportunities to accomplish the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."
- Chinese leaders more aggressively use military force and coercion against weaker countries but continue to exercise caution when confronted with the prospect of direct military intervention by the United States.
- The CCP's calculus surrounding the use of military force is informed by confidence that historical forces are propelling the PRC's rise as a great power. As a result, Chinese leaders have been emboldened to act more forcefully in the region while awaiting opportunities to take bolder actions to seize or expand control over additional territory as the PRC increases its global power and influence.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been instructive for Chinese leaders, both highlighting potential shortfalls in PLA capabilities and plans and offering important lessons for preparing for a potential future military conflict.

Even though the PRC's more forceful approach in the Indo-Pacific has yielded only mixed results to date, concern is growing in the United States and capitals around the world about Beijing's more assertive use of the PLA to achieve its regional and global goals. From the China-India border to the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and the CCP's sweeping sovereignty claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea, recent years have witnessed increasingly aggressive actions by the PLA to assert control over territory the CCP believes to be vital to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Flashpoints have included a fatal clash on the China-India border in 2020, which saw the PRC's first use of lethal force against India in nearly half a century; the PLA's aggressive efforts to prevent the Philippines' resupply of Second Thomas Shoal, which continued into 2024; and what CIA director William Burns stated publicly to be CCP general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Xi Jinping's instruction to the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.¹ Meanwhile, China's security forces continue to expand their presence outside the PRC's immediate periphery, including into the small island states of the Pacific.

¹ Olivia Gazis, "CIA Director William Burns: 'I Wouldn't Underestimate,' Xi's Ambitions for Taiwan," CBS News, February 3, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-director-william-burns-i-wouldnt-underestimate-xis-ambitions-for-taiwan>.

Amid these tensions, the United States must update its understanding of the drivers behind the PRC's more aggressive military posture, including the CCP's perception of its security environment and thinking regarding the use of military coercion and force to achieve its goals. This PLA Conference volume provides in-depth analysis of Chinese leaders' assessments of the challenges and opportunities in their external security environment, the PRC's military and economic preparations for a future conflict, and the PLA's evolving posture and capabilities in key regions, including around Taiwan, in the South China Sea, and in Oceania.

Using Military Power in a Turbulent World

The CCP's increasing use of military power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond is informed by a darkening view of its external security environment. Chinese leaders have long perceived both challenges and opportunities for achieving their goals, but in recent years they have assessed that the challenges facing them have grown more severe. This view was articulated by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the CCP's 20th National Congress in October 2022, where he declared:

[China] has entered a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising. Various “black swan” and “gray rhino” events may occur at any time. We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms.²

The CCP's growing sense of unease was captured as early as January 2021, when a commentary in the *People's Daily* expressed similar concern about the challenges the CCP faced heading into the centennial year of its founding. “The closer we get to national rejuvenation, the less likely smooth sailing will be, the more risks, challenges, and even stormy seas there will be,” the commentary warned. It continued:

In the past we were able to take advantage of the trend and opportunities were relatively easy to grasp; now we have to go up against the wind... In the past, the general environment was relatively stable, and risks and challenges were relatively easy to see clearly; now global circumstances are turbulent and

² Xi Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects” (report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, October 16, 2022), http://my.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792358.htm.

complex, geopolitical challenges are high and pressing, and there are many submerged reefs and undercurrents.³

Shortly before the 20th Party Congress, General Secretary Xi repeated this assessment verbatim, confirming its authoritative encapsulation of views at the highest level of the party-state.⁴

A central factor driving the CCP's assessment of its growing risks is the increasingly fraught state of its relationship with the United States. In 2019 the PRC's vice minister of public security warned that "suppression" by the United States had become the most significant external factor affecting the CCP's "political security."⁵ At the National People's Congress in March 2023, General Secretary Xi took the unusual step of publicly identifying the United States as behind the PRC's growing challenges, declaring that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedentedly severe challenges to our country's development."⁶ That same month, the PRC Foreign Ministry highlighted the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) as posing profound threats to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime and regional stability and peace.⁷

Perhaps paradoxically, despite these challenges the CCP maintains that long-term trends are in its favor. In 2020, an official statement assessed that the PRC's "period of strategic opportunity" would continue beyond the first two decades of the 21st century—the period initially envisioned by former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin in 2002 for increasing the PRC's power and influence in a relatively benign external environment.⁸ What Chinese leaders believe to be a "profound adjustment in the international balance of

³ Ren Zhongping, "征途漫漫从头越: 论新征程上的孺子牛 拓荒牛老黄牛精神" [Long Journey from Scratch: Of the Spirit of a Willing Ox, Pioneering Ox, and Old Ox in the New Journey], *People's Daily*, January 22, 2021.

