

China's Worldwide Military Expansion

Prepared statement by

Dan Blumenthal

Director and Resident Fellow, Asian Studies

American Enterprise Institute

Before the House of Representatives Select Committee on Intelligence

United States House of Representatives

115th Congress, May 17, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank you for holding this critical hearing today and inviting me to testify along with this distinguished panel. Our recent National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy call for a robust, multidimensional strategy to compete effectively with a “revisionist” China. In order to do so we need to better understand the goals and purposes of China’s grand strategy and more specifically, the topic of this hearing, China’s “Worldwide Military Expansion.”

Here is the bottom line up front:

First, China’s boom in wealth over the past four decades has provided the Chinese Communist Party with means to implement a large-scale military modernization that will allow China to power project far beyond China’s borders.

Second, China has begun using this newfound military power to engage in campaigns in the Asia-Pacific to coerce regional neighbors into accepting China’s territorial claims and, over time, its dominance. Beijing has changed the regional balance of power by undermining the United States’ historical ability to operate freely in the region.

Third, through increasingly sophisticated military exercises, “defense diplomacy” and targeted investment and construction projects, the CCP is demonstrating its desire to operate further afield in what we call the “second island chain” closer to our homeland as well as through the Indian Ocean.

Fourth, while China capabilities are formidable, it has manifold military and political weaknesses that a true competitive strategy would exploit.

The CCP’s Strategic Purposes and Goals

The Chinese Communist Party aims to achieve the “China Dream” of “Great National Rejuvenation” which means reordering the Asia-Pacific with China at its center as the “Middle Kingdom.” China has always been a continental empire and remains one to this day. However,

now it is a continental empire “going to sea.” At first this was driven by the desire to recapture one of the last remaining part of the Qing empire not now under CCP control, Taiwan. But now its ambitions have grown beyond that as we see from its actions in the South and East China Seas and in the Indian Ocean.

The main military target was and remains Taiwan, but to successfully force democratic Taiwan to come to heel, the People’s Liberation Army needed greater power projection capabilities, what they call, “counter-intervention” capabilities to put at risk US and allied assets within what it is called the “first island chain”: from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines and Indonesia. As it grew these capabilities it has found them useful in advancing expansionist claims in what it calls its “near seas.”

Military Modernization

In November 2013, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping announced substantial Chinese military reforms to optimize the size and structure of the 2.3 million People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and accelerate building “new types of combat forces.” The first steps of these reforms was to reduce the PLA manpower by 300,000, give operational command to the Theatre Commands that focus on geographic-specific mission sets, elevate the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) to the same status level as that of the PLA Army, and establish the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) to share joint command and control with the Central Military Committee over China’s strategic missile forces. These reforms are meant to push the Chinese armed forces to more rapidly adapt to shifts in China’s overall goals: from protecting the mainland to projecting power beyond China’s borders.

China’s 2015 Military Strategy White Paper lays out the following strategic tasks for the Chinese armed forces:

- safeguard sovereignty and security of China’s territorial land, air, and sea;
- safeguard the unification of the motherland;
- safeguard China’s security interests overseas and interests in new domains;
- maintain strategic deterrence;
- strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism, and terrorism to maintain China’s political security and social stability;
- and perform humanitarian and disaster relief operations.

To achieve all of these goals China needs to devote more resources to increased air/sea capability, more sophisticated joint and combined forces, and, as we have seen, more “counter-intervention” capabilities on Chinese man-made islands in South China Sea. The PLA is also heavily focused on information and political warfare, to both dominate all information during wartime and to try and undermine US and allied will to and hope for resistance.

Counter-intervention and Power Projection in the South China Sea

Since 2014, China has substantially expanded its ability to monitor and project power throughout the South China Sea via the construction of dual civilian-military bases and the placement of military assets at its outposts in the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands. These include new radar and communications arrays, airstrips and hangars to accommodate combat aircraft, shelters likely meant to house missile platforms, and deployments of mobile surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missile systems at Woody Island in the Paracels.

On May 2, 2018, it was reported that China installed YJ-12B cruise missiles and HQ-9B long-range surface-to-air missiles (that have ranges of 295 and 160 nautical miles, respectively). This was the first Chinese missile deployments to Chinese reclaimed “islands.” Some Chinese forward operating bases in the South China Sea are complete giving China the capability to make costly third party intervention in the region. In April 2018, new satellite imagery suggested that China had deployed electronic warfare equipment to the Spratlys, and later reports revealed that U.S. Navy fighters had encountered some jamming problems as its Growlers patrolled the South China Sea.

If China continues along this trajectory and deploys forces onto these reclaimed islands, then China will be able to “extend its influence thousands of miles to the South and power project deep into Oceania,” as Admiral Philip Davidson noted.

Regional Coercion

With this newfound military power, China has also become more confident in engaging in coercion campaigns against regional states.

Coercion Tactics

Within in the South China Sea, China aims to limit other countries’ access to the waters through coercive tactics by the Chinese “maritime militia” patrolling the waters and trailing U.S. patrols in the region. Against regional neighbors, the Chinese maritime militia, which is not officially part of the PLAN, consists of “fishing” boats that are equipped with large steel rods and strong spray water hoses that ram against and spray Filipino and Vietnamese fishing boats that try to fish near the contested islands.

Moreover, China continues to engage in unsafe intercepts of U.S. planes conducting routine surveillance flights around the South China Sea and Korean peninsula, sometimes coming within 1000 yards of U.S. Navy P-3s.

