

Factors Shaping China's Use of Force Calculations Against Taiwan

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Testimony of Mark Cozad¹
The RAND Corporation²

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The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) primary modernization and planning priority since 1993 has been Taiwan. That year, the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the *Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Era*, a document that served as the PLA's baseline military strategy until 2015.³ In the last few years, the PLA has expanded its operational focus by developing systems and capabilities that will enable it to more effectively assert the influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC), intimidate rival maritime claimants, and defend against challenges to China's territorial claims around its extensive periphery.⁴ Despite these developments and a growing recognition that the PLA must be capable of supporting China's increasing international interests and presence, Taiwan remains the PLA's main strategic direction—a designation that dictates its priority relative to other potential planning scenarios and hot spots.⁵ The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) sense of urgency regarding Taiwan has only increased with the ascendance of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party and major shifts in Taiwan's public opinion regarding questions of national identity and willingness to resist

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ See David Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, Carlisle, Penn.: Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2007, pp. 82–87.

⁴ Information Office of the State Council, *China's Military Strategy*, reprinted by Xinhua, May 26, 2015.

⁵ Mark Cozad, "The PLA and Contingency Planning," in Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, eds., *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015, pp. 15–32.

China.⁶ A core element of China's perceptions of its own ability to influence Taiwan is Beijing's assessment of PLA capabilities and efficacy in times of crisis. Although Beijing has a wide range of tools, the PLA's military capabilities are a foundational element, and they shape the range of options available to China's political leaders.⁷

In this testimony, I argue that even though Beijing's confidence in all elements of PRC national power has increased significantly over the past two decades and continues to grow, Chinese political leaders probably remain cautious about the PLA's ability to execute high-intensity operations, most notably a major campaign to force unification with Taiwan. Even though the PLA has made great strides over the past two decades, military publications, official statements, and reform programs suggest that its modernization has not progressed as rapidly as Beijing thinks necessary in several areas critical to fighting modern wars.⁸

Beijing's Confidence in the People's Liberation Army and Use of Force Considerations

The PLA's successful modernization and development over the past three decades is well-documented and undisputed.⁹ Today's PLA is vastly more capable now than in 1996, when the Taiwan Strait Crisis occurred. The PLA has made major improvements in advanced systems, a growing percentage of its force uses modern weapons, and it has greatly enhanced its cyber, space, and long-range precision strike capabilities. The PLA also has devoted significant attention to developing its doctrine and tailoring new operational concepts to the requirements of fighting modern wars; at the same time, it has embarked on programs to improve command and control, develop its personnel, and improve training.¹⁰ These changes are behind today's significant imbalance between the PLA and Taiwan's military. In addition, many observers in the United States are gravely concerned that U.S. military advantages are eroding at a dramatic pace, and these observers are calling into question the United States' ability to prevail in a war with China.¹¹

⁶ Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative: Closer Taiwan-U.S. Relations Largely Welcomed, Especially Economically," Pew Research Center, webpage, May 2020; and Timothy Rich and Andi Dahmer, "Taiwan Opinion Polling on Unification with China," *China Brief*, Vol. 20, No. 18, 2020.

⁷ Yimou Lee, "U.S. Denounces 'Coercion' as China Conducts Drills near Taiwan," Reuters, April 15, 2019.

⁸ Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Weaknesses and Xi's Concerns About PLA Capabilities," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 7, 2019.

⁹ One of the most comprehensive studies documenting this trend line is Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Tao Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015.

¹⁰ Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A394-1, 2020.

¹¹ Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare*, New York: Hachette Books, 2020; and "Strait Shooting: Defending Taiwan Is Growing Costlier and Deadlier," *The Economist*, October 8, 2020.

It is unlikely that the PLA's advantage over Taiwan's military or the PLA's progress relative to the U.S. military will diminish at any point in the near future, particularly in quantitative terms. Indeed, these problems will become more pronounced as the PLA continues to integrate modern platforms, weapons, and information systems into its inventory.

China's Military Strategy, published seven months before the PLA's announcement of major reforms at the end of 2015, outlined several CCP-directed modernization goals.¹² Any assessment of Beijing's confidence in the PLA should address these goals, which encompass a wide range of modernization concerns, including service mission areas, capabilities development, information systems, personnel, and operational concepts.¹³

In this testimony, I examine general themes in Beijing's assessment of the PLA's strengths and weaknesses.

