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FORECASTING CHINA'S POSTURING FOR A GLOBAL WAR

Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui
Editors

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Forecasting China's Posturing for a Global War

Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui
Editors

Brian G. Carlson, Darrell Driver, R. Evan Ellis,
Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Rick Gunnell,
Gregory D. Hillebrand, Joel R. Hillison, Michael Long,
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Foreword

As the strategic rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China continues to shape the global security environment, the expectation that a future conflict between these two great powers would be neatly contained in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly untenable. Whereas conventional military planning often prioritizes immediate, cross-strait echelons and localized combat power, China's growing power is not inherently regional. Instead, Beijing's long-term military-modernization program and extensive global footprint are designed to provide the Chinese Communist Party with ways to escalate a crisis horizontally, well beyond nearby countries.

Forecasting China's Posturing for a Global War analyzes China's global preparations and associated vulnerabilities by using scenario planning to break through traditional analytical boundaries. By explicitly bounding the level of kinetic violence in a shared, nonnuclear scenario, this volume forces defense specialists and regional experts to look past basic troop positioning and evaluate the critical, often-overlooked intangibles of global conflict: political relationships, economic leverage, space capabilities, and targeted information campaigns.

The insights of this collaborative study demonstrate, in a protracted war, China would not need global military dominance to create severe security dilemmas for the West. Instead, Beijing's strategic influence and efforts to expand its presence outside Southeast Asia can achieve high-value impacts simply by convincing historically neutral or even pro-US nations to deny the United States overflight permissions, the ability to make port calls, and the ability to access facilities during a crisis. From the resource-rich corridors of Central Asia and Africa to critical maritime choke points and the space domain, this collaborative study maps how China has systematically positioned itself to protect its critical resources while simultaneously disrupting the power-projection capabilities the United States needs to execute its strategy.

Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui have expertly designed and managed a range of coherent analyses from a diverse set of experts to broaden the US aperture and inform policymakers, analysts, and war fighters about the true depth of China's global reach. This creative collaborative study does not pretend to predict the future or to forecast how deterrence might fail. Rather, this study provides a rigorous baseline for understanding how China's current commercial, diplomatic, and security posturing shapes the possibilities for future warfare. Only by grasping the selective and global nature of Beijing's strategy can the United States and its allies hope to develop coherent, whole-of-government responses that preserve stability, protect critical supply chains, and the West maintain its competitive edge.

Forecasting China's Posturing for a Global War offers both a vital warning and a practical foundation for an informed response.

C. Anthony Pfaff
Director, Strategic Research
and Assessment Department
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Executive Summary

This collaborative study aims to provide the US Department of War with a comprehensive understanding of China's global strategy in preparing for a potential war against the West, using potential futures to help shape the present. This volume—which explores a hypothetical, limited conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—is devised to be an analytical tool that challenges regional experts and China specialists to move beyond the existing literature on great-power competition. The analysis is separated into four parts. The first section examines China's logic and decision making to help the Department of War appreciate the adversary's perspective and avoid mirror imaging. The second section establishes the conflict scenario and includes assessments of seven distinct regions of the world. The third section shifts the assessment to the space and information domains. The final section incorporates the regional and domain-based analyses into a global discussion, synthesizes the study's findings, and consolidates the recommendations of the chapter authors in a concise, and easy-to-digest format.

Part 1: The China Perspective

In chapter 2, "Between Peace and War: Chinese Strategic Culture and Norms of Competition," C. Anthony Pfaff argues China's strategic norms—shaped by classical military texts, philosophical traditions, and modern doctrine—do not treat competition and war as distinct categories; rather, these concepts are framed as continuous processes of political struggle that aim to shape the strategic environment. Drawing on Sunzi's emphasis on winning without fighting, Confucian ideals of harmony, Mohist utility, Daoist restraint, and the Legalist prioritization of order, the chapter shows how Chinese thought integrates moral, political, and military considerations to favor indirect, calibrated, and often nonkinetic means of achieving PRC strategic objectives. Contemporary concepts like the assassin's mace and the three warfares operationalize philosophical traditions by emphasizing asymmetry, deception, and influence to secure a Chinese advantage while limiting overt conflict. The result is a strategic approach that embeds limited force within a broader logic of coercion and environment shaping, challenging Western assumptions about clear thresholds between peace and war and increasing the risk of Western actors making miscalculations when the differing Chinese and Western frameworks collide.

In chapter 3, "China's Global Perspective," Sheena Chestnut Greitens examines China's current global priorities and outreach, laying a foundation from which

subsequent chapters extrapolate potential pathways toward horizontal escalation. Drawing on current PRC strategy, Chestnut Greitens examines China's globally distributed interests, particularly cross-regional interests that may not come to the fore in regionally focused chapters. She then analyzes how Beijing believes the global security environment may threaten its interests, and what activities could protect or advance China's strategic objectives in the event of a military conflict with the United States. Chestnut Greitens's chapter focuses on areas in which Beijing is most likely to perceive vulnerabilities and challenges to its fundamental interests within the conflict scenario, and where the People's Republic of China is therefore most likely to consider escalating to ensure the regime's survival.

Part 2: Regional Assessments

In chapter 4, "The Next Great War," Brennan Deveraux establishes the limited-war scenario between the United States and China, which is designed to serve as a reference point for chapter authors and as the collaborative study's underlying narrative. The scenario features a small skirmish near Taiwan, in which both great powers sustain casualties. The scenario is designed to be realistic, and Deveraux outlines its important characteristics, which serve as a shared starting point for individual chapter analyses. The limited conflict is nonnuclear, does not involve strikes against either homeland but does cross a kinetic threshold into armed conflict, and has a deliberately ambiguous origin and time frame, providing the authors with flexibility.

In chapter 5, "Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao: China in the Pacific," Kyle Marcrum and Michael Long illustrate how the People's Republic of China would target US peripheral alliances and partnerships to limit US efforts to support a conflict. Marcrum and Long assert China would use its sizable economic leverage and employ the considerable PRC military and paramilitary forces to frustrate US movements in the Indo-Pacific and to influence other nations' decisions to get involved in the conflict. In Marcrum and Long's scenario, the United States' traditional allies assist where they can. Still, ultimately, all politics are local, and nations must ensure they can satisfy their domestic needs first. The chapter provides unique forecasts of the pressure China would put on US relations in the Indo-Pacific, including PRC efforts to keep the Association of Southeast Asian Nations divided.

In chapter 6, "South Asia: From Secondary Theater to Fortified Western Flank," Joshua Arostegui explains how the People's Republic of China is working to secure its interests in a potential Indo-Pacific conflict by systematically transforming South Asia from a secondary maritime theater into a fortified western flank. Through the far-seas-protection concept, Beijing has established a strategic triangle

of influence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, leveraging infrastructure projects and arms sales to create a pervasive surveillance curtain. In the conflict scenario, China's encirclement forces India into a reactive, land-centric defense posture along the Himalayas, effectively pinning India's resources and limiting its maritime reach. To counter the PRC effort and ensure the Indian Ocean remains a contested but open corridor, Arostegui asserts the United States must prioritize integrated deterrence by operationalizing defense coproduction with India and providing secure technological alternatives.

In chapter 7, "China's Central Asia Policy in a Taiwan Strait Crisis," Brian G. Carlson analyzes the significance of Central Asia in China's strategic thinking about Taiwan. For more than three decades, China has steadily increased its engagement in Central Asia, enabling China to build significant regional influence and diplomatic leverage. In a Taiwan Strait crisis, China's leaders would have grounds for believing they could secure their interests in Central Asia, including an uninterrupted flow of oil and gas from the region, continued access to Central Asia's critical minerals, and cooperation with Central Asian nations to ensure the security and stability of the neighboring Xinjiang province.

In chapter 8, "Excluded from the Equation: How China Can Keep Europe Out of the War," Darrell Driver and Joel Hillison argue Europe is central to US economic strength and global power projection, making the continent a prime target for Chinese horizontal escalation during a conflict over Taiwan. China could combine cyber operations, economic coercion, disinformation, and political influence to limit European support for the United States. At the same time, Russian opportunism heightens the risk of the conflict spilling over into Europe. Deep Chinese investments in ports, digital infrastructure, and critical supply chains amplify European vulnerabilities. To address these risks and ensure transatlantic security, the authors recommend strengthening the US-Europe alliance, reducing economic dependencies on China, and bolstering Europe's military capabilities.

In chapter 9, "Lacking Strategy and Losing the Center of the World: Pro-Chinese Neutrality and the US Position in the Middle East," Jacob Stoil examines the perhaps-surprisingly critical role the Middle East would likely play in any future conflict with China. Drawing on events from 2023 to 2026, Stoil explores how US decisions regarding the Middle East have enabled the growth of Chinese influence and enabled China to develop a strategy that involves leveraging regional partners and allies to prevent the United States from using the critical crossroads of the Middle East. Having painted a dark vision of the future, the chapter demonstrates the United States can still take concrete actions to shift

the Middle East from an area of vulnerability to a point of strength that can enable US global and Indo-Pacific campaigns.

In chapter 10, "Fostering Influence on the Forgotten Continent: China's Rise in Africa," Paul Milas examines Africa's central role in strategic competition between the United States and China, arguing Beijing's long-term, multidimensional engagement with Africa has created enduring political, economic, and military advantages. Milas traces the evolution of China-Africa relations from ideological solidarity to institutional partnerships, highlighting mechanisms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. In this chapter, Milas analyzes how China leverages diplomatic partnerships, infrastructure development, and military access to secure supply chains and contest US influence. Milas asserts Africa will play a decisive role in future great-power conflict, requiring the United States to adopt a selective, strategy-driven approach.

In chapter 11, "China's Strategic Pursuits and Military Options in Latin America," R. Evan Ellis examines China's strategic military activities in Latin America and how these activities might help China leverage its regional knowledge, relationships, and presence during the lead-up to, and conduct of, a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. The chapter focuses on the opportunities the People's Republic of China has created through its access to military facilities in Cuba; its commercial presence in strategic areas such as the Caribbean Sea, the Panama Canal, and the Strait of Magellan; and PRC dual-use ports and space facilities in Latin America. Ellis also examines China's ability to access the United States through its southern land and maritime borders.

Part 3: Domain Assessments

In chapter 12, "Space: The Coming Collision," David Zesinger and Gregory Hillebrand analyze how China has observed the role of space power in the US way of war. The authors assert China is working to threaten US space capabilities while building its own space power by investing heavily in space-based intelligence and communications systems, as well as developing space-control assets ranging from kinetic to cyber weapons. Zesinger and Hillebrand argue, in a conflict, China would leverage its capabilities and weapons across the spectrum of military operations to degrade US and Western space capabilities and blind, deafen, and silence US forces. Internationally, China is positioning itself to be the space-power partner of choice, reducing US influence. This chapter outlines why the United States must act now to maintain space superiority, or even parity, against the rising Chinese threat.

In chapter 13, "Shaping the Narrative of War: Examining China's Use of the Information Domain," Rick Gunnell details how the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army regard the information and cognitive domains as critical elements of Chinese national power. Both organizations strategically employ these domains at scales and scopes that present near- and long-term challenges to the West. Leveraging precedents and insights from other chapters, Gunnell suggests ways the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Liberation Army, and the People's Republic of China may conduct global, regional, or country-specific information operations during the conflict scenario envisioned in this collaborative study.

Part 4: Strategic Implications

In chapter 14, "Addressing China's Global Reach: Consolidated Findings and Recommendations," Brennan Deveraux synthesizes the study's findings by incorporating the regional analyses into a global discussion concerning the broad PRC strategy. To do so, Deveraux draws from the scenarios and forecasts in the regional and domain-specific chapters to examine China's global posturing efforts across four escalating categories: strategic influence, access, critical resources, and combat support. Each category includes generalized and thematic forecasts and global recommendations.

Conclusion

The analyses in this collaborative study find China's external efforts are selective; the different cultures, geographies, economic ties, and security architectures of each region inherently limit the impact or level of influence the People's Republic of China could hope to achieve. Still, when synthesized and viewed from a global perspective, these findings highlight China's potential to leverage relationships and economic footholds in key regions to undermine US power projection. Through diplomatic and economic pressure, China may coerce PRC-friendly nations to limit US access and overflight, disrupting US commercial and military movements by air and sea. This PRC effort may even lead the United States to become isolated from its allies in varying degrees. Consequently, the study outlines specific, tangible recommendations to mitigate these potential future outcomes.

— 1 —

Introduction

Brennan Deveraux

The prospect of a war between the United States and China warrants careful examination, as both the conflict's avoidance and potential occurrence serve as strategic catalysts for critical US security decisions. But a generally accepted road to war between the United States and China does not exist, regardless of the espoused or interpreted Chinese military milestones of acquiring the military capability to unify Taiwan by 2027, completing Beijing's current modernization initiatives by 2035, and becoming a world-class military power by 2049.[1] Still, the US government must make decisions today to try to influence the problems of tomorrow—decisions that support the deterrence of and preparation for a war whose timeline and characteristics are inherently difficult to predict.

Complicating matters further, the US Department of War focuses on global challenges through a regional lens, viewing the world as separated by administrative boundaries. This framing often limits the analysis of a potential future conflict, as a great power such as China is not inherently a regional power. Instead, conflict may spread globally—in unpredictable and potentially nonkinetic ways—particularly as the United States and China both attempt to avoid vertical escalation to nuclear strikes or direct action against each other's homelands.

This collaborative study tackles a straightforward question to broaden the aperture through which the United States can analyze the implications of a potential US-China conflict: How might China horizontally escalate a future conflict

1. US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Department of Defense, 2024), 162.

with the United States to areas beyond the Indo-Pacific theater? The volume's underlying objective is not to predict the characteristics of a future war or to develop a scenario military organizations could subsequently use for wargaming or planning. Instead, the aim is to provide the Department of War with a comprehensive understanding of China's global strategy as it relates to preparing for a potential war with the West, using potential futures to help shape the present.

To this end, the volume's authors analyze the global implications of scenarios involving Chinese horizontal escalation across various regions, forecasting China's future actions. The authors then use this predictive analysis to justify present-day and near-term recommendations. What distinguishes this work is not a concern with peacetime competition per se; rather, the work is distinguished by an explicit focus on how the People's Republic of China might act through its military, space, commercial, relational, and other assets in different parts of the world. This assessment is conducted through the lens of how China's current actions contribute to future warfare possibilities, even if those actions are not all part of a nefarious military master plan.

Methodology

This volume leverages the tool of scenario planning, moving the assessment beyond the current literature on great-power competition and China's ongoing expansion efforts, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Scenario planning does not produce forecasts, projections, or simulations; it creates alternate futures to force research into new and uncharted areas, drawing out creative and innovative analysis.[2]

The scenario for this collaborative study is built around a hypothetical future conflict between the United States and China. Establishing such a framework shifts any potential analysis, providing authors with the unique freedom to explore what events are likely to occur, could occur, and even are highly unlikely to occur but should not be discarded out of hand. This analytical freedom can drive unique recommendations beyond merely acknowledging the current situation or simply asserting current trends are bound to continue.

Although the details of this hypothetical US-China conflict are outlined in chapter 4, the conflict's specifics are less important than the general characteristics of the scenario, as these characteristics serve as shared assumptions for the analyses presented in individual chapters. Authors are thrust into the scenario, prompted to begin their chapters by examining what a limited war between the two great powers

2. Naazneen H. Barma et al., " 'Imagine a World in Which': Using Scenarios in Political Science," *International Studies Perspectives* 17, no. 2 (May 2016): 117–35.

would mean for regional dynamics. This forward-looking examination catalyzes each subject-matter expert to revisit the present situation and reassess how the Department of War, or the US government as a whole, should evaluate China's current and expected actions in relation to posturing for a potential future conflict.

This approach to exploring the stated problem is not without its faults, particularly because it has the potential to bias the analysis. A scenario provides a baseline framework upon which authors can build. But the scenario-based approach also may have unintended consequences, such as limiting exploration, predisposing conclusions, or enabling groupthink. To mitigate these limitations, three important efforts were built into the approach. First, authors were selected from diverse methodological and disciplinary backgrounds and included regional experts, language specialists, and practitioners. Second, collaboration among authors was built into the process, with authors presenting their preliminary findings and subsequently sharing their draft chapters with the group for feedback. Through this process, the analysis was challenged and refined. Third, certain scenario parameters, such as the year of the incident and the belligerents' initial intentions, were intentionally left ambiguous. This decision, detailed in chapter 4, aimed to provide authors with maximal freedom within the collaborative study's framework.

Overall, the scenario-planning approach does not predict a future war or provide an assessment of how deterrence may fail. Instead, the approach allows others to explore the varying paths and possible outcomes of strategic competition with China and subsequently propose whole-of-government and Department of War–specific recommendations for mitigating the effects of potential Chinese actions.

Structure

Although each chapter provides a stand-alone assessment, the volume is designed to offer a unified, coherent narrative. The collaborative study is divided into four parts: the China perspective, regional assessments, domain analysis, and strategic implications.

Part 1: The China Perspective

The study's first part consists of two chapters that examine China's logic and decision making, aiming to appreciate the adversary's perspective and help regional analysts avoid mirror imaging. The first of these chapters examines China's way of war, incorporating historical and cultural components to assess why China might respond to specific US actions. The chapter outlines a strategic approach that embeds limited force within a broader logic of coercion and environment shaping, challenging Western assumptions about clear thresholds between peace

and war and highlighting the risk of miscalculation when differing frameworks collide. The second chapter transitions from the philosophical to the practical, examining China's current intentions, broad global objectives, and growth potential. Leveraging recently released Chinese strategic documents, the chapter focuses on areas in which Beijing is most likely to perceive vulnerabilities and fundamental interests and, thus, is more likely to escalate to ensure regime survival.

Part 2: Regional Assessments

Most of the study's analysis is presented in the second part, which includes assessments of seven world regions that extend from China's periphery to the rest of the globe. This analysis begins with a chapter that describes the next great-power war, creating a feasible, incident-based scenario authors can apply to their regional analyses. The scenario features a small skirmish near Taiwan, with both great powers sustaining casualties. The hypothesized limited conflict is nonnuclear, does not involve strikes against either great-power homeland, crosses a kinetic threshold into armed conflict, and has a deliberately ambiguous origin and time frame (to provide authors with flexibility). Importantly, this chapter sets the groundwork for the collaborative study by identifying forecasting assumptions and establishing the starting point for analysis.

Seven regional chapters finish out the remainder of the volume's second part, covering the following regions: the Pacific, South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Whereas the regional assessments in these chapters are unique and provide maximal flexibility to authors, they are organized similarly, broadly addressing four critical questions and creating a straightforward chapter structure anchored in the scenario, historical precedence, forecasts, and recommendations. In following this structure, the study's second part provides a coherent, consistent narrative that lends itself to cross-regional comparisons.

1. **Scenario.** What does deliberate horizontal escalation in a limited war with China mean for this region? This first question places regional experts in the designed scenario, forcing them to make assumptions about the road to war in a region while acknowledging how current trends have created opportunities for China in an ambiguous future. Notably, these regional implications—which focus specifically on the war effort, both direct and indirect—are future oriented and may involve examining the conflict in the near, medium, and long terms, as well as identifying controversial options whose likelihood may shift over time. At the same time, conventional war fighting is not expected to occur in every theater; the scenario assumes a limited

conflict, not a world war. Consequently, the hypothesized conflict and China's efforts to exert its influence are treated very differently across the seven chapters.

2. **Historical precedence.** How has China postured itself in the last 25 years (or historically) to operate in or influence this region in a conflict? This question provides authors with the opportunity to justify their previous answer by outlining the trends that underpinned their scenario analysis. Historical posturing efforts may include both straightforward military actions, such as establishing a forward base, and more intangible efforts that have positioned China for future opportunities such as business ventures, personal relationships with foreign leaders, and military-to-military engagements.

3. **Forecasts.** What can the United States expect China to do next in the region? This question builds on the previous two questions by bridging the gap between what China may do in a future limited war and what it has been doing in the last 25 years. The findings that result from answering this question are the heart of the project, requiring analytical synthesis and creativity to forecast future actions by examining risks and strategic options for China. Notably, this question lends itself to incorporating the three Chinese milestone years as potential inflection points in Beijing's decision making, allowing authors to propose potential Chinese actions that may unfold in the near, medium, and long terms.

4. **Recommendations.** What are the options for the United States to respond to, mitigate, or counter the possibilities and risks stemming from Chinese actions in this region? This final question shifts the narrative to friendly actions, providing readers with specific regional recommendations the Department of War or the US government may adopt to address China's potential future actions.

The focus on the Chinese perspective is a foundational component of the regional analysis and an essential aspect of the research that makes this collaborative study unique. To enable creative forecasting in regions in which Chinese objectives are less obvious or tangible, the volume frames potential Chinese actions through an adapted Joint concept that distinguishes between high-payoff and high-value targets. In the targeting world, a high-payoff target is one "whose loss to the enemy will significantly contribute to the success of the friendly course of action," and a high-value target is one "the enemy commander requires for the successful

completion of the mission."[3] This distinction is easily transferable to Chinese objectives or actions. From this perspective, a high-payoff action is China-centric, directly contributing to the success of China's strategy or the accomplishment of Chinese objectives. Conversely, a high-value action is Western-centric, directly disrupting a required element of US mission success or strategic execution. Stated simply, the projected posturing actions may be focused either on helping China or on hurting or disrupting the West, with a natural overlap often distinguished only by perceived intentions.

Part 3: Domain Assessments

The volume's third part explores how two domains—space and the information environment—affect the scenario. A chapter dedicated to the space domain mirrors the structure of the regional analysis, applying the four-question framework to assess China's approach to leveraging the space domain in the hypothesized limited conflict. The chapter also distills forecasts and recommendations similar to those of the preceding chapters. In contrast, a chapter focused on the information environment outlines China's approach to information operations as a construct of war fighting, providing a framework for understanding why and how China will communicate with various audiences to influence decisionmakers and populations. This framework is subsequently applied to critical events across the regional chapters to amplify the information campaign supporting China's global actions.

Part 4: Strategic Implications

The final part of the volume places the regional analysis within a global discussion, synthesizes the collaborative study's findings, and consolidates the recommendations presented in individual chapters in a concise, easily digestible manner. Because the regions and the assessments associated with them are inherently unique, different aspects (or factors) apply to different regions. Consequently, this part leverages four escalating, broad umbrella categories to assess China's global approach: strategic influence, access, critical resources, and combat support. Each of these categories includes generalized and thematic forecasts and global recommendations.

Terms of Reference

Before beginning the analysis, an important step is to establish common definitions of essential terms used throughout this volume. The following list of definitions is not intended to be all-inclusive. The list captures the key

3. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Targeting*, Joint Publication 3-60 (Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 2018).

distinctions among China's main political and military actors, clarifies terminology in the information domain, and provides a straightforward definition of horizontal escalation.[4]

- **Chinese Communist Party.** This term refers to the political party that has governed China since 1949. Founded in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party is the paramount political and legal authority in China, directing all official actions in the country.
- **People's Republic of China**. This term refers to the formal state apparatus of China. All senior leaders of the People's Republic of China are members of the Chinese Communist Party. This inclusion is fundamental and differs critically from the governing arrangements in Western democracies, in which members of different political parties can be in charge.
- **People's Liberation Army.** This term refers to the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party. Absolute control over the People's Liberation Army is maintained by the party, not the People's Republic of China (the state)—an arrangement often referred to as "the party commands the gun."[5] Whereas US soldiers swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution, members of the People's Liberation Army promise to follow the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Stated simply, the party commands and controls all actions of the Chinese state and military.
- **Information operations.** This term refers to the use of information to change a person's, a community's, or a society's cognitive processes or behavior. The key difference between Chinese and Western information operations lies in the Chinese Communist Party's strategic-level command and control of such operations, employed as a centralized, deliberate tool. Democratic states (and their functional organizations) focus information operations at the operational and tactical levels, often in support of larger strategic objectives. Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, but their goal remains the same: to use information to change

4. The authors are grateful to Rick Gunnell of the China Landpower Studies Center for compiling most of these definitions.

5. Payton Rawson, "How China Commands Its 'People's Army,'" *The Strategist* (blog), November 13, 2023, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-china-commands-its-peoples-army/.

cognition. The differences lie in the operator (party versus state); the scale (strategic and centralized versus operational, tactical, and decentralized); and the constraints (politically based versus rules based).

- **Information warfare (信息战).** This term refers to the Chinese Communist Party or the People's Liberation Army using information-domain tools in peacetime and wartime to advance party goals.
- **Cognitive warfare (认知战).** This emerging term, used by the Chinese Communist Party, refers to using media and technology to shape an adversary's beliefs and narratives.
- **Cognitive-domain operations (认知域作战).** This term refers to warfare that "influences or shapes the viewpoints, attitudes and beliefs of targeted populations" to create a favorable "cognitive posture."[6] At its core, information has the power to change thoughts. When this power is successfully exercised at scale, a small or large group of people may wittingly or unwittingly accept those thoughts and may even change their behavior. Information may be communicated verbally, released in official documents, or published through various media outlets. For the People's Liberation Army, the information domain comprises at least three distinct categories: (1) information communicated through various systems and the connectedness of those systems (that is, informationization), (2) defensive and offensive cyber warfare, and (3) domestic and foreign information operations.
- **Horizontal escalation.** This term refers to actions that expand a conflict beyond its original combat zone to affect the conflict directly or indirectly. These actions may include conducting operations in a different geographic area, incorporating different domains, or, as most of the study's analysis concludes, influencing other nations to adjust their roles in the conflict (by abstaining from the conflict, restricting US military access, and securing critical resources).

6. Liang Xiaobo 梁晓波, "认知作战能力域外观察" [Cognitive warfare capabilities and foreign observations], 人民论坛·学术前沿 [*People's Forum: Academic Frontiers*] (June 2023).

Conclusion

Moving forward, the United States must plan for and, if possible, prevent a war with China. This collaborative study does not pretend to predict the future. Instead, the volume's analysis presents glimpses of possible scenarios based on currently available data and assessments by experts in their respective fields. This analysis is a necessary starting point for an overdue conversation about the global implications of a potential future war with China, offering decisionmakers and military analysts an initial path to begin addressing China's global posturing.

Part 1:
The China Perspective

— 2 —

Between Peace and War: Chinese Strategic Culture and Norms of Competition

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China's unique historical, cultural, and ideological perspectives shape its approach to competition, often diverging from Western norms. This divergence is evident in China's handling of disputes in the South China Sea, its approach to Taiwan, and its use of economic and technological leverage, coupled with the threat of force, to secure its interests. These differences, if not well understood, can lead to misunderstanding and miscalculation. Dismissing these differences as conflicts of interest would be easy. Nevertheless, culture and history often shape values that, in part, determine what those interests are and how they may be pursued. Whereas China and the West have long-standing strategic traditions that date back millennia, these traditions have evolved in distinct historical and philosophical contexts. As a result, Chinese and Western strategic norms often reflect different assumptions and respond to different problems.

Failure to understand these differences can lead to negative, avoidable consequences for both parties. Whereas the experience of competition and war is sufficiently universal to prompt all strategic traditions to address which goals are worth pursuing and how those goals may be pursued, the answers often depend on unique cultural values that are not always explicit in a given confrontation. Further complicating matters, normative judgments reflect trade-offs state actors must make to achieve their goals; thus, what might appear to be cynicism may, in fact, be the result of considered ethical reasoning.

Better understanding how China—specifically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—might respond to strategic challenges requires an understanding of Beijing's thinking about how competition works, how wars are won, and how values apply to strategic choices. Unlike Western strategic traditions, which emphasize categorical thresholds separating peace from war, Chinese strategic norms frame competition and conflict as a continuous, environment-shaping process in which force is subordinated to political leverage, strategic deception, and the preservation of order. Rather than being exceptions to the rules-based international order, Chinese norms associated with the use of force are embedded in a broader logic of political shaping, coercive influence, and the creation or preservation of an order that establishes regional hegemony and expands global influence.

Although culture underdetermines behavior for any state actor, a better understanding of the cultural factors that influence strategic thought enables one to interpret and respond to an adversary's actions. In the context of this collaborative study, which analyzes how a conflict between the United States and China might escalate to war, such an understanding is critical to assessing Chinese actions described elsewhere in the volume. Whereas achieving a comprehensive understanding is beyond the scope of this chapter, tracing how classical sources, modern doctrine, and contemporary practice collectively frame competition and war as a continuous spectrum of political struggle—rather than as categorically distinct states—provides a starting point for learning. In turn, the chapter first surveys China's Seven Military Classics—especially *The Art of War*—to show how Chinese strategic thought privileges shaping, deception, and leverage over decisive battle. The chapter then examines philosophical traditions that have influenced PLA scholars to articulate a normative view oriented toward order, harmony, and preservation rather than rigid legal thresholds. Finally, the chapter examines applications of these conceptual foundations, such as assassin's mace and the three warfares, to illustrate how these foundations manifest in modern PLA doctrine.

Chinese Views on Strategic Competition and War

Much like the influence of Carl von Clausewitz; Henri, baron de Jomini; and other great thinkers in the Euro-American military tradition, the Seven Military Classics of ancient China have long shaped Chinese approaches to strategy, ethics, and the political utility of force. In fact, these classics are still studied in Chinese military universities and academies in both the People's Republic

of China and Taiwan. The most well-known text is *The Art of War* by Sunzi.[1] Others include the *Wuzi*, the *Wei Liaozi*, and the *Six Secret Teachings*, each emphasizing different aspects of military organization, leadership, intelligence, and strategy. These texts constitute a canon of Chinese military thought and were formally compiled during the Song dynasty (960–1279) as part of an effort to professionalize and standardize military education. Despite being composed over different periods from the Warring States era to the early Tang dynasty, these texts collectively reflect a sophisticated and diverse body of strategic thought.[2]

Together, the Seven Military Classics embody a consistent, though not always coherent, concern with minimizing destruction, maximizing political efficacy, and integrating warfare into broader moral and administrative systems, albeit not without exception.[3] Whereas each of these classics contains important insights, over time the materialist and instrumentalist approach articulated by Sunzi came to dominate ancient Chinese military thought, in part because it displaced religion and aristocratic honor as the factors governing war. By the first century BCE, newer military texts either incorporated lessons from the Seven Military Classics or responded to them.[4] This history has given *The Art of War* an outsize impact on the People's Liberation Army's modern views on war fighting.[5] As observed by the just-war scholar Ping-cheung Lo, PLA officers dominate contemporary Chinese publications on Sunzi.[6]

Given its outsize impact, *The Art of War* suggests a Chinese approach to conflict and competition would de-emphasize force in favor of leverage that both constrains an adversary's ability to act and aligns the adversary's interests with China's. Sunzi, for example, famously commented: "Thus, those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle."[7] Privileging capture over destruction, *The Art of War*

1. Scholars widely acknowledge *The Art of War* was not written by Sun Wu, to whom the work was originally attributed, and the text was likely written after his time, perhaps by multiple authors. Similar doubts apply to most other works referenced in this chapter, but given the association of Sunzi with *The Art of War*, the chapter uses the name Sunzi when referring to the work. See Andrew Seth Meyer, trans., *The Dao of the Military: Liu An's Art of War* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 8; and Sun Tzu, *Master Sun's Art of War*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), xvii.

2. Ping-cheung Lo, "The *Art of War* Corpus and Chinese Just War Ethics Past and Present," in *Chinese Just War Ethics: Origin, Development, and Dissent*, ed. Ping-cheung Lo and Sumner B. Twiss (Routledge, 2015), 29–31; and Ralph D. Sawyer, trans., *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Westview Press, 1993), 1–2.

3. Ping-cheung Lo, "*Art of War* Corpus," 29–32; Christopher C. Rand, *Military Thought in Early China* (State University of New York Press, 2017), 161–62; and Yvonne Chiu, "Seven Military Classics: Martial Victory Through Good Governance," in *Warfare Ethics in Comparative Perspective: China and the West*, ed. Sumner B. Twiss et al. (Routledge, 2024), 92–96.

4. Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 8–22.

5. Ping-cheung Lo, "Warfare Ethics in Sunzi's *Art of War*? Historical Controversies and Contemporary Perspectives," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 78; and Mark Metcalf, "A Survey of 21st Century PLA Scholarship on the Role of Military Ethics in Warfare," in Twiss et al., *Warfare Ethics*, 224.

6. Ping-cheung Lo, "Warfare Ethics," 77.

7. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford University Press, 1971), 79.

argues the best strategies attack the enemy's plans, the second best its diplomatic relations, the third best its forces, and the worst of all its cities.[8] Whereas the work is agnostic on moral justifications for when to use force, its emphasis on undermining the enemy's coherence over destroying its material capacity seems well suited to both competition and war. Force plays a limited—and least preferred—role in the pursuit of political objectives, providing a practical, if not moral, imperative to limit aims and restrain force in favor of alternatives. In this view, escalation may not be preferred, but given high-enough stakes and no alternatives, it would still be permitted.

As noted earlier, this way of thinking has informed Chinese military leaders since the inception of the People's Liberation Army. Mao Zedong, for example, frequently quoted or paraphrased Sunzi in his own writing.[9] More recently, the People's Liberation Army's *Science of Military Strategy*, prepared by the PLA National Defense University, has also made positive references to the Seven Military Classics, emphasizing Sunzi. But one must be careful not to infer too much from such references. The *Science of Military Strategy* also cites Western strategic works, such as Clausewitz's *On War* and Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War*, claiming these works have had a greater impact on China's modern strategic theories than classical texts.[10] Of greater significance, according to the document, is the CCP revolutionary ideology, which gave rise to the concept of active defense—a concept that explicitly states China will attack only if attacked and will use force to stop fighting, promote peaceful development, and prevent war.[11]

Ascribing a unique, culturally informed approach to conflict to any state actor also ignores how actors within that strategic culture disagree about what principles are relevant and how they should be applied. Sunzi, for example, warned against protracted war, whereas Mao, citing Clausewitz, embraced it in the Second Sino-Japanese War, concurrent with World War II.[12] Such discontinuous precedents set conditions for equally discontinuous applications. Still, such disagreements themselves serve as precedents and inform future debate within military cultures. Moreover, whereas the People's Liberation Army may adopt a de-escalatory and defensive approach to national security based on communist values, that approach aligns equally well with what Sunzi or, as discussed later, Confucius might have

8. Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 79.

9. Griffith, introduction to *Art of War*, 45–56.

10. Xiao Tianliang, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022), 2.

11. Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, 23, 31.

12. Rick Chersicla, "Stop Talking About a 'Chinese Way of War,'" *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/stop-talking-about-a-chinese-way-of-war/. The author owes this point to Rick Gunnell of the China Landpower Studies Center.

advocated. Thus, understanding the debate and how precedents shape it is critical to understanding a military culture's strategic thinking.

Therefore, as Alastair Iain Johnston observed in his 1995 study of Chinese strategic culture, the view of the Chinese approach to competition as embodying a minimal-violence heuristic may not be the only, or even the best, interpretation. Whereas that heuristic is frequently cited in the secondary literature, traditional texts such as the Seven Military Classics treat it more as a historically bounded ideal—one that may yield to other considerations in practice.[13] Other concepts, such as flexibility (权变), also mentioned in the traditional texts, encourage a strategic view that frames the challenge as one of adapting to change and discourages commitments to "a priori political, military, or moral limits on strategic choices."[14] In this view, a Chinese approach to competition, predicated on Sunzi's maxim of the skilled general defeating the enemy without fighting, suggests a strategy intended to constrain an adversary's options when China decides to act. This approach implies the enemy will see the futility of fighting and surrender; otherwise, fighting is preferred.

This approach is reflected in speeches reportedly delivered in 2016 by Jin Canrong, a close advisor to President Xi Jinping. In these speeches, Jin outlined a strategy comprising six sequential "movements" that begin by intertwining US and Chinese interests while establishing alternatives to the United States, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.[15] Once these alternatives are established, China will gradually displace US influence—first regionally, then globally—exploiting the interests embedded in the US system to build wealth while simultaneously inoculating the US public against criticism of China.[16] Following this approach does not alter the zero-sum nature of international competition; rather, it distributes the costs and benefits of competition among the various stakeholders comprising an adversary's political system. To the extent China can sufficiently entangle its interests with these stakeholders, it can better control costs and thus gain greater leverage to align adversaries' actions with Chinese interests.

Other considerations may also impact how Chinese decisionmakers interpret the application of the minimalist heuristic. As Johnston observes, the traditional texts distinguish between enemies, who cannot be won over, and rebels, who may

13. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 63.

14. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 102–3.

15. Manyin Li, "What China Really Wants: A New World Order," *National Review*, March 7, 2021, https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/03/what-china-really-wants-a-new-world-order/.

16. Manyin Li, "What China Really Wants."

be won over by kindness or even bribery.[17] Therefore, the choice of a maximalist over a minimalist approach within Chinese traditions could turn on perceptions of the opponent. If an enemy is intent on one's destruction, all interactions will be zero sum, and a maximalist approach, including preventive and preemptive uses of force, makes strategic sense. If, on the other hand, reconciliation or cooperation has utility, a more minimalist approach is the practical, if not the ethical, choice. During World War II, Mao seemed to have made such a distinction between fighting the Nationalist Party, against which he directed a restrained, tit-for-tat strategy, and the Japanese forces, against which Mao directed an attrition-based strategy aimed at driving them out.[18]

These measures are evident throughout much of this collaborative study. As Sheena Chestnut Greitens points out in chapter 3, China characterizes the security environment as "highly risky, unstable, and rapidly shifting," indicating the Chinese Communist Party perceives the potential for conflict as increasing. Framing these risks as imposed on China, the CCP response encompasses a broad range of activities, including those related to food, ecosystems, and biology, as well as more traditional political, military, and economic areas. Other chapters illustrate how these activities might manifest globally. As Joshua Arostegui points out in chapter 6, China is expanding its influence in South Asia through economic cooperation and a growing network of joint logistics systems aimed at eroding India's regional hegemony and neutralizing the US Navy's ability to act. As described by Jacob Stoil in chapter 9, China quickly leveraged the US decision not to renew the 10-year package of foreign military sales and aid for Israel, thereby gaining political and economic access to that country. Similar strategies are described in the other regionally focused chapters.

Chinese Just-War Considerations

The practical norms described earlier are not the only CCP considerations in addressing strategic challenges. Whereas the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army are often characterized as amoral actors, PLA authors frequently draw on moral traditions when crafting policy recommendations. Moreover, unlike in the West, where ethics is frequently viewed as constraining, PLA authors often regard ethical norms as a means to enhance military readiness, war-fighting capabilities, and support for socialist progress.[19] Confucian thinker

17. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 72.

18. Mao Zedong, *Mao on Warfare: On Guerrilla Warfare, On Protracted War, and Other Martial Writings* (CN Times Books Inc., 2013), 97–98; and Sumner B. Twiss, "Mao Zedong's Ethics of War (1927-1949)?," in Twiss et al., *Warfare Ethics*, 184.

19. Metcalf, "Survey," 223–28.

Xunzi, for example, argued a good government that embodies the Confucian values of ritual, humaneness, and justice will motivate loyalty and deep commitment to its leadership, even to the point of going to war.[20] In more recent formulations, PLA scholar Zhao Feng has argued for "moral warfare," in which one seeks moral superiority over one's enemy to influence the attitudes and behaviors of allies and adversaries.[21] On the surface, such a view may appear to be a particularly cynical form of information warfare. Yet, for moral warfare to be effective, practitioners arguably must make an honest attempt to be moral or, failing that, present a stronger moral case than their enemy.

A 2015 survey of PLA scholarship described several studies on premodern military thought, which sensitized PLA officers to the ethical requirements associated with *jus ad bellum* and, to a lesser degree, *jus in bello*, with the latter receiving less emphasis from the Chinese Communist Party.[22] More recently, the People's Liberation Army has published a growing number of scholarly works on military ethics that, though heavily influenced by Marxist ideology, still incorporate "Chinese characteristics" by drawing on classical texts.[23] As Andrew Scobell noted in 2003, China's strategic behavior is influenced by both realism relative to CCP interests and Confucian ideas regarding what those interests should be.[24] In 2015, drawing on Scobell's observation, Lo observed Chinese strategic culture has "deeply internalized" a preference for nonviolent solutions to interstate disputes, thereby rationalizing its aggressive pursuit of perceived interests as defensive.[25]

Confucianism is not the only traditional school of thought that informs CCP thinking. Traditional Chinese thought on just war generally falls into four schools: Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism. Each school emerged as a response to the fall of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), which, much like the fall of the Roman Empire, led to political fragmentation and unrestrained conflict. As power coalesced around seven ascendant powers, China entered the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), which was marked by frequent and fierce fighting. Rulers during this period sought more effective ways to govern and wage war, a development

20. Aaron Stalnaker, "Xunzi's Moral Analysis of War and Some of Its Contemporary Implications," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 137.

21. Zhao Feng 赵枫, "军事伦理学应当研究道德战范畴" [Military ethics should investigate the scope of moral war], 南京政治学院学报 [*Journal of Nanjing Institute of Politics*] 19, no. 4 (2003): 86–88, quoted in Mark Metcalf, "Moral Warfare: Weaponizing Ethics to Weaken, Divide, and Smash the Enemy," in Twiss et al., *Warfare Ethics*, 243.

22. Ping-cheung Lo, "Warfare Ethics," 77–78.

23. Metcalf, "Survey," 223.

24. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

25. Ping-cheung Lo, "Warfare Ethics," 48–50.

that led to a surge of scholarship addressing practical and ethical concerns.[26] Whereas the Seven Military Classics serve as a practical guide, many of the texts they include also address the ethical concerns articulated by the aforementioned schools. These philosophical and religious schools made their own contributions to understanding how war and warfare should be governed.

Confucianism

Harmony plays a central and constitutive role in Confucian ethics, representing both the absence of conflict and a dynamic moral ideal achieved through virtuous conduct, proper ritual, and the maintenance of right relationships. Rather than arising from uniformity, harmony emerges from the balanced coordination of distinct roles and responsibilities. In this sense, harmony in Confucian thought both justifies and limits the use of force, emerging as an active moral achievement that is cultivated through virtuous conduct and right relations, rather than as a passive ideal of nonconflict.[27]

Harmony, in this context, manifests as a balance among distinct elements rather than uniform conformity, thereby both enabling and constraining the use of force.[28] In Confucian just-war theory, then, aggressive wars are prohibited, whereas defensive wars to protect one's own people are permitted. Confucian thinkers also permit "punitive expeditions" against rulers who wage aggressive wars against other states or tyrannize their own people.[29] Such permissions resemble modern Western norms regarding humanitarian intervention, as both Mencius and Xunzi characterize tyranny in terms of widespread deprivation, predation, and abuse.[30] These standards are similar to the "gross violations of human rights" standard employed by the UN, which treats such violations as so severe they cannot be considered as "falling exclusively within the domestic jurisdiction of States."[31]

In the Confucian tradition, the quality of the actor matters as much as conformity to principle. A ruler must be both just (义) and benevolent (仁) to possess the authority to wage war. These virtues extend both to the justification for war and to the war's conduct. A truly virtuous ruler—the true king—

26. Ping-cheung Lo, "*Art of War* Corpus," 3–4.

27. Confucius, *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 5.

28. Confucius, *Analects*, 5; and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (Peter Lang, 1993), 12.

29. Sumner B. Twiss and Jonathan K. L. Chan, "Classical Confucianism, Punitive Expeditions, and Humanitarian Intervention," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 117.

30. Twiss and Chan, "Classical Confucianism," 124.

31. "Frequently Asked Questions," UN Human Rights Council, n.d., accessed February 16, 2026, https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/complaint-procedure/faq.

would be constrained to avoiding escalation whenever possible and to using only the minimum force necessary to achieve morally legitimate objectives.[32] In this way, a Confucian framework would ethically obligate the limited use of force, especially when doing so preserves harmony, protects the innocent, and reflects the ruler's moral responsibility to act with compassion and restraint.

Nevertheless, a Confucian-derived preference for nonviolent solutions is not without qualifications. In a 2013 article in the Chinese government–sponsored journal *Contemporary International Relations*, the authors argue the Chinese government, motivated by Confucian virtues, tolerated several maritime-boundary provocations competitors interpreted as signs of weakness, thereby prompting further provocations.[33] Asserting such tolerance was self-defeating—because it led to further provocations—the authors instead recommend a response that still follows the Confucian tradition and seeks to establish balance by being simultaneously more confrontational toward those who challenge China's interests and more cooperative with actors who accept (or at least do not challenge) those interests.[34] Consequently, the demands of harmony may override the preference for nonviolence, but only to the point of restoring harmony and rendering violence unnecessary.

Mohism

Mohism, founded by Mozi (circa 470–391) as a reaction to Confucianism, which it saw as both irreverent and impractical, eventually lost its appeal because its strict ascetism and utilitarianism made the philosophy impractical.[35] Mohism has experienced a resurgence in recent years, and some Chinese scholars regard it as a defensive complement to the offensive character of *The Art of War*.[36] Relevant to the present discussion is the apocryphal story in which Mozi travels to the kingdom of Chu after learning the kingdom is planning to invade its weaker neighbor, the state of Song. In Chu, Mozi visits the master craftsman Gongshu Pan, whom Chu had engaged to build siege ladders for the assault on Song. When they meet, Mozi asks Gongshu to help him kill someone who had insulted him. When Gongshu declines, Mozi offers him cash. Gongshu angrily

32. David A. Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War," in *The Prism of Just War: Asian and Western Perspectives on the Legitimate Use of Military Force*, ed. Howard M. Hensel (Routledge, 2010), 200; and Ping-cheung Lo, "*Art of War* Corpus," 8–9.

33. Wang Sheng and Luo Xiao, "Transformation of the International System and Changes in China's Foreign Policy Toward Neighboring Countries: From Maintaining Stability to Safeguarding Rights," *Contemporary International Relations* (2013).

34. Wang Sheng and Luo Xiao, "Transformation."

35. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1963), 212.

36. Li Bin, "Insights into the Mozi and Their Implications for the Study of Contemporary International Relations," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 428.

responds murder is against his morality.[37] Observing Song had committed no offense and Chu had excess territory, Mozi then accuses Gongshu and, by extension, Chu of "destroying what it has in insufficiency [people] in order to struggle for what it has in excess [territory]."[38]

This story illustrates a Mohist reliance on a combination of practical reasoning and shared moral values to discourage aggressive war. As the story shows, Mozi first relied on rational argument to persuade an aggressor war would be self-defeating. From the Mohist point of view, injuring others for one's own benefit is inherently morally wrong and, given the difficulty of predicting the costs and benefits of aggression, imprudent.[39] Mohist writings also discuss defensive technologies, and Mohists would travel to besieged cities to assist in their construction. This rational and scientific aspect of Mohism has reintroduced Mohist thought to the literature on international competition, where Mohism is sometimes employed to emphasize the defensive nature of CCP policies and actions.[40]

Daoism

Daoist attitudes toward war, as reflected in the *Dao-de Jing* (*DDJ*), are deeply skeptical and morally restrained, viewing war not as a legitimate extension of statecraft—as in Confucian, Legalist, or Mohist thought—but as a failure of harmony. But considering Daoism to be strictly pacifist would be wrong. In the Daoist view, conflict arises from selfish desires and ambitions, which the Daoist would understand as distortions of the *dao*. Therefore, force is sometimes necessary, but only when employed reluctantly, minimally, and under conditions of extreme necessity. Chapter 31 of the *DDJ* declares, "[w]eapons are instruments of evil, not the instruments of a good ruler," and even in victory, one must not celebrate, "[f]or to praise victory is to delight in the slaughter of men."[41] Rather than a celebration, victory in war should be observed as a funeral. This view rejects the idea war can ever be just but recognizes war is sometimes necessary.

37. Hui-chieh Loy, "Mohist Arguments on War," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 225–26; and Mòzǐ, *The Essential Mòzǐ: Ethical, Political, and Dialectical Writings*, trans. Chris Fraser (Oxford University Press, 2020), 202–3.

38. Hui-chieh Loy, "Mohist Arguments," 226.

39. Hui-chieh Loy, "Mohist Arguments," 231–32.

40. Li Bin, "Insights into the Mozi," 453–54; "The Chinese Communist Party at 100 and the Theocracy of Mozi," Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism, July 4, 2021, https://www.cauxroundtable.org/2021/07/04/the-chinese-communist-party-at-100-and-the-theocracy-of-mozi/; and David Cowhig, "1939: Reading the Classics with Chairman Mao—Letter to Chen Boda on 'Mozi's Philosophical Thought,'" *David Cowhig's Translation Blog*, February 24, 2026, https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2026/02/04/1939-reading-the-classics-with-chairman-mao-letter-to-chen-boda-on-mozis-philosophical-thought/.

41. Wing-Tsit Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 136–55; Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 35–36; and Ellen Y. Zhang, "'Weapons Are Nothing but Ominous Instruments': The *Daodejing*'s View on War and Peace," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 191–93.

The *Huainanzi*, compiled under the Daoist ruler Liu An in the second century BCE, further refines this view. This Chinese classic contains a chapter on military matters that attempts to reconcile Sunzi's pragmatism with Daoist ethical restraint. The text presents war not as a means of domination or enrichment; rather, it presents war as a temporary tool to "sustain those who [were] perishing, revive those [lineages] that had been cut off, pacify the chaos of the world, and eliminate harm to the myriad people."[42] As Andrew Seth Meyer points out, this language echoes broader Warring States–period texts that advocate political settlement over complete military victory.[43] Conquerors, in this model, are not to exploit the wealth of the vanquished; rather, they should establish institutions that serve the welfare of the vanquished, reflecting the Daoist value of stewardship over control. Whereas this requirement fits better with Western views of *jus post bellum*, it underscores the values of benevolence, restraint, and the obligation to restore balance—values that place ethical limits on the ends and means of war.[44]

As seen in both the *DDJ* and the *Huainanzi*, the Daoist approach demands violence serve restoration and balance rather than conquest or punishment. Like other philosophies engaged in this chapter, Daoism does not acknowledge a threshold of war that requires a separate ethic for the use of force below that threshold. Yet, by accepting the necessity of force while rejecting any moral justification for it, Daoism goes beyond merely rejecting aggression: It embeds ethical limits within a broader cosmological and moral vision in which coercion is tolerated only insofar as it prevents greater disharmony. For contemporary discussions of *jus ad vim*, Daoism offers a compelling alternative logic—one insisting force remain morally constrained, spiritually burdensome, and always subordinate to the higher goal of restoring the *dao*, rather than being justified by legal or strategic necessity alone.

Legalism

In the late Warring States period, Legalism emerged as a direct critique of the moral idealism of Confucianism and Mohism, which Legalist thinkers regarded as unrealistic and dangerously constraining. Philosophers such as Han Feizi (circa 280–233 BCE) rejected the idea governance or warfare should be guided by virtue, ritual, or universal love. Instead, they argued the ruler's primary responsibility was to secure a strong, stable, and enduring state grounded in strict laws (法), impersonal institutions, and efficient administration.[45] Despite dismissing morality

42. Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 91 (brackets in original).

43. Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 37, 40–41.

44. Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 45.

45. Ping-cheung Lo, "Chinese Just War Ethics," 250; and Eric L. Hutton, "Han Feizi's Criticism of Confucianism and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 5 (2008): 430.

as a basis for governance, Legalists nonetheless stressed public accountability and predictability: Laws should be clearly written, publicly proclaimed, and uniformly enforced. This development created a form of institutional egalitarianism—one more consistent than that of Confucianism or Mohism but entirely oriented toward political stability rather than justice or human flourishing.[46] For Legalists, all other values could be sacrificed to the overriding goal of order.

In international relations, the Legalist view parallels aspects of modern political realism. Legalism's central imperative is conditional: If rulers wish to preserve the state, they must maintain internal order and prepare for external conflict. Unlike realist traditions that treat power as an end in itself, Legalism values both domestic and geopolitical order for its utility in safeguarding prosperity and preventing chaos.[47] Han Feizi counseled rulers should discipline their own states before projecting power abroad, prioritizing stability over conquest. From this standpoint, force is justified when it restores or preserves equilibrium rather than upholds virtue or justice.[48] Limited uses of force to sustain a balance of power—through deterrence, coercion, or preemption—are therefore permissible and, at times, necessary.

This view yields a functional, though nonmoral, basis for something akin to a Legalist *jus ad vim*: Limited force is justified when it is the most effective means of maintaining regional stability, preventing escalation, or forestalling disorder. But because Legalism does not accept the moral threshold between peace and war, such measures risk blending into preventive war, which is the very boundary-eroding practice against which Michael Walzer warns.[49] Han Feizi, by contrast, would treat preemption as a duty whenever equilibrium is threatened.[50] Whereas Han Feizi allowed for a balance of power in the international system, he also regarded hegemony as the most secure foundation for such order.[51]

Surprisingly, some forms of Legalism were significantly shaped by Daoism, particularly in Han Feizi's writings and in the later Huang-Lao method. Han Feizi incorporated elements of the *DDJ*, including *dao* (道, the way); *de* (德, potency or virtue); and *wu wei* (无为, nonaction). Here, *wu wei* is best understood as

46. Wing-Tsit Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 251–52.

47. Eirik Lang Harris, "Normativity of War and Peace: Thoughts from the *Han Feizi*," in Twiss et al., *Warfare Ethics*, 114–15.

48. Harris, "War and Peace," 119–20; and Panagiotis Kallinikos, "Political Realism in the Chinese Warring States Period and the European Renaissance: Han Fei and Machiavelli," *Conatus* 8, no. 1 (2023): 130.

49. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (Basic Books, 2015), 74–80.

50. Harris, "War and Peace," 116–20.

51. Ping-cheung Lo, "Legalism and Offensive Realism in the Chinese Court Debate on Defending National Security 81 BCE," in Ping-cheung Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 253.

acting in such a way as to avoid struggle against the natural flow of the universe, rather than as refraining from action.[52] For Han Feizi, *wu wei* meant governance through institutional design, allowing the ruler to govern indirectly via systems rather than personal intervention. The Daoist emphasis on natural order and restraint thus tempered Legalist coercion. Han Feizi praised rulers who rarely use armor and weapons outside the state, preferring strong domestic governance, agricultural productivity, and restraint over conquest.[53] In this view, force should be used only when necessary to increase order, and warfare—being resource intensive—should be avoided if it weakens the state's governing capacity.[54] Nevertheless, Han Feizi "unabashedly advocated hegemony" when it aligned with long-term stability.[55] Whereas the goal of regional hegemony may be a function of CCP ideology, that goal has a long history in Chinese thought.

The Huang-Lao method synthesized Legalist administrative methods with Daoist metaphysics. The *Huangdi sijing*, attributed to this school, advocated governance rooted in the *dao* and outlined principles of war. As Ellen Y. Zhang notes, rulers guided by *wu wei* should allow people to self-organize, intervening only when necessary and only to the degree needed to restore self-ordering.[56] Applied to international relations, war should be used only when peaceful processes for establishing an international order fail. The tradition also promotes a "feminine" strategic posture—marked by softness, humility, and accommodation—and prioritizes self-defense and peacekeeping over expansion.[57]

In its pure form, Legalism advances a utilitarian view of force: Force is justified when the benefits to order outweigh the harm. Unlike other schools, which tend toward limited objectives, Legalism often prefers expansive goals associated with hegemony, which may entail frequently resorting to force. But Legalism tempered by Daoism emphasizes limited force for limited ends—an emphasis grounded in prudential rather than moral reasoning. Even in this form, the approach would restrain violence by requiring force to be effective, sustainable, and consistent with preserving the state's long-term strength. Integrated with Daoist restraint, noninterference, and balance, this hybrid approach supports a strategically minimalist model of limited force—one in which stability, rather than domination, is the ultimate aim.

52. Wing-Tsit Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 791; and Laozi, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 66–67. The author owes this point to Joshua Arostegui of the China Landpower Studies Center.

53. Harris, "War and Peace," 119.

54. Harris, "War and Peace," 121.

55. Ping-cheung Lo, "Legalism and Offensive Realism," 253.

56. Ellen Y. Zhang, "War and Peace According to Huang-Lao Philosophy," in Twiss et al., *Warfare Ethics*, 130.

57. Zhang, "Huang-Lao," 135–38.

Application

The practicality of Sunzi, combined with the tenets of the Confucian, Mohist, Daoist, and Legalist traditions, does not yield a single, coherent doctrine regarding the use of force and escalation to war. But these philosophical traditions do establish a shared conceptual vocabulary—order, harmony, utility, balance, and strategic efficacy—through which questions of war and competition can be interpreted. The question, then, is not whether these philosophical traditions directly determine contemporary policy. Instead, the question is whether and how the traditions inform the strategic imagination of PLA thinkers operating under modern conditions. To see how this integrated logic of competition and limited force functions in practice, one must turn to its doctrinal expressions—most notably concepts such as *shashoujian* (杀手锏, assassin's mace) and the three warfares—which translate classical preferences for shaping, deception, and calibrated coercion into operational tools suited for twenty-first-century rivalry.

Assassin's Mace

As articulated in the *Science of Military Strategy*, the concept of active defense incorporates many features of shashoujian. This approach, though not a PLA doctrine, is better thought of as a strategic metaphor that frames how the People's Liberation Army thinks about a particular problem and its solutions.[58] Developed in response to the perceived superiority of US conventional military capabilities, the approach refers to a collection of asymmetric strategies and weapons systems designed to enable a conventionally weaker force to defeat a stronger adversary. Historically, the term shashoujian originates from a compact, easily concealed weapon used in ancient China to overcome better-armed opponents through surprise, skill, and deception—features closely associated with Sunzi's preference for deception and minimal force. In its modern military usage, shashoujian encompasses niche capabilities such as anti-ship ballistic missiles, cyber operations, space-denial systems, and electronic warfare, combining them in a way intended to offset US advantages in force projection and command and control.[59] Together, these capabilities are designed to deter, disorient, decapitate, or paralyze adversary operations at the outset of a confrontation, shaping the conflict's trajectory before it escalates into large-scale hostilities.

58. The author owes this point to an anonymous reviewer.

59. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets: The Eroding Foundations of American Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 18–33; and Jason Bruzdzinski, "Demystifying Sha Shou Jian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept," in *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, September 2004), 314, 344, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/33/.

In practice, PLA leaders and scholars apply the term broadly, in contexts in which resources or capabilities appear constrained.[60] Reflecting a broader PLA focus on strategic surprise, preemption, and system disruption, the shashoujian approach aligns with the logic of competition: It aims to achieve political and strategic goals through limited, targeted, and preemptive actions intended to keep a conflict from escalating to full-scale war. Often presented as defensive, the approach also offers tools for managing escalation, including preemptive action in circumstances in which waiting would increase risks, undermine deterrence, or invite greater instability. In this sense, shashoujian embodies a conception of limited force as both a shield against stronger adversaries and a scalpel for shaping the strategic environment.

Shashoujian also appears to align with many of the just-war ideals articulated in Chinese classical literature. By balancing defensive and offensive action, the approach reflects a Confucian concern with harmony, permitting force only to protect regional stability and avoid protracted conflict. Shashoujian's reliance on surprise and systemic disruption also mirrors Daoist preferences for subtle, nonobvious methods of achieving outcomes through nonaction. Therefore, to the extent its application seeks to destabilize an enemy's capacity to act rather than annihilate the enemy, the approach further reflects Daoist norms. Mohism, which values defense, utility maximization, and harm reduction, is also reflected in shashoujian's prioritization of deterrence over destruction, though only insofar as this principle is applied exclusively to defensive actions. Whether this alignment is intentional or accidental is difficult to say, but the fact classical ideals are integrated into the shashoujian approach suggests they have some normative standing in Chinese strategic thought.

Three Warfares

The three-warfares doctrine, officially incorporated into PLA guidelines in 2003, is a key component of China's contemporary military strategy.[61] Encompassing psychological, public-opinion, and legal warfare, the doctrine is designed to shape the strategic environment, influence perceptions, and control the narrative in ways that help the state achieve political and military objectives without resorting to open conflict. Under this doctrine, psychological warfare targets the morale and decision making of adversaries; public-opinion warfare seeks to sway domestic and international audiences through propaganda, censorship, and information control; and legal warfare employs international and domestic law

60. Thomas G. Mahnken, *Secrecy & Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture* (Lowy Institute for International Policy, February 2011), 25.

61. Sangkuk Lee, "China's 'Three Warfares': Origins, Applications, and Organizations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 199–201.

to legitimize Chinese actions while constraining opponents. Rooted in traditional Chinese concepts of indirect strategy—such as those found in *The Art of War*—the three-warfares doctrine reflects a broader emphasis on winning without fighting, leveraging nonkinetic means to gain advantage in peacetime competition and in the gray zones below the threshold of armed conflict.[62]

From a Western perspective, the three-warfares doctrine may be best understood as a peacetime doctrine intended to deter or compel other actors to accept Chinese interests without resorting to force. But as Sangkuk Lee points out, the doctrine's components would also be integrated into joint wartime operations to minimize the role of force.[63] Viewed this way, the three warfares may be understood as a comprehensive approach that is applicable across the spectrum of conflict, prioritizing preservation over destruction while still allowing the state to achieve its strategic objectives. Moreover, the doctrine is not simply about competing against stronger powers. One can see this flexible application reflected in how China pursues its interests globally, particularly in its border dispute with India and its territorial encroachments in the Arctic.[64]

Conclusion

As clearly established in Johnston's study, PLA practitioners and scholars frequently draw on Confucian, Daoist, Mohist, and Legalist thought—either indirectly, through the Seven Military Classics, or directly—to inform contemporary policy and strategy. But Johnston argues the idealized moral strategies informed by these traditions play only a small role in restraining action. When the ideal of using minimal force to restore the moral order interacts with the idea of an uncompromising, immoral enemy, the resulting framework imposes few restrictions on action. Instead, drawing on philosophical ideals enables policy scholars and elites to legitimize claims justified by more practical considerations.[65] The British-American strategist Colin S. Gray makes a similar point regarding Western just-war traditions. Whereas Gray acknowledges soldiers are more likely to fight harder for a just cause, he argues ethics has rarely constrained or enabled action historically, asserting "soldiers and strategists" translate justice claims through their perceived needs and the "political-military necessities of the moment."[66]

62. Fumio Ota, "Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter 2014): 76–80.

63. Lee, "Three Warfares," 204.

64. Kartik Bommakanti, *China's 'Three Warfares' Strategy in Action: Implications for the Sino-India Boundary, the Arctic, and Antarctica*, Occasional Paper 426 (Observer Research Foundation, February 2024).

65. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 120–21, 164–65.

66. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 68–69.

Like Johnston's claims regarding China, Gray's observations about Western traditions suggest moral language can serve as a mask to legitimize policies, strategies, and their authors.

Although hypocrisy transcends cultures, this view may be overly cynical. As Walzer points out, the fact of state actors' describing their military operations in just-war terms is a triumph and an indication of those actors' constituent norms having some force. As Walzer states, even the hypocritical application of just-war traditions is the "tribute that vice pays to virtue," thereby exposing the vicious to accountability by the virtuous.[67] Despite their potential for misuse, classical just-war traditions in China, as in the West, are more likely to interact with modern sensibilities and practical necessities to generate policies, strategies, and actions that can be legitimized across society. This legitimacy stems from the traditions' partial conformity to social values, allowing governments to maintain the political will necessary to see a conflict or confrontation through to the end. In fact, especially in national security affairs, practical and ethical considerations can become so intertwined they are hard to disentangle.

Overall, this chapter's survey of classical texts, philosophical traditions, and contemporary doctrine suggests Chinese strategic norms do not treat competition as a condition separate from war, nor do they view limited force as a morally exceptional threshold between peace and open hostilities. Rather, these norms embed force within a continuous logic of political struggle oriented toward shaping the strategic environment, preserving order, and securing advantage with minimal overt destruction. Whether expressed through Sunzi's preference for winning without fighting, Confucian commitments to harmony, Mohist calculations of utility, Daoist restraint, or Legalist concern for order and stability, the dominant pattern is one of integration: Political, economic, informational, and military tools are fused into a unified conception of statecraft. In this framework, what Western observers might label gray-zone activity is intrinsic rather than peripheral to war.

For policymakers and military planners, this analysis does not imply conflict with China is inevitable, nor does it imply cultural determinism explains Chinese behavior. Rather, the analysis suggests misreading China's integrated conception of competition as incremental aggression—or, conversely, misreading calibrated coercion as restraint—risks escalation through misunderstanding. If Western actors assume sharp thresholds where Chinese strategists perceive gradients of pressure, both sides may miscalculate when and how competition becomes war. Understanding the differences between these perspectives does not eliminate risk, but it clarifies the terrain on which escalation decisions will be made. In that sense,

67. Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (Yale University Press, 2004), 4.

appreciating the normative foundations of Chinese strategic thought goes beyond an academic exercise; this appreciation is a prerequisite for managing rivalry between peace and war.

— 3 —

China's Global Perspective

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If a localized military conflict between the United States and China occurs, how might China horizontally escalate such a conflict to areas or domains beyond the Indo-Pacific theater? This chapter examines China's current intentions, broad global objectives, and growth potential. The purpose of this examination is to lay out a baseline for understanding how China could use its current global priorities and outreach in service of its objectives, in the aftermath of the initial Indo-Pacific engagement described in chapter 4.

