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China's Military Interventions

Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts



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Preface

This report examines patterns and developments related to Chinese military interventions. It was conducted as part of a project entitled *Anticipating Adversary Interventions and Aggression*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to identify characteristics and signposts of adversary military interventions to better inform Army planning, operations, and force posture.

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Summary

The research reported here was completed in July 2020, followed by security review by the sponsor and the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in July 2021.

Great powers have frequently employed large, expeditionary military forces in a variety of operations abroad. Some fought wars to defend colonial possessions, while others engaged in bitter fighting alongside besieged allies or undertook other missions throughout the world. As China has ascended in power, observers have debated whether the country might follow a similar path. Yet in the three decades leading to the country's ascent as the second-largest economy in the world, China to date has only deployed relatively modest numbers of troops abroad in nonwar missions, such as maritime patrols, United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs), and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs). Whether this pattern will persist or how it might change is the primary focus of this study.

The project summarized in this report employed both quantitative statistical and qualitative analyses to examine patterns in *Chinese military interventions*, defined as uses of military forces outside China's borders above a 100 person-year threshold for ground forces (similar thresholds apply to air and naval forces) and engaged in a qualifying activity (e.g., combat, counterinsurgency, humanitarian, stabilization, deterrence). The project team found that China has undertaken two broad types of interventions in its post-1949 history, which are illustrated in this report by contrasting case studies of (1) China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and (2) its initiation of counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in 2009 and subsequent establishment of a supporting military base in Djibouti.

The first type occurred throughout much of the Cold War, from 1949 through the 1970s. These interventions tended to be fewer in

number but of a more aggressive nature, frequently designed to deter or defeat a threatening great-power adversary or its allies. The Korean War provided the occasion for the largest Chinese intervention, involving hundreds of thousands of troops, but other conflicts also involved major formations. Drivers of these interventions stemmed primarily from acute perceptions of threat posed by external powers, most notably that of the United States and the Soviet Union, and often involved disputes over territory. Insecurity over the newly founded country's domestic situation, concern about the regional balance of power, alliance and partnership commitments, the domineering personality of the People's Republic of China leader Mao Zedong, and a fervent ideological atmosphere also contributed to Beijing's decisions to engage in those military interventions. In the Sino-Vietnam War (the last major Cold War-era combat intervention and the subject of a case study in this report), Chinese leaders directed an invasion by ill-prepared People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces to counter a threatening Vietnamese alliance with the Soviet Union, address an escalating border dispute, assert China's dominance over Vietnam, and uphold commitments to ally Cambodia. Concern about Hanoi's treatment of ethnic Chinese also played an important but secondary role in Beijing's calculus in that conflict.

A dramatic easing of tensions with the United States after the 1970s and Russia following the end of the Cold War, the abandonment of Maoist ideological fervor, and China's deepening integration into the global economy has reduced or eliminated many of the incentives that underpinned the early large-scale combat interventions while introducing new incentives for different types of interventions. The second type of intervention appeared in the mid-2000s, when the PLA began to increase its involvement in a growing number of nonwar missions, including participation in UNPKOs, counterpiracy naval patrols in the Gulf of Aden, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and NEOs. These missions occurred at farther distances from China's borders than was the case in the Cold War, in locales as far away as Africa. The new-style missions involved modest numbers of troops, rarely surpassing more than a few hundred personnel. In contrast to the old-style interventions, concerns about economic interests

and the vulnerability of citizens and their assets provided key drivers of these operations. Considerations of the country's status and a desire to promote stability in areas featuring important Chinese interests also factored into the decisions to carry out such interventions. In the case of China's decision to begin counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and subsequent establishment of a military base in Djibouti, key drivers included the pursuit of economic interests, concern about the vulnerability of Chinese citizens in the region, and perceptions of nontraditional threats to Chinese interests in the Gulf of Aden and North Africa.

Table S.1 draws from the quantitative and qualitative literature to provide a summary of the factors that we assessed to explain Chinese military interventions since 1949.