Based on overall trends in the cross-Strait balance and the PLA's progress in developing capabilities to counter the United States, Beijing should have considerable confidence in the PLA's capability to achieve its overarching objectives in most conflict scenarios, particularly if the United States is not involved. However, there are several indications that Beijing still has reservations about the PLA's capabilities and readiness and the progress of its modernization programs. These concerns are especially significant when viewed in the context of scenarios in which the PLA might have to confront the United States—the military power which PLA publications hold up as the benchmark for informatized warfare.¹⁴ The PLA sees modern warfare as extending beyond comparisons of individual weapons systems and platforms. Instead, it is a contest between opposing operational systems that requires integration, joint action, adaptability, continuous assessment, and timely decisions, all based on accurate information.¹⁵ This informatized warfare relies on the use of advanced information systems, data gathering and fusion, and command automation tools to enable joint operations and systems warfare. These three concepts—informatization, joint operations, and system warfare—are central to what the PLA calls its “preparation for military struggle.”

Internal PLA discussions reveal systemic problems slowing the PLA's progress toward fielding an informatized military.¹⁶ PLA publications point out that institutional and organizational shortcomings limit the PLA's ability to effectively implement operational concepts that emphasize systems warfare and joint operations. These (sometimes stark) self-assessments suggest that Beijing might lack confidence in the PLA's ability to achieve CCP

¹² State Information Council, *China's Military Strategy*, 2015.

¹³ State Information Council, *China's Military Strategy*, 2015.

¹⁴ For recent examples of applied studies, see Dong Lianshan, ed., *Target-Centric Warfare: The Path to Achieving Victory in Future Warfare*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2015; and Wang Yongnan, *Exploring the Essentials of Gaining Victory in System Warfare*, National Defense University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ For one of the earliest references from PLA military education literature, see Xue Xinglin, ed., *Campaign Theory Study Guide*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2001, p. 66.

¹⁶ See Blasko, 2019, for a discussion of the “two incompatibles” and the “two big gaps.”

objectives in a variety of military operations including a military campaign to force unification with Taiwan.¹⁷

Some PLA evaluations require net assessment and comparative analysis, particularly when considering force structure, weapons systems, and concepts of operation. However, PLA self-evaluations often address qualitative issues, such as personnel quality, decision making, reliability, and command. These evaluations deal heavily with internal PRC and PLA issues of demographics, organizational culture, and differing cognitive styles. According to the PLA's logic of systems warfare, operational systems' strengths and weaknesses can only be understood in relationship to an opposing system, and PLA modernization imperatives—such as informatization, jointness, and systems warfare—cannot be realized without qualitative intangibles, such as capable personnel and efficient, effective command.¹⁸

Overall, Beijing views the PLA's increasingly modern maritime, air, and missile forces as critical strengths that enable it to perform several key missions in any Taiwan conflict involving the United States. A variety of space, cyber, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities maintain situational awareness over large areas of the region, monitoring U.S. force deployments, targeting U.S. and Taiwan forces, and helping PRC leaders and commanders obtain critical wartime information.¹⁹

China's relative proximity to Taiwan amplifies these strengths. The PLA has numerous options to hold at risk major U.S. bases, logistics hubs, and command and control facilities throughout the region because of the extended reach of PLA precision strike capabilities. The PRC's advanced integrated air defense system is capable of protecting PLA forces moving to embarkation points. Similarly, PLA forces operating in the region are much closer than U.S. forces to their home ports and bases, maintenance facilities, and resupply and logistics facilities. In recent discussions of future U.S. concepts of operations, PRC military researchers noted the PLA's progress in holding U.S. forces at risk. They contended that the PLA's regional antiaccess/area denial (A2AD) capabilities have forced the United States to adopt new operational concepts that emphasize distributed lethality to ensure survivability.²⁰ Some PLA observers view this development as a potentially dangerous shift that will limit the PLA's ability

¹⁷ Wang Yongnan, 2015, pp. 1–27; and Liu Wei, ed., *Theater Joint Operations Command*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 1st ed., 2016, p. 106.

¹⁸ These imperatives are outlined in *China's Military Strategy* from 2015. The modernization areas are also outlined by Xi Jinping. See “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” *Xinhua*, November 3, 2017.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C., 2020, p. 115.