Although China's ability to project military power is currently concentrated in the Indo-Pacific, and the scenario in chapter 4 focuses on an initial military engagement in that region, China's interests have global implications, and the country has a global presence. The fact China has a global presence and interests does not necessarily mean Beijing's interests would be served by an indiscriminate horizontal escalation to global war with the United States, though China may escalate selectively, as the rest of this volume explores. Rather than spreading its recently acquired and as yet minimally battle-tested capabilities across the entire global-security environment—where the United States has long operated and where support from US allies and partners could augment American capabilities most effectively—the Chinese Communist Party could better serve its own interests in other ways. Namely, the party could pursue its global interests by continuing its attempts to concentrate military power in the Indo-Pacific (thereby hindering the United States' efforts to achieve its desired "overmatch") and by using other,

less costly tools.[1] Moreover, as Joel Wuthnow recently noted, the thrust of Beijing's response to a localized conflict in the Indo-Pacific would likely center on figuring out how to counter US intervention in the region, either through asymmetric escalation against key US military targets or by using space, cyber, and cognitive-warfare tools designed to pressure the United States into backing off an intervention.[2]

Even if Beijing would likely not escalate a conflict equally in all horizontal directions, it could escalate selectively in regions and ways designed to protect what China views as its key vulnerabilities and fundamental interests. China would also be more likely to escalate if it believed the United States could take theater-specific actions to put pressure on the sources of China's regime security or the political survival of the Chinese Communist Party leadership.

Therefore, the ways in which China's presence and interests would bear on its strategy in a conflict with the United States are worth considering. Accordingly, this chapter examines what globally distributed interests China has to protect, with a particular focus on interests that cut across regions and may not come to the fore in the regionally focused chapters that follow. The chapter then analyzes how the Chinese leadership may see the global-security environment as a threat to the country's interests, what activities could protect those interests, and how China could leverage its interests to achieve its strategic objectives in a military conflict with the United States. By exploring these topics, this analysis lays the baseline for subsequent, regionally focused chapters to examine the varying and selective approaches China may take to escalating a crisis horizontally.

Defining China's National Security Interests

In spring 2025, the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Council Information Office released a white paper titled "China's National Security in the New Era"; an English translation followed in June.[3] The document authoritatively states China's approach to national security under Xi Jinping. But not all the statements in documents like the white paper should be taken at face value, and care should be taken to juxtapose China's rhetoric with its actual behavior. For example, Ukraine and much of Europe might object to the white paper's characterization of China's "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" with Russia as "a good example for friendly exchanges between major neighboring countries,"

1. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (White House, November 2025), 23.

2. Joel Wuthnow, *Taming the Hegemon: Chinese Thinking on Countering U.S. Military Intervention in Asia*, China Strategic Perspectives 20 (National Defense University Press, September 2025).

3. Unless otherwise noted, references to this document are to the People's Republic of China's official English translation. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security in the New Era* (Foreign Languages Press, June 2025).

and the placement of this discussion under the heading "working for a world of common security for all."[4] Nonetheless, a careful reading of the white paper highlights several points about how Chinese leaders in Beijing conceptualize China's interests—a perspective and way of thinking that would be relevant to a military conflict in which China may consider horizontal escalation.

First, China's emphasis on maintaining internal security and domestic social stability cannot be overestimated. The white paper frames "rapid economic development and lasting social stability" as the Chinese Communist Party's two major achievements since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and lauds China's "historic transformations and achievements" in national security under Xi Jinping.[5] Critically, the white paper frames China's work on national security as preparation to navigate what China sees as a highly risky, unstable, and rapidly shifting security landscape. The white paper describes "a backdrop of uncertainty and turbulence. . . . a complex domestic and international landscape – with growing risks, challenges, and adverse impact."[6] The document adds, "interwoven risks and conflicts are intensifying, while deficits in peace, development, security, and governance continue to grow. Humanity is once again confronted with a fundamental choice between peace and war."[7] Several pages later, the document asserts, "External security threats are intensifying."[8]

The description of China's current security environment suggests the Chinese Communist Party views the risk of conflict as real and increasingly high. The white paper echoes Xi's previous exhortations to prepare for war in peacetime, as well as to prepare for "extreme circumstances" (about which Xi issued a warning at a 2023 meeting of the Central National Security Commission).[9] In the white paper, Xi's directive is presented as a reflection of traditional Chinese thinking and as guidance to "be mindful of possible danger in times of peace, downfall in times of survival, and chaos in times of stability."[10] The white paper clearly shows,

4. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 39.

5. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 1–2.

6. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 3.

7. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 3.

8. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 7.

9. "习近平主持召开二十届中央国家安全委员会第一次会议" [Xi Jinping presided over the first meeting of the 20th Central National Security Commission and stressed that the modernization of the national security system and capabilities should be accelerated], Xinhua, May 30, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202305/content_6883803.htm; and "工业和信息化部等十四部门关于加强极端场景应急通信能力建设的意见" [Opinions of 14 departments including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on strengthening the construction of emergency communication capabilities in extreme scenarios], Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, December 31, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202501/content_7000295.htm.

10. John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war; and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 9.

though the Chinese Communist Party would frame a hypothetical future conflict as one that was brought to China, not one China initiated, the Chinese leadership believes a future conflict is likely enough to warrant serious preparation.

The white paper also notes China's national security "encompasses more dimensions than ever before, expanding across time and space and involving an intricate interplay of domestic and international factors," suggesting the breadth and horizontal reach of China's perceived interests.[11] Therefore, the outbreak of conflict and its potential to impact China's sense of global security are, at least to some extent, factored into China's current thoughts about security and the need to protect its global interests. China's attention to global security means surveying China's current global interests is a good place to start in considering how the People's Republic of China would approach defending those interests in a military conflict with the United States.

China views its global strategy, first and foremost, as an externalization of its internal approach to national security (also translated as state security). In this light, the Global Security Initiative Xi proposed in April 2022 is "not only the 'security element' of a global community of shared future, but also the 'global element' of China's holistic approach to national security," also described as the "comprehensive national security concept."[12] The latter was proposed by Xi in 2014, and is characterized by a focus on the regime's internal security needs; on nontraditional and traditional security threats; on the connections between the external and internal dimensions of security; and on an incredibly broad definition of security that encompasses "politics, the military, territory, the economy, finance, culture, society, science and technology, cyberspace, food, ecosystems, resources, nuclear, overseas interests, space, deep sea, the polar regions, biology, artificial intelligence, and data."[13] This conceptual framework highlights the fact the Chinese political system has spent years socializing China's military and political leadership (and rank and file) to think of protecting these interests as a matter of national security. Through this process, the political system has expanded the topical and regional perimeter around what may be considered legitimate national security objectives and targets during a scenario that could risk escalation in the military domain.

11. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 8.
12. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 36.
13. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 11.

Protecting Regime Security at Home and Abroad

At the center of China's national security interests lies the regime security of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese leadership. The white paper explicitly states "political security" is "the lifeline" and "primary goal" of national security in the new era, and further defines that goal as protecting "the CCP's governing status and maintain[ing] the Chinese socialist system."[14] Texts such as the People's Liberation Army National Defense University's *Science of Military Strategy* emphasize the demand for political security continues in active combat conditions, when military forces must "not only focus on the needs of external offensive operations, but also consider the needs of internal stability maintenance operations."[15]

Chinese strategists and planners have expressed concern, in the event of a crisis—particularly in the "main strategic direction" (*zhuyao zhanlue fangxian*, 主要战略方向) of the southeastern coast—adversaries may complicate military operations by creating border-security problems elsewhere on China's multicountry periphery. Adversaries might also collaborate with domestic secessionists, saboteurs, or provocateurs, creating a so-called "chain reaction" (*liansuo fanying*, (连锁反应) or "two-front operation" that combines an external conflict with challenges to internal stability and the political security of the regime.[16] The white paper implicitly acknowledges the risk of a chain reaction when it frames China as a "country with many neighbors, extensive land and sea borders, and a complex security environment in neighboring regions," as well as "a supersized country of 1.4 billion people with a vast territory and many ethnic groups" that must "maintain national unity and ethnic solidarity and resolutely oppose all separatist activities."[17] The document mentions China's need to "prevent risks from cascading across borders" and highlights its need to remain vigilant against "infiltration, sabotage, subversion, and separatist activities by hostile forces."[18]

In the event of an external conflict, China has already laid the groundwork that could enable it to be vigilant and defend itself against ostensibly heightened risks of infiltration, subversion, or separatist activity. This groundwork involves both law enforcement and paramilitary forces cooperating with China's neighbors to

14. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 12.

15. Xiao Tianliang 肖天亮, ed., 战略学 [The science of military strategy], trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022), 198.

16. Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?*, China Strategic Perspectives 15 (National Defense University Press, June 2020); Zhang Peigao 张培高, ed., 联合战役指挥教程 [Lessons on joint campaign command] (Military Science Press, 2012); and M. Taylor Fravel, "Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4–5 (August–October 2007).

17. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 10.

18. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 13, 16.

enhance the country's border security, as well as the development of a comprehensive emergency-response system under the 2025 "National Emergency Comprehensive Response Plan" (国家突发事件总体应急预案).[19] According to the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council in their announcement of the plan, the "National Emergency Comprehensive Response Plan" was formulated to "prevent and mitigate major safety risks, respond to emergencies, protect the lives and property of the people, and maintain national security and social stability."[20]

China's efforts to "strengthen emergency management capacity," which build on the Ministry of Emergency Management that was created in March 2018, also appear in the national security white paper, in which such efforts are framed as measures to increase Chinese citizens' sense of security.[21] The white paper sets out a goal to "strengthen the response and support system for major public emergencies, improve the emergency command mechanism under the overall safety and emergency response framework," and augment regional emergency-response capabilities.[22] The 2025 "National Emergency Comprehensive Response Plan" includes "social security incidents," which the plan describes as events such as mass incidents, terrorist attacks, ethnic and religious incidents, and "foreign-related or other events" that cause, or could cause, serious social harm.[23] The plan also establishes a four-tiered, color-coded emergency-warning system that assesses the severity, trajectory, and potential harm of an unfolding incident.[24] In accordance with the national-level plan, lower-level authorities are now charged with developing appropriate emergency-response plans as well.

The other area in which China would likely mobilize nonmilitary security (that is, police and paramilitary) assets and personnel during a military conflict is in enhancing border security. Under Xi, China passed a Land Borders Law (陆地国界法) that became effective in January 2022, following the enactment of laws related to maritime traffic and the coast guard.[25] The Land Borders

19. For more details about this plan, and about how actors across the Chinese political system have generated their own corresponding emergency-response plans, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Jake Rinaldi, "China's Approach to Social Stability in a Taiwan Contingency," in *If China Attacks Taiwan*, ed. Bonnie S. Glaser (German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2025).

20. "中共中央 国务院印发《国家突发事件总体应急预案》" [CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council issue "National Emergency Comprehensive Response Plan"], Xinhua, February 25, 2025, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/zywj/20250225/a0c06e30ad36490697fbf780530839e4/c.html.

21. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 18.

22. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 50.

23. "中共中央 国务院印发《国家突发事件总体应急预案" [The CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council issue the "National Emergency Comprehensive Response Plan"], State Council of the People's Republic of China, February 25, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202502/content_7005635.htm.

24. "CCP Central Committee."

25. For the history of the law, see "Land Borders Law," NPC Observer, updated August 3, 2025, https://npcobserver.com/legislation/land-borders-law/.

Law lays out circumstances under which China's borders might be closed, including in the occurrence of a major conflict or war.[26] The law also clarifies the roles of various actors responsible for border security and assigns most border-security duties to the People's Armed Police and the People's Liberation Army. In wartime contingencies, the role of the People's Armed Police in ensuring border defense and border security is notable. In any military contingency, People's Armed Police units are also expected to bear significant responsibility for tasks including "rear defense, maintaining order, and supporting operations," as well as securing critical infrastructure and supply lines, thus enabling the People's Liberation Army to "wage war without . . . disruption" offshore.[27]

Across its many borders, China would likely call on the influence it has developed through years of intensive police and nonmilitary security diplomacy, as well as police training. Both these lines of effort, which have expanded during Xi's tenure, are security-producing activities that concentrate most heavily on China's regional periphery (including its border with Russia) in mainland Southeast Asia and in Central Asia.[28] The white paper documents the progress China has made in cross-border security cooperation, noting the People's Republic of China has signed cooperative border-defense agreements with nine countries and has established mechanisms for border-defense consultation with 12 countries.[29] In the event of a conflict, planners should expect Beijing to require the participation of the maximum possible number of neighbors with which China has border-defense agreements, even if their main role is to secure China's rear areas and prevent chain-reaction warfare from materializing or becoming acute.

China has also developed a broad set of significant, nonmilitary security relationships using its police (led by the Ministry of Public Security), intelligence organizations (including both the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of State Security), and other internal security entities (including the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which oversees China's domestic security institutions, and the People's Armed Police paramilitary forces, which fall under the Central

26. Shuxian Luo, "China's Land Border Law: A Preliminary Assessment," Brookings Institution, November 4, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-land-border-law-a-preliminary-assessment/.

27. Xiao Tianliang, *Science of military strategy*, 431; Jake Rinaldi, "Waging War Without Disruption: China's People's Armed Police in a Future Conflict," China Landpower Studies Center, US Army War College, April 24, 2025, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/4165397/waging-war-without-disruption-chinas-peoples-armed-police-in-a-future-conflict/; and Wang Shucheng 王树成 and Xie Feng 谢峰, "武警部队后方防卫作战指挥要做到'三个坚持" [The three principles for the command of rear defense operations of the People's Armed Police], 国防 [*National Defense*] 4 (2012): 54–55.

28. Sheena Chestnut Greitens et al., *A New World Cop on the Beat? China's Internal Security Outreach Under the Global Security Initiative* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2025); and Sheena Chestnut Greitens et al., *China's Foreign Police Training: A Global Footprint* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2025).

29. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 24.

Military Commission). These nonmilitary activities expand China's security footprint and presence; offer intelligence benefits that assist in China's efforts to shape the peacetime environment; and help China build relationships and potential influence among the security bureaucracies of governments in multiple regions of the world.[30] China can reasonably be expected to use the influence and intelligence obtained through this outreach to complicate the United States' regional and global operations, whether diplomatically, logistically, or otherwise. China should also be expected to flex the regional organizations it has created and invested in shaping for these purposes, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Lancang-Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center, the latter of which was established in 2017.

One of the purposes of China's outreach and potential escalation could be to protect the security of the country's "overseas interests," as mentioned in the white paper. Doing so is essential to protecting "the security of [China's] basic economic system."[31] Overseas interests generally connote Chinese citizens abroad, Chinese businesses, and Chinese investments. The white paper emphasizes "a prevention-first approach. . . . Early warning, risk control, and protection mechanisms" and primarily refers to legal and diplomatic tools to safeguard China's overseas interests.[32] But the white paper also discusses China's increased ability to evacuate its nationals from "high risk regions" abroad, suggesting evacuation operations may indicate where and how China thinks a conflict could escalate, as China takes preventive steps to diminish its attack surface and protect its interests by repatriating citizens to within PRC borders.[33]

Nontraditional Global-Security Interests: Food and Energy

Among the other global interests China would likely move to protect are interests related to food security and energy security, along with critical mineral resources. Not surprisingly, both food and energy security appear in the People's Republic of China's national security white paper. The document notes China "seeks to strengthen the initiative in food security, safeguard energy and

30. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "China's Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia," *Parameters* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 35–50, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss1/5/.

31. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 20, 23; and Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

32. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*.

33. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*.

critical resource security, ensure the security of industrial and supply chains, and effectively address risks in key sectors."[34]

The white paper clearly identifies both food security and energy security as critical factors in national security that depend on global inputs. Energy security—including China's dependence on a supply of energy from overseas—is a major PRC vulnerability. In a 2025 testimony, Erica Downs noted, "Beijing remains concerned about China's oil supply security because of China's heavy reliance on oil imports in general and seaborne oil imports in particular."[35] Xi Jinping has called for China "to secure its energy supply in its own hands," and, in recent years, China has taken steps to reduce its overall dependence on oil imports, including through increases in domestic production; rapidly growing sales of new energy vehicles; and expanding commercial and strategic oil stocks.[36]

Likewise, the PRC food-security law, which entered into force in June 2024, is included in the white paper's appendix, titled "Key Laws on China's National Security in the New Era."[37] According to a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Xi mentioned "food security" (粮食安全) in over 450 speeches, meetings, and other activities between 2013 and 2024, and the PRC Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has referred to food security as "a critical cornerstone of national security."[38] Increased food consumption (which has dramatically reduced malnourishment), limits on domestic food production, and reliance on food imports from overseas all heighten China's sense of vulnerability. China has become the world's largest food importer, and its rate of self-sufficiency dropped from 94 percent in 2000 to 66 percent in 2020, with further declines expected to occur by 2030.[39] Recent reductions in food imports from the United States, the overall diversification of China's overseas food supply, and China's emphasis on agricultural innovation seem designed to insulate

34. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 30.

35. *Hearing on China's Domestic Energy Challenges and Growing Influence over International Energy Markets, Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Erica Downs, Senior Research Scholar, Center on Global Energy Policy, Columbia University).

36. "Xi Says China Must Secure Energy Supply in 'Its Own Hands,'" *Bloomberg*, October 22, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-22/xi-says-china-must-secure-energy-supply-in-its-own-hands; Ren Ping 任平, "能源的饭碗必须 端在自己手里" [The energy rice bowl must be held in our own hands], 人民网[*People's Daily Online*], January 7, 2022, http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0107/c1003-32325750.html; and Downs, testimony on *China's Domestic Energy Challenges*, 5–6.

37. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 58.

38. The quote is "粮食安全是国家安全的重要基石." See Wu Zhenjun, "更高水平保障国家粮食安全" [Ensuring national food security at a high level], Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 22, 2024, https://www.moa.gov.cn/ztzl/ymksn/jjrbbd/202402/t20240222_6448893.htm; and Brian Hart et al., "How Severe Are China's Food Security Challenges?," Center for Strategic and International Studies China Power Project, updated April 22, 2025, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-food-security/.

39. Hart et al., "China's Food Security Challenges."

the People's Republic of China from geopolitical tensions that could exacerbate food insecurity.

Current efforts appear to fall short of the measures Beijing sees as necessary. The national security white paper calls for China to "implement a diversified energy supply strategy," reduce "inefficient energy consumption," reform the energy sector, and expand international cooperation "to ensure energy security under open market conditions."[40] The white paper also calls for the People's Republic of China to "[remain] firmly committed to its national food security strategy" and to "increase the overall grain production and supply capacity," which involves efforts both to remain above a minimum threshold of farmland and to accelerate breakthroughs in seed technology (presumably to increase yield efficiency).[41] At the time of this writing, US military operations against Iran are impacting global energy markets, but these impacts seem unlikely to soften Beijing's assessment or reduce its motivation to minimize vulnerabilities in food and energy security.

But PRC efforts to solve problems related to China's food and energy supplies will likely be incomplete at best for years to come. Should a conflict in the Indo-Pacific occur before Beijing has met its own benchmarks for success in the food- and energy-security domains, planners should expect China to take steps toward assuring the continued flow of key goods and to lean on partners that are relatively impervious to US sanctions and other forms of economic pressure. In acting to protect the overseas dimensions of its food and energy security, China would presumably also try to leverage its global network of ports, which has limited combat utility but provides the People's Republic of China with logistical benefits that span peacetime and wartime.[42]

Using Global-Security Governance and Strategic Narratives

Observers should also be prepared for China to employ substantial information operations—in both the traditional and cyber domains—to frame a future conflict in terms favorable to China. Whereas these operations are not necessarily a part of horizontal escalation, they are a global dimension of conflict that would likely widen and intensify following the outbreak of localized military conflicts. Therefore, planners and strategists must account for information operations. (See chapter 13 for more on the PRC approach to information operations.) The key goals of Chinese information operations would likely include delegitimizing the

40. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 51, 21.

41. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 51, 21.

42. Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (Spring 2022).

actions of the United States and its allies and partners; using diplomatic censure or pressure to constrain freedom of action for the United States and its allies and partners; and portraying PRC actions that could otherwise be considered escalatory as purely defensive in their intent.

The audience for China's communications would be both internal (that is, the Chinese public) and global. Domestically, Beijing would carefully seek to manage the balance between two goals that are somewhat in tension: mobilizing support for China's war efforts on the one hand, and, on the other, leaving enough room for the de-escalation and war termination that may result from a negotiated solution rather than an unambiguous People's Liberation Army victory.[43] De-escalating a conflict over Taiwan without achieving a total victory would likely be regarded as a particularly politically sensitive effort because a victory over Taiwan is the one deliverable that is clearly tied to Xi's goal of "national rejuvenation." Additionally, the Taiwan conflict is the one territorial or sovereignty dispute about which the Chinese Communist Party has never allowed or encouraged popular protest.[44] External strategists and decisionmakers should be aware of the range of possible domestic constraints (and lack thereof) on Chinese decision making in any potential escalating conflict.

Internationally, planners should expect China to mobilize both strategic narratives and its diplomatic influence in global-security governance to create normative and diplomatic constraints on freedom of action for the United States and its allies and partners. China would likely frame any conflict, regardless of the facts of its origin, as emerging from destabilizing actions by the United States, which China has consistently critiqued as a force that heightens global uncertainty, risk, and instability. The scenario presented in chapter 4 could be used to support that framing. Observers should also expect Beijing to repeat its talking points about how the United States' formation of alliances and partnerships is a zero-sum security behavior that pursues security for some at the expense of others, in contrast to China's "win-win" behavior that seeks "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security" for all.[45] The white paper plainly states Beijing's view:

43. Greitens and Rinaldi, "China's Approach."

44. A significant volume of literature has now been written on how nationalist sentiment affects China's foreign policy behavior and on whether that sentiment is expected to constrain de-escalation. For example, see Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 1–35; Yang Zhong and Wonjae Hwang, "Why Do Chinese Democrats Tend to Be More Nationalistic? Explaining Popular Nationalism in Urban China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121 (2020): 61–74; and Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-Escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (Winter 2017–18): 7–36.

45. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 13, 37–38; and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "How 'Safe China' Sells Its Security Strategy to the World," *Financial Times*, September 21, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/5c42a94c-a37d-436d-8d40-1da5ad26a6fd.

"With regard to peace and security, China is a major country with the strongest track record globally."[46] In some areas, others clearly view China's actions as detrimental to the promotion of international peace and security and contrary to the principles of the Charter of the UN, which the People's Republic of China claims to uphold. For example, Beijing has strengthened its security partnership with Moscow in the midst of the grinding Russia-Ukraine War. But China has portrayed this cooperation as "a good example for friendly exchanges between major neighboring countries" and "working for a world of common security for all."[47]

Planners and diplomats should therefore prepare to counter Chinese narratives in any diplomatic, regional, or multilateral fora that could be used either to constrain or increase support for American efforts. For example, China places particular emphasis on the UN system and has emphasized its leadership in upholding (a particular nonliberal, Chinese interpretation of) the post-1945 global order.[48] Any actions China takes in UN fora should be expected to follow these general principles.

Conclusion

China's global interests and its perceived vulnerability to global interdependence mean, in a military conflict against the United States, China would likely escalate horizontally in key domains that are intended to buttress the Chinese Communist Party's hold on power and assure regime security. Key areas in which the Chinese Communist Party would mobilize globally—with implications that cut across regions—are enhancing internal security against foreign infiltration and subversion; strengthening border security; moving to protect the access that provides the People's Republic of China with food security and energy security; and using global governance and discourse to portray these moves as defensive rather than horizontally escalatory. As the following chapters explore, China's approach to mobilization would vary in terms of region and approach as China prioritized where it must, should, and could have the most significant impact on its war effort by taking steps that reached beyond the Indo-Pacific.

46. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 29.

47. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Security*, 39.

48. Kainan Gao and Margaret M. Pearson, "Military Parades and Memory Wars: China and Russia Commemorate History to Reimagine International Order," Brookings Institution, August 27, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/military-parades-and-memory-wars-china-and-russia-commemorate-history-to-reimagine-international-order/.

Part 2:
Regional Assessments

— 4 —

The Next Great War

Brennan Deveraux

In a military engagement between the United States and China, the triggering event and the way the ensuing conflict would unfold are unknown. The spark of a conflict could be a deliberate act of aggression. Or, as history has often shown, the spark could be a combination of minor factors that, though individually insufficient, combine to create the necessary circumstances for war. In turn, this chapter does not predict how the initial spark will occur or even provide a set of circumstances for the West to avoid. Instead, this scenario is designed to drive a conversation about China's long-term expansion efforts and their associated impact on the United States' ability to employ its global strategy in the event of a conflict. The scenario serves as a reference point for the authors of this collaborative study and as the underlying narrative. This scenario weaves the beginning of a hypothetical global war between the United States and China and sets the context for the rest of the regional chapters to follow.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section creates the scenario, and the second describes the choices surrounding the characteristics of the conflict and identifies the shared assumptions applied throughout this collaborative study.

Conflict Scenario: The Perfect Storm

This scenario aims to depict a realistic situation that could lead to a conflict between the United States and China. Most important are the characteristics that drive analysis, not the details surrounding the engagement. This section begins

by establishing the strategic backdrop, then describes the initial engagement, and finally outlines the transitional point at which the authors begin their analyses.

Strategic Backdrop

Tensions are high in the Indo-Pacific theater. In this scenario, an upcoming presidential election in Taiwan has China on edge. With the election only a few months away, the Democratic Progressive Party and the Nationalist Party are neck and neck, and Taiwan's betting markets are split evenly.[1] Neither side is calling for independence, but China does not like the fact both parties include strong movements for increased defense spending. Complicating matters, the provisional agenda for the following year's UN General Assembly includes a discussion about self-determination. Whereas the issue of Taiwan will not be part of the planned discussion, China openly protests the agenda, expressing concern about the potential global ramifications of the session.

Amid these political tensions, China increasingly places military and gray-zone pressure on Taiwan. The international community openly condemns China's increased military demonstrations and exercises as rehearsals for a cross-strait invasion. Over the course of 90 days, China builds up forces along its eastern coast, a series of unexplained accidents occur at critical-infrastructure sites, and rolling blackouts sweep across Taiwan, suggesting an invasion is imminent.

In this scenario, the United States maintains a publicly ambiguous policy toward Taiwan while the US military carries out actions in the Indo-Pacific. In turn, whether the US military's actions are a response to China's recent actions or part of the regular exercise cycle is unclear. As part of the annual Pacific Vanguard exercise, the US Navy and a handful of partner-nation vessels are positioned in the Philippine Sea, ideally located to deter potential aggression against Taiwan. Still, China decides to move forward with what appears to be its largest joint military exercise in years. The great powers are on the precipice of war, awaiting the small spark that may set the world ablaze.

The Engagement

The US Navy has become numb to the constant pressure on Taiwan. Meanwhile, more than 50 Chinese fighter jets approach the unofficial median line of the Taiwan Strait, in an intimidation effort that has been ongoing

1. "A Deep Dive into Taiwan's Political Parties," Taiwan Center for Security Studies, n.d., https://taiwancss.org/taiwan-political-parties/. The presence of a multiparty system in Taiwan is worth noting, though technically three parties dominate: In addition to the Democratic Progressive Party and the Nationalist Party, the Taiwan People's Party is also prominent. The Taiwan People's Party does not currently have sufficient power to win the presidency, though it has become influential in the legislature and potentially has enough voters to sway an election one way or another. But addressing Taiwan's changing political landscape is not necessary in the presented scenario.

since 2022, when then–Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. Simultaneously, Chinese ships begin sailing toward the island, likely positioning themselves to simulate yet another encirclement. People's Liberation Army Navy ships move in the Pacific Ocean as the Chinese coast guard moves to the east of Taiwan—a common way to signal Taiwan is an internal matter. Due to weather and tide conditions, the ideal invasion window is still about six weeks away, though the United States and its allies watch as Taiwan's Republic of China Air Force scrambles to meet the Chinese fighters once again (a standard response to these incursions).[2]

Both nations have a sense of control over the tensions as they go through similar motions—an awkward dance they have done many times. Suddenly, a small explosion captures everyone's attention. All eyes lock onto the Chinese fighter careening toward the ocean, engulfed in flames, and the Taiwanese fighter billowing smoke as it heads back to base. The world collectively holds its breath, seconds crawling by as all interested parties wait to see if cooler heads will prevail. Instead, the aerial collision—which was likely accidental—quickly escalates.

The damaged Taiwanese fighter, along with its two escorts, does not arrive back on the island. Chinese aircraft swarm the fleeing fighters to avenge their comrade. Notably, China's land-based integrated air defense systems and anti-ship weapons remain inactive—an act of restraint that likely aims to prevent the minor skirmish from appearing to be the early stage of an invasion. Still, chaos ensues.

Taiwan's Air Force focuses on defensive measures, attempting to limit further escalation. But these actions still lead to the downing of numerous Chinese aircraft, starting a vicious cycle of retribution. As Taiwan's primary aerial defenses falter, its navy intervenes, providing cover for the remaining fighters to regroup and withdraw. But as soon as the first ship begins firing its air defense weapons, it becomes a target. The naval engagement is limited, though Taiwan loses two ships and three other Taiwanese ships are severely damaged. Taiwan's forces begin withdrawing to within 12 nautical miles of the island, with a handful deciding to move closer to the US fleet that is slowly inching closer to the fray.

2. Cui Yafeng 崔亚峰 et al., 陆军作战学 [Science of army operations] (PLA Press, 2009), 190–91. Mid-March to mid-April and late September to mid-October are the ideal windows for China to conduct a cross-strait invasion. As stated in Chinese planning documents: "The sea areas where we may conduct landing operations are maritime space with the most noticeable monsoons in the world. The wind power is fairly high throughout the year. The northeast monsoon lasts a long time, from late October to mid-March of the following year. During that period, there are strong winds and huge waves on the sea, and the air is cold and dry, which is unsuitable for small ships to move around and unsuitable for amphibious armored equipment to form assault waves. From July to September, it is the typhoon season with strong winds, rainstorms, huge waves, and high tides that are extremely destructive and can severely affect the landing operations action. From late March to late April and from late September to mid-October are the two periods between the monsoon season. During those periods, there is little wind and small waves, which is favorable for landing operations. However, the duration is fairly short, thus restricting the choices of landing operations opportunities."

The US forces conducting Pacific Vanguard are not looking to join the fight. Still, these forces have enough combat power to attempt to de-escalate the situation and potentially deter an invasion (if invading is China's objective). The US Navy acts, scrambling its fighters to escort any fleeing Taiwanese forces to international waters. Simultaneously, a US carrier strike group that is already operating in the South China Sea moves south of Taiwan to establish a buffer area and prevent the conflict from spilling over into the Philippine Sea.

Chinese fighters take notice and slow their pursuit. But two Chinese vessels open fire on US aircraft. Whether the vessels identify the aircraft as US fighters, or if they are simply attempting to interdict a potential threat, is unclear. Regardless, the Chinese munitions hit three US fighters, destroying one and damaging two others. As usual, calls to the Chinese ships go unanswered. In response, a US vessel fires a warning shot, but the shot does little to compel the People's Liberation Army Navy, which continues to engage US fighters. Another US fighter is hit, and the US Navy responds by attempting to land disabling shots on the Chinese vessels, successfully neutralizing the weapon systems of one and unintentionally sinking the second. The People's Liberation Army Navy withdraws.

As the US Navy begins moving to assess the situation closer to Taiwan, China launches a missile barrage from the mainland, aimed at the carrier strike group. The US Navy shoots down most of the missiles, but two ships sustain direct hits, which cause substantial damage and kill numerous sailors. Not wanting to escalate further by striking into Chinese territory, US forces pull back toward Guam to reconsolidate, assess damages, coordinate recovery options, and receive further guidance from Washington.

The invasion of Taiwan does not begin on the same day as these events, as the world's great powers gradually withdraw from tactical striking range. Still, the rapid tit for tat and self-defense decisions lead to considerable destruction in a short period. The initial salvos are now complete, and both China and the United States have shown some restraint, but the crisis in the Indo-Pacific theater has clearly just become a conflict. An accident and a misunderstanding, coupled with increased tensions, bring the great powers to war.

The Transition Point

The impending war dominates headlines around the world. Domestically, within 24 hours after the conflict begins, the United States convenes the National Security Council and an emergency session of Congress to plan the way forward. Internationally, the UN calls for restraint and, within 72 hours, plans a meeting to discuss the incident. Before the UN assembles, the United States plans to meet with NATO representatives and members of the Quad.

The United States' overarching assessment is China is planning to invade Taiwan in the next four to six weeks. That window gives the United States one month to posture its assets, solidify its strategy, and rally its allies. Worldwide, US military installations are on high alert, and the Department of War has issued warning orders to global units, instructing them to prepare for a shift in operations to the Indo-Pacific.

The United States is preparing for a handful of options, though China's intentions remain a mystery, shrouded in the noise of its propaganda and its refusal to answer any US or allied "hotlines" to Beijing.[3] China publicly condemns US aggression in its waters, demanding the United States remove its instruments of war from China's doorstep. China also amplifies this message to the UN, seeking international support. Additionally, China clearly states it will consider an invocation of NATO's Article 5 to be an act of war and respond accordingly.[4]

Moving forward, China must make critical decisions. In the 12 hours after the initial conflict, China's actions will shape the Indo-Pacific theater. How China leverages its global influence over the following few days will shape the characteristics of a potential war with the United States. Combined, China's decisions will set the conditions for a cross-strait invasion, regardless of whether China decides to execute the invasion. Just as importantly, the impact of its decisions may enable China to assert its position as the regional hegemon, permanently reducing US presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific theater.

Scenario Characteristics: Deliberate Scoping

This scenario is designed to prompt subject-matter experts to evaluate China's potential strategy in a limited war. Still, such a scenario must strike a balance between the two extremes of the conflict continuum. On one extreme, nuclear Armageddon leaves few recommendations available. On the other extreme, a crisis that is not yet a conflict does not lend itself to an analysis that differs drastically from current scholarship. In turn, this study leverages a Goldilocks scenario that is positioned between these extremes. To achieve a middle ground, the scenario is underscored by five conflict characteristics and three future assumptions, providing readers with a coherent narrative on which the broader work is based.

3. Jake Rinaldi, "Understanding the PRC's Selective Use of Military Hotlines," *China Brief* 24, no. 19 (2024). This article provides a historical examination of China's reluctance to leverage hotlines.

4. See chapter 13 of this collaborative study, "Shaping the Narrative of War: Examining China's Use of the Information Domain," for a detailed assessment of Chinese information operations within this scenario.

Conflict Characteristics

- Nonnuclear: Keeping the conflict below the threshold of nuclear war is essential. Regional authors would assess local actions quite differently if the belligerents had entered a total war. This collaborative study does not intend to focus on the aftermath of the unthinkable.
- Homeland sanctuary: The opening aspects of the conflict are intentionally limited to military targets. Each nation implicitly accepts, if military actions occur within the borders of its homeland, the conflict will escalate exponentially. This framework encourages regional authors to account for the escalatory implications of potential actions in other theaters, forcing them to weigh horizontal-escalation decisions rather than simply superimposing the conflict onto different regions.
- The threshold of conflict: The scenario is intentionally escalated to the level of armed conflict. This escalation provides regional authors with the flexibility to incorporate lethal actions into their analyses. Whereas a conventional, cross-regional clash of forces is unlikely to occur, the option should not be discounted, particularly as authors look further into the future. Because authors must account for this possibility, establishing a situation in which countries are only on the brink of war, or in which conflict is imminent, would have been insufficient. At the same time, assuming conventional war fighting would occur everywhere is unrealistic. Avoiding this assumption forces certain regional authors to examine more unconventional means of impacting the conflict.
- Ambiguous culpability: What exactly sparks the conflict or who is to blame remains unclear. All parties can and will argue they were acting in self-defense. This ambiguity is by design, because it provides deniability. This deniability feeds international conversations, opening up ways for China to influence potential support for US operations. This narrative would shift if China moved forward with an invasion of Taiwan or if the scenario painted China as an unprovoked aggressor.

- Time-frame ambiguity: Choosing a specific time frame would likely yield specific results. But choosing to leave the conflict's time frame ambiguous—only scoped to account for China's three milestone years—enables authors to examine potential actions on a spectrum, noting a particular event could become more or less likely over time. Similarly, because China will take longer to develop its presence and influence in certain regions, temporal ambiguity provides flexibility, allowing authors to highlight the growth and change in influence over time. Additionally, this ambiguous time frame provides authors with a freedom that helps mitigate the potential analysis bias sometimes associated with scenario planning.

Future Assumptions

The future is wrought with variables. Trends, both positive and negative, can and should be carried into future analyses and assumptions made by regional authors. For example, other nations may shift their allegiances, or an unaligned nation may choose a side, but such developments must be based on existing data and expert analysis. For this project, overlooking China's potential would be a waste of effort. To limit the disruptive power of certain variables in this scenario, all authors will operate based on the same three assumptions regarding China's future.

- Party continuity: The Chinese Communist Party remains the driving force behind China's actions, regardless of whether Xi Jinping or his successor is leading China.
- Military modernization: China achieves its planned military objectives.[5] China develops the military capability to unify Taiwan by 2027 and will complete its currently established military-modernization initiatives by 2035. The post-2035 military is on a path to becoming a world-class military, and the nation has gradually expanded its operations beyond its regional sphere of influence.[6]

5. US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Department of Defense, 2024), 162.

6. Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui, *More Than a Numbers Game: Comparing US and Chinese Landpower in the Pacific Requires Context* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2025), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/982/. This monograph offers a unique perspective on China's military-modernization efforts, presenting them as a natural outgrowth of the military's domain-centric warfare concept. It also analyzes Chinese joint military operations and the nation's ability to simulate war with its training centers.

- Economic growth: China's economy remains strong, enabling the nation to implement effective economic policies that garner influence in other nations.

Overall, this intentionally simplistic scenario serves as an analytical tool. Whereas the goal was to design a realistic scenario, the important aspects remain the outlined characteristics. This chapter provides a baseline for shared assumptions that enables a coherent approach throughout the collaborative study. The chapter serves as a starting point that synchronizes authors and creates the connective tissue needed to synthesize the analyses of the distinct regional and domain-based chapters that follow.

— 5 —

Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao: China in the Pacific

Kyle Marcrum and Michael Long

During China's Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the Wei kingdom laid siege to the Zhao kingdom's capital city. The Zhao kingdom asked the nearby Qin state for help. Rather than attacking the Wei formations directly, the Qin state laid siege to the Wei capital. The Wei kingdom was thereby forced to end its siege of the Zhao kingdom and moved home to defend its own capital. "Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao" (围魏救赵), now a well-known Chinese idiom and one of the "Thirty-Six Stratagems," reflects China's modern goal in the Pacific. China does not want to attack the United States directly; instead, it wants to keep the United States and its allies distracted from a future conflict in Taiwan.

This chapter examines what would arguably be the most important region in a conflict between the great powers of China and the United States: China's periphery in the western Pacific. The analysis begins by building on the established scenario, exploring how the initial stages of the conflict would play out in East Asia. Because the region spans a vast geographic area and contains varying allegiances, this chapter's sections are organized into three categories that correspond with Chinese strategies. The first section covers US allies and partners and discusses how—in the scenario—China attempts to disrupt the operations of the United States, as well as US allies and partners. The second section discusses the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which China attempts to prevent from taking any substantive action. The third section covers the Pacific Island countries to which China attempts to block US access. The assertions in the scenario build upon existing trends. This chapter highlights those trends and

subsequently uses them to forecast China's efforts in the region and to recommend potential US actions to mitigate those efforts.

China's Conflict: The Primacy of the Pacific

As its initial engagement with the United States and Taiwan comes to a close, the People's Republic of China (PRC) quickly establishes its top priorities: emerge the victor of this conflict, whatever level it escalates to, and sideline the United States as much as possible. Both objectives can only be accomplished by managing the countries in the Pacific region. Consequently, the Pacific Ocean is China's main area of effort and its primary path to victory.

American Allies and Partners: Disrupt Operations

The People's Republic of China has long identified the US alliance system as a dangerous force multiplier and enabler. In turn, in this scenario, China's initial efforts in the Pacific prioritize preventing the United States from accessing its bases overseas and its allies' bases. If successful, the People's Republic of China knows it could force the US military to operate under the umbrella of modernized sensors and fires that are designed to prevent the United States from entering into a close fight—the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) bubble.[1] But PRC attempts to force wedges between the United States and its Pacific allies and partners are unsophisticated and overly hostile. These ham-fisted attempts, be they a form of wolf-warrior diplomacy or broad sanctions against private companies, do not have the intended effect, often driving regional nations closer to the United States and decoupling their economies from China.[2]

China has had significant difficulties in northeast Asia, which is home to some of the United States' most trusted allies. Japan and South Korea have military alliances with the United States, and both countries contributed troops to support the United States in the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War.[3] In fact, the United States has dozens of bases in the region, with large numbers of troops stationed in the bases' respective countries. South Korea hosts 28,500 US troops, most of which are part of the Eighth Army at Camp Humphreys and the Seventh

1. Alex Vershinin, "The Challenge of Dis-Integrating A2/AD Zone," *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2nd Quarter 2020): 13.

2. Peter Martin, "Understanding Chinese 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy,'" interview by Joanna Nawrotkiewicz, National Bureau of Asian Research, October 22, 2021, https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/.

3. Caitlin Campbell et al., *Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RL33436 (Congressional Research Service, 2023); and Mark E. Manyin et al., *South Korea: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service Report IF10165 (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Air Force at Osan Air Base. Japan hosts 60,000 troops.[4] In addition to their unilateral alliances with the United States, Japan and South Korea have regularly conducted multilateral naval exercises.[5]

Unsurprisingly, in the scenario presented in this study, South Korea publicly condemns the People's Republic of China's actions, framing China as the belligerent that sparks the conflict. But South Korea remains hesitant to become directly involved in the conflict, making clear (at least as the situation stands) it will not conduct direct combat operations against the People's Republic of China. Instead, South Korea privately agrees to allow the United States' Seventh Air Force to conduct attack missions from air bases on the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, to support the war effort, South Korea is openly willing to sell military equipment, munitions, and other supplies like food and energy to the United States. The government of South Korea also agrees to allow the US Army to station reserve forces in its territory. In addition to acting as a theater reserve for the conflict with the People's Republic of China, these units act as a deterrent against potential horizontal escalation with North Korea. Finally, South Korea allows the US military to develop a logistics hub for maintenance and service support of forces in the conflict. Even though South Korea does not directly conduct military operations against the People's Republic of China in support of the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of South Korea, Seoul's mix of public and private support significantly strengthens the US force posture.

Japan also agrees to support US efforts against the People's Republic of China and it, too, refuses to conduct combat operations outside its sovereign territory. Tokyo privately agrees to allow the US military to use its bases in Japan to support the conflict. Additionally, Japanese companies like Mitsubishi Heavy Industries vow to contribute to the US war effort by providing much-needed heavy equipment. Diplomatically, Japan strongly condemns China's aggression on the international stage and is a leading voice in the push for a UN resolution condemning PRC provocations, though China and Russia ultimately stop the resolution from passing. Additionally, Tokyo agrees to host all civilian noncombatants from Taiwan as the United States leads the largest noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) in history, with a humanitarian coalition of more than 40 countries (including numerous NATO members).

In a rare multilateral operation, Tokyo and Seoul agree to establish a combined naval fleet with the United States that will remain in the territorial waters of Japan

4. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, S. 4638, 118th Cong. (2024); and "About USFJ," U.S. Forces Japan, n.d., accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ/.

5. Kim Tong-Hyung, "US, South Korea and Japan Open Joint Air and Naval Exercise," Military.com, September 15, 2025, https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/09/15/us-south-korea-and-japan-open-joint-air-and-naval-exercise.html.

and South Korea. The fleet's main purpose is to ensure the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy does not use the conflict as an excuse to carry out a land grab. Additionally, to ensure their collective skies remain protected, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Canada explore the possibility of combining their air defense assets and fighter jets with North American Aerospace Defense Command. But the slow production of the Integrated Battle Command System prevents the initiative from launching.

The People's Republic of China responds aggressively. The PLA Navy and PLA Air Force begin conducting regular military patrols in contested territorial waters and inside the airspaces of Japan and South Korea. At the same time, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia conducts miles of anchor-dragging operations, severing all the undersea cables that connect the isolated nations to the global community. In concert with the physical destruction of hard-line communications, China jams satellites and conducts cyber operations against communications companies throughout both Japan and South Korea.

Diplomatically, the People's Republic of China attempts to leverage the Kim Jong-Un regime's proximity and military capabilities as a distraction from Chinese actions in the South China Sea. China wants the North Korean military to conduct a sustained bombardment of South Korean territory on the disputed Yeonpyeong Island west of Seoul, position armored units from its tank corps inside the demilitarized zone, and conduct naval patrols within disputed waters. China's military goal on the Korean Peninsula is to fix US forces while ensuring Seoul is too concerned about a potential conflict to provide military support to the United States. But the Kim regime is not swayed to conduct such overt military actions. Still, North Korea agrees to posture armored units just outside the demilitarized zone, sell munitions and military equipment to the People's Republic of China, and send several generals to observe military operations in China.

Financially, the People's Republic of China closes dozens of South Korean and Japanese companies in China and Hong Kong and boycotts many more. Additionally, China halts trade with both Japan and South Korea, putting pressure on the isolated countries and causing a dramatic rise in inflation; it also jails hundreds of Japanese and South Korean citizens in China (including dozens of well-connected businessmen), accusing them of spying. The Japanese and South Korean populations' reaction to the PRC response displays a mix of anger and fear. In Tokyo and Seoul, daily protests advocate for an end to US support and are often accompanied by angry counterprotests in support of Japan and South Korea's longtime ally. In response to the protests in Japan, the prime minister implements a curfew in multiple locations. Several of the protests in Seoul become extremely violent, prompting South Korea's president to declare martial law. Martial law is an

initial step in South Korea's Chungmu Plan (충무계획), which involves preparing for internal defense and potential mobilization against aggressors like North Korea and China.[6]

The People's Republic of China is more aggressive toward the Philippines, which openly supports the United States in its military actions in the Pacific. The Philippine government approves the basing of US forces and strikes from Philippine soil and expands US access beyond traditional bases and airports. But the massive evacuation of 146,000 Filipino workers from Taiwan consumes the Armed Forces of the Philippines, limiting the nation's direct involvement in large-scale operations against China.[7]

China uses what resources it can spare from the PLA Navy, the China Coast Guard, and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia to press all Philippine claims in the South China Sea. China's goal is to occupy what remains of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in dispersed, limited conflicts, preventing these forces from providing direct support to combat operations. China's maritime forces are able to seize and establish semi-permanent bases in almost all parts of the Spratly Islands that are occupied by the Philippines. Seeing it as a symbol of resolve in the face of China's actions, the Philippine government focuses its efforts on the Second Thomas Shoal's BRP *Sierra Madre*.[8] In response, the People's Republic of China destroys the *Sierra Madre* alongside a significant number of Filipino sailors, taking minimal losses in the process.

Further south, China leverages its economic influence with mixed success. The Australian government announces it will not directly support US combat operations, and the divided Australian government cannot agree to provide the United States with funding. But Australia approves the use of its territory as a US logistics hub, base of operations, and command headquarters for operations in the Pacific. In contrast, New Zealand's deep economic dependence on the People's Republic of China drives it to self-censor and eventually pull away from the United States. In response to PRC pressures, New Zealand withdraws from the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance—a significant diplomatic hit and a demonstration of PRC power in the region. In turn, New Zealand denies the United States' request to use its territory for staging or logistics and refuses to contribute forces, arms, or funding to the fight.

6. Choi Yun-hee, "Bracing for the North's Chemical Weapons," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 30, 2022, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/opinion/bracing-for-the-norths-chemical-weapons/11516980.

7. Republic of China Ministry of Labor, *Monthly Bulletin of Labor Statistics* (Republic of China Ministry of Labor, April 2026), table 12-3.

8. Jon Hoppe, "The Measure of the Sierra Madre," *Naval History* 36, no. 1 (February 2022). The *Sierra Madre* is a US-built Philippine Navy landing craft that was intentionally grounded in 1999. The ship acts as a permanent outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal.

Having had limited success in preventing the United States from accessing its allies and partners, the People's Republic of China calls on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to uphold its principle of noninterference, giving China a much-needed secure border.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Prevent Action

To secure its southern border, the People's Republic of China prioritizes efforts to deter the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from participating in the conflict. As part of these efforts, China provides economic incentives for Cambodia, Burma, and Laos, thus spoiling ASEAN votes on any measures that would stymie PRC plans. Consequently, despite proposals from Thailand and the Philippines—US allies—that support moving the organization toward sanctions, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is unable to coalesce around more than a thin statement reiterating the ASEAN principle of "peaceful settlement of disputes" and calling for peace in the region.[9]

The Kingdom of Thailand notes the US-Thai alliance provides for mutual-defense commitments but does not cover third-party intervention.[10] The Thai government, pulled in polar directions by a long-standing defense relationship with the United States and a growing economic dependence on China, holds heated debates on whether Thailand should allow the United States to use its bases in the fight. During this debate, Thailand's neighboring countries—Burma, Laos, and Cambodia—all deny US military overflights, preventing the United States from substantively using Thai resources in the war. This development provides the Thai government with a convenient excuse to shy away from the US request and instead focus on its ongoing NEO of more than 70,000 Thai citizens living in Taiwan.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, for obvious historical and current political reasons, refrains from supporting either great power.[11] Still, Vietnam loudly voices its displeasure with the Chinese seizure of the Spratly Islands. This opposition is not inspired by unity with the Philippines; rather, Vietnam speaks out of a selfish need to solidify its claims in the South China Sea, or at least not cede them to China or other claimants.

To mitigate a potential vulnerability in the Strait of Malacca, the People's Republic of China leverages its economic ties with Singapore, pressuring Singapore to maintain neutrality. Singapore concedes, publicly stating the United States

9. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *The ASEAN Charter* (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2015).

10. "Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact); September 8, 1954," Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, n.d., accessed June 26, 2026, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp.

11. Although the United States ended its fight with Vietnam in 1975, China fought a border conflict with Vietnam starting in 1979, with occasional fighting continuing until 1991.

cannot use its territory to stage attacks or operations, repair equipment, or station additional troops. Singapore is unwilling to provide substantive assistance to the US war effort and declares if any nation attempts to block the Strait of Malacca, Singapore will consider the action a violation of its sovereignty.

With the Strait of Malacca open, Indonesia's many maritime choke points become far more important to US resupply than to the Chinese. With more than 106,000 Indonesian workers living in Taiwan—the second-largest population of workers after the Filipino population—Indonesia is compelled by its people to remain out of the fight, at least until its large and complicated NEO is completed. The Indonesian government reiterates its nonalignment policy, denying the US military the ability to stage and conduct operations from its territory. The People's Republic of China capitalizes on this situation, sending its Chinese Maritime Militia and fishing fleets to various choke points like the Lesser Sunda Islands to complicate US operations and lengthen sea lines of communication. China's ships cannot close the choke points, but they can make operations lengthier and more expensive. With its southern border secure, China looks to cash in on its investments in Pacific Island countries and block US logistics in the region.

Pacific Island Countries: Block Access

China uses its submarines to conduct disruptive operations in the shipping lanes connecting the United States to Japan, forcing the United States to rely on historic, World War II–era shipping routes through Pacific Island countries. But for several years, the People's Republic of China has worked diligently to build influence over Pacific Island countries through economic investments and diplomatic presence. These countries provide China with soft-power A2/AD. With this capability, China can use soft power, not hard power, to prevent the United States from entering into a close fight. China has found ample successes in the region, including security and economic agreements with the Solomon Islands.[12] These agreements have resulted in the opening of a Chinese logistics base in the Solomon Islands, complete with the radars and antiair and anti-ship missiles needed for base defense. China has made similar gains with the newly independent Bougainville, securing sole use of its limited ports and the ability to place tracking radars on its islands.

In critical areas in which China is unable to gain a significant foothold—such as Fiji and New Caledonia—China's illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing fleets are positioning themselves to harass US ships and clog ports.[13]

12. "Australia and PNG Sign Defence Deal as China Grows Influence in the Pacific," MSN, n.d., accessed October 9, 2025, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/australia-and-png-sign-defence-deal-as-china-grows-influence-in-the-pacific/ar-AA1NVjUw?ocid=BingNewsSerp (page discontinued).

13. Brent Sadler and Trevor LaClair, "The Next Island Crisis," RealClearDefense, March 2, 2026, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/03/02/the_next_island_crisis_1167820.html.

With these actions, China is prepared to block the critical logistics lines between the United States and Australia and between Australia and Taiwan. Complicating matters, the United States cannot spare the ships necessary to escort logistics enablers throughout the area. Consequently, US logistics routes will grow longer, costs will increase, and timelines will extend, greatly frustrating the already-stressed US logistics system.

Historical Trends in East Asia: Shaping the Pacific

The PRC actions in the previous scenario are natural continuations of China's ongoing efforts in the Pacific. For years, the People's Republic of China has worked to shape the region for its needs and for war through economic coercion, economic incentives, and gray-zone activities.[14] This section explores these trends across the same three broad categories : US allies and partners, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and Pacific Island countries.

American Allies and Partners

Economic coercion remains a favored PRC tool against US allies and partners in the Pacific. For example, in 2016, the United States and South Korea jointly announced the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system would be deployed to a golf course owned by Lotte—a South Korean conglomerate. After this announcement, the People's Republic of China started a series of unofficial boycotts, which resulted in the closure of 75 of its 99 Lotte Marts by April 2017.[15] This coercion has likely deterred some actions to which China would object; yet, at the same time, it has likely also caused long-term resentment and distrust of China, pushing some companies to find alternate markets.

In 2020, in retaliation against Australia's inquiries into the origin of COVID-19, China blacklisted Australian coal, wine, timber, lobster, beef, and other products.[16] At the time, China was Australia's largest export market for coal. Exports to China fell from 66 million tonnes in 2020 to just 0.3 million tonnes by 2022. But Australia was able to find new markets to limit the ban's overall impact on export volumes.[17] Once the ban was lifted, coal exports to China rebounded to 84.8 million tonnes by 2024. Australia's largest export destination for coal remains Japan, which received

14. Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik, "China's Power Play Across the Pacific," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 8, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-power-play-across-pacific.

15. Ethan Meick and Nargiza Salidjanova, *China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and Its Implications* (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, July 2017).

16. "China's Trade Restrictions on Australian Exports," United States Studies Centre, April 2, 2024, https://www.ussc.edu.au/chinas-trade-restrictions-on-australian-exports.

17. "Australian Coal Relatively Successful in Finding New Markets," The Coal Hub, June 12, 2024, https://thecoalhub.com/australian-coal-exports.html.

105.3 million tonnes of Australian coal in 2024.[18] Overall, China's investment in Australia has decreased from $11.5 billion in 2016 to $854 million in 2024.[19] According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in 2024 China was the 13th-largest foreign investor in Australia and was Australia's largest trading partner, accounting for $212 billion in exports and 26 percent of total Australian trade.[20] The People's Republic of China has also worked to gain influence in more nefarious ways. For example, in 2016, an Australian senator resigned after being found to have accepted donations from Chinese donors, raising questions about other potential illicit actions that have not yet come to light.[21]

Of of the countries discussed in this chapter, New Zealand is the most reliant on China. The China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations—a Chinese think tank funded by the Ministry of State Security—noted, "Bilateral trade has grown from approximately NZ$7 million to NZ$38.26 billion by 2024, with China firmly being New Zealand's largest trading partner since 2013."[22] The People's Republic of China has worked to deepen this economic relationship by eliminating tariffs on more than 98 percent of goods from New Zealand by 2024.[23] Even so, China still relies on nefarious actions. A 2025 New Zealand Security Intelligence Service assessment highlights China is the nation that most actively conducts foreign interference in New Zealand.[24] The assessment does not specifically tie China to election interference, though China is mentioned in the section pertaining to that subject. Notably, China

18. "Dry Bulk Shipping: Australia's Coal Exports to China Soared by 51.4% in 2024," *Hellenic Shipping News*, January 18, 2025, https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/dry-bulk-shipping-australias-coal-exports-to-china-soared-by-51-4-in-2024/.

19. Doug Ferguson et al., *Demystifying Chinese Investment in Australia* (KPMG, April 2026); and "Chinese Investment in Australia Shifts from Acquisitions to Greenfield," University of Sydney, April 1, 2025, https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2025/04/01/chinese-investment-in-australia-shifts-from-acquisitions-to-gree.html.

20. "Statistics on Who Invests in Australia," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, updated July 2025, https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/trade-and-investment-data-information-and-publications/foreign-investment-statistics/statistics-on-who-invests-in-australia; and "China Country Brief," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, updated May 2026, https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief.

21. James Massola, "Labor Senator Sam Dastyari Quits over Chinese Donations Scandal," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 7, 2016, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/labor-senator-sam-dastyari-quits-over-chinese-donations-scandal-20160907-grb3p1.html.

22. Tian Jingling, "China–New Zealand Relations in a Changing World: Strategic Perspectives and Practical Pathways," China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, June 9, 2025, http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/en-us/opinion.html?id=c2cd33e9-efa1-454b-8412-493822a2eabe.

23. "New Zealand - China Free Trade Agreement Overview," New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d., accessed October 14, 2025, https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-in-force/nz-china-free-trade-agreement/overview.

24. New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, *New Zealand's Security Threat Environment* (New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, 2025).

has been accused of interfering with the free press, but no substantive reports have surfaced to date.[25]

The People's Republic of China also uses gray-zone activities to pressure US allies and partners. For example, in February 2025, PLA Navy ships conducted live-fire drills in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, with minimal prior notice. The drills did not pose an imminent danger to Australia or New Zealand, but the nations were forced to divert civilian aircraft that were already in the air.[26] As Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik from the Center for Strategic and International Studies explain, "these actions are a not-so-subtle way to exacerbate Australia and New Zealand's greatest fears of being isolated, alone, and cut off in a time of conflict. In other words, the cost versus gains calculus for China just became that much more compelling."[27] Additionally, China's actions in the South China Sea, such as ship ramming and preventing resupplies of the *Sierra Madre*, have caused sentiments in the Philippines to swing dramatically, with most Filipinos now identifying China as their greatest threat.[28] China does not seem to be changing its pressure tactics in the South China Sea, with the China Coast Guard ramming a Philippine ship on October 12, 2025, near the Spratly Islands.[29] Overall, these gray-zone activities will likely continue, and may very well escalate in the near future.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Since 2013, China has been working to establish an ASEAN-China community of common destiny (CCD).[30] At a 2021 summit commemorating the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue, General Secretary Xi Jinping said: "China stands ready to work with ASEAN to grasp the overriding trend, remove interference, share opportunities and promote shared prosperity. We will implement in earnest our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and make new strides toward building a closer ASEAN-China community with a shared

25. Laura Walters, "The Chinese Dissident, the Car Crash and the Petition," *Newsroom*, October 10, 2024, https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/10/10/the-chinese-dissident-the-car-crash-and-the-petition/.

26. "Australia Says China Warned of 'Live Fire' Drills in Tasman Sea with Little Notice, Diverting Flights Midair," *CBS News*, updated February 21, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-live-fire-drills-australia-new-zealand-tasman-sea/.

27. Edel and Paik, "China's Power Play."

28. Sebastian Strangio, "76% of Filipinos View China as Country's 'Greatest Threat': Survey," *The Diplomat*, June 7, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/76-of-filipinos-view-china-as-countrys-greatest-threat-survey/.

29. "US Backs Philippine Ally After China Warns over Vessel Clash," Reuters, October 13, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-tells-philippines-stop-provocations-after-south-china-sea-vessel-clash-2025-10-13/.

30. Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018).

future."[31] As detailed by Liza Tobin, the CCD is China's way of transforming global governance.[32]

According to Hoang Thi Ha of the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, China is using the ASEAN-China CCD proposal to engineer a China-centered regional order and a China-centric, hierarchical system. He explains:

> first, projecting China as a "benevolent brother" in the ASEAN-China family; and second, conditioning ASEAN member countries into "good behaviours". These two elements suggest China's push to renegotiate the normative content of a new regional order—one that is relation-based rather than rules-based, in which "good behaviours" are not in reference to international law but to how one should behave according to their status in a hierarchical relationship.[33]

But China is not looking to reorder the entire Association of Southeast Asian Nations (at least not yet). For now, focusing on a few key nations will enable China to accomplish its goal of keeping the association out of the fight. Some nations appear to have bought into the CCD already. In 2019, during the second Belt and Road Initiative summit, China signed two documents on a community of shared future with Cambodia and Laos.[34]

China is also attempting to adjust ASEAN norms. These efforts include adjusting language in ASEAN documents and shifting behaviors in activities such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting–Plus Experts' Working Groups. In the *ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030*, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was careful not to endorse the CCD. Still, the phrase "China's vision to build an ASEAN-China community with a shared future" appears in the document, along with the statement: "Further reaffirming our mutual respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in accordance with international law, and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; and reaffirming ASEAN countries' adherence to one-China policy."[35]

31. "China, ASEAN Form Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as Xi Chairs Summit," State Council of the People's Republic of China, updated November 22, 2021, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202111/22/content_WS619b8df5c6d0df57f98e54c6.html.

32. Tobin, "Xi's Vision."

33. Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding China's Proposal for an ASEAN-China Community of Common Destiny and ASEAN's Ambivalent Response," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 223–54.

34. Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding China's Proposal," 223–54.

35. "ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030," Association of Southeast Asian Nations, November 14, 2018, https://asean.org/asean-china-strategic-partnership-vision-2030/.

Such a statement amounts to little more than a thinly veiled attempt to keep the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from intervening in a Taiwan contingency.

China increasingly offers incentives through investment in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. According to an ASEAN report, in 2023, the United States was the largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, at $74.4 billion. Intra-ASEAN FDI ranked second, at $21.9 billion, and China ranked third, accounting for $17.3 billion. But China's investments appear to be particularly focused. According to the same ASEAN report, Cambodia received half its FDI from China. China's level of investment is rising so fast the ASEAN report has a section called "Rising investment from China."[36] In 2003, China provided 1.5 percent of Laos's inbound FDI, in contrast with 2018, when China provided 79 percent of Laos's inbound FDI.[37] Similarly, even though Burma receives a greater share of its FDI from South Korea, the combined contribution with China accounts for two-thirds of Burma's FDI.[38] Thailand has also grown heavily dependent on China's economy. In 2025, China was Thailand's largest import market, with more than 26 percent of Thailand's imports coming from China. Additionally, Thailand expected two million Chinese tourists to visit the country during late 2025 alone.[39]

China has also taken noneconomic actions to block the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. As of 2014, China consumed half of all the fish humans ate.[40] To supply this fish, China employs at least 16,966 distant-water fishing ships, the largest fleet in the world.[41] These ships can operate illegally in the exclusive economic zones of nations as far away as Argentina.[42] These ships also frequently operate in the South China Sea alongside the People's Armed Forces Maritime

36. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Investment Report 2024* (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, October 2024).

37. Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "2023 Foreign Investment Opportunities in Laos," ASEAN Briefing, July 26, 2022, https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2023-foreign-investment-opportunities-in-laos/.

38. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Investment Report 2024*.

39. Kitiphong Thaichareon and Chayut Setboonsarng, "Thailand to Step Up China Cooperation, Lines Up Economic Stimulus," Reuters, September 26, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailands-credit-rating-not-concern-no-vat-hike-plan-official-says-2025-09-26/.

40. "Getting Serious About Overfishing," *The Economist*, May 26, 2017, https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/05/26/getting-serious-about-overfishing.

41. Miren Gutiérrez et al., *China's Distant-Water Fishing Fleet* (ODI, June 2020). Since distant-water-fleet activities are sometimes illegal, the real numbers can be hard to pin down, especially the numbers pertaining to China. But in comparison, Taiwan has the second-largest fleet in the world. According to Taiwan's fisheries agency, its fleet comprised 940 ships in 2025.

42. Micah McCartney, "Argentina Deploys Military as China Leads Fishing Swarm near Waters," *Newsweek*, February 25, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/argentina-deploys-military-atlantic-fishing-swarm-china-spain-korea-taiwan-2035671.

Militia and the China Coast Guard. The China Coast Guard has even entered Indonesian waters.[43]

As the People's Republic of China works to make inroads into ASEAN nations, it knows this effort will require time. In the short term, China is happy with blocking ASEAN actions and preventing ASEAN unity by maintaining a few disruptive agents. And where China is pressed to take immediate actions, its maritime services prove effective—a tactic China also uses in Pacific Island countries.

Pacific Island Countries

China is competing for influence in Pacific Island countries. Justin Bassi, of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, identified China's endgame in Pacific Island countries as "to push out US and allied interests, achieve regional hegemony, create vassal states, control access to supply chains and improve its ability to take Taiwan with minimal costs."[44] Analysts may argue the People's Republic of China is not going as far as Bassi suggests, but steps in that direction are noticeable. Indeed, in the South Pacific, China is working to complicate US and allied contingency planning.