Although Beijing has elevated the protection of far-flung interests in importance, it continues to prepare for large-scale combat interventions closer to its borders. Implied and explicit U.S. security assurances with U.S. allies and partners, such as Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines, raise the risk that a Chinese intervention in a neighboring country could once again provide the setting for a broader war with the United States. To deter U.S. involvement in such a clash, the PLA has greatly expanded its inventory of weapons and armaments that could counter a military intervention by the United States in any contingency involving China. Chinese political and military leaders will continue to have to balance managing potential hot spots along the country's border regions with the challenges of protecting against more-distant interests.

We conclude that the pattern of military interventions adopted by the PLA since 2000 is likely to continue to define the general trajectory of Chinese interventions for at least the next five years because of the persistence of the principal drivers underpinning this pattern, such as the generally low risk of war with another great power, China's expanding array of overseas interests, and the vulnerability of those interests to a variety of nontraditional threats abroad.

The deepening of tensions with the United States in recent years raises questions about how Chinese military interventions might

Table S.1
Summary of Factors to Explain Chinese Military Interventions Since 1949

Factor Name	Summary Assessment
External threat to sovereignty	The nature of the threat has changed, but a need to counter perceived threats to sovereignty remains a primary driver of Chinese military interventions.
Alliance or partnership with host	This was an important factor in key Cold War conflicts but plays a different role today, mainly in providing an incentive for nonwar missions in Asia and Africa.
Regional power balance	Chinese concerns for balance of power in Asia drive nonwar interventions and PLA planning for contingencies. During the Cold War, this factor played an important role in some wars.
National status concerns	This is a contributing factor, especially in periods of strategic competition, such as the Cold War and the current period of strategic competition. But other factors likely more directly affect intervention choices.
Domestic politics and legitimacy	This is potentially a factor, but the role differs widely according to the nature of the leader and the riskiness of the potential intervention.
Coidentity group populations in host country	This is a contributing factor in some Cold War conflicts and an important driver of some contemporary nonwar interventions, such as those in Africa.
Economic interests	Economic interests matter far more for contemporary interventions than for operations during the Mao era.
Ideology	This was an important factor in the Cold War, but it is less relevant in current nonwar missions. Nationalism may be an exception because it relates to potential future interventions in Taiwan.
Adversary leadership and personality	This is clearly an important factor in early high-stakes Cold War clashes; less decisive for missions in recent years.
Enablers	Growth in capabilities is a contributing factor for contemporary interventions requiring long-distance deployments.

evolve.¹ In many ways, current bilateral strains suggest a return to the interstate rivalries and antagonisms that characterized the Cold War, albeit thus far in a more muted form. The current era of great-power competition features a higher degree of mutual interdependence and integration with a globalized economy, signified by the fact that the United States and China remain among the top trade partners of one another, despite current tensions. Yet the competition also occurs within an increasingly fragmented and polarized world order that bears increasing similarities to the Cold War period, with the United Nations, World Bank, and other international organizations experiencing greater gridlock and great powers reluctant or unwilling to cooperate against major transnational threats, such as mass migration, climate change, and persistently slow economic growth. It is possible that under these conditions, Chinese military actions abroad may take on a more antagonistic tone regarding the United States. Chinese efforts to improve its ability to protect its maritime interests in the South China Sea through the construction of artificial islands already have aggravated tensions with the United States and its allies.² Similarly, the United States has accused Chinese fishermen operating near the PLA base in Djibouti of trying to blind U.S. pilots with lasers.³

The pattern of interventions could evolve in strikingly different directions in response to new drivers. Most obviously, a crisis over Taiwan or other disputed maritime region or border could give rise to a larger-scale combat intervention. The tempo of Chinese operations in more-distant locations could also increase if Beijing concludes additional foreign basing and security partnership arrangements in response to increasing risks in a friendly country featuring substantial Chinese interests. A high-profile incident that underscores the vulnerability of overseas interests, such as a major terrorism-related attack, could also

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," Washington, D.C., 2018.

² Joel Guinto, "China Builds Artificial Islands in South China Sea," Bloomberg, June 19, 2014.

³ "U.S. Admiral: China's PLA Uses 'Irresponsible' Tactics in Djibouti," *Maritime Executive*, June 20, 2019.

motivate Beijing to scale up its interventions abroad, although this again would most likely take the form of a collaborative operation with the host-nation government. Although the possibilities remain remote, the emergence of radicalized Chinese leadership, perhaps in response to some traumatic shock, such as rapid economic dislocation, could also herald a dramatic shift toward more-aggressive interventions (see Table S.2).

