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China Primer: The People's Liberation Army (PLA)

Overview

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the military arm of the People's Republic of China's (PRC' or China's) ruling Communist Party. Since 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has referred to China as the “pacing” threat or challenge for the U.S. military. DOD reported in November 2022 that China's leaders aim to use the PLA, in part, to “restrict the United States from having a presence in China's immediate periphery and limit U.S. access in the broader Indo-Pacific region.” Members of Congress have responded in part by focusing on resourcing and conducting oversight of U.S.-China security competition.

PLA Organization

Established in 1927, the PLA predates the founding of the PRC in 1949. The PLA encompasses four services: the PLA Army, PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force, as well as two sub-service forces, the Strategic Support Force, and the Joint Logistics Support Force. The Communist Party oversees these forces through its Central Military Commission, which in some respects is akin to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. This Commission also oversees a paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (which includes the China Coast Guard), and China's militia forces. Xi Jinping, who serves concurrently as Communist Party general secretary and PRC president, also has chaired the Commission—which currently has six other members—since 2012.

In 2015, Xi publicly launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. This overhaul had two overarching objectives: reshaping and improving the PLA's structure to enable joint operations among the services and ensuring PLA loyalty to the Party and Xi. Seven years on, the PLA continues to fine-tune and institutionalize these sweeping changes.

China's Military Strategy and Goals

The stated goal of China's national defense policy is to safeguard the country's sovereignty, security, and development interests. The concept of “active defense”—the defining characteristic of PRC military strategy since 1949—prescribes how China can use defensive and offensive operations and tactics to achieve these goals in the face of a militarily superior adversary.

Authoritative PRC sources indicate China's military strategy focuses primarily on preparing for a conflict involving the United States over Taiwan—the self-ruled island of 23 million people off the coast of mainland China over which the PRC claims sovereignty. (See CRS In Focus IF10275, *Taiwan: Political and Security Issues*, for a discussion of U.S. interests related to Taiwan's security.) The PLA also focuses on defending and advancing China's

territorial claims over disputed areas in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and along the China-India border. As China's economic and diplomatic interests have expanded beyond its immediate periphery, PRC leaders have tasked the PLA with global missions such as distant sea lane protection and United Nations peacekeeping operations. The PLA established its sole overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. Some analysts assess that it will be the first of several.

PLA Modernization and Key Capabilities

Since 1978, China has engaged in a sustained and broad effort to transform the PLA from an infantry-heavy, low-technology, ground forces-centric military into a leaner, more networked, high-technology force with an emphasis on joint operations and power projection. Xi has set the goal of transforming the PLA into a “world-class” force by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC's founding and the year by which Xi has stated he aims to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

A guiding principle of PLA modernization and strategy since the mid-2000s has been the concept of “informatization,” or the application of advanced information technology across all aspects of warfare. Reflecting widely-held expectations that artificial intelligence and related technologies will have a transformational effect on warfare, China's leaders more recently have called for the “intelligentization” of the PLA.

The PLA is expanding its operational reach, strengthening its ability to conduct joint operations, and fielding increasingly modern weapons systems. Key features of PLA modernization include:

- An approximately 340-ship **navy** that includes modern and advanced platforms such as submarines, aircraft carriers, and large multi-mission surface vessels, giving China the ability to conduct naval combat operations in its immediate periphery and sustained non-combat operations further afield.
- **Air forces** increasingly capable of conducting joint and over-water missions, featuring a fighter fleet with several hundred fourth-generation fighter aircraft and growing numbers of fifth-generation fighters (China and the United States are the only countries to have developed fifth-generation stealth fighters).
- A **conventional missile force** designed to enable China to deter or defeat third-party intervention in a regional military conflict, featuring at least 1,900 missiles, including approximately 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles, missiles armed with hypersonic glide vehicles,

and anti-ship ballistic missiles designed to target adversary surface ships.

- An expanding and diversifying **nuclear force** (DOD estimates China's nuclear warhead stockpile exceeds 400 with the potential to reach 1,500 by 2035).
- A Strategic Support Force that centralizes **information warfare** capabilities in the cyber and space domains (referred to by the PRC as the “new commanding heights in strategic competition”) as well as electronic and psychological domains.
- A Joint Logistics Support Force that facilitates **logistics** to enable complex operations.