A prime example of these efforts is the China–Solomon Islands bilateral security agreement, which was signed in secret in 2022 but leaked shortly thereafter. The agreement enabled China to deploy personnel to assist in maintaining social order and providing humanitarian aid. Additionally, among Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, the agreement stoked fears China would soon establish a naval base in the Solomon Islands.[45]

China has taken steps toward establishing similar agreements with other Pacific Island countries. For example, Vanuatu signed a policing agreement with China, embedding Chinese police in Vanuatu.[46] Similarly, the Cook Islands, despite being in free association with New Zealand, signed an agreement with

43. Izzah Aqilah Norman, "Chinese Vessel in Natuna: Indonesia's Response 'Shows Resolve' by New Prabowo Government Without Harming Ties, Say Analysts," *CNA*, updated November 6, 2025, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/south-china-sea-indonesia-china-natuna-maritime-dispute-prabowo-test-4702526.

44. Justin Bassi, "Australia's Reset with China Has Already Happened," *The Strategist* (blog), May 25, 2022, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-reset-with-china-has-already-happened/.

45. Joseph Hammond, "China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (November-December 2023); and Daniel Hurst, "Security Agreement with China 'Initialled' by Both Countries, Solomon Islands Says," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/security-agreement-with-china-initialled-by-both-countries-solomon-islands-says.

46. Lillyrose WelWel and Stephen Dziedzic, "Vanuatu Minister Tells Australia to Respect China Policing Deal, Rebukes Pat Conroy," *ABC News*, September 26, 2025, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-26/vanuatu-tells-australia-to-respect-china-policing-deal/105820502.

China without consulting New Zealand. This agreement could give China access to ports and other dual-use facilities.[47]

China is also providing economic assistance to Pacific nations. In honor of the 76th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Solomon Islands' acting prime minister, Bradley Tovosia, gave a speech to offer "sincere congratulations to President Xi Jinping and the people of China," claiming, "The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was a turning point in history."[48] In the speech, Tovosia said China and the Solomon Islands were working on a Framework Agreement on Enhanced Economic Partnership, which is expected to become a free-trade agreement after 2027.[49] China underwrites these investments with messaging that complicates the United States' regional strategy. As Edel and Paik note, "These actions are part of a broader series of moves by China throughout the Pacific, with an unmistakable message to Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands: The United States is far away and uninterested; China is a neighbor who offers great benefits to its friends, so long as you don't cross it."[50]

In Pacific Island countries, China is working to frustrate potential US actions in a contingency. Like in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China does not need to persuade every nation to support its actions. Instead, the People's Republic of China just needs the support of a few key nations to frustrate US logistics and timelines. And where money is not enough, China's maritime services can make up for any shortfalls.

Projecting China's Next Actions in East Asia and Oceania

Based on the previous analysis, the People's Republic of China will likely take a combination of six actions to achieve its goals of blocking the United States' access to its allies and partners, disrupting united action by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and frustrating US contingency plans in Pacific Island countries.

47. Anne-Marie Brady, "Cook Islands' China Shock: A 'Frog in the Pot' Moment for Pacific Security," *The Diplomat*, February 18, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/cook-islands-china-shock-a-frog-in-the-pot-moment-for-pacific-security/.

48. Moffat Mamu, "SI-PRC Friendship Hailed," *Solomon Star*, September 27, 2025, https://www.solomonstarnews.com/si-prc-friendship-hailed/.

49. Mamu, "SI-PRC Friendship Hailed."

50. Edel and Paik, "China's Power Play."

1. China will work to further its denial of US access to Pacific Island countries and frustrate US contingency planning through economic incentives—a soft-power A2/AD. From China's perspective, preventing US access is a high-value effort. China will continue investing in key infrastructure and working to secure secret, bilateral security arrangements with all Pacific Island countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Global Development Initiative investments are not all evil and do not all require a response or counterinvestment from Western countries.

2. China will continue to foster relationships with Burma, Laos, and Cambodia to spoil any united ASEAN actions against the People's Republic of China. China does not need to win over every ASEAN nation. China can satisfy its need to prevent ASEAN unity by keeping a few key partners as disruptive agents.

3. China will continue to develop its traditional A2/AD capabilities to prevent US interference in the region. The People's Liberation Army will continue to field its hard A2/AD capabilities like the DF-21D and longer-range DF-26B anti-ship ballistic missiles. It will also continue to research future A2/AD capabilities, such as one-way attack drones, high-energy weapons, and other innovative capabilities aimed at preventing the US military from interfering in a contingency.

4. China will attempt to deter Japan and the Philippines from aiding the United States through military pressure. Barring an improbable, dramatic change in its government, China will likely be unable to get the Japanese and Philippine governments to abandon the United States in the near term. In turn, China will aim to achieve deterrence by punishment, convincing each country getting involved in internal affairs would be too costly. The United States can expect to see China continue its attempts to coerce Japan and the Philippines militarily. During a conflict, fixing the Japanese and Philippine militaries through low-cost means, such as by probing disputed island claims or frustrating NEO attempts, could accomplish a similar result.

5. Using information operations, China will attempt to place wedges in the complicated relationships among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. The People's Republic of China may deliberately inflame Japanese and Korean skepticism through information operations and a corresponding propaganda campaign aimed at keeping the two nations from working together. These tensions, even if minor, would undoubtedly complicate US support needs in the region.

6. The United States can expect increased PRC information operations (that is, cognitive warfare) to erode the United States' desire to intervene in the Pacific. These operations will include efforts specifically designed to put into question the strategic importance of Taiwan to the United States. These information operations will target US political leaders and their decision making. China will also use a variety of methods to amplify its operations through more subtle messaging aimed at the US populace—from United Front Work Department operations to social-media influences. At the end of the day, all other efforts become unnecessary if the People's Republic of China can deter the United States from coming to Taiwan's aid in the first place.

Although they appear broad in terms of location and action, these operations remain focused on disrupting and frustrating the United States. Blocking US access to its allies and partners, disrupting united action by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and frustrating US contingency plans in Pacific Island countries provide China with the necessary space to occupy Taiwan.

American Opportunities in the Pacific

The previous projected actions also present the United States with opportunities to mitigate risks caused by the People's Republic of China and to advance US interests in the region. The following are seven tangible recommendations for the US government to prevent or mitigate PRC actions in the Pacific.

First, the United States should provide key nations in Oceania with development and defense-cooperation money, such as Foreign Military Financing (FMF), to create and maintain critical lines of communication and support contingency plans. Because the United States has limited funds for all types of foreign assistance, it could establish its priorities by focusing on nations it needs to support contingency

plans.[51] Of the $5.6 billion the United States spent on Foreign Military Financing in 2015, only $67.4 million went to East Asia and the Pacific.[52] According to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency Historical Sales Book covering fiscal years 1950 to 2024, of the $11.8 billion the United States spent on FMF during fiscal year 2024, only $207 million was spent in the entire United States Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility (including the $48.6 million provided to Taiwan).[53] A similar disparity is evident in the Department of State's foreign assistance. Of the $42.3 billion spent worldwide during fiscal year 2023, only $1.1 billion was spent in East Asia and the Pacific. Of that sum, the Pacific Islands only received $34 million.[54] If China is the pacing threat, the United States must spend its money accordingly.

Second, the US National Guard should expand and prioritize the State Partnership Program and the assignment of bilateral affairs officers (BAOs) to nations essential to US contingency plans. According to the National Guard website, through the State Partnership Program, "the National Guard conducts military-to-military engagements in support of defense security goals but also leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres."[55] In this partnership, a BAO is often assigned to live and work in a given country to advance its security cooperation relationship with the United States. The BAO positions should be expanded and prioritized according to contingency plans. Logistics officers and warrant officers should be assigned to these billets and focus on creating and maintaining lines of communication. Likewise, BAO positions in noncritical locations must be moved to more critical locations.

Third, arrangements like the US Embassy in Suva—which is accredited to Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu—may not support contingency plans sufficiently. Instead, the Department of War should establish stand-alone Military Groups (formerly known as Security Cooperation Offices) in critical

51. Brennan Deveraux, "Arming Allies and Partners: How Foreign Military Sales Can Change the China Problem," Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, March 20, 2024, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3707347/arming-allies-and-partners-how-foreign-military-sales-can-change-the-china-prob/. This article proposes a framework for looking at partner nations through the lens of their expected contributions to a war with China, providing an unclassified starting point for how the United States could tailor its efforts in the region.

52. "Foreign Military Financing Account Summary," U.S. Department of State, n.d., accessed October 17, 2025, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14560.htm.

53. Department of Defense, *Historical Sales Book: Fiscal Years 1950–2024* (Department of Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2024).

54. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs; Supplementary Tables; Fiscal Year 2025* (Department of State, 2024).

55. "State Partnership Program," National Guard, n.d., accessed October 17, 2025, https://www.nationalguard.mil/Leadership/Joint-Staff/J-5/International-Affairs-Division/State-Partnership-Program/.

locations to meet the needs of the host nation and the United States. These groups should be established even if they are not collocated with embassies.

Fourth, improving domain awareness in key Indo-Pacific nations and improving their ability to respond to China's gray-zone coercion would mitigate the military coercion tools available to China. This effort could begin with a gray-zone-coercion working group that would be hosted by the United States and include Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. This working group would share information on China's tactics, techniques, and procedures for gray-zone coercion and discuss effective methods of countering this coercion. A key component of this working group should be developing and coordinating the information operations needed to counter the People's Republic of China.

Fifth, the relationships among the United States, Japan, and South Korea are as complex as they are critical. To prevent the People's Republic of China from driving wedges between US partners, the United States must strengthen the bonds between them through increased trilateral dialogue. These dialogues should focus on PRC coercion and should be conducted in person to help build personal relationships. The end state does not need to be perfect, but should demonstrate a unity of effort in countering PRC aggression.

Sixth, all these listed opportunities require increased resources for the Department of State, the Office of the Secretary of War, and diplomatic elements within the Department of War such as Foreign Area Officers, Defense Attaché Offices, and Military Groups. The 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* notes: "America's diplomatic efforts should focus on pressing our First Island Chain allies and partners to allow the U.S. military greater access to their ports and other facilities, to spend more on their own defense, and most importantly to invest in capabilities aimed at deterring aggression."[56] These diplomatic efforts are conducted by the offices listed previously. As one example, the Defense Attaché System—the office within the Defense Intelligence Agency that is responsible for manning and equipping the US military's Defense Attaché Offices at embassies and other locations around the world—would need an increased budget and more personnel to manage relationships with Indo-Pacific partners. The Department of War cannot conduct its diplomatic efforts remotely.

Seventh, continued education about China's intentions and information operations could help US political leaders identify and counter these operations. The CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency are briefing senior leaders on PRC information operations, but more should be done to issue public callouts of misinformation and disinformation campaigns and other goals the People's

56. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (White House, November 2025).

Republic of China is trying to achieve. These public efforts would help the United States achieve the goal laid out in the 2025 *National Security Strategy* to end "[p]ropaganda, influence operations, and other forms of cultural subversion."[57] Public access also helps inform US allies and partners around the world.

These seven recommendations provide tangible steps for the United States to prevent or mitigate PRC actions in the Pacific. But they are only the first of many necessary steps toward preventing China from disrupting US contingency planning.

Conclusion

The Pacific region, which is the People's Republic of China and Taiwan's immediate neighborhood, is the linchpin of great-power conflict. China will continue setting the conditions for a successful fight against the United States by working with nations in the region. The People's Republic of China does not want to fight the United States head-on and will instead use economic incentives, economic coercion, information operations, and gray-zone activities to deny the United States access to the Pacific. China can achieve this indirect victory by denying the United States essential access to its allies and partners, disrupting ASEAN unity, and frustrating US logistics in and around Pacific Island countries. China does not have to succeed in swaying the opinions of every country. Instead, by securing the support or neutrality of a select few nations, the People's Republic of China may be able to besiege Wei to rescue Zhao.

57. White House, *National Security Strategy*.

— 6 —

South Asia: From Secondary Theater to Fortified Western Flank

Joshua Arostegui

The strategic center of gravity for the twenty-first century is rapidly shifting from the narrow confines of the western Pacific to the expansive maritime corridors of the Indian Ocean. Whereas the specter of a future US-China conflict is often framed within the first island chain, the outcome of such a struggle may ultimately be decided on the conflict's western flank. China's transition from a land-centric defense posture to a "Far Seas Protection" doctrine, as codified in the country's most recent national security papers, has transformed South Asia into a critical theater of deterrence.[1] By financing leveraged infrastructure projects, deploying the Digital Silk Road, and building a burgeoning network of overseas joint logistics systems, Beijing is systematically eroding India's regional hegemony and neutralizing the US Navy's traditionally safe rear area. This chapter examines the trajectory of China's regional expansion, the specific infrastructural and technological nodes currently being weaponized, and the urgent need for a US strategy that prioritizes regional sovereignty and maritime resilience to prevent the Indian Ocean from becoming a contested lake in a future global conflict. Similar to the other chapters in this collaborative study, this chapter continues the limited-conflict scenario, examines China's past and projected actions in the region, and discusses potential ways for the United States to mitigate the influence of its expanding adversary.

1. Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb, *The Origins of "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection,"* China Maritime Report No. 13 (China Maritime Studies Institute, February 2021).

The Western Flank: South Asia as the Critical Second Front in the Pending Conflict

As tensions grow around the first island chain, Washington faces a dilemma. With the growing expectation of war on the horizon, the United States needs to surge forces quickly to the Pacific Ocean, aiming to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or to be in position to fight the People's Liberation Army (PLA) should the conflict escalate. Despite the US military's sizable presence in the Pacific, additional manpower and equipment will have to come from United States Central Command and United States European Command to support the effort. This reallocation of forces, though effectively weakening combat power in the respective combatant-command areas of responsibility, requires the movement of ships, aircraft, and land forces across the Indian Ocean. Whereas the Pacific will decide the outcome of the pending conflict, US combat power will be supplied, reinforced, and sustained from half a world away. South Asia and the Indian Ocean have suddenly become a critical secondary theater.

After the USS *John F. Kennedy* (one of the US Navy's newest *Ford*-class nuclear aircraft carriers) and its carrier strike group depart Manama, Bahrain—with plans to move from the US 5th Fleet to the US 7th Fleet—sensors immediately pick up a Chinese naval-escort task force leaving Gwadar Port in Pakistan.[2] The Chinese task force—composed of one Type 052D guided-missile destroyer, one Type 054A guided-missile frigate, and one Type 903A replenishment ship—is clearly moving toward the Gulf of Oman after a short, two-day goodwill visit to Pakistan.[3] This group of vessels is one of two Chinese naval-escort task forces that maintain a presence in the Arabian Sea and around the Horn of Africa as part of a decades-long anti-piracy mission. The second task force has become a permanent fixture over the last few years, though it spends most of its time monitoring and escorting oil and gas tankers to and from the increasingly contentious Persian Gulf. As the *Kennedy* strike group passes through the Strait of Hormuz and enters the Gulf of Oman, the PLA Navy vessels keep their distance but do not hide their intention to shadow the US forces well into the Arabian Sea.

Recognizing the need for additional ballistic-missile-defense assets in the Pacific, the Pentagon also orders two US 6th Fleet missile-defense destroyers

2. Mallory Shelbourne, "Carrier John F. Kennedy Delivery Delayed 2 Years, Fleet Will Drop to 10 Carriers for 1 Year," *USNI News*, updated July 7, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/07/07/carrier-john-f-kennedy-delivery-delayed-2-years-fleet-will-drop-to-10-carriers-for-1-year.

3. "PLA Update: Issue 19, March 22, 2024," CNA, March 22, 2024, https://www.cna.org/our-media/newsletters/pla-update/issue-19.

to depart the Mediterranean Sea.[4] The risk of losing missile-defense assets in United States European Command's area of responsibility is one US leaders believe they have to take to ensure a more capable presence and deter the People's Republic of China (PRC) from using its anti-access/area-denial weapons in the first island chain and the South China Sea. As the two destroyers leave the Red Sea through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the other PLA Navy escort task force leaves its piers in Djibouti to begin shadowing the formation from a distance. This task force, composed of one Type 052D destroyer and one Type 054A frigate, monitors the US vessels as they enter the Arabian Sea.

The Chinese task forces monitor their respective targets for a few hours by using ship-launched unmanned aircraft systems and integrated onboard sensors before returning to their points of embarkation. The first formation steams back to the Gulf of Oman to escort a very large crude carrier from the United Arab Emirates to Ningbo. Whereas the US Navy has not announced plans to stop oil shipments from heading to China, the PLA Navy vessels are ordered to maintain a presence in the area to ensure the safe passage of oil tankers leaving the Persian Gulf. The other Chinese task force also turns around to maintain a presence in the Gulf of Aden for continued monitoring and crisis response.

Although India did not overtly express support for the United States during the most recent Taiwan Strait crisis, it shares intelligence with Washington indicating a large number of Chinese private military contractors have recently entered Pakistan to provide security for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. According to New Delhi, the contractors have been dispatched to contentious locations within Pakistan, with the largest number of personnel being concentrated at Gwadar Port and the energy and industrial zone under construction nearby—the same locations at which Islamabad has employed its modern, Chinese-built sensor suite for coastal and air surveillance.[5] Whereas plans for an oil pipeline extending from Gwadar Port to Xinjiang, China, have been stalled for the past decade, construction efforts at the port and the nearby airport have resumed in recent years.[6] Consequently, US vessels and aircraft operating in the region must assume Pakistan's X-band and S-band radars, electro-optical and infrared towers, and passive radio frequency (RF)–collection sensors (the latter of which likely

4. Sam LaGrone, "5 U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense Destroyers Now in the Mediterranean Sea," *USNI News*, updated June 20, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/06/20/5-u-s-ballistic-missile-defense-destroyers-now-in-the-mediterranean-sea.

5. Isaac B. Kardon et al., *Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan*, China Maritime Report No. 7 (China Maritime Studies Institute, August 2020).

6. Syed Fazl-e-Haider and Akbar Notezai, "China in Limbo over Importing Middle East Oil Overland Through Pakistan," The China Project, October 30, 2023, https://thechinaproject.com/2023/10/30/china-in-limbo-over-importing-middle-east-oil-overland-through-pakistan/.

exist but have not been disclosed) are monitoring operations and sharing multidomain situational awareness with PRC entities.

Pakistani systems, including Chinese-built Type 054A/P *Tughril*-class guided-missile frigates and KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, also monitor the maritime and air domains in the Arabian Sea.[7] Islamabad notifies Washington its military activities in the region are purely for security purposes, citing concerns about the pending great-power conflict. Nevertheless, as a small number of US bombers begin flying from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar to Diego Garcia, US forces must assume their transits are fully monitored and are likely being shared with the People's Republic of China.

As the US task forces move further into the Arabian Sea on their way to Diego Garcia, they are forced to operate under emission-control procedures after India warns them the People's Republic of China is likely operating passive RF-collection sensors from Chinese-built facilities in the Maldives. Whether Malé is complicit in such collection remains unclear, but many Chinese private contractors have been operating in various facilities around Velana International Airport and the port of Malé for several years.[8] Whereas the capabilities of the sensors present in those facilities are very limited, the sensors could easily cue other national-level Chinese systems usable for targeting.

Prior to the onset of the current crisis in the Pacific, China's *Yuan Wang 5* space-tracking and missile-monitoring vessel had been operating in the Bay of Bengal and parts of the Indian Ocean to monitor ongoing Indian naval activity and missile test launches. As the crisis erupts, the vessel moves to Sri Lanka's Port of Hambantota for resupply and to reduce tensions in the region. Whereas the vessel's first visit to the port in 2022 created a diplomatic spat with India, the presence of such survey vessels became normalized in subsequent years.[9] As the US vessels and aircraft continue on their way to Diego Garcia, the *Yuan Wang 5* departs Sri Lanka and appears to move directly toward the *Kennedy* strike group's route, which was likely discovered through other sensors in the region. Whereas the sensors on board the Chinese vessel are optimized for precision telemetry and space tracking, they also include powerful capabilities to collect RF and electronic intelligence that could allow for targeting.

7. Albee Zhang and Ryan Woo, "China Completes Warship Deliveries to Pakistan as Military Alliance Grows," Reuters, updated May 11, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-completes-warship-deliveries-pakistan-military-alliance-grows-2023-05-11/.

8. Andrea Malji, "Small State, Big Stakes: The Maldives and Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean," War on the Rocks, July 14, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/07/small-state-big-stakes-the-maldives-and-strategic-competition-in-the-indian-ocean/.

9. Andrew Erickson, "China's New Liaowang-1 Space Support Ship: Defensive and Offensive Capabilities from Sea to Satellites," 19FortyFive, May 8, 2025, https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/05/chinas-new-liaowang-1-space-support-ship-defensive-and-offensive-capabilities-from-sea-to-satellites/.

To avoid escalatory activities, the *Yuan Wang 5* always stays around 300 kilometers away from the *Kennedy* strike group. Still, the US strike-group commander recognizes the potential danger his forces face during the rest of the voyage to Diego Garcia. After US sensors pick up probable Chinese unmanned underwater vessels operating in even closer proximity than the *Yuan Wang 5*, strike-group leaders realize they cannot operate invisibly for the rest of the way to their destination. This problem compounds when the strike group discovers some Chinese-flagged civilian cargo vessels are suspected of carrying containerized, vertically launched YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missiles capable of reaching the US vessels.[10]

Nearly nine days after its departure from Manama, the *Kennedy* strike group finally arrives at Diego Garcia to resupply and await potential orders to move toward the Strait of Malacca. Whereas the strike-group vessels reach their destination safely, the typically uneventful voyage was one of high combat readiness, leaving the crew exhausted and forcing the ships to travel at slower-than-normal speeds.

With the flurry of Chinese and Pakistani maritime activity nearby, New Delhi dispatches its own naval forces into the region. Whereas assets of the Indian Navy's Western Fleet monitor the tense situation around the Strait of Hormuz (primarily to ensure the flow of India's shipborne energy resources), Eastern Fleet assets move out to secure the Bay of Bengal. The INS *Chennai*, a *Kolkata*-class guided-missile destroyer, provides a consistent presence in the northern area of the bay after a Chinese Type 039 *Yuan*-class diesel-electric submarine unexpectedly departs from Bangladesh's BNS Pekua submarine base. The Type 039 submarine was visiting the Chinese-built base as part of a marketing campaign to sell more modern submarines to Dhaka, as Bangladesh's two Chinese-built *Ming*-class diesel-electric boats are aging out of relevance.[11] India suspects Chinese contractors at the base, like those at Gwadar Port, were receiving multidomain situational-awareness updates from their Bangladeshi hosts, who were using Chinese-produced radars and command-and-control systems. As a result, the crew of the Type 039 submarine was able to get underway before Indian Navy assets could track the vessel.

Although the presence of an old PLA Navy submarine, such as the *Yuan*-class vessel, does not present a major problem for India in the Bay of Bengal, such a vessel could become problematic if it made its way to the Strait of Malacca.

10. Ethan Gossrow, "Container Ship Turned Missile Battery Spotted in China," *Naval News*, December 25, 2025, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/12/container-ship-turned-missile-battery-spotted-in-china/.

11. "Bangladesh Takes Delivery of Two Submarines from China," *Business Standard*, updated November 14, 2016, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/bangladesh-takes-delivery-of-two-submarines-from-china-116111401593_1.html.

After an Indian Navy P-8I maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft based out of Andaman and Nicobar Command reports spotting a probable PLA Navy Type 093B *Shang-III*–class nuclear attack submarine operating in the Andaman Sea, New Delhi expresses its displeasure with Beijing. Two Chinese submarines in the vicinity of the Strait of Malacca represent a potential escalation of the conflict in the Pacific and the endangerment of India's maritime trade.

As maritime tensions between the two Asian neighbors increase, Beijing informs New Delhi any unprovoked action against the Chinese vessels, or any direct support provided to US forces traveling to the Pacific, will be considered highly provocative and could lead to conflict—a result neither country wants. Following this proclamation, the PLA Army starts to move units permanently stationed in the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Districts to several garrisons along the roughly 3,400-kilometer border between China and India. Decades of contested construction within China and in areas of Bhutan enable the rapid movement of mechanized forces to the world's highest elevations.[12] The army units, already partially acclimated to the terrain, are equipped with some of the most advanced combat platforms in the force; long-range rocket launchers and advanced tactical air defense systems are also dispatched to deployment zones. Pre-positioned logistics stocks make the maneuvers sustainable, as nearly 50,000 troops take up positions facing the China-India border and, further east, more than 100,000 troops begin preparing for a potential deployment to the border.

Although China publicly declares the troop movements are defensive and Beijing has no intention of entering Indian territory, the situation forces New Delhi to respond in kind. The Indian Army's Northern Theatre Command begins mobilizing its formations in preparation for a conflict but, like the People's Republic of China, carefully limits its deployments to preprepared defensive positions. Whereas the Indian movements are clearly designed to counter a Chinese presence along the borders of disputed regions, they still prompt Pakistan to increase its force presence along its borders with India. Pakistan's Chinese-built fighter aircraft and unmanned aircraft systems patrol the skies to monitor Indian Army activity in the area, raising concerns Islamabad may share its surveillance information with Beijing. In New Delhi, this situation creates a creeping dread of a two-front war.

The tensions in South Asia eventually lead to an undeclared stalemate, with India maintaining neutrality and refusing to provide direct support to US military assets transiting the Indian Ocean. Without officially taking sides, Pakistan clearly leans toward China, a posture based on decades of military-

12. Dennis J. Blasko, "A Baseline Assessment of the PLA Army's Border Reinforcement Operations in the Aksai Chin in 2020 and 2021," Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, April 9, 2024, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3735300/a-baseline-assessment-of-the-pla-armys-border-reinforcement-operations-in-the-a/.

equipment sales, infrastructure construction, and economic development. Bangladesh's reliance on China also becomes apparent. This realization is not unexpected, as Beijing has become Bangladesh's preferred partner for defense acquisitions and economic development in recent years. Indian dominance of the Bay of Bengal, though still intact, cannot keep China from increasing its presence in the region, especially as military and infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar, grows in scope and scale.

Although Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the Maldives and Sri Lanka do not enable a permanent PLA presence in the Indian Ocean, they enable China to improve its regional collection capabilities covertly and maintain situational awareness during a conflict. The passive RF-collection sites in the Maldives are able to monitor US Air Force and US Navy traffic traveling to and from Diego Garcia, when the traffic is not operating under emission-control procedures (though not with high fidelity). Similar sites at the Port of Hambantota can also monitor Indian and US activity within range of passive-collection sensors.

The remaining countries in South Asia—Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan—maintain their neutrality as tensions grow. Chinese investment in Afghanistan has slowly increased in recent years, with the Taliban acknowledging it needs Beijing's money to exploit natural resources more effectively within Afghanistan's borders. Whereas security cooperation between Kabul and Beijing remains limited, the countries' relationship is much stronger than Afghanistan's relationship with the United States. Chinese investment in Nepal also remains limited despite Kathmandu signing on to the BRI several years prior to the beginning of the conflict. India remains Nepal's dominant economic lifeline, but Nepal plays no role in the conflict in the Pacific. Bhutan lacks formal relations with China and continues to rely on India as its guarantor of security, but Thimphu maintains a trade relationship with Beijing that does not include financing for future infrastructure projects.

China's decades-long strategy in South Asia pays off as the threat of war grows in the Pacific. Rather than turn the Indian Ocean into a secondary conflict zone, the People's Republic of China aims to ensure Indian neutrality and multidomain awareness of US operations in the region. The increased PLA Navy presence in the region, though not capable of supporting large-scale combat operations, forces US units to operate under emission-control protocols and move slowly to protect key targets from Chinese submarines operating near the Strait of Malacca.

Beijing has several economic means of forcing countries in the region to maintain neutrality and deny or place severe limits on support to the United States, including delaying BRI-project disbursements, threatening to pause future

deals, raising the costs of maritime-shipping insurance, and imposing targeted sanctions. Nevertheless, these potential punishments prove unnecessary because China has spent years increasing its investments in the region's developing countries. These investments place China in a favorable position to deny support for US and Indian military activities that could harm Beijing's access to the critical energy resources that are shipped across the Indian Ocean.

Chinese Activities in South Asia: Tilting the Balance

China's expanding footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean is the operational manifestation of a multilayered national strategy officially codified in several high-level PRC policy documents. This activity-led approach is primarily guided by the "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection" concept, first formalized in the 2015 white paper "China's Military Strategy" and reinforced in the 2019 white paper "China's National Defense in the New Era."[13] These documents mark a historic pivot from land-centric defense to maritime-centric power projection, explicitly stating the "traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned."[14] Through this lens, South Asian nodes are both commercial ports and essential components of an overseas joint logistics system designed to safeguard China's sea lines of communication, project influence abroad, and contain and reduce US and Indian presence in the region. Whereas the maritime domain remains the dominant regional priority, Beijing is also increasing its regional access and presence through multiple land-centric infrastructure and security projects in local developing countries.

Force Projection

As the People's Republic of China has increased its level of infrastructural and economic development in South Asia and the Indian Ocean since the early 2000s, a sustained PLA presence in the region has slowly formed to protect China's overseas interests. In late 2008 and early 2009, the PLA Navy's first anti-piracy task force joined ships from other international and regional naval powers in the Gulf of Aden, seeking to protect Chinese merchant vessels, especially crude-oil tankers, transiting the area.[15] Rotations continued seamlessly for the next four years, with 13 task forces transiting the Indian Ocean and patrolling the region by the end of 2012. During the initial four-year period, task-force vessels traveling to

13. Rice and Robb, *Origins*.

14. Rice and Robb, *Origins*.

15. "China Sends Naval Task Force on Anti-Piracy Mission," *The New York Times*, December 26, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/world/asia/26iht-beijing.1.18936740.html.

and from their assignments started to visit ports across the Indian Ocean, including ports in Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. Other PLA Navy vessels, such as the hospital ship *Peace Ark*, joined the task force for short periods while also visiting Bangladesh and several ports in Africa.[16]

China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean expanded in 2013 and 2014, when submarines entered the region, presumably for the first time. In early 2014, a PLA Navy Type 091 nuclear attack submarine, which was already obsolete by the time it started patrolling the area, joined the anti-piracy task force for a short period before returning to Qingdao.[17] Only a few months later, a PLA Navy *Song*-class diesel-electric submarine and a Type 925 submarine-support ship stopped multiple times in Colombo, Sri Lanka, before and after joining the anti-piracy task force. These actions unnerved India and set a new precedent for Chinese force deployment abroad.[18]

Following the 2017 opening of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti and the development of new capabilities to sustain deployments, Beijing's military presence in the Indian Ocean became more consistent and widespread. Throughout the late 2010s and 2020s, the People's Liberation Army has been able to expand its military engagement with countries in Africa, Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, using exercises across much of the Indian Ocean.[19] Some exercises, particularly the China-Tanzania training exercise Peace Unity-2024, provided Beijing with the opportunity to conduct multidomain force projection across the Indian Ocean, with China deploying PLA Air Force Y-20 aircraft and PLA Navy Type 071 amphibious landing-platform-dock ships to the area. The naval vessels, including a Type 052D guided-missile destroyer, stopped in Sri Lanka during the return voyage for a "technical stop" (likely a term for repairs), demonstrating additional capacity to sustain a military posture in the region.[20]

Beyond projecting traditional naval force into the Indian Ocean, the People's Republic of China has maintained a growing presence of dual-use oceanographic-survey and aerospace-monitoring vessels across the strategic region.

16. Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, "Four Years of Anti-Piracy Mission: Chinese Navy's Showcase Achievement," National Maritime Foundation, January 22, 2013, https://maritimeindia.org/four-years-of-anti-piracy-mission-chinese-navys-showcase-achievement/.

17. Minnie Chan, "China's Pirate Patrol Submarine Is Too Noisy, Say Naval Experts," *South China Morning Post*, May 3, 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1784525/chinas-pirate-patrol-submarine-too-noisy-say-naval.

18. Vijay Sakhuja, "Chinese Submarines in Sri Lanka Unnerve India: Next Stop Pakistan?," *China Brief* 15, no. 11 (May 2015).

19. Darshana M. Baruah, "China in the Indian Ocean: A Stronger Indo-Pacific Presence," International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 22, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/05/china-in-the-indian-ocean-a-stronger-indo-pacific-presence/.

20. "Chinese PLA Naval Fleet Arrives in Sri Lanka," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 29, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zwbd/202409/t20240903_11484141.html.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, China has more than 60 civilian research vessels that carry out oceanographic research in support of scientific and commercial objectives. The center's research indicates more than 80 percent of those vessels are suspected of exploring and mapping oceans for covert military purposes, as the vessels spoof their identifications or turn off signals from their automatic identification systems for extended periods, particularly when near foreign military facilities.[21] These vessels, owned and operated by state-affiliated organizations with close ties to the People's Liberation Army, repeatedly show up in areas where either India or the United States is operating. For example, in early December 2025, four of the dual-use survey vessels appeared in areas around an Indian-declared closure zone for a probable long-range-missile test, with one of the vessels—*Lan Hai 201*—being active near Diego Garcia just before the planned weapons test.[22] Since 2020, these vessels have also made regular port calls in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, despite Indian protests.[23]

The PLA Aerospace Force's own fleet of space-tracking ships—the *Yuan Wang*–class and the newer *Liaowang*-class vessels—also frequently deploy to the Indian Ocean. Whereas these vessels are normally dispatched downrange of space launches to monitor telemetry, relay data, and collect information for postmission analysis, they can also operate at sea and perform other missions for several months. The vessels' dual-use capabilities enable them to monitor, collect electronic intelligence on, track, and catalogue foreign launches and orbital systems. The vessels' presence and port calls in the Indian Ocean have proven problematic for India, especially following the visit of *Yuan Wang 5* to Sri Lanka's Port of Hambantota in August 2022 and the presence of *Yuan Wang 6* near Andaman and Nicobar only months later. The latter occurrence forced the Indian military to delay its testing of the BrahMos extended-range supersonic cruise missile.[24]

Although the presence of China's warships and survey vessels across the Indian Ocean has grown since the PLA Navy first dispatched its anti-piracy task force in 2008, it remains limited to crisis response and ad hoc tasking. During a potential war in the Pacific, China's current posture (including its military and dual-use assets) would only be capable of providing multidomain awareness and collecting

21. Matthew P. Funaiole et al., "Surveying the Seas: China's Dual-Use Research Operations in the Indian Ocean," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 10, 2024, https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-indian-ocean-research-vessels.

22. "China Floods Indian Ocean with Spy Ships Just as India Prepares for Massive Missile Test," *Swarajya*, November 28, 2025, https://swarajyamag.com/defence/china-floods-indian-ocean-with-spy-ships-just-as-india-prepares-for-massive-missile-test.

23. Ryan Woo, "Maldives Visit of Chinese Survey Ship Could Rouse Indian Ocean Security Concerns," Reuters, updated February 22, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/maldives-visit-chinese-survey-ship-could-trigger-indian-ocean-security-concerns-2024-02-22/; and Funaiole et al., "Surveying the Seas."

24. Erickson, "China's New Liaowang-1."

intelligence on forces transiting the Indian Ocean. If the US or Indian militaries chose to deny the transit of China-bound oil tankers, the People's Liberation Army would lack the maritime capacity to counter such threats.

Containing India

Although the United States remains the dominant external power capable of projecting force in the Indian Ocean, the Indian military maintains the largest persistent presence in the strategic theater. Because South Asia has traditionally been India's sphere of influence, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been forced to develop strategies to neutralize India's regional power and limit the country's ability to harm Chinese access to critical terrain and resources. Economic interdependence with New Delhi makes overly aggressive diplomatic and economic tactics more difficult for Beijing, yet China has effectively carried out a growing geopolitical encirclement of India. Part of this encirclement is designed to hold India's domestic security at risk, especially if a deeper alignment with the United States becomes the norm. During a future global conflict between the United States and China, keeping India neutral and out of the fight will be a pivotal Chinese objective in this strategic theater.

To chip away at India's Big Brother status in South Asia, China has focused its decades-long regional effort on positioning itself as a more reliable and nonintrusive alternative for infrastructure and security needs. Leveraging its superior financial resources, Beijing has integrated nearly all India's neighbors into the BRI by providing billions of dollars in loans for dual-use ports and digital networks New Delhi cannot match in scale.[25] This economic statecraft is paired with a normative shift through the Global Security Initiative (GSI), whereby China exploits regional powers' historical resentment of perceived Indian paternalism by emphasizing sovereignty and noninterference. By supplying over 70 percent of the military hardware Pakistan and Bangladesh use, and establishing permanent maritime footprints, China is successfully encircling India with a network of states that increasingly hedge their strategic bets.[26] This strategy erodes India's Neighbourhood First foreign policy, forcing New Delhi into a defensive, continental posture that limits the effectiveness of India's future security partnership with the other members of the Quad—namely, the United States, Japan, and Australia.[27]

25. "China's Ring of Debt: How Beijing Is Boxing in India with Ports, Proxies, and Power," *Business Today*, updated May 18, 2025, https://www.businesstoday.in/india/story/chinas-ring-of-debt-how-beijing-is-boxing-in-india-with-ports-proxies-and-power-476717-2025-05-18.

26. Joshua Kurlantzick and Annabel Richter, "China Is Quietly Becoming Its Neighbors' Biggest Arms Dealer," World Politics Review, September 15, 2025, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/china-arms-exports/.

27. Maqbool Shah, "China's Quad Counter Centers on Building an Anti-India Arc," *Asia Times*, January 1, 2026, https://asiatimes.com/2026/01/chinas-quad-counter-centers-on-building-an-anti-india-arc/.

Militarily, PLA presence in the Indian Ocean remains minimal and incapable of forcing India to stay out of a potential conflict, but Beijing's heavy investment in the land domain along the China-India border forces New Delhi to allocate a large portion of India's defense budget to ground forces in the region—money that is not being spent on maintaining supremacy in the air and maritime domains. For China's part, the People's Liberation Army has prioritized the modernization of its forces along or near the Line of Actual Control since 2020. Recently, China updated nearly all the obsolete equipment fielded in the PLA Army's four combined-arms divisions in the Xinjiang Military District, three combined-arms brigades in the Tibet Military District, and supporting artillery and air defense units. Additionally, China established new army units in the region, equipping them with modern platforms for electronic warfare, intelligence and reconnaissance, and command and control.[28]

To contain India along the Line of Actual Control, China employs a strategy of continuous rotational deployment, creating a permanent, high-readiness presence without requiring the same units to endure the physiological toll of high-altitude stationing indefinitely. By rotating fresh combined-arms regiments with modern equipment from the Xinjiang Military District's divisions—thus creating a fortified, permanent infrastructure—the PLA Army is effectively normalizing a new status quo of heavy militarization, which subsequently forces India into a reactive and resource-draining defensive posture. This system enables China to sustain its largest near-combat deployment in decades, using unit rotations to conduct acclimatization and training in the Aksai Chin while ensuring its forward-deployed forces remain combat effective and capable of rapid escalation at any point along the disputed border.[29]

To counter China's aggressive posture, New Delhi has shifted to a strategy of active deterrence, prioritizing spending in the land domain and reorganizing its Mountain Strike Corps into agile, high-altitude, battle-ready formations.[30] This continental focus is solidified by the deployment of Pralay quasi-ballistic missiles and extended-range BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles specifically designed to strike Chinese logistics hubs and air bases across the Line of Actual Control.[31] Massive investments in all-weather infrastructure, such as the Se La and Zoji La Pass tunnels, ensure heavy armor and T-90 tanks can be rapidly mobilized even

28. Joshua Arostegui and Jake Vartanian, "The PLA's Progress Toward World-Class Ground Force Capabilities," in *The PLA's Long March Toward a World-Class Military: Progress, Obstacles, and Ambitions*, ed. Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025).

29. Blasko, "Baseline Assessment."

30. "Revisiting Mountain Corps to Deter China," *The Tribune*, updated June 18, 2020, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/revisiting-mountain-corps-to-deter-china-100707/.

31. Gabriel Honrada, "India's Rocket Force Takes Off with China in Its Sights," *Asia Times*, December 26, 2022, https://asiatimes.com/2022/12/indias-rocket-force-takes-off-with-china-in-its-sights/.

in extreme winter conditions.[32] This land-centric expenditure is further necessitated by the potential two-front threat from Pakistan, which compels New Delhi to maintain a massive standing land force. As a result, the Indian Army garnered more than 50 percent of India's defense budget from 2024 to 2026—nearly three times as much as the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force—though salaries and pensions make up a significant portion of that amount.[33] Consequently, India is fiscally tethered to its borders, serving Beijing's objective of pinning Indian resources to the Himalayas and effectively limiting New Delhi's maritime reach in the Indian Ocean.

Pakistan as the Cornerstone

China has strategically positioned Pakistan—a country with which Beijing has developed an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership—as the cornerstone of Chinese efforts to contain India through a multifaceted approach involving military integration, economic dependency, and maritime expansion.[34] Pakistan has fully integrated into China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the GSI, formally aligning Islamabad's national development goals with Beijing's frameworks for poverty alleviation and noninterference-based security cooperation. Islamabad's willingness to join the GDI and the GSI effectively institutionalizes the China-Pakistan axis beyond infrastructure alone, creating a unified diplomatic and security bloc Beijing can use to counter Indian influence and challenge US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific.[35]

The PRC military strategy focuses on transforming Pakistan into a sophisticated counterweight to India's conventional superiority. As of 2026, the Chinese and Pakistani militaries have reached an unprecedented level of interoperability, evidenced by the May 2025 border conflict following India's Operation Sindoor. During this clash, Pakistan used Chinese-made J-10C fighter jets, PL-15 air-to-air missiles, and HQ-9/P surface-to-air missile systems to challenge advanced Indian platforms such as the Rafale, effectively serving as a live combat test for

32. Fayaz Wani, "Asia's Longest Zojila Tunnel Set to Achieve Breakthrough by Mid-2026 as Workers Defy Extreme Cold," *The New Indian Express*, updated December 25, 2025, https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Dec/25/asias-longest-zojila-tunnel-set-to-achieve-breakthrough-by-mid-2026-as-workers-defy-extreme-cold.

33. Tushar Chakrabarty, *Demand for Grants 2025-26 Analysis* (Institute for Policy Research Studies, February 2025); and Poonam Mondal, "India's $86.1B Defence Budget Outpaces Pakistan by 8x: But Is 1.9% of GDP Enough?," ET Edge Insights, May 15, 2025, https://etedge-insights.com/featured-insights/indias-86-1b-defence-budget-outpaces-pakistan-by-8x-but-is-1-9-of-gdp-enough/.

34. "Wang Yi: Developing the China-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership by Upholding the 'Four Always' Principles," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated August 21, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202508/t20250823_11694904.html.

35. "China's GDI Promotes People-Centric Development, Connectivity, Regional Integration: Pakistani Officials," Xinhua, June 19, 2025, https://english.news.cn/20250619/882dc88dbcad4d4a94d7d7b5fcda0bfd/c.html; and Sheena Chestnut Greitens et al., *A New World Cop on the Beat? China's Internal Security Outreach Under the Global Security Initiative* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2025).

Chinese hardware.[36] The military clash demonstrated the effectiveness of decades of PRC land- and air-domain weapons sales to, and coproduction projects with, Pakistan—activities that have also included modern armor, long-range artillery, helicopters, and radar systems.[37] As a result, Pakistan has reportedly placed orders for even more advanced weapons platforms from China, including J-35 stealth fighters, HQ-19 air defense systems (similar to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system), and KJ-500 airborne early warning and command aircraft.[38] These systems would significantly improve Pakistan's ability to monitor and defend its land and airspace, while potentially enabling further integration with China. The ongoing Warrior series of counterterrorism exercises between the two countries has also increasingly focused on force interoperability, leading India to grow concerned about China's growing influence in the region.[39]

In the maritime domain, the development of Gwadar Port provides China with a critical outpost just 600 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz, challenging India's traditional dominance in the Indian Ocean. By transferring *Yuan*-class diesel-electric submarines and Type 054A frigates to Islamabad, China is helping Pakistan transition from a sea-denial posture to one capable of sustained maritime friction.[40] This naval presence, bolstered by at least one Chinese-built surveillance vessel that was sold to Islamabad in 2023, forces the Indian Navy to focus on securing India's immediate western littoral rather than projecting power into the South China Sea alongside its Quad partners.[41]

Economically, China has used the CPEC to create a state of strategic dependency that aligns Islamabad's survival with Beijing's regional interests. In January 2026, the two nations launched CPEC 2.0, moving beyond basic

36. Saeed Shah and Shivam Patel, "How Pakistan Shot Down India's Cutting-Edge Fighter Using Chinese Gear," Reuters, updated August 2, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/how-pakistan-shot-down-indias-cutting-edge-fighter-using-chinese-gear-2025-08-02/; and Shaheer Ahmad, "India-Pakistan Military Crisis: A Testing Ground for Chinese Military Hardware," *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/india-pakistan-military-crisis-a-testing-ground-for-chinese-military-hardware/.

37. Srinjoy Chowdhury, "Economic Crisis-Hit Pakistan Buys Radars from China," *Times Now*, updated October 3, 2022, https://www.timesnownews.com/india/economic-crisis-hit-pakistan-buys-radars-from-china-article-94610556; Charlie Gao, "Here Are 5 Weapons China Has Sold Pakistan," *The National Interest*, October 23, 2021, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/here-are-5-weapons-china-has-sold-pakistan-195306; and Dylan Malyasov, "Pakistan Gets First Z-10ME Attack Helicopters from China," *Defence Blog*, July 29, 2025, https://defence-blog.com/pakistan-gets-first-z-10me-attack-helicopters-from-china/.

38. Gabriel Honrada, "New Heights for China's Arms Diplomacy in South Asia," *Asia Times*, June 12, 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/06/new-heights-for-chinas-arms-diplomacy-in-south-asia/.

39. Fareena Habib, "Warrior 9: Defence Diplomacy or the Security Dilemma," *Modern Diplomacy*, January 3, 2026, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/01/03/warrior-9-defence-diplomacy-or-the-security-dilemma/.

40. Zhang and Woo, "China Completes Warship Deliveries."

41. Aadil Brar, "Online Images Show New Spy Ship Exported by China," *Newsweek*, updated March 18, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/china-pakistan-spy-ship-images-new-surveillance-missile-1880245.

infrastructure into high-tech industrial, agricultural, and mining integration under a new 2025–29 action plan. This deepened economic bond serves as a strategic artery, parts of which run through contested areas in Jammu and Kashmir, allowing China to project power into South Asia while shielding Pakistan from international financial isolation. The new framework also allows China to maintain a constant presence in Pakistan to service CPEC and provide protection. Whereas original CPEC plans included a now-unlikely oil pipeline from Gwadar Port into China's Xinjiang region—a project that could have provided some relief in the event of a closure of the Strait of Malacca—Beijing has still effectively turned Pakistan into a strategic satellite, ensuring Pakistan remains a persistent, Chinese-backed obstacle to India's regional hegemony.[42]

Ultimately, this "ironclad friendship" is designed to create a permanent two-front dilemma for New Delhi, with Beijing's efforts to position itself as a mediator in India-Pakistan crises further constraining India's diplomatic and military room for maneuver.[43] Given this encirclement, India would, in the event of a wider US-China conflict, remain too bogged down by its immediate neighbors to offer significant support to the West. The 17 percent increase in Pakistan's 2025–26 defense budget, which enables continued purchases of Chinese military equipment, underscores Beijing's role in building both an ally and a long-term force multiplier intended to keep India pinned to the land indefinitely.[44]

Bangladesh as the Pincer

In recent years, China has transitioned from a transactional trading partner to Bangladesh's primary strategic benefactor, systematically embedding itself in the country's national security and economic architecture and creating a northern anchor in the Bay of Bengal. China now supplies approximately 72 percent of Bangladesh's military hardware, including main battle tanks, *Ming*-class submarines, Type 056 corvettes, F-7BGI fighter aircraft, and small arms. Dhaka will also likely purchase new J-10CE fighters to upgrade its air force.

42. Mirwaise Khan, "CPEC 2.0: How China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Is Transforming Pakistan's Economy," *Balochistan Pulse*, January 8, 2026, https://balochistanpulse.com/cpec-2-0-how-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-is-transforming-pakistans-economy/; "'Illegal and Invalid': India Rejects China-Pakistan Economic Corridor - What Is the Project?," *The Times of India*, updated January 9, 2026, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/illegal-and-invalid-india-rejects-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-what-is-the-project/articleshow/126434260.cms; and Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Will Pakistan's Gwadar Port Resolve China's Malacca Dilemma?," *ThinkChina*, November 30, 2023, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/will-pakistans-gwadar-port-resolve-chinas-malacca-dilemma.

43. "China, Pakistan Reaffirm Ties as US Outreach to Islamabad Deepens," Reuters, updated January 5, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-pakistan-reaffirm-ties-us-outreach-islamabad-deepens-2026-01-05/; and Atiqullah Baig Mughul, "Between Mediation and Manipulation: China's Role in the India-Pakistan Rivalry," *The Diplomatic Insight*, January 7, 2026, https://thediplomaticinsight.com/chinas-role-in-india-pak-rivalry/.

44. Amir Daftari, "Major Pakistan Defense Boost as China Military Ties Deepen," *Newsweek*, June 11, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/major-pakistan-defense-boost-china-military-ties-deepen-2083898.

Additionally, China built the Bangladesh Navy's submarine base at Pekua—BNS Pekua (formerly BNS Sheikh Hasina)—which was inaugurated in 2023.[45] This defense integration ensures Bangladesh's three-dimensional naval capabilities are built according to Chinese standards, providing the PLA Navy with potential future access to logistical hubs and intelligence-gathering vantage points that directly outflank India's Eastern Naval Command.

Following the 2024 political transition in Dhaka, Beijing capitalized on the ensuing diplomatic vacuum to consolidate the China-Bangladesh alignment through the GSI and the GDI. In March 2025, during the 50th anniversary of bilateral ties, Bangladesh secured $2.1 billion in new Chinese investments.[46] Significant milestones in the deepening relationship include the modernization of Mongla port—a strategic site that offers a foothold near the Strait of Malacca—and the China-Bangladesh Golden Friendship-2024 counterterrorism exercise, the first of its kind between the two nations.[47] Furthermore, China's involvement in sensitive projects—such as the Teesta River management project near India's Siliguri Corridor—transforms economic infrastructure into a geopolitical lever that limits New Delhi's regional maneuverability.[48]

This multifaceted Chinese integration with Bangladesh serves as a critical counter to the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific and the Quad's efforts to contain Chinese expansion. Beijing has neutralized Western influence by offering a development-first alternative to Dhaka, including by extending duty-free market access for 99 percent of goods through 2028 to support Bangladesh's transition toward developing-country status.[49] In the event of a future conflict, this decades-long Chinese buildup ensures the northern Indian Ocean is no longer solely India's realm or a secure operating theater for the US Navy. Instead, Bangladesh has been positioned as a vital node

45. Amir Erez, "China's Enduring Grip on Bangladesh's Defence Hardware Supply," Bangladesh Military Forces, October 28, 2025, https://www.bdmilitary.com/defence-news/defence-acquisitions/chinas-enduring-grip-on-bangladeshs-defence-hardware-supply/3477/; John Feng and Amir Daftari, "Map Shows China's Arms Sales Footprint Around the World," *Newsweek*, updated June 2, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/china-global-arms-footprint-map-2079771; and Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan, "Rethinking Bangladesh's Reliance on Chinese Arms," *Asia Times*, August 30, 2024, https://asiatimes.com/2024/08/rethinking-bangladeshs-reliance-on-chinese-arms/.

46. Rimon Tanvir Hossain, *One Year Later, China Is the Real Winner of the 2024 Bangladesh Revolution*, PacNet 85 (Pacific Forum, October 2025).

47. Jayanth Jacob, "India Is Monitoring China's Growing Footprint in Bangladesh: MEA," *The New Indian Express*, updated December 18, 2025, https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Dec/18/india-is-monitoring-chinas-growing-footprint-in-bangladesh-mea; and Saqlain Rizve, "China-Bangladesh Military Exercises Signal Shifting Geopolitical Landscape," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/china-bangladesh-military-exercises-signal-shifting-geopolitical-landscape/.

48. Sohini Bose and Ayush Bhardwaj, "Bangladesh's Pivot to China: From Balance to Realignment," Observer Research Foundation, October 31, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/bangladesh-s-pivot-to-china-from-balance-to-realignment.

49. "Bangladesh to Get Duty-Free, Quota-Free Access to China Until 2028," *Bay of Bengal Post*, March 29, 2025, https://bayofbengalpost.com/news/bangladesh_to_get_duty_free_access_to_china (page discontinued).

in a China-centric security triad with Pakistan—an arrangement designed to protect China's energy lifelines and bypass the Malacca dilemma by potentially forcing adversaries to divert resources away from the Pacific.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives: Disrupting Maritime Dominance

In the island nations of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, China's recent strategy has shifted from pure infrastructural investment to a security-first integration designed to compromise India's status in the northern Indian Ocean and disrupt US maritime dominance in the central Indian Ocean.

Under the administration of President Mohamed Muizzu, who assumed power in late 2023 on an "India out" platform, the Maldives underwent a rapid strategic pivot toward the People's Republic of China.[50] In March 2024, Beijing and Malé signed a landmark military-assistance agreement under which China would provide free military equipment and training to the Maldives—the first agreement of its kind for the archipelago.[51] This agreement was followed by the 2025 reaffirmation of the China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2024–28), which included permissions for China to place data-collection devices in Maldivian waters—devices that could also likely be used for surveillance.[52] By replacing Indian military personnel with Chinese-backed capabilities—and hosting research vessels such as *Xiang Yang Hong 03*, which docked in the Maldives multiple times in 2024—Beijing has effectively turned the Maldives into a forward-deployed sensor node capable of monitoring US and Indian naval movements near critical sea lines of communication.[53]

In Sri Lanka, China remains the undisputed controller of the Port of Hambantota via a 99-year lease. By 2025, Beijing increased technical stops by PLA Navy vessels and research ships at the port. Despite official moratoriums on foreign research vessels being put in place in early 2024, Chinese influence normalized these visits by 2025, with the island serving as a logistical hub for the

50. Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Mohamed Muizzu: The Maldives' New President Wants India Out," *BBC News*, October 22, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67166425.

51. "Maldives-China Defence Agreement to Obtain Non-Lethal Weapons and Training, Says President Muizzu," *The Economic Times*, updated March 6, 2024, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/maldives-china-defence-agreement-to-obtain-non-lethal-weapons-and-training-says-president-muizzu/articleshow/108271962.cms?from=mdr.

52. Ahmed Shareef, "China's New Deal with Maldives Sparks Spying Concerns," *Maldives Voice*, February 21, 2025, https://maldivesvoice.com/2025/02/21/chinas-new-deal-with-maldives-sparks-spying-concerns/.

53. Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Xiang Yang Hong 3: Chinese Ship's Port Call in Maldives Fans India Tensions," *BBC News*, February 4, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68163343.

PLA Navy's expanding Indian Ocean presence.[54] This presence effectively splits New Delhi's focus between India's eastern and western coasts and places Chinese assets within targeting distance of the US base at Diego Garcia.

This dual-island strategy serves as a critical flanking maneuver against the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. By financing projects such as the Sinamalé Bridge and the expansion of Velana International Airport in the Maldives—as well as the development of Port City Colombo as a futuristic smart city in Sri Lanka—China is using the BRI to build dual-use facilities that could also be used to monitor adversaries' regional activities in the event of a future conflict.[55] For the United States and India, this development means the Indian Ocean would no longer be a safe rear area for logistics or carrier operations in wartime; instead, the region would become a contested zone in which Chinese-backed island outposts would provide Beijing with the necessary maritime domain awareness to disrupt global energy flows and allied reinforcement routes.

Keeping the Periphery Neutral: Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal

Beijing's peripheral diplomacy with Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal helps neutralize the continental influence of India and the United States by creating a trans-Himalayan buffer zone that enhances the security of China's western flank. Since the 2020–21 withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, China has emerged as the primary external power in that country, adopting a policy of engagement without recognition. Under the GSI, Beijing provides the Taliban with an economic and security lifeline—including full duty-free trade access for Afghan goods and the development of mass-surveillance infrastructure—in exchange for security guarantees against Uyghur militants. By 2025, China had formally integrated Afghanistan into the BRI, viewing the country as a vital transit hub for the CPEC.[56] This integration ensures the United States remains excluded from the regional security architecture while granting China access to Afghanistan's estimated

54. Ankit Panda, "Sri Lanka Formally Hands Over Hambantota Port to Chinese Firms on 99-Year Lease," *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/sri-lanka-formally-hands-over-hambantota-port-to-chinese-firms-on-99-year-lease/; and "Sri Lanka to Complete SOP for Foreign Research Vessels in Two Months: Minister," EconomyNext, January 5, 2026, https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-to-complete-sop-for-foreign-research-vessels-in-two-months-minister-255919.

55. Malji, "Small State, Big Stakes"; and Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "China's New Futuristic Outbound Investment Development Strategy," *China Briefing*, December 9, 2021, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-new-futuristic-outbound-investment-development-strategy/.

56. Ghulam Ali, "China Deepens Its Engagement with Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, December 4, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/china-deepens-its-engagement-with-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/; and James Andrew Calderon, "Chinese Counterterrorism Diplomacy in Afghanistan: Cooperation or Coercion?," *The Asia Cable* (blog), January 6, 2026, https://www.theasiacable.com/p/chinese-counterterrorism-diplomacy.

$1 trillion in untapped minerals, including lithium and rare earth elements essential for a future war economy.[57]

Beijing has used a package-deal strategy in long-running border negotiations with Bhutan, including offers to renounce claims in northern Bhutan if Thimphu cedes strategic western territories near the Doklam plateau. In 2024, satellite imagery confirmed several Chinese villages had been constructed inside disputed territory, placing Chinese surveillance and potential offensive capabilities within striking distance of India's sensitive Siliguri Corridor.[58]

In Nepal, China has institutionalized its presence through the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network—part of the BRI. By 2025, the two nations had fast-tracked the feasibility study for the proposed cross-border railway between Kathmandu and Gyirong and signed a BRI framework agreement under the administration of Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli. This infrastructure aims to transform Nepal from a landlocked dependency of India into a land-linked gateway for Chinese goods seeking to enter the lucrative North Indian market.[59]

This land-based encirclement directly counters the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific by demonstrating Western sanctions and isolation are ineffective in China's immediate neighborhood. Beijing's deepening ties with Kabul, Kathmandu, and Thimphu also challenge India's traditional role as the region's primary security provider.[60] As of 2026, these partnerships, supported by the GSI, the GDI, and other global initiatives, have cumulatively resulted in a China-centric Himalayan order. This development forces India to commit vast military resources to its northern borders, thereby reducing the country's capacity to challenge the People's Liberation Army in the wider Pacific or Indian Ocean theaters.

57. Makhdum Karam Shah, "Mining for Influence: China's Mineral Ambitions in Taliban-Led Afghanistan," Wilson Center, August 19, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/mining-influence-chinas-mineral-ambitions-taliban-led-afghanistan.

58. Shishir Gupta, "Chinese PLA's New Expansion Plans on Bhutan," *Hindustan Times*, updated September 13, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/chinese-pla-s-new-expansion-plans-on-bhutan/story-bqKkkq7SpHPl8xq5R7UpuN.html; and Robert Barnett, "The Politics of China's Land Appropriation in Bhutan," *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/the-politics-of-chinas-land-appropriation-in-bhutan/.

59. Kalinga Seneviratne, "Two Words Stick as Nepal PM Goes to China for Connectivity Assistance," IDN-InDepthNews, December 7, 2024, https://indepthnews.net/two-words-stick-as-nepal-pm-goes-to-china-for-connectivity-assistance/.

60. Aparna Pande, "China's Increasing Footprint in South Asia," GIS, August 29, 2025, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-south-asia-india/.

Forecasting China's Plans: Transforming the Region

Over the next decade, China's strategy in South Asia and the Indian Ocean will likely be designed to transform the region from a secondary maritime theater into a fortified western flank. By 2035, Beijing aims to field a largely modernized military capable of contested operations, creating a continental and maritime pincer that restricts the strategic options of the United States and India. This military power will be supplemented by increased diplomatic and economic partnerships throughout the region—partnerships that would support Chinese operations and limit US and Indian freedom of maneuver, particularly in the event of a war in the Pacific. This envisioned transformation in South Asia is driven by five distinct forecasts of Chinese actions.

1. **Over the next decade, China will transition to a permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean.** According to the Pentagon's 2025 annual report on Chinese military power, the PLA Navy is projected to field at least six aircraft carriers by 2035. The PLA Navy's growth—including its continued production of powerful surface and subsurface warships—would be sufficient to normalize a permanent Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.[61] This transition to a blue-water naval presence would be supported by a shift from simple port access to a formal overseas joint logistics system, including sites such as Pakistan's Gwadar Port and Bangladesh's submarine base BNS Pekua. In a future scenario involving a war in the Pacific, these bases would function as unsinkable carriers that would force the US Navy to divert resources away from the Pacific to protect its own logistics hub at Diego Garcia.

2. **Over the next decade, China will complete a transregional, fiber-optic digital network through Pakistan and Nepal, while Chinese companies build out most of Bangladesh's communications infrastructure.** This Digital Silk Road creates a state of technological lock-in, in which South Asian nations become dependent on Chinese 5G, the Beidou Navigation System,

61. US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025* (US Department of Defense, 2025); and Andrew Erickson, "Latest Pentagon Report: China's Military Advancing amid Churn," War on the Rocks, January 9, 2026, https://warontherocks.com/2026/01/latest-pentagon-report-chinas-military-advancing-amid-churn/.

and cloud systems.[62] In a conflict, this structure would grant Beijing a kill-switch power over regional communications and provide the People's Liberation Army with a pervasive surveillance curtain across the Indian Ocean littoral.

3. Beijing will likely formalize a trilateral security framework with Pakistan and Bangladesh by 2030. This "strategic triangle" involves deep military-industrial cooperation that would likely include the joint production of unmanned aircraft systems and the delivery of J-35E stealth fighters.[63] Diplomatically, China would use the GSI to position itself as the region's neutral security guarantor. This strategy would effectively trap India in a continental pincer, forcing it to divert military focus to its land borders and reducing its ability to assist the United States in the Pacific. The advanced strike and surveillance systems provided to Pakistan and Bangladesh would also enable PLA integration, enhancing domain awareness in the region and allowing for the monitoring and potential targeting of US movements.

4. China's transparent-ocean strategy will likely expand beyond the western Pacific and into the Indian Ocean over the next decade. This strategy involves a five-layer sensor architecture, from seabed cables to space-based lidars, designed to leave US and Indian submarines with nowhere to hide.[64] By 2030, China will have likely deployed a dense network of unmanned underwater vessels—including extra-large and extra-extra-large variants with ranges well over 10,000 kilometers—and acoustic arrays around the Maldives

62. Hasaan Ali Khan, "At Baku Talks, Pakistan, China Push Digital Silk Road as Next Phase of Economic Corridor," *Arab News*, updated November 17, 2025, https://arab.news/5349c; Sylvie Zhuang, "China Keen to Ramp Up Trans-Himalayan Project with Nepal, Vying with India for Influence," *South China Morning Post*, updated July 24, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3319399/china-seeks-boost-trans-himalayan-project-amid-contest-india-win-over-nepal; and Suman Saha, "China-Bangladesh: A Digital Partnership Powering the Future," *Daily Sun*, October 1, 2025, http://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/830104.

63. Maliha Fatima Arain, "The China-Pakistan-Bangladesh Triangle: A Counterweight to India's Aspirational Dominance," Global Stratagem Insight, May 6, 2025, https://thegsinsight.com/the-china-pakistan-bangladesh-triangle-a-counterweight-to-indias-aspirational-dominance/; and Himel Rahman, "Strategic Implications of the First China-Pakistan-Bangladesh Summit," *The Diplomat*, June 25, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/strategic-implications-of-the-first-china-pakistan-bangladesh-summit/.

64. Tye Graham and Peter W. Singer, "China's Burgeoning Undersea Sensor Net Aims to Turn the Ocean Transparent," Defense One, October 15, 2025, https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2025/10/chinas-burgeoning-undersea-sensor-net-aims-turn-ocean-transparent/408815/.

and Sri Lanka.[65] This undersea kill web would allow China to track allied movements in real time, effectively neutralizing the stealth advantage of Western submarine forces.

5. China will likely use gray-zone tactics to threaten India's Siliguri Corridor. By 2030, the completion of encroachment villages in Bhutan and the Teesta River management project in Bangladesh will place Chinese electronic-warfare and surveillance arrays within striking distance of this narrow corridor.[66] In a future war, the mere threat of a Chinese thrust in the area could paralyze India's internal logistics, preventing New Delhi from opening a second front or providing maritime support to US forces.