²⁰ Han Yi and Chu Xin, “Divide Troops And Set Fire, Fight On All Ships—Analysis of the U.S. Military “Distributed Lethality” Concept,” *Defense Technology Review*, May 2018; and Hu Bo, “U.S. Military Maritime Strategic Transformation: ‘From Sea to Land’ to ‘Return to Sea Control,’” *National Security Research*, March 2018. I would like to acknowledge and thank my RAND colleague Mike Bond for making me aware of these sources.

to find and target U.S. forces.²¹ Others question the United States' ability to use these concepts on a scale necessary for countering the PLA's force posture in a major conflict.²²

These substantial strengths, dispositional advantages, and highly favorable trend lines only tell part of the story. Beijing also sees weaknesses in several key areas, as highlighted by *China's Military Strategy* and the PLA's reorganization, which was initially implemented in 2016. These problem areas include personnel, command, experience, readiness, proficiency, and the pace of technological modernization.²³ The migration of strategic management responsibilities to the CMC and creation of theater commands removed multiple traditional stovepipes that were seen as bureaucratic hindrance limiting PLA responsiveness.²⁴ These developments were intended to help the PLA better plan and respond to regional contingencies. Despite these necessary reforms, recently the PLA has highlighted several systemic shortcomings related to command ability, political reliability, and overall proficiency in areas critical to modern warfare. PLA internal discussions at multiple levels—from General Secretary Xi Jinping to military science publications—frame these concerns using a series of slogans that capture general themes.²⁵ One of the most substantial issues covered by these slogans is the need to develop capable commanders and staffs for the planning and coordination functions necessary for conducting integrated joint operations and systems warfare. The PLA has designed educational programs for these shortfalls, but command and leadership remain persistent themes in Beijing's discussion of the PLA's weaknesses.

Although the PLA has developed several new programs to train its commanders, new rigorous evaluation processes for its training and exercises, and new concepts of operation, Beijing remains concerned about the PLA's overall level of experience and proficiency. As early as 2001, the PLA was experimenting with its ability to perform integrated joint operations and conduct systems warfare. PRC leaders, including Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, have identified these as critical requirements for future wars. The PLA has made substantial progress in both areas, but most PLA concepts are still in development and would require deep changes in PLA thinking to work. One of the most basic milestones in developing joint operations was expanding command staffs to include commanders and staff officers from all of the services and service arms; before this, the PLA relied solely on personnel from the ground forces. In this respect, the PLA has shown great, albeit slow, progress. However, the command and operational requirements for new concepts are substantially different from how the PLA has operated in the past. In particular, these concepts require a highly adaptable force, commanders empowered and

²¹ Yi Liang and Lu Yang, "United States Navy Equipment Technology for 'Distributed Lethality' Concept," *Journal of Naval University of Engineering*, February 2018, p. 1.

²² Wang Yongnan, 2015, p. 16.

²³ Phillip Charles Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N. D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019.

²⁴ Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, "Coming to a Theater Near You," in Phillip Charles Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N. D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019, pp. 246–247.

²⁵ Blasko, 2019.

willing to make decisions, and the delegation of authority from higher to lower levels.²⁶ PLA publications discussing these new concepts highlight these problems with the slogans of the “two incompatibles” and “five incapables.”²⁷ For these new concepts to be successful, planning and decisionmaking are critical. Beijing’s push to develop training programs highlights the PLA’s recognition of the problem, but the PLA still lacks practical experience, and its organizational culture has trouble balancing political reliability and individual initiative.²⁸

The PLA’s lack of recent experience and its recent efforts to incorporate unexpected events into exercises and training scenarios raise questions about Beijing’s view of PLA adaptability.²⁹ However, experience also can be a negative force. Experience does impart valuable lessons both for the nation undertaking an operation and outside observers, such as the PLA. However, the lessons learned may not be the right lessons for future wars. The PLA’s lack of timely real-life experience may not be its biggest issue; rather, its ability to adapt to new situations may be more critical.