⁴ Xi Jinping, "In the New Development Stage, the Implementation of the New Development Concept Will Inevitably Require the Construction of a New Development Pattern," *Qiushi*, August 31, 2022.

⁵ Kanis Leung, "China's Public Security Ministry Warns Its Bureaus to Be on Guard against 'Political Risks' Caused by Influence of Protest-Hit Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, June 29, 2019.

⁶ Chun Han Wong, Keith Zhai, and James T. Areddy, "China's Xi Jinping Takes Rare Direct Aim at U.S. in Speech," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2023.

⁷ "China Says AUKUS on 'Dangerous Path' with Nuclear Subs Deal," Associated Press, March 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-aukus-nuclear-submarines-f6ecf854646e2dbdd6beaa2f2e971d>.

⁸ "Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 2021, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-11-17%20Communiqué%20of%20the%20Fifth%20Plenary%20Session%20of%20the%2019th%20Central%20Committee%20of%20the%20Communist%20Party%20of%20China.pdf?ver=YsJuJy8mBmqG_jIadpcHcA%3d%3d.

power” and “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局) reflect their perception of significant opportunities in an era of relative U.S. decline vis-à-vis the PRC. Encapsulating this view, at the same time that Chinese leaders warned of increasing risks and challenges, they began publicly stating that “the East is rising while the West is in decline”—a judgment attributed to General Secretary Xi himself.⁹ Put otherwise by the PRC’s top leader, “time and momentum are on China’s side” and the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is now on an irreversible historical course.”¹⁰

In the CCP’s view, taking advantage of these epochal opportunities is not a passive endeavor. Rather, the CCP believes that it must exert itself and actively “struggle” to achieve its goals, as Kim Fassler highlights in her chapter in this volume. “Military struggle” factors prominently among these efforts, which Chinese leaders believe is a particularly important tool for the PRC to achieve its goals while deterring challenges to its policies from the United States and U.S. regional allies and partners. This philosophy was prominently expressed by former defense minister Wei Fenghe in 2020, when he told delegates to that year’s National People’s Congress that the PRC should “use fighting to promote stability.”¹¹ Illustrating this approach, that year the PLA provoked a violent incident that resulted in the first military fatalities on the Sino-Indian border in 45 years. It also escalated its multiyear coercion campaigns around Japan’s Senkaku Islands, against Taiwan, and in the South China Sea. These campaigns continued into 2024 as the PRC used the PLA and China Coast Guard to sail into waters around the Senkaku Islands and to prevent the Philippines from resupplying its outpost at Second Thomas Shoal. In December 2023 the PRC Foreign Ministry warned that “China-Philippines relations are at a crossroads” and that “the Philippines must act with caution.”¹² Meanwhile, more than 1,700 PLA aircraft intruded into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone in 2023, further stoking regional tensions.¹³

⁹ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “2021 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” November 2021, chap. 1, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/Chapter_1_Section_1--CCPs_Ambitions_and_Challenges_at_Its_Centennial.pdf.

¹⁰ Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, “Xi Jinping Says ‘Time and Momentum on China’s Side’ as He Sets Out Communist Party Vision,” *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021; and Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.”

¹¹ Jun Mai, “Two Sessions 2020: China-U.S. Rivalry in ‘High-Risk Period,’ Chinese Defense Minister Says,” *South China Morning Post*, May 27, 2020.

¹² “China Urges Philippines to ‘Act with Caution’ amid South China Sea Dispute,” Al Jazeera, December 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/21/china-urges-philippines-to-act-with-caution-amid-south-china-sea-dispute>

¹³ Micah McCartney, “China Deployed Over 1,700 Military Planes Around Taiwan in 2023,” *Newsweek*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-military-aircraft-taiwan-strait-2023-1858106>.

