

“Examining the Office of Insular Affairs’ Role in Fostering Prosperity in the Pacific Territories and Addressing External Threats to Peace and Security”

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My name is Dean Cheng. I am a non-resident fellow with the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

China’s Strategic Interest in the Central Pacific

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has a growing strategic interest in the central Pacific region. This is partly rooted in the fundamentals of geography: an adversary will likely transit the central Pacific, if coming from the east, in order to strike at the PRC. That same adversary, even if relying on existing facilities closer to the Chinese littoral, will nonetheless have to rely on sea and air lines of communications that traverse the central Pacific in order to bring reinforcements and provide logistical support. Similarly, there are an array of undersea cables and space support facilities in this region that help sustain the flow of information across the Pacific. If the PRC is going to dominate the western Pacific, or seek to secure targets including Taiwan and the South China Sea, then it will likely strive to influence the central Pacific in order to strategically isolate those targets to limit interference and intervention.

One of the most important tools available to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership is the Chinese military, embodied in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA’s approach to warfare is embodied in the strategy of the “active defense (*jiji fangyu*; 积极防御).” This concept embodies the view that the PRC will be strategically defensive, not overtly commencing a conflict but only responding with force to outside aggression, while maintaining an operationally and tactically offensive stance.

In December 2004, Hu Jintao, in his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission, gave a major speech wherein he charged the PLA with a set of “historic missions for the new phase of the new century,” commonly referred to as the “new historic missions.”¹ The speech provided guidance for the kinds of tasks and eventualities the PLA might be expected to apply the strategy

¹ Daniel M. Hartnett, “The ‘New Historic Missions’: Reflections on Hu Jintao’s Military Legacy,” in *Assessing the People’s Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. by Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, et. al. (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, 2014).

of the active defense, i.e., what kind of wars it should be preparing for, given changes in the international strategic context, national development, and broader technological evolution.

One of the new historic missions that Hu charged to the PLA was to “provide strong strategic support for maintaining the nation’s interests.” While those interests center on issues of territorial integrity and national sovereignty, they now also extend to the maritime domain, outer space, and the electromagnetic spectrum and the information domain.²

For the PRC, *the maritime domain* has gained an unprecedented importance. For most of its millennia long history, China has been a classical “continental” power, mainly focused on land power. China’s foremost threats were typically from the steppe people to the north. Indeed, China has only been conquered by invaders from the north, such as the Mongols and the Manchus. While the Ming dynasty developed a substantial maritime capacity, as reflected in the “treasure fleets” of Admiral Zheng He, imperial China never became dependent upon the seas. The low priority accorded maritime power at the time is symbolized in the eventual dissolution of those same fleets, along with the destruction of the associated shipyards and blueprints.³

By contrast today’s PRC depends on the world’s sea lanes to move energy, raw materials, and food to keep the nation running, and to transport its finished products to markets around the world. The PRC is now as much a maritime power as it is a continental one. A review of the growth of the PLAN’s capabilities over the last thirty years reflects this growing emphasis on maritime power. At the time of the end of the Cold War, China’s navy had some 20 destroyers, and hundreds of motor torpedo boats, only slightly more advanced than those that fought in the Solomon Islands during World War II.⁴ Today’s PLAN boasts three aircraft carriers, six cruisers, over thirty destroyers comparable to the USS Arleigh Burke-class (the most advanced destroyers in the US inventory), as well as over three dozen frigates.⁵

Moreover, while China’s navy was long a “brown water navy,” a primarily coastal defense force mainly operating very close to China’s own shores, it has now become a “blue water navy” operating much farther afield. Indeed, in the 21st century the PLAN has been operating in what the Chinese term “the far seas.” Chinese naval forces have conducted exercises with the Russians in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas.⁶ A Chinese naval task force has maintained a presence in the

² Weiping Zheng, Minfu Liu, *Discussions on the Military’s New Historic Missions* (Beijing, PRC: People’s Armed Police Publishing House, 2005), p. 138.

³ Edward Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty 1403-1433* (Old Tappan, NJ: Pearson Longman, 2006).

⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1995-1996* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 177-179.

⁵ <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

⁶ Sam Lagrone, “Two Chinese Warships Enter Black Sea, reports Link Visit to Possible Chinese Frigate Sale to Russia,” USNI News (May 5, 2015) <https://news.usni.org/2015/05/05/two-chinese-warships-enter-black-sea-reports-link-visit-to-possible-chinese-frigate-sale-to-russia>, and “China in Baltic Navy Drill with Russia,” BBC (July 21, 2017) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40682442>

Gulf of Aden since 2008.⁷ In 2025, Chinese naval forces conducted live fire exercises in the Tasman Sea near Australia and New Zealand, some 5300 miles from southern Chinese naval facilities.⁸ This is even farther from Chinese shores than Guam (2300 miles).

