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

Overview

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) serves the Communist Party of China (CPC), the ruling party of the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). The PLA was established in 1927 during the rise of the CPC and China's civil war, and predates the founding of the PRC in 1949. Since 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has referred to China as the "pacing challenge" for the U.S. military. For a quarter-century, Congress has formally monitored the PLA's modernization and conducted oversight of U.S.-China military exchanges. As policymakers across the U.S. government have prioritized "great power competition" with China, Congress has authorized programs and appropriated funds with the goal of competing militarily with the PRC.

PLA Organization

The PLA encompasses four services (the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force) and four service arms (the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force, and Joint Logistics Support Force). The CPC oversees these forces through its Central Military Commission, which serves some functions similar to those of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Central Military Commission also oversees a paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (which includes the China Coast Guard), and China's militia forces. Xi Jinping, CPC general secretary and PRC president, also chairs the Commission.

In 2015, Xi launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. This overhaul appears to have two overarching objectives: (1) reshaping and improving the PLA's structure to enable joint operations among the services; and (2) eliminating corruption and ensuring PLA loyalty to the Party and Xi. A decade later, Xi's effort to reshape the PLA remains a work in progress. He has purged dozens of PLA leaders (particularly since 2023) and has continued to make changes to the PLA's command structure. Opacity surrounding personnel changes has led some observers to raise questions about political cohesion and the pervasiveness of corruption in the PLA.

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 possible 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 IF12481, *Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues*.) The PLA also seeks to secure and defend China's territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, and along the China-India border. As PRC economic and diplomatic interests and influence have expanded, China's leaders have tasked the PLA with global missions such as distant sea lane protection, UN peacekeeping operations, and the protection of PRC citizens abroad. The PLA established a naval base in Djibouti in 2017, appears to have had rotational access to a Cambodian naval base since December 2023, and, according to DOD, "is very likely considering and planning for additional military logistics facilities" around the world.

PLA Modernization and Key Capabilities

Since 1978, PRC leaders have sought 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 (including amphibious operations) and power projection.

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. More recently, China's leaders also have called for the "intelligentization" of the PLA, reflecting widely-held expectations that artificial intelligence and related technologies will have a transformational effect on warfare.

Xi has set the goal of shaping 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." Xi publicly set two interim goals: to "accelerate" informatization and intelligentization by 2027 and to "basically complete" military modernization by 2035. Key features of the PLA today include the following:

- An approximately 370-ship **navy** (numerically the world's largest) that includes modern and advanced platforms such as submarines, aircraft carriers, large multi-mission surface vessels, and uncrewed systems, and that advances the PLA's ability to conduct naval combat operations in its immediate periphery and sustained non-combat operations further afield.
- **Air forces** increasingly capable of providing long-range airpower projection and air and missile defense capabilities, featuring uncrewed systems and a fighter jet fleet of 1,900 comprising primarily advanced (fourth-generation and some fifth-generation) aircraft.

- A **missile force** designed to deter third-party intervention in a regional military conflict, including, according to DOD, at least 1,550 launchers and 3,500 missiles, including approximately 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles, missiles armed with hypersonic glide vehicles, and anti-ship ballistic missiles to target adversary surface ships.
- An expanding and diversifying **nuclear force**, featuring a nascent nuclear triad (that is, the ability to launch nuclear weapons from land-, sea-, and air-based platforms) and, according to DOD, an estimated operational nuclear warhead stockpile of more than 600 in 2024, estimated to exceed 1,000 warheads by 2030.
- A “significant, persistent **cyber**-enabled espionage and attack threat to an adversary’s military and critical infrastructure,” according to DOD.
- **Space** capabilities to locate, track, and target forces on earth, as well as counterspace capabilities such as anti-satellite missiles, co-orbital satellites, electronic warfare, and directed-energy systems.

The extent to which the PLA is able to leverage these capabilities effectively—particularly in a coordinated or “joint” fashion—is unclear. The PLA last fought a war in the 1970s. In some areas, according to some observers, the skillsets of PLA leaders and operators may have not kept pace with technological advances in equipment. A decade into Xi’s sweeping reform and reorganization, it is unclear whether the PLA’s leadership, bureaucracy, and command structures may undergo further change. Analysts have debated the impact that frequent personnel changes, corruption, opacity, a highly centralized command and control apparatus, and an intensive focus on political education and Party fealty may have on the PLA’s operational effectiveness. DOD assessed in 2024 that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign and associated personnel changes “may have disrupted the PLA’s progress toward stated 2027 modernization goals.”

China’s Defense Expenditures

China is the world’s second-largest spender on defense after the United States. Economic growth has supported a steady increase in the PRC’s defense budget since the 1990s. The PRC’s officially-disclosed defense budget was about \$231.3 billion in 2024, but DOD reported that China’s “actual defense budget is probably approximately \$330 billion-\$450 billion.” China’s official 2025 defense budget is \$246.5 billion.

China seeks to augment its military investments by leveraging commercial advances—particularly in high-technology areas—through an initiative known as “military-civil fusion.” PRC defense companies have benefitted from foreign joint ventures and technology licensing, and possibly from the alleged theft of foreign technology.

Issues for Congress

U.S. policymakers and observers have often described China’s military buildup as a threat to U.S. and allied interests. This view reflects concerns about PLA capabilities (many of which appear designed to counter

U.S. military power), China’s growing economic and geopolitical power, and PRC leaders’ statements about the country’s regional and global intentions. Several public government and nongovernmental assessments have concluded that the PLA’s ability to challenge U.S. military superiority in some areas has increased over time. Observers have debated whether China could prevail in a regional conflict—for example, over Taiwan—in the coming years.

Policymakers and experts also have debated how best to respond to China’s growing military capabilities in the face of competing priorities and limited resources. Some have argued the United States must pursue military primacy over China to ensure the United States can credibly deter—and if necessary, deny and punish—PRC military adventurism. Others have assessed that maintaining long-term U.S. military dominance over China in the Western Pacific is unrealistic in light of China’s growing military resources and “home field” advantages, and U.S. domestic challenges and global commitments. Based on this assessment, some experts have argued the United States should seek to deter PRC aggression in ways that do not rely on force-on-force dominance in all domains and scenarios (e.g., relying more on allies and partners).

Selected Legislative Tools

Authorizations and Appropriations. The annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) has been 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 NDAs have included numerous provisions explicitly and implicitly aimed at competing with China. Congress has funded through appropriations legislation programs aimed at enhancing U.S. military competitiveness vis-a-vis China.

Policy Oversight. Congress has directed the executive branch to submit numerous reports pertaining to China’s military, U.S.-China military competition, and related issues. Some such reports have been produced on a regular (often annual) basis. While many of these reports are classified or exclusively for Congressional recipients, some are public. Since 2001, pursuant to the NDAA for FY2000 (P.L. 106-65, as amended), Congress has required DOD to submit an annual report on military and security issues related to China, the *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*. (DOD often refers to it as the “China Military Power Report.”) The most recent report was published in December 2024.

The FY2000 NDAA established limits on, and enhanced Congressional oversight of, U.S.-China military contacts by prohibiting the Secretary of Defense from authorizing any military contact with the PLA that would “create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure” of the PLA to certain operational areas of the U.S. military (e.g., force projection operations, advanced joint combat operations, and access to a DOD laboratory).

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