Finally, Beijing is worried about readiness and the pace of technological modernization. As mentioned previously, the PLA has improved its readiness significantly simply by having force structures in theaters close to potential hot spots, such as the Indian border and North Korea. Focused planning and training in individual theaters also contribute to improved readiness. Likewise, the PLA is a considerably more modern force from a technological standpoint than it was just a decade ago, and more of those capabilities are now available to theater commanders. However, persistent concerns on the part of PRC senior leaders are reflected in such self-assessments as the “two incompatibles” and the “two big gaps”—both of which highlight PLA perceptions that it “does not meet the requirements of winning local wars under informatized conditions” or that it does not have capabilities comparable to “the level of the world’s most advanced militaries.”³⁰ The PLA’s difficulties realizing its informatization goals and lingering concerns about its overall state of modernization raise questions for Beijing about whether the PLA’s progress has been rapid enough. When coupled with efforts to improve training—a

²⁶ Burke et al., 2020, pp. 15–20. Several PLA publications written by experts who have been involved with these processes, as well as PLA media ventures designed to popularize these concepts, have highlighted the significant challenges facing the PLA in these areas. In 2013 the PLA produced a movie, titled *Target Locked*, to present the challenges of integrating a new operational concept into the PLA’s organizational culture.

²⁷ See Blasko, 2019, p. 17. The “two incompatibles” slogan highlights that the PLA does not meet the requirements of winning local wars under informatized conditions and the requirements for carrying out its historic missions at the new stage of the new century. The “five incapables” highlights that PLA commanders cannot judge the situation, understand the intention of higher authorities, make operational decisions, deploy troops, or deal with unexpected situations.

²⁸ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “A Modern Major Genera: Building Joint Commanders in the PLA” in Phillip Charles Saunders, ed., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019, pp. 294–296.

²⁹ Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen Gunness, Scott W. Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015; p. 48, 76.

³⁰ Blasko, 2019, p. 17.

longstanding concern and problem for the PLA—Beijing may have reservations about the types of conflicts it is willing to pursue based on the PLA’s progress.

It is unclear how Beijing weighs the PLA’s strengths and weaknesses in its decisionmaking process. Based on PLA activity over the past several years, Beijing appears to be much more willing to wield the PLA’s growing capabilities than at any time in the past three decades.³¹ Most of these situations—frequently described as *gray zone* operations—are designed to avoid putting the PLA in positions that might result in direct confrontation;³² Beijing assumes a relatively low level of risk that an inadvertent encounter or unforeseen action might lead to escalation. The intent is to avoid confrontation by operating below the threshold that would trigger a kinetic response, particularly from the United States or its allies. The PLA’s increased technological capability and growing inventory of state-of-the-art weapons systems also appear to contribute to Beijing’s growing sense of confidence.

On the other hand, discussions about the PLA’s systemic problems highlight what appears to be Beijing’s concern with the PLA’s ability to fight an adversary like the United States. PLA publications continue to highlight command and integrated operations as core weaknesses in the PLA’s ability to effectively and efficiently operationalize its most important technical capabilities and weapon systems.³³ The PLA’s current and emerging concepts of operation depend on advanced planning, targeting, synthesis, and decisionmaking capacity. These dependencies are a massive and underappreciated departure from the mechanized, attrition-based model that the PLA has relied on since the PRC’s founding. The PLA’s recent reforms were an important first step and necessary follow-on to the PLA’s foundational work on systems warfare; however, these reforms are incomplete and the required changes to the PLA’s organizational culture are significant. As PLA self-assessments demonstrate, there are still numerous reservations and concerns regarding the PLA’s progress in these areas.

In addition, the PLA still has shortfalls in key operational areas necessary for a campaign to subdue and occupy Taiwan. Amphibious and airborne lift capabilities remain limited.³⁴ Sustainment and the capabilities necessary for urban combat on Taiwan also raise questions about the PLA’s ability to gain and maintain control of critical terrain and infrastructure if PLA forces are able to develop a lodgment and expand their area of control.³⁵ Similarly, there are questions about whether the PLA’s weapons inventory is adequate for a protracted conflict. The PLA’s push for efficient use of weapons is based on improved ISR, targeting, and assessment.³⁶ It is a centerpiece of the PLA’s understanding of the high consumption rates associated with noncontact operations. PLA researchers recognize the challenges of effectively targeting new

³¹ “China’s Half-Loving, Half-Threatening Pitch to Taiwan Doesn’t Work,” *The Economist*, October 22, 2020.

³² Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffery W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2942-OSD, 2019.

³³ Liu Wei, 2016, p. 106.

³⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 118.

³⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 114.

³⁶ Dong Lianshan, 2015, p. 130.

U.S. operational concepts centered on distributed lethality. Ultimately, Xi Jinping's recent call to accelerate modernization timelines could be interpreted as a more aggressive desire to expand the PRC's national power. An alternative, and possibly more accurate, interpretation could read it as a sign that China's military reforms—regardless of their substantial progress—have not proceeded quickly enough for Xi.