These concerning trends require a better understanding of how the CCP is thinking about the use of military force to achieve its objectives in an increasingly complex security environment. To this end, this volume examines how CCP leaders assess the PRC's external security environment, including both the opportunities and threats presented therein; how this assessment is driving changes to the PLA's strategy, planning, and modernization efforts; and how the PLA's posture and capabilities are evolving in key theaters of interest to the United States. The following sections survey the arguments of each chapter and summarize key findings.

Chinese Leaders Assess the PRC's Challenges and Opportunities

The 20th Party Congress highlighted CCP leaders' view of an increasingly uncertain and challenging external security environment. In his address to the assembly, General Secretary Xi Jinping reported that international developments posed a "series of immense risks and challenges" and that the world had "entered a new period of turbulence and change." The opening section of this volume examines how growing diplomatic, economic, and military tensions with the United States and other countries are affecting Chinese leaders' decision-making, party-military relations, and whole-of-society mobilization efforts in the PRC for a potential military conflict.

In the volume's first chapter, Kim Fassler examines the concept of "profound changes unseen in a century" as distilling the CCP's Marxist assessment of its opportunities to shape world events amid favorable historical trends. Identifying Xi's address to the 2017 Ambassadorial Work Conference as being one of the first official uses of this phrase, Fassler concludes that the gathering marked an inflection point toward more assertive efforts by the CCP to achieve its goal of national rejuvenation. She argues that "changes unseen in a century" is the CCP's assessment that strategic trends of multipolarity and economic globalization that it has observed since at least the 1980s are accelerating, driven by the rise of developing economies, technological advancement, and China's growing national power. Under Xi, Beijing has responded to these "profound changes" with new strategies to advance China's vision for global governance and doubled down on "struggle" to accelerate favorable strategic trends. At the same time, Fassler concludes that the apparent certainty of Chinese leaders regarding long-term favorable trends may make them more flexible

in their tactics for engaging in protracted competition with the United States and more willing to tolerate near-term setbacks.

In the second chapter, Joel Wuthnow contributes a fresh analysis of Xi's long-running efforts to strengthen his control over the PLA. To this end, the chapter focuses on the ways in which Xi has catered to the interests of senior officers, politically influential subgroups like the PLA Army, and the PLA itself as a powerful interest group during a period otherwise marked by disruptive change caused by the historic reforms and reorganization of the PLA beginning in 2015. Wuthnow argues that many portrayals of Xi's leadership of the PLA have myopically focused on purges of political rivals and a coercive anticorruption campaign while overlooking the broader political strategy that Xi used to consolidate power and push through ambitious reforms. According to Wuthnow, this strategy must also be recognized as respecting long-standing norms and practices in the PLA, including its prerogatives as a highly autonomous player in the Chinese government bureaucracy. Based on public data, including leadership biographies, budgets, and resource allocation, Wuthnow explains how Xi has galvanized support for his reorganization efforts at the individual, subgroup, and institutional levels. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes that Xi has also had to accept limits on his ability to pursue further reforms to the PLA and that the PLA's continuing high degree of bureaucratic autonomy creates the conditions for additional diplomatic embarrassments like the 2023 spy balloon incident.

The third chapter examines efforts by the CCP to transition its national defense mobilization system (NDMS) from a vehicle for emergency response and economic subsidization to a "war oriented" system capable of supporting national requirements during a protracted conflict. Erin Richter and Howard Wang review the evolution of the NDMS, identifying its initial objectives as geared toward leveraging resources across the whole of Chinese society to enable military operations supporting a "people's war." Subsequently in the mid to late 2000s, the NDMS priorities shifted away from wartime requirements toward economic development through subsidization and domestic emergency response. Richter and Wang identify the most recent transition as occurring in 2015 when the PRC initiated a series of reforms to prioritize the NDMS's war mobilization capabilities—a trend that solidified after the 20th Party Congress in 2022 as PLA media increasingly emphasized the "war orientation" of national defense mobilization work. The chapter concludes that the greatest significance of the 2015 reforms may be in freeing the military to focus on national defense missions while the civilian National

Development and Reform Commission picks up other functions supporting national defense mobilization previously handled by the PLA.