Countering China's Increasing Influence in South Asia

As the strategic focal point of the Indo-Pacific shifts toward the Indian Ocean, New Delhi's traditional Neighbourhood First foreign policy is increasingly challenged by a pervasive and well-funded Chinese presence. For the United States, this regional competition is no longer a secondary theater; rather, the competition is a critical front line for ensuring maritime freedom and for neutralizing potential second-front vulnerabilities in a future Pacific conflict. Addressing the challenges in the region is even more difficult for Washington, as leaders in India and other South Asian countries increasingly balance their relations with both the United States and China by adhering to policies of strategic autonomy.[67]

The United States should continue pursuing a strategy of countering Beijing's security statecraft, which leverages debt-heavy infrastructure projects and technological dependency. The following six recommendations emphasize high-tech coproduction with India, the deployment of secure digital alternatives to the Digital Silk Road, and an expanded diplomatic footprint designed to empower South Asian nations to preserve their own strategic autonomy against Chinese encirclement.

65. H. I. Sutton, "China's New Underwater Drones Could Threaten West Coast U.S.," *Naval News*, December 10, 2025, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/12/chinas-new-underwater-drones-could-threaten-west-coast-u-s/; Gabriel Honrada, "PLAN's Big Underwater Drones Push Undersea Power Toward US Shores," *Asia Times*, December 13, 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/12/plans-big-underwater-drones-push-undersea-power-toward-us-shores/; and Shareef, "China's New Deal."

66. Barnett, "China's Land Appropriation."

67. Apekshya Shah and Shweta Karki, "Examining the Systemic Realities of India in the US-Backed Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 3, no. 6 (2023); and Abdelazim Allahgabo, "Pakistan's Diplomatic Repositioning in a Multipolar World," *The Diplomatic Insight*, May 20, 2026, https://thediplomaticinsight.com/pakistan-diplomatic-repositioning-multipolar/.

First, formalizing aspects of the Quad is essential to transforming the organization from an informal strategic forum into an institution that can adequately counterbalance China's growing military, economic, and political assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Over the next decade, the United States should take incremental steps to establish a series of formal working groups and agreements among the group's four members, removing the current constraints on collective action. For example, the United States should institutionalize the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, moving beyond data sharing to a common operational picture that includes the western Indian Ocean.[68] By establishing the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership and a dedicated task force under the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative, the four countries can offer a high-quality alternative to China's debt-heavy infrastructure models.[69] Most importantly, expanding the Malabar naval exercises and launching the Quad Indo-Pacific Logistics Network for rapid humanitarian and security response will create a formidable deterrent. This deeper integration will ensure the Indian Ocean remains a free and open corridor, preventing any single power from achieving the regional hegemony necessary to dominate a future Pacific conflict.

Second, the United States should move beyond a transactional relationship with New Delhi, making India a regional military-industrial hub. The October 2025 Framework for the US-India Major Defense Partnership prioritizes the coproduction of General Electric F414 jet engines and the assembly of MQ-9B drones in India.[70] This strategy will create a long-term technological anchor that ensures the Indian military is interoperable with US systems for decades, countering China's efforts to isolate India.

Third, to prevent China from achieving technological lock-in through 5G and the Beidou Navigation System, the United States should use the US International Development Finance Corporation, which had its lending cap increased to $205 billion under the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026.[71] By funding Western-backed subsea cables and low-Earth-orbit satellite networks such as Starlink, the United States can offer a secure digital ecosystem free of the kill-switch risks inherent in Chinese technology.

68. Peter Parson, "Quad's Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative Strengthens Indo-Pacific Security," *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM*, June 19, 2025, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/06/quads-maritime-domain-awareness-initiative-strengthens-indo-pacific-security/.

69. "2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting," U.S. Department of State, July 1, 2025, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/2025-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting/.

70. Mandeep Singh, "Jet Engines, Drones at Core of Reinvigorated India-U.S. Defense Collaboration," *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM*, December 10, 2025, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/12/jet-engines-drones-at-core-of-reinvigorated-india-u-s-defense-collaboration/.

71. Ray Cai, "What Does the Development Finance Corporation Reauthorization Mean for Energy?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 12, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-development-finance-corporation-reauthorization-mean-energy.

Fourth, the United States should continue to prioritize Distributed Maritime Operations and should increase this effort by certifying shipyards in India and Sri Lanka for the maintenance of US Navy vessels.[72] By creating a network of regional hubs for logistics, the United States will ensure its fleet can remain in the theater for longer periods, negating the geographical advantage China seeks to gain through its own port investments.

Fifth, the United States should leverage the State Partnership Program as a primary tool of irregular warfare and soft-power projection, providing South Asian nations with a sustainable alternative to Chinese security architecture. As of 2026, the United States has expanded its enduring military-to-military relationships under the program, pairing Oregon with Bangladesh and Montana with Sri Lanka and the Maldives.[73] To maximize the impact of these relationships on regional containment, the United States should shift focus from traditional infantry drills to high-value technical areas such as maritime domain awareness, cyber defense, and drone operations. These efforts would counter China's security-driven efforts in South Asian countries and improve the safety of US operations in a future regional conflict.

Finally, acknowledging the permanence of China's military presence in the Indian Ocean is a pragmatic necessity for a future-oriented US strategy. Rather than pursuing an exhausted policy of absolute denial, the United States should pivot toward a model of contested coexistence that treats the PLA Navy as a permanent resident in the theater. This acceptance involves shifting planning from preventing access to managing a high-threat, high-transparency environment. Strategically, the United States should focus on hardening its own regional logistics—both at Diego Garcia and with partners like Australia and India—while using advanced undersea and drone capabilities to ensure even a permanent Chinese presence remains vulnerable during a conflict. By accepting this new reality, the United States can shift its resources from futile diplomatic protests to the more urgent task of maintaining a decisive, qualitative edge in a permanently contested maritime domain.

72. Anil Khosla, "Distributed Maritime Operations: Applicability in the Indian Context," Indus International Research Foundation, September 4, 2025, https://indusresearch.in/distributed-maritime-operations-applicability-in-the-indian-context-by-air-mshl-anil-khosla-retd/.

73. "Mutual Benefits: U.S. State Partnership Program Builds Knowledge, Familiarity, Personal Bonds Among 100-Plus Nations," *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM*, October 20, 2025, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/10/state-partnership-program-builds-bonds-among-100-plus-nations/.

Conclusion

The transformation of South Asia and the Indian Ocean from a secondary maritime theater into a primary front of global competition is no longer a forecast; rather, this transformation is a realized strategic shift. As China's "Far Seas Protection" doctrine matures, the regional landscape has moved toward a state of permanent contestation, where the control of undersea data, digital infrastructure, and dual-use logistical hubs will dictate the outcome of any future Pacific conflict.[74] The era of a safe rear area in the Indian Ocean has ended and has been replaced by a complex environment in which Chinese-backed sensor webs and strategic anchors in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other South Asian states challenge traditional US and Indian dominance.

In the coming years, the stability of the Indo-Pacific will depend on a policy of resilience. For the United States and its partners, mitigating China's encirclement of India and growing presence in the Indian Ocean will require moving beyond reactive diplomacy to a proactive model of contested coexistence. By operationalizing defense coproduction with India, deploying high-standard digital alternatives to the Digital Silk Road, and institutionalizing the Quad as a regional security engine, Washington can ensure the Indian Ocean remains a free and open corridor. Rather than being measured by the exclusion of China, success will be defined by the ability of South Asian nations to preserve their sovereignty, ensuring the maritime heart of the twenty-first century remains a theater of cooperation rather than a staging ground for global war.

74. Rice and Robb, *Origins*.

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China's Central Asia Policy in a Taiwan Strait Crisis

Brian G. Carlson

Central Asia is located on China's northwestern periphery, far from the Taiwan Strait, but the region nevertheless plays an important role in China's strategic thinking about a potential war over Taiwan. The goal of preventing forces originating in Central Asia from destabilizing China's northwestern province of Xinjiang, a long-standing priority for China, would be especially important at a time when China's main strategic attention was focused on the Taiwan Strait. The outbreak of war in the Taiwan Strait would likely cut China off from seaborne supplies of oil, gas, and other commodities, highlighting the importance of secure overland supply chains. Central Asia's oil and gas pipelines, critical mineral deposits, and transportation networks would play an important part in China's efforts to address this concern.

Such considerations have featured prominently in China's approach to Central Asia for more than three decades.[1] China's sustained engagement with the region, featuring major investments in energy, mining, and infrastructure, has resulted in the steady accumulation of regional influence.[2] China has converted this influence into important diplomatic victories, including on the issue of Taiwan. All five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—officially affirm that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China

1. Niva Yau, "Central Asia and China's Taiwan Dilemma," Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 20, 2022, https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/09/central-asia-and-chinas-taiwan-dilemma/.

2. Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, *Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

(PRC).[3] The Central Asian states have few interests directly at stake in the Taiwan Strait and therefore would be likely to maintain official diplomatic neutrality in a cross-strait conflict. At the same time, in recognition of China's influence in their region, they would be certain to carry on business as usual with the PRC leadership in Beijing. This policy would have the effect of providing material benefits to China as the country prepared for the possibility of war over Taiwan.

The influence and diplomatic leverage that China has built in Central Asia are likely to prove durable. China and the Central Asian states, along with Russia, may already have held detailed discussions about the region's anticipated role in a potential war over Taiwan, possibly leading to clear understandings. In the type of scenario this volume envisions, China's main diplomatic task would be to ensure the implementation of any such understandings. China should be able to achieve this aim through routine diplomacy, most likely supplemented by public relations campaigns seeking support from the people of Central Asia, and would not have to employ covert action, sabotage, or other pressure tactics. China's leadership most likely has a high degree of confidence that the country could obtain the cooperation it desires from Central Asia. The United States has few options to change this situation in the near term, but long-term engagement with the region can help the Central Asian states avoid excessive dependence on China.

China's Aims in Central Asia amid Tensions in the Taiwan Strait

As tensions rise in the Taiwan Strait and an invasion of the island looms, China takes steps to ensure its strategic rear is secure. In this effort, China devotes particular attention to Central Asia. This region, which abuts China's northwestern province of Xinjiang, is significant for China's war effort across several dimensions, including security, economics, energy, critical minerals, and transport. China aims to ensure the region remains stable and secure, in addition to serving as a reliable supply base.

With war potentially approaching, China's first order of business in diplomacy is to ensure as many countries as possible support China or at least remain neutral. In the case of Central Asia, all five countries in the region reaffirm their expected positions of diplomatic neutrality. Although China's leaders would welcome a more overtly pro-China stance, including official endorsement of any military action China might take to gain control of Taiwan, they recognize the reasons for the Central Asian states' reluctance to insert themselves directly into the conflict. Most importantly, Chinese leaders are confident that the Central Asian

3. Benjamin Herscovitch, *Five One-Chinas: The Contest to Define Taiwan* (Lowy Institute, January 2025), https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/one-china-contest-to-define-taiwan/.

states' position will provide their country with the material benefits they seek. The Central Asian countries agree to abstain on any votes in the UN General Assembly that are critical of China's course of action in the current crisis and to refrain from joining any international sanctions the United States and its allies impose on China.

Having affirmed the Central Asian states' neutrality, China's top priority in regional security is to ensure no sources of instability from Central Asia spill across China's western border. Such sources of instability, especially those connected to what China calls the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, have been a perpetual source of concern for China and would be particularly distracting while its focus is on the Taiwan Strait and a potential military engagement with the United States.[4] China is determined to prevent a recurrence of the kinds of events seen in Xinjiang's recent past, including large-scale ethnic riots or terrorist attacks occurring in, or emanating from, the province.

Accordingly, China takes several steps to reinforce security along its western frontier. China tightens security measures in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which have already been extremely restrictive throughout Xi Jinping's tenure. China also sends additional People's Armed Police (PAP) forces to reinforce its security installations in Tajikistan, which are designed to prevent sources of instability from Afghanistan and the broader region from penetrating Chinese territory. China holds consultations with the Central Asian states, both bilaterally and within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), reaffirming the need for coordination in addressing security issues. China also secures agreement from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, both of which have purchased the HQ-9B air defense system and accompanying radar systems, to share data about any aircraft or drones flying in their airspaces.

To prepare for a potential escalation, China confronts the possibility of a US naval blockade of the Strait of Malacca, which, if successful, would sharply curtail China's imports of seaborne energy supplies. Under a blockade, China would rely heavily on secure overland oil and gas supplies from Russia and Central Asia. The Central Asian countries offer their assurance that they will continue pumping oil and gas, in their maximum possible volumes, to China through existing pipelines. China quietly sends personnel from private military companies to select locations along oil and gas pipeline routes, aiming to thwart any attempts by hostile actors to conduct sabotage against these pipelines. The Central Asian countries, recognizing the importance of this step to China, quietly give their assent.

4. Robert E. Hamilton, "China, Russia, and Power Transition in Central Asia," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 31, 2024, https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/05/china-russia-and-power-transition-in-central-asia/.

The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network, which by the opening stages of the current crisis consists of four lines, including the recently constructed Line D, has a throughput capacity of 85 billion cubic meters per year. The pipeline network is operating well below full capacity, but China aims to ensure throughputs are as high as possible during the current crisis. Coupled with the natural gas flowing from Russia through two Power of Siberia pipelines, the second of which has recently been completed at the time of this scenario, Central Asian gas is set to make an important contribution to China's energy security as the conflict looms. The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, operating at a full capacity of 20 million tons per year, makes a more modest but nevertheless welcome contribution to China's available oil supplies.[5]

The Central Asian states' neutrality and the preservation of regional stability create an environment in which China continues mining the region's critical minerals and aims to achieve maximum extraction. These mining operations, focusing on gold, copper, rare earth elements, lithium, antimony, aluminum, and tungsten, provide essential resources for China's technology and defense sectors.[6] China's military planners know that in a potential escalation of conflict with the United States, especially one that becomes a protracted war, a reliable supply chain of critical minerals from Central Asia would help to replenish China's military supplies as the confrontation continues. Securing these critical minerals relies on continued extraction and on uninterrupted transport back to China.

To ensure the transport of critical minerals and other goods, China explores options for using the Middle Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a route that passes from China through Central Asia and onward to the Caucasus, Türkiye, Iran, and Europe. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which began construction in 2025, provides a valuable rail connection within Central Asia and beyond. This new railway eases the transport of critical minerals and other supplies from Central Asia to China's own territory. Moreover, facing the specter of a US naval blockade, China considers whether it might be able to use the Middle Corridor to obtain necessary materials from willing suppliers to the west. Just as Central Asia served as a hub for Russia's evasion of sanctions during the Russia-Ukraine War, China aims to ensure the region will help to relieve some of the economic pressure that the United States and its allies impose amid the approaching conflict over Taiwan.

5. Robert M. Cutler, "Kazakhstan Gains Weight in China's Energy System," *The Times of Central Asia*, April 9, 2026, https://timesca.com/kazakhstan-gains-weight-in-chinas-energy-system/.

6. Haley Nelson and Natalia Storz, "Central Asia's Geography Inhibits a US Critical Minerals Partnership," *EnergySource* (blog), April 15, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energysource/central-asias-geography-inhibits-a-us-critical-minerals-partnership/.

China's Engagement with Central Asia in the Post-Soviet Era

China laid the groundwork for the foregoing scenario through its engagement with Central Asia in the post-Soviet era. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of five newly independent states in Central Asia, including three sharing a border with China, opened opportunities for China to expand its influence in a region previously closed to it. China's initial efforts in the 1990s led to subsequent milestones.

In 1996, China joined Russia and the three new Central Asian states on China's western border—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—to form a grouping called the Shanghai Five. In bilateral negotiations, with China on one side and Russia and the three Central Asian states on the other, the parties negotiated two important treaties concerning the regions along China's borders with each of these countries. The first treaty, signed in 1996, implemented military confidence-building measures. The second treaty, concluded in 1997, mandated the reduction of military forces along China's borders with the other parties. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five grouping, and the parties formed the SCO.[7]

Since then, the SCO has been an important component of China's engagement with Central Asia. Membership in the organization has helped to smooth China's relations with Russia, a potential rival for regional influence. The organization has focused on regional security issues, adopting China's aim to combat the "three evils" and establishing the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure.[8] In 2005, the SCO began holding the Peace Mission series of joint military exercises, which often focus on counterterrorism. That same year, the SCO issued a joint declaration calling for a timetable for the United States to withdraw from the military bases it established in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to support operations in Afghanistan. The United States withdrew from the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan by the end of 2005 and from the air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, in 2014.[9]

At times, China has been disappointed in the SCO's stalled progress, as reflected in the other member states' unwillingness to support a development bank or free-trade area within the organization's framework. China has responded

7. Linda Maduz, *Flexibility by Design: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Future of Eurasian Cooperation* (Center for Security Studies/ETH Zurich, May 2018).

8. Pantucci and Petersen, *Sinostan*; and Adeeb Khalid, "Tight Belt and Road: China's Growing Influence in Central Asia," *Times Literary Supplement*, September 30, 2022, https://www.the-tls.com/politics-by-region/asian-politics/sinostan-raffaello-pantucci-alexandros-petersen-book-review-adeeb-khalid.

9. Alexander Cooley and Emma Larson, "Military Base Timeline of Central Asia," Columbia University Harriman Institute, n.d., accessed August 11, 2026, https://harriman.columbia.edu/central-asia-military-base-timeline/.

by engaging more frequently with the Central Asian countries in bilateral formats.[10] The SCO's eventual expansion to include India, Pakistan, and Iran added to the geopolitical heft of the organization's membership but changed its character by shifting it away from a strict focus on Central Asia. More recently, facing financial isolation amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, Russia has signaled to China that it is open to joining a regional development bank as a member, provided that the bank would be set up to operate free of the constraints of Western sanctions.[11]

One major motivation for China's engagement with Central Asia has been to promote security and stability in its own restive province of Xinjiang. The province, home to a large population of Uyghurs and other, mostly Muslim, ethnic minorities, has experienced long-standing social tensions and instability. China's leadership has sought to address the situation in Xinjiang through a combination of repression and economic development. The central government strengthened its control over the province, promoted the large-scale settlement of Han Chinese, and curtailed expressions of ethnic and religious identity by Uyghurs and other groups in the region. During Xi's tenure, China's policies in Xinjiang eventually led to the establishment of internment camps where one million or more Uyghurs and members of other ethnic minorities have reportedly been detained.[12] China has also sought to ensure regional stability by promoting economic development, based in part on efforts to strengthen economic linkages with neighboring Central Asia. The Western Development Strategy, launched at the beginning of this century, is emblematic of China's approach to regional stability.

The energy sector has been a major focus of China's economic engagement with Central Asia. In line with China's "going-out strategy" promoting overseas investment, as well as its efforts to secure energy resources from around the world to meet the country's growing energy needs, China has made major investments in Central Asia's energy sector.[13] The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline opened in 2005.[14] The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline followed in 2009, stretching from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before

10. Maduz, *Flexibility by Design*.

11. Lingling Wei and Thomas Grove, "Putin Is Now Xi's Junior Partner," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2026.

12. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China* (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 2022).

13. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Going Out: An Overview of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment* (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 2011); and Bruce Pannier, "Debt and Development: The Next Chapter of Chinese Investments in Central Asia," Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 11, 2025, https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/08/debt-and-development-the-next-chapter-of-chinese-investments-in-central-asia/.

14. F. William Engdahl, "China Lays Down Gauntlet in Energy War: The Geopolitics of Oil, Central Asia and the United States," *Asia-Pacific Journal*, December 12, 2005, https://apjjf.org/f-william-engdahl/1986/article.

reaching China.[15] This pipeline carries large volumes of gas from Turkmenistan to Chinese markets. Eventually, two other parallel lines followed, one of which carries natural gas from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in addition to Turkmen gas. These three lines, together with the proposed Line D that would extend from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan before crossing into China, form the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network.[16]

China has sought to strengthen regional connectivity through investments in regional infrastructure. In 2013, during a speech in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, Xi announced the formation of the Silk Road Economic Belt, one component of what eventually became known as the BRI. The Silk Road Economic Belt served as an umbrella covering existing and future endeavors to build roads, railroads, airports, and other infrastructure in Central Asia and beyond. The BRI envisioned several transport corridors that would improve China's connectivity with other regions of the world. Prospects for the Northern Corridor, which would pass from China to Russia and onward to Europe, declined as a result of the Russia-Ukraine War. This development increased the attractiveness of the Middle Corridor, which passes through Central Asia, giving a stimulus to the long-discussed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which began construction in 2025. China has used the BRI, including the Middle Corridor, to ensure direct access to mineral resources and the ability to transport them back home cheaply.

These considerations help to explain why Central Asia has recently been a major focus of the BRI. In 2025, China's BRI investments totaled $213.5 billion, a significant increase over the 2024 figure of $122 billion. Analysts noted that an "unusually high concentration" of this funding went to Central Asia, especially for projects related to metals and mining.[17] In 2025, China's BRI investments included $32.6 billion in the metals and mining sector, about 60 percent of which went to projects in Kazakhstan. China's largest project in Kazakhstan is a $12 billion aluminum complex. According to some analysts, China's focus on metals and mining in Central Asia may be driven at least in part by US-China trade tensions and by US intentions to establish dominance in Central Asia's minerals sector.[18]

15. "Flow of Natural Gas from Central Asia," China National Petroleum Corporation, n.d., accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.cnpc.com.cn/en/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia2.shtml.

16. Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Beijing Digs In for the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline," Lowy Institute, December 13, 2023, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beijing-digs-central-asia-china-gas-pipeline.

17. Ralph Jennings, "China Steps Up Belt and Road Initiative Funding with Focus on Central Asia," *South China Morning Post*, updated August 28, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3323354/china-steps-belt-and-road-initiative-funding-focus-central-asia.

18. Jennings, "China Steps Up"; and Mia Nurmamat, "China Signs Record US$213 Billion of New 'Belt and Road' Deals in 2025: Report," *South China Morning Post*, January 19, 2026, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3340442/china-signs-record-us213-billion-new-belt-and-road-deals-2025-report.

China has also taken steps to increase its involvement in regional security. This issue is a delicate one for China, which has been reluctant to expand its security presence abroad and which must account for Russia's interests in Central Asia.[19] To date, China and Russia have been successful in harmonizing their relations in the region and in smoothing over possible sources of tension. One reason for this success, to all outward appearances, is a tacit agreement on a division of labor in which Russia continues to serve as the region's main security provider while China acts as an engine for economic development. Most of China's security engagement with Central Asia has occurred within the framework of the SCO, which allows for coordination with Russia and the Central Asian states. By respecting Russia's interests in Central Asia, including its long-standing primacy in regional security, China can pursue its economic interests in the region while maintaining its close partnership with Russia.

China's own security interests in Central Asia are growing, however. As early as 2016, China established a mechanism with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to discuss security along China's western border. Russia's exclusion from this grouping raised eyebrows, but Chinese officials reportedly explained to their Russian counterparts that China's aim was to strengthen its own border security rather than to expand its role in regional security more generally. In 2019, reports emerged that China had established a military base in Tajikistan.[20] Further investigation revealed this base was for China's People's Armed Police, rather than for the regular People's Liberation Army. The purpose of this base, as well as another one China established later, was to enable China to coordinate with Tajikistan, the only Central Asian country that shares a border with both China and Afghanistan, on regional security issues. China's aim was to prevent sources of instability originating in Afghanistan from spreading through Tajikistan and into China's territory.[21]

Since Xi's announcement of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022, China's activities related to Central Asian security have fit neatly into this new framework. The SCO's approach to regional security, as it unfolded for more than two decades preceding the GSI's announcement, was consistent with the purpose of the newer initiative. Through its focus on nontraditional security threats such

19. Hamilton, "Power Transition."

20. Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html.

21. Stephen Blank, "China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does It Mean?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 18, 2019, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13569-chinas-military-base-in-tajikistan-what-does-it-mean.

as counterterrorism, as well as on law enforcement and regional security, the SCO has built a foundation for China's security engagement with Central Asia.[22]

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure has achieved a relatively high level of institutionalization, featuring routine meetings at the vice-ministerial level, multilateral counterterrorism exercises, and intelligence sharing. The Antiterrorism Interaction-2024 drill, which this organization conducted in Xinjiang in July 2024, marked the first time all SCO member states participated in a joint live counterterrorism exercise. The China–Central Asia (C+C5) Summit, which convened for the first time in May 2023 in Xi'an, China, has also emphasized security issues, including the notion that "security is the foundation of development" along the 3,300-kilometer common border between China and the Central Asian countries.[23] Through these initiatives and others, China has used security diplomacy to present itself as a bulwark of regional stability in Central Asia.[24]

Since the mid-2010s, China has also played a growing role in arms sales to Central Asia, becoming the region's second-largest foreign arms supplier after Russia. Since 2022, Russian arms sales to Central Asia have declined, falling by 52 percent in 2023 alone and creating opportunities for China. To date, China has sold unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, antiaircraft missile systems to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, armored vehicles to Tajikistan, and transport aircraft to Kazakhstan. Particularly striking are the examples of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which purchase more than 20 percent of their weapons from China.[25] By the mid-2020s, both countries had acquired Chinese HQ-9B air defense systems.[26] The HQ-9B, a more advanced version of Russia's S-300, has a range of 300 kilometers.[27] The JY-27A long-range, three-dimensional very-high-frequency radar, which accompanies the HQ-9B,

22. Sheena Chestnut Greitens et al., *A New World Cop on the Beat? China's Internal Security Outreach Under the Global Security Initiative* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2025), 22–25.

23. Greitens et al., *New World Cop*, 24.

24. Greitens et al., *New World Cop*, 22–25.

25. Ivan Yu. Zuenko, "China's Activity in Central Asia in Light of Russian Interests," *Russia in Global Affairs* 23, no. 2 (April–June 2025): 156–67.

26. "China's HQ-9B Long Range Air Defence System Continues to Take Global Markets by Storm: Azerbaijani Purchase Confirmed," *Military Watch Magazine*, November 5, 2025, https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/chinese-hq9b-air-defence-markets-storm.

27. "HQ-9," Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, n.d., accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/china/china-anti-access-area-denial/hq-9/.

has a range of 500 kilometers and is designed to detect stealth fighters.[28] China has also reportedly held discussions with Uzbekistan over a possible sale of fighter jets.[29]

Consistent with its efforts to promote the Digital Silk Road, China has rapidly expanded its influence in Central Asia's digital economies. The Central Asian countries have primarily adopted Chinese technologies and Russian regulatory models for digital governance, potentially strengthening authoritarian rule domestically and increasing these states' dependence on China and Russia. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, Chinese firms control at least 30 percent of the smartphone market and dominate the market for smart-city surveillance cameras. China's dominance in the digital sphere potentially leaves the Central Asian countries and their people vulnerable to data theft, surveillance, censorship, information manipulation, exploitation, coercion, and other threats.[30]

China's influence in Central Asia has continued to expand. A variety of factors have contributed to this trend, including China's ability to invest large sums of money in the region's infrastructure and economies, the decline of US influence following the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and the apparent weakening of Russia's influence at a time when it has been distracted by the Russia-Ukraine War. During the May 2023 China–Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, China pledged large-scale aid and investment to Central Asia and persuaded the countries of the region to sign on to China's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative.[31] A second China–Central Asia Summit was held in Astana in 2025. In line with their support for China's first three global initiatives, the Central Asian countries have also endorsed the more recently announced Global Governance Initiative.[32] These developments have raised concern among Western democracies that China could be gaining economic leverage over the region and drawing the Central Asian countries into its own conceptions of a revised international order.[33]

28. "JY-27A," radartutorial.eu, n.d., accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.radartutorial.eu/19.kartei/02.surv/karte029.en.html.

29. "China Trying to Expand Role as Arms Supplier to Central Asia," Eurasianet, April 8, 2025, https://eurasianet.org/china-trying-to-expand-role-as-arms-supplier-to-central-asia.

30. Dylan Welch, *Russia and China in Central Asia's Technology Stack: An analysis of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*, German Marshall Fund, June 2025.

31. Catherine Putz, "In Xi'an, China's Xi Calls for a 'Shared Future' with Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, May 19, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/in-xian-chinas-xi-calls-for-a-shared-future-with-central-asia/.

32. "Wang Yi Says China to Accelerate Common Development with Central Asian Countries," *The Caspian Post*, November 23, 2025, https://caspianpost.com/central-asia/wang-yi-says-china-to-accelerate-common-development-with-central-asian-countries.

33. Dewey Sim, "China Looks to Central Asia as the West Sees Threat to US-Led World Order," *South China Morning Post*, updated May 20, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3221199/china-looks-central-asia-west-sees-threat-us-led-world-order.

China's Next Steps in Central Asia

China has positioned itself to expand its influence in Central Asia significantly in the coming years. Building upon the activity described earlier, China will continue to pursue several main lines of effort, focusing on areas such as energy, critical minerals, infrastructure, security, diplomacy, and soft power. The Central Asian economies are attracting growing interest from various outside actors, including the United States, Europe, Türkiye, Gulf Arab States, and India. Despite this competition, China is well positioned to establish itself firmly as the main external contributor to Central Asia's economic growth and to pursue several important objectives in the region.

1. **China will push to complete Line D of the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network and bring the Central Asian pipelines to full capacity, while using its negotiations with Russia over the proposed Power of Siberia 2 pipeline to build bargaining leverage in Central Asia.** China has sought to use the prospective construction of Power of Siberia 2, which would have a capacity of 50 billion cubic meters, to strengthen its bargaining position in negotiations over the construction of Line D.[34] In September 2025, China and Russia signed a memorandum of intent to build Power of Siberia 2, but they have yet to reach agreements on crucial issues such as gas pricing and project financing.[35] In May 2026, during an official visit to Beijing, Russian President Vladimir Putin sought but failed to reach a deal on Power of Siberia 2, with Chinese negotiators holding out for more favorable prices.[36] China would appear to have an interest in completing both natural gas pipelines as part of its effort to increase access to secure overland energy supplies. At the same time, as with the already completed Power of Siberia 1 pipeline that originates in Russia, China has adopted a patient approach in negotiations over both projects. China's demonstrated willingness to engage in protracted negotiations while aiming to secure the lowest possible prices suggests that further delays in negotiations over Line D are possible. China also has a strong interest in ensuring the

34. Robert M. Cutler, "The Power of Siberia 2 Project and Central Asia's Gas Bargaining Power," *The Times of Central Asia*, September 12, 2025, https://timesca.com/the-power-of-siberia-2-project-and-central-asias-gas-bargaining-power/.

35. Elizabeth Wishnick, "Power of Siberia 2: Significant Shift in Global Gas Markets or Another Pipe(line) Dream?," *China's Resource Risks* (blog), September 6, 2025, https://chinasresourcerisks.substack.com/p/power-of-siberia-2-significant-shift.

36. Reid Standish and Colin Hood, "Putin Gets Show of Unity, but No New Pipeline Deal in Beijing Summit," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, May 20, 2026, https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-xi-power-of-siberia-iran-war-trump-china-russia/33760781.html.

Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network eventually operates at its full capacity, which was 55 billion cubic meters at the time of writing and would reach 85 billion cubic meters upon the successful completion of Line D. To date, the failure of existing pipelines to operate at full capacity has resulted from technical issues, underinvestment in gas fields, and a surge in Central Asia's domestic demand for gas during recent cold winters. Further Chinese investment in Turkmenistan's gas fields could help to alleviate this problem by boosting production, but this prospect is also contingent on China's negotiations over Power of Siberia 2 and Line D.

2. China will aim to achieve the strongest possible position in Central Asia's metals and mining sector. China's recent focus on this sector, reflected in its BRI investments, will continue and accelerate. China will explore all options for developing additional sites, increasing extractive capacity, and further strengthening its position in global markets for critical minerals, which is one of China's main points of leverage in its relations with the United States. Amid growing signs of US interest in Central Asia's critical minerals, China will redouble its own efforts to maintain dominance in the metals and mining sector.[37] Kazakhstan, which holds 15 rare earth deposits, will be the main focus of China's efforts.[38]

3. Acting within the BRI framework, China will press forward to complete the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway while seeking to shape the development of the Middle Corridor. After years of negotiations, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is now under construction. With agreements having been reached on the railway's route and financing, China will push to ensure the project's completion.[39] The railway has great geopolitical significance, as it will improve China's transportation connections to Central Asia and beyond while enhancing the country's

37. Aiman Nakispekova, "Critical Minerals Open New Chapter in US-Central Asia Relations," *The Astana Times*, June 10, 2026, https://astanatimes.com/2026/06/critical-minerals-open-new-chapter-in-us-central-asia-relations/.

38. Assel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan Boasts 15 Rare Earth Deposits, Eyes for Deeper Exploration," *The Astana Times*, January 19, 2024, https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/kazakhstan-boasts-15-rare-earth-deposits-eyes-for-deeper-exploration/.

39. Sergey Kwan, "Financing Agreement for China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project Signed in Bishkek," *The Times of Central Asia*, December 17, 2025, https://timesca.com/financing-agreement-for-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-project-signed-in-bishkek/.

ability to transport critical minerals back to Chinese territory.[40] Although the BRI's main focus in Central Asia has recently shifted to critical minerals, China will continue to explore ways to invest in regional infrastructural projects—including roads, bridges, airports, and tunnels—that can improve the country's access and connectivity. China will aim to exert maximum influence over the development of the Middle Corridor. The potential weakening of the Iranian regime as a result of US and Israeli military operations may complicate China's plans, which have focused on Iran as a primary outlet for the corridor.[41] China may also face strong US and European competition in shaping the development of Central Asia's westward transport outlets. China will continue to focus on Iran but may also give increased attention to multimodal, trans–Caspian Sea options focused on Baku, Azerbaijan.

4. In regional security affairs, China will continue to focus on nontraditional security threats within the frameworks of the SCO and the GSI while placing a priority on the security of China's western border. By continuing to address terrorism and other nontraditional security threats in the SCO, a body China connects to the GSI, China can engage in regional security through a framework that includes both Russia and the Central Asian states. This approach will avoid creating friction with Russia over China's growing role in Central Asian security. At the same time, China will redouble its own efforts related to border security. The security of China's western border will remain an ongoing concern, especially considering the continued threat from terrorist groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan Province.[42] China will further strengthen its People's Armed Police bases in Tajikistan and expand regional cooperation in border security and counterterrorism. China might also consider modestly expanding its regional security presence, especially in Tajikistan, where it has invested heavily in mines, roads, tunnels, and other infrastructure. Line D, the planned gas pipeline, will also pass through Tajikistan. China may perceive

40. Darren Spinck, "Why Transit Corridors Will Define the Central Asian Game," *The National Interest*, November 19, 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/why-transit-corridors-will-define-the-central-asian-game.

41. Ali Dayar and Joshua Bernard-Pearl, "Middle Corridor Live Map," Caspian Policy Center, June 9, 2025, https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/maps/middle-corridor-live-map.

42. Morgan Tadych, "ISIS Has Its Sights Set on a New Potential Ally—Uyghur Jihadi Groups," *MENASource* (blog), September 30, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-has-its-sights-set-on-a-new-potential-ally-uyghur-jihadi-groups/.

the need to protect its investments, whether by employing private security companies or by using other means. Unless regional conditions change considerably, China is unlikely to seek further basing arrangements or a more expansive role in regional security. China's arms sales to the region, however, are likely to grow.

5. China will bid to ensure the Central Asian countries' support for Chinese conceptions of world order, including any future global initiatives. Building upon the China-Central Asia summits of 2023 and 2025 and its success in winning the Central Asian countries' support for its global initiatives, China will attempt to draw the region further into Chinese conceptions of world order, such as the notion of a "community of common destiny."[43] China will also seek the Central Asian countries' support for any future Chinese global initiatives, as well as in the UN General Assembly and in other international bodies in which global norms and standards are shaped.

6. China will aim to strengthen its position in the Central Asian digital economies. By drawing the Central Asian countries further into the embrace of Chinese digital technologies, China will aim to strengthen its regional influence further. This objective would complement the goal of gaining Central Asian support for China's conceptions of world order, including in crucial realms such as Internet governance and digital authoritarianism. Success in this effort could also improve China's resilience against Western sanctions and increase the country's control over trade routes and access to critical minerals.[44]

7. China will attempt to address its shortcomings in soft power. Soft power is currently a weak link in China's outreach to the region. Compared to their perceptions of other countries such as Russia, Türkiye, the United States, and the European countries, the people of Central Asia have relatively little familiarity with China and its culture. The Central Asian countries harbor concerns about China's growing influence in their region and about China's ultimate intentions. China has sought to address these concerns by establishing Confucius Institutes, promoting Chinese cultural

43. Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 154–66.

44. Welch, *Central Asia's Technology Stack*, 70.

> programming on television and through other media, funding think tanks in Central Asia, and implementing other measures. These efforts have a long way to go toward achieving tangible results, but China will continue to focus on them. China will focus on cultural engagement, including efforts to increase the number of Central Asian students studying in China and to promote other people-to-people exchanges. China will also try to improve its image through public relations campaigns on social media.[45] Nevertheless, soft power is an area in which China will struggle for the foreseeable future.

Looking further ahead, one major question is whether China will continue to expand its involvement in Central Asia along existing lines or change its involvement qualitatively. Regional security is an especially important issue. China could gradually expand its current focus on border security to encompass the protection of Chinese investments in Central Asia, eventually raising questions about whether China should expand its role in regional security more broadly. Beyond security, China could also consider expanding its overall role in the region. The main question is whether China should continue to focus primarily on regional economic engagement or seek to expand its political and diplomatic influence, even to the extent of establishing China as the dominant power in Central Asia.

One major factor that will bear upon these questions is the future balance of power between China and Russia, both globally and in Central Asia.[46] As the China-Russia relationship has grown closer in recent decades, analysts have frequently identified Central Asia as a potential source of tension in the relationship. Moscow ruled over the region from the time of the tsarist imperial conquest in the nineteenth century until the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russia now aims to preserve its influence in Central Asia and has viewed China's growing presence in the region with some apprehension.

To date, China and Russia have handled their relationship in Central Asia smoothly.[47] Even as its regional influence has grown, China has paid due respect to Russia's interests in Central Asia and has sought to offer reassurance about its own intentions. For its part, Russia has concluded that China's approach to the region poses no threat in the near term. In any case, Russia has few means to resist

45. Assel G. Bitabar et al., "China's Digital Diplomacy in Kazakhstan: A Study of Instagram Posts from 2024 to 2025," Mapping Global China, January 4, 2026, https://mapglobalchina.com/research/chinas-digital-diplomacy-in-kazakhstan-a-study-of-instagram-posts-from-2024-to-2025.

46. Parviz Mullojonov et al., "China's Role and Involvement in Post-Soviet Central Asia," in *United States–Central Asia Perspectives on China* (American Councils for International Education, 2025), 56–64.

47. Brian G. Carlson, *Central Asia in an Era of Great-Power Rivalry*, CSS Analyses in Security Policy no. 327 (Center for Security Studies/ETH Zurich, July 2023).

China's inroads, given its own growing dependence on China and its inability to match China's financial resources for investment in Central Asia. Symbolic of the two countries' careful management of relations in the region was the May 2015 agreement to link China's Silk Road Economic Belt with the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russian-led regional integration project. Although this linkage has led to few concrete results, it demonstrates both countries' desire to avoid friction in their relations in Central Asia.[48]

In the near-to-medium term, including the period in which this volume's scenario might occur, the main question concerns Russia's power trajectory. By some indications, Russia's influence in Central Asia has weakened slightly since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[49] The Russia-Ukraine War has distracted Russia, cast doubt on its military prowess, and raised questions about its intentions toward Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, Russia has largely shored up its position in the region, preserving its ability to wield influence.[50]

Projecting from current trends, the balance of power between China and Russia in Central Asia is likely to remain roughly constant, even as China's regional influence grows steadily. Under these circumstances, China would likely continue offering reassurance to Russia. China's leaders would probably conclude that they retained plenty of scope to pursue their economic interests, but that seeking a significantly greater political and security role could antagonize Russia in ways detrimental to China's overall interests. Therefore, during the period considered in this volume, China is likely to maintain its current emphasis on economic engagement with Central Asia.

Nevertheless, if Russia weakens significantly in the coming years and can no longer play its current role in Central Asia, then the door could be open for China to establish itself as the dominant power in the region. In this scenario, a protracted stalemate or outright defeat in Ukraine, with all the attendant damage to Russia's economy and society, could force Russia to retrench and reduce its role in Central Asia. With Russia no longer able to play the role of the main security provider in the region, China might perceive a need to assume more responsibility for regional security itself.

48. James McBride et al., "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, updated February 2, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative.

49. Temur Umarov and Alexander Gabuev, "Is Russia Losing Its Grip on Central Asia? What China's Growing Regional Ambitions Mean for Moscow," *Foreign Affairs*, June 30, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/russia-losing-its-grip-central-asia.

50. Alexander Cooley, "Russia's Hidden Empire: How Moscow Has Rekindled Its Influence in the Post-Soviet Space," *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/central-asia/russias-hidden-empire.

China might also conclude that it should play a greater political and diplomatic role in Central Asia. At a minimum, China might seek greater political influence to promote regional stability. More ambitiously, as its rivalry with the United States intensifies, China might seek to pull the Central Asian countries decisively into its camp. In an extreme case, China could aim to turn at least some of them into client states. Such an outcome would become even more likely if the United States and Europe, along with other outside actors such as Türkiye and India, failed to consolidate their own regional influence in ways that could serve as a check on China's ambitions.

In the long term, China's own growing power could change the terms of its relationship with Russia. At present, China views Russia as a crucial partner in its competition with the United States. This consideration gives China a powerful incentive to offer reassurance to Russia, including in Central Asia, to maintain Russia's support. At some point, China's view of Russia could change. China has ambitious goals it hopes to achieve by the middle of this century, including gaining control of Taiwan, establishing itself as the dominant power in Asia, and ensuring China "leads the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence."[51] If China achieves these goals, then it might feel sufficiently self-confident to assert its interests more openly, including in Central Asia, while showing less concern for Russia's views.

In the scenario considered in this collaborative study, however, China has not yet achieved these goals. Therefore, the most likely outcome during the period under consideration is one in which China and Russia continue to pursue their current policies of carefully managing relations in Central Asia, with an eye toward preserving cooperation at the global level. If, during a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, China's chosen course of action in Central Asia resembles the one described in this chapter, then Russia is likely to offer its full support. Nevertheless, US engagement with the region could play an important role in ensuring that the Central Asian states do not become overly reliant on these two US adversaries.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

The United States has traditionally faced significant challenges in exerting influence in Central Asia. The region sits adjacent to China and Russia, forcing the Central Asian countries to pay due respect to the interests of their powerful neighbors, but it is geographically distant from the United States.

51. 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" (speech, 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, CN, October 16, 2022), https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/china-s-party-congress/transcript-president-xi-jinping-s-report-to-china-s-2022-party-congress.

Following the September 11 attacks, the United States rapidly expanded its influence in Central Asia, establishing military bases in the region to support US operations in Afghanistan. Over time, as the Afghanistan war failed to achieve its objectives, US influence in Central Asia waned. The failure to stabilize Afghanistan frustrated US plans to strengthen Central Asia's transport connections to South Asia, which were designed to reduce the region's reliance on China and Russia. By 2014, US influence in Central Asia had already diminished following the departure from regional military bases. This influence declined further after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Despite US corporations investing heavily in the Central Asian economies, especially in the energy sector, the United States has encountered persistent Russian influence and growing Chinese inroads in the region.

Despite these challenges, recent events have opened new possibilities. The United States should pursue robust commercial engagement with Central Asia, placing particular emphasis on promising opportunities in transportation and critical minerals. In the transportation sector, prospects have improved for the United States to promote the development of a transit corridor connecting Central Asia to the west, potentially reducing the region's dependence on Russia while also limiting China's ability to shape the Middle Corridor to its own advantage. By investing in the development of Central Asia's critical minerals, the United States can strengthen its own supply chains while limiting China's ability to wield its strong position in this crucial sector as leverage against the United States.

Improved relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have opened new possibilities for transit routes from Central Asia to the west. In August 2025, President Donald Trump hosted Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia and President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan at a White House summit, during which the two visiting leaders signed a joint declaration of intent to end their countries' long-running conflict. At the same time, Armenia announced it would grant the United States exclusive development rights to a transit corridor passing through Armenian territory. The 27-mile corridor, to be named the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), will run along Armenia's southern border with Iran, connecting Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan on the border with Türkiye.[52]

The Armenia-Azerbaijan deal partly resulted from a loss of regional influence by two US adversaries, namely Russia and Iran. In the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia traditionally supported Armenia, a fellow member of the

52. Karoun Demirjian and Luke Broadwater, "Leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan Sign Peace Pledge at White House," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/us/politics/trump-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal.html.

Collective Security Treaty Organization, in upholding Armenia's control over the exclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is located inside Azerbaijan's territory. In 2023, however, Russia was distracted by the Russia-Ukraine War and unable to prevent Azerbaijan from seizing the territory and forcing its Armenian inhabitants to leave. This situation opened the door to the Armenia-Azerbaijan agreement at the White House. Following the announcement of this agreement and the TRIPP, Iran expressed its opposition to the transit corridor and promised a firm response. However, US and Israeli military operations in 2025 and 2026 have left Iran weakened and unable to mount an effective response.[53] In March 2025, Iranian drones crossed into Azerbaijan's territory and attacked the Nakhchivan International Airport, but the two countries avoided escalation in the aftermath of the attack.[54]

The United States should seize the opportunity the TRIPP transit corridor presents to assist the Central Asian countries in developing their own transport linkages to the west. The Central Asian countries could link up with the TRIPP, developing additional rail and energy conduits that would traverse the South Caucasus and Türkiye to reach the Mediterranean Sea. This effort could provide a valuable export route for Central Asia's oil, gas, minerals, and other resources. In November 2025, the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan held a summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in a new C6 format. Close cooperation under this new framework increases the prospects for connecting Central Asia to the TRIPP.[55] If this effort succeeds, it could spoil China's plans to dominate Central Asia's westward trade under a BRI framework that would establish transit routes mostly leading to Iran and beyond.[56]

Recent developments have also opened commercial opportunities for the United States in Central Asia. In November 2025, Trump hosted the presidents of all five Central Asian countries at a White House meeting in the C5+1 format.[57] This meeting showcased a series of previously negotiated or newly concluded business deals in critical minerals, transportation, energy, and other sectors. In a deal valued

53. Melik Kaylan, "Trump's Summit with Central Asian Leaders Can Rebalance World Power," *Forbes*, November 10, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/melikkaylan/2025/11/10/trumps-summit-with-central-asian-leaders-can-rebalance-world-power/.

54. Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Why Azerbaijan and Iran Stepped Away from Confrontation," *The National Interest*, April 25, 2026, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/why-azerbaijan-and-iran-stepped-away-from-confrontation.

55. Eric Rudenshiold, "Two Summits, One Pivot: Central Asia Steps into the Sun," *The National Interest*, November 21, 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/two-summits-one-pivot-central-asia-steps-into-the-sun.

56. Kaylan, "Trump's Summit."

57. Anton Troianovski et al., "In Cozying Up to Trump, Leaders Hedge Their Reliance on Moscow and Beijing," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/07/us/politics/central-asia-leaders-trump.html.

at $1.1 billion, Cove Capital, a mining investment firm, agreed to develop a large deposit of tungsten, a wear-resistant metal used to harden steel for weapons and other products, in Kazakhstan.[58] Parallel initiatives for the development of uranium, copper, lithium, and rare earth deposits are also proceeding, aiming to reduce dependence on China and secure US access to essential inputs for semiconductors, weapons systems, and artificial intelligence applications.[59] Kazakhstan agreed to buy 300 locomotives from the US firm Wabtec for $4.2 billion.[60] Airlines in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan agreed to buy up to 37 Boeing aircraft.[61] Chevron and its partners recently completed a $48 billion expansion of Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil field.[62]

Under present conditions, such commercial diplomacy is likely to be the most effective form of US engagement with Central Asia. In the coming years, the United States should build on the promise of the November C5+1 summit, aiming to bolster US regional influence, support the Central Asian countries, and limit Chinese and Russian leverage over the region.[63] The United States should also continue to promote existing forms of cooperation with Central Asia. For example, all five Central Asian countries continue to participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace.[64] The United States should continue to seek cooperation with Central Asian governments on democracy promotion and human rights, but it should be patient and avoid hectoring them in ways that are likely to alienate them and push them toward China and Russia.

The United States should recognize that the Central Asian countries must maintain good working relationships with China and Russia. They are unlikely to move fully into the US camp or to offer their full support for a liberal international order or for Western conceptions of liberal democracy. However, the United States has an important advantage in that it shares the Central Asian states' desire

58. "Cove Capital to Mine Kazakhstan Tungsten in Trump-Announced Deal," Reuters, updated November 6, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cove-capital-mine-kazakhstan-tungsten-trump-announced-deal-2025-11-06/.

59. Rudenshiold, "Two Summits, One Pivot."

60. "Kazakhstan's Rail Deal – A Long Way from Soviet-Era Locomotives," *The Times of Central Asia*, September 24, 2025, https://timesca.com/kazakhstans-rail-deal-a-long-way-from-soviet-era-locomotives/.

61. Jay Menon, "Air Astana, Uzbekistan Airways and Somon Air Sign $7bn Boeing Aircraft Deals," *Aerospace Global News*, November 7, 2025, https://aerospaceglobalnews.com/news/air-astana-uzbekistan-airways-somon-air-7bn-boeing-deals/.

62. Stanley Reed, "How Chevron Aims to Tap More Oil Below Kazakhstan's Grassy Plains," *The New York Times*, updated January 5, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/business/chevron-kazakhstan-oil.html.

63. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, "Deals, Not Declarations: America's New Central Asia Strategy," *The National Interest*, November 6, 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/deals-not-declarations-americas-new-central-asia-strategy.

64. "Partnership for Peace Programme," NATO, updated June 28, 2024, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-programme.

to uphold their sovereignty and avoid excessive dependence on China and Russia.[65] This common desire provides the basis for a productive US relationship with Central Asia, provided US policymakers and business leaders are prepared to give the region the sustained attention that this objective requires.

Conclusion

Through its engagement with Central Asia since the 1990s, China has established a strong position in the region that is likely to serve it well in the event of future crises in the Taiwan Strait or elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. In such crises, China's leadership can already be reasonably certain of obtaining the material support the country needs from Central Asia. Although the natural inclination of the Central Asian states would be to stay out of the great-power rivalry between the United States and China, a variety of economic, diplomatic, and geographic considerations would encourage them to maintain normal diplomatic relations and economic exchange with China. From China's standpoint, such an outcome would be satisfactory.

Despite this overall outlook, the benefits China may gain from cooperation with the Central Asian states in a crisis are subject to important limitations. If the United States imposes a naval blockade that proves effective, China cannot compensate for its lost access to seaborne energy supplies purely by relying on oil and gas shipped through overland pipelines. This limitation is true of Russia, which is China's most important international partner.[66] It is also true of Central Asia. Energy supplies from Russia and Central Asia can contribute to China's energy security in a crisis, especially if the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline and Line D are eventually built and reach full capacity. However, in the face of an effective US naval blockade, Russian and Central Asian energy supplies would fall well short of satisfying China's energy demand, which is set to expand rapidly in the coming years.[67]

In 2025, China consumed nearly 442 billion cubic meters of natural gas, more than 38 percent of which was imported.[68] According to various forecasts,

65. Tatiana Gfoeller, "How the US Should Partner with Central Asian States to Avoid Russia-China Dominance," *New Atlanticist* (blog), October 21, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/partner-with-central-asian-states-to-avoid-russia-china-dominance/.

66. David R. Stone, "Russia's Potential Role in a Protracted War with China," in *The 2024 Carlisle Conference on the PLA: Protracted War Against the PRC*, ed. Joshua Arostegui (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, January 2026), 220–23, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/983/.

67. "Restructuring and Evolution: Key Drivers in China's Power Demand Surge," S&P Global, May 27, 2025, https://www.spglobal.com/energy/en/news-research/blog/electric-power/052725-restructuring-and-evolution-key-drivers-in-chinas-power-demand-surge.

68. Energy Institute, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2026* (Energy Institute, 2026), 49, 52.

China's natural gas consumption is projected to increase steadily throughout the 2030s before peaking at some level between 600 billion and 700 billion cubic meters by 2040.[69] Despite growing domestic natural gas production, China's dependence on imported gas is also projected to grow rapidly, potentially hovering at around 60 percent by the time peak consumption is reached in 2040.[70] If the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline is eventually built, then the full capacity of Russian gas pipelines to China would be slightly less than 100 billion cubic meters.[71] The completion of Line D, which would increase the capacity of the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network to 85 billion cubic meters, would thus leave China's total pipeline supplies of natural gas from Russia and Central Asia well below its total import needs.

The scenario presented in this chapter assumes the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline and Line D are complete and pumping gas at full capacity. In the wake of the 2026 Iran war against Iran, uncertainty about the future stability of Middle Eastern energy supplies could strengthen China's interest in Power of Siberia 2, potentially leading to a deal on this pipeline.[72] However, this outcome is highly uncertain, as shown by Putin's failure to secure a deal on Power of Siberia 2 during his visit to Beijing in May 2026, and may not occur before the outbreak of the kind of Taiwan Strait crisis envisioned in this collaborative study. If China attempts and fails to seize Taiwan in a rapid fait accompli, leading to a protracted war, then China's difficulties in importing sufficient energy volumes could shift the advantage to Taiwan and its defenders in a US-led coalition.

Although China has established a strong position in Central Asia, robust US engagement with the region could pay important dividends in the coming years. If the US government and business leaders cooperatively pursue commercial engagement with Central Asia, their efforts could yield both strategic and economic benefits. Major US investments in the region's critical minerals could strengthen the US position in this sector, potentially thwarting China's attempts to use its dominance in critical minerals as leverage against the United States. A concerted effort by the United States, in cooperation with its European allies, to shape westward transport routes from Central Asia could stymie China's attempts

69. See, for example, Colleen Howe and Sam Li, "WGC-Sinopec Sees China Gas Demand Peaking near 620 bcm Between 2035 and 2040," Reuters, May 20, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/wgc-sinopec-sees-china-gas-demand-peaking-near-620-bcm-between-2035-2040-2025-05-21/; and "China's CNPC Expects Peak Gas Demand by 2040," Energy Intelligence, December 17, 2025, https://www.energyintel.com/0000019b-228a-d02f-adfb-e69bdddf0000.

70. DNV, *Global Energy Transition Outlook 2025* (DNV, 2025).

71. Erica Downs et al., *The Future of the Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline* (Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia, May 2024).

72. Reid Standish, "Will Iran War Give Green Light to Russia's Power of Siberia-2 Pipeline?," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, March 24, 2026, https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-iran-war-oil-gas-energy-pipeline-middle-east/33714378.html.

to shape the Middle Corridor to suit its own preferences and to use the corridor as a major supply route in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Such US initiatives could help the Central Asian countries avoid developing an excessive dependence on China, an objective that is in their own interest and in the interest of the United States.

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Excluded from the Equation: How China Can Keep Europe Out of the War

Darrell Driver and Joel Hillison

Europe is a critical component of any US strategy. Europe contains the United States' most important trade and investment partners and the transatlantic economy is the largest in the world, amounting to $9.5 trillion. Sixty-four percent of global investment in the United States comes from Europe and 56 percent of US global investment goes into Europe, accounting for 5.3 million jobs in the United States and 4.6 million jobs across Europe.[1] One-quarter of US exports and imports are exchanged with Europe, making Europe—not Mexico, Canada, or China—the United States' largest trading partner.[2] In 2024, US trade with the EU was estimated at $1.5 trillion, whereas US trade with China equaled only $659 billion. China's trade with the EU was estimated to be at about €845 billion ($965 billion).[3]

On the military front, Europe is home to the United States' closest allies and is deeply integrated into US military power projection in much of the world. For example, Ramstein Air Base and its surrounding area alone comprise the

1. Daniel S. Hamilton and Joseph P. Quinlan, *The Transatlantic Economy 2025* (Foreign Policy Institute / Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies/Transatlantic Leadership Network, 2025).

2. John R. Deni, "Does NATO Still Matter?," *The Dallas Morning News*, March 31, 2025, https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2025/03/31/does-nato-still-matter/.

3. "European Union," Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d., accessed November 19, 2025, https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/europe/european-union; "The People's Republic of China," Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d., accessed November 19, 2025, https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china; and "EU-China Trade: Facts and Figures," European Council and Council of the European Union, updated August 8, 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/infographics/eu-china-trade/.

United States' largest overseas military community, as well as the US military's largest transport hub and rear-area medical facility outside the homeland. In addition, if the United States repositioned military assets from Europe to the Indo-Pacific, port facilities in Europe would become critical embarkation points. These facilities would also be important debarkation points for Canadian and European allies, reinforcing European deterrence against a potential Russian attack. European ports are also critical for maintaining Atlantic sea lines of communication, providing major logistical hubs in places like Rota, Spain, and Crete Naval Base. Ports located in the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Norway also serve as important refueling, repair, and resupply points for ships transiting to the Arctic and Asia via the Atlantic Ocean.

The centrality of Europe to the United States' economy and global military reach would provide China with strong incentives to exert maximal pressure on Europe in a potential conflict, seeking to limit its support for the United States. Additionally, Russian opportunists would be tempted to take advantage of any conflict in which the United States' focus and military capabilities were absorbed by a war in Asia. Despite such challenges, preserving the transatlantic military and economic relationship will be critical to the United States' ability to prosecute any protracted war successfully.

This chapter considers how the established Asian conflict scenario might spill over into Europe, reviews the trends that make this scenario possible, and assesses how the People's Republic of China (PRC) may seek to deepen its ability to escalate horizontally in Europe. The final subsection offers recommendations for how these trends may be arrested and, in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, how any threats to US transatlantic interests may be limited.

Engaging in Europe: Ongoing Conflict

In the lead-up to hostilities between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific, China begins escalating its hybrid-warfare activities below the threshold of an Article 5 attack on countries in NATO and the EU. China's primary objective is to deter the United States' European allies from actively intervening in the Indo-Pacific. China pursues this objective through a series of cyberattacks against high-value economic and military targets in Europe, with a focus on disrupting civilian and military infrastructure. These attacks are assessed to be part of a signaling campaign that highlights China's ability to disrupt key European economic nodes such as telecommunications, airports and seaports, and energy industries.

China is demonstrating its ability to cripple key sectors of European economies. It pairs signaling attacks with restrictions on critical components of the wind and solar industries. China restricts the export of critical minerals, medical supplies, and pharmaceuticals to Europe, blaming these restrictions on the United States by claiming it disrupted shipping in the Indo-Pacific. China also restricts the flow of legacy microchips (used in automobiles and green technologies) to European states.[4] Both China and Russia have recently moved beyond typical hybrid activities. In space, China conducts several tests of anti-satellite systems around US satellites. But in one case, a Chinese rocket explodes in the vicinity of an EU military satellite. China blames the incident on US jamming, which allegedly caused the rocket to veer off course.

China's secondary objective is apparently to fix key US assets in Europe. Recent cyberattacks against key US airports and seaports have disrupted US efforts to shift key enablers (such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; airlift and refueling assets; and airborne early-warning and control aircraft) to the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, China conducts espionage activities at European ports to gain valuable intelligence about US and European military movements.

All these efforts are augmented by a disinformation and propaganda campaign designed to turn public attitudes against the United States by portraying it as an external aggressor in the Indo-Pacific. Through this information campaign, China seeks to portray its efforts in the western Pacific as attempts to restore Indo-Pacific stability by asserting its sovereignty over Taiwan. China also offers to partner with European governments and industries to combat recent cyberattacks, which it blames on discontented US actors and Islamic immigrants who have failed to integrate into European societies. In a more directed information action, China issues specific warnings to NATO's secretary-general, indicating an invocation of Article 5 over recent incidents in the Indo-Pacific would be considered an act of war.

China's social-media campaigns intensify, blaming pro-US politicians for initiating the conflict around Taiwan and potentially dragging Europe into a conflict in which it does not want to participate. China also increases its clandestine financial support for right-wing political parties in Europe, such as France's National Rally party. This support includes social-media messaging that reinforces France's interest in greater strategic autonomy and criticizes aggressive US activities in Latin America, the Middle East, and recently in the Indo-Pacific. China's main narrative highlights the economic benefits of breaking the US stranglehold on the global economy

4. Pieter Haeck and Giovanna Coi, "Europe Has Risky Reliance on China for Low-Tech Chips, Auditors Warn," *POLITICO*, April 28, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-reliance-china-low-tech-microchips-manufacturing-european-court-of-auditors/.

and enhancing economic ties between Europe and China. Building upon China's all-weather strategic partnership with Hungary and its previous investments in Türkiye, both countries receive massive new investments from Chinese businesses. These investments are designed either to keep Hungary and Türkiye on the sidelines of a conflict or to convince them to pursue better relations with China and Russia.[5]

Russia also appears to sense the crisis around Taiwan presents an opportunity. Because the bulk of US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets have shifted to the western Pacific, Russia engages in both cyberattacks and sabotage (primarily in eastern Europe). Europe also sees an uptick in police investigations of potential targeted assassinations of both industry leaders and political figures with US sympathies, similar to the 2024 plot to kill the chief executive officer of Rheinmetall.[6] Russia is believed to be behind these assassinations. In the lead-up to the crisis in the Taiwan Strait, Russia is involved in efforts to disrupt European elections, blaming immigrants for recent assassination plots and acts of sabotage, and lambasting centrist political parties for putting US interests over European interests. Russia also increases its clandestine financial support for right-wing political parties in Europe, such as Germany's Alternative for Germany. This support includes social-media messaging that reinforces Germany's economic interest in renewing energy ties with Russia. Similarly, Russia intensifies its jamming of European satellites and the Global Positioning System while navigating its satellites closer to European satellites, potentially setting the stage for more aggressive action in the future.

Unclear is whether Russia is coordinating its activities with Beijing or is simply seizing an opportunity to destabilize NATO while US attention is directed toward the Indo-Pacific. Russia is staging for a series of provocative exercises on NATO's borders and is increasing its airspace violations in the Baltic states and Poland. Russia also steps up the use of drones to disrupt airport operations in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. Additionally, Russia turns to politically friendly leaders in Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia to question the wisdom of continued US leadership in Europe. Most worryingly, Russia increases its nuclear saber-rattling in Europe while simultaneously undermining confidence in the United States' willingness to follow through on its nuclear guarantees to Europe. Russia openly asks Europeans if the United States would really trade Washington for Warsaw in a nuclear exchange.

5. Anita Komuves and Boldizsar Gyori, "China's Xi Jinping Says China-Hungary Relations an 'All-Weather' Strategic Partnership," Reuters, updated May 9, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/chinas-xi-jinping-hungary-discuss-ukraine-infrastructure-2024-05-09/.

6. Csongor Körömi, "NATO: There Was Officially a Russian Plot to Kill European Weapons Chief," *POLITICO*, January 28, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-official-confirms-russian-plot-kill-european-weapons-chief-armin-papperger/.

Both Europe and Washington are concerned the crisis in the Taiwan Strait may spill over into Europe. China uses a combination of diplomatic and economic pressure and cyber signaling to convince Europeans becoming involved in an Indo-Pacific war would not be in their interests. For example, China increasingly pressures Hungary to block any NATO or EU condemnation of Chinese activities around Taiwan. At the same time, Russia uses the crisis to convince Europeans the United States is not reliably able to backstop the security of NATO allies. The possibility that poses the most danger to Europe is the possibility of Moscow taking this narrative further, using the cover of military exercises to seize parts of NATO territory in northeastern Europe while critical US capabilities like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; air defense; and long-range precision fires are being consumed by the Indo-Pacific crisis.

The United States' inability or unwillingness to come to the aid of its European allies in such a crisis could result in the dissolution of the NATO alliance, which would be a significant victory for both China and Russia. China's refusal to negotiate with the United States about the recent military conflict, and China's increased supply of dual-use civilian and military material to Russia, exacerbates fears about the dissolution of NATO. For now, China appears content for Russia to continue conducting its large-scale exercises without initiating a general engagement. Beijing's and Moscow's future intentions, and whether those intentions align, are less clear. So far, Russia and Belarus's large-scale, snap exercise (taking place in Belarus and in Russia's Western Military District) and the ongoing sabotage campaign are effectively consuming NATO's and the EU's attention, with the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania all demanding an increased NATO presence in their countries.

Already, the possibility of a conflict with Russia has heavily circumscribed what role US and European military assets located on the continent might play in an Indo-Pacific conflict. Germany and France cancel planned freedom-of-navigation exercises in the Taiwan Strait and the United Kingdom scales back planned deployments of the HMS *Prince of Wales* to the Indian Ocean. In response to increased Russian activity, the EU is set to vote on a first round of new, secondary sanctions on states that have continued to trade with Russia. But Hungary and Slovakia indicate they will oppose additional sanctions and publicly call on other nations to support China's peace proposal. The Baltic states call for Article 4 consultations, but some countries, such as Türkiye, express they are hesitant to overreact to what they call a limited incident in the Indo-Pacific. Demonstrations against US foreign policy take place outside some of the air-base hubs, medical facilities, and European ports that are most important to US force projection. For fear Russia will escalate its attempts at nuclear coercion, pro-US European governments call for the United States to maintain

its conventional presence in Europe during the crisis. These challenges suggest the United States can expect Europe to provide limited direct military assistance during the Indo-Pacific crisis.