Based on the nature of PLA weaknesses, a key question in our understanding of China's calculations regarding the use of force against Taiwan is how Beijing's views of the PLA's weaknesses might shape or constrain its decision to take military action against the island. Framing for this question should center on both political and military considerations shaping any use of force decision from Beijing. First, there is the question of whether internal PRC political pressure would force Beijing's hand. This would likely entail political considerations regarding the CCP's credibility if it failed to act or failed to achieve its objectives in a Taiwan-related crisis. Second, there is the question of which actions, if any, Beijing would see as forcing its hand. Recent discussions on red lines, such as an independence referendum or changes in United States policy that would appear to recognize Taiwan's sovereignty, would likely create internal pressure for the CCP to maintain its credibility. It is uncertain what type of action would compel Beijing to consider the use of force, let alone a decision to force unification with Taiwan; however, in certain cases, the internal political forces that would drive Beijing to use force might also create a climate in which China's leaders would be willing to accept significant risk largely because they believed they had little or no choice but to act or face the CCP's potential demise.

In an environment like Taiwan, in which perceptions of China have grown markedly more negative and a majority of Taiwan's population says it will fight against China if needed, these political and military challenges would likely weigh heavily on any decisionmaking process in which Beijing would contemplate the use of force to unify Taiwan. The possibility of placing an inexperienced, untested military with widely acknowledged shortcomings into an environment that is intensely hostile toward China and which would involve the support of the United States would force Beijing to weigh the costs of action against the consequences of inaction. These decision factors would force Beijing to consider what other options might be available while reserving the use of force for only the most desperate and dire situations. Ultimately, the stakes for this fight would go well beyond Taiwan unification. They would involve a confrontation to decide which of the world's two most significant powers would emerge on top.

International Reactions and Escalation Management

The United States' reaction is another critical variable in Beijing's thinking about the use of force. The issue of American political will is often raised in U.S. discussions about conflict scenarios; however, outside of China's English-language press, PLA media does not indicate that Beijing has doubts about the United States' will to defend Taiwan. Based on PLA campaign theory, force posture, weapons systems, and concepts of operation, Beijing almost certainly

assumes United States involvement in a Taiwan conflict.³⁷ Although Beijing views the United States as a declining power, PRC publications still portray the United States as willing to jealously guard its place in the international system and use force to achieve its interests. Similarly, the PLA still views the United States as the benchmark for joint operations, systems warfare, informatization, fifth-generation technology, and command and control capabilities.³⁸ In addition, the PLA continues to have significant respect for United States cyber, space, ISR, air, and maritime capabilities. Ultimately, the PLA's views of its improving capabilities, discussions about challenges in new U.S. operational concepts, and Beijing's view of its localized advantages do not translate into a dismissal of U.S. capabilities. The PLA recognizes that the United States possesses considerable strength that can be deployed globally with the support of a vast network of global bases, allies, and partners.

Beijing has long expected that conflict with the United States would require significant mobilization of national power. These perceptions emerged in the early 1990s and gained momentum following the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia. The PLA's key takeaway from that conflict was the concept of noncontact operations—avoiding direct contact between ground forces and instead emphasizing long-range precision strikes to destroy an enemy's war potential and diminish its political control. The PLA took several actions to counter this new style of warfare. During the mid-1990s, the PLA developed its “joint anti-air raid campaign,” an operation designed to employ both offensive and defensive assets to limit an enemy's ability to build forces around China's periphery. This campaign marked the initial development of Chinese A2AD capabilities. After Kosovo, Beijing directed a series of efforts to defend against advanced U.S. capabilities, bolstered its civil defense programs, and pushed forward to develop a national defense mobilization system.³⁹

The growth of Chinese national power in all dimensions has provided Beijing with many tools for influencing international opinion, particularly among U.S. allies and partners. Although these messaging campaigns and attempts at retribution have often been counterproductive, they have demonstrated China's willingness to assertively use its influence and power to achieve the outcomes they desire even when dealing with U.S. allies. The extent to which Beijing sees these factors at play in conflict scenarios involving Taiwan is uncertain. As recent events have demonstrated, Beijing has faced few, if any, repercussions in response to its human rights abuses against the Uighurs; the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong; and provocations in the South China Sea, on the Indian border, and near Taiwan. Although Beijing appeared to temper its response to Hong Kong protests early in 2020, later in the year, when the world was distracted by the global pandemic, Chinese leaders cracked down harshly. Because of China's increasing global influence, particularly its economic and trade relationships, Beijing appears increasingly confident in its ability to prevent states from acting against China's interests. There

³⁷ Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, eds., *The Science of Campaigns*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2000; Zhang Yuliang, ed., *The Science of Campaigns*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006; and Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013.