China responds to U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea by deploying fighters and surface ships to “escort” the US destroyer out of the contested waters. These tactics are the Chinese Communist Party’s way of asserting its dominance and control over the waters and the islands by warning other countries that, if you intend to access or sail through these areas, China is tracking your movement and will respond as it chooses.

China has also increased its military coercion campaigns against Taiwan, particularly after Xi’s reinforcement that China would defend the “One China” principle by force if necessary at the

19th Party Congress in October 2017. For example, in January 2018, China unilaterally announced new M503 commercial flight paths that enter within 4 nautical miles from Taipei and through restricted airspace blocks set up by Taiwan's air force. China also began regularly circling the island with military aircraft, forcing Taiwan to scramble fighter jets.

This air coercion campaign has been complemented with coercion in the seas as well, as China's sole aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, has also sailed through the Taiwan Strait/Taiwan's ADIZ five times since the election of Tsai Ing-wen in January 2016. In April 2018, shortly after the U.S. decision to allow high-level government exchanges between Washington and Taipei, China conducted live fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA can, and is willing to, use its might to coerce Taiwan into reunification.

Exercises

In addition to coercion campaigns aimed at specific countries, China has also increased the frequency and intensity of its military exercises in the region. Just last month, China conducted its largest ever naval parade where Xi Jinping stood on the deck of a missile destroyer and reviewed a line of warships that included an aircraft carrier, submarines, and fighter jets – over half of which were commissioned after 2012, according to Xinhua News.

This follows the *Liaoning*'s take-off and landing drills and live ammunition drill for aircraft carrier formations in the South China Sea in 2017. This marks a significant improvement in capability since China first "broke" the first island chain through PLA air and maritime maneuvers between late 2016 and early 2017. All of these exercises demonstrate that the Chinese military not only has increased its military capability as a whole, but are also more willing to use these capabilities to achieve its strategic goals beyond the first island chain.

Beyond East Asia

Driven by the need for resources, China has been more military active in the Indian Ocean, Eastern Africa and the Persian Gulf. Despite the challenges facing the Chinese economy, Xi Jinping has also aimed to project Chinese power worldwide through the Belt and Road initiative that aims to link China with Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The creation of a new "Silk Road" is highly unlikely.

However, targeted investments and projects that aim to secure Chinese energy and oil supply lines are ongoing. Beijing has also deployed a toolkit of economic inducements to purchase the support of countries it has deemed strategically valuable – from the eastern coast of Africa, where it wants naval bases, to the Middle East, where it needs oil. In these cases, Beijing is trading money for access to ports and other potentially useful military facilities. If you carefully track the numbers as my colleague Derek Scissors does in his China Investment Tracker, you find that China has mass investment and construction projects in countries that offer potential access to the Indian Ocean, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In addition to infrastructure and capital investment, China has bought up many global ports around key trade routes and maritime chokepoints, usually first for commercial purposes and then sometimes transitioning their use for military assets as well. An example of this is the Gwadar port in Pakistan, where first Beijing invested heavily to secure ownership over a strategic trading base and eventually the PLAN began conducting port visits. In Sri Lanka, Greece, and Djibouti, Chinese investment in civilian ports have likewise been followed by deployments or visits of PLAN vessels. Djibouti has become China's first overseas military base. The PLA completed its first ground-based exercise in a foreign territory independent of a United Nations Command in Djibouti in November 2017. This base will reportedly host up to 10,000 troops and is near the U.S.' sole military base in Africa – Camp Lemonnier. The establishment of this base signals China's interest in protecting its growing economic and security interests in Africa and the Indian Ocean.

China's Arms For Influence

Chinese arms sales have also increased in these regions in an attempt for China to export its military influence abroad. A study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) that looked into the volume of international transfers of major weapons between 2008 and 2017 revealed Chinese arms exports increased by 38% in the last few years: exports to Africa alone rose by 55% in this period. Most of this arms sales were naval sales, for example China's sale of submarines to Pakistan and Thailand and corvettes to Bangladesh and Algeria. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Algeria were the top three destinations for Chinese arms, with China being Pakistan's largest arms supplier. China's sale of stolen US UAV technology has also increased to America's partners in the Gulf.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The key to the competitive strategy to which we have committed ourselves is to identify and examine China's many weaknesses and to start to exploit them. China's greatest military weakness is its lack of real combat experience, unrealistic training, and rigid command culture. First, China has not engaged in actual combat since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Second, the Chinese PLA lacks "realistic" training that includes combat training, joint operations, and mitigating risk. Third, due to the high level of suspicion and fear amongst the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), PLA leaders are wary of making decisions without direct CCP approval. Down the latter, NCOs or junior officers could be hesitant to make quick decisions on the ground, and thus may be hindered by this rigid command structure. Fourth, the CCP is vulnerable to imperial overstretch. It borders 14 countries, has restive provinces and yet also has great maritime ambitions.

However, the greatest weakness we should be prepared to confront is the CCP itself. We must remember that the CCP dominates life in China and will always put the needs of the party first. The people of China know that. And, Xi Jinping worries constantly about "domestic threats"

from the ethnic peoples he oppresses in Xinjiang and Tibet to the many Chinese who attempt to work for more justice. And, the recipient countries of Chinese largesse are themselves ambivalent about the OBOR and greater China power.

We should certainly continue to demonstrate that it will be very difficult for China to accomplish all of its goals at sea. Building out our new partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia and India while strengthening our alliances and partnerships with Japan, Australia, Taiwan and Singapore will create the maritime encirclement that China most fears. But we need not be reactive. We can also start targeting the CCP with information campaigns and political warfare, as they do us. The goal should be to force China to spend more of its scarcer resources on defending against “internal threats” and on facing its manifold domestic problems and less on its destabilizing expansionism.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.