Trending Chinese Initiatives in Europe

The described scenario is possible because, over the past few decades, China has worked hard to cultivate a series of political and economic levers of influence that could prove useful during a confrontation with the United States in Asia. Whereas some European leaders have become more aware of China's efforts and their potential strategic consequences, progress toward limiting Chinese influence has been uneven. Northern and western European states have taken steps to limit China's ability to influence political and economic decision making, though PRC influence in southeastern Europe remains a concern. China's influence is especially evident in EU decision-making processes, where select European states that are most vulnerable to China's influence have proven willing to side with China and block decisions deemed counter to PRC interests.

China's efforts to pressure European states on political matters have been most successful in countries where China has cultivated economic relationships through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries arrangement, or other business initiatives.[7] China's influence has proven to be strongest in European states where Chinese economic investments are most extensive and enduring. The Budapest-Belgrade railway modernization project is one of the most visible investments China has made in extending its BRI into southeastern Europe. China's other projects include assisting Serbia with the Belgrade metro line and completing sections of the Pan-European Corridor XI, which provides highway and ferry connections among Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Italy.

The acquisition of stakes in port facilities has been a particular focus of PRC business ventures. The most visible of these acquisitions has been the China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO)'s efforts to accumulate a majority stake in the terminals of the Port of Piraeus, Greece: an important EU-Asia transshipment port. But COSCO also owns a controlling stake in the port of Zeebrugge, Belgium, and owns controlling stakes in the largest terminals in Valencia and Bilbao, Spain. The Chinese company COSCO and other state-owned enterprises also own significant minority stakes in the ports of Thessaloniki, Greece; Hamburg, Germany; Antwerp, Belgium; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; Barcelona, Spain; Dunkirk and Le Havre, France; Stockholm, Sweden; Vado Ligure, Italy;

7. "China's Belt and Road Initiative Is Booming Again," *The Economist*, November 2, 2025, 33–34.

and Gdynia, Poland.[8] In the third quarter of 2025, about 846 million tons of goods went through the EU's main ports, with main ports being defined as ports that handle more than one million tons of goods annually.[9] Of the 846 million tons of goods reported in the third quarter of 2025, just five ports—Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Gdansk, and Le Havre—accounted for around 220 million tons or a quarter of the total.[10] Outside the EU, Chinese companies are also majority investors in Türkiye's Kumport port in Istanbul. Ports are difficult to close completely, though disruptions can have outsize impacts, and such disruptions could result from a wide range of events, including strikes, work slowdowns, acts of sabotage, and cyberattacks. Even if port disruption is not the goal, the heavy presence of Chinese state-owned enterprises at key European points of military embarkation and debarkation provides the People's Republic of China with ample opportunity to surveil NATO's military movements.

In addition to ports, PRC companies have made headway in the European 5G market and in Europe's critical undersea fiber-optic infrastructure. Despite the European Commission urging European countries to restrict or outright exclude Huawei and the ZTE Corporation from their 5G infrastructures, the implementation of these restrictions has been uneven.[11] Currently, 17 EU member states have failed to develop comprehensive plans to reduce their dependence on Chinese tech companies. According to the chief executive officer of Strand Consult, "One decision by the Chinese Communist Party, with its deep ties to Huawei, could cripple Germany's mobile-dependent digital economy, triggering widespread disruption across the entire EU."[12] Chinese companies have also made inroads in the European undersea infrastructure—an effort that has been less widely publicized than China's infiltration of the European 5G market. This undersea infrastructure includes the PEACE Cable System that links Europe and Africa and the proposed Europe–Middle East–Asia cable, which is owned by a subsidiary of China's Hengtong Group.[13] These cable systems were developed as part of China's Digital Silk Road initiative, providing Chinese state-owned enterprises with a level of access that

8. Karin Smit Jacobs, *Chinese Strategic Interests in European Ports*, PE 739.367 (European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2023).

9. "Maritime Transport of Goods - Quarterly Data," Statistics Explained, March 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=666892.

10. "Maritime Transport of Goods."

11. European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: Implementation of the 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox*, C(2023) 4049 (European Commission, June 2023).

12. Théophane Hartmann, "Seventeen EU Countries Not Ready to Cut China 5G Dependence," *European Business Review*, March 19, 2025, https://www.europeanbusinessreview.eu/page.asp?pid=7640.

13. Joe Brock, "China Plans $500 Million Subsea Internet Cable to Rival US Backed Project," Reuters, updated April 6, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-plans-500-mln-subsea-internet-cable-rival-us-backed-project-2023-04-06/.

has caused concern about China's potential to conduct surveillance or even impose an outright blackout on these critical data highways.[14] These concerns have received more attention following recent incidents in which Chinese-owned vessels were implicated in the sabotage of existing undersea cables in the Baltic Sea.[15]

China's business ventures have affected European decision making on the People's Republic of China. In 2017—one year after COSCO purchased a majority stake in the Port of Piraeus—Greece blocked an EU statement at the UN that was critical of China's human rights record. This action marked the first time the routine statement had been blocked by one of the 27 EU member states, with Greece arguing the statement was detrimental to the EU's relationship with China.[16] Hungary followed a similar path in 2021 when it blocked an EU statement criticizing China for its crackdown on political freedom in Hong Kong.[17] In 2024, Xi Jinping honored Hungary and Serbia with a visit, during which Hungary's Viktor Orbán promised "China can count on Hungary" to prevent the EU from implementing trade barriers that would affect Chinese companies that benefit from state subsidies.[18]

Outside southeastern Europe, other European states have become more cautious of the way China has demonstrated a willingness to leverage economic influence for political gain. In 2021, Lithuania was the first state to exit the Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries partnership, followed by Latvia's and Estonia's departures in 2022.[19] China retaliated against the 2021 opening of a Taiwanese diplomatic office in Lithuania by placing restrictions on Lithuanian imports. China similarly retaliated against Czechia through diplomatic protests and threats of consequences in response to the country's political

14. Nancy Ross and Maggie Vencill, "Digital Silk Road Peace: Subsea Cable Connections to the ICT," MITRE, May 2, 2024, https://www.mitre.org/news-insights/publication/digital-silk-road-peace-subsea-cable-connections-ict.

15. Bojan Pancevski, "Chinese Ship's Crew Suspected of Deliberately Dragging Anchor for 100 Miles to Cut Baltic Cables," *The Wall Street Journal*, updated November 29, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/chinese-ship-suspected-of-deliberately-dragging-anchor-for-100-miles-to-cut-baltic-cables-395f65d1.

16. Robin Emmott and Angeliki Koutantou, "Greece Blocks EU Statement on China Human Rights at U.N.," Reuters, updated June 19, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/greece-blocks-eu-statement-on-china-human-rights-at-un-idUSKBN1990FP/; and Helena Smith, "Greece Blocks EU's Criticism at UN of China's Human Rights Record," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/18/greece-eu-criticism-un-china-human-rights-record.

17. Csaba Moldicz, "Hungary External Relations Briefing: A Foreign Policy of Vetoes? The Limitations of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *Weekly Briefing* 40, no. 4 (May 2021).

18. Jean-Baptiste Chastand and Harold Thibault, "Xi Jinping's European Visit Takes Him to Allies Hungary and Serbia," *Le Monde*, May 8, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/08/xi-jinping-s-european-visit-takes-him-to-allies-hungary-and-serbia_6670753_4.html.

19. Ricardo Barrios et al., *The European Union and China*, Congressional Research Service Report IF10252 (Congressional Research Service, June 2023).

interactions with Taiwan in 2023.[20] China's growing ties to Russia and its willingness to further its strategic interests by leveraging economic ties have variously been cited as reasons why global actors are growing increasingly skeptical of China's motives.[21] Many of these concerns were exacerbated by China's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, when China took advantage of economic strain to continue acquiring European infrastructure, firms, and dual-use civilian and military technologies, albeit at rates that were lower than prepandemic levels.[22] Nevertheless, the most significant result of the pandemic was a sudden awareness of the vulnerability of Europe's China-based supply chains.[23]

The overall numbers are telling. Europe and the United States are highly economically interdependent, and the same can be said for Europe and Asia. The Indo-Pacific makes up almost 40 percent of Germany's trade outside the EU, and estimates suggest at least a 10 percent drop in global gross domestic product would result from a military conflict over Taiwan.[24] In a rapidly developing situation in Taiwan, any European hesitance to take a firm stand alongside the United States could provide a window in which China could escalate, increasing the likelihood of military confrontation.

Moreover, economic pressure is not the only lever the People's Republic of China has indicated a willingness to use in Europe. In recent years, China, alongside Russia, has targeted Europe through an increasing number of sabotage operations, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns. In addition to China's previously mentioned use of a ship anchor to cut Baltic Sea fiber-optic cables, in October 2023, another Chinese ship damaged a gas pipeline and other undersea

20. Bonny Lin et al., "Tracking China's April 2023 Military Exercises Around Taiwan," ChinaPower, updated November 8, 2023, https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-chinas-april-2023-military-exercises-around-taiwan/.

21. Stuart Lau, "Down to 14+1: Estonia and Latvia Quit China's Club in Eastern Europe," *POLITICO*, August 11, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/down-to-14-1-estonia-and-latvia-quit-chinas-club-in-eastern-europe/.

22. John R. Deni and Jake Shatzer, "China's Economic Statecraft in Europe During the Pandemic," War on the Rocks, October 16, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/chinas-economic-statecraft-in-europe-during-the-pandemic/; Agatha Kratz et al., *Chinese FDI in Europe: 2020 Update* (Mercator Institute for China Studies, June 2021); Francesca Ghiretti et al., *Chinese Investments in European Maritime Infrastructure*, PE 747.278 (European Parliament, September 2023); and Nicholas Nelson and Lauren Speranza, "Security Risks: Dual-Use Technology in Europe," in *China, Europe, and the Pandemic Recession: Beijing's Investments and Transatlantic Security*, ed. John R. Deni (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2022), 151–98, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/949/.

23. Sam Lowe, "Securing Europe's Medical Supply Chains Against Future Shocks," Centre for European Reform, May 29, 2020, https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2020/securing-europes-medical-supply-chains-against-future.

24. Aylin Matlé and Hanna Gers, "In the Same Boat: Security Challenges in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific," German Council on Foreign Relations, September 9, 2025, https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/same-boat-security-challenges-euro-atlantic-and-indo-pacific.

cables in the Baltic Sea. In this incident, the ship continued to a Russian port.[25] Such events indicate China and Russia are increasingly collaborating to employ a large shadow fleet of tankers to avoid US and EU sanctions on Russian oil.[26] China has also been suspected of launching two major cyberattacks since 2021: Volt Typhoon compromised "communications, energy, and water" infrastructure in the United States, and the Salt Typhoon attack on a European telecommunications firm was labeled "one of the most destructive Chinese cyber operations" to date, compromising important communications infrastructure and creating vulnerabilities for future attacks to exploit.[27]

Finally, both China and Russia have conducted disinformation campaigns intended to "weaken Western democracies, erode public trust, and promote multipolarity through shared anti-Western narratives."[28] Notably, China and Russia have aligned in their interference in and manipulation of foreign information, with both blaming NATO for the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine War.[29] These activities demonstrate a growing Chinese capability and willingness to use hybrid-warfare techniques in Europe, as well as a willingness to do so in concert with Russia.

The relationship between China and Russia goes beyond hybrid warfare. Russia's military cooperation with China has also increased since 2014. The number of joint military exercises increased from four in 2013 to 14 in 2024, including "annual Vostok, Zapad, and Joint Sea drills highlight the growing interoperability between Russian and Chinese forces."[30] Two-thirds of these exercises took place in the Indo-Pacific, though China and Russia held a naval exercise

25. Elisabeth Braw, "Suspected Sabotage by a Chinese Vessel in the Baltic Sea Speaks to a Wider Threat," *New Atlanticist* (blog), November 21, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/suspected-sabotage-by-a-chinese-vessel-in-the-baltic-sea-speaks-to-a-wider-threat/.

26. Hugh Schofield and Aleks Phillips, "Captain of Tanker Linked to Russian 'Shadow Fleet' Charged in France," *BBC News*, October 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqxz1wvqvzqo.

27. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, *PRC State-Sponsored Actors Compromise and Maintain Persistent Access to U.S. Critical Infrastructure*, AA24-038A (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, February 2024); Rebekah Koffler, "NATO Is Defenceless Against China's Real West-Killing Weapons," *The Telegraph*, September 6, 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/us/comment/2025/09/06/nato-is-defenceless-against-chinas-real-west-killing-weapon/; and Jessica Lyons, "Suspected Salt Typhoon Snoops Lurking in European Telco's Network," *The Register*, October 20, 2025, https://www.theregister.com/special-features/2025/10/20/suspected-salt-typhoon-spies-lurking-in-european-telco/1224324.

28. Tamás Matura, "Sino-Russian Convergence in Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference: A Global Threat to the US and Its Allies," Center for European Policy Analysis, June 30, 2025, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/sino-russian-convergence-in-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference/.

29. European External Action Service, *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats* (European External Action Service, March 2025), 13.

30. András Rácz and Alina Hrytsenko, "Partnership Short of Alliance: Military Cooperation Between Russia and China," Center for European Policy Analysis, June 16, 2025, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/partnership-short-of-alliance-military-cooperation-between-russia-and-china/.

in the Gulf of Finland in 2024.[31] These exercises would serve as convenient launchpads for direct action in a conflict between the United States and China, or between Russia and Europe.

Russia's pattern has been clear. In 2008, Russia held large training exercises immediately before the invasion of Georgia, and in 2022, Russia held massive exercises (Zapad-2021 included some 200,000 soldiers) in Belarus before invading Ukraine.[32] In 2025, Russia conducted similar, though smaller, Zapad exercises in Belarus on the country's border with NATO.[33] These exercises, combined with repeated violations of NATO members' airspaces in 2025, could be used to deter European support for US activities in the Indo-Pacific, tie down residual US forces in Europe, or serve as a launchpad for direct action in Europe. China's so-called no-limits relationship with Russia represents a significant challenge to the United States and its European allies.[34]

China's Next Moves in Europe: Forecasting Future Trends

In preparation for a future conflict, China will aim to increase its ability to influence European decision making in the event of a conflict with the United States. On the military front, the goal would be to disrupt NATO airports and seaports and to fix US assets in Europe. If current trends are a predictor, this approach would include conducting cyberattacks, carrying out acts of sabotage, and placing economic pressure on host governments to restrict the United States' use of facilities located in their territories. Ramstein Air Base in Germany supports operations from the Arctic to Africa and the Middle East. The greater Ramstein area is also home to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, which is one of the largest US military hospitals outside the continental United States.[35] This facility served as a key medical-evacuation hub for US forces fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan. If either an all-consuming, simultaneous conflict in Europe or problems with access, basing, and overflight permissions prevented the United States from relying

31. Narantsatsral Enkhbat, *Friends with Benefits: Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises*, Outlook No. 7 (NATO Defense College, June 2025).

32. Brian Whitmore, "Did Russia Plan Its War in Georgia?," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, August 15, 2008, https://www.rferl.org/a/Did_Russia_Plan_Its_War_In_Georgia__/1191460.html; and Giangiuseppe Pili and Fabrizio Minniti, "Understanding Russia's Great Games: From Zapad 2013 to Zapad 2021," Royal United Services Institute, June 7, 2022, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/understanding-russias-great-games-zapad-2013-zapad-2021.

33. Steve Rosenberg, "Belarus and Russia's Show of Firepower Appears to Be a Message to Europe," *BBC News*, September 15, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn95jxvn04eo.

34. Antoni Slodkowski and Laurie Chen, "China's Xi Affirms 'No Limits' Partnership with Putin in Call on Ukraine War Anniversary," Reuters, updated February 24, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/xi-putin-hold-phone-call-ukraine-war-anniversary-state-media-says-2025-02-24/.

35. Measured in bed space, US Naval Hospital in Okinawa is larger, but measured in patient throughput and level of trauma care, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center is larger and more capable.

on Landstuhl Regional Medical Center or Ramstein Air Base, US operations would be significantly constrained in a large part of the world.

Similarly, a conflict in Asia would likely require the United States to draw from its capabilities in Europe and deploy them closer to the fight. This shift would drain the United States' ability to support operations in the United States European Command, United States Central Command, and United States Africa Command areas of responsibility. In addition to the greater Ramstein area, the United States maintains air bases in Aviano, Italy; Sigonella, Italy; and Spangdahlem, Germany, among other military facilities that would be similarly challenged to support globally integrated operations simultaneous with a major conflict in the Indo-Pacific.[36]

China will likely continue cultivating the ability to constrain or disrupt US and allied naval capabilities and bases in Europe. As part of this effort, NATO should expect China to use both sabotage and attempts to stir local populations to oppose the United States' use of European bases in an Indo-Pacific conflict. China will look to leverage Chinese diasporas, especially in Spain and Italy, where it has previously used extrajudicial measures like the establishment of underground PRC police stations.[37] China will also use threats against public officeholders and bribes to intimidate or incentivize US and European citizens to advocate for policies favorable to China, commit espionage, or simply promote a positive view of PRC activities.[38]

Such activities could challenge the United States' ability to rely on critical ports like Crete Naval Base and ports in Naples, Italy, and Rota, Spain. This challenge could impede US efforts to maintain maritime operations in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea or to transition ships to the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, allied facilities in the United Kingdom, Norway, the Netherlands, and Spain augment US capabilities through memorandums of agreement with the host nations. If available to US planners, these ports would be vital to the United States' sustainment of naval operations in the Arctic, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. China will also seek to prevent the United Kingdom's and France's carrier strike groups (led by the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and the

36. Mila Tanghe, "Going, Going . . .? The US Base Network in Europe," Center for European Policy Analysis, April 14, 2025, https://cepa.org/article/going-going-the-us-base-network-in-europe/.

37. Wilhelmine Preussen, "Italy Hosts Largest Number of Shadow Chinese 'Police Stations' Worldwide, Report Says," *POLITICO*, December 5, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-hosts-most-illegal-chinese-police-stations-worldwide-report/.

38. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2023 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2023), 223–80; and "14 Governments Launch Investigations into Chinese 110 Overseas Police Service Stations," Safeguard Defenders, November 6, 2022, https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/14-governments-launch-investigations-chinese-110-overseas-police-service-stations.

FS *Charles de Gaulle*, respectively) from working alongside the US Sixth Fleet and leveraging the permanent bases both allies maintain in the Indo-Pacific.

China will seek to deter Europe from supporting the United States by maintaining Russia as a PRC partner, bolstering Russian military capabilities, and threatening retaliatory hybrid attacks or economic retribution. On the US side, a conflict in Asia would require a globally integrated response, in which the United States would rely heavily on its bases and allies in Europe for support. Any disruption to this support would constrain the United States' ability to project power in a large part of the world, limiting its ability either to support operations in the Indo-Pacific or to escalate horizontally and push PRC decisionmakers toward off-ramps in the Indo-Pacific.

Although a Russian threat would likely play the largest role in limiting European military support for the United States, China will continue cultivating its economic inroads in European markets as important sources of influence. China will seek to increase its information campaigns and economic investments to provide an alternative to the current transatlantic economy.

China will also continue to foster supply-chain dependencies for critical military and civilian goods. It will stress the importance of Indo-Pacific stability to the critical materials and minerals on which Europe relies. In Europe's continued rush to support Ukraine and to deter direct conflict with Russia by increasing its own military capabilities, European allies will need to turn toward their partners' defense industrial bases in the Indo-Pacific. One such partner is South Korea, which has made up for significant shortfalls in the production capacities of US and European firms. South Korea's military sales to Poland alone have totaled more than $22 billion in main battle tanks, self-propelled howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems, combat aircraft, and jet trainers.[39] If a war over Taiwan spread to other parts of Asia, the conflict may interrupt this supply chain. Because European states are currently unable to produce the military equipment necessary for European deterrence domestically, the defense industries of Indo-Pacific partners are increasingly important.

Although Europe is intensifying its focus on limiting PRC control over critical infrastructure like ports, and will likely continue to make progress in reducing China's access to critical infrastructure, Europeans will find extracting Chinese firms from European markets to be difficult in several areas. Despite steps to curb dependence on foreign supplies of personal protective

39. "One of the World's Best Battle Tanks Doesn't Come from the US — Poland Turns to Tiny South Korea, Buys 180," *The Economic Times*, updated July 10, 2025, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/one-of-the-worlds-best-battle-tanks-doesnt-come-from-the-us-poland-turns-to-tiny-south-korea-buys-180/articleshow/122368918.cms.

equipment after the COVID-19 pandemic, dependencies on countries like China, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam remain, especially for lower-cost, disposable products. Asian manufacturers, including manufacturers in China, Japan, and South Korea, will likely continue to be major producers of medical devices, diagnostic equipment, and related repair parts.[40]

But the most significant source of medical dependence on Asia is in the supply of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), which serve as the raw inputs that give medicines their therapeutic effects. Whereas legislative proposals in both the United States and Europe have sought to curb this dependence, little action has been taken because such action would be both disruptive and expensive.[41] Currently, 17 percent of US drugs rely on Chinese APIs and a much higher proportion of generic drugs imported from places like India are also heavily reliant on China for API inputs.[42] In Europe, the dependencies are even more pronounced. The EU's Economic and Social Committee estimates as much as 80 percent of the APIs used in Europe are sourced from China or India.[43] This figure is even higher for certain APIs used in antibiotics.[44] Europe's inability to reduce its dependence on these drug components will continue to make it vulnerable to PRC pressure during a crisis.

Rare earth, renewable-energy, and military-equipment components are other areas in which Europe's dependence on vulnerable Asian supply chains will be difficult to reverse. Accounting for 46 percent of the EU's rare earth imports, China is the EU's largest supplier of rare earth elements, followed by Russia and Malaysia.[45] China's demonstrated willingness to restrict rare earth exports as an influence lever in other negotiations will put the EU in a difficult position should an Asian conflict interrupt the flow of these critical materials. Rare earth

40. Xiao Bai et al., "Most Influential Countries in the International Medical Device Trade: Network-Based Analysis," *Physica A* 604 (October 2022).

41. Julia Payne and Maggie Fick, "EU Announces Plans to Cut Reliance on Asia for Antibiotics, Other Critical Drugs," Reuters, updated March 11, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/eu-announces-plans-cut-reliance-asia-antibiotics-other-critical-drugs-2025-03-11/.

42. Niels Graham, "The US Is Relying More on China for Pharmaceuticals—and Vice Versa," *Econographics* (blog), April 20, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/the-us-is-relying-more-on-chinafor-pharmaceuticals-and-vice-versa/; and Andrew Rechenberg, "U.S. Dangerously Reliant on High-Risk Imported Drug Supply," Coalition for a Prosperous America, May 29, 2025, https://prosperousamerica.org/u-s-dangerously-reliant-on-high-risk-imported-drug-supply/.

43. European Economic and Social Committee, *Securing Europe's Medicine Supply: Envisioning a Critical Medicines Act*, CCMI/212-EESC-2023 (European Economic and Social Committee, December 2023).

44. Veronika Blablová, "How to Address Europe's Dependence on Medicine Imports from China," China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, July 18, 2023, https://chinaobservers.eu/how-to-address-europes-dependence-on-medicine-imports-from-china/.

45. "Imports of Rare Earth Elements Saw 30% Drop in 2024," Eurostat, April 9, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250409-1.

elements are used in a wide range of products, including wind turbines, smartphones, guided missiles, and night-vision devices.[46]

Europe similarly depends on China for more complete products that are crucial to the EU's transition from Russian oil and gas to renewable-energy sources. China owns 80 percent of the global market in solar manufacturing, and around half of European solar imports come from China.[47] According to the European think tank Bruegel, this figure increases to 90 percent when only the supply of important photovoltaic modules is considered.[48] The EU's Net-Zero Industry Act aims to be capable of meeting at least 40 percent of the EU's annual deployment needs for strategic net-zero technologies (including solar photovoltaic) by 2030, but even this goal is likely out of reach given current trends.[49]

Even in areas that affect emerging military capabilities like drones, China's manufacturing capabilities will be difficult to replace. Eighty percent of the neodymium magnets used in drone motors are made in China.[50] The Chinese technology company DJI is credited with holding an 80 percent share of the global consumer market for drones. In September 2024, the People's Republic of China demonstrated a willingness to use that leverage by claiming to ratchet up export restrictions on dual-use civilian and military drones to both Ukraine and Russia, while applying those restrictions more unevenly against Ukraine.[51] In light of global dependence on China, calls for derisking European supply chains have emerged, but as with rare earth materials and renewable-energy components, the response will likely continue to be slow.[52] European dependence on Chinese and broader Asian supply chains will be difficult to correct in the near-to-medium term. This reality will continue to give China tremendous economic leverage

46. Gracelin Baskaran and Meredith Schwartz, "China Imposes Its Most Stringent Critical Minerals Export Restrictions Yet Amidst Escalating U.S.-China Tech War," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 4, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-imposes-its-most-stringent-critical-minerals-export-restrictions-yet-amidst.

47. Sam Hawkins, *Solar Exports from China Increase by a Third* (Ember, September 2023).

48. Ben McWilliams et al., "Smarter European Union Industrial Policy for Solar Panels," Bruegel, February 8, 2024, https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/smarter-european-union-industrial-policy-solar-panels.

49. Patrick Schröder, "How Europe's Solar Industry Can Be Saved," *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/22/europes-solar-industry-panels-energy-strategy/.

50. Bohdan Kostiuk, "How China Has Become a Lord of War Drones" (presentation, Eastern Circles Roundtable on the War in Ukraine, Paris, FR, September 5–6, 2025), https://www.easterncircles.com/european-dependence-on-the-defense-industry-value-chain-chinas-dominance-in-drone-production-and-components-fabrique-de-la-diplomatie/.

51. Aosheng Pusztaszeri, "Why China's UAV Supply Chain Restrictions Weaken Ukraine's Negotiating Power," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 16, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-chinas-uav-supply-chain-restrictions-weaken-ukraines-negotiating-power.

52. Hilde Vautmans, *European Drone Capabilities and Defence Autonomy: Steps to Reduce Dependency on China and Foster Innovation in Drone- and Counter-Drone Systems*, Parliamentary Question E-000668/2025 (European Parliament, February 2025); and Centre for Future Generations, *Bolstering Defence and Deterrence: Strategic Innovation for Security Part 1* (Centre for Future Generations, May 2025).

in areas where it holds manufacturing dominance. Observers should expect the People's Republic of China to make the case Asian supply chains are reliable so long as stability in the Indo-Pacific is maintained.

Although the described concerns about PRC pressure in Europe are predictable given current trends, China might take other, more far-reaching steps to double down on its levers of influence over Europe. In turn, as the People's Republic of China continues trying to increase its influence in Europe, the United States and its European allies must be aware of six major initiatives that could strengthen China's influence over key US allies in Europe. Through these initiatives, China would aim to encourage US allies to refrain from opposing a forcible PRC reunification with Taiwan. The following list is not all-inclusive; instead, the list is meant to serve as a menu of potential measures that would signal a more purposeful effort to encourage European hesitancy. The list items are roughly presented on a continuum according to the level of concern they would pose for the United States, from moderate to significant.

1. **China intensifies its existing all-weather partnership with Hungary.** This action would include increased investment in battery production and additional infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. In return, China would seek assurances from Hungary it would block any NATO or EU condemnation of Chinese activities in Taiwan.

2. **China proposes to reopen the negotiation process for the stalled Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.** In doing so, China would lift all restrictions on critical exports to EU members, impose voluntary export quotas on key products such as electric vehicles, and promise to reduce subsidies for Chinese state-owned enterprises. A PRC pledge to improve protections for intellectual property would help build support for revisiting the agreement among industrialists in France and Germany.

3. **China invites Türkiye to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and offers investments to connect Türkiye's Middle Corridor projects to China's Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure.** This proposal would bind a major European power and its critical geography to Chinese economic interests and influence. It would also offer alternative energy routes from Central Asia into Europe, allowing Europe to increase its energy security. China could also threaten to support other rival corridors if Türkiye demonstrates support for US efforts in the Indo-Pacific.

4. China offers a variation of the Hungarian all-weather, global partnership to France. This action would include proposing significant joint investment in areas such as microchips and technology sharing across green technologies and artificial intelligence. These investments could be marketed as a way to promote France's economic growth and enable greater European strategic autonomy. China could complement this economic offer with other forms of partnership. For example, China may invite France to participate in the International Lunar Research Station and build on past collaboration in space.[53]

5. The People's Republic of China and Russia sign additional protocols of cooperation that include stronger commitments of mutual support in the event of a conflict. Both nations have already affirmed mutual support for the protection of core interests like territorial integrity. The expansion or even formalization of these commitments would signal a significant increase in the potential for these countries to collaborate on simultaneous military operations in the future.

6. The People's Republic of China and Russia enhance participation in each other's military exercises. These efforts would indicate China and Russia were deepening their capacity for military-to-military coordination, if not enhancing their operational interoperability.

Although none of these scenarios are necessarily likely, they are possibilities that would signal an increasing PRC interest in cultivating levers of horizontal escalation in Europe in the event of a Taiwan crisis.

Mitigating the Risks Posed by Chinese Actions in Europe

Despite the challenges outlined in this chapter, the United States' European allies and partners represent a strategic advantage in a US competition with China. The key to deterring both Chinese and Russian aggression is strengthening those relationships diplomatically, economically, and militarily. The growing collaboration between China and Russia, together with China's growing influence in Europe, is making increasingly clear US strategies in the Pacific and in the Atlantic

53. Victoria Samson and Ian Christensen, "Lunar Space Cooperation Initiatives," Secure World Foundation, updated July 24, 2025, https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/lunar-space-cooperation-initiatives.

must be linked rather than viewed as separate challenges, as Julianne Smith and Lindsey Ford have argued.[54]

Diplomatically, the United States should continue working closely with Europe to demonstrate public unity and a shared determination not to return to a world in which national borders can be redrawn by force. As part of this approach, the United States and Europe should conduct hard negotiations in advance of a conflict. These negotiations should include the crisis-response measures each nation would take in the event of a Chinese effort to seize Taiwan with military force. Some strategic ambiguity will likely be necessary, at a minimum, and the two sides must be prepared to signal jointly the economic and military measures that could result in a China-generated Taiwan crisis. The United States should also support greater EU-NATO cooperation and support European countries' efforts to increase their own strategic autonomy in parallel with strengthening NATO.

Economically, both the United States and the EU have a lot of work to do to limit Chinese investment in and access to critical national security infrastructure, and to reduce reliance on Chinese supply chains. The former will be easier to accomplish than the latter. Like the US government's intervention in the Chinese app TikTok, the EU should press member states to reduce China's stakes in communications infrastructure, critical ports, and other defense-related mobility infrastructure. The recent pledge for NATO members to spend a minimum of 1.5 percent of gross domestic product on defense-related investments could serve as a vehicle for replacing PRC firms' investments with domestic sources, perhaps in public-private partnerships. The United States should also seek to revive the EU-US Trade and Technology Council to improve cooperation in securing supply chains, restricting Chinese investment in critical sectors, and harmonizing regulatory standards.[55] At the same time, the United States should warn its European allies about the potential downsides of reopening negotiations with China on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

Reducing dependencies on supply chains will be more difficult, but EU efforts to set goals for the domestic reshoring of critical industries should continue. When domestic reshoring cannot be achieved within a reasonable timeline, the EU should look to diversify its import sources and import more products from markets that would be minimally impacted by PRC aggression or influence. The United States should also work with the EU to strengthen economic and security ties with Türkiye, recognizing tensions will persist, especially around

54. Julianne Smith and Lindsey Ford, "The New Eurasian Order: America Must Link Its Atlantic and Pacific Strategies," *Foreign Affairs*, October 21, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/new-eurasian-order-smith-ford.

55. "EU-US Trade and Technology Council," European Commission, n.d., accessed November 26, 2025, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council_en.

democratic backsliding. Finally, Europe and the United States must continue to ramp up sanctions on Russia and impose secondary sanctions on states that continue to trade with Russia and prop up its faltering economy.

The United States and Europe should also appreciate the growing role Russia will play as a threat in support of the People's Republic of China. Europe's continued efforts to build out its own industrial base and military deterrence are part and parcel of reducing potential Russian military adventurism in an Indo-Pacific conflict. These efforts will require reducing NATO's military dependence on the United States. But to ensure NATO continues to view US extended nuclear deterrence as credible, the United States will also need to maintain a sufficient conventional deterrence posture in Europe.

The discussions regarding what a sufficient US conventional posture in Europe would look like will need to take place in NATO well ahead of any potential Asian conflict. The alliance will need to plan for the US capabilities it can rely on during an Indo-Pacific conflict, as well as the ones it cannot. To make up for the latter, the United States should support and collaborate with the EU's $913 billion defense plan, known as Readiness 2030, which will yield additional military capabilities. Especially critical will be the development of high-demand capabilities of which the United States is currently the primary provider, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and space-based assets; long-range precision fires; ground-based air and missile defense; critical munitions; combat aircraft; and drones.[56] This initiative would reduce the risk involved in shifting these essential US capabilities to the Indo-Pacific. Such investments could prove critical to Europe's ability to deter and, if necessary, defend against a Russian attack when the bulk of US assets are engaged elsewhere.[57] Current NATO defense-planning guidelines state no single ally should provide more than 50 percent of any required military capability.[58] The alliance will need to set future defense-planning goals that move it toward the stricter enforcement of this guideline.

Finally, on the military front, the United States should consider how the potential for horizontal escalation in Europe might inform United States European Command's and NATO's military-exercise programs. First, NATO should continue to use its exercises and programs to build partnerships with the key allies in the Indo-Pacific Four (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea); the Philippines; and other partners like India and Vietnam. The Indo-Pacific Four

56. Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., *Understanding Russia's Calculus on Opportunistic Aggression in Europe* (Center for a New American Security, September 2025).

57. "Bolstering European Defence: Readiness 2030," European Union External Action, September 2, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bolstering-european-defence-readiness-2030_en.

58. Jordan Becker and Robert Bell, "Defence Planning in the Fog of Peace: The Transatlantic Currency Conversion Conundrum," *European Security* 29, no. 2 (2020): 125–48.

attended the NATO summits in 2023 and 2024, signaling their desire for a closer partnership. The United States and NATO should cultivate those relationships, including by incorporating Indo-Pacific countries into NATO and bilateral exercises around the world. Second, military exercises in Europe should develop scenarios that anticipate reduced US support. To inform defense planning going forward, such exercises should rely on what support the United States might reasonably provide in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Although the People's Republic of China can use numerous methods to pressure European states and attempt to divide them from the United States in a crisis, the United States and its European allies and partners remain bound by a shared set of values and a decades-long history of defending those values together. This transatlantic partnership has proven essential for deterring conflict in Europe, and it will be equally important for deterring conflict in the Indo-Pacific—a crisis that could spread to Europe. The time to begin the work of reducing some of the vulnerabilities discussed in this chapter is well before any potential crisis; the time to begin preparing for the Asian contingency is now.

— 9 —

Lacking Strategy and Losing the Center of the World: Pro-Chinese Neutrality and the US Position in the Middle East

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Over 2,000 years ago, parts of the Middle East were described as the "navel of the earth."[1] Whereas this description was originally meant in a literal sense, and perhaps later in a spiritual one, the phrase has proven to be truer than one might imagine for the world's great powers. Maps placing the Middle East at the center of the world reflect a certain reality: Great-power engagement has meant transiting through and contesting the Middle East. Because of this dynamic and its importance in the minds of much of the global population, for the last 200 years, great-power engagement and conflict in the Middle East have followed a predictable pattern—one the United States and China are unlikely to escape.

This chapter explores a potential scenario in which the rumblings and beginnings of a great-power conflict in the Indo-Pacific might extend to the Middle East. The scenario provides a vision of an undesirable future that may occur if current trends continue unchecked. The chapter subsequently examines the recent history of Chinese actions in the Middle East and follows with a projection of what the next five to 10 years could bring. Finally, the chapter presents recommendations for how the United States might counter Chinese activity in the Middle East, hold the US position in the region, and turn that position into an advantage against China should a conflict break out.

1. Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Jerusalem: The Navel of the Earth in Muslim Tradition," *Der Islam* 84, no. 1 (2008): 47.

Usurping the United States: How China Manages the Middle East

For too long, the United States has viewed the Middle East as a realm of terrorists and stability missions, without a core or vital interest to be found. As long as oil and capital can flow and markets remain open, deploying forces to the Middle East is considered an annoyance or a distraction. This mindset does not change even on the eve of hostilities with China.

Shifting Regional Dynamics

In many ways, China's activities from 2026 to the outbreak of hostilities with the United States follow a pattern of continuity with previous events. China is not in a position to drive the United States from the Middle East or serve as the guarantor of security in the region. China also cannot develop the type of garrisons that serve to maintain stability, but the country can take advantage of increasing US disinterest in the Middle East and the decline of US power and prestige in the region. Given these realities, China accelerates its program of regional integration and development, which drives the region toward pro-Chinese neutrality. In each sphere of activity, China accelerates actions the country is already undertaking.

For over a decade, Chinese naval vessels have been conducting port visits in the Middle East. In the years following 2025, the dwell time for port visits increases until, slowly and eventually, the Chinese navy becomes a permanent presence in the Persian Gulf, without establishing permanent bases there. Whereas the Chinese naval vessels spend most of their time operating out of the United Arab Emirates and Iran, the vessels also conduct port visits in places such as Qatar. Chinese naval vessels also escort oil tankers coming from Iran to help with sanctions avoidance, and take part in ever-larger multinational exercises incorporating Iran and several Gulf Arab States.

China's real growth in the Middle East comes from two opportunities: one following the United States' withdrawal from Syria and the other following the second round of US and Israeli strikes on Iran. The relationship between China and Iran undergoes a critical change following those strikes.

The US strikes, like those of the 12-Day War, demonstrate the impotence of Russian-made air defenses and Russian security guarantees in the face of US and Israeli capabilities. Whereas the air campaign is limited and fails to destabilize the regime in Tehran, the campaign does weaken the regime. The campaign also serves as a wake-up call for Iran, forcing the nation to change

its global tack. Rather than changing its regional behavior, Iran offers economic concessions and support to China in exchange for Chinese military support and security guarantees. This shift gives China a proxy in the Middle East and access to Iran's proxy networks in the event of a war with the United States.

As the United States continues to signal its lack of interest in the region and reduce its presence there, China continues to capitalize on the United States' struggle to convince once-dependable US allies to act in US interests. As US forces withdraw from Syria, the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces collapse in the face of a ceasefire-violating offensive by the Turkish-backed Syrian government forces. China begins to step into the void created by the withdrawal of US power. At first, China's move merely continues the cultural and economic ties Beijing has already established in Erbil. But China then brokers a critical agreement between Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria and the Iranian government. As part of the deal, the Kurdish factions agree not to support Kurdish separatists in Iran in exchange for Chinese support.

This deal is the first in a series of agreements China negotiates with the Kurds to enshrine a new status quo under Chinese influence. The shift in status quo allows China to expand its footprint for intelligence collection and regional access even further, striking another blow to US prestige. More worrying, the deal denies the United States a crucial partner on which Washington has come to rely since the 1990s. The deal also gives China a potential threat to deploy against actors in the region, allowing Beijing to move toward arming Kurdish forces against Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq should those countries prove to be opposed to Chinese interests. China's realization provides these countries with further motivation, if any were needed, to adopt a stance of pro-Chinese neutrality in the eventual conflict between the United States and China.

China even makes gains in Israel—a country generally hostile to China and long regarded as the United States' most consistent regional ally. Without the renewal of the 10-year US-Israel aid package, including foreign military sales, the United States loses critical leverage in Israel—leverage Washington had previously used to limit further Chinese investment in major Israeli infrastructure. Israel is interested in selling weapons to Taiwan but requires US support, which is not forthcoming. Whereas Israel does not deny the United States access and overflight rights in hostilities with China and helps the United States fight against the potential Houthi threat, China is also able to expand its economic and political access in Israel. China quickly turns its progress into the ability to collect intelligence on US systems and movements. Israel could crack down on Chinese intelligence collection, but Chinese market penetration makes the Israeli government reluctant to do so as long as Chinese activities focus solely on the United States.

The lead-up to the Taiwan crisis reinforces the US shift away from the Middle East, accelerating the pace at which the United States moves forces, resources, and attention away from the region. As a result, the importance of the Middle East in the war comes as almost a complete surprise.

The Middle East's Role in the War

The first blow from the Middle East happens before the war begins, but the blow's significance is not recognized even as its effects are felt. Whereas the United States expects China to have some advanced knowledge of NATO systems, the depth of Chinese expertise surprises Washington. Only much later, after the US search for the source of Chinese intelligence penetration fails to provide answers, the United States slowly realizes China has exploited its relationships in the Middle East to great effect. For China, the steady drumbeat of exercises with Gulf Arab States serves purposes beyond merely building interoperability. Every time the United Arab Emirates brings its NATO equipment to China or invites Chinese forces to the United Arab Emirates, the People's Liberation Army makes the most of the opportunity.

Exercises are not the only way China accesses critical US defense technology through the Middle East. To build server capacity and win the artificial-intelligence (AI) race against China, US corporations become heavily involved in capacity-building projects in Gulf Arab States. The United States allows its major corporations to become part of the same technological and data ecosystem used by Chinese firms throughout the region. This decision greatly increases Chinese access to sensitive technology, allowing Beijing to upgrade its forces just before the Taiwan crisis begins. Whereas the United States recognizes the issue, Washington fails to appreciate the issue's full ramifications, which prove much larger than understood at the time. As with all knowledge transfer, what is done cannot be undone.

The battle for resources brings the Middle East—long neglected by planners of great-power war—suddenly to the fore. As war breaks out over Taiwan, the United States is forced to strip away many of the important assets on which it has relied to defend the US position in the Middle East. The US Navy, with its frigates and battle groups fully engaged in the Pacific, can no longer sustain its patrol missions in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. European partners have long since completed their pivot back to Europe-centric defense and cannot replace the vital role played by US assets. As a result, US partners and allies in the region are left to fend for themselves amid the bellicose rhetoric still coming from Iran. Yet, for the United States, the Middle East remains a strategically vital choke point for military forces and supplies originating east of the Rocky Mountains,

with no choice but to transit the Middle East either by air or, more frequently, by sea. This predicament is the first challenge China exploits.

As tensions ramp up, China significantly upgrades the capabilities of the Houthi movement. As soon as the first shots are fired in the Pacific, the Houthis announce they will stand in solidarity against imperialist aggression and close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to US and allied vessels. Supported by Chinese space-based capabilities, spy ships, and bases in Djibouti, the Houthis begin accurately targeting various US and European merchant ships transiting the strait. The Houthi threat forces the United States into an unenviable position. The United States can either pull its already-stretched naval and air resources away from the decisive theater to reopen and protect sea lines of communication or allow critical supplies and reinforcements to take a much longer voyage around the Cape of Good Hope or through the Panama Canal and across the Pacific.

Even before the war, China had put diplomatic pressure on the Gulf Arab States to maintain a posture of true neutrality if a conflict were to break out between the great powers. Immediately after the incident in the Pacific, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain publicly declare neutrality. Whereas none of these states make the United States evacuate its bases, they clearly indicate the bases can only be employed to protect the region, not to interdict trade with China or support the US war effort. Given the nature of the neutrality rules, China can continue to use its joint space centers and hybrid commercial-military facilities without US interference. This advantage, in turn, furthers the efficacy of Chinese support to the Houthis and improves Chinese intelligence collection on US naval movements in the region.

Although the neutrality rules do not necessarily apply to covert or intelligence operations, they prohibit overt activity originating from the Arab countries. The United Arab Emirates and Iraq indicate US flights bound for the Pacific cannot transit their airspaces, and, under vigorous Chinese pressure, other Gulf Arab States indicate they might follow suit. These flight restrictions have the immediate effect of complicating US troop movements from Europe and the US Eastern Seaboard to the Indo-Pacific theater.

The effectiveness of Chinese pressure in the Middle East is enhanced by Beijing's support for both Iran and militant groups in the region. The backers of the Axis of Resistance—from Hezbollah and Hamas to the Houthi movement and the Iraqi paramilitaries—demonstrate the improved capabilities Chinese sales to Iran have granted these actors. Displays such as videos and parades clarify the threat Axis of Resistance groups pose to the Arab world, further encouraging pro-Chinese neutrality in the hope China can keep local threats at bay.

In the Middle East, the true winner of the initial phase of the Indo-Pacific crisis is Iran. With the United States distracted in the lead-up to the crisis, China can help Tehran leap forward in its nuclear program, making Iran relatively untouchable to regional adversaries. Iran's newfound sense of security greatly boosts the country's ability to provide cover and support for its proxies and threaten the region with Iranian missiles. Similarly, without US security guarantees and protections, the countries of the region intensify their rapprochement with Tehran in the lead-up to the war. With Chinese assistance, Iran establishes itself, along with Türkiye, as one of the two dominant powers in the Middle East. Whereas this development has an immediate effect on the drive toward pro-Chinese neutrality in the region, the development's true implications are not felt until the United States tries to resume its strategic policies after the war.

One potential bright spot for the United States is its relationship with Israel. The United States can certainly use Israeli ports and facilities, and US access and overflight rights are assured. Years of US-Israeli military cooperation have secured these assurances. The War Reserve Stock for Allies–Israel stockpile proves critical in surging munitions to the South Pacific Ocean during the early days of the war. Moreover, whenever possible, Israel strikes Houthi forces to help reopen the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, but a lack of operational reach and US resupply limits the strikes' efficacy.

Prior to the war, Israel had sought US guarantees that would allow Israel to cooperate with Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific partners, but these guarantees are not forthcoming. Granting Israel's request could have reduced the demands on the US defense industrial base during a critical period, but because the request is never granted, it becomes a footnote in the history of missed opportunities. The Israeli defense industrial base is willing to sell equipment to the United States but is not robust enough to provide for Israel's own needs as well as the surplus capabilities the United States requires. Initially, effective joint information operations by Iran and China make the idea of US overreliance on and integration with Israel politically unpalatable. Moreover, once the war begins, the Iranian threat and China's penetration of the Israeli economy make Israel reluctant to become openly involved.

China and Iran further integrate their information operations to great effect, spawning protests throughout the United States and Europe. For the first time, critical US partners in the region—such as the United Arab Emirates, which fears Iranian counterstrikes and has a good working relationship with China—deny the United States access, basing, and overflight rights. In another development whose significance is not fully realized at the time, the Kurds, influenced by China and, even more so, by a lack of trust in the United States, hold similar

discussions but ultimately decide to continue supporting the United States during the limited conflict.

Overall, China has done enough to undermine long-held US assumptions about the support Middle Eastern nations would provide in a time of conflict. The region, often touted as a distraction from US efforts to counter China, quickly becomes an unexpected complication to those same efforts.

One of Many Futures

The preceding scenario is not wholly speculative. During the 2026 Iran war, China increased its support for Iran in line with the scenario. According to reports covering the war, China shared intelligence capabilities that allowed Iran to target US bases.[2] China also allegedly provided fuel for Iran's ballistic missiles and supplied other components and resources to aid Iran.[3]

Despite China's moves to actualize its support of Iran, the scenario described earlier is not the only possible future. In another version, the United States is able to deny China the resources and global connectivity the Middle East provides. Much like the Allied powers during World War II, the United States could operate in a reality in which global resources flow to it, whereas China would have to rely on its own domestic capabilities for reconstitution. The United States could use the Middle East's advanced technologies, capital, and emerging defense industry while starving China of them, relying on a coalition to help protect US sea lines of communication and enable overflight. The longer such a war against China lasted, the worse China's position would become. In that case, the United States would emerge in a stronger strategic position in the Middle East, regardless of the outcome of a limited confrontation in the Indo-Pacific. Such an alternative future is possible only in the years prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Once a conflict begins, the opportunity has passed.

China's Growing Role in the Middle East

As recently as World War II, great powers fought in the Middle East employing both regular and irregular forces to contest the region at great

2. Miles Johnson et al., "Iran Used Chinese Spy Satellite to Target US Bases," *Financial Times*, April 14, 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/1fddd2cd-1294-4e9c-a17d-5ea06b399355?syn-25a6b1a6=1.

3. Sophia Yan, "China Fuelling Iran's Ballistic Missiles," *The Telegraph*, April 3, 2026, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2026/04/03/china-delivers-missile-fuel-chemicals-to-iran/; and Steve Holland and Alexandra Alper, "China's Top Chipmaker Has Supplied Chipmaking Tech to Iran Military, US Officials Say," Reuters, updated March 26, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-top-chipmaker-has-supplied-chipmaking-tech-iran-military-us-officials-say-2026-03-27/.

expense.[4] Today, the Middle East is and will remain strategically important to the United States and China, the great powers of today, for many of the same reasons great powers have been drawn to the Middle East in the past. First, the Middle East provides important connective tissue. When moving between the northern Western Hemisphere and the southern Eastern Hemisphere, no route is faster and more direct than the one provided by the Middle East. This statement remains true today. Due to infrastructural considerations, US domestic basing and industrial potential lend themselves to embarkations from Atlantic seaports. Consequently, the fastest way to support large parts of the South Pacific Ocean theater is through the Middle East—making the region critical terrain.

The second reason great powers are drawn to contest the Middle East is access to resources. If the United States' need to transit the Middle East were not enough to draw China's interest, the region's resources make the Middle East critical to China's war effort. Additionally, the capital generated in the Middle East is instrumental to the maintenance of both the US and Chinese economies.

The third reason great powers become involved in the Middle East is prestige. More than one billion people consider the Middle East the focal point of their mental attention—both in their devotional lives and in their consumption of information. Even when they cannot physically see the region, people consume descriptions of it and whatever limited news they have been able to receive about the Middle East.[5] Many people have imagined the region's reality, and their worldviews are based on the limited information they are able to receive. Whereas China has been slow to realize the power of this phenomenon, Beijing has started to experiment in recent years.

Taken together, these three reasons for regional involvement have started to shape China's activities in the Middle East and will continue to drive China toward the region. For revisionist powers such as China, the Middle East offers another benefit. China does not need to have a particular policy goal in the Middle East. As the regional status-quo power, the United States bears responsibility for pursuing its own policy objectives. On the other hand, for China, any US embarrassment or failure in the Middle East weakens the United States' global position relative to China. This dynamic enables China to take seemingly contradictory actions as long as these actions can hurt the United States, force Washington to expend resources, or generate a Chinese win in the information domain.

4. Jacob Stoil, " 'Friends' and 'Patriots': A Comparative Study of Indigenous Force Cooperation in the Second World War" (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2015).

5. Pelia Werth, "Following in Their Footsteps: Virtual Pilgrimage, Women on Pilgrimage, and Navigating Enclosure in Mid to Late Medieval Europe," in *Within Walls: Experience of Enclosure in Christian Female Spiritualities (from Late Antiquity to Early Modern Period)*, ed. Julia Lewandowska and Araceli Rosillo-Luque (Brepols, 2025), 193–213.

Over the last 25 years, the economic relations between China and the Middle East have grown more strategically important for both Beijing and the countries of the region. For China, the Middle East has immense strategic importance for one reason above all else—oil. By 2022, China was importing more than 53 percent of its hydrocarbon needs from the region.[6] This figure accounts for a significant proportion of the region's hydrocarbon exports.[7] Even so, oil is not the only critical resource China receives from the region; for example, Qatar now supplies 90 percent of China's helium imports.[8] Like other great powers before it, these resources have led China to rely on the Middle East's production of primary resources and China has adopted a deliberate policy of investment in the region. Chinese investment has been motivated less by strategic reasons and more by economic ones. China has not pursued a balanced approach; rather, it has flooded the Middle Eastern market with Chinese goods and investments while mainly importing natural resources.[9] At the same time, China's regional investments have been strategically consequential because they have begun to make Beijing increasingly indispensable to local economies. In fact, China's exports to the Middle East increased 80 percent between 2020 and 2024.[10]

Specific areas of Chinese economic investment, including green technology and infrastructure, pose a bigger strategic challenge for the United States. China's investments are particularly important because they affect areas of great strategic importance to Middle Eastern countries, and China's gains in those areas are partly due to a lack of US investment.[11] The rapid expansion of Chinese green technology is of tremendous interest in the Middle East and has given China a disproportionate advantage.[12] Many of the Gulf Arab States exist in a contradictory position: On the one hand, they rely on thriving global oil markets for their wealth; on the other, the states recognize the domestic need to invest

6. Yun Sun, "Forecasting China's Strategy in the Middle East over the Next Four Years," Brookings, December 19, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/forecasting-chinas-strategy-in-the-middle-east-over-the-next-four-years/.

7. Andrea Ghiselli, "China and the Middle East: Growing Influence and Divergent Perceptions," Middle East Institute, April 17, 2018, https://mei.edu/publication/china-and-middle-east-growing-influence-and-divergent-perceptions/; and Jeffrey Reeves, "China's Expanding Influence in the Middle East and North Africa," The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, February 24, 2025, https://peacediplomacy.org/2025/02/24/chinas-expanding-influence-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/.

8. Benjamin M. Holtzman, "China in the Middle East: February 2025," Council on Foreign Relations, updated March 3, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-middle-east-february-2025.

9. Reeves, "China's Expanding Influence."

10. Min Mitchell and Jim Snyder, "How China Became the Middle East Economic Power," Middle East Broadcasting Networks, December 17, 2025, https://alhurra.com/en/9003.

11. Faris Al-Sulayman and Jon B. Alterman, *China's Essential Role in the Gulf States' Energy Transitions* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2023).

12. Yun Sun, "Forecasting China's Strategy."

in green technology.[13] Besides supplying electric vehicles to the Gulf Arab States, China has built manufacturing capabilities in the region, investing billions of dollars in joint ventures to build green-technology factories and infrastructure.[14] This effort elevates China to a position of importance and power in the region, making Beijing a partner Middle Eastern countries would be reluctant to lose should China and the United States engage in a conflict. This dynamic, in turn, makes Middle Eastern countries more likely to adopt a pro-Chinese posture of neutrality should a conflict break out between the great powers.

Besides making China economically indispensable, two areas of Chinese investment in the Middle East pose a particular strategic challenge for the United States and may contribute to the realization of the scenario envisioned in the first section of this chapter. In recent years, China has surged its investment in Middle Eastern infrastructure, and, in 2024, the region became the top recipient of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments.[15] In the event of future US-China hostilities, Chinese investment in Middle Eastern ports and critical transportation infrastructure would be of particular concern. Recent Chinese contracts involving the port of Haifa in Israel and ports in the United Arab Emirates pose a particular threat to US movements, as these ports are facilities on which the United States may rely.[16] From road and rail networks in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to shipbuilding in Qatar and construction projects in Israel, China has been investing in the type of regional power, construction, and transportation infrastructure that amplifies opportunities for intelligence collection and the disruption of US asset movements.[17]

China has also made significant strides in integrating its own data and AI capabilities with those of countries in the Persian Gulf. For years, Chinese integration meant neither Saudi Arabia nor the United Arab Emirates could benefit from US technology transfers of advanced AI capabilities, such as advanced NVIDIA Corporation chips, because of fears these countries could serve as a back door through which China could acquire such capabilities. After significant lobbying from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the United States has recently reversed its policy.[18] This development has been coupled with recent Chinese investments in the digital infrastructure

13. Al-Sulayman and Alterman, *China's Essential Role*.

14. Reeves, "China's Expanding Influence."

15. Holtzman, "China."

16. Mitchell and Snyder, "Middle East Economic Power."

17. Mitchell and Snyder, "Middle East Economic Power."

18. Emma Graham, "U.S. Greenlights AI Chip Exports to Gulf Tech Giants After Saudi Crown Prince's Washington Visit," *CNBC*, updated November 21, 2025, https://www.cnbc.com/2025/11/20/us-approves-ai-chip-exports-to-gulf-after-saudi-crown-prince-visit.html.

of Middle Eastern countries, including in 5G and cloud-network infrastructure for countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt.[19] Whereas China does not make these investments with the explicit intent to pose a military or security threat to the United States, the investments have embedded China in the infrastructure of Middle Eastern countries and increased China's importance to the Gulf Arab States. This development increases the likelihood of the technology transfer envisioned in the scenario introduced at the start of this chapter.

In recent years, China has moved beyond viewing the Middle East through its ability to provide economic resources and as a place in which to invest. Like revisionist powers before it, China has begun to seek the establishment of military relations with countries in the region, seeking opportunistic victories against the status-quo power—the United States. China has engaged in a series of military exercises with US partner nations, including the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The Falcon Shield exercises with the United Arab Emirates are perhaps the most problematic because, in 2023 and 2024, the United Arab Emirates flew NATO airframes (including US models) to China for joint exercises with the People's Liberation Army Air Force.[20] The United Arab Emirates is also increasingly mixing Chinese and US capabilities together within its military.[21] All these developments offer China excellent opportunities for intelligence collection and technology transfer.

The dynamics occurring in the land, air, and sea domains also extend to space. China has launched Emirati satellites, created a joint space center with the United Arab Emirates, and signed a memorandum of understanding for sharing space technology and resources.[22] This agreement means the United Arab Emirates is one of the few countries, if not the only one, integrated into both the US-European-Israeli and Chinese space ecosystems.[23]

Over the last 20 years, China has sought opportunistic gains by cooperating with regional US adversaries such as Iran. Joint Chinese-Iranian military exercises in the region and beyond are now commonplace and a relationship

19. Hugo Morrison, "China's Digital Influence in the Middle East: Implications for US Relations," JASON Institute for Peace and Security Studies, November 27, 2023, https://jasoninstitute.com/chinas-digital-influence-in-the-middle-east-implications-for-us-relations/; and Stefan Lukas and Manuel Langendorf, "Cloud Competition Is Heating Up in MENA and China Expands Its Presence," Wilson Center, October 29, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/cloud-competition-heating-mena-and-china-expands-its-presence.

20. Albert Vidal Ribe and Joseph Dempsey, "More Than a Mirage: UAE Combat Aircraft in China," *Military Balance Blog*, July 22, 2024, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/07/more-than-a-mirage-uae-combat-aircraft-in-china/.

21. Vidal Ribe and Dempsey, "More Than a Mirage."

22. Naomi Kantor Itzhayek et al., "China–UAE Space Cooperation: Risk or Opportunity for Israel?," The Institute for National Security Studies, April 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/china-uae/.

23. Kantor Itzhayek et al., "China–UAE Space Cooperation."

that began with arms sales eventually evolved into the provision of components and technical assistance.[24] Tehran's relationship with China has allowed Iran to increase its capabilities and transfer advanced capabilities to its regional proxies—capabilities subsequently employed against the United States and its allies. The threat of such transfers may have only increased after the 12-Day War between Israel and Iran, with some reports indicating China is now directly resupplying and upgrading Iran's capabilities.[25]

In times of conflict, China's cooperation has gone further. In the Red Sea over the last two years, Chinese vessels were able to transit the area without threats from the Houthis, with China reportedly supplying the Houthis with advanced capabilities and weaponry to enable Houthi operations.[26] Chinese support even extended to providing geospatial intelligence and satellite-based targeting data to the Houthis, enabling their operations.[27] Beijing's assistance to Iran and its proxy network has crossed from the physical domain into the information domain, with China taking actions to back disruptive pro-Palestinian groups in the United States and providing digital support to Iranian and proxy information and propaganda operations.[28] At times, Chinese hackers have even attacked Israel.[29]

Beijing has also sought to increase China's public role in the Middle East and therefore boost the country's prestige. China publicly brokered a peace agreement and helped warm the arrangements between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing has also tried to step into the region's highest-prestige diplomatic role by attempting to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians while facilitating a unity agreement between the rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah.[30] Through these efforts,

24. Jean-Loup Samaan, "Is the Cautious China-Iran Military Cooperation at a Turning Point?," *MENASource* (blog), August 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-the-cautious-china-iran-military-cooperation-at-a-turning-point/.

25. Ruta R. Deshpande, "16 Chinese Military Cargo Planes Fly into Iran, Triggering Fears of a Major Arms Transfer Ahead of U.S. Showdown," DeftechTimes, January 20, 2026, https://deftechtimes.com/16-chinese-military-cargo-planes-fly-into-iran-triggering-fears-of-a-major-arms-transfer-ahead-of-u-s-showdown/.

26. "China Arming Houthi Rebels in Yemen in Exchange for Unimpeded Red Sea Passage," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 2, 2025, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/01/02/china-arming-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-in-exchange-for-unimpeded-red-sea-passage/.

27. Samaan, "China-Iran Military Cooperation."

28. Luke Tress, "Report Links US Anti-Israel Groups to Beijing-Backed Network Aiding China," *The Times of Israel*, July 27, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-links-us-anti-israel-groups-to-beijing-backed-network-aiding-china/.

29. Patrick Howell O'Neill, "Chinese Hackers Disguised Themselves as Iran to Target Israel," *MIT Technology Review*, August 10, 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/08/10/1031622/chinese-hackers-false-flag-iran-israel-fireeye/.

30. Ilan Ben Zion, "China Offers to Facilitate Israel-Palestinian Peace Talks," Associated Press, April 18, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/china-israel-palestinians-peace-talks-32c9f5176c5b295d2d20111af2053351; and Dominika Urhová, "Beijing Declaration: China's Role in Post-War Middle East," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, August 20, 2024, https://ceias.eu/beijing-declaration-chinas-role-in-post-war-middle-east/.

Beijing has attempted to usurp the United States' position as the prestige power in the region and demonstrate China's status as a great and global power.

In the Middle East, China is following in the footsteps of great and revisionist powers that came before it. China's actions show it has slowly begun to recognize the Middle East as a place of strategic importance rather than just an area from which China can derive natural resources and economic benefits. China is not yet in a position to contest the region or try to wrest control of it from the United States. Still, the importance of China to the economies and security situations of many Gulf Arab States, coupled with the relationship between Beijing and Tehran, means China currently stands a chance of denying much of the Middle East to the United States should the great powers clash. In the meantime, China is already reaping the benefits of its growing influence and declining US interest in the region.

Forecasting China's Next Actions in the Middle East

China's actions in the Middle East over the next 10 years will be marked by policy continuity, positioning Beijing to capitalize on changes in the region. Whereas no single Chinese action will prove decisive, the steady drumbeat of Chinese activities will erode the United States' position, give China more kinetic options through regional proxies, establish China as the Middle East's critical economic power, and help China gain access to NATO systems and US technology.

1. **China will increase its naval presence in the Middle East through increased dwell time and multinational exercises, bringing together Iran, other regional states, and extraregional powers such as Russia and South Africa.** Coupled with frequent port calls, multinational exercises will establish a Chinese naval presence in the region without requiring the provocative step of establishing official Chinese bases.

2. **China will use arms sales and complex exercises to deepen its military and technological relationship with the United Arab Emirates, creating a hybrid Chinese-NATO technological ecosystem.** China will expand the scope of the Falcon Shield exercises and sell equipment, such as unmanned systems, to the United Arab Emirates. These activities will create a hybrid technological ecosystem of Chinese and NATO systems that will allow Beijing to collect more data on NATO technology. China's data-collection effort will include integrating the data link

from Chinese unmanned systems into NATO airframes. The effort will also give Chinese pilots a chance to practice against NATO air defense systems, such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system possessed by the United Arab Emirates.

3. China will provide military equipment to shore up the Iranian regime while continuing to coordinate with Tehran in the information domain and provide Iran with access to resources such as space-based capabilities. China will support negotiations for a US-Iranian nonaggression agreement while providing Iran with access to improved missile and drone technologies. As Tehran continues to face domestic unrest, China will help provide Iran with technologies to strengthen Iranian domestic security. China will also provide dual-use technologies Iran can employ in electronic warfare, radar systems, and guidance systems.

4. Building on lessons from the Israel-Hamas War, China will seek closer cooperation with the Houthis by helping them reconstitute their forces and gain capabilities. In the immediate future, China will help the Houthis improve their drone capabilities and will provide dual-use technology to make Houthi missiles and drones more accurate.

5. Building on its investments in green technology, China will seek to become the dominant nonregional economic player in the Persian Gulf. Given the danger posed by geological hazards in the region, the Gulf Arab States are increasingly attempting to diversify their infrastructures away from hydrocarbon dependence. As a result, these states are seeking major investments in electric vehicles and solar power. Given its global position in both sectors, China is well postured to become the critical partner for countries in the region as they develop. China will pursue these partnerships by building new electric-vehicle plants, especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and providing resources for solar plants in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. These actions will give China significant influence in the region.

6. China will seek to expand its influence in the Persian Gulf's AI and digital-technology ecosystem by building new data centers and chip-manufacturing facilities in both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. China will seek to integrate these facilities with systems being added to US global infrastructure and use this effort as a means to access restricted chip and data technologies.

7. China will seek to compete with the United States diplomatically by brokering agreements between the Gulf Arab States and Iran (and Iranian proxies). China has already begun pursuing such agreements and will continue to do so to gain prestige, carve Middle Eastern countries out of the US orbit, and drive these countries toward a position of neutrality.