For the PLA, *the outer space domain* has also become a likely arena for future conflict. In the PLA's view, the American way of war is heavily dependent upon space. In the first Gulf War, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm for example, Chinese assessments note that the U.S. brought some 70 satellites to bear against Iraq. By PLA estimates, these satellites provided the U.S. with about 90 percent of its strategic intelligence and a substantial portion of its targeting information. Space systems also carried about 70 percent of all transmitted data for allied forces.⁹ The ability to exploit space is seen as a major contributing factor to the Coalition's victory.¹⁰

That reliance has only grown in the intervening three and a half decades. Meteorological data, communications, intelligence gathering including imaging and signals intelligence, as well as weapons guidance have all involved space systems. Many UAVs require guidance from ground stations, linked by communications satellites, with positioning and navigational data provided by PNT satellites.

Meanwhile, political warfare efforts, including efforts at effecting deterrence, imposing psychological pressure, and influencing global audiences also increasingly involve information and images derived from space systems. As the United States sought to dissuade Russia from invading Ukraine, images from Maxar were circulated globally to demonstrate that Russia was indeed planning to invade.¹¹ The impact of satellite images can be significant. One Western analysis suggested that “news audiences can often ascribe a greater sense of authority and objectivity to satellite images than other kinds of photos.”¹²

From the PRC perspective, the ability to successfully conduct modern wars requires the establishment of space dominance, both to guarantee freedom of action for the PLA while denying that to an adversary. To this end, the PLA has sought to develop its own space support capacity, as well as an array of capabilities to deny adversaries the ability to freely exploit space.

For the PLA, space information support operations (*kongjian xinxi zhiyuan zuozhan*; 空间信息支援作战) are defined as “the use of space information collection and transmission systems, space

⁷ Ryan Chan, “Map Shows Chinese Navy Fleet’s 300-Day Mission to Three Continents,” *Newsweek* (January 27, 2025) <https://www.newsweek.com/china-news-navy-ships-escort-mission-middle-east-asia-africa-europe-2021107>

⁸ Rod McGuirk and Charlotte Graham-McClay, “China Issued ‘Disconcerting’ Warning of Live Fire Exercises to Planes Flying Above, Australia Says,” AP (February 21, 2025) <https://apnews.com/article/australia-new-zealand-chinese-flight-diverted-08067898b342c350ce7ef7cec56717de>

⁹ Yubiao Gao, Chief Editor, *Joint Campaign Teaching Materials* (Beijing, PRC: Academy of Military Science Publishing House, 2001), p. 54.

¹⁰ Xianqi Chang, et. al., *Military Astronautics*, 2nd Edition (Beijing, PRC: National Defense Industries Press, January 2005), p. 249.

¹¹ Robert Burns, “Satellite Photos Give a Bird’s Eye View of Ukraine Crisis,” AP (February 18, 2022) <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-belarus-0b5ca81d822671b5ef2c514bf531505c>

¹² Jordan Teicher, “Are These Satellite Images War Propaganda?” *The New Republic* (March 31, 2022) <https://newrepublic.com/article/165910/maxar-ukraine-russia-satellite-images-war-propaganda>

navigation systems, to provide land, sea, and air combat power with reconnaissance and surveillance, missile early warning, communications, navigation and positioning, weather, geodetic surveying,” and other such information support.¹³ The PRC fields satellite constellations that can support all of these tasks.

The PRC has also been developing a variety of counter-space capabilities. These include both ground-based and co-orbital anti-satellite hard-kill systems, as well as electronic warfare jamming systems and cyber attack methods capable of interfering with normal satellite operations (commonly referred to as “soft kill” systems).¹⁴

While these systems would target adversary military systems, the Ukraine war has demonstrated not only the growing importance of space in modern conflict, but that commercial space companies will play an increasingly prominent role as well. Maxar and PlanetLabs are only two companies that have provided a wealth of images to think-tanks and media organizations striving to analyze and report on the war. Meanwhile, SpaceX’s Starlink satellite Internet constellation has played a major role in supporting Ukrainian military operations. Consequently, the PLA must also consider the demands of countering commercial as well as governmental systems.

These various capabilities demonstrate the intimate linkage between the outer space and the broader *information domain*. Chinese military writings in 2001 already noted that, besides the physical elements of soldiers and weapons, combat power would be increasingly generated through both greater access to information and information exploitation to link together forces.¹⁵ Modern warfare would require information power.