The PLA's Mandate amid a Complex Security Environment

As Chinese leaders perceive an increasingly complex external security environment, they have directed the PLA to step up its preparations to overcome challenges confronting the PRC and take advantage of new opportunities. The second section of this volume explores how the PLA's missions, strategy, and operational posture are evolving in the context of the PRC's changing security environment, as well as what role the CCP expects the PLA to play in achieving national goals in the coming years. It also examines the strategic, operational, and doctrinal lessons the PLA has learned from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and assesses the PLA's continuing efforts to adequately prepare its personnel to fight and win against a well-prepared opponent on the modern battlefield.

In the second section's first chapter, Timothy Heath challenges the view that Chinese leaders are preparing to initiate a conflict in the near term that could involve military intervention by the United States. Instead, he argues that the PLA has been tasked to focus on long-term military modernization, deterrence, and support of the government's efforts to incrementally change the status quo in China's favor through coercion and other non-war methods. Heath finds that the CCP assesses the primary challenges to its governing legitimacy to be domestic, relegating the PLA to a supporting role in achieving the party's goals in the coming decades. As such, he argues that coercion and gray-zone tactics may constitute the principal Chinese military challenge to Taiwan and others in the region in the near term, while warning that the United States must also plan to deter the long-term threat of an outright attack by the PRC to compel Taiwan's unification.

The next chapter examines the impact of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on Beijing's calculus regarding the use of military force to most effectively achieve political goals. From their wide-ranging analysis of original Chinese sources, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Tsun-Kai Tsai argue that Beijing is carefully studying the trajectory of Russia's invasion—a conflict described by one authoritative source as “the most serious geopolitical event since the end of the Cold War”—and drawing lessons that inform its views on future warfare. The authors highlight several of these lessons as worthy of attention. First, authoritative Chinese observers judge that the risk of an

extremely costly and protracted war between great powers is more likely than at any time since the world wars. Second, these sources clearly warn of the potentially game-changing impact of external assistance, especially from the United States and its allies, on a conflict between otherwise mismatched opponents. Among the most significant forms of external assistance they identify are intelligence support, material assistance, and training provided by the advanced industrial democracies. Finally, Chinese sources have carefully observed the nuclear dynamics of the conflict, concluding that Russia's nuclear deterrent largely failed to force Ukraine's capitulation and deter large-scale military assistance from outside powers once Ukraine proved itself resilient against Russia's initial assault.

In the next chapter, Dennis Blasko and Rick Gunnell argue that, despite major improvements in capabilities in recent years, senior PLA leaders still foresee decades of work before they will feel fully confident in the force's ability to win a conflict against one of the world's leading militaries. Xi Jinping himself has remarked on many of the PLA's self-assessed weaknesses, which include "peacetime malpractices," "ability panic," and the "five incapables," which refer to "some" commanders being incapable of judging the situation, understanding the intentions of higher echelons, making operational decisions, deploying troops, and dealing with unexpected situations. Highlighting the PLA's perception of itself as lagging behind the world's leading militaries in many technologies, the chapter concludes that while the PLA might be required to fight at any time, its leaders would prefer to achieve the nation's goals through efforts short of war and build additional confidence before initiating large-scale combat operations.

Is China Preparing for the Use of Force?

At the same time that its leaders express doubt over some aspects of the force's ability to fight a large-scale modern conflict, the PLA is steadily increasing its presence and improving its readiness to carry out assigned missions around the PRC's periphery and beyond. This volume's final section explores the PLA's changing force posture and capabilities around Taiwan, in Southeast Asia, and in the South Pacific and how Beijing is using the PLA as an instrument of power to deter challenges to its interests and seize opportunities in pursuit of its goals.

In the section's opening chapter, Andrew Erickson examines the PLA's posture toward Taiwan and the force's growing capabilities and options for conducting a cross-strait offensive campaign. Erickson argues that Xi

Jinping is devoting tremendous national resources to improve the PLA's options for an offensive operation against Taiwan and that his "centennial military building goal" of 2027 represents a major milestone for developing a full range of options to coerce or conquer the island. At the same time, Erickson finds that many Chinese writings suggest that Beijing does not yet believe the time is ripe to initiate a military conflict against Taiwan and that "peaceful reunification" remains the least costly way for resolving cross-strait political differences. Others, however, express greater willingness to use military coercion and even force to bring Taiwan under Beijing's control. Erickson suggests that this view may be manifested in the PLA's increasing use of military exercises and other pressure tactics to demoralize Taiwan's leaders and population and instill a sense of futility in resisting the PRC's growing national power.