A Path Forward for the United States

China's opportunities in the Middle East come primarily from a lack of US interest and attention. In short, the United States is creating opportunities China is merely exploiting. Arguably, China does not have a concrete Middle Eastern strategy, but the United States is allowing China to capitalize on a similar absence of US strategy. In the near future, many of China's opportunities will come from three spheres: green technology, a lack of faith in the United States, and China's relationship with Iran and Tehran's proxies. The United States has also allowed most countries in the region to avoid choosing between China and the United States, further complicating the strategic environment. The United States can counter the growth of Chinese influence in each area, but doing so will require a changed approach to the region.

Although China is economically active throughout the Middle East, Beijing is particularly active in developing and providing the green and electric-vehicle technologies the region so badly needs. Whereas the United States may currently struggle to replace China as a major exporter of electric-vehicle systems and technology, Washington could partner with Middle Eastern countries that have advanced agricultural, water, and battery technologies and help finance regional partnerships. For example, Israel is a world leader in advanced battery technology but lacks manufacturing capabilities. By brokering and potentially financing partnerships between Israeli technology firms and local manufacturers in countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, the United States could help balance China's influence. The more US companies develop their own electric-vehicle and solar capabilities, the more the United States can offer a viable alternative for countries that would rather not rely on China.

The United States also needs to be seen as a reliable ally in the region. Constant statements suggesting the United States lacks interest in the Middle East and wishes to withdraw undermine US regional credibility and encourage hedging behavior. The issue with US credibility is reinforced by highly visible redeployments of critical assets, such as air and missile defense systems, which cause anxiety about whether those assets will be available to protect countries such as the United Arab Emirates when they face regional threats. In turn, regional partners become more likely to distance themselves from conflicts involving the United States. To counter this development, the United States should stop messaging disinterest in the region and prioritize the defense of critical partners through actions, not just words, including the permanent basing of assets to reflect security guarantees.

The United States should also work to keep faith with the Kurds. The Kurdistan Regional Government occupies a critical strategic corridor, yet the United States has repeatedly abandoned this partner. In the past, US abandonment resulted in Kurdish cooperation with US adversaries. This outcome need not happen again. Maintaining a small US deployment to guarantee Kurdish autonomy and encourage US and European investment could have a disproportionate strategic effect.

Several countries in the region—particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—are looking to develop their own defense industrial bases. Whereas such bases would give these countries greater autonomy from US policy, they could also benefit US strategy. Israel, in particular, requires funding to develop its defense industrial base. In a war with China, the United States would consume more than its own defense industrial base can produce. With financing deals in place, the United States could begin to reverse the flow of stocks from the War Reserve Stock for Allies–Israel stockpile. Helping Israel develop its defense industrial base would free up US materiel currently flowing to Israel and, with agreements for excess production in place, allow the United States to stockpile and use Israeli-produced materiel in war. Similar agreements could be made with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, though reaching such agreements may be more challenging. Washington could also encourage these countries to sell defense products to Indo-Pacific allies, which could help reduce the burden on the United States. For example, Israel has shown a willingness to work with Taiwan, a willingness the United States should encourage.

Collectively, these moves would help reassure allies but still leave the problem of Iran and its proxies unresolved. During the Cold War, the United States often encouraged Israel to embarrass the Soviet Union by capturing and destroying Soviet systems employed by adversaries. The same approach should be adopted vis-à-vis China. Should China help Tehran rearm and reconstitute Iranian

capabilities, the United States should help Israel publicly degrade those capabilities. Similarly, wherever possible, the United States should publicly expose the malign nexus of joint Chinese-Iranian information operations by employing the type of declassification that proved highly successful prior to the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War. The United States should also seek to encourage, support, and require regional actors such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel to continue countering Iranian proxies such as the Houthis. Countereffforts should include developing maritime security capabilities that could keep regional sea lines of communication open in the event of a conflict with China.

The United States should not provide support nor security guarantees for free. The United States should send a clear message: US support and security guarantees are ironclad, but countries cannot use both the US and Chinese defense ecosystems. Additionally, the United States will allow other regional powers to impose costs on those outside US security guarantees. This US strategy, adopted in the Middle East during the Cold War, was highly effective, eventually helping flip Egypt's alignment in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War.

Conclusion

Although the United States cannot stop all Chinese activities in the Middle East, Washington can reinforce its own position in the region, double down on its support for its closest allies, and develop mechanisms that make operating beyond the bubble of US protection undesirable. In doing so, the United States can minimize the effects of Chinese relationships in a future conflict, following a well-worn track of great-power behavior in the region. Prior to World War II, Germany and Italy had significant economic and cultural investments in the Middle East, but the Allied powers were ultimately able to secure the region by combining military and political interventions sustained through persistent presence. On the other hand, if the United States continues to deprioritize the Middle East, Washington will find, at great cost, the cartographers of old were not entirely wrong in calling the region the navel of the earth. If the United States does not change course, China may be able to benefit from the region's tremendous resources in a future war with the United States, undermine the US global position and prestige, and force the United States to complicate its strategic mobility by avoiding the region altogether.

— 10 —

Fostering Influence on the Forgotten Continent: China's Rise in Africa

Paul Milas

Africa has emerged as an increasingly important arena in the strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). As tensions between Washington and Beijing intensify beyond the Indo-Pacific, Africa is no longer a peripheral theater; instead, this continent is a critical space in which diplomatic influence, economic leverage, and military access intersect. Once framed primarily through anticolonial solidarity and developmental cooperation, China's long-standing engagement with Africa has evolved into a multidimensional strategy that carries significant implications for regional security and competition between global powers. China increasingly integrates African states into its global strategy. Many African governments formally recognize Beijing's claims in the South China Sea and its positions on core sovereignty issues, including China's stances on Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. The official stances of African governments reinforce China's efforts to shape international norms and advance its own interests. Yet, at the same time, African governments continue to balance relations with multiple global powers in pursuing African countries' own national interests and preserving their own agency. African countries' approaches range from hedging and balancing global powers to setting the terms for economic partnerships and investments.

Over the past 25 years, Beijing has systematically expanded its presence across Africa through a combination of institutionalized diplomacy, large-scale economic statecraft, technological integration, and selective security engagements. China's efforts have enabled the country to insert itself into African political,

economic, and security systems while cultivating durable relationships with governments, militaries, and state-linked enterprises. As a result, China has positioned itself to protect its overseas interests, secure critical supply chains, and contest US freedom of maneuver in the event of a heightened strategic confrontation. Building on this collaborative study's established scenario, this chapter examines how China has postured itself to operate in and influence Africa during a great-power conflict. It then traces the historical foundations of China-Africa relations, analyzes the role of mechanisms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and assesses Beijing's use of diplomatic, economic, and military tools to build enduring influence across Africa.

One must understand how China arrived at its current position in Africa before assessing future risks and policy options. As Beijing continues to engage the continent, African countries will play an increasingly central role in China's global strategy and in the broader contest over the influence, access, and norms shaping the international order.

Great-Power Conflict on Africa's Doorstep

As the conflict between Washington and Beijing spills over from the Indo-Pacific into Africa, the continent becomes more than a peripheral player. Africa becomes a stage for influence, leverage, and low-level confrontation. For decades, the People's Republic of China has cultivated relationships and influence across Africa that go beyond development projects and loans. China's established networks and military relationships now serve as instruments in a broader campaign to disrupt US freedom of maneuver and undermine US economic interests, as well as secure PRC economic investments and trade, safeguard China's sea lines of communication, and align regional sentiment in Beijing's favor.

Nowhere is the risk of a direct military confrontation greater than in Djibouti and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The Doraleh naval base, Beijing's first overseas military facility, has become a hub of activity in recent months as tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China increase. The Djiboutian government, which is publicly committed to neutrality, demands both Washington and Beijing avoid engaging in any hostilities or military action on Djiboutian soil or within Djibouti's territorial waters. Still, little stands in the way of a US-China skirmish outside these constraints.

Over the past decade, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has pre-positioned offensive and defensive weapons systems at Doraleh. Concealed in shipping containers and warehouses without the Djiboutian government's knowledge, surface-to-air systems, anti-ship systems, unmanned aerial vehicles, and uncrewed

surface and underwater vessels stand ready to defend the base or to be deployed if the United States or another Western nation attempts to enforce a blockade in the Indian Ocean. The PLA Navy's *Fujian* aircraft carrier strike group—originally slated to redeploy to China following the strike group's participation in China's biannual, joint Mosi exercise with South Africa and Russia in the southern Indian Ocean—diverts to Djibouti. While in port, the strike group is rapidly replenished and rearmed for a follow-on deployment to the Indian Ocean. The purpose of the rerouting is to protect Chinese commercial vessels transiting from Africa to mainland China against a potential US blockade, though the strike group's presence signals a broader deterrence posture.

In a more deliberately escalatory action, the People's Republic of China begins leveraging its sophisticated monitoring and interference networks located at Doraleh to intensify electronic interference, jam the Global Positioning System, and intercept the communications of US naval vessels and aircraft operating in the vicinity of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Complicating the situation further, US and Western naval and commercial vessels have recently been targeted by armed drones and anti-ship ballistic missiles in the Red Sea. These attacks are enabled by Beijing's economic partnership with Iran, including its purchases of Iranian oil and its sales of dual-use and military-grade materials to Iran. In turn, Iran provides financial and material support to the Houthi movement and other proxy forces in the region. The People's Republic of China also discreetly provides Iran and the Houthis with commercial-shipping data gathered through PRC port operations. The data enable Iran and the Houthis to target US and Western vessels while giving safe passage to Chinese-flagged vessels.[1] These actions echo the 2023 and 2024 events that temporarily but severely disrupted shipping in the Red Sea and forced most shipping vessels to transit around the Cape of Good Hope.

The benefit to the People's Republic of China is clear: Each attempted strike on a Western ship forces the US Navy to divert resources from the Indo-Pacific to protect vital maritime routes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which account for 10–15 percent of global maritime trade.[2] Global maritime-shipping companies now have to choose between transiting through the Red Sea (at the risk of being attacked) or diverting around the southern tip of Africa (a more costly and time-consuming route).

1. Tuvia Gering and Jason M. Brodsky, "China Is Supporting the Houthis. Here's How the Trump Administration Can Respond," *New Atlanticist* (blog), January 14, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/china-is-supporting-the-houthis-heres-how-the-trump-administration-can-respond/.

2. *Hearing on Examining the PRC's Strategic Port Investments in the Western Hemisphere and the Implications for Homeland Security, Part I, Before the Subcomm. on Transportation and Maritime Security of the H. Homeland Security Comm.*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Ryan C. Berg, director, Americas Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies); and Paroma Soni and Giovanna Coi, "By the Numbers: How Conflict in the Red Sea Disrupts Global Trade," *POLITICO*, March 4, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/how-conflict-red-sea-disrupts-global-trade-by-the-numbers-houthis-shipping/.

Beyond PRC military activities in Djibouti, the PLA Navy has normalized its operations in the Atlantic Ocean and the western Indian Ocean through routine port visits and annual naval exercises with South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, Madagascar, and Ethiopia. Growing instability in the Gulf of Guinea and western Africa has turned the region into a new space for security competition, enabling the People's Republic of China to justify deploying an escort task force to secure Chinese economic investments in the region. Because the sustainment operations of PRC naval deployments to Africa rely heavily on regional ports constructed and managed by China, Beijing approaches countries in western Africa to discuss a new logistics support base for PLA Navy operations.

The PLA Navy's anti-piracy missions, port visits, and routine military cooperation, coupled with the construction of dual-use ports along Africa's east and west coasts and the establishment of military access agreements, create an enduring strategic foothold. Together, these activities form a logistical and surveillance network that sustains the PLA Navy's persistent presence on both sides of the continent. This development allows the People's Republic of China to monitor US naval movements and deny Washington the uncontested maritime access it once enjoyed from the Gulf of Guinea to the Mozambique Channel and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Chinese entities participate heavily in African port management, operations, and infrastructure, which has implications that go beyond military impacts. Ship-to-shore cranes, logistics software, and other port equipment built and operated by the People's Republic of China provide the country with an avenue for commercial espionage. Chinese firms have gained access to sensitive US shipping information, which allows them to monitor and disrupt US trading vessels transiting to and from African ports.[3] As a result of Beijing's sabotage, US commercial vessels now sit outside many African ports because of port prioritization, customs delays, and regulatory leverage, at the cost of billions of dollars a week.

China's economic dominance in Africa extends into infrastructural networks, rail networks, mining operations, and commerce. The same economic ties that once appeared benign have reduced Western access to and influence over supply chains and now serve to insulate Beijing from Western economic pressure and sanctions. China's economic ties ensure its continued access to raw materials and trade critical to the Chinese economy and defense industry. Coupled with the PLA Navy's escorts, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ensures China has uninterrupted access to cobalt, manganese, and other critical and rare earth elements, which continue to support China's economic engine.

3. Berg, *Strategic Port Investments*.

The United States has attempted to break China's dominant position in the critical-mineral sector through dialogue and limited economic and infrastructural investments in African partners. But countries that depend on Chinese investment and trade—like South Africa, the DR Congo, Nigeria, and Zambia—have been reluctant to condemn Beijing's position, citing nonalignment or respect for sovereign decision making. African countries look to China for the downstream processing, refining, and manufacturing of critical minerals because China dominates those sectors compared to Western countries. Beneath the rhetoric of African countries lies a deeper fear China—whose economic footprint dwarfs that of the United States and other Western nations—will cause economic disruption and withdraw investments.

China moves swiftly to reinforce its relationships after the incident in Taiwan, launching a disinformation campaign through state-controlled media outlets and PRC-friendly news organizations across Africa. The People's Republic of China portrays its actions in the Indo-Pacific conflict as a defensive response to US provocation and as a struggle to protect cooperation among countries in the Global South. Additionally, Beijing accuses the United States of undermining the safety and security of the alternative international arrangements the People's Republic of China has built under the BRI and the Global Development, Governance, Civilization, and Security Initiatives. China's narrative resonates with many of its African partners, both in government and society, particularly in countries where US policies have long been perceived as paternalistic or inconsistent.

Washington's counterefforts, which are limited to diplomatic statements and modest information operations, struggle to match the reach of Beijing's messaging. In some countries, pro-China narratives have begun influencing parliamentary debates, national media coverage, and even public opinion on the presence of the US military in Africa.

African governments and regional organizations are not passive observers of the Indo-Pacific conflict; these entities have various approaches and reactions to the crisis. Leveraging its members' collective diplomatic weight, the African Union urges the United States and the People's Republic of China to exercise restraint but stops short of criticizing either side. As a vocal proponent of nonalignment, South Africa continues to engage diplomatically and economically with both the United States and China. But South Africa's membership in the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) organization causes it to favor the People's Republic of China. Both Kenya and Ghana, which are recipients of significant US and Chinese investment, seek to lead mediation efforts, viewing the crisis as an opportunity to assert Africa's influence over global politics. Meanwhile, Nigeria and Egypt quietly signal their desire to strengthen security

and economic cooperation with the United States to reduce their reliance on the People's Republic of China. Across the continent, African militaries now face political pressure to avoid being seen as partisan, including by reconsidering their coordination with the United States. Other militaries that rely on China's economic and security assistance find themselves drawn deeper into Beijing's orbit.

From Solidarity to an All-Weather Community with a Shared Future

> China-Africa relations have today reached a stage of growth unmatched in history. We should scale the heights, look afar and take bold steps. Let us join hands, pool the vision and strength of the 2.4 billion Chinese and Africans and open a new era of China-Africa win-win cooperation and common development.
>
> —President Xi Jinping,
> speech at the opening ceremony of the 2015 FOCAC summit[4]

A future in which the previously described fictitious scenario becomes reality is not hard to imagine, particularly when placed within the context of China's historical activities and posture in Africa. Over the past 25 years, China has strategically positioned itself as a key player in Africa, employing a multifaceted approach that intertwines diplomacy, economic initiatives, and selective security engagements. China often claims no strings are attached to its engagements in this dynamic strategy, which has enabled Beijing to enhance its influence across the continent and shape the political, economic, and security landscapes to align with China's long-term national interests. From its early support for African independence movements to its contemporary engagements through platforms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China has cultivated relationships built on the principles of mutual respect and sovereignty. By leveraging its economic power and promoting programs and initiatives such as the BRI, China has expanded its footprint in Africa and framed its involvement as a partnership rooted in solidarity among countries in the Global South, thus redefining traditional power dynamics in the region.

4. Xi Jinping, "Speech by President Xi Jinping on FOCAC" (speech, Forum On China-Africa Cooperation, Johannesburg, ZA, December 4, 2015), http://en.cabc.org.cn/?c=policys&a=view&id=33.

African Agency in Great-Power Competition

Despite China's many activities and significant influence across the continent, African states are not submissive actors within a great-power competition, nor do they uniformly gravitate toward Beijing's orbit. Instead, African countries exercise their own agency and leverage competition between the United States, China, Russia, and other global actors to secure political support, economic investment, and military assistance while advancing African countries' national interests. Many African nations seek to obtain better terms from their partners, including China and the United States. The shift in African countries' strategies reflects a growing trend toward resource nationalism, digital-governance initiatives, strategic alignment with multiple partners, and the fostering of relationships that are contingent and transactional. Consequently, African agency can be viewed as a form of resistance to great powers' tendencies to overstep rather than as an alignment with any particular great power.

The Origins of China-Africa Relations

China's contemporary engagement with Africa began in the 1950s, when many African countries were fighting for and gaining independence from colonial rule. China's support for African independence movements differentiated it from Western colonial powers, enabling China to frame itself as a partner rather than a patron: a developing nation that helped Africa counter imperialist powers. The People's Republic of China focused on cultivating political relationships by stressing the principles of sovereignty, noninterference, and mutual respect, offering political, economic, and military support to liberation movements.[5] This approach helped Beijing cultivate a reputation for no-strings-attached cooperation that emphasized noninterference. China drew heavily on solidarity among countries in the Global South, portraying China and African states as partners with shared experiences of colonial exploitation and underdevelopment. In the 1950s, China had a lower gross domestic product and Human Development Index score than many African countries. The narrative of solidarity allowed China to assert its experiences and enabled it to understand the challenges other underdeveloped countries were facing. China's framing continues to resonate today, even as African nations increasingly recognize China as a superpower. One essential goal of China's early cooperation was to prevent the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. The People's Republic of China's efforts enabled it to gain a seat in the UN in 1971, with substantial backing from African countries.[6]

5. Oluwatimilehin Sotubo and Cortez A. Cooper III, *Chinese Engagement with Africa* (RAND Corporation, July 2025).

6. Sotubo and Cooper, *Chinese Engagement with Africa*.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, China's engagements in Africa shifted away from a primarily ideological focus and toward a focus on pragmatic economic cooperation. This shift was influenced in part by reforms and evolving domestic conditions after the death of Mao Zedong. Since the turn of the century, the People's Republic of China has substantially expanded its economic, diplomatic, and security engagements across Africa. Formally announced in 2000, China's going-global strategy set the conditions for expanded engagements by encouraging Chinese companies to invest overseas, secure natural resources, and expand into new markets.[7]

The going-global strategy was institutionalized through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.[8] Created in 2000 and convening every three years, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation is the primary mechanism through which the People's Republic of China facilitates and advances its political, economic, and security partnerships with African nations.[9] The forum promotes high-level political dialogue to advance mutually beneficial cooperation, often incorporating the goals of international bodies, including the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.[10]

In his keynote address at the 2024 FOCAC summit, Xi elevated China-Africa relations by characterizing the summit's participants as an "all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future for the new era."[11] Additionally, for all African countries to which China has diplomatic ties, Xi elevated the bilateral relations to "strategic relations."[12] During the forum, Beijing also established or upgraded its relationships with 30 African nations.[13] Notably, the People's Republic of China upgraded its relationship with South Africa to an "all-round strategic cooperative partnership" and upgraded its relationships with Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe

7. UN Conference on Trade and Development, *World Investment Report 2006: FDI from Developing and Transition Economies; Implications for Development* (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2006).

8. Shirley Ze Yu, "What Is FOCAC? Three Historic Stages in the China-Africa Relationship," *Africa@LSE* (blog), February 3, 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/02/03/what-is-focac-three-stages-the-new-china-africa-relationship-trade-economics/.

9. Yu, "What Is FOCAC?"

10. Paul Nantulya, "Reimagining African Agency in Africa-China Relations—Lessons from FOCAC 2024," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, October 7, 2024, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/reimagining-african-agency-in-africa-china-relations-lessons-from-focac-2024/.

11. Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands to Advance Modernization and Build a Community with a Shared Future" (speech, Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Beijing, CN, September 5, 2024), https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202409/05/content_WS66d964bdc6d0868f4e8eaa07.html.

12. Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands."

13. Tianyi Wu, "Back in Action: The Ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Sees Renewed Relations and Development Prospects," Boston University Global Development Policy Center, October 15, 2024, https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2024/10/15/back-in-action-the-ninth-forum-on-china-africa-cooperation-sees-renewed-relations-and-development-prospects/.

to "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnerships."[14] These elevated relationship statuses signify Beijing's interest in deepening its diplomatic, economic, and military partnerships with African countries.[15]

Although the forum is framed as a platform to promote mutually beneficial cooperation, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation also serves as a venue in which China can advance its own agenda by systematically incorporating Chinese global initiatives into summit agendas, shaping diplomatic narratives, and encouraging African support for Beijing's foreign and domestic policies.[16] Xi explicitly cited the Global Development Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, Cultural Silk Road program, and BRI during his 2024 keynote address.[17] Collectively, these frameworks present China as an alternative to the traditional, Western-led development and governance models while expanding Beijing's political influence, economic partnerships, and ability to shape international norms and institutions in ways that align with Chinese interests.

The one-China policy and the concept of "mutual support on global governance issues" are core tenets of the forum and of all Chinese bilateral and regional agreements.[18] Members of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation explicitly affirm their dedication to these principles through joint declarations, action plans, bilateral agreements, and defense pacts.[19] Eswatini is the one African country that is absent from the forum. Eswatini has not been invited to any FOCAC events because the country maintains diplomatic recognition of and relations with Taiwan, while also pursuing economic engagement with Beijing.[20] Two recent examples demonstrate how African countries have practically managed the one-China policy. In 2022, then–Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan drew criticism from several African countries (including Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and the DR Congo), which cited support for the one-China policy.[21] Meanwhile, in April 2026, the Taiwanese president's visit to Eswatini was postponed by several weeks after strong pressure from Chinese authorities caused Seychelles,

14. Tianyi Wu, "Back in Action."

15. Tianyi Wu, "Back in Action."

16. Tianyi Wu, "Back in Action"; and Nantulya, "Reimagining African Agency."

17. Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands."

18. Paul Nantulya, "Africa's Role in China's Multilateralism Strategy," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 24, 2023, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-china-multilateralism/.

19. Nantulya, "Africa's Role."

20. Shannon Tiezzi, "China-Africa Summit Shines a Spotlight on Eswatini, Taiwan's Lone Partner in Africa," *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/china-africa-summit-shines-a-spotlight-on-eswatini-taiwans-lone-partner-in-africa/.

21. Kate Bartlett, "African Leaders Quick to Address US-China Tensions over Taiwan," Voice of America, August 18, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/african-leaders-quick-to-address-us-china-tensions-over-taiwan/6707458.html.

Mauritius, and Madagascar to cancel permits that would allow the president to fly over their territories.[22]

Institutionalizing Influence: The FOCAC Mechanism and Economic Partnerships

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation is the primary venue in which China announces its economic commitments to Africa. At the inaugural forum summit, Beijing offered modest debt relief in the amount of ¥10 billion ($1.2 billion at the time).[23] Since then, pledged funding has risen significantly, from $5 billion in 2006 to $60 billion in 2015 and 2018, $40 billion in 2021, and $50.7 billion in 2024.[24] The substantial increase in funding is likely a result of the BRI's launch in 2013.[25] Pledged funding at FOCAC events comes in the form of investments, aid, and credit lines.[26] The 2024 forum summit was attended by 51 African heads of state, the chairperson of the African Union Commission, and the UN secretary-general.[27]

China's economic engagement has transformed trade and infrastructure across Africa. Trade grew from $11.67 billion in 2000 to $296 billion in 2024. As a result, China has been Africa's largest bilateral trading partner since 2009.[28] But China's trade with Africa is uneven. From 2000 to 2022, 89 percent of Africa's exports to China were natural resources like copper, iron ore, oil, and alumina commodities, whereas imports from China consisted primarily of manufactured goods.[29]

22. Johnson Lai and Simina Mistreanu, "Taiwan President Postpones Eswatini Visit and Says China Pressured African Countries," *AP News*, updated April 21, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-eswatini-visit-cancel-lai-china-pressure-766186171449ceb7e62b1356e503986d.

23. Zeng Aiping and Shu Zhan, "Origin, Achievements, and Prospects of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation," *China International Studies*, no. 72 (September/October 2018).

24. Yun Sun, "2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit: A New Chapter?," Brookings Institution, November 5, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/2024-focac-beijing-summit-a-new-chapter/; and Alexandra Dent, "China in Africa: September 2024," Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-africa-september-2024.

25. Yun Sun, "2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit."

26. Tianyi Wu, "Back in Action"; and Yun Sun, "2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit."

27. Teshu Singh, "An Analysis of the Ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation," Indian Council of World Affairs, October 3, 2024, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=11884&lid=7215.

28. Marvellous Ngundu, "Africa-China Trade: Openness Without Industry," *ISS African Futures* (blog), September 2, 2025, https://futures.issafrica.org/blog/2025/Africa-China-trade-openness-without-industry; Oyintarelado Moses, "10 Charts to Explain 22 Years of China-Africa Trade, Overseas Development Finance and Foreign Direct Investment," Boston University Global Development Policy Center, April 2, 2024, https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2024/04/02/10-charts-to-explain-22-years-of-china-africa-trade-overseas-development-finance-and-foreign-direct-investment/; and Chido Munyati, "Why Strong Regional Value Chains Will Be Vital to the Next Chapter of China and Africa's Economic Relationship," World Economic Forum, June 25, 2024, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/06/why-strong-regional-value-chains-will-be-vital-to-the-next-chapter-of-china-and-africas-economic-relationship/.

29. "China-Africa Economic Bulletin, 2024 Edition," Boston University Global Development Policy Center, April 1, 2024, https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2024/04/01/china-africa-economic-bulletin-2024-edition/.

The People's Republic of China has secured access to mining operations through "resource-backed finance" deals and the direct acquisition of mines in countries like Angola, the DR Congo, and Zambia.[30] To support these efforts and control mineral supply chains, China has invested in a network of roads, railways, ports, and power grids.[31] Mines in Zambia and the DR Congo are connected to ports in Angola, Kenya, and Tanzania by roads and railways, like the Tan-Zam railway and Benguela Railway corridors.[32]

Despite the scale of China's investments in Africa's critical-mineral sector, China's position is not uncontested. African governments are actively seeking greater control over their natural resources through various reforms, including stronger regulatory oversight, export restrictions, technology-transfer mandates, and regional cooperation.[33] For instance, since 2022, Zimbabwe has taken several measures to increase its control over the mineral sector and boost domestic processing, which is dominated by Chinese mining companies.[34] In February 2026, Zimbabwe introduced an export ban on raw minerals and lithium concentrate to "enhance mineral accountability, promote beneficiation, and maximise value retention within Zimbabwe."[35] Zimbabwe's actions reflect a broader continental movement that aims to move Africa away from its legacy of raw-mineral exploitation and transform Africa into a central hub of downstream mineral processing. This shift has also been supported by the African Union, which adopted the African Green Minerals Strategy in February 2025. This policy framework aims to leverage a green transition, fuel industrialization, and advance sustainable development across Africa.[36]

Furthermore, the push for stricter oversight is compounded by growing environmental grievances. China has faced criticism, including claims its mining operations have caused severe environmental damage. Such is the case in Zambia,

30. Paul Nantulya, "China's Critical Minerals Strategy in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 9, 2025, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-africa-critical-minerals/.

31. Nantulya, "China's Critical Minerals Strategy."

32. Benedict Hamlyn, "China in Sub-Saharan Africa: Sanction-Proof Supply Lines and Dual-Use Ports," Royal United Services Institute, March 14, 2024, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/china-sub-saharan-africa-sanction-proof-supply-lines-and-dual-use-ports.

33. Paul Nantulya, "Reciprocal and Resilient Mineral Supply Chains: Lessons from the Nacala Corridor," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 13, 2026, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mineral-supply-chains-nacala-corridor/.

34. "Export Control on Lithium Ore in Zimbabwe," International Energy Agency, September 22, 2025, https://www.iea.org/policies/28974-export-control-on-lithium-ore-in-zimbabwe; and Africa Defense Forum, "Ban on Mineral Exports Gives Zimbabwe Leverage with China," *Africa Defense Forum*, April 14, 2026, https://adf-magazine.com/2026/04/ban-on-mineral-exports-gives-zimbabwe-leverage-with-china/.

35. Ministry of Mines and Mining Development, "Press Statement on Ban of Export of Raw Minerals and Lithium Concentrate," news release, February 2026, https://www.mines.gov.zw/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PRESS-STATEMENT-ON-EXPORTS-1.pdf.

36. African Minerals Development Centre, *Africa's Green Minerals Strategy* (African Union, December 2024).

where a Chinese-owned copper mine spilled 1.5 million tons of toxic metals into waterways that connect to the Kafue River—a key source of drinking water and irrigation for local communities.[37]

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Chinese firms have built or upgraded more than 10,000 kilometers of railways, nearly 100,000 kilometers of highways, and roughly 1,000 bridges across Africa.[38] These transportation corridors connect mining zones and inland markets to coastal ports, enabling Chinese firms to move commodities efficiently while strengthening Beijing's access to critical resources and reducing global supply-chain vulnerabilities.[39] But many of the projects backed by Chinese firms are underused, expensive, and have contributed to debt-sustainability concerns and long-term operational challenges. For example, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway project improved freight and passenger service between Mombasa and Nairobi, but the project's high costs have contributed to a significant debt burden Kenya has struggled to repay.[40] Ethiopia's light-rail mass-transit system in Addis Ababa (completed in 2015) is another example of a large-scale infrastructure project that has struggled to achieve its intended economic and operational outcomes. By 2024, only about one-third of the original 41 trains in the system remained operational, and passenger volumes remained well below initial projections.[41] Constructed at a total cost of $475 million, 85 percent of which was financed by a loan from the China Export-Import Bank, the rail system has faced persistent challenges related to maintenance, electrical shortages, and the availability of spare parts for repairs.[42]

Chinese firms have also played a significant role in financing, constructing, and operating African ports. State-owned companies are estimated to hold stakes in 78 commercial ports, with a heavy concentration in western Africa along the

37. Kennedy Gondwe, "Zambia Presses China for More Compensation over Toxic Mine Spill," *BBC News*, September 11, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy9j8xqq2yo.

38. "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated November 26, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367447.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

39. Hamlyn, "China in Sub-Saharan Africa."

40. Africa Defense Forum, "Kenya Feels Financial Squeeze of China's Standard Gauge Railway Loans," *Africa Defense Forum*, updated October 16, 2025, https://adf-magazine.com/2025/10/kenya-feels-squeeze-of-chinas-railway-debt-trap/; and "Kenya, Uganda Double Down on Rail Extension Burdened by Chinese Debt," *France 24*, updated March 21, 2026, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20260321-kenya-uganda-open-rail-extension-burdened-by-chinese-debt.

41. Sepo Haihambo, "African Banks Should Lead Financing of Urban Infrastructure," *African Business*, November 6, 2025, https://african.business/2025/11/african-banker/african-banks-and-institutions-must-lead-on-urbanisation-finance-or-risk-being-sidelined-by-foreign-investors-says-pan-african-banker.

42. Africa Defense Forum, "Five Years On, Addis Ababa Light Rail Still Plagued by Debt," *Africa Defense Forum*, March 24, 2021, https://adf-magazine.com/2021/03/five-years-on-addis-ababa-light-rail-still-plagued-by-debt/.

Gulf of Guinea.[43] In several cases, these arrangements include equity stakes or long-term concessions. For example, at the Lekki Port in Nigeria, Chinese state-owned firm China Harbor Engineering Company holds a majority 54 percent share of the ownership, part of a joint-venture consortium holding 75 percent, providing the People's Republic of China with substantial influence over Africa's trade and logistics networks.[44]

The Digital and Technological Dimension

China has also invested in projects under the Digital Silk Road, which features Huawei and ZTE Corporation communications systems, smart cities and safe cities, power networks, and space infrastructure and cooperation.[45] Through the Digital Silk Road, Chinese firms provide much of Africa's digital backbone, supplying telecommunications equipment, surveillance platforms, data centers, and e-government systems that are often bundled with concessional financing, scholarships, training, and long-term service agreements. Africa-China space cooperation has similarly increased over time, with China supporting satellite development, launch services, ground stations, and technical-training programs for countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Namibia, Egypt, and Ethiopia.[46] Whereas these space partnerships are framed as forms of capacity building and development assistance, they deepen Africa's technological dependence on China and the integration of African data into Chinese systems. These trends reinforce Beijing's broader strategic objective of embedding Chinese standards, platforms, and governance norms across Africa's critical digital and informational infrastructures. For many African governments, Chinese digital systems provide affordable modernization opportunities and fill infrastructural gaps Western actors may not be able to address.

Nevertheless, African countries continue to shape their digital enterprises and governance based on necessities as well as political and economic objectives.[47] Rather than wholly submitting to China's digital architecture and governance

43. Paul Nantulya, "Mapping China's Strategic Port Development in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 10, 2025, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-port-development-africa/.

44. Nantulya, "China's Strategic Port Development"; and Seun Sanni, "Nigeria Opens 'Game Changer' Billion-Dollar Deep Seaport," Reuters, updated January 24, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-opens-game-changer-billion-dollar-deep-seaport-2023-01-23/.

45. Jason Warner and Toyosi Ajibade, "China's Smart Cities in Africa: Should the United States Be Concerned?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 18, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-smart-cities-africa-should-united-states-be-concerned.

46. Rebecca Nadin and Elena Kiryakova, "China's Expanding Role in Space in Africa: Geostrategic Implications," ODI Global, December 17, 2024, https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/global-china-2049-initiative/chinas-expanding-role-in-space-in-africa-geostrategic-implications/.

47. Zenel Garcia and Alex Marino, "China and African Sovereignty: Beyond the Digital Silk Road Narrative," *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2026, https://thediplomat.com/2026/04/china-and-african-sovereignty-beyond-the-digital-silk-road-narrative/.

models, many African countries are creating regulatory frameworks that draw on global best practices and constrain foreign actors. In countries like Nigeria and Kenya, governments have implemented regulations regarding data collection, protection, and privacy to ensure foreign companies show accountability.[48]

China's Military Diplomacy

The People's Republic of China has significantly expanded its military diplomacy in Africa: an evolution of the limited security role China played at the start of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000. Chinese military diplomacy is described as "external relationships pertaining to military and related affairs between countries and groups of countries, including military personnel exchange, military negotiations, arms control negotiations, military aid, military intelligence cooperation, military technology cooperation, international peacekeeping, military alliance activities, etc."[49] The transition toward expanded military diplomacy is most evident in China's establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, as well as in the rapid growth of military exercises, training programs, arms transfers, professional military education (PME), and peacekeeping operations.

Djibouti has become the location of China's most strategically significant activities in Africa. In Djibouti, Beijing's desire to protect its interests has evolved into a permanent military presence that enables China to project military power in the region. Beginning in 2008, the PLA Navy deployed a rotational anti-piracy task force to the Gulf of Aden as part of a UN-authorized mission to escort and protect civilian ships from piracy.[50] This mission marked the PLA Navy's first sustained far-seas naval operation. The operation required a PLA Navy supply ship to remain in place to support successive task forces and required the use of foreign ports for replenishment.[51] In 2014, China and Djibouti signed a defense and security cooperation agreement that granted the People's Liberation Army access to Djiboutian port facilities, laying the groundwork for deeper military cooperation. Following this development, the People's Republic of China began building its own support facility, which opened in 2017.[52] Officially described as "logistical facilities," the base supports the PLA Navy's anti-piracy missions,

48. Andrew Heffernan, *Why Africa Should Lead on Governing Global Tech Giants*, Policy Brief No. 226 (Centre for International Governance Innovation, February 2026).

49. Phillip C. Saunders and Samuel King, "From Pandemic to Purges: China's Military Diplomacy from 2018 to 2025," *China Military Studies Review* 2 (2026).

50. Dennis J. Blasko, *Recent Changes in the PLA Navy's Gulf of Aden Deployment Pattern*, China Maritime Studies Institute Note #8 (US Naval War College, August 2024).

51. Blasko, *Recent Changes*.

52. Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *China's Engagement in Djibouti*, Congressional Research Service Report IF11304 (Congressional Research Service, June 2025).

peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian-relief missions.[53] The People's Liberation Army has extended the pier to accommodate its largest vessels, including aircraft carriers, submarines, and other naval vessels.[54] The base allows the PLA Navy to project and sustain military power in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, as well as safeguard sea lines of communication that are vital to China's economic and security interests in Africa.

To expand Chinese far-seas naval operations, the People's Republic of China is considering establishing a second military base in Africa, with potential locations including Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, and Mozambique. According to the US Department of War's *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, Gabon's president, Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, confirmed he met with Xi in 2024 to discuss a Chinese base in the Gulf of Guinea.[55] Furthermore, several African ports—such as ports in Tanzania, South Africa, and Nigeria—have hosted PLA Navy vessels and have been used for PLA exercises.[56] More frequent PLA Navy port calls and military activities, as well as the dual-use nature of the host ports, raise concerns commercial infrastructure could increasingly support Chinese naval operations and future basing, blurring the lines between China's economic investments and military power projection.

Beijing has incrementally and pragmatically increased its military exercises and engagements in Africa since 2000. Early engagements were symbolic, focusing on senior-level visits, military diplomacy, and military exchanges with long-standing political partners such as Tanzania and South Africa.[57] Starting in the late 2000s, PLA engagements became more functionally oriented and focused on expanding peacekeeping support, port calls, and humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief exercises. This shift is evidenced by the People's Liberation Army's 2009 Peace Angel exercise: the first joint medical-rescue mission between the People's Liberation Army and Gabon.[58]

53. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on November 26, 2015," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, November 26, 2015, https://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/201511/t20151126_1593836.htm.

54. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (Department of Defense, 2024), 143.

55. Department of War, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025* (Department of War, 2025), 50.

56. Nantulya, "China's Strategic Port Development."

57. David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 166.

58. Prashant Kumar Singh, "Twin Purpose Military Exercises of the Chinese PLA in 2009," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, December 22, 2009, https://idsa.in/publisher/comments/twin-purpose-military-exercises-of-the-chinese-pla-in-2009.

Since the mid-2010s, and especially after the establishment of the PLA support facility in Djibouti, PLA exercises have increased in operational complexity and realism to include live-fire components, joint command-and-control elements, and naval drills. In Djibouti, the People's Liberation Army began conducting live-fire exercises in 2017 and now conducts joint training exercises with the Djiboutian military each year.[59] Since 2019, Beijing has periodically worked with South Africa to conduct naval drills focused on anti-piracy efforts and sea-lane protection in Southern Africa. The most recent drill occurred during the Will for Peace 2026 exercise that incorporated participants from Russia, South Africa, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.[60] In 2024, the People's Republic of China conducted Peace Unity-2024, a joint military training exercise between the People's Liberation Army and the Tanzania People's Defence Forces. The exercise was held in Tanzania and focused on combined sea and land counterterrorism and anti-piracy operations, marking the largest PLA deployment to the region. The following year, the People's Liberation Army conducted Eagles of Civilization 2025, a joint air exercise with Egypt. The exercise was the first large-scale PLA Air Force deployment to Africa and the first joint training exercise between Egypt and China.[61] Beijing characterizes its exercises as capacity building and noninterventionist—a portrayal that aligns with its stated principles of sovereignty and noninterference.

Professional military education (PME) has become an important pillar of China-Africa military cooperation and a key aspect of the Chinese Communist Party's strategy, which aims to shape foreign military officers' political and ideological perspectives to align with the party's own perspective.[62] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China educated about 2,000 African military officers annually.[63] At the 2024 FOCAC summit, Beijing pledged to train 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 police and law-enforcement personnel from Africa over the coming three years.[64] Numerous alumni of PLA educational institutions have risen

59. Wang Zongyang et al., "PLA Support Base in Djibouti Carries Out Joint Training with Djiboutian Military," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, May 5, 2025, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/Videos/16384320.html.

60. Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Chinese, Russian, Iranian Warships Gather near South Africa for Multilateral Drill," U.S. Naval Institute, January 9, 2026, https://news.usni.org/2026/01/09/chinese-russian-iranian-warships-gather-near-south-africa-for-multilateral-drill.

61. Ying Yu Lin, "What a China-Egypt Military Training Reveals About the PLA's Air Combat Readiness," *The Diplomat*, May 20, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/what-a-china-egypt-military-training-reveals-about-the-plas-air-combat-readiness/.

62. Paul Nantulya, *Chinese Professional Military Education for Africa: Key Influence and Strategy*, Special Report no. 521 (United States Institute of Peace, July 2023).

63. Paul Nantulya, "China's 'Military Political Work' and Professional Military Education in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, October 30, 2023, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-pla-military-political-work-pme-africa/.

64. "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027)," Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, September 26, 2024, https://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/202409/t20240926_11497783.htm.

to significant leadership positions, including at least 10 chiefs of defense and eight defense ministers. Graduates of PLA institutions also include President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea and President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe, and former Presidents Laurent Kabila of the DR Congo and Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete of Tanzania.[65]

Arms sales have become an important diplomatic tool for Beijing, enabling the People's Republic of China to build relations with its African partners and position itself as a major arms supplier across the continent. China's sales to Africa include advanced systems such as aircraft, armored vehicles, radars, anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, unmanned aircraft systems, and naval vessels.[66] Whereas the number of Chinese arms transfers declined between 2018 and 2022, China has surpassed Russia and the United States to become Africa's top arms supplier.[67] Unlike Western countries, Beijing often provides arms without political conditions pertaining to human rights, governance, or democratic accountability.

The People's Republic of China has increasingly deployed troops in support of UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. Beijing's first deployment of military peacekeeping forces to Africa occurred in 2003, when China sent 218 military personnel to the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and an additional 558 troops to the UN Mission in Liberia.[68] In 2007, Major General Zhao Jingmin was appointed as the force commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, marking the first time a military officer assumed a senior command position in UN peacekeeping operations.[69] Subsequently, Beijing established the Peacekeeping Affairs Center in 2018 to coordinate UN peacekeeping deployments. China has also increased the number of military officers who have served in top roles within UN peacekeeping missions.[70] China is now the second-largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, and the 10th-largest contributor of troops and police.[71]

China's peacekeeping deployments serve to advance its national interests, mirroring the motivations of many other countries. Through these deployments,

65. Nantulya, "China's 'Military Political Work.' "

66. Sotubo and Cooper, *Chinese Engagement with Africa*.

67. Sotubo and Cooper, *Chinese Engagement with Africa*.

68. "Timeline of Nation's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, November 12, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16351281.html.

69. "Timeline of Nation's Participation."

70. Claude A. Lambert, "Small Eagle, Big Dragon: China's Expanding Role in UN Peacekeeping," Royal United Services Institute, July 19, 2024, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/small-eagle-big-dragon-chinas-expanding-role-un-peacekeeping.

71. Lambert, "Small Eagle, Big Dragon."

Beijing seeks to gain operational experience, protect its citizens, safeguard its economic investments, and expand its influence within the UN.[72] In Liberia, where China's economic investments and diplomatic ties were limited before 2003, Beijing's participation in the UN Mission in Liberia provided the People's Liberation Army with valuable operational experience in multinational peacekeeping operations. Through this mission, China also expanded its military engagement in Africa, deploying more than 10,000 peacekeepers over a 14-year period.[73] As Liberia undertook massive efforts to rebuild after the end of the Liberian civil war, Beijing's economic investments in Liberia also increased with the launch of China's going-global strategy.[74] In contrast, China's involvement in South Sudan has reflected a more direct connection between peacekeeping and the protection of economic interests and Chinese citizens. Since the mid-1990s, China has invested billions of dollars in Sudan's (and later, South Sudan's) oil sector, employing hundreds of Chinese nationals.[75] As war broke out in South Sudan in late 2013, Beijing pushed for UN officials to include the protection of oil infrastructure and personnel in the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan.[76] In 2015, China deployed an infantry battalion to the UN Mission in South Sudan, where 350 noncombatants were already serving, marking the first time Beijing contributed a combat unit to a UN peacekeeping-operations mission.[77] Beijing has denied claims the deployments were linked to its desire to secure its overseas investments and citizens. But China likely intended to achieve this goal indirectly through a broader security and stabilization approach in South Sudan and Africa.[78]

China's peacekeeping efforts established the foundation for its long-term engagement strategy in Africa and normalized China's presence as an economic,

72. Richard Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping," Brookings Institution, September 14, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/; and Thomas Dyrenforth, "Beijing's Blue Helmets: What to Make of China's Role in UN Peacekeeping in Africa," Modern War Institute at West Point, August 19, 2021, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/beijings-blue-helmets-what-to-make-of-chinas-role-in-un-peacekeeping-in-africa/.

73. "Trade, Economic Assistance and Cooperation," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Liberia, n.d., accessed May 8, 2026, https://lr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sbgx/ecoc/.

74. "China and Liberia: 45 Years of Friendship," Africa Press, March 4, 2022, https://www.africa-press.net/liberia/all-news/china-and-liberia-45-years-of-friendship; and "Trade, Economic Assistance."

75. Luke Patey, "Chinese Peace and Its Discontents: China's Peacemaking and Peacekeeping in South Sudan," *International Affairs* 100, no. 3 (May 2024): 981–1000.

76. Colum Lynch, "U.N. Peacekeepers to Protect China's Oil Interests in South Sudan," *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/16/u-n-peacekeepers-to-protect-chinas-oil-interests-in-south-sudan/; and Patey, "Chinese Peace."

77. "The Blue Helmet and an African Girl," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated August 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/zggcddwjw100ggs/xsd/202406/t20240606_11377997.html.

78. Nikita Savkov, "China's Discourse and Interests Related to Its Role in U.N. Peacekeeping," *China Brief* 20, no. 19 (October 2020).

political, and security partner. As Africa's strategic importance continues to grow, China's emphasis on partnership and solidarity will likely enable it to expand its influence further.

The Long Game: What China Will Likely Do Next

> This year marks the 65th anniversary of the start of diplomatic relations between China and African countries. Over the past 65 years, China and Africa have forged unbreakable fraternity in our struggle against imperialism and colonialism, and embarked on a distinct path of cooperation in our journey toward development and revitalization. Together, we have written a splendid chapter of mutual assistance amidst complex changes, and set a shining example for building a new type of international relations.
>
> —Xi Jinping,
> speech at the opening ceremony of the 2021 FOCAC summit[79]

Over the next decade, Africa will play an important part in China's Global South strategy. The People's Republic of China will implement a comprehensive, multidomain strategy designed to secure its own national interests and counter and supplant the influence of the United States. By transitioning from broad initiatives to targeted engagement, China will build a deeply integrated network of influence across Africa. As part of this coordinated campaign, China will advance its diplomatic relationships to reshape global governance structures and norms, refine its economic leverage and control over critical supply chains, and establish a sustained military presence to secure its investments and power projection in the Indian Ocean. The following list outlines China's broad efforts across eight distinct forecasts.

1. **China will deepen its diplomatic engagement through multilateral forums like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and will reshape global governance structures and norms to China's benefit by leveraging bilateral relations across Africa.** The People's Republic of China will seek to operationalize its concept of community with a shared future and advance its global initiatives across Africa, while also using the continent as a testing

79. Xi Jinping, "Uphold the Tradition of Always Standing Together and Jointly Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era" (speech, 8th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Ministerial Conference, Dakar, SN, November 29, 2021), https://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zyjh/202201/t20220124_10632446.htm.

ground for new initiatives. China will seek to expand African support for its core interests by embedding Beijing's governance preferences within international institutions and positioning itself as a leading voice in the Global South. In the UN and other multilateral bodies, China will leverage its deep relationships with key partners such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, and South Africa to align African voting tendencies with China's, particularly on issues including sovereignty, noninterference, the Internet and digital governance, and human rights.

2. The People's Republic of China will expand technological cooperation across Africa, enabling Beijing to influence the continent's digital governance, surveil Africa's digital networks, and conduct espionage. Having built a significant portion of Africa's digital backbone, China will seek to expand the Digital Silk Road and shape the continent's digital governance. China will advance this effort through telecommunications, cloud services, satellite cooperation, and space-based services. Beijing will promote its model of state-managed Internet control through safe-city and smart-city initiatives, which are often bundled with surveillance technology and data-management platforms. The People's Republic of China will likely present its cooperation as a way to achieve stability and development. China will also proliferate Chinese technological platforms and standards, as well as norms associated with authoritarian governance, throughout Africa's digital and surveillance networks. This effort could create an African dependence on Chinese technology and provide Beijing with access to valuable data.

3. China will adjust its investment strategy and state-funded infrastructure projects to focus on small, targeted investments in key sectors across preferred countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Facing accusations of debt-trap diplomacy and domestic constraints, Beijing will adjust its investment strategy, shift toward public-private partnerships, and focus on small-and-beautiful projects in sectors like green technology, e-commerce, and the digital economy. The People's Republic of China will likely continue making targeted investments in transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure—including ports, railways, power grids, and data centers—that links African economies more tightly to China's economy. China will likely deepen its role as a leading

trade partner and creditor across Africa by expanding manufacturing, resource processing, and logistics hubs tied to Chinese firms. Chinese firms will also likely attempt to acquire majority stakes in and directly manage critical resources, moving beyond resource-for-infrastructure agreements to ensure China controls the supply chains for minerals essential to its technological and defense industries. At the same time, African countries will seek to pursue their own national interests, seeking more favorable terms for infrastructure projects, critical-mineral extraction, critical-mineral refining, and revenue generation. To protect its BRI projects and economic investments, Beijing will increasingly rely on private security companies and will coordinate with state-owned enterprises and local forces to secure Chinese interests without deploying the politically sensitive People's Liberation Army. These security firms are often described as private, but they operate under the oversight of the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China and are aligned with Beijing's objectives.

4. China will promote the use of the renminbi in its trade and lending with Africa, gradually creating a financial ecosystem parallel to the US dollar. This effort will reduce China's vulnerability to the US dollar and Western financial sanctions. Beijing will attempt to strengthen its economic leverage and insulate its African interests from US financial pressure by encouraging African banks to hold renminbi reserves and by facilitating renminbi-based loans, payments, and trade.

5. Over the next decade, China will normalize the People's Liberation Army's role as a long-term security partner in Africa, expanding China's strategic access and shaping regional defense norms to align with its interests. As part of its defense diplomacy, Beijing will expand training, exercises, arms sales, and PME to increase its influence and access. China will deepen its defense diplomacy through sustained, senior-level exchanges and security dialogues tied to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the Global Security Initiative. The People's Republic of China will likely increase the frequency, scope, and complexity of its joint exercises. Future exercises will likely resemble China's recent engagements, including its 2024 engagement in Tanzania and its 2025 engagement in Egypt, emphasizing interoperability with select, politically aligned

partners. Beijing will also sustain peacekeeping contributions and increase its arms sales. China will continue to provide numerous PME opportunities to African militaries to promulgate the PRC concepts of sovereignty, civil-military relations, and noninterference. Collectively, efforts involving the People's Liberation Army aim to portray China as a credible and responsible security actor, enhance its operational reach, build soft power, and gradually shape African militaries and security policies in ways that favor Beijing.

6. Over the next decade, the People's Republic of China will expand its support base in Djibouti, which currently serves as a logistics hub for counterpiracy operations. China will seek to transform the facility into one capable of supporting contingency and power-projection missions. Beijing will introduce additional defensive and offensive capabilities, either discreetly (in containerized systems) or openly (by providing capabilities such as short-to-medium-range air defense systems, unmanned aerial vehicles, unmanned underwater vehicles, and anti-ship cruise missiles). Through this strategy, Beijing will seek to enhance its force protection and enable greater operational reach across the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. The PLA Navy may normalize rotational visits by aircraft carriers, submarines, and advanced surface combatants, using Djibouti as a sustainment node for increasingly routine naval deployments in the western Indian Ocean and the southern Atlantic. China's expanding capabilities will reflect a broad effort to secure sea lines of communication, protect overseas interests, and maintain a presence in the western Indian Ocean.

7. The People's Liberation Army will expand and normalize its naval presence in the western Indian Ocean and in the Atlantic Ocean. To support far-seas naval operations and secure sea lines of communication, the People's Liberation Army will seek to gain greater access to African ports along the east coast of Africa and along the Gulf of Guinea. The People's Republic of China will systematically expand the scale, frequency, and complexity of its naval engagements across both eastern and western Africa, using exercises and port calls as mechanisms to deepen military relationships and normalize a PLA Navy presence in African maritime spaces. Multilateral and bilateral exercises will likely feature advanced systems, integrated command-and-control elements, and training

missions that extend beyond maritime security to include air-sea integration, amphibious operations, and logistical coordination. Naval exercises, such as the trilateral naval exercise with South Africa and Russia, will grow larger, more complex, and potentially include additional participants. Through its naval activities, Beijing aims to build reliable naval partnerships, demonstrate Chinese naval capabilities and strategies, promote the use of Chinese navigational systems with which African navies are currently experimenting, and strengthen China's reputation as a long-term security partner.

8. **The People's Republic of China will pursue a permanent naval facility in western Africa near the Gulf of Guinea.** To complement Beijing's presence in Djibouti and enable sustained operations in the Atlantic, China will likely pursue the establishment of a naval-support facility on Africa's west coast. Building on prior overtures in Gabon, Beijing will likely engage countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Namibia, and Angola through a phased approach emphasizing expanded economic ties, high-level political dialogue, and increased military cooperation. China's initial efforts may include infrastructure development, training partnerships, and arms sales or donations, gradually laying the groundwork for a logistics-support facility China can frame as mutually beneficial and respectful of sovereignty. The People's Republic of China will likely offer to construct and maintain facilities while embedding PLA Navy personnel to support equipment upkeep and training, thereby establishing a persistent, low-visibility presence. Progress toward a logistics-support facility will depend heavily on host-nation politics, regional perceptions, and external pressure from the United States and other Western nations, but Beijing's sustained interest suggests a long-term effort to secure Atlantic access and global naval reach.

In addition to naval facilities, the People's Republic of China will continue to build on its large portfolio of Chinese-built military and security facilities across Africa, which range from military bases to training facilities in countries like Tanzania. The Chinese-built Comprehensive Training Centre in Mapinga, Tanzania, served as the training site for the land phase of the Peace Unity-2024 joint military exercise between the People's Liberation Army and the Tanzania

People's Defence Forces.[80] China's naval activities will provide the People's Liberation Army persistent access, even in the absence of formal basing agreements.

Options for the United States

Africa has emerged as a central arena in China's expanding diplomatic, economic, and strategic influence. The continent serves as a critical source of natural resources, a growing market for Chinese goods, and a platform for an expanding military and diplomatic footprint, including China's first overseas military base in Djibouti. But China's position in Africa does not guarantee strategic dominance, nor does it preclude effective US competition. The United States cannot afford to remain reactive to China's diplomatic, economic, and military activities across Africa, nor can the United States realistically counter every action Beijing undertakes. Instead, the United States must plan to operate in a contested African environment and adopt a proactive and prioritized strategy that focuses on identifying and countering PRC activities that pose a direct threat to US interests. Effectively mitigating the risks posed by China will require sustained diplomatic engagement, increased and targeted economic investments, and the cultivation of resilient partnerships capable of withstanding strategic competition and a potential conflict with the People's Republic of China. To accomplish these tasks, the United States can take seven distinct actions in Africa.

First, the United States must counter the threat of China establishing a naval facility on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. The United States must proactively engage with potential host nations (as it did with Gabon), emphasizing the risks of hosting a foreign military presence while offering diplomatic, economic, and security incentives to deter China from establishing an Atlantic naval facility. Targeted development initiatives, trade partnerships, and security cooperation grants and assistance can provide tangible alternatives to PRC investments.

Second, the United States should deepen its economic engagement and private-sector investment in strategic African sectors. The United States must increase its economic investments in key sectors to stem China's expanding economic and political influence. To compete effectively with China in Africa, the United States must significantly enhance its economic engagement and mobilize private-sector investments, particularly in strategic sectors such as technology, energy, health, and critical minerals. The United States should prioritize targeted investments and partnerships that provide credible, high-quality alternatives

80. Jake Vartanian, "Peace and Unity: China's Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania," Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, October 9, 2024, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3930357/peace-and-unity-chinas-growing-military-footprint-in-tanzania/.

to PRC-backed projects. Leveraging initiatives such as the BUILD Act of 2018, alongside robust public-private partnerships, would support the development of sustainable infrastructure, strengthen access to critical supply chains, and advance US industrial and defense interests. By encouraging American firms to expand their presence across the continent, the United States can increase African countries' economic options while reinforcing its own long-term strategic influence and leverage.

Third, the United States should strengthen trade frameworks and reduce risk to enable a sustained US commercial presence. Washington must address the structural and political barriers that deter American companies from operating in Africa. As part of this effort, the United States must expand support for programs that reduce financial, regulatory, and political risks for US investors; lower trade barriers; and strengthen bilateral and multilateral trade partnerships. Securing a long-term extension of the African Growth and Opportunity Act and actively supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area would signal an enduring US commitment to Africa's economic integration and growth. These measures would enhance US firms' market access and institutionalize alternatives to PRC-centered trade and infrastructure models. By embedding US engagement within durable trade architectures, the United States can position itself as a reliable economic partner while countering China's expanding economic and political footprint.

Fourth, the United States should expand its influence over African militaries through PME programs. Few African military officers are afforded the opportunity to attend US PME courses because a limited number of seats are available through the international military education and training program. In the absence of increased funding and seats for African partners, the United States must have an alternate solution. One possible solution is to improve the quality of African PME institutions by conducting faculty exchanges, providing technical assistance with curriculum development and faculty training, and leveraging existing Department of War security cooperation authorities and funding. This approach would allow the United States to align African military education, doctrine, institutions, and professional norms with US values and strategic interests. By increasing mid- and senior-level officers' access and emphasizing educational curriculum that aligns with US interests, the United States can influence the development of African militaries while building enduring personal networks and interoperability. Such low-cost, high-impact investments would counter the PRC influence on military education and ensure African security institutions evolve in alignment with US doctrine and long-term strategic objectives.

Fifth, the United States must engage more strongly with the alumni of US PME institutions and other US-sponsored training programs. Effective alumni networks will ensure emerging African military leaders remain connected to US operational norms, professional standards, and strategic priorities over the long term. Maintaining alumni connections is an essential step in reinforcing US influence, countering growing Chinese engagement with future decisionmakers, and building enduring military relationships that often translate into broader diplomatic cooperation.

Sixth, the United States must protect freedom of maneuver through Africa's maritime choke points (the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Mozambique Channel) and alternate routes such as the Cape of Good Hope. China's Doraleh naval base in Djibouti and its dual-use infrastructure across African ports potentially threaten US freedom of maneuver. Additionally, China's presence at dozens of PRC-developed ports throughout Africa represents a high likelihood the People's Republic of China is conducting intelligence collection and maritime surveillance through port-management systems, logistics infrastructure, and maritime tracking stations. The United States should work closely with the Djiboutian government and other African governments to limit PLA activities that could interfere with US forces, freedom of navigation, and commercial shipping. The United States must leverage targeted diplomatic engagement, economic-development incentives, and military cooperation to ensure African states remain cooperative with US maritime needs. Expanding joint exercises, anti-piracy operations, air-sea interdiction training, maritime-domain-awareness training, and intelligence sharing can strengthen key African countries' maritime capacities and reduce the risk of critical sea lines of communication being disrupted.

Finally, the United States should protect digital and technological infrastructure. China's investment in telecommunications, surveillance systems, and space infrastructure creates technological dependence and potential US strategic vulnerabilities across Africa. To counter these issues, the United States should expand its digital and technological cooperation with partners like Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa, offering alternatives in telecommunications, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and space capacity building. Programs emphasizing resilience, interoperability, and secure communications, combined with technical training and advisory support, can reduce reliance on PRC platforms, safeguard critical data, and maintain US influence over Africa's emerging digital and technological infrastructure.

Conclusion

Africa has moved from the periphery of great-power competition to its center, emerging as a critical arena in which diplomatic alignment, economic leverage, and military access increasingly intersect. China's long-term, coordinated engagement across Africa—spanning infrastructure, digital networks, military diplomacy, and strategic communications—has positioned Beijing to protect its interests, contest US access and freedom of maneuver, and shape regional and global outcomes in China's favor. As this chapter has demonstrated, China's approach is neither opportunistic nor episodic; rather, its approach is the product of sustained investment, institutionalized engagement, and a willingness to accept risk in the pursuit of long-term influence.

Nevertheless, African governments are not merely the object of great-power competition; they have an active role in shaping the continent's future. Many African countries increasingly assert their own agency and are pursing hedging strategies to protect their national interests and avoid becoming overly reliant on one partner. The future of strategic competition in Africa will not be determined solely by ambitious external powers; rather, the future depends on how African governments will use strategic competition to advance their political, economic, and security priorities.

For the United States, the challenge is not to match the People's Republic of China dollar for dollar or to counter every Chinese initiative. Instead, the challenge is to compete selectively and strategically where US interests are most prevalent. This approach will require the United States to accept Africa is a contested environment and prioritize engagements that preserve freedom of maneuver, protect critical supply chains, and reinforce partnerships with countries that seek balanced relationships rather than exclusive alignment. Through expanded diplomatic engagement, targeted economic investments, persistent military diplomacy, and improved strategic messaging to counter PRC narratives, the United States can maintain its influence, mitigate risk, and preserve strategic access without overextending limited US resources. The outcome of US-China competition in Africa will not be decided by a single base, project, or partnership. Rather, the outcome depends on whether the United States can sustain a credible, long-term presence that aligns African priorities with US interests while respecting African agency in an increasingly competitive global order.

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China's Strategic Pursuits and Military Options in Latin America

R. Evan Ellis

The primary focus of a major war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) would likely be the Indo-Pacific. Historically, Beijing has focused on pursuing and protecting strategic interests close to home, including Taiwan and PRC maritime claims over the South and East China Seas.[1] Notably, the People's Republic of China has shown an increasing willingness to use limited force outside its home region through People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, PLA Navy support for the evacuation of Chinese personnel from Libya and Yemen, and the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti.[2] Additionally, the People's Republic of China provided some support to wars of national liberation in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, PRC behavior, public statements, and military doctrine have de-emphasized the use of conventional forces in waging war far from home. Additionally, the People's Republic of China has historically been particularly cautious with respect to military activity close to its principal geopolitical rival, the United States. Thus, the proximity of Latin America to the United States—particularly Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and the northern part of the Andes Mountains—suggests PRC activities in the region, short of a major war, will continue to be cautious and limited, centered on protecting Chinese nationals

1. Paul H. B. Godwin, *From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capabilities Towards 2000* (National Defense University Press, 2000).

2. Tim Ditter et al., *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence: Changes in a Time of Global Shocks* (CNA Corporation, October 2024).

and core interests and advancing China's relationships and strategic position in ways that could be exploited in wartime.

Still, as a power with global interests and an increasingly global reach, the People's Republic of China inherently focuses a component of its security planning and engagement on Latin America and the Caribbean.[3] As in other parts of the world, PRC security-related activities in Latin America and the Caribbean include interrelated components oriented toward economic, political, and other strategic objectives in peacetime, as well as components oriented toward a possible large-scale war. Whereas open-source material regarding PRC thinking about wartime activities in Latin America is almost nonexistent, a reasonable picture can be assembled from Beijing's public statements and activities related to peacetime security engagement and broader military thinking. Wartime imperatives and opportunities in the region can also be inferred from the strategic geography of Latin America in relation to the United States and the Indo-Pacific.

This chapter crafts an assessment of China's regional thinking by examining how an established Asian conflict scenario would affect Latin America, exploring the trends that make this scenario possible, and forecasting future PRC activities in the region. The final subsection shifts the narrative back to the United States, proposing recommendations to mitigate the growing PRC influence in the US periphery.

Considerations for Latin America in a War with the People's Republic of China

Consistent with the scenario used in other chapters of this collaborative study, the present analysis assumes a period of Indo-Pacific tensions focused on Taiwan will occur, including an identifiable prehostilities phase. The analysis further assumes major combat operations will proceed between the People's Republic of China and opposing forces—operations that include a substantial role for the United States but do not lead to nuclear war. The PRC activities in Latin America discussed herein are also consistent with scenarios, such as a PRC blockade of Taiwan, that would require a major, sustained US military response in the Indo-Pacific.

In the aftermath of an initial engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the People's Republic of China would likely leverage Latin America and the Caribbean

3. R. Evan Ellis, "Preparing for PRC Military Actions in Latin America in the Context of a War in the Indo-Pacific," in *Expecting the Unexpected: Essays on Strategic Surprises in the 21st Century*, ed. Max Margulies and Patrick Sullivan (West Point Press, September 2025), 67–77.

as a supporting rather than primary theater of operations, focusing the main PRC effort closer to home. Nonetheless, the geography of Latin America and the Caribbean—relative to the United States and the People's Republic of China—creates strategic imperatives for limited PRC operations in the region. If the conflict were to continue to escalate, the region would become an important area in a major military conflict with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's major wartime imperatives in Latin America can be understood across six broad categories.