These advances notwithstanding, many of the capabilities the PLA is developing remain aspirational. In 2022, for example, DOD assessed that the PLA's ability to carry out joint operations to counter third-party intervention beyond the first island chain (which runs from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to enclose the South China Sea) is “in its infancy.” The PLA's battlefield performance is also uncertain: China last fought a war in the 1970s, and it is not clear how successfully the PLA would operationalize its new and largely untested post-reform organizational structure. Analysts also debate the extent to which corruption impedes the PLA's effectiveness, whether the PLA's intensive focus on political education and Party fealty is to the detriment of its operational effectiveness, and how the PLA's highly centralized command and control apparatus affects its performance.

Resourcing China's Defense

The PLA's modernization has been enabled by China's growing economy and a defense budget that has increased steadily since the 1990s. China's officially-disclosed defense budget is the world's second-largest (behind the United States)—around \$229.5 billion for 2022—although some analysts assess China's military-related spending is higher. China also seeks to augment its military strength by leveraging civilian commercial advances—particularly in emerging high-tech areas—through a sprawling and ambitious initiative it calls “military-civil fusion.” PRC defense contractors in sectors such as aerospace, microelectronics, and advanced manufacturing benefit from foreign joint ventures and technology licensing, as well as the alleged theft of technologies from the United States and elsewhere. At the same time, Beijing seeks to make the country's defense industry more self-sufficient and less reliant on foreign technology and supply chains.

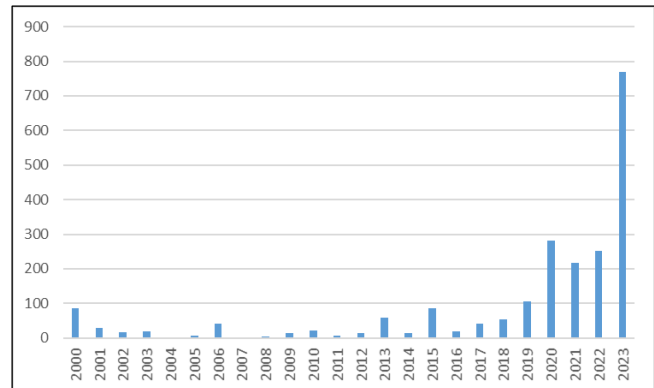
Issues for Congress

U.S. policymakers and observers increasingly describe China's military buildup as a threat to U.S. and allied interests. This view reflects concerns about PLA capabilities, China's growing economic and geopolitical power, and China's regional and global intentions. Some Members in Congress have asserted that meeting this perceived challenge requires the United States and its partners to strengthen their advantages, and address their vulnerabilities, vis-à-vis the PLA. Increasingly,

congressional efforts to compete with China militarily have focused on a potential conflict over Taiwan.

The annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is the primary legislative vehicle by which Congress has sought to enhance the United States' ability to compete with China in the national security realm. Recent NDAA's have included numerous provisions explicitly aimed at competing with China, in addition to provisions that relate or could relate to China (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. References to China in the NDAA



Source: National Defense Authorization Acts, FY2000-FY2023.

Notes: Includes references to the words “China,” “Chinese,” “Taiwan,” and “Hong Kong.” The FY2023 NDAA refers to the House- and Senate-passed version of the bill.

For example, the James M. Inhofe NDAA for FY2023 (H.R. 7776) would include dozens of provisions related to China. Among these is the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act, which would include provisions to enhance deterrence of PRC military aggression against Taiwan by increasing and expediting the provision of weapons and munitions to Taiwan. It also would authorize \$2 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) loans and \$2 billion in FMF grants to Taiwan each year through FY2027 (Taiwan has not previously received FMF). The omnibus appropriations bill for FY2023 (H.R. 2617) would include the authorized FMF loans but not the grants. The FY2023 NDAA also would authorize \$11.5 billion to extend the “Pacific Deterrence Initiative” established in the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283) to fund and oversee U.S. and allied military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Congress requires both regular and one-off reports by the executive branch and other entities to inform its decisionmaking on policy related to China's military. Since 2001, pursuant to the FY2000 NDAA (P.L. 106-65), Congress has required DOD to submit an annual report on military and security issues related to China. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, created by the FY2001 NDAA (P.L. 106-398), reports annually on PRC defense issues.

Faced with competing priorities and limited resources, Congress may face questions of whether and how the United States should seek to sustain military primacy vis-à-vis China in various military domains and geographic contexts.

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