In the next chapter, Ketian Zhang examines the role of the PLA in China's strategy in Southeast Asia and makes four core arguments. The first is that China has preferred to use gray-zone coercion in lieu of direct military coercion in the South China Sea in recent years, while still using the PLA as an important backstop supporting the China Coast Guard. Second, Zhang finds that Beijing carefully calibrates its use of the PLA alongside its other tools of statecraft, such as gray-zone and economic coercion, in order to avoid direct military intervention by the United States. Third, China's primary military goals in Southeast Asia are improving its combat capabilities, especially vis-à-vis the United States, and deterring other countries in the region from strengthening their own sovereignty claims. Fourth, Zhang argues that Beijing's use of military and nonmilitary coercion often counteracts its economic "carrots" in the region, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of economic statecraft.

In the volume's final chapter, Peter Connolly examines the significant increase in China's security engagement with the Pacific Islands since 2017, noting that this engagement has been supported by and integrated with Beijing's political and economic statecraft. He argues that China has executed its grand strategy in the Pacific Islands with comprehensive whole-of-nation statecraft to build dual-use facilities, establish a police presence in Pacific Island countries, and ultimately gain access to formal military bases. Connolly concludes that Beijing's intensifying outreach in the Pacific Islands demonstrates that the region is of higher strategic importance for China than was previously commonly understood. Ultimately, he encourages the United States and its allies to adapt their approach to better understand the interests and agency of the Pacific Island states and their peoples, recognize the growing role of China's police forces as its weapon of choice for competing in

the South Pacific, and focus on and counter PRC efforts to achieve strategic access in the region.

Conclusion

The nine chapters in this volume from NBR's 2023 PLA Conference offer important insight into the PLA's increasingly prominent role in advancing Beijing's interests in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The first three chapters explore the ways in which Chinese leaders perceive the PRC's external security environment, as well as how their assessment is shaping party-military dynamics and driving reforms to the national defense mobilization system. The next three chapters evaluate how an increasingly complex external security environment is shaping the PLA's strategy and missions, what lessons the PLA has learned from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, and how senior Chinese leaders assess the abilities of the PLA's personnel to execute their missions. The final three chapters examine the evolution of the PLA's posture and presence in three key regional theaters—the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific—and consider how Beijing is using the military tool of power to achieve its goals in each region.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume reveal that Chinese leaders view the PLA as playing an essential and in some cases increasingly prominent role in accomplishing national goals. At the same time, Beijing has also demonstrated caution in using the PLA in ways that could trigger military intervention or direct opposition from the United States. As Chinese leaders forecast long-term trends as being in the PRC's favor, it is likely they will intensify their use of military and gray-zone coercion to pressure their neighbors and steadily change the status quo in a direction favorable to PRC interests. Meanwhile, the PRC may refrain, at least in the near term, from initiating a large-scale combat operation that could jeopardize its long-term prospects until such time as it feels its national power has grown to the point that the United States and other powers will not dare challenge it. Through their careful research and analysis, the contributors to this volume have produced fresh and insightful arguments that will be key to shaping ongoing debates about the PLA's role in achieving the PRC's goals now and in the years ahead.

NBR is grateful for its sponsors and partners at the China Strategic Focus Group at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. We are also grateful for the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia for providing the venue in which the conference took place. Without their support,

the research published in this volume would not have been possible. Conference discussants, panel chairs, attendees, and keynote speakers, as well as NBR staff, including Roy Kamphausen, Alison Szalwinski, Audrey Mossberger, Rachel Bernstein, Josh Nezam, Jerome Siangco, Jaymi McNabb, Joshua Ziemkowski, and Jessica Keough, also deserve special thanks and acknowledgment for their contributions to the 2023 conference and accompanying volume.

About the Contributors

Dennis J. Blasko is a retired Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, with 23 years of service as a military intelligence officer and foreign area officer specializing in China. He served in infantry units in Germany, Italy, and South Korea and in Washington, D.C., at the Defense Intelligence Agency, Headquarters Department of the Army (Office of Special Operations) and the National Defense University War Gaming and Simulation Center. From 1992 to 1996, he was an army attaché in Beijing and Hong Kong. Mr. Blasko is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and the Naval Postgraduate School. He has written numerous articles and chapters on the Chinese military, along with the book *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (2012).