³⁸ Wang Yongnan. 2015, p. 32.

³⁹ Burke et al., 2020, p. 3.

is no evidence that Beijing believes that it can completely undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships, but it does believe that its stronger economic relationships and proximity to Taiwan will complicate any decision to actively support the United States in a Taiwan conflict. Currently, it is highly unlikely that fear of international blowback would deter China from taking action.

Chinese researchers have long recognized the importance of controlling escalation; however, they are realistic about their ability to do so. Early PLA work on *war control* highlighted the importance of managing escalation as a core strategic command function.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Beijing believes that major power conflicts run the risk of escalation on many fronts and that de-escalation could be extremely difficult for both sides. In a conflict, off-ramps might not be readily available, based on the political drivers that led Beijing to decide on using force in the first place. In the unlikely situation in which China decides to use force against Taiwan without an immediate political crisis compelling it to act, finding an off-ramp might be less difficult. Limiting the use of force to destruction of key infrastructure and forces would allow Beijing to regroup and declare success, as it did in Vietnam in 1979. In the much more likely event that Beijing decides to use force based on a *perceived* crisis, PRC internal politics and the need for the CCP to maintain its political standing may make it more difficult to find off-ramps.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Several U.S. publications have highlighted PLA challenges with modernization and reform.⁴¹ In several cases, these reports are based on PLA sources voicing concerns about systemic problems within China's military establishment. Beijing has increased confidence in the PLA, but its remaining concerns raise questions about how much political risk China's leaders are willing to accept if faced with a decision of whether or not to use force. Beijing's questions about the PLA's progress in areas of informatization, joint operations, and systems warfare are central to understanding whether the PRC sees itself as capable of confronting the United States and its allies in a conflict over Taiwan.

I have four policy recommendations for consideration as the United States develops the concepts and capabilities necessary for 21st-century major power competition. First, the United States government needs to maintain its focus on China as a national security problem. Continued congressional oversight is necessary, including hearings with administration officials to ensure a continued focus on China. We have been slow to build our China expertise and the capabilities required to fight the type of war that China believes it will have to fight. If PLA research on U.S. operations since the end of the Cold War is any indication, Beijing views a future war with the United States as an expansive, devastating conflict that will require national mobilization. Researchers have focused on issues such as China's National Defense Mobilization

⁴⁰ See Xiao Tianliang, *On War Control*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2002; and Peng Guangqian and You Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*. Beijing: Military Science Press, 2001, p. 213.

⁴¹ Chase et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2019; and Blasko, 2019.

System and civil-military fusion, but there seems to be little appreciation or preparation on the part of U.S. planners for the actions that this type of conflict with China might entail.

Second, focus on deterrence. If China does see a major war as a possibility, U.S. deterrence messaging from across the whole of government needs not only to be focused on our capabilities, but also acknowledge our will and commitment to our allies and partners.

Third, we need to develop a better understanding of PLA weaknesses and how these weaknesses affect PLA capabilities and Beijing's confidence in the PLA beyond shows of force and coercive signaling. A significant portion of PLA analysis is devoted to cataloging and counting new equipment, plotting organizational relationships, and highlighting PLA strengths. These are all critical areas, but studying PLA self-evaluations could allow serious consideration of PLA vulnerabilities and how those vulnerabilities might be exploited. To spur this kind of review, Congress could consider directing studies of PLA self-evaluations and PLA deception capabilities in a future National Defense Authorization Act.

Fourth, researchers and analysts in the United States routinely discuss deception as a key pillar of Chinese strategy. This is an underexplored topic, especially considering the role assigned to it in Chinese strategy by many U.S. researchers. The question is particularly relevant because PLA publications have discussed the use of deceptive practices to mask weaknesses to enhance deterrence. If the PLA self-assessments discussed in this testimony are accurate reflections of Beijing's concerns, the PLA would benefit greatly from covering up these shortcomings.