Indeed, establishing space dominance is one aspect of the larger effort to establish “information dominance (*zhi xinxi quan*; 制信息权),” the ability to establish control of information and information flow at a particular time and within a particular space.¹⁶ It entails the ability to collect more information, manage it faster, and employ it more precisely than the adversary.¹⁷

The side that enjoys information dominance will be better able to seize and retain the initiative, and force the adversary into a reactive mode, losing the ability to influence the outcome of an engagement. This exploits a key difference between mechanized warfare of the Industrial Age, and informationized warfare of the Information Age. “Mechanized warfare focuses on physically

¹³ Xianqi Chang, *Military Astronautics*, 2nd Ed., (Beijing, PRC: Defense Industries Publishing House, 2005), p. 304, and Lianju Jiang, *Space Operations Teaching Materials* (Beijing, PRC: Military Sciences Publishing House, 2013), pp. 150-152.

¹⁴ DOD Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, p. 70, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>

¹⁵ Xinzhaoh Xu, “Examining How Information Has Become a Key Factor in Combat Power,” *Jianghui Forum* (#2, 2001), pp. 65, 71.

¹⁶ All Army Military Terminology Management Commission, *Chinese People’s Liberation Army Terminology* (Unabridged Volume), (Beijing, PRC: Military Science Publishing House, 2011), p. 79.

¹⁷ Chinese Military Encyclopedia 2nd Edition Editorial Committee, *PLA Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition, *Military Strategy* (Beijing, PRC: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2007), p. 68.

and materially destroying an opponent, whereas informationized warfare focuses on inducing the collapse of the opponent's psychology and will.”¹⁸

Information dominance is not only achieved through space activities, but also by interfering with an adversary's information infrastructure. This includes attacks against submarine cables, many of which transit the central Pacific. Palau, for example, has reported on repeated Chinese presence near submarine cables in its waters.¹⁹ Given alleged Chinese cable-cutting in the Taiwan Straits area, the threat to central Pacific cables is likely growing.²⁰

To generate and sustain this information power, the PLA has undertaken repeated overhauls of its organization to better conduct information operations. These efforts saw, in 2024, the dissolution of the relatively new PLA Strategic Support Force, and its replacement with the Military Aerospace Force, the Information Support Force, and the Cyber/Network Space Force.

Potential Chinese Efforts Against Central Pacific Territories and States

In light of the PRC's strategic interest in denying the central Pacific to the US, Chinese leaders are likely to undertake a variety of actions to influence and deter states in the region, as well as to hold American territories in the area at risk.

There has already been an effort underway to expand China's economic presence in the region. In 2024, China was the second largest aid provider to the region, ahead of the United States and behind Australia.²¹ Much of this aid is in the form of loans, not grants. But, for the Pacific Island countries, who have a paucity of infrastructure, there are few choices. In the case of Vanuatu, for example, China has been willing to provide a majority of bilateral infrastructure funding.²² Moreover, as one analyst has observed, “It is easier to apply for Chinese loans because they require less paperwork and do not have the same requirements in areas such as good governance, financial reform, human rights, and democracy.”²³

¹⁸ Gaoming Fan, “Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare, the Three Major Combat Methods to Rapidly Achieving Victory in War,” *Global Times* (March 8, 2005), http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2005-03/08/content_2666475.htm

¹⁹ L.N. Reklai, “Palau Says Chinese Vessel Slowed Over Undersea Cable During Incursion into Waters,” *Radio Free Asia* (May 31, 2023) <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/pacific/palau-china-cable-05312023014251.html>.

²⁰ Yimou Lee, “Taiwan Detains China-Linked Cargo Ship After Undersea Cable Disconnected,” *Reuters* (February 25, 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-detains-china-linked-cargo-ship-after-undersea-cable-disconnected-2025-02-25/>

²¹ “China Reclaims Position as Second Largest Donor to Pacific Islands, Report Finds,” *Voice of America* (November 20, 2024) <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-reclaims-position-as-second-largest-donor-to-pacific-islands-report-finds/7870835.html>

²² Alexandre Dayant, Riley Duke, “A New China Loan Threatens Vanuatu's Debt Outlook,” *Lowy Interpreter* (February 6, 2024) <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-china-loan-threatens-vanuatu-s-debt-outlook>

²³ Darshana Baruah, Satyendra Prasad, and Denghua Zhang, “How Chinese Financing Shapes the Pacific,” *Carnegie Endowment* (February 8, 2024) <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/02/how-chinese-financing-shapes-the-pacific?lang=en>