Peter Connolly is an Adjunct Fellow at the University of New South Wales in Canberra and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at Solomon Islands National University. In 2023, he completed a PhD at the Australian National University with a thesis entitled “Statecraft and Pushback: Delivering China’s Grand Strategy in Melanesia 2014–2022.” His research on Chinese interests in Melanesia drew on an extensive range of interviews in China, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Timor-Leste. Dr. Connolly has previously conducted academic research on international relations and strategy, including the Australia-Indonesia relationship and Australia’s whole-of-government response to terrorism. During a 33-year career as an infantry officer in the Australian Army, he commanded troops on active service in Somalia, Timor-Leste, and Afghanistan from platoon through to battalion level. Dr. Connolly also served in Parliament House, Sandhurst, and the Pentagon, and completed his service as director of international engagement–army and director of the Australian Army Research Centre. He now advises the Australian Department of Defence on the Pacific.

Andrew S. Erickson is a Professor of Strategy in the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College. He helped establish CMSI in 2006 and has played an integral role in its development. CMSI inspired the creation of other research centers, which he has advised and

supported. He is also an associate at the China Aerospace Studies Institute. His research focuses on Indo-Pacific defense, international relations, technology, and resource issues. Dr. Erickson is currently a visiting scholar in full-time residence at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, where he has been an associate in research since 2008. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute of Maritime Policy and Strategy's International Advisory Committee and serves on the editorial boards of *Naval War College Review* and *Asia Policy*. He has presented extensively at academic, private-sector, and government institutions throughout the United States and Asia. Dr. Erickson received his PhD and MA in politics from Princeton University and graduated from Amherst College. He studied Mandarin in the Princeton in Beijing program at Beijing Normal University's College of Chinese Language and Culture. His research website is www.andrewerickson.com.

Kim Fassler is a Foreign Affairs Officer at the U.S. Department of State's Office of China Coordination. Prior to joining the Department of State in 2023, she worked for twelve years at the U.S. Department of Defense, where her assignments included senior analyst at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's China Strategic Focus Group as well as posts at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing in the Office of the Defense Attaché and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Ms. Fassler has an MA from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, including graduate coursework in Mandarin at the Hopkins Nanjing Center on a David L. Boren Graduate Fellowship, and a BA from Williams College. She is from Honolulu, Hawaii, and worked in public affairs at the Hawaii State Legislature and as a reporter for Hawaii's largest newspaper before starting her career with the federal government.

Rick Gunnell is the Research Professor of China Military Studies in the U.S. Army War College's China Landpower Studies Center. He focuses on the Central Military Commission as an organization and the PLA's "land domain" people, organizations, and activities. Mr. Gunnell is proficient in Chinese and earned his BA in international business and management with a focus in East Asian studies from Dickinson College in 2006.

Timothy R. Heath is a Senior International Defense Researcher at the RAND Corporation. Prior to joining RAND in October 2014, he served as

the senior analyst for the U.S. Pacific Command China Strategic Focus Group. He has over twenty years of experience researching and analyzing military and political topics related to China. Fluent in Mandarin Chinese, he has extensive experience analyzing China's national strategy, politics, ideology, and military, as well as Asian regional security developments. He has a PhD in political science from George Mason University and an MA in Asian studies from George Washington University.

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise is Director of the China Studies Program at CNA. She has over two decades of experience directing projects and conducting research and analysis on Chinese military and strategic issues. Her research interests include Chinese military modernization, politics and foreign policy, economic statecraft, media issues, strategic communications, and information operations, as well as the South China Sea and ASEAN issues. She is the author of chapters in several edited volumes addressing Chinese security issues. Before joining CNA, Kivlehan-Wise worked for an international nonprofit organization, where she directed projects on Chinese and Mongolian affairs. She also worked in Bosnia with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in support of elections. Kivlehan-Wise holds an MA in security policy studies, with a focus on Northeast Asian security issues and Chinese foreign policy, from the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University and a BA in political science from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She is also a graduate of the Johns Hopkins–Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies and has studied Mandarin Chinese in Beijing at Capital Normal University.