- blocking support for the war effort of the United States and its partners
- observing and collecting data on US operations
- putting US deployment and sustainment flows at risk
- exploiting access to space from the Western Hemisphere for offensive and defensive space operations, satellite operations, and space-domain awareness
- supporting PLA forces in the Western Hemisphere
- infiltrating and attacking the continental United States[4]

The following scenario envisions China's actions in Latin America across these six categories, accounting for varying levels of activity based on the limited Indo-Pacific conflict scenario established in this collaborative study.

China's War in Latin America: Scenario Spillover

As tensions escalate toward an initial kinetic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the People's Republic of China begins actively working to persuade Latin American governments to deny the United States cooperation in support of any war effort in the Indo-Pacific, just as China uses economic and other levers of power to pressure governments on issues of vital importance to China, such as the nonrecognition of Taiwan.[5] China primarily drives these efforts by leaning on the political relationships and leverage it holds over partners through commercial, financial, and personal ties. Specific Chinese actions include threats to call in loans and suspend major purchases of soy and other commodities critical to Argentina's exports. Similarly, the People's Republic of China threatens to suspend imports

4. Robert Evan Ellis, "The Strategic Role of Latin America in a Global Conflict over Taiwan," *Seguridad y Poder Terrestre* 2, no. 1 (January–March 2023): 113–31.

5. *Hearing on PRC Influence and the Status of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies in the Western Hemisphere, Before the Subcomm. on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues of the S. Comm. on Foreign Relations*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Evan Ellis, senior associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies).

of key commodities—meat and soy from Brazil and copper and potassium nitrate from US ally Chile—which are key generators of export revenue for those countries.

In dealing with less cooperative nations, the People's Republic of China uses blackmail and thinly veiled threats to pursue its aims. Countless Latin American officials have benefited from side payments linked to authorizing deals with PRC-based companies in the region or have traveled to China on trips, during which the officials have received financial remuneration or other favors recorded by the PRC Ministry of State Security.[6] Countless other corrupt dealings by Latin American leaders in the region—including bribes, as well as conversations and visits with mistresses—have doubtlessly been transmitted via Huawei and Xiaomi phone lines, digitally captured during trips in Chinese Didi Chuxing taxis, or recorded in financial and other data stored in Huawei data centers in the region. Beijing's 2017 National Intelligence Law obliges Chinese companies to collaborate actively with and turn over records of interest to the Chinese state, giving the state access to all sensitive information. This access, in turn, enables the People's Republic of China to exert personal pressures that aim to achieve a range of effects: convincing Mexican security officials to raise superficial objections to, and ultimately deny, cooperation with the United States regarding the control of migrants flowing to the US border; causing otherwise cooperative regional officials in the Dominican Republic or Trinidad and Tobago to deny US military access to facilities in the Caribbean; causing Panamanian officials to obstruct cooperation the United States needs to identify threats to the Panama Canal; causing otherwise friendly Honduran officials to impede operations at the US forward operating location at Soto Cano Air Base; causing Peruvian officials to deny US access to areas close to the Chinese-operated port at Chancay; or denying US options to transit the waters of Argentina and Chile, make port calls in those countries, or obtain intelligence from their otherwise friendly governments.

In addition to its efforts in private, bilateral discussions, the People's Republic of China expands its information operations, targeting regional and intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization of American States and its subordinate institutions. These targeted operations are amplified by broader communications to Latin American populations through numerous sympathetic reporters in the region (including those who have benefited from paid trips to the People's Republic of China), as well as through newspapers and other media outlets that have benefited from significant paid advertising from PRC sources. China's information operations also include messaging through Chinese media such as the Xinhua News Agency and the China Global Television Network,

6. "Para Estados Unidos China juega sucio de la mano de la élite panameña," Expediente Público, April 10, 2025, https://www.expedientepublico.org/para-estados-unidos-china-juega-sucio-de-la-mano-de-la-elite-panamena/.

which have long provided content to numerous regional media outlets through content-sharing agreements. The messaging includes stories originating from those outlets, such as stories about what is happening in the Indo-Pacific conflict, about what is happening in the United States domestically, and about China's relationships with host Latin American governments relevant to the conflict. The general message to Latin American audiences is straightforward: The United States seeks to draw you into its unnecessary war of aggression, and any country that takes a nonneutral position will face economic and other consequences for aiding the US-led coalition of aggressors that seeks to impose its will on another region, just as the PRC has done in Latin America and the Caribbean.

With the US military response to the initial clash of arms still unclear, the People's Republic of China significantly increases its attempts to monitor US military and other war-related activities in and around the continental United States. This high-priority effort includes monitoring communications traffic and collecting electronic, acoustic, and other signatures of US and partner forces in the Western Hemisphere.

The People's Republic of China is prioritizing efforts to monitor and collect intelligence on US Eastern Seaboard facilities such as the headquarters of Joint Interagency Task Force South and Naval Air Station Jacksonville—as well as US operations in the Savannah, Georgia, and Norfolk, Virginia, areas—among others, using Chinese government and commercial facilities in the region. The collection facilities include PRC electronic-intelligence facilities in Cuba; PRC embassies in the Caribbean, including Beijing's outsize embassy in Antigua and Barbuda; and commercial sites with embedded PRC intelligence and other personnel.[7]

In the Pacific, the operation of PRC ports and other commercial facilities in Mexico provides the People's Republic of China with capabilities to monitor US military installations from San Diego northward. Additionally, the People's Republic of China is leveraging commercial facilities in northern Mexico to monitor US installations close to the US-Mexico border. This effort includes operating from the hundreds of facilities owned by PRC-based companies in the border region—facilities used for final-assembly operations and the warehousing of products destined for the US market. The People's Republic of China is also using CK Hutchison Holdings Limited–operated port facilities close to the United States, such as those in Tijuana and Ensenada, as well as digital infrastructure operated

7. Micah McCartney, "Map Shows China's Suspected Spy Bases in Cuba," *Newsweek*, updated June 19, 2026, https://www.newsweek.com/china-news-map-shows-suspected-spy-bases-cuba-1997464; and Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "China Building New Outpost on U.S. Doorstep, Leaked Documents Reveal," *Newsweek*, updated January 7, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/2024/05/17/china-caribbean-united-states-antigua-belt-road-diplomacy-debt-chinese-xi-jinping-rivalry-1891668.html.

by PRC-based companies such as Huawei and Lenovo. Beijing knows the Mexican and US governments will face difficulties in distinguishing between, on the one hand, technical personnel and equipment brought into China-operated facilities specifically for manufacturing and distribution, and, on the other, personnel actually affiliated with the Chinese military or security services.

Notably, PRC observational efforts also extend into space. Beijing has given the order to begin leveraging an array of facilities in the Western Hemisphere to track US satellites for targeting should the conflict escalate.[8] These sites include primary and secondary facilities for satellite tracking and control built by the People's Republic of China for both Venezuela and Bolivia, provided the facilities have not been removed by governments receptive to US leverage in those countries. The sites also include the Espacio Lejano Station near Neuquén, Argentina.[9] The geographic location of the PRC deep-space radar in Neuquén—as well as the facility's operation by China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, part of the People's Liberation Army—has allowed the site to serve as a hub for coordinating PRC space operations in the area.[10] Whereas the People's Republic of China is hesitant to escalate the conflict into space, the nation is still positioning assets to exploit access to the skies over the Western and Southern Hemispheres. Chinese assets support actions against US and allied satellites and enable offensive operations against the United States.[11]

Beyond observation, the People's Republic of China recognizes many US warships, military logistics vessels, and other ships would need to transit from the Atlantic or US Eastern Seaboard ports through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal in a major Indo-Pacific conflict. The People's Liberation Army has established a significant commercial presence along critical transit routes used by the US military, often leveraging substantial commercial and political influence, as well as security cooperation, with small Caribbean and other nations. For example, the People's Liberation Army's presence in hotels and port operations is particularly notable in the Bahamas and Antigua and Barbuda. The People's Liberation Army

8. Henry Ziemer, "To Prepare for a Pacific War, U.S. Must Harden Southern Flank," *The Maritime Executive*, November 16, 2024, https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/to-prepare-for-a-pacific-war-u-s-must-harden-southern-flank.

9. R. Evan Ellis, "China's Security Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean," *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/chinas-security-engagement-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/.

10. R. Evan Ellis, *China – Argentina Space Engagement: Reconciling Science, Sovereignty and Strategic Risk*, REDCAEM Working Paper Series No. 40 (Red China and América Latina Enfoques Multidisciplinarios, May 2024).

11. *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States Northern Command and United States Southern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program, Before the S. Armed Services Comm.*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Alvin Holsey, commander, United States Southern Command).

has similarly conducted numerous projects and constructed deep people-to-people relationships in Jamaica, Grenada, and Dominica, among other countries. As a result, the People's Republic of China is poised to leverage its physical presence, relationships, and technical knowledge to threaten US deployment and sustainment flows to the Indo-Pacific.

Building on its collection operations, the People's Republic of China is nesting special-forces teams in its embassies—including its large embassy facility in Antigua and Barbuda—and in China's logistics and other commercial facilities in the region, where these teams stand ready to attack or tag transiting vessels. Additionally, Beijing is staging capabilities to shut down the Panama Canal, if only temporarily.[12] In preparation for such an operation, the People's Republic of China has developed various options, including sinking a large cargo vessel at a choke point such as the canal's narrowest point, Gaillard Cut; collapsing one of the bridges spanning the canal; mining the canal; physically damaging the canal's locks; or electronically impairing the locks through the canal's mechanical-control and water-management systems. So far, China's plans remain contingencies. The People's Republic of China recognizes any such action, if attributable, would potentially escalate the conflict further, while also carrying secondary and tertiary implications for the global economy and damaging Beijing's global information campaign. Still, a delay of even several days in the transit of critical warships, heavy equipment, munitions, and other sustainment supplies into the theater could give the People's Liberation Army enough time to consolidate an invasion of Taiwan or secure other strategically decisive objectives.

If the People's Republic of China decides to disrupt operations in the Panama Canal, ships departing US Eastern Seaboard ports and transiting to the Indo-Pacific theater in support of the war effort would have to circumvent the canal. In turn, to complement actions against transits through the Caribbean and the canal, the PLA Navy is repositioning vessels toward a deep-water port in Argentina. These vessels are transiting from assignments in Europe, Africa, and other Atlantic regions, providing Beijing with a forward-deployed PLA Navy presence in Latin America. Concurrently, the People's Republic of China is leveraging its commercial presence in southern Argentina and Chile to identify and, if needed, target any US ships; monitor traffic; and possibly seek to deny transit around South America through the Strait of Magellan or the Drake Passage. The corresponding PRC narrative highlights China's increased naval presence as an economic-security endeavor designed to ensure the aggressive United States does not force its will on PRC-friendly nations or interdict critical PRC shipping vessels. Whereas direct naval hostilities might not be occurring

12. Gordon G. Chang, "China and America: The War over the Panama Canal," *The Gordon Chang Report* 1, no. 8 (February 2025).

in Latin America, the People's Republic of China has positioned critical capabilities and garnered the necessary influence to hamper drastically any movement of US naval capabilities from the Atlantic.

In the Pacific, China has begun conducting activities that place the US homeland at risk. To this end, the People's Liberation Army has begun positioning dual-use commercial vessels and special-operations teams at regional ports and other facilities operated by Chinese state-owned enterprises, an action the United States has condemned as an unnecessary escalation.[13] Most overt military operations—the staging of military equipment and PLA Navy vessels—are occurring at the Peruvian port of Chancay, which is operated exclusively by the PLA-affiliated, state-owned logistics giant China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company. Still, other Chinese-operated facilities in the region are being prepared to support military operations against the United States, including multiple ports operated by the PRC company CK Hutchison Holdings Limited on Mexico's Pacific coast and in Panama.

Naval staging is augmented by limited ground operations that emphasize plausible deniability. Just as the United States seeks to avoid a land war in Asia, China's direct action on the ground is meant to be disruptive, akin to gray-zone operations or tied to criminal activity. These efforts include the movement of small elements and equipment from embassies in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and possibly Colombia to port facilities and interdiction points along the Panama Canal route. Additionally, large numbers of military-age Chinese nationals have been attempting to cross the US border to infiltrate the United States. These individuals are logically positioning themselves to conduct attacks on US infrastructure or engage in other acts of terrorism, espionage, or sabotage should the conflict escalate. Importantly, the People's Republic of China would publicly condemn any such actions.

Takeaways from the Conflict

Overall, the People's Republic of China would use its military and other presence, relationships, and knowledge in Latin America to inhibit US and allied sustainment and force projection into the Indo-Pacific theater, disrupt US space and cyber operations, and put the US homeland and key allies at risk. To do so, Beijing would likely leverage its regional partners—including US-hostile regimes such as Cuba and Nicaragua, extrahemispheric US adversaries with a regional presence such as Russia and Iran, and nonstate actors such as Hezbollah, Colombia's National Liberation Army, and possibly other criminal and terrorist groups—to support PRC wartime objectives in ways China would probably not pursue in peacetime.[14]

13. Ziemer, "Pacific War."

14. Ellis, "War in the Indo-Pacific."

In this scenario, the forward presence and relationships of the People's Republic of China could provide Beijing with the opportunity to observe closely the initial US military actions in the conflict, which may well indicate larger movements. Information about US actions would create a window for disruptive operations against potential US military deployments. China's growing naval presence and capabilities in Latin America, as well as its more discreet land-based support through commercial entities and special-operations teams, provide Beijing with a viable means to extend an Indo-Pacific conflict into the Western Hemisphere, albeit as a supporting theater built based on a framework of disruption, delay, and denial.

Current PRC Trends and Posture

The previous scenario is possible because of Beijing's current efforts to gain access to and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Empirically, the People's Republic of China has continued to build military relationships and presence, engage in arms sales and gifts, and engage in the space domain in ways that could allow China to pursue its wartime strategic imperatives in the Western Hemisphere.[15] Beijing is expanding its commercial presence in the region, especially in strategic sectors such as digital technologies, ports, and space, and is partnering with academia and scientific institutions in those sectors. Beijing is also expanding its personal relationships with key government, academic, and commercial elites in the region, strengthening the PRC ability to exploit key opportunities and imperatives. The following section further examines these trends, aiming to understand China's future in Latin America.

Official PRC Policy and Thinking

The PRC government and Chinese military scholars have said almost nothing publicly about how Beijing might exploit its commercial and military presence in the Western Hemisphere in wartime. Scarce public evidence of Beijing following the imperatives of the strategic terrain and considering Western Hemisphere operations in wartime includes coverage of a November 2026 PLA war game in Xuchang (Henan province)—a war game involving simulated operations between PRC and opposing forces near Cuba, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean.[16]

As a supplement to such evidence, the People's Republic of China has highlighted the importance of global engagements in its official documents, including in its

15. R. Evan Ellis, "Chinese Military and Police Engagement in Latin America," in *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*, ed. Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, July 2022), 51–66, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/951/.

16. R. Evan Ellis, "China's Military Is Planning for Combat in Latin America," *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/chinas-military-is-planning-for-combat-in-latin-america/.

2025 white paper "China's National Security in the New Era."[17] Such highlights also appear in PRC military strategy and policy statements, as well as in the 2008 and 2016 policy white papers on Latin America.[18] An official PRC white paper on China's Global Security Initiative specifically mentions Beijing's interest in security engagement with Latin American multilateral institutions that exclude the United States, such as BRICS (a grouping composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.[19] At the May 2025 triennial senior leaders' meeting between the latter organization and the People's Republic of China, Beijing highlighted its commitment to expanding engagement in the security domain, including in the areas of cybersecurity and counternarcotics.[20] These documents and statements amplify long-standing trends in the region.

Arms Sales and Donations

The People's Republic of China has focused its arms transactions in Latin America on sales to anti-US regimes and gifts to smaller nations, creating goodwill, material dependencies, and long-term maintenance and training relationships with recipient countries. Beijing has sold Hongdu JL-8 fighters to Venezuela and Bolivia; radars to Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador; and military trucks and armored vehicles to Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina, among others. Additionally, the People's Republic of China has sold its Type 90B multiple launch rocket system to Peru, as well as an offshore patrol vessel to Trinidad and Tobago. Most recently, China has attempted to market its combat-tested Chengdu J-10 fighter aircraft to Brazil and Colombia.[21]

The People's Republic of China has donated, among other items, police cars and motorcycles to the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Costa Rica; mobile bridges to the Colombian army; and tractors and ambulances to the Guyana Defence

17. Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Security in the New Era" (white paper, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 12, 2025).

18. "China Defense White Papers—1995-2019," *Andrew S. Erickson* (blog), July 23, 2019, https://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/07/china-defense-white-papers-1995-2019-download-complete-set-read-highlights-here/; and "Full Text of China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean," *People's Daily Online*, November 24, 2016, https://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1124/c90000-9146474.html.

19. "Full Text: The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," *Global Times*, February 21, 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285900.shtml.

20. Zhou Jin, "Joint Declaration, Action Plan New Milestones for Ties," *China Daily*, May 13, 2025, https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/611656; and "Full Text: President Xi's Keynote Speech at Opening Ceremony of 4th Ministerial Meeting of China-CELAC Forum," CGTN, May 13, 2025, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-05-13/Full-text-Xi-s-speech-at-4th-ministerial-meeting-of-China-CELAC-Forum-1DlxnWicLDi/p.html.

21. "China's J-10C Offer to Colombia Threatens to Shatter U.S. Hegemony in Latin American Skies," Defence Security Asia, May 19, 2025, https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/chinas-j-10c-offer-to-colombia-threatens-to-shatter-u-s-hegemony-in-latin-american-skies/.

Force.[22] China has also donated riot-control equipment to Panama, Costa Rica, and various other countries.

Recently, amid ongoing regional tensions, China sent a hospital ship into the Caribbean, making port calls in Jamaica and Barbados while US forces prepared for military intervention in Venezuela in January 2026. The Chinese deployment may have sought to collect signals and other intelligence on US forces.[23]

Military Diplomacy

Virtually all Latin American and Caribbean countries with which the People's Republic of China maintains military relations send students to participate in short security and other courses at the PLA National Defense University in Changping. Some countries also send students to participate in longer programs in military leadership and other subjects in Nanjing and elsewhere in China. Most recently, the People's Republic of China has begun hosting Latin American police forces for training, including personnel from Nicaragua and Peru.[24] Brazil, whose leftist government has taken particular strides to strengthen the country's military relationship with Beijing, has assigned three general officers as military attachés to Beijing, demonstrating its commitment to and interest in strengthening the military relationship.[25]

The People's Liberation Army also regularly sends personnel to Latin American countries for institutional visits, training, and other activities. At the beginning of the most recent term of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Beijing sent an unprecedented delegation of 17 general officers to visit Brazil's military leadership and institutions.[26] Chinese students have participated in courses at Latin America's premier training institutions, including the Lancero course for Colombian special forces and Brazil's Jungle Warfare School, and Beijing regularly sends delegations to war colleges in the region.[27] The PLA Navy has sent hospital ships

22. Ellis, "Military and Police Engagement."

23. "Jamaica to Get Healthcare Boost with Arrival of Chinese Naval Hospital Ship — Tufton," *Jamaica Observer*, November 27, 2025, https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/2025/11/27/jamaica-get-healthcare-boost-arrival-chinese-naval-hospital-ship-tufton/.

24. "Clausura del 'Curso de Capacitación para Oficiales Superiores e Intermedios de la Policía Nacional del Perú' en China," Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, November 14, 2019, https://www.gob.pe/institucion/rree/noticias/68667-clausura-del-curso-de-capacitacion-para-oficiales-superiores-e-intermedios-de-la-policia-nacional-del-peru-en-china.

25. Robbin Laird, "Is There a Military Pivot to China Underway by President Lula's Brazil?," Defense.info, August 8, 2025, https://defense.info/defense-decisions/2025/08/is-there-a-military-pivot-to-china-underway-by-president-lulas-brazil/.

26. Edilson Salgueiro, "Chinese Generals Are in Brazil," *The Rio Times*, June 6, 2023, https://www.riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/chinese-generals-are-in-brazil/.

27. For example, see R. Evan Ellis, "Peru's 'Active Neutrality' Between China and the West," *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/perus-active-neutrality-between-china-and-the-west/.

to Latin America and the Caribbean for military diplomacy four times; most recently, the PLA Navy sent ships to Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Caribbean in December 2025.[28] Notably, facing increased US pressure over military engagement with the People's Republic of China, a number of countries in the region, including Argentina and Mexico, have limited the presence of PLA students at their educational institutions.[29]

Space

In the space sector, the People's Republic of China continues to pursue active technical and personnel collaboration across Latin America and the Caribbean, including by inviting space professionals from Mexico, Colombia, and other parts of the region to participate in courses and programs in China.[30] Beijing has established data-sharing and other cooperation with Peru through the latter's membership in the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, has actively pursued a relationship with the new Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency, and has invited personnel from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other countries to participate in China's project to establish a permanent base on the Moon by the 2030s. Since the 1990s, the People's Republic of China and Brazil have collaborated on the development and launch of satellites under the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite program.[31] Most recently, in 2025, the Brazilian telecommunications company Telebras committed to cofund and launch a new constellation of microsatellites, Qianfan, giving the People's Republic of China access to Brazil's strategic equatorial-launch facility at Alcântara, where the United States has long operated.[32]

As with military engagements, several Latin American and Caribbean countries have restricted new PRC-linked space projects with the potential to be used for military purposes, possibly partly in response to US pressure. The countries' restrictions include the blocking of a stand-alone PRC astronomical facility

28. "Falmouth Set to Host Chinese Hospital Ship," *The Jamaican Blogs*, November 30, 2025, https://jablogz.com/2025/11/falmouth-set-to-host-chinese-hospital-ship/.

29. R. Evan Ellis, "Amid Trump Tariffs, Where Do China-Mexico Ties Stand?," *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/amid-trump-tariffs-where-do-china-mexico-ties-stand/.

30. Evan Ellis, "El avance de China en Colombia en tiempos de Gustavo Petro," *Infobae*, updated June 11, 2025, https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/06/10/el-avance-de-china-en-colombia-en-tiempos-de-gustavo-petro/.

31. R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Update," *Diálogo Américas*, February 21, 2024, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-update/.

32. Eduardo Baptista, "Chinese Rival to Starlink Strikes Deal to Enter Brazil," Reuters, updated November 20, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/technology/space/chinas-starlink-rival-agrees-deal-enter-brazilian-market-2024-11-20/.

at Ventarrones on Cerro Paranal, Chile, as well as a long-planned 40-meter-diameter radio telescope at the San Juan observatory in southern Argentina.[33]

Ports

The opening and expansion of the port of Chancay, operated exclusively by the PRC-based China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company, has been the most significant development concerning Latin American and Caribbean ports that could be used for military purposes.[34] In addition, the PRC government has effectively torpedoed an initiative by CK Hutchison Holdings Limited, a Hong Kong–based company, to sell 43 of its global port holdings, leaving the company in control of port operations in Panama, Mexico, the Bahamas, and Argentina—assets with possible military uses in a conflict with the United States.[35] Although in 2026, the Panamanian government subsequently ended Hutchison's concession for the two ports for other reasons.[36]

Complicating matters, China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited holds a 49 percent interest in the port at Kingston, Jamaica, as well as stakes in ports in Brazil, whereas China Harbour Engineering Company Limited is expanding the port of Corinto for the US-hostile Nicaraguan government, among other projects in the region.[37] Other projects that could have strategic military significance—such as a potential megaport complex at the port of La Union in the Gulf of Fonseca, complemented by a port and interoceanic connection linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Honduras—have not progressed.[38] A proposed commercial port in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, which may have given China options to observe and threaten ships transiting the Strait of Magellan (a strategic choke point), has been suspended.[39]

33. "Red Flagged by the U.S., Chile to Review Chinese Observatory Project in the Country as Beijing Woos Latin America," *The EurAsian Times*, March 20, 2025, https://www.eurasiantimes.com/red-flagged-by-the-u-s-chile-to-review-chinese/; and "Argentina canceló un millonario proyecto chino de observatorio espacial en San Juan," *El Esquiú*, November 4, 2025, https://www.elesquiu.com/nacionales/2025/11/4/argentina-cancelo-un-millonario-proyecto-chino-de-observatorio-espacial-en-san-juan-559917.html.

34. R. Evan Ellis, *Strategic Implication of the Chinese-Operated Port of Chancay*, REDCAEM Working Paper Series No. 42 (Red China and América Latina Enfoques Multidisciplinarios, November 2024).

35. "China Moves to Block CK Hutchison Deal: Protecting Strategic Port Influence," Container News, April 2, 2025, https://container-news.com/china-moves-to-block-ck-hutchison-deal/.

36. "Para Estados Unidos."

37. "Puerto Corinto será ampliado y modernizado por empresa china," *Nicaragua Investiga*, July 10, 2025, https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/economia/163070-puerto-corinto-ampliado-modernizado-empresa-china/.

38. Max Channon, "The Incredible £15.7bn Mega-Project That Would Rival the Panama Canal," *Express*, December 6, 2024, https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1984941/7-9bn-mega-project-rival-Panama-Canal.

39. R. Evan Ellis, *The Evolution of Chinese Engagement in Argentina Under Javier Milei* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2024).

Digital Sectors

Since the late 1990s, PRC-based companies have accumulated significant positions in Latin American and Caribbean digital infrastructure and services, including 3G, 4G, and 5G data networks; smartphones; data storage and cloud computing; commercial and home surveillance systems; customs scanners; port cranes; and even rideshare services such as those offered by the Chinese company Didi Chuxing.[40] The ubiquity of PRC equipment and service providers in the region's digital infrastructure is particularly concerning. China's 2017 National Intelligence Law and other laws oblige PRC-based companies such as Huawei to relinquish data and cooperate fully with the Chinese government regarding user data and other matters under the companies' purview when deemed relevant to national security.[41]

Digital technologies have been a principal focus of China's commercial advance in Latin America and elsewhere.[42] Whereas some countries, such as Costa Rica, have restricted Huawei from participating in their 5G networks, the PRC digital advance in the region continues to deepen.[43] The government of Mexico currently places sensitive data in the Huawei cloud, and other governments, such as that of Colombia, are considering easing restrictions on Chinese participation in their digital infrastructure.[44]

From a wartime perspective, PRC digital access creates opportunities for Beijing to capture US-relevant data passing through Latin American servers and to obtain information on the plans of Latin American countries in that context. Such access also increases the ability of Chinese intelligence services to obtain personal information on Latin American leaders. This information could be used to persuade or blackmail those leaders into restricting cooperation with the United States, providing information on US operations, working against the United States, or providing the People's Republic of China and other anti-US actors with access during wartime.

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40. Huawei Cloud, "Enhanced Huawei Cloud LATAM Ecosystem: Building a Digital Cloud Foundation to Amplify Intelligence Across Industries," news release, March 26, 2025, https://www.huaweicloud.com/intl/en-us/news/20250326231926071.html.

41. *Hearing on Safeguarding the Homeland: Examining Conflicts of Interest in Federal Contracting to Protect America's Future, Before the S. Comm. on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 118th Cong. (2024) (statement of Rush Doshi, C. V. Starr senior fellow and director of the China Strategy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations).

42. Margaret Myers, "China's New Playbook for Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, October 14, 2025, https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/chinas-new-playbook-in-latin-america/.

43. Juan Pedro Tomás, "Costa Rican Court Suspends Exclusion of Huawei as a 5G Provider," *RCR Wireless News*, February 14, 2024, https://www.rcrwireless.com/20240214/featured/costa-rican-court-suspends-exclusion-huawei-5g-provider.

44. Evan Ellis, "El avance de China en México," *Infobae*, March 24, 2025, https://www.infobae.com/america/opinion/2025/03/24/el-avance-de-china-en-mexico/.

Chinese Influence Networks

Complementing the influence gained through PRC commercial engagements and digital penetration in Latin America, Beijing continues to expand its web of personal relationships and obligations in the region. In times of war, ties to Latin American actors give Beijing options to influence regional discourse in ways relevant to each nation's support for the United States or the People's Republic of China. China's ties also enable it to influence decisionmakers and others through relationships based on shared interest, obligation, and blackmail, encouraging regional actors to work against the United States—or to allow others to do so—in ways similar to those enabled by blackmail through access to digital data.

Chinese people-to-people networks in Latin America include thousands of students who are offered scholarships to study in the People's Republic of China. Many of these students are recruited through the region's 44 Confucius Institutes and 18 Confucius Classrooms.[45] These points of leverage include education in China funded directly by the PRC state, as well as programs sponsored by private entities, such as Huawei's Seeds for the Future program.[46]

The People's Republic of China also regularly brings reporters, academics, government workers, local and national politicians, and others to China for training and cultural exchange. In the most recent three-year plan between the People's Republic of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Beijing promised the region's politicians 3,500 scholarships for Latin America, 10,500 additional "training opportunities," and 300 opportunities to travel to China.[47] Through its local embassies and consulates and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, the People's Republic of China also regularly reaches out to local business councils, China friendship organizations, and local Chinese communities.

Critical Resources

Supporting both wartime and peacetime requirements, Latin America is an important supplier of lithium, rare earth elements, and other materials the People's Republic of China needs for the weapons, command-and-control systems, and various devices that sustain the PRC economy. The region contains a significant

45. "Confucius Institutes Around the World – 2024," Dig Mandarin, updated October 12, 2024, https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html.

46. "Seeds for the Future: Inspiring Global Talent to Shape the Future," Huawei, n.d., accessed December 2, 2025, https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/index.html.

47. "Wang Yi on Five Programs for the China-LAC Community with a Shared Future and Implementation Measures," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated May 14, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202505/t20250515_11623588.html.

portion of global lithium resources, concentrated in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia.[48] Brazil also contains a substantial portion of the world's known reserves of rare earth elements, with those deposits currently under control of China Nonferrous Metal Mining (Group) Co., Ltd., a company partly owned by Chinese state capital.[49] Through its extractive operations in Latin America, as well as its broader ability to influence regional policy toward other producers operating there, the People's Republic of China has substantial leverage to restrict US access to lithium and rare earth minerals needed in both wartime and peacetime.

Takeaways from Current Trends

Currently, the People's Republic of China is using its diplomatic, economic, and security engagements in Latin America to expand its regional position, taking advantage of opportunities arising from changes in US regional policies. This effort includes expanding Chinese purchases of agricultural goods from countries such as Brazil, whose exports to the United States have been harmed by significant tariff increases imposed by Washington.[50] Beijing has similarly advanced a new Global Governance Initiative and a messaging campaign emphasizing China's image as a reliable and respectful partner, both of which seem designed to take advantage of the region's discontent with US policies and expand China's regional position.[51]

China's Possible Next Steps in Latin America

The People's Republic of China seems to be on a trajectory to continue deepening its military relationships, dual-use commercial presence, and digital and people-to-people networks in Latin America. These developments will give Beijing options in the region should a conflict with the United States break out in the Indo-Pacific, without requiring China to engage in direct confrontation with the United States through the establishment of formal military alliances or bases.

48. Monsalve William, "Lithium: Latin America's Precious White Gold in Dispute," *ColombiaOne*, January 16, 2026, https://colombiaone.com/2025/05/27/lithium-latin-america-china/.

49. Jorge C. Carrasco, "As China Tightens Its Grip on Rare Earths, Can Brazil Be an Alternative Source?," Rest of World, October 30, 2025, https://restofworld.org/2025/china-rare-earth-export-curb-brazil/; and "Chinese Mining Giant Secures Brazilian Rare Earth Company," *The Rio Times*, November 28, 2024, https://www.riotimesonline.com/chinese-mining-giant-secures-brazilian-rare-earth-powerhouse/.

50. Rafael Cardoso, "China Clears 183 Brazilian Companies to Export Coffee to the Country," Agência Brasil, August 4, 2025, https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/economia/noticia/2025-08/china-clears-183-brazilian-companies-export-coffee-country.

51. "The Global Governance Initiative Comes at the Right Time, Points the Way Forward, and Demonstrates Responsibility," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, September 1, 2025, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202509/t20250904_11702287.htm; and Pedro Camacho, "China Claims Latin America Is as 'a Zone of Peace', Urges U.S. to Stop Interfering 'in Venezuela's Internal Affairs,'" *The Latin Times*, November 19, 2025, https://www.latintimes.com/china-claims-latin-america-zone-peace-urges-us-stop-interfering-venezuelas-internal-591765.

Still, this analysis can be taken one step further to forecast potential PRC actions in Latin America. The following list attempts to synthesize the current trends, identifying 12 potential PRC actions based on the established conflict scenario.

1. **The People's Republic of China will likely persuade one or more Caribbean nations, possibly St Vincent and Grenadines, to switch their diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China.** Then, Beijing will likely use the new relationship to expand its commercial presence and influence rapidly, followed by expanded military donations and invitations for partner personnel to travel to China for training activities. In this way, Beijing will expand its range of actors in the strategically important Caribbean region—actors with which the People's Liberation Army can position forces to observe and disrupt US deployment and sustainment flows in times of conflict.

2. **Beyond flipping the allegiance of some Caribbean states from Taiwan to China, Beijing will likely continue expanding its people-to-people relationships in the region.** This effort will likely focus on military and police forces in the Caribbean, as well as on expanding economic and personal leverage over Caribbean government and business elites. In doing so, the People's Republic of China will expand its potential methods of observing and disrupting US deployment and sustainment transits in the region during wartime.

3. **The People's Republic of China will likely continue expanding its commercial projects and logistics operations in Panama, as well as China's relationships with Panamanian business and government elites.** This initiative would expand China's potential methods of shutting down the Panama Canal in wartime, even as the United States expands its formal military facilities in Panama, such as by reopening the Jungle Warfare School.

4. **The People's Republic of China will likely continue to expand its people-to-people programs at all levels in the region.** The relationships nurtured through people-to-people programs give China's intelligence services opportunities to obtain information on and compromise business and political leaders in ways China can exploit for intelligence purposes. Such relationships may also be used to oblige these leaders to take actions that would benefit China in wartime, such as resisting US access or intelligence cooperation during a conflict, in the name of neutrality.

5. The People's Republic of China will likely seek to continue deepening its military relationships with anti-US partners such as Cuba and Nicaragua, facilitating PLA military operations from those partners' territories in times of conflict. This effort would include the further exploitation of PRC-operated electronic-intelligence facilities in Cuba, as well as the possible use of the Nicaraguan port of Corinto, Punta Huete Airport, or other facilities for military purposes in wartime, even without formal basing or alliance agreements.

6. The People's Republic of China will likely expand the deployment of military ships and delegations, including Beijing's new hospital ships, to the region. This action would aim to strengthen military relationships and China's awareness of the operational environment, supporting operations in times of conflict.

7. Absent an abrupt change of government in Brazil's November 2026 national elections, the People's Republic of China will likely continue deepening its strategic relationship with Brazil—China's principal military and strategic partner in the Western Hemisphere. Brazil will also likely remain Beijing's principal Latin American partner in global forums, including vehicles such as BRICS.

8. The People's Republic of China may seek to collaborate with Cuba, Russia, and other US adversaries to weaken pro-US governments in the region. This effort could bring to power new regimes more disposed to cooperate with Beijing and to limit interactions with the United States.

9. The People's Republic of China will likely invest significant resources in Peru to expand PRC influence through mutually reinforcing infrastructure projects in mining, land and maritime transportation, and other areas, increasing Beijing's leverage at all levels of government. China will also likely seek to dominate transpacific shipping by exploiting its control over the port of Chancay, leveraging China's cost advantage in shipping through Chancay to make competitor routes economically unviable. As a result, an increasing portion of Latin American maritime shipping to the Indo-Pacific would be routed through the China-owned port.

10. The People's Republic of China may simultaneously work surreptitiously to reinforce corruption and political fragmentation within the Peruvian government. This effort could apply leverage over Peruvian government officials to ensure Beijing's logistics champion China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company has the latitude, through Peruvian institutional weakness, to use the Chancay port for any military or other surreptitious activities.

11. The People's Republic of China will likely continue to expand its access to space facilities in the Western Hemisphere, particularly through Brazil and possibly through other manipulable partners, such as Peru and Suriname. This focus on space would improve China's ability to locate, track, and retain custody of US satellites in the skies over the Southern and Western Hemispheres, as well as to communicate with China's own offensive and defensive space assets.

12. The People's Republic of China will likely seek to exploit the region's dissatisfaction with US tariffs and other policies, encouraging partners to reject security and intelligence cooperation with the United States and expand their work with Beijing. This effort will be particularly noticeable in areas such as arms sales, gifts, people-to-people exchanges, base access, and humanitarian cooperation, providing Beijing with additional options in times of conflict.

Recommendations

The United States, together with its partners, should prepare for PRC military actions in Latin America and the Caribbean. This preparation should include anticipating logical PRC actions that would leverage China's commercial and other regional presence to persuade governments in the region not to cooperate with the United States. The US-led coalition should also anticipate PRC attempts to disrupt US deployment and sustainment through the Caribbean, to shut down the Panama Canal and passage through the Strait of Magellan, and to exploit access to ground-based space assets in the Western Hemisphere, targeting US satellites and supporting Chinese space operations. Finally, the coalition's preparation should include anticipating China's use of ports and other logistics facilities in the region to rearm and otherwise support PLA warships. To enable the coalition's preparatory efforts, this section offers four distinct recommendations.

First, where possible, the United States should coordinate with its regional partners on courses of action to (1) limit the ability of the People's Republic of China and other US adversaries to undertake the aforementioned actions and (2) ensure the United States and its partners can respond appropriately if those actions occur.

Second, the United States should expand its peacetime efforts to restrict the presence of PRC dual-use space, port, and other critical facilities in the region, as well as to increase partner transparency regarding facilities that cannot be blocked.

Third, the United States should do more to restrict PRC sources of intelligence and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean—sources Beijing could exploit in wartime to induce decisionmakers and others in the region to restrict US access and cooperation, act against US facilities, or allow others to do so. This effort should include applying diplomatic and commercial pressure, as well as other tools, to counter PRC people-to-people networks and digital presence in the region.

Finally, the partial success Beijing would likely have in blocking the United States' access to physical facilities, air and maritime transit, base access, and other forms of cooperation in Latin America should be considered in US planning for a potential conflict with the People's Republic of China. Governments that have significant economic and people-to-people ties with Beijing—and have expressed reservations about cooperating with the United States in other areas, such as US counterdrug initiatives in the Caribbean, including in Colombia and Brazil—might logically yield to PRC pressure not to cooperate with the United States or to deny it access to their territories and airspaces. Complicating matters, pro-US actors whose economies are deeply vulnerable to China, such as Peru, Guyana, and Jamaica, might adopt such a posture as well.

Conclusion

Understanding how the People's Republic of China could operate in the Western Hemisphere during a conflict, working with partners to respond to those operations, and pushing back against near-term PRC activities that strengthen Beijing's wartime options continue to be cornerstones of US national security and homeland defense. Whereas a direct military engagement in the region remains unlikely, the United States should act now to disrupt PRC initiatives in Latin America, mitigate their effects, and strengthen US deterrence in the Western Hemisphere.

Part 3:
Domain Assessments

— 12 —

Space: The Coming Collision

David Zesinger and Gregory Hillebrand

Over the past few decades, the United States has used space to devastating effect through the US way of war. Instant communications and data transfers, overhead intelligence collection, and precision navigation enable the US military to eliminate high-value targets swiftly, dissolve conventional opposition, and even topple nations. American mobility, agility, and lethality are underpinned and amplified by space-based effects. China has studied the US way of war and understands how space power enables US success.[1] From the shock and awe of the Iraq War, to Operation Midnight Hammer, to the layered space and cyber effects of Operation Absolute Resolve and the 2026 Iran war, the United States has ravaged adversaries that, though not lacking courage or will, lack the pillars of a twenty-first-century military power.[2] China is determined not to let such a destiny befall it. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is working to leverage space to the country's benefit and undermine the US way of war, effectively eliminating the decisive advantages on which Western militaries rely.

To understand China's approach to leveraging the space domain, this chapter analyzes how the Taiwan conflict scenario presented in this volume could involve space operations and escalate into space. This futuristic assessment is underpinned by ongoing and historical PRC efforts that position China to operate in space

1. Kevin Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities: The View from PRC Sources* (China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 2024).

2. Dan Caine, "Press Briefing on Operation Absolute Resolve" (speech, Palm Beach, FL, January 3, 2026), https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dancainepressopabsoluteresolve.htm.

throughout the twenty-first century. Combined, the forward-looking scenario and the historical examination enable a projection of future PRC actions, which are addressed through corresponding recommendations designed to help the United States counter the initiatives of a spacefaring China.

China's Use of Space in a Future War

> PLA authors assert that space capabilities can undermine an adversary's space, nuclear, and conventional forces, as well as its economic performance.
>
> —Kevin Pollpeter[3]

As US-China tensions rise over China's aggression toward Taiwan, tensions quietly but meaningfully intensify in space. On-orbit competition or conflict is well suited for gray-zone warfare, in which military options can be nuanced, escalatory, and difficult to attribute accurately. Over the past few years, China has furiously invested in space, positioning itself to have an array of options for any contingency.[4] Technologies for kinetic space weapons, jamming, and directed energy have greatly matured. Complicating matters, China has gained indispensable experience as a spacefaring nation and conducted invaluable rehearsals and exercises involving these capabilities.[5]

China does not need far-fetched, futuristic weapons to complicate the calculus for US strategic options in the western Pacific Ocean. Instead, as the United States begins moving strategic assets toward the Pacific, including US Navy vessels, the People's Republic of China begins maneuvering satellites into orbits that put irreplaceable US and allied space assets at risk.[6] Such inexpensive PRC maneuvers create a difficult dilemma for the United States, allowing Beijing to dismiss any public protest as a US overreaction or jingoism.

3. Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities*.

4. Eric Berger, "A New Report Finds China's Space Program Will Soon Equal That of the US," Ars Technica, September 16, 2025, https://arstechnica.com/space/2025/09/a-new-report-finds-chinas-space-program-will-soon-equal-that-of-the-us/.

5. National Space Intelligence Center (NSIC)/National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC), *Competing in Space*, 2nd ed. (NSIC/NASIC, December 2023).

6. Alan T. Dugger, "Space as a Gray Zone: The Future of Orbital Warfare," Modern War Institute at West Point, February 14, 2025, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/space-as-a-gray-zone-the-future-of-orbital-warfare/.

Consequently, these close-proximity operations in space create complex issues that could easily lead to misunderstandings, escalation, and tragedy in orbit.[7] The United States knows the People's Republic of China could, if so inclined, sacrifice an old satellite (or satellites), sending the satellite on a collision course with US space assets—such as a Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite or an irreplaceable, high-value intelligence satellite—while maintaining the appearance of an accident. A physical conjunction, or crash, may not even be necessary, as the threat alone could force the United States to move its assets to avoid a potential impact, disrupting US military operations. The People's Republic of China knows adjudicating whether its act is intentional or accidental would muddy any messaging, at least in the short term, and take a US satellite off mission. Stated another way, China's initial satellite movements are designed as a threat against further US action, giving China plausible deniability regarding the destruction of critical US capabilities. Ultimately, China can easily frame an incident as a regrettable accident in an overcrowded space environment.

In addition to space-based assets, China begins employing ground-based systems capable of creating effects in space. The most prevalent systems are nondestructive jammers designed to render US and allied forces deaf and mute. China's jamming efforts have been intermittent and erratic since the initial incident near Taiwan, but their effects are felt globally as China strategically positions ground-based systems to maximize their impact.

Additionally, during the first 24 hours of the engagement, China employs its laser systems. Unlike jamming capabilities, these systems are designed to blind collection satellites and may cause permanent sensor damage. The People's Republic of China knows firing these valuable systems exposes them and turns them into targets susceptible to counterattack. Carefully balancing risk and return, China limits the use of these systems in scale and scope, focusing on key US military satellites. Without these on-orbit collection assets, the United States is unable to gather imagery of the Indo-Pacific theater in the aftermath of the initial clash, limiting US assessments of China's response. Combined, these PRC activities in space have already impacted military and commercial space operations by disrupting communications, logistics, navigation, and Earth sensing, affecting both military action and allied economies.

Notably, the People's Republic of China has yet to employ its more destructive space capabilities, such as ground-based and space-based anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles. China's restraint stems from its own reliance on space and from its

7. These consequences can be very costly. An EP-3 spy plane costs about $36 million, whereas a satellite, such as a Global Positioning System satellite or a National Reconnaissance Office collector, could cost hundreds of millions to even billions of dollars.

hesitation—at least during the early stages of the conflict—to spoil the space domain with clouds of high-velocity debris. The decision not to employ space capabilities may seem counterintuitive. When a ship sinks or a plane crashes, it immediately exits its war-fighting domain; in space, a destroyed satellite can create hundreds or thousands of projectiles traveling thousands of miles per hour and remaining in orbit for decades, thus endangering the spacecraft of friend and foe alike. To mitigate this unwanted destruction, the People's Republic of China develops sophisticated rendezvous spacecraft capable of docking with noncooperative satellites to disable them, move them, or enlist them to China's side.[8] China is ready to employ these assets if the conflict escalates.

Although the United States has gained a tremendous advantage by employing space effects in support of terrestrial operations, the hypothesized US-China engagement is the first involving a credible spacefaring adversary the United States has faced this century. With the modern world undergirded by space, an unrestrained conflict with China in orbit would be devastating. Both parties appreciate this reality. The United States and the rest of the world rely on space-based navigation and weather information to ensure rapid and efficient logistics. Satellite communications connect the planet. Any disruption to these services would hamper global economies and impact billions of people.

Wary of these potential consequences, the People's Liberation Army has so far limited its operations in space to actions with reversible effects, positioning assets for future escalation and targeting US reconnaissance and communications capabilities to deafen and blind the United States.[9] China seeks a high payoff from its investment in space, leveraging new PRC capabilities above the atmosphere to deter US action and complicate any terrestrial effort in the Indo-Pacific theater. By presenting a fait accompli of credible space power, the People's Republic of China seeks to win without fighting, as Sun Tzu would say, and eclipse US influence in East Asia by making any direct conflict unbearable and prohibitively costly for the United States. Whereas China takes limited action in space in the early stages of this conflict scenario, the country positions itself to act aggressively against the United States and challenge accepted norms of behavior in space.

8. Theresa Hitchens, "Chinese Sats Appear to Be Attempting First-Ever On-Orbit Refueling, Sat Tracking Firms Say," Breaking Defense, June 19, 2025, https://breakingdefense.com/2025/06/chinese-sats-appear-to-be-attempting-first-ever-on-orbit-refueling-sat-tracking-firms-say/.

9. US Space Force, *Space Threat Fact Sheet* (US Space Force, updated April 2026).

Setting Conditions in Space

> Over the last two decades, our competitors—China in particular—have invested heavily in counterspace threats: kinetic and non-kinetic weapons that can deny, degrade, or destroy our satellites at will.
>
> —General B. Chance Saltzman[10]

The scenario presented in the previous section is possible only because the People's Republic of China is rapidly pursuing critical space capabilities to circumvent US conventional might and obtain space parity—an effort capitalizing on the previously blazed US flight path into space and on the theft and acquisition of foreign technology.[11] Directed investment and Chinese ingenuity have also dramatically leveled the playing field. China is not a new player in the contest for space. In fact, China has successfully landed on the Moon several times, seemingly with a higher success rate than the rest of the world (though China may be less forthright with mission failures).[12] Like the United States, China is developing a manned spacecraft to travel from Earth to the Moon and from lunar orbit to the lunar surface.[13] The US spacecraft, Orion, is significantly behind schedule, despite its successful flight around the Moon in April 2026; the Chinese spacecraft, Mengzhou (similar in design to Orion), is still in development. Alongside its exploratory efforts, China has spent the last few decades diligently identifying and prioritizing areas for investment in space technology.

After carefully observing US and allied war fighting for decades, China has concluded US military power is founded in space power.[14] China believes, with reason, the loss—or threat of loss—of critical space-provided products and services, such as global intelligence and communications, could deter US and allied military action.[15] Seeing space as a clear asymmetric advantage

10. *Hearing on "The Rocket's Red Glare: China's Ambitions to Dominate Space," Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of B. Chance Saltzman, chief of space operations, US Space Force).

11. Defense Intelligence Agency, *2022 Challenges to Security in Space: Space Reliance in an Era of Competition and Expansion* (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2022).

12. Katie Holland, "Chinese Lunar Exploration Program," National Space Centre, April 29, 2024, https://www.spacecentre.co.uk/news/space-now-blog/chinese-lunar-exploration-program/.

13. Marissa Martin, "China Is Going to the Moon by 2030. Here's What's Known About the Mission—and Why It Matters," RAND Corporation, November 13, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/11/china-is-going-to-the-moon-by-2030-heres-whats-known.html.

14. Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities*.

15. Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities*.

for the United States, China aims to take that advantage and build a similar advantage for itself.

China is developing a suite of capabilities to attack space systems from Earth's surface to the farthest orbits.[16] China understands the attack surface for a space system extends beyond the spacecraft to include ground stations, links, and systems for data processing and storage. Cyber warfare is a relatively inexpensive way to degrade space products and effects. For example, in 2014, China hacked the computer systems of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.[17] Whereas the hackers did not gain access to weather satellites, they did access weather databases. Corrupting databases may have the same operational impact as taking a satellite off mission, but with far less risk and far lower costs.

Besides possessing systems that can render US forces deaf and mute, China has capabilities to attack space-based assets for intelligence collection, potentially blinding US forces.[18] Some of China's directed-energy systems are capable of blinding or even damaging imagery spacecraft, and Chinese military exercises regularly include jamming systems that target space-based radar. Without their space-based tools for intelligence collection, US forces would be at a significant and potentially insurmountable disadvantage.

Today, China may not have enough electromagnetic-warfare assets to establish true dominance in the electromagnetic spectrum, but the country does have sufficient resources to degrade US capabilities.[19] In fact, US forces increasingly rely on the electromagnetic spectrum for communications, a capability critical to multidomain operations. Additionally, China is expanding its ability to jam signals from GPS satellites, which are another essential enabler of US operations. Consequently, even if China cannot completely shut down US satellite communications, radio communications, or GPS, China may be able to degrade—or threaten to degrade—those capabilities to the point of deterring US action.

Complicating matters further, China has the technology and systems to attack on-orbit spacecraft kinetically, and the country will continue to upgrade and field more such systems. Kinetic attacks on a spacecraft in orbit can originate from the ground, as with an ASAT weapon, or from a maneuvering satellite conducting an attack in orbit. In 2007, China demonstrated its initial ASAT capability by destroying one of its own spacecraft in a test demonstration, creating more

16. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

17. Justin Sculiletti, "Chinese Hackers Breach U.S. Weather System," *PBS News*, November 12, 2014, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/chinese-hackers-breach-u-s-weather-system.

18. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

19. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

than 3,000 pieces of debris.[20] This type of attack creates an enormous debris field, endangering spacecraft in the affected orbit, as well as spacecraft at the same altitude. As China begins to rely more on space products and services, a kinetic attack—and its associated consequences—will endanger both Chinese and adversary spacecraft, potentially making the risk of collateral damage too high. Direct-ascent ASAT attacks on proliferated-low-Earth-orbit systems are less effective because an adversary would need to destroy many systems to cause the substantial degradation of a network consisting of hundreds or even thousands of spacecraft. Besides creating massive debris fields, this type of attack would be cost prohibitive; current direct-ascent ASAT weapons are often more costly than the targeted spacecraft.

A cleaner, more direct way to attack on-orbit spacecraft is through orbital combat. In 2022, China demonstrated this capability with its Shijian-21 (SJ-21) spacecraft.[21] The SJ-21 rendezvoused with a broken Chinese spacecraft in geostationary orbit, connected to it, and then towed the spacecraft to a different orbit. The SJ-21 and the SJ-25 (a similar spacecraft) may have rendezvoused and conducted on-orbit refueling experiments, a technique the United States has yet to master.[22] This type of operation requires precise navigation, sophisticated docking sensors and systems, advanced automation, and large propellant tanks for sustained maneuver. Spacecraft with these capabilities help remove space debris in peacetime—a rationale China has leveraged to justify SJ-21 testing.[23] In times of conflict, these trash-truck spacecraft can become potent weapons. Defending against maneuvering spacecraft is difficult; defense by movement may take a target spacecraft off mission, accomplishing the goal of the attacker.

Although China has limited ability to strike spacecraft kinetically, the potential for such action may have a strong deterrent effect. China has proven its ability to employ direct-ascent ASAT systems against targets in low Earth orbit, and it will continue to develop these systems, eventually holding targets at risk from low Earth orbit out to geostationary orbit.[24] Moreover, in a threatening but reversible move, China may maneuver spacecraft to orbital positions that provide an advantage over critical US assets.[25] By maneuvering spacecraft and preparing ASAT missiles for launch (legal actions), China can, without causing harm to any US spacecraft, send a message of intent and resolve while maintaining plausible deniability.

20. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

21. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

22. US Space Force, *Space Threat Fact Sheet*.

23. "Aerospace: Spacecraft to Remove Orbital Debris (MSC-TOPS-90)," NASA Technology Transfer Program, n.d., accessed August 10, 2026, https://technology.nasa.gov/patent/MSC-TOPS-90.

24. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

25. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

If these actions deter or de-escalate the situation, China will have achieved its goals at a very low cost. If the conflict escalates, China can execute its missions, degrade US capability, and continue the conflict against a weakened United States.

China has apparently focused its current space efforts on expanding its forces' orbital capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.[26] Collecting intelligence through space-based imagery (visible or infrared), radar, and signals intelligence may be the first critical step in a kill chain. General B. Chance Saltzman, the US Space Force's chief of space operations, once described a budding PRC "kill web" as "a series of hundreds of satellites that . . . provide real-time updates, targeting quality information of our force."[27] Satellite communications can rapidly deliver this targeting information to a fires asset. Backed by investment, Chinese technological advancements in space-based collection, communications, and processing capabilities are making the execution of this space-enabled kill chain faster and more lethal.

Notably, China has taken its space credentials beyond military applications. In 2000, China launched the Beidou Navigation System, which offers an alternative to GPS for continuous positioning, navigation, and timing services.[28] Similarly, the People's Republic of China is rapidly populating its own versions of megaconstellations like SpaceX's Starlink. For example, Qianfan—a low-Earth-orbit constellation with initial launches in 2024—will deliver PRC-endorsed Internet globally as a direct rival to Starlink. Also known as the "Thousand Sails," this constellation is planned to consist of more than 14,000 satellites, exceeding the total number of active satellites in orbit in 2025.[29]

According to Major General Brian D. Sidari, the Space Force's deputy chief of space operations for intelligence, SpaceX's current dominance in reaching orbit is a critical US advantage, but "[i]t's concerning how fast [China is] going."[30] The People's Republic of China has developed a network of relatively new ground stations peppered throughout the globe, ostensibly for command and control. China boasts at least 18 overseas nodes in Africa, Antarctica, Latin America, South Asia, and the South Pacific Ocean. To augment its land-based nodes,

26. US Space Force, *Space Threat Fact Sheet*.

27. Giselle Ruhiyyih Ewing, "US Space Chief Warns of Emerging Threats from China and Russia," *POLITICO*, May 15, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/15/space-chief-saltzman-china-russia-threats-00351616.

28. "Serve the World and Benefit Mankind," BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, n.d., accessed July 10, 2026, http://en.beidou.gov.cn/.

29. Sydney Nystrom et al., *Thousand Sails: Why Low Earth Orbit Is the Next Frontier for Great Power Competition Between the U.S. and China*, Space Policy Review no. 6 (American Foreign Policy Council, February 2025).

30. Stephen Clark, "US Intel Officials 'Concerned' China Will Soon Master Reusable Launch," Ars Technica, September 22, 2025, https://arstechnica.com/space/2025/09/us-intel-officials-cite-reusable-launch-as-difference-maker-with-china/.

China also has at least five ships (*Liaowang*-class and *Yuan Wang*–class vessels) devoted to missile- and satellite-tracking missions.[31] In concert, this array of assets constitutes a robust and maturing global infrastructure supporting China's growing space missions, enabling worldwide networking similar to existing US capabilities.

Seeking to take away the US advantage in space, China is building capabilities to secure its own advantage, making great strides in leveraging the space domain. China will continue to invest in the development and fielding of systems that rival the capabilities of the West. These investments will allow China to challenge the United States in a conflict above Earth.

Projecting China's Next Moves in Space

> [China must] speed up air and space integration and sharpen [its] offensive and defensive capabilities.
>
> —Xi Jinping[32]

China has substantially developed its space technologies and capabilities over the last two decades. Still, if Beijing hopes to assert its authority in the western Pacific and stymie US efforts there, it must continue to prioritize its investments in space capabilities. Any aggression China demonstrates on Earth—such as airspace violations, provocative missile tests, antagonistic maritime operations, or troop movements—should be expected to echo in space through increased jamming, dazzling, and reckless maneuvers in orbit. These types of actions will become increasingly feasible and commonplace with the introduction of new systems and technologies. China will continue to fill its quiver of space-control assets, including electromagnetic-warfare, cyber, direct-ascent, and on-orbit capabilities, to deny US space superiority. Learning from the US way of war, China is building its own space systems to enhance its terrestrial forces and position itself as a leader in space. These Chinese efforts should be observed across six distinct forecasts.

1. China will continue to develop systems to dominate the electromagnetic spectrum, sever the spacecraft-to-ground connection, and eliminate key space services such as communications and GPS.[33] All spacecraft communicate with the

31. Meia Nouwens, "China's Dual-Use Space Sector Goes Global," International Institute for Strategic Studies, July 17, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/07/chinas-dual-use-space-sector-goes-global/.

32. Ben Blanchard, "China's President Xi Urges Greater Military Use of Space," Reuters, updated April 14, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/chinas-president-xi-urges-greater-military-use-of-space-idUSBREA3E03H/.

33. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

ground through the electromagnetic spectrum (including lasers). This link is susceptible to jamming, either at the spacecraft's receiver or at the ground station's receiver.

2. China will continue to develop, refine, and deploy directed-energy systems capable of blinding or damaging spacecraft sensors, eventually developing systems powerful enough to damage spacecraft.[34] These systems will improve in power (increasing the amount of damaging energy delivered to a target) and decrease in size. Current systems tend to be large, low in power, and mostly stationary. Technological advances will produce smaller and more powerful directed-energy systems, enabling the systems' employment on ships and ground vehicles. This increased mobility will greatly enhance the systems' attack capabilities and complicate any defensive countermeasures.

3. China will leverage artificial intelligence to enhance its space capabilities. In 2025, Zhejiang Lab launched the first tranche of satellites for its 2,800-satellite constellation, aiming to bring artificial-intelligence processing into orbit. Such a constellation will provide various efficiencies and enable satellites to respond autonomously and quickly, without having to transmit data to ground-based data centers for analysis and then back to orbit.[35] This effort demonstrates China's ambitions to shrink its extraterrestrial "observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) loop" to outperform and outmaneuver US forces in space.[36]

4. China will seek to present itself as an attractive alternative to the United States in the area of space operations. Both Chinese and US initiatives seek to establish norms for operating in space. Whereas this rivalry is not as explicit as the one between NATO and the former Warsaw Pact, it nevertheless underscores the prospect of great-power competition in which each competitor curries favor with countries to advance its own vision for outer space. China will endeavor to draw favor by outperforming the United States through technological advances and grand demonstrations.

34. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

35. Sandra Erwin, "New Report Details China's Push to Dominate Artificial Intelligence," *SpaceNews*, May 29, 2025, https://spacenews.com/new-report-details-chinas-push-to-dominate-artificial-intelligence/.

36. Brian R. Price, "Colonel John Boyd's Thoughts on Disruption: A Useful Effects Spiral from Uncertainty to Chaos," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2023).

5. China will seek to beat the United States back to the Moon and jump-start a cislunar economy (cislunar refers to the area between Earth and the Moon, whereas a cislunar economy involves the eventual development of lunar resources). Having missed out on the conquest of the Americas during the Age of Discovery, China has resolved not to miss out on the conquest of the next frontier: the Moon. China is dedicated to this task, investing significant resources and successfully moving toward the country's goal. China sees the Moon as both a source of resources (especially helium-3, which is critical as a fuel for nuclear fusion) and a gateway to the rest of the solar system (and the resources it contains). The cislunar environment around the Moon has limited military value for conflicts on Earth, but in its traditional way, China is looking to the distant future in which lunar resources will be critical to life on Earth. By building technologies, infrastructure, and legal frameworks now, China will be postured to dominate the cislunar region and the Moon. Operations in the cislunar environment require specific infrastructure for space-domain awareness and communications. Most current space-tracking systems are designed to observe space only from low Earth orbit (about 100 kilometers above Earth's surface) to geostationary orbit (about 36,000 kilometers above the Equator). The average distance between the Moon and Earth is about 384,400 kilometers.[37] This region of space between geostationary orbit and the Moon is vast, and the United States has limited capability to detect and track spacecraft in it. As the region becomes more congested or contested, Earth-, space-, and lunar-based architectures will become critical to understanding who is doing what.

6. China wants to lead the development of the legal framework and norms for activities in cislunar space and on the Moon. The Outer Space Treaty (1967)—the foundational international treaty on space—discusses the Moon, though not in sufficient detail (the treaty does forbid building fortifications or testing weapons).[38] Earth-based norms, such as time zones, map-grid standards, radio-frequency assignments, and shipping and aircraft right-of-way

37. "Helium-3 Mining on the Lunar Surface," The European Space Agency, n.d., accessed August 10, 2026, https://www.esa.int/Enabling_Support/Preparing_for_the_Future/Space_for_Earth/Energy/Helium-3_mining_on_the_lunar_surface.

38. "Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies," UN Office for Outer Space Affairs, n.d., https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introouterspacetreaty.html.

rules, do not exist for activities in cislunar space and on the Moon. The United States has taken steps toward developing norms for these environments through the Artemis Accords, which states in section 10 "The Signatories affirm that the extraction of space resources does not inherently constitute national appropriation under Article II of the Outer Space Treaty," with the goal of reinforcing free-market and capitalist ideas (such as allowing nations to extract resources for their own gain and profit).[39] Whereas China is attempting to build and lead an international coalition for PRC efforts within the International Lunar Research Station initiative, only one of the 17 nations currently signed on as partners—Russia—has space-lift capabilities.[40] China will continue to push an anti-Western, anticolonial message to draw nations, particularly those in the Global South, into supporting the lunar-station initiative.[41] China will use this influence to set norms in cislunar space in support of Chinese goals. China has a history of using precedent and lawfare to achieve its goals, and it will use this same strategy to set new norms in space.

American Options for Countering Chinese Space Ambitions

Fortune favors the bold.

—Ancient Roman idiom

To maintain space superiority (or even parity) vis-à-vis China, the United States must act now to counter the rising Chinese threat. In the near term, the United States must work to retain its space dominance through space defense and resilience, while continuing to develop tools to deny China the use of space at critical moments. In the longer term, the United States must prioritize cislunar space and the Moon and not cede the initiative in this resource-rich domain. Whereas these short- and long-term efforts will be costly, the cost of allowing China to achieve dominance would be far higher.

The first step in maintaining US space superiority is understanding the environment. Space-domain awareness includes the totality of what is happening

39. "The Artemis Accords," NASA, updated June 25, 2026, https://www.nasa.gov/artemis-accords/.

40. Andrew Jones, "China Wants 50 Countries Involved in Its ILRS Moon Base," *SpaceNews*, July 23, 2024, https://spacenews.com/china-wants-50-countries-involved-in-its-ilrs-moon-base/.

41. Jones, "China Wants 50 Countries."

in the operational environment of space.[42] This understanding requires the fusion of data from tracking (radar and optical), intelligence, and space-weather sources. Analysts must appreciate the rationale and intent behind actions taken in orbit. As the space environment becomes increasingly congested and competitive, with more national and commercial actors and highly maneuverable spacecraft, the task of understanding the environment continues to grow in complexity. Only through a concerted effort—one that fuses tracking data (including from commercial sources) with in-depth intelligence while leveraging the latest computational and prediction tools—can the United States truly begin to understand and anticipate actions in orbital space.

To maintain the flow of space products and information, the United States must build resilience. In this context, resilience means having networks of systems that are difficult or impossible to attack and defeat. Starlink is an example: The constellation's sheer number of active spacecraft—almost 11,000 as of July 2026—makes it a challenging target.[43] If an adversary were to disable hundreds of Starlink spacecraft, the system would still have the resilience to maintain an acceptable level of operations. Resilience also entails having diverse networks and services to maintain capability. For example, the United States could focus on leveraging military, government, commercial, and allied systems to enhance and, in times of conflict, maintain the flow of space products. The US military may focus on specific, expensive, and limited exquisite capabilities while relying on commercial services to provide adequate communications, imagery, and spacecraft-tracking services. Partnering with allies also increases the breadth and depth of shared space capabilities, further reducing the potential impact of any attack on the United States' overall ability to provide space services.