In addition to aid, though, the PRC also engages in trade and investment. A recent series of agreements signed by the Cook Islands' prime minister and the PRC "cover infrastructure, ship-building, tourism, agriculture, technology, education and, perhaps crucially, deep-sea mineral exploration."²⁴ Chinese tourism, meanwhile, constitutes a major source of income for states such as Fiji and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.²⁵

This is backed by the growing ability of the PLA to project power. As noted earlier, Chinese naval forces have conducted operations in areas such as the Tasman Sea and the Gulf of Aden that are farther from China than the Federated States of Micronesia or Guam; they can clearly therefore operate in the central Pacific. China's growing fleet of aircraft carriers, and as important its array of support ships, means that it should be expected to undertake patrols and extended visits to the region.

Chinese air force units also operate at increasing distances from the mainland. The 2024 DOD report on Chinese military capabilities notes that the most recent versions of the Chinese H-6 bomber can carry land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs). "H-6K bomber flights into the Philippine Sea demonstrate the PRC's ability to range Guam with air-launched LACMs."²⁶

In event of war, these capabilities would be supplemented by the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). Over the past decade, the PLARF has been fielding an array of new conventional missiles that will give the CCP leadership additional options to hold both American military forces and local states at risk. This includes the DF-26 intermediate range ballistic missile and the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV). A new missile, the DF-27, appears to have a range that straddles the IRBM-ICBM line while carrying an HGV payload. The 2024 DOD report on China notes that "a PRC-based commentator stated that the DF-27 can be used to strike high-value targets on Guam, indicating that the DF-27 would primarily be used for regional conventional strikes during a conflict."²⁷

Such systems should be viewed in the context of the PLA's "campaign basic guiding concept," i.e., how the Chinese military thinks it will undertake campaigns. The 2006 version of the "campaign basic guiding concept" laid out the idea of "integrated operations, precision strikes to control the enemy (*zhengti zuozhan, jingda zhidi*; 整体作战, 精打制敌)." Precision strikes are described as those involving the use of precision munitions to attack vital targets. The goal is not

²⁴ Katy Watson, "Cook Islands China Deal Riles Allies as West's Grip Loosens," BBC (February 28, 2025) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg559y0803o>

²⁵ Yuan Zhi Ou, "The Northern Mariana Islands: US-Territory, China-Dependent," The Diplomat (September 25, 2021)

²⁶ <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

²⁷ <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

only destroying key points, but also precisely controlling the course and intensity of a conflict.²⁸ It also entails disrupting the enemy's system, and not just their weapons or forces.²⁹

The emphasis on disrupting the adversary's systems makes many of the central Pacific islands, but especially Guam, a likely high priority for PRC efforts in time of crisis or conflict. US bombers and tankers are regularly deployed to Andersen Air Force, allowing rapid, flexible application of massive firepower. The US Navy has begun to forward deploy nuclear attack submarines to Guam.³⁰

As important, the island hosts a number space-related facilities. One of the tracking sites for the Satellite Control Network, which provides real-time command and control support to US forces worldwide through satellite management, is located on the island. One of NASA's two ground facilities for its Tracking and Data Relay Satellites (TDRS) network is also located on Guam.³¹ Disruption of these facilities would help the PLA achieve information dominance. Similarly, the island is a key landing point for a variety of undersea cables. Striking these sites would complement cable-cutting efforts to interrupt global communications and data transmission.

Finally, the US Navy stores millions of pounds of munitions and high explosive at the Ordnance Annex. The tank farm at Andersen Air Force Base can hold up to 66 million gallons of fuel, making it the largest single facility in the US Air Force.³² Successful attacks against these logistical hubs would crimp the ability of combat forces to sustain operations.

²⁸ Zhang Yuliang, Chief Editor, *The Science of Campaigns* (Beijing, PRC: National Defense University Publishing House, 2006), p. 81.

²⁹ Wang Weiyu, Zhang Qiancheng, *Discussing Military Theory Innovation with Chinese Characteristics* (Beijing, PRC: National Defense University Publishing House, 2009), pp. 202-203.

³⁰ 1st LT James Caliva, "First Forward Deployed Virginia Class Submarine Arrives in Guam" (November 2024) <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3978978/first-forward-deployed-virginia-class-submarine-arrives-in-guam/>

³¹ <https://www.nasa.gov/mission/tracking-and-data-relay-satellites/>

³² Abraham Mahshie, "Pacific Refueling," *Air & Space Forces Magazine* (August 29, 2022) <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/pacific-refueling/>