Erin Richter is a Senior Analyst within the U.S. Department of Defense, where she has specialized in foreign military capabilities and civil-military interdependencies for nearly two decades. Before joining the Department of Defense, she served as a logistics officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, and she continues to serve as an intelligence officer in the Marine Corps Reserve, having completed assignments in the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Ms. Richter is a graduate of the Marine Corps Expeditionary Warfare School, the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and the Air War College. She holds an MA in international affairs from American University and a BA in anthropology from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Tsun-Kai Tsai is a Senior Research Specialist in the China Studies Program at CNA. His research interests and expertise focus on contemporary Chinese politics, contemporary Taiwanese politics, and cross-strait relations. Before joining CNA, Mr. Tsai was a research intern at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and also served in the Marine Corps for more than six years. As a native Chinese Mandarin speaker, he was able to provide language and analytic support to various missions and research projects. Mr. Tsai holds an MA in international policy from the University of Georgia (nonproliferation track) and a BA in psychology from the University of California, Irvine.

Howard Wang is a Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation. His primary research interests include China's elite politics, emerging capabilities in the People's Liberation Army, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. Before joining RAND, Dr. Wang served as a policy analyst for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, where he researched U.S.-China military competition and deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. He has also spent time at Guidehouse, the Jamestown Foundation, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Dr. Wang completed his doctorate in international affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where he was awarded distinction for his thesis research on the Chinese Communist Party's sea-power strategy. He also completed an MPP at the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy and a bachelor's degree at Boston University.

Joel Wuthnow is a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs within the Institute for the National Strategic Studies at National Defense University (NDU). He is also an Adjunct Professor in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. His research areas include Chinese foreign and security policy, Chinese military affairs, U.S.-China relations, and strategic developments in East Asia. Prior to joining NDU, Dr. Wuthnow was a China analyst at CNA, a postdoctoral fellow in the China and the World Program at Princeton University, and a predoctoral fellow at the Brookings Institution. He holds an AB from Princeton University, an MPhil from Oxford University, and a PhD from Columbia University. He is proficient in Mandarin. His recent books include *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (2022, lead editor), *Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military*

Leadership (2022), *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context* (2021, lead editor), *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* (2020), and *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform* (2019).

Ketian Zhang is an Assistant Professor of International Security in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. She studies rising powers, coercion, economic statecraft, and maritime disputes in international relations and social movements in comparative politics, with a regional focus on China and East Asia. Dr. Zhang bridges the study of international relations and comparative politics and has a broader theoretical interest in linking international security and international political economy. Her book *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* (2023) examines when, why, and how China uses coercion when faced with issues of national security, such as territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, foreign arms sales to Taiwan, and foreign leaders' reception of the Dalai Lama. Part of her research has appeared in *International Security*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the *Journal of Contemporary China*, among other venues. Dr. Zhang is currently working on her second book that explores the relationship between economic interdependence and rising power grand strategies. She received her PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2018 and her BA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters features papers from the 2023 People's Liberation Army Conference convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's China Strategic Focus Group, and the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. The volume examines how Chinese leaders assess China's external security environment, including both the opportunities and threats presented; how this assessment is driving changes to the PLA's strategy, planning, and modernization efforts; and how the PLA's posture and capabilities are evolving in key theaters of interest to the United States, including the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific.

Editors Benjamin Frohman is Research Director for the People's Liberation Army Conference and a Nonresident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. Jeremy Rausch is Director with the Political and Security Affairs group at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

Contributors Dennis J. Blasko, Peter Connolly, Andrew S. Erickson, Kim Fassler, Rick Gunnell, Timothy R. Heath, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Erin Richter, Tsun-Kai Tsai, Howard Wang, Joel Wuthnow, and Ketian Zhang

Past volumes in the People's Liberation Army Conference series include:

China's Military Decision-making in Times of Crisis and Conflict
Modernizing Deterrence: How China Coerces, Compels, and Deters
Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA
The People of the PLA 2.0
Securing the China Dream: The PLA's Role in a Time of Reform and Change
The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025



THE NATIONAL BUREAU of ASIAN RESEARCH

ONE UNION SQUARE
600 UNIVERSITY STREET, SUITE 1012
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98101
NBR@NBR.ORG, WWW.NBR.ORG