Adversaries already have or are developing the ability to strike space systems through cyber, electromagnetic, and kinetic means.[44] To overcome this threat, the United States must develop both passive and active defenses. Passive defenses involve hardening spacecraft networks, including the spacecraft, ground stations, and physical (cable) and electromagnetic links. Proliferation is another form of passive defense, ensuring the potential vulnerability of any individual spacecraft in a proliferated network does not compromise the overall network's resilience to attack. Active defenses include building maneuverability into spacecraft,

42. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Space Operations*, Joint Publication 3-14 (Joint Chiefs of Staff, updated August 2023).

43. "Find STARLINK," satellitemap.space, n.d., accessed July 8, 2026, https://satellitemap.space/constellation/starlink.

44. NSIC/NASIC, *Competing in Space*.

enabling them to move away from threats.[45] Enhanced maneuverability technology may also lead to bodyguard spacecraft: spacecraft that orbit closely and protect another spacecraft, using maneuvers to intercept or negate threats.[46]

Although active and passive defenses may be the cornerstone of maintaining the flow of space products or services, offensive space operations are critical to denying adversarial space operations at critical moments. Offensive space operations require a multiservice, multidomain approach. Ground, sea, air, and space forces all have a role to play in this approach, operating in and through their assigned domains to create effects on space systems: US Navy ships, with their electrical power and mobility, are ideal electromagnetic-warfare platforms; US Army assets, collocated with maneuver formations, are necessary to dazzle low-orbit imagery spacecraft; and US Air Force aircraft are able to strike satellite ground stations. Achieving space superiority and dominance is a Joint fight; all services and the Joint Force need to prioritize this fight and devote time, personnel, and funds to this critical mission.

Cislunar space is becoming more complex and important as China, the United States, and the rest of the world seek a foothold on the Moon. The United States must lead the effort to secure and manage this space through both technological and political leadership; as US policy contends, this effort would benefit all humanity.[47] The United States has sufficient ground- and space-based tracking assets to maintain a solid understanding of what is happening from Earth to geosynchronous orbit.[48] Outside the geosynchronous region, achieving space-domain awareness becomes more difficult because the distances between elements is greater, and orbital predictions become more complex as the Moon's gravitational pull has a greater impact on spacecraft's movements. The United States must invest in sensors dedicated to tracking and monitoring friendly and adversarial actions in the region around the Moon.[49] Working with allies and partners, the United States must continue to fund and lead efforts to build a permanent lunar base. The US-led Artemis Accords, a series

45. Greg Hadley, "Dynamic and Responsive: Space Force Leaders Plan for a New Kind of Operations," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, December 20, 2023, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/dynamic-responsive-space-force-operations/.

46. "Lodestar Is Building Satellite 'Bodyguards' to Protect the Next Battlefield," Resilience Media, October 17, 2025, https://resiliencemedia.co/lodestar-is-building-satellite-bodyguards/.

47. One of the stated policy goals is to "[l]ead, encourage, and expand international cooperation on mutually beneficial space activities that broaden and extend the benefits of space for all humanity"; see The White House, *National Space Policy of the United States of America* (The White House, December 2020), 5.

48. "State-of-the-Art of Small Spacecraft Technology," NASA, May 7, 2026, https://www.nasa.gov/smallsat-institute/sst-soa/identification-and-tracking-systems/.

49. "Oracle-M Hot Fire Test: A Major Milestone in Cislunar Space Situational Awareness and National Security," Space Systems Command, May 6, 2025, https://www.ssc.spaceforce.mil/Newsroom/Article/4176371/oracle-m-hot-fire-test-a-major-milestone-in-cislunar-space-situational-awarenes.

of nonbinding, multilateral arrangements establishing norms for space operations, already have nearly 70 signatory nations (excluding Russia and China).[50] The Artemis program—an initiative associated with the accords and pursued in partnership with the European Space Agency, Japan, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other nations—is NASA's plan to return to the Moon and develop a permanent, manned base there.[51] Whereas this initiative is costly, it could yield astronomical gains from lunar resources. The United States must set the precedent for how the world will manage this new frontier.

Conclusion

Any US-China conflict on the ground will be preceded by aggressive actions beyond the atmosphere. Over the past three decades, China has meticulously exploited space for its own martial use while denying vital space effects to adversaries. As tensions between the United States and China rise, space will increasingly be a domain of conflict, putting US assets and strategy at risk. China's end goal is to master space for the country's benefit while denying that benefit to adversaries. Beijing aims to use space first for deterrence and, if deterrence fails, to leverage space to blind and deafen US space assets, thereby permitting PRC freedom of action in the western Pacific. China will continue to develop various weapons, both kinetic and nonkinetic, to hamper Western intelligence, navigation, and communications to an unparalleled degree. China has long-range designs on cislunar space and on the Moon, where Beijing is striving for dominance and military supremacy. The question is not whether the People's Republic of China will challenge the United States in space; the question is when. The United States, alongside its allies and partners, must continue to leverage all its capabilities—military, commercial, governmental, and international—to build space infrastructure and systems strong and flexible enough to meet and defeat any threat.

50. "Artemis Accords."

51. "Artemis," NASA, updated April 10, 2026, https://www.nasa.gov/humans-in-space/artemis/.

— 13 —

Shaping the Narrative of War: Examining China's Use of the Information Domain

Rick Gunnell

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), regard the information and cognitive domains as critical elements of China's national power.[1] Both organizations aim to mobilize these domains toward a critical mass, significantly affecting key individuals, communities, and societies. The CCP and the PLA strategically employ the information and cognitive domains via information operations (IO) that present both near- and long-term challenges to the West.[2] The CCP uses these domains through its "discourse power" (话语权) to "'tell [China's] story well' and . . . fight fiercely to protect their 'image sovereignty.'"[3] This approach fits into a larger security framework Sheena Chestnut Greitens identified in 2023: "To protect his regime from outside forces, Xi believes, China must make the international realm more favorable to CCP rule . . . [now,] ostensibly defensive ends at home require increasingly

1. "[C]ognition is . . . 'the process by which people acquire, process, and apply information and knowledge'. . . . [it is also] how we respond mentally to some form of stimuli." For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Liberation Army, "[i]f an adversary is able to control cognition it can disrupt decision making and overall strategy." See Josh Baughman, *How China Wins the Cognitive Domain* (China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 2023), 1–2.

2. Many terms describe how a person or an organization can use information to influence cognition. These terms, defined at the beginning of this volume, include information operations, information warfare, psychological warfare, and cognitive-domain operations. For simplicity and consistency, the authors of this volume largely use the term information operations.

3. Atlantic Council, *Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition* (Atlantic Council, December 2020); and Baughman, *How China Wins*, 4.

assertive means abroad."[4] As a party army, the PLA employs the information and cognitive domains through both kinetic and non-kinetic means, including the "Three Warfares" strategy (public-opinion warfare, legal warfare, and psychological warfare).[5] In the twenty-first century, the CCP and the PLA have leveraged these domains to prepare for a future conflict, creating a situation in which horizontal escalation has become a reality.

In 2024, Xi Jinping stated "the spatiotemporal nature of modern warfare [now] extends beyond the traditional physical domain . . . the physical, information, and cognitive domains are intertwined."[6] For the PLA, the information domain consists of at least three distinct categories: (1) information communicated through various systems and the connectedness of those systems (that is, informationization), (2) defensive and offensive cyber warfare, and (3) domestic and foreign IO.[7] In any future conflict, the PLA will certainly lean on informationized systems and wage cyber warfare, but given this collaborative study's premise, the third tool—domestic and foreign IO—is the most appropriate object of analysis.

This chapter answers the following questions: Which actors do the CCP and the PLA consider high-payoff IO targets? How might the CCP and the PLA try to influence those targets strategically? What might the CCP and the PLA do in the future to enhance their IO capabilities? What can the United States and its partners, allies, and invested stakeholders do to counter CCP and PLA activities?

Commanding Information

The PLA first turned its attention to the information domain in the early 2000s, cementing the domain's importance when PLA leaders determined "local wars under the conditions of informationization" to be the

4. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Xi's Security Obsession: Why China Is Digging In at Home and Asserting Itself Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, July 28, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xis-security-obsession.

5. Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/.

6. "深入贯彻习近平强军思想 充分解放和发展新质战斗力," Communist Party Member Network, September 16, 2024, https://djyj.12371.cn/2024/09/16/ARTI1726473629223147.shtml.

7. A possible fourth category consists of direct or indirect military actions that cause a reaction, either intentionally or unintentionally, in the information environment. For example, exercises conducted by the People's Liberation Army around Taiwan are primarily strategic-deterrence operations, but they also create media reactions. See Rick Gunnell, "Protracted War at the Strategic Level," in *The 2024 Carlisle Conference on the PLA: Protracted War Against the PRC*, ed. Joshua Arostegui (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, January 2026), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/983/.

military's strategic guideline in 2004.[8] The cognitive domain was mentioned in PLA writings as early as 2002, but only gained traction when Xi rose to power. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, PLA scholars were energetically exploring the domain's importance to modern and future warfare.[9] The PLA has repeatedly discussed the importance of "disintegrating the enemy" (瓦解敌人), a concept inspired by Sun Tzu's idea to "subdue (or win) without fighting" (不战而屈).[10] In modern terms, this concept could be roughly defined as having enough pre-conflict IO to convince the enemy (or its allies and partners) not to fight.

Disintegrating the enemy is not just a PLA mission. To be effective, this effort requires all levels of the party, government, and military to act in concert toward a common goal. In fact, the real tip of the spear is the CCP, with the PLA supporting party goals. Whereas some of the information environment (IE) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is dedicated to basic propaganda that repeats party lines ad nauseum, the CCP's IO and influence operations also provide countless examples—especially when targeting foreign audiences—of sophisticated, purposeful, and, most critically, successful efforts. Three key IO successes achieved by the CCP include (1) convincing foreign countries not to recognize Taiwan, (2) persuading Western countries to abandon human rights as a precondition for development, and (3) fostering cognitive indifference to increased CCP control over Hong Kong.

The global concept of IO is not new. As long as humans have existed, humans have formally or informally communicated information in the hope of changing behaviors. This practice is so fundamental that it can even be observed among animals with strong social communities.[11] At its core, information has the power to change cognition. When successfully executed at scale, IO may cause small or large groups of people to accept new ideas, whether wittingly or unwittingly, and even change their behavior. Importantly, information may be communicated verbally among people, released in official documents, or published through various media outlets.

The basic process of information dissemination is not inherently malign. When altruistically backed by a government, disseminating information can result in measurable and positive changes. For example, since the 1970s, governments

8. M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Military Strategy: 'Winning Informationized Local Wars,'" *China Brief* 15, no. 13 (June 2015); and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Chinese Next-Generation Psychological Warfare* (RAND Corporation, June 2023), 10.

9. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Psychological Warfare*, 21.

10. "经典兵学丨浅析《孙子兵法》的'胜敌'思想," *PLA Daily*, January 6, 2026, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16435830.html.

11. Examples include bees, dolphins, monkeys, and other social species.

around the world have launched seat-belt campaigns featuring strong public messaging backed by government policy and enforcement. In the United States, these campaigns have reduced traffic-fatality rates by 75 percent since the 1970s.[12]

Trouble begins when information is disseminated with malign intent. For the purposes of this chapter, malign IO are defined as information activities that are intentionally deceptive or misleading and directed by actors with the intent to thwart lawful actions or create confusion, mistrust, or panic. For the CCP, using either traditional or malign IO is instrumental to the party's peacetime and wartime IO processes. One of the most powerful modern examples of such use is the CCP's United Front system—a "magic weapon," according to Xi.[13]

The key difference between CCP and Western IO lies in the CCP's command and control of IO at the strategic level, with the party employing IO as a centralized and intentional tool. By contrast, democratic states (and their functional organizations) focus IO at the operational and tactical levels, often in support of larger strategic objectives. Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. Because IO are embedded in the CCP's political work, the party can better plan its IO, but its messaging (and tone) can turn audiences away. Western IO are executed under legal and ethical constraints and through decentralized efforts, encouraging discussion and civic awareness. In both cases, the goal is the same: to use information to change cognition. The differences lie in the operator (party versus state), scale (strategic and centralized versus operational and tactical with decentralized execution), and constraints (politically based versus rules based).

The CCP, PLA, and PRC channels for information dissemination target domestic and foreign audiences, with messages tailored as appropriate.[14] Information is passed both at the peer-to-peer level (that is, through key leader engagements, usually verbal) and across all types of media. The four most common CCP IO media categories are: (1) print newspapers (including their virtual equivalents) and websites with varying degrees of credibility and editorial discretion; (2) terrestrial and satellite radio, including podcasts; (3) basic, subscriber, and streaming television, including virtual hubs like YouTube; and (4) social media.

Aiming to change cognition, the CCP's massive IO system transmits information to at least four core foreign audiences: key leaders, military

12. "Traffic Safety: Then, Now and the Future," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, n.d., accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.nhtsa.gov/traffic-safety-then-now-and-future.

13. Alexander Bowe, *China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States* (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 2018).

14. For simplicity, this chapter uses the term Chinese Communist Party to describe this group of actors. All actions by the People's Republic of China and the People's Liberation Army are directed by the Chinese Communist Party. When a specific action requires organizational attribution, the responsible actor is identified accordingly.

personnel, local persons and organizations, and the overseas Chinese diaspora. Local persons and organizations can include individuals and entities outside mainland China, including members of the public, academics, scientists, and actors within the commercial sector.[15] The term "overseas Chinese" is an imperfect translation of the Chinese term 华侨 and an even more imperfect target. From the CCP's viewpoint, overseas Chinese include both mainland Chinese citizens who have traveled abroad for various reasons and people who emigrated from China decades or even centuries ago. The term "ethnic Chinese" may be a more appropriate translation. Regardless, the CCP believes ethnic Chinese will be more sympathetic to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."[16] In practice, the party has found some success with this population but has likely overestimated the power of ethnicity and belonging when individuals are faced with the atrocities the party has carried out.

A Framework for IO

For the conflict scenario leveraged throughout this volume, the CCP is betting its efforts in the information and cognitive domains will bear fruit. For decades, the party and the PLA have purposefully used information to plant alternative ideas in the minds of foreign audiences. Some audiences have already been converted; others, once free of doubt, are now challenged by the prospect of a conflict that could escalate into a third world war.

For this collaborative study, authors were encouraged to leverage both informed judgment and outright speculation to describe how the CCP, backed by the PLA, might employ IO. This chapter examines one of the most effective tools (if not the most effective tool) the CCP possesses to escalate the conflict horizontally. The non-kinetic aspects of IO are perfectly suited to escalate the conflict across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. These IO activities can be executed within China's borders by anyone with access to a keyboard, a microphone, or a mobile phone.

This section aims to amplify the narratives presented throughout this volume by expanding the discussion of information as a tool through tangible examples of the actors, actions, and motivations behind potential actions. To this end, this section proposes a straightforward framework for forecasting CCP IO actions. The framework is designed to separate the distinct yet important aspects of IO actions by identifying the incident in question, highlighting the specific actor

15. This audience can also include local persons living in China.

16. "CPPCC Members Discuss Overseas Chinese Engaging in China's Modernization Drive," The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, February 5, 2026, http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/2026-02/05/c_1160428.htm.

responsible for the forecasted action, and then exploring the foreign reaction. The section presents 12 cases, drawn from this volume, that warrant further analysis of China's potential use of IO to shape the responses and perceptions of its target audiences.

Framework Example

Conflict scenario. A strategic-, operational-, or tactical-level event in this volume's scenario.

CCP, PLA, or PRC action. A global, regional, or country-specific IO action.

Foreign reaction. An effect on a high-payoff target for China or an unintended countereffect resulting in a high-value-target win for the United States.

1. **Conflict scenario.** Taiwan's presidential elections are approaching.

CCP response. Covert CCP United Front work amplifies minority narratives arguing increased defense spending will increase the risk of kinetic conflict. Through intermediaries, the CCP carries out malign influence and interference operations through United Front work to support previously cultivated pro-Beijing candidates.[17]

Foreign reaction. The CCP succeeds in creating inorganic disagreement, heightened by follow-on conflict events. Fringe candidates once seen as having a small chance of winning are now competitive in local polls.

2. **Conflict scenario.** The UN General Assembly puts the issue of self-determination on the agenda.

CCP or PRC response. The PRC representative to the UN demands any discussion of self-determination occur only after a firm UN declaration asserting "no right to secession has yet been recognized under international law."[18] The PRC calls ongoing elections in Taiwan an internal issue fueled by "'Taiwan independence' separatist forces."[19] The CCP and the PRC apply diplomatic and economic pressure on other countries to prevent the discussion from ever taking place.

17. Precedent exists for such efforts. See, for example, Peter Mattis and Cheryl Yu, *Chinese Communist Party Covert Operations Against Taiwan* (Global Taiwan Institute, March 2025), 13–14.

18. As of 2026, "no right to secession has yet been recognized under international law." See *Encyclopedia Princetoniensis*, s.v. "Legal Aspects of Self-Determination," accessed February 4, 2026, https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/511.

19. Significant precedent exists for such statements. For a recent representative example, see "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on December 19, 2025," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated December 19, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202512/t20251219_11776971.html.

Foreign reaction. The UN fails to bring the discussion to the floor. International media cover the story for 24 hours with little IE resonance.

3. Conflict scenario. China holds its largest joint military exercise in years.

CCP or PLA response. CCTV-7, a domestic channel dedicated to PLA coverage, releases a video about how the PLA Rocket Force is ready, at any time, to launch a strategic missile. The video shows missile operators rushing to a control room where a map depicts Japan, implying a warhead is pointed at the country.

Foreign reaction. Western media picks up CCTV-7's story, spreading the idea of a potential Chinese missile threat and creating fear among the target country's key leaders and society. Japanese politicians and society openly discuss restricting US access, basing, and overflight rights.[20]

4. Conflict scenario. PLA Navy and China Coast Guard ships move east of Taiwan.

CCP or PLA response. In a pre-vetted question, a reporter at a Ministry of National Defense press conference asks about the PLA's actions. The spokesperson responds by stating the PLA's "resolve and will is unwavering in safeguarding national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity."[21] The statement is repeated on the Xinhua News Agency's English-language Africa subsite and translated for the Xinhua News Agency's Spanish- and Arabic-language versions.[22] The statement is also translated into Swahili and transmitted via China Radio International.[23]

Foreign reaction. Countries with content-sharing agreements with the CCP repost such stories, allowing the party to control the narrative.[24] Elsewhere, such CCP and PLA comments are so common local populations pay little attention to the news, permitting the Chinese Communist Party to achieve cognitive indifference.

5. Conflict scenario. A Taiwanese military aircraft accidentally collides with a PLA Air Force fighter, bringing down the PLA Air Force plane and inadvertently escalating the situation.

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20. See chapter 5 of this volume for a forecast on this topic.

21. Significant precedent exists for such statements. For a recent representative example, see "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on July 25," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, August 1, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16328897.html.

22. For examples of such sites, see "Africa," Xinhuanet, n.d., accessed May 21, 2026, https://english.news.cn/africa/index.htm; "Xinhua Arabic," Xinhuanet, n.d., accessed May 21, 2026, https://arabic.news.cn/index.htm; and "Xinhua Español," Xinhuanet, n.d., accessed May 21, 2026, https://spanish.news.cn/index.htm.

23. For this site, see "CRI Swahili," China Radio International, n.d., accessed May 21, 2026, https://swahili.cri.cn/.

24. See chapter 11 of this volume for background on CCP foreign-journalist training and content-sharing agreements.

CCP or PLA response. Domestic media controlled by the CCP and the PLA immediately portray the PLA Air Force pilot as a hero (英雄) and a martyr (烈士), stoking latent nationalism.[25]

Foreign reaction. Not applicable.

6. Conflict scenario. Unexplained accidents occur at Taiwanese critical-infrastructure sites, causing rolling blackouts.

CCP or PLA response. The CCP and the PLA act in the information domain under the cyber-warfare category outlined in this chapter's introduction.

Foreign reaction. Western intelligence organizations announce the purported accidents in Taiwan were malign cyber-warfare operations funded by CCP actors. The CCP vehemently denies such accusations, but few Taiwanese citizens believe the denials. Local civic-awareness organizations use social media and word of mouth to warn an invasion of Taiwan may be coming.

7. Conflict scenario. The US exercise Pacific Vanguard occurs with US Navy and partner-nation vessels in the Philippine Sea; a US carrier strike group moves south of Taiwan.

PLA action. The PLA holds joint strategic air patrols (联合空中战略巡航) with Russia over the East China Sea and the western Pacific.[26]

Foreign reaction. Foreign media cover the event, hyping up the issue. Statements by CCP media outlets and PRC spokespersons characterize the air patrols, like Pacific Vanguard, as "normal" and "lawful."[27] A CCP-aligned think-tank expert in Pakistan concludes the United States is the aggressor—an assessment reposted by CCP-controlled foreign media outlets and promoted through CCP-funded advertisements in other countries' newspapers.[28]

25. The 2020 China-India border conflict provides such precedents. See, for example, "陈红军," *PLA Daily*, April 4, 2021, http://www.81.cn/yljnt_208627/ylml/C/10033043.html; and "传承英雄精神，民兵续写荣光," *PLA Daily*, November 6, 2024, http://www.81.cn/dy_208579/jdt_208580/16349794.html.

26. China and Russia have held at least 10 such events. See "中俄两军组织实施第10次联合空中战略巡航," Xinhuanet, December 9, 2025, https://www.news.cn/world/20251209/80ca75fabd3445ff9f11098b39dd992e/c.html.

27. Jiang Chenglong, "China-Russia Joint Air Patrol Shows Resolve to Maintain Peace, Stability," *China Daily*, updated December 10, 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/10/WS69399617a310d6866eb2df73.html.

28. Precedent exists for such actions. See, for example, Muhammad Tayyab Safdar, *The Local Roots of Chinese Engagement in Pakistan* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2021); "Pak-China Think-Tanks Agree to Work Together to Counter Misperceptions," *The News International*, April 10, 2025, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1299848-pak-china-think-tanks-agree-to-work-together-to-counter-misperceptions; and Sarah Cook, *Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence Since 2017* (Freedom House, January 2020).

8. Conflict scenario. A US carrier strike group moves south of Taiwan; Chinese fighters open fire on US aircraft; the US Navy unintentionally sinks a Chinese ship; China launches missiles from the mainland at the carrier strike group, causing US casualties.

CCP action. CCP-owned video channels, such as China Global Television Network, portray the event as an example of US hegemonic behavior. To shift the narrative and create wedges among US partners and allies, the CCP leverages bilateral law-enforcement relationships or blackmail to pressure a Latin American country into arresting a local Japanese businessman for espionage. Falsified documents are released, alleging the businessman was working on behalf of the US Intelligence Community and spying on local South Korean competitors.[29]

Foreign reaction. Business leaders staying at hotels see the broadcast on their televisions. The leaders call their home offices and suggest selling financial positions that could be affected by the crisis, causing global stock markets to plummet. The espionage allegations spread on social media, with mixed reactions. Some South Koreans believe the allegations and are enraged, rekindling existing political and social tensions between South Korea and Japan. Technically skilled online investigators point out inconsistencies in the falsified documents, exposing the CCP's malign efforts and educating the public. After US intelligence agencies publicly confirm the documents are fake, some Latin American citizens believe the announcement is simply a cover-up.

9. Conflict scenario. US forces withdraw to Guam.

CCP or PLA action. The CCP claims military success in safeguarding the nation's sovereignty. To deter further US aggression and placate public demand for total victory over Taiwan, the PLA publicizes strikes against targets in central China that resemble US Navy ships, as well as demonstrations of PLA landpower elements seizing a mock-up of Taiwan's Presidential Office Building.[30]

Foreign reaction. Some Chinese citizens believe this action is enough, but more nationalistic citizens begin protesting for a full invasion. Seeking to control the situation, CCP media outlets launch "pacification campaigns."[31] Actively censoring

29. This scenario combines forecasts presented in chapters 5 and 11 of this volume.

30. H. I. Sutton, "China Builds Missile Targets Shaped Like U.S. Aircraft Carrier, Destroyers in Remote Desert," *USNI News*, updated November 7, 2021, https://news.usni.org/2021/11/07/china-builds-missile-targets-shaped-like-u-s-aircraft-carrier-destroyers-in-remote-desert; and Hollie Younger, "China Expands 'Mock Taipei' Site in Inner Mongolia: Report," *Taipei Times*, October 2, 2025, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/10/02/2003844809.

31. Frances Yaping Wang, *The Art of State Persuasion: China's Strategic Use of Media in Interstate Disputes* (Oxford University Press, 2024); and Weilong (David) Kong, "Rampant Nationalism Is Undermining China's 'Three Warfares,'" *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/rampant-nationalism-is-undermining-chinas-three-warfares/.

the Internet, CCP Great Firewall operators shut down the network when they feel total information control is beyond their reach. The remaining, most fervent nationalists are quelled by local security forces. The United States, seeking more time and recognizing the CCP may need an off-ramp, decides not to escalate the situation.[32]

10. Conflict scenario. The UN calls for restraint.

PRC action. The PRC nominates pro-Beijing South Africa as a potential mediator to resolve the conflict.[33]

Foreign reaction. Due to potential bias, the United States immediately rejects the nomination. The PRC, predicting the US response, releases a series of official statements accusing the United States of neither respecting the Global South nor wanting peace.

11. Conflict scenario. The United States plans to meet with NATO and the Quad.

PRC action. Xi meets with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Joint statements from the event suggest China has asked North Korea, Beijing's only defense-treaty ally, for direct or indirect support.

Foreign reaction. Faced with the prospect of a two-front war, the South Korean armed forces and US Forces Korea hold discussions on how to proceed.[34]

12. Conflict scenario. According to US assessments, China plans to invade Taiwan in the next four to six weeks.

CCP, PLA, or PRC action. The CCP, the PLA, and associated cyber warriors launch a coordinated social-media disinformation campaign intended to sow division within societies aligned with the United States and the West. The CCP uses both organic and inorganic accounts to amplify existing disagreements, further entrenching netizens—citizens actively engaged in online discussions—in their preexisting cognitive beliefs.

Foreign reaction. American society, already deeply divided by political affiliation, launches insults across social media. Some Americans are antiwar; others call for retaliation. Russian digital actors freely join the discussion, calling liberals unpatriotic and conservatives reckless. Europeans, encumbered

32. See chapter 3 of this volume for the rationale behind this decision.

33. See chapter 10 of this volume for a forecast of warming China–South Africa relations.

34. See chapter 5 of this volume for a forecast of how a Xi–Kim agreement might play out.

by their own domestic issues and their reliance on the PRC economy, question the strategic necessity of Taiwan.[35]

Adding to the confusion, the PRC refuses to answer hotlines. As the CCP inflames the now-viral Western disagreements, it relishes the victory over its highest-payoff target: the leaders and netizens of the free world, now divided.

Controlling the Brain

The CCP and the PLAy already possess the resources required to conduct significant IO. But conducting these operations is not Beijing's end goal. In 2020, the commandant of the PLA Strategic Support Force's Information Engineering University stated: "[T]he cognitive domain has become the ultimate domain of great power games and military confrontations . . . act[ing] directly on the brain's cognition through special means to influence its emotions, motivation, judgment, and behavior, and even to achieve the purpose of controlling the brain."[36] Adversary hard-power capabilities are important, but the CCP and the PLA are actively identifying advanced systems and methods to make an opponent feel like it cannot, dares not, or does not want to carry out an action.[37] An adversary's mind is the ultimate high-payoff target.

The CCP and the PLA are investing in artificial-intelligence (AI) capabilities and advanced technologies that will both transform traditional military systems and execute IO more quickly and on a larger scale. This section explores how the CCP can amplify its ongoing IO efforts in the short term and leverage the current AI revolution in the medium and long terms.

Starting today, the CCP could build countless fake websites or social forums that could be mobilized during conflict. These websites could impersonate local groups averse to US hegemony and war or could promote other strategic CCP narratives. Precedents for such activities exist, including in Italy, where the CCP has set up "well-known [Italian-language] news outlets."[38] The CCP will likely also continue buying media properties and advertisements in foreign-controlled media outlets. Such efforts target Chinese-language media

35. See chapter 8 of this volume for a forecast of future Russian involvement in Europe.

36. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Psychological Warfare*, 32.

37. Baughman, *How China Wins*, 2.

38. "Network of Fake, Pro-China 'News' Websites Unveiled in Italy," Decode39, October 25, 2023, https://decode39.com/8109/network-fake-china-news-websites-italy/. See also chapter 8 of this volume for a discussion of more CCP information-operations activities in Europe.

to reach and influence overseas Chinese communities and target media in other languages to affect local populations.[39]

The CCP could continue to help build political parties in autocratic and democratic countries.[40] In these efforts, the party's aim is to teach foreign parties how to stay in power for longer periods and to endear those parties to CCP positions of interest. Along the way, the CCP could sell political parties a host of surveillance and digital-control tools.[41] These tools can help the ruling party control its own population and, if pressured to do so, squash anti-CCP dissent. If welcomed by a foreign power, the CCP might also help that power construct a Great Firewall that suppresses outside information.[42]

The CCP could continue funding political candidates in foreign countries, likely playing both sides of the aisle and funding opposition campaigns. Playing both sides of a national-level election guarantees the CCP will maintain influence; in subnational elections (especially large municipal elections with a significant overseas Chinese population), the CCP actively funds pro-CCP candidates.[43] The CCPy could also try to manipulate local politicians into opposing US security interests in foreign countries. A key example of such manipulation occurred in May 2022, when the party's United Front Work Department attempted to exert malign influence on the governor of Cagaya in the Philippines, encouraging opposition to the US-Philippine joint exercise Balikatan.[44]

39. Significant precedent exists for such efforts. See, for example, "Beyond Borders: China's Grip on Global Media," *Human Rights Foundation* (blog), March 27, 2024, https://hrf.org/latest/beyond-borders-chinas-grip-on-global-media/.

40. Significant precedent exists for such efforts, especially those led by the Chinese Communist Party's United Front system, including in Latin America and Africa. See, for example, International Republican Institute, *A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response* (International Republican Institute, 2021); and US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2021), 69–118.

41. Significant precedent exists for such efforts. See, for example, *Hearing on Rule by Law: China's Increasingly Global Legal Reach, Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 118th Cong. (2023) (statement of Paul Scharre, vice president and director of studies, Center for a New American Security).

42. Precedent exists for such efforts, including in Myanmar, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Ethiopia. See chapter 8 of this volume for more information on CCP digital-control tools employed in Central Asia. See also Ali Rogin and Andrew Corkery, "Massive Leak Exposes How China's 'Great Firewall' Is Being Exported to Other Countries," *PBS News*, October 18, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/massive-leak-exposes-how-chinas-great-firewall-is-being-exported-to-other-countries.

43. Michael Forsythe et al., "How China Influences Elections in America's Biggest City," *The New York Times*, updated August 30, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/25/nyregion/china-consulate-new-york-elections.html.

44. The Chinese Communist Party also attempted, but ultimately failed, to plant a person affiliated with a local pro-Beijing think tank within the national security system of the Philippine government. See Peter Chalk, "PRC Influence Operations in the Philippines: Can Beijing Flip the South China Sea Script?," *China Brief* 23, no. 9 (May 2023).

Notably, the CCP propaganda system is highly standardized— which is both a feature and a flaw.[45] The system requires certain key words and phrases to emphasize strategic communications about China's core national interests. Therefore, the CCP can likely take advantage of preformed, party-approved lexicons for any situation. Precedent exists for such efforts; in 2024, the Cyberspace Administration of China announced a large language model with training data based on Xi thought.[46] When integrated with AI, such a lexicon could be used to create and disseminate information quickly, thereby flooding an IE zone across multiple languages and formats. The CCP is already well prepared for this scenario, with at least three of the party's core media outlets (the Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily*, and the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs) publishing content in Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic, among many other languages. Collectively, more than 3.5 billion people (about 50 percent of the global population) speak one or more of these languages. In turn, the CCP's investment in AI would likely give it a first-mover advantage and greater flexibility to target countries or populations in their native languages and through their preferred media formats.[47]

One emerging IO area in which the PLAy has already experimented is the use of virtual spokespersons. The technology is still in its infancy and is currently susceptible to the uncanny-valley phenomenon, but the PLA has developed a digital author named Mulan (穆兰).[48] As AI evolves, digital creations like the Mulan avatar could become indistinguishable from a human counterpart. If paired with an effective and automated system for information dissemination, these avatars could be created at will and display chameleon-like characteristics. For example, the CCP or the PLA might create a virtual person of any ethnicity who can speak any language and be located in any physical environment. That person could then spread CCP narratives to a high-payoff target. More maliciously, the CCP or the PLA could use existing deepfake technologies to spread disinformation or cause confusion.[49]

45. Standardization is a flaw because it makes CCP jargon easier for Western-trained systems to track and causes messaging to appear highly scripted and forced.

46. Sylvie Zhuang, "China Rolls Out Large Language Model AI Based on Xi Jinping Thought," *South China Morning Post*, updated May 22, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3263530/china-rolls-out-large-language-model-based-xi-jinping-thought.

47. Additionally, *People's Daily*, the Xinhua News Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China Global Television Network, *Global Times*, and *China Daily* already maintain social-media accounts across Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

48. "名字，定了！全军首位数字军人取名穆兰," *PLA Daily*, November 14, 2023, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/tp_214132/16266633.html; and Changhe Forum (@长河论见), 置顶]数字军事记者亮相国防部例会 (Changhe Forum, May 30, 2024), YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/bDLk4pCeyj0.

49. Precedent exists for such efforts. See, for example, Sze-Fung Lee, "Deepfakes with Chinese Characteristics: PRC Influence Operations in 2024," *China Brief* 24, no. 7 (March 2024).

The CCP could also make breakthrough advancements in IE volumetric software that allow it to monitor engagement and predict how key leaders and communities will act next.[50] A more limited version of this concept, commonly called event detection, already exists. In event detection, automated software using natural language processing reads through edited and social media to identify upcoming events. In a future world enabled by more advanced AI capabilities, the CCP could identify upcoming events (for example, anti-CCP protests), create digital counterstrategies, and plan in-person (and fabricated) counterprotests.[51] Hypothetically, if the party tracks enough events over time, it can begin predicting (and even guiding) how people will cognitively respond to unknown future events. Nevertheless, because nothing can be above the party, the CCP will likely never use AI to the technology's full potential; instead, the party will likely restrict itself by limiting the ingestion of anti-CCP data or ensuring a human is always in (or on) the loop.[52]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The focus of the CCP, the PRC, and the PLA on the information and cognitive domains should feel familiar. Whereas cultural differences matter greatly, the core information-cognition process is universal. China, the United States, and every other entity in the world communicate information, sometimes with the intent to influence another person's or society's cognitive behavior. That process becomes problematic when such intentions are malign and when IO are strategically directed by an authoritarian regime. The United States can take the following five actions to counter CCP IO.

1. **Western soft power must be more active in penetrating the CCP IE space.** Within China, this effort is complicated by the Great Firewall but not impossible. Chinese citizens consistently find ways around prohibited streaming sites such as Netflix, showcasing a demand for non-CCP-directed content.[53]

50. Authors of the People's Liberation Army are already writing "very ambitiously" on such efforts. See Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Psychological Warfare*, iv.

51. This strategy is already being implemented. Besides aiming to convert people to its cause, the Chinese Communist Party sees value in artificially creating ideas that run counter to public opinion. In countries in which alternative ideas are encouraged and respected, the party artificially creates discussions that were previously absent.

52. Recently, the People's Liberation Army even examined how the United States employs artificial intelligence and unmanned systems, with one commentary warning an overreliance on artificial intelligence could lead to disastrous consequences. See "Outpost: When War Hits 'AI Fast-Forward,' Can Humans Still Take Control?," China Military Online, December 21, 2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/M_251449/V_251467/16428306.html.

53. Josh Ye, "Squid Game Sees Booming Piracy in China, Where Netflix Is Unavailable, amid Beijing's Crackdown on Unlicensed Content," *South China Morning Post*, updated October 19, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3151533/squid-game-sees-booming-piracy-china-where-netflix-unavailable-amid.

2. Social-media companies must do more to identify and counter overt and covert CCP accounts. The CCP is known to pay foreign influencers to spread its narrative. The US government must develop clearer and stronger policies on malign IO while protecting First Amendment rights for all. Further, the idea of information sovereignty should be explored.[54]

3. The United States, led by technology ethicists and legal scholars, should create advanced international AI standards, ethics, and limits now, before malign actors such as the CCP can do so.

4. The US government should significantly increase its capabilities to disseminate official information in multiple languages. This effort should combine AI-enabled technologies with language-enabled subject-matter experts who understand how messages should be curated for a target audience.

5. American students should be taught comprehensive digital literacy at an age recommended by teachers and psychologists. In 2020, the Pew Research Center found more than 60 percent of US children began engaging with smartphones before the age of five.[55] As AI advances, significantly more national and state efforts will be needed to stimulate cognitive development in digital environments. Advanced efforts in media literacy (including validating news sources)—likely for older students—will also be imperative.

Presently, the CCP is averse to the quagmire of protracted war, instead preferring protracted competition.[56] In a protracted competition, the party has often employed, and will continue to employ, the information domain to influence others' cognition. The United States can and should contest CCP efforts in the information space. Whereas the CCP is proficient at disseminating and restricting content, it cannot, and never will, fully control the information domain. Instead, democratic societies will prevail because their storytelling and creativity is about appealing to the soul rather than controlling the mind.

54. One desired end state would be to define malign actions against another country's information sovereignty as carrying the same weight as incursions into physical sovereignty.

55. Brooke Auxier et al., *Parenting Children in the Age of Screens* (Pew Research Center, July 2020).

56. Gunnell, "Protracted War."

Part 4:
Strategic Implications

— 14 —

Addressing China's Global Reach: Consolidated Findings and Recommendations

Brennan Deveraux

This collaborative study has explored a hypothetical scenario in which the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) engage in a limited conflict. This scenario was devised as an analytical tool to challenge regional experts and China specialists to move beyond the existing literature surrounding great-power competition. As a result, the coalition of authors examined their respective regions in novel, creative ways, with each chapter identifying possible futures and distilling specific, tangible forecasts and recommendations. But as Sheena Chestnut Greitens astutely notes in chapter 3, to assume the People's Republic of China would spread the conflict indiscriminately just because it has a global presence and interests would be folly. Instead, as the regional analyses throughout this volume illuminate, China's external efforts are selective and every assessed region is unique. China has varying priorities that shape its efforts abroad. At the same time, the different cultures, geographies, economic ties, and existing regional security architectures inherently limit the type of impact or level of influence the People's Republic of China could hope to achieve. Some of the Chinese objectives and actions outlined in this study are high value, meaning they are Western-centric and directly linked to the disruption of US objectives or strategies. Others are high-payoff actions, meaning they are China-centric and directly support China's objectives.

Still, these regional assessments are intended to be individual parts of a broader whole, with each chapter being a component of the larger narrative behind the global PRC strategy. In turn, if viewed through the lens of conflict preparation,

individual actions can be grouped under broad umbrellas that go beyond the simple positioning of military capabilities and account for the often-forgotten intangibles of warfare. To enable synthesis, this chapter draws from the scenarios and forecasts in the regional and domain-specific chapters to examine China's global posturing efforts across four escalating categories: strategic influence, access, critical resources, and combat support. Each of these categories includes generalized and thematic forecasts and global recommendations.

Strategic Influence

The first category is strategic influence: a catchall that captures China's ability to influence the strategic actions of the United States, its allies, or other nations that may play a role in the hypothetical war. These strategic actions include intangible efforts such as conducting disruptive activities, carrying out information operations, and discrediting alliances. This assessment category is not designed to capture strategic influence as a tool or a means; rather, it interprets strategic influence as an end. Using political influence to prevent the United States from conducting overflights in a given country is an application of strategic influence, but the end falls under a different category: access. Instead, actions within the strategic-influence category focus on creating future opportunities to leverage influence. One example of an action that may fall within the strategic-influence category is formalizing a relationship with a neutral country or undermining the US dollar as a global currency of choice.

Strategic influence may be China's primary lever for advancing its cause and creating challenges for the United States. Authors covering every region of the world highlight China's ability and efforts to influence nations' strategic choices and key leaders' cognitive decision making. Beijing aims both publicly and privately to apply its influence in many ways, with the most common area of focus being the information domain. In chapter 13, Rick Gunnell highlights though the People's Republic of China carries out dedicated propaganda efforts, it also has a more sophisticated information-operations apparatus capable of conducting purposeful, targeted information campaigns, which have proven successful. These targeted efforts vary in medium (from basic print media to social media) and in audience, with categories of external audiences including key leaders, military personnel, local persons and organizations, and overseas Chinese populations. Many authors reference the power of information operations to amplify or shape the narratives surrounding individual actions in their respective regions. Where appropriate, Gunnell's chapter provides a framework for and an example of how the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, or the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would respond to envisioned events in the

information domain and subsequently highlights potential foreign reactions. In so doing, Gunnell demonstrates the importance of information as a tool for shaping a potential conflict.

In terms of China's broader application of strategic influence, the general findings support the idea the People's Republic of China aims to keep neutral countries neutral, or to sway such countries' allegiance toward China. This assertion is by no means groundbreaking, but it should not be discounted either. As this collaborative study has shown, a war with the People's Republic of China will not be confined to the Indo-Pacific, even if direct combat remains local. In turn, historically neutral or nonaligned countries may serve a critical function that has yet to be realized. This reality is best highlighted in Central Asia. In chapter 7, Brian G. Carlson hypothesizes a scenario in which the People's Republic of China secures neutrality pledges from the Central Asian states. In this scenario, each nation publicly declares its desire to abstain from the conflict while privately agreeing to maximize oil exports to China and to abstain from any UN vote that is critical of PRC actions.

More controversially, numerous chapters highlight the potential impact the People's Republic of China could have on US-friendly nations or even US allies. Many nations that are friendly to the United States also have growing economic ties to China. This trend is a reality in Latin America. As R. Evan Ellis highlights in chapter 11, the deep economic ties of Peru, Guyana, and Jamaica to the People's Republic of China may make these pro-US nations vulnerable to Chinese coercion efforts, or at least hesitant to appear supportive of a US initiative. Similarly, in chapter 8, Darrell Driver and Joel Hillison outline a plausible PRC path toward fixing NATO countries in Europe and weakening the alliance by limiting its ability to act. Many NATO Allies are unlikely to remain neutral in a conflict, though Driver and Hillison's analysis calls into question the alliance's level of support, particularly if the People's Republic of China continues to strengthen its ties with Russia or undermines the US narrative in Western countries. The most troubling of the potential futures is in the Indo-Pacific. In chapter 5, Kyle Marcrum and Michael Long envision a scenario in which China effectively dislodges New Zealand from the West, with the longtime US ally withdrawing from the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance.

Strategic influence gained through economic pressure and targeted information campaigns will likely be the currency of great-power competition. The United States and the broader West have built a strategy around global relationships. But as this analysis highlights, the People's Republic of China has gradually built its own networks. The difference is China does not plan or intend to rely on the participation of its partner nations. Instead, this study's exploration

of a future conflict highlights the value of simply convincing the rest of the world not to get involved. This collaborative study, though broad by nature, highlights six PRC-based strategic-influence forecasts and six corresponding recommendations for the US government.

Strategic-Influence Forecasts

- The People's Republic of China will aim to strengthen its relations with NATO by intensifying its existing all-weather partnership with Hungary, offering a variation of this relationship to France, and inviting Türkiye to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- China will continue seeking to collaborate with accommodating regional actors to undermine pro-US governments and pro-US initiatives globally.
- The People's Republic of China will expand its technological cooperation where able, enabling the country to shape digital governance, conduct mass surveillance of digital networks, and engage in espionage.
- China will promote the use of the renminbi in its trade and lending, gradually creating a financial ecosystem parallel to the US dollar.
- The People's Republic of China will increase its information operations to erode the United States' desire to intervene in the Indo-Pacific, including by making efforts specifically designed to call into question the strategic importance of Taiwan to the United States.
- Using information operations, the Chinese Communist Party will attempt to insert wedges into critical US relationships, such as the United States' relationships with NATO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as well as the complex trilateral relationship among the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

Strategic-Influence Recommendations

- The United States and the EU should work to limit Chinese investment in and access to critical national security infrastructure and to reduce reliance on Chinese supply chains by diversifying import sources to include markets that are minimally affected by PRC aggression or influence.

- To create and maintain critical lines of communication and support contingency plans, the United States should prioritize providing key nations in Oceania with funding for development and defense cooperation.
- To strengthen relationships with nations essential to US contingency plans, the Department of War should expand and prioritize programs such as the National Guard's State Partnership Program and the varying international fellows' alumni networks managed by organizations such as the National Defense University and the US Army War College.
- The United States should increase education about PRC intentions and information operations, especially for US political leaders, the US domestic audience, and neutral nations worldwide.
- The United States should recognize numerous countries around the world must maintain good working relationships with China and Russia.
- The US government should significantly increase its capabilities to disseminate official information across multiple languages.

Access

The second category, access, is straightforward. Access can be measured by assessing various abilities, such as the ability to operate within specific geographical areas (including in orbit), establish bases and facilities, or fly over a country's airspace. Whereas comparing the United States' and China's current levels of access would reveal significant asymmetry, one cannot assume the People's Republic of China will fail to expand its agreements globally, or at the very least, shift or keep nations in an unaligned status. This section of the findings focuses on US access; PRC efforts are captured through the lens of how they achieve high-value impacts, such as affecting US operations or undermining the United States' power-projection strategy. The subsequent categories of critical resources and combat support capture the high-payoff efforts that provide China with further access.

Although strategic influence is China's primary means of escalating the conflict horizontally, restricting US access is the most tangible outcome. In every regional scenario, China finds some level of success in this category, limiting the type of access the United States could rely on in a future conflict.

In China's near abroad, Central and South Asian countries unsurprisingly maintain neutrality, with most members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations publicly denying US military overflights, effectively preventing the US military from relying on nations in China's periphery. Still, the United States finds a few friendly nations among its long-term partners and allies, such as South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, which all continue to provide the US military with full access.

Jacob Stoil paints a more discouraging picture of US access in chapter 9 with his future scenario examining the Middle East. This region, often taken for granted in war planning, is central to global movement. But Stoil crafts a scenario in which US movement through the Middle East completely halts when, one after another, countries with strong ties to the United States—such as Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain—publicly declare neutrality. Whereas the United States is not forced to remove any of its existing bases, host nations clearly indicate any US military forces that remain in the Middle East are present solely to protect the region and not to interdict trade with the People's Republic of China or support the US war effort. At the same time, Stoil envisions China making great strides in the Middle East. In turn, China can operate neutrally, leveraging joint space-operations centers and hybrid commercial-military facilities in the region without US interference.

In the Latin America scenario, the People's Republic of China leans on political relationships and leverage, including threats to call in loans and to suspend major purchases of commodities critical to regional economies. When those efforts fail, China uses blackmail and thinly veiled threats to pursue its aims. Ellis describes a future in which PRC actions cause otherwise-cooperative officials in the Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago to deny the US military access to facilities in the Caribbean. Additionally, Honduran officials impede operations at the US forward operating location at Soto Cano Air Base, Peruvian officials deny the United States access to areas near the Chinese-operated port of Chancay, and Argentinian and Chilean officials deny the US Navy the ability to make port calls.

The People's Republic of China even succeeds in limiting the United States' access in space. In chapter 12, David Zesinger and Gregory Hillebrand outline how China could achieve effects by simply maneuvering satellites into orbits that put

irreplaceable US and allied space assets at risk. By doing so, the People's Republic of China could sacrifice an old satellite, setting it on a collision course with critical US systems that appears accidental. Moreover, China could take this action with plausible deniability, publicly framing the incident as just a regrettable accident in an overcrowded space. In chapter 12's scenario, Zesinger and Hillebrand highlight how these collisions would drastically reduce US access to critical positions in space, significantly degrading the United States' ability to communicate and collect intelligence.

The People's Republic of China succeeds in the access category because it asks for very little. In most places, China only needs commercial or dual-use access for itself, if it needs anything. Conversely, the US strategy for force projection is built around different levels of global access. In turn, access becomes a high-value objective. All China has to do is convince other nations to remain neutral, to be indecisive about how they will support the United States, or simply to be slow to commit. This collaborative study highlights three PRC-based access forecasts and one corresponding recommendation for the US government.

Access Forecasts

- China will work to further its denial of US access to the Indo-Pacific through a combination of traditional anti-access/area-denial capabilities and soft power, such as economic incentives.
- China will continue to develop systems to dominate the electromagnetic spectrum, sever the spacecraft-to-ground link, and disrupt key space services such as the Global Positioning System and systems designed for communication and intelligence collection.
- China will aim to improve its relationships—people to people, economic, and security—in the Western Hemisphere to undermine the United States' efforts to strengthen its presence in the region.

Access Recommendations

- The United States must accept the likelihood of the People's Republic of China partially blocking US access to physical facilities, air and maritime transit, base access, and other opportunities for cooperation across the globe. The Department of War should build this likely blockage into its planning considerations for a potential conflict.

Critical Resources

The third category builds on the previous one, adding nuance to the issue of access by focusing on critical war-making or war-sustaining materials. The ability to access materials, from oil to rare earth minerals, may be the strategic factor that allows a nation to outlast an adversary in a protracted conflict. The category of critical resources encompasses the push to acquire new rights, deny adversaries access to resources, disrupt the flow of critical materials in transit, or even destroy the infrastructure that supports the distribution of these materials.

Although the first two categories capture PRC success in disrupting or limiting US actions (high-value operations), access to critical resources is a fundamental component of China's strategy (high-payoff operations). As Chestnut Greitens outlines in chapter 3, if China decides to conduct any force projection outside the Indo-Pacific region, the purpose will likely be to protect food, energy, critical-mineral security, and the security of major Chinese populations or business interests overseas. She notes both food security and energy security are clearly identified as critical factors in PRC national security, and China's reliance on overseas energy supplies is seen as a major vulnerability.

Interestingly, even though China has become the world's largest food importer, the regional assessments do not focus on food security. In fact, the only real conversation regarding China's food imports is in the Latin America chapter, where Ellis highlights these imports as a tool of economic coercion against nations like Argentina and Brazil, not as a PRC weakness. The absence of food security from the conversation is likely due to preconceived notions about what constitutes critical resources, particularly in warfare. Food, though essential to the people who sustain the machines of war, may be overlooked in favor of the resources that feed those machines. In turn, energy security and critical minerals are major themes in numerous scenarios.

For example, in chapter 10, Paul Milas describes a future in which Beijing maintains a leading economic position in Africa through the continued integration of strategic-mineral infrastructure and through mining investments aimed at securing long-term supply-chain reliability. He highlights how, despite growing US efforts to counterbalance Beijing and diversify critical-mineral supply chains, the People's Republic of China maintains structural advantages. Given the breadth of their trade, investment, and financial dependencies on China, numerous African states hesitate to support measures against Beijing that could risk their national development strategies.

Joshua Arostegui incorporates PRC efforts to secure energy resources into his chapter on South Asia. He describes a future in which the PLA Navy has gradually increased its presence in the Indian Ocean, with one of its primary tasks being to escort oil tankers and critical exports from Africa and the Middle East. Arostegui takes the scenario a step further, with the PLA Navy positioning submarines in the vicinity of the Strait of Malacca as a preemptive countermeasure against a potential US blockade aimed at cutting the People's Republic of China off from its critical resources.

Building on the threat of a potential blockade, Carlson highlights the importance of overland access to critical resources. He argues China would aim to ensure Central Asia could serve as a reliable supply base. Similar to the findings in the Africa chapter, Carlson describes a future in which Central Asian states' neutrality and the preservation of regional stability allow China to expand its mining of the region's critical minerals, aiming for maximal extraction. Just as importantly, the region would provide essential overland transit routes for oil and gas supplies, mitigating the impact the United States could have on PRC access by interdicting these resources at sea. In turn, Carlson and Arostegui discuss infrastructural improvements and investments that could enable China to receive more significant, direct ground flows from countries such as Pakistan or from oil-producing countries like Russia and Kazakhstan. These new routes could help China avoid the Strait of Malacca. To prevent hostile actors from disrupting the distribution of these critical resources, Carlson envisions China quietly sending private military company personnel to select locations along oil and gas pipelines—an action Central Asian countries begrudgingly accept.

Across the collaborative study, few authors focus on the People's Liberation Army's potential to conduct large movements. The absence of this topic is unsurprising. The deployment of combat power beyond the potential Indo-Pacific battlefield would require strategic justification. Consequently, the few instances of overtly aggressive posturing or PLA Navy movements focus on securing critical resources and on limiting the impact of a US effort to isolate China from the world. Still, the authors identify tangible outcomes and highlight five PRC-based critical-resource forecasts and five corresponding recommendations for the US government.

Critical-Resource Forecasts

- China will push to complete Line D of the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline network and bring the Central Asian pipelines to full capacity, while using its Power of Siberia 2 pipeline negotiations with Russia to build bargaining leverage in Central Asia.
- China will press forward to complete the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway while seeking to shape the development of the Middle Corridor.
- China will aim to achieve the strongest possible position in Central Asia's and Africa's metals and mining sectors.
- China will pivot from massive, state-funded infrastructure projects to smaller, targeted investments in key sectors across preferred countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Ethiopia.
- In an effort to dominate trans-Pacific shipping, the People's Republic of China will likely invest significant resources in Peru's port of Chancay, leveraging its cost advantage in shipping through Chancay to make competing routes economically unviable.

Critical-Resource Recommendations

- The United States should move beyond a transactional relationship with India and position the country as a regional military-industrial hub.
- The United States should pursue robust commercial engagements with resource-rich regions such as Central Asia and Africa, with a particular emphasis on promising opportunities in transportation and critical minerals.
- The United States should strengthen trade frameworks in regions where China has significant influence.
- The United States should seize the opportunity presented by the establishment of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity transit corridor to assist Central Asian countries in developing their own transport linkages to the West.
- The United States must develop and maintain contingency plans to protect freedom of commerce and the ability to maneuver through maritime choke points.

Combat Support

The final category, combat support, examines which regions could become future battlegrounds and assesses whether China would contest the West militarily in certain areas, such as through a blockade or a direct attack on a US installation or asset. This category also accounts for areas in which military forces can receive support through non-war-fighting or indirect means: for example, areas where military forces can send their wounded for medical care, conduct vehicle maintenance, or establish a logistics hub. Conventional clashes between military forces would likely not spread to all global regions in a war between the United States and China, though the conflict would likely not remain geographically isolated.

In addition to limiting US access, authors describe how China begins gaining strategic footholds globally. Milas crafts a scenario in which the PLA Navy gradually increases its presence in Africa through anti-piracy missions, port visits, routine military cooperation, and military-access agreements. Similarly, Stoil envisions a future in the Middle East in which port visits and military exercises become more frequent until, slowly and eventually, and without establishing permanent basing, the PLA Navy becomes a permanent presence in the Persian Gulf. More broadly, multiple authors highlight the rise of PRC-built and operated ship-to-shore cranes, logistics software, and other port equipment that provides the People's Republic of China with an avenue for disruptive activities and espionage.

The most obvious region of escalation is the Indo-Pacific, a natural extension of the initial clash near Taiwan. Marcrum and Long paint a detailed picture of what is likely the most violent scenario in the volume. They propose China could foreseeably leverage ongoing agreements with Pacific Island countries like the Solomon Islands, as well as a hypothetical newly independent Bougainville, to establish logistics bases and secure the sole use of some limited ports in the area. In Marcrum and Long's possible future, few US allies directly participate in the war. But South Korea privately agrees to allow the US military to conduct attacks from its air bases, to continue using the country as a logistics hub, and to station additional reserve forces (albeit as a deterrent to North Korea, which the People's Republic of China cannot convince to conduct overt military action). Japan allows a similar level of access but refuses to get directly involved. Leveraging their tenuous trilateral relationship, the United States, Japan, and South Korea establish a combined naval fleet designed to protect the territorial waters of Japan and South Korea. A direct clash with the PLA Navy and the PLA Air Force never occurs, though China's People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia conducts anchor-dragging operations, severing all the undersea cables that connect the isolated nations to the global community. The only real combat that occurs outside the opening scenario is against the Philippines. Marcrum and Long propose a future in which the involvement

of the Philippines draws the ire of the People's Republic of China, which subsequently seizes and establishes semipermanent bases in almost all parts of the Spratly Islands that are claimed by the Philippines. China also devastates a significant portion of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in dispersed, limited conflicts.

Additionally, China employs its land forces to great effect, though not in direct combat. Arostegui crafts a scenario in which the PLA Army mobilizes a significant force, sending nearly 50,000 troops to take up positions facing the China-India border, and ordering more than 100,000 troops further east to begin preparing for a possible deployment to the border. These units—supported by advanced combat platforms, long-range rocket launchers, and advanced tactical air defense systems—force India's focus inward. In turn, the Indian Army mobilizes for a conflict but carefully limits its deployments to preprepared, defensive positions to avoid antagonizing China. In Central Asia, Carlson highlights how the People's Republic of China could leverage the People's Armed Police to increase regional security and counter any direct or indirect attempts by the West to create instability in China's backyard. He envisions China reinforcing its security installations in Tajikistan, which are designed to prevent sources of instability in Afghanistan and the broader region from penetrating Chinese territory. More alarmingly, Carlson envisions Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan privately agreeing to share data on any aircraft or drones flying over their airspaces, leveraging the HQ-9B air defense system and accompanying radar systems the countries purchased from China.

Numerous authors incorporate other opportunistic actors that take advantage of the conflict, an event China is able to capitalize on to assist its broader war-fighting strategy. For instance, in chapter 8, Driver and Hillison discuss how Russia could view the crisis around Taiwan as an opportunity to increase its cyberattacks and sabotage activity in eastern Europe, as well as a chance to conduct targeted assassinations of both industry leaders and political figures who harbor US sympathies. Moreover, they outline how Russia would leverage the United States' preoccupation to begin staging for a series of provocative exercises on NATO's borders and test the alliance's resolve by increasing its nuclear saber-rattling in Europe.

Similarly, Stoil foreshadows Iran's rise in the absence of a strong US presence in the Middle East. Unlike Driver and Hillison's envisioned trajectory for Russia, Stoil creates a scenario in which China gains significant influence over Iran and elevates it to become the region's dominant military power. In turn, Iran is able to apply pressure on the region and encourage its Axis of Resistance to sow chaos. The most influential component of this effort is the Houthis, whom both Stoil and Milas envision playing a frustrating role in the Red Sea by targeting

US and Western vessels while giving safe passage to Chinese-flagged vessels. These actions would be aided by PRC intelligence, space assets, and years of arms deals. These strikes could only threaten commercial vessels, though the impact on global trade would force the US Navy to divert resources bound for the Indo-Pacific to protect vital maritime routes through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Although the most violent aspects of combat occur in China's backyard, the most worrisome aspects are envisioned to occur in the United States' backyard, echoing the concerns of the recently published 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and *2026 National Defense Strategy*. The US homeland itself does not have a dedicated chapter, which is a deliberate choice, but the Latin America chapter still addresses the threat to the homeland. In Ellis's scenario, China conducts clandestine activities that put the US homeland at risk by positioning dual-use commercial vessels and special operations teams at ports and other regional facilities operated by PRC state-owned enterprises. This staging is meant to support disruptive operations, more akin to gray-zone operations and tied to criminal activity than to direct military action. China's efforts include using large numbers of military-age Chinese nationals to infiltrate the United States and conduct attacks on US infrastructure or engage in other acts of terrorism, espionage, or sabotage should the conflict escalate.

The extent of actual combat in the volume is limited by design. Still, this study provides glimpses of what a kinetic escalation could be like, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Authors also explore the role of proxies and opportunistic actors. Just as importantly, most of the scenarios illustrate how China's current non-combat-related posturing could help it position assets to cause disruption and chaos, impacting the deployment of US military assets from the homeland to the waters surrounding Taiwan. In turn, six PRC-based combat-support forecasts and four corresponding recommendations for the US government can be distilled from the chapters.

Combat-Support Forecasts

- In its space operations, the People's Republic of China will continue to develop, refine, and deploy directed-energy systems capable of blinding or damaging spacecraft sensors, and will eventually develop systems powerful enough to damage spacecraft.
- China and Russia will sign additional protocols of cooperation that include stronger commitments of mutual support in the event of a conflict. The countries will also enhance their participation in each other's military exercises.

- The People's Republic of China will likely formalize a trilateral security framework with Pakistan and Bangladesh by 2030.
- China will likely seek to deepen its military relationships with anti-US partners in ways that would enable China to conduct military operations in partners' territories in a time of conflict.
- During the next decade, the People's Republic of China will transition to a permanent naval presence in the Indian and east Atlantic Oceans, including by potentially establishing a permanent naval facility in western Africa near the Gulf of Guinea.
- China will likely expand the deployment of military ships and delegations, including its new hospital ships, to regions China aims to influence, such as Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Combat-Support Recommendations

- Rather than pursuing an exhausted policy of absolute denial, the United States should pivot toward a contested-coexistence model that treats the People's Republic of China as a global actor and its military as a permanent resident in numerous theaters.
- The United States must build space resiliency by developing networks of systems that are difficult or impossible to defeat.
- The United States should expand its peacetime efforts to restrict the presence of China's dual-use space, port, and other critical facilities, as well as to increase transparent communications with partners that host facilities that cannot be blocked.
- The United States should continue to work closely with Europe and begin hard negotiations concerning the crisis-response measures each would take in the event of a Chinese effort to seize Taiwan through military force.

Conclusion

The scenario-planning methodology pushed authors out of their comfort zones and challenged them to approach the China problem creatively. Authors were asked to move beyond the existing literature to craft a possible future based on historical trends and to make bold, tangible forecasts of what actions the People's Republic of China will pursue next in the authors' examined regions. Some of the scenarios, forecasts, and general findings are unsurprising. But as authors moved away from straightforward projections and extensions of current trends,

the analyses uncovered unique facets of China's global efforts. When synthesized and viewed from a global perspective, these findings highlight China's potential to undermine US power projection fundamentally by leveraging relationships and economic footholds in important regions. Through diplomatic and economic pressure, China may coerce nations to limit US access and overflight, disrupting US commercial and military movements by air and sea. To varying degrees, China's efforts may even isolate the United States from its allies, placing China (depending on the level of the conflict) in an enhanced position to conduct unconventional, multidomain attacks. The specific projections may not come to fruition, but the process of developing them has created tangible, regional recommendations the United States can begin implementing now to mitigate China's posturing efforts before these futures become reality.

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Conclusion

Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui

This collaborative study is a thought experiment by the US Army War College. What began as an engaging conversation in the halls of the Strategic Studies Institute became a unique assessment of China's global posturing. The project directors provided regional experts and China specialists with a straightforward structure and scenario. Based on this foundation, authors were asked to explore how China might horizontally escalate a future conflict with the United States into areas beyond the Indo-Pacific theater. Authors were encouraged to be bold and not to fear being wrong, acknowledging the future is inherently difficult to predict. As this overall volume illustrates, and as synthesized in chapter 14, the authors produced analyses with tangible findings and recommendations to help shape US policy. These findings are a necessary addition to the broader literature on great-power competition and offer useful insights into the dangers posed by China's growing global influence and presence.

The topic of this collaborative study is exploratory and the project is based on four primary goals and objectives. First, the study provides the Department of War with an assessment of China's global strategy for preparing for a potential war against the West, along with corresponding recommendations and ideas for addressing China's efforts. Second, the approach frames China as a global power, shifting the narrative about what a conflict with China could look like. Third, the deliberate decision to limit the level of violence in the scenario aims to broaden Western conceptions of what posturing for war entails. This choice encourages the defense community to move beyond accounting for the positioning of military forces and examine the intangibles of relationships, influence,

and economic dependencies when evaluating strategic positioning. Finally, the authors of regional chapters were required to provide specific forecasts. The purpose of this requirement was to force authors to think outside the box and to spark a necessary debate about China's long-term global objectives.

Hopefully, this volume achieves its aims. But regardless, as with all research, more needs to be done. Both war fighters and scholars should conduct studies that challenge the deliberate assumptions underlying this study. Despite the Chinese military's expanding global capabilities, would the People's Republic of China truly limit escalation in the buildup to a conflict with the United States in East Asia? Would food security be as important as energy security in such a conflict? How much agency would key regional players like Russia and Iran have when reacting to US-China escalations in their own backyards? Would problems with the People's Liberation Army's global command-and-control structure limit the Chinese military's ability to counter US operations outside the Indo-Pacific? Most importantly, would the Chinese Communist Party's global security strategy change in the event of Xi Jinping's death or a change in leadership?

The project directors anticipate that future research efforts will challenge this study's analyses and findings. In fact, it is the hope of all involved that this volume prompts such challenges. As most war fighters, scholars, and researchers who cover the People's Republic of China understand, China is a global challenge rather than just a regional one. But analyses of China's current and future global security strategy and posture rarely incorporate all geographic regions and the information and space domains, underscoring the value of this type of research. Should further research and publications emerge to support, supplement, or contradict the findings in this collaborative study, the authors will consider their work a success.

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