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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. Established in 1927, it carried that party to victory in the country's civil war, which concluded with the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China). 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 and power projection.

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 party oversees the PLA through its Central Military Commission (CMC), which serves some functions similar to those of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. The CMC also oversees a paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (which includes the China Coast Guard), and China's militia forces. Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the Communist Party of China and PRC president, chairs the CMC.

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 pervasive corruption and ensuring PLA loyalty to the party and Xi. More than a decade later, Xi's effort to reshape the PLA remains a work in progress. He has continued to adjust the PLA's command structure, and since 2022 appears to have removed or sidelined more than 100 senior officers, including several CMC members. The CMC, which had 11 members when Xi came to power, now has one sitting member aside from Xi. The scale and opacity of these personnel changes have led some experts to raise questions about the PLA's political cohesion and combat readiness.

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.

China's military strategy focuses in large part 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, United Nations peacekeeping operations, and the protection of PRC citizens abroad. The PLA established a naval base in Djibouti in 2017, inaugurated a "Joint Logistics and Training Center" at Ream Naval Base in Cambodia in 2025, and "has likely also considered basing in" 21 other countries around the world, according to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD, which is "using a secondary Department of War designation" under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025).

PLA Modernization and Key Capabilities

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 their 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 332-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 noncombat 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 2,200, comprising primarily advanced (fourth-generation and some fifth-generation) aircraft.
- A diverse ground-based **missile force** featuring 2,750 ballistic missiles of short- to intermediate-ranges, 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles, and 300 ground-launched cruise missiles. The PLA fields some missiles that can carry conventional or nuclear warheads, as well as anti-ship missiles and missiles armed with hypersonic glide vehicles.

- An expanding and diversifying **nuclear force**, featuring a nascent nuclear triad (the ability to launch nuclear weapons from land-, sea-, and air-based platforms) and, according to DOD, an estimated nuclear warhead stockpile “in the low 600s,” estimated to exceed 1,000 warheads by 2030.
- Sophisticated **cyber** espionage and attack forces designed to disrupt an adversary military’s ability to mobilize in conflict.
- **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 not be keeping 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 intense focus on political education and party fealty may have on the PLA’s operational effectiveness. DOD assessed in 2025 that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign and associated personnel changes could improve readiness in the long term, but “very likely risk short term disruptions” in operational effectiveness.

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. China’s official 2026 defense budget is around \$281 billion. Experts estimate China’s defense spending is much higher than it reports (e.g., DOD estimated that in 2024, defense spending was 32-63% higher than China’s official budget).

China seeks to augment its military investments by leveraging commercial advances—particularly in high-technology areas—through a multi-pronged “military-civil fusion” strategy. PRC defense companies have benefitted from foreign joint ventures and technology licensing, and reportedly from the 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. Since 2021, DOD has referred to China as the “pacing challenge” for the U.S. military. This assessment 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 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. The 2026 National Defense Strategy states that the Trump Administration seeks “to ensure that neither China nor anyone else can dominate us or our allies,” and to achieve “a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that allows all of us to enjoy a decent peace.”

Policymakers and experts also have debated how best to respond to China’s growing military capabilities and nuclear arsenal 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). As Congress deliberates approaches for addressing China’s growing military prowess, Members may consider legislative tools available for advancing congressional intent.

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. NDAA’s have included numerous provisions explicitly and implicitly aimed at competing with China. Congress has also 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. Some of these reports are classified or exclusively for Congressional recipients; others are public. Since 2001, pursuant to the NDAA for FY2000 (P.L. 106-65, as amended), Congress has required DOD to submit the *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*. DOD often refers to the report, published most recently in December 2025, as the “China Military Power Report.”

The FY2000 NDAA established limits on, and enhanced Congressional oversight of, U.S.-China military exchanges and contacts by prohibiting any DOD interaction 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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