Over time, growing PLA capacity abroad could introduce new opportunities and challenges for the United States. China's growing fleet of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, replenishment ships, surface combatants, and long-range aircraft provide options for distant deployments that were not available in the Cold War. The establishment of a military post in Djibouti and the possibility of follow-on dual-use facilities in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean raise the possibility that more PLA combat forces may regularly appear in other regions of strategic importance to the United States. With Beijing eager to demonstrate the country's might and the value of friendly relations with it, incentives are growing for Beijing to consider interventions in partner countries grappling with their own varieties of threats. In some circumstances, this might open opportunities for the United States and Chinese military forces to collaborate against shared threats, such as nonstate terror groups. U.S. and Chinese militaries already collaborate in the counterpiracy mission near the Gulf of Aden, and cooperation in UNPKO missions is also likely to continue at some level between the two militaries. With many U.S. allies struggling to provide military contributions on shared threats and a resource-constrained military straining under its responsibilities, U.S. decisionmakers may have few options but to collaborate with the PLA in some cases. However, in other cases, PLA collaboration with host-nation governments could aim to weaken or undermine U.S. influence or alliances. Although no example currently exists, China could someday choose to militarily back a host-nation government against U.S. interests in a proxy fight, as discussed later in this report. A better understanding of the dynamics that motivate Beijing's approach to military interventions can help U.S. decisionmakers and defense planners better anticipate and prepare for such possibilities.

Table S.2
Potential Signposts of Future Chinese Military Interventions

Signpost	Relevant Factors	Indicator
Increased instability in country featuring Chinese interests	Economic interests; coidentity group populations in host country; national status concerns; regional power balance and stability	A region featuring substantial Chinese investments and citizen becomes unstable; host country unable to provide security; opportunities for PLA to collaborate with multilateral organizations to conduct stability operations
Stronger partnerships or new military alliances	Alliance or partnership with host; regional power balance and stability	High-level state and military visits; increasing state-owned enterprise involvement in dual-use port and facility construction; increase in PLA Navy port calls or PLA Air Force transport visits
Perceived increase in nonstate threat	External threat; coidentity group populations in host country; domestic politics and legitimacy; enabling military capabilities	A high-profile incident resulting in public outrage; a host nation incapable of controlling threats; availability of enabling capabilities to deal with threat
Outbreak of crisis in flashpoint	External threat; regional power balance and stability; domestic politics and legitimacy; national status concerns; enabling military capabilities	Growing political crisis over hot spot issue; unusual deployments of forces near the scene of dispute; threats by senior leaders; military demonstrations
Level of antagonism with United States	External threat; regional power balance and stability; national status concerns; ideology	Evidence of a military buildup; Breakdown in normal U.S.-China diplomacy and trade; statements by top leaders that designate the United States as a top threat
Emergence of aggressive leadership in China	External threat; domestic politics and legitimacy; national status concerns; adversary personality; ideology, including heightened nationalism	Ascent to power of a leader who upholds an aggressive vision or radicalized ideology; economic or other massive shock; intense domestic political turmoil

China's increasing willingness and capacity to operate military forces in other countries carry several implications for the U.S. Army. In some cases, the U.S. Army may find opportunities to cooperate with the PLA against shared concerns, such as epidemics, natural disasters,

and other nontraditional threats. If strains in the U.S.-China relationship ease, the possibility for U.S. and Chinese forces to work even more closely against shared threats may emerge. Although it has not yet done so, PLA forces at some point might seek to carry out counterterrorism operations against domestic nonstate actors in Chinese partner countries. In some cases, the target group may be a shared concern with the United States. For example, PLA forces could seek to collaborate with a host nation and U.S. military forces to fight a transnational terror group, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or al Qaeda. Although difficult to envision today, the possibility exists that U.S. and Chinese forces could unite against a common foe.

Even in the cases of cooperation against shared threats, however, the reality of a geopolitical competition between China and the United States highlights the need for prudence. Wherever Chinese forces operate abroad, the U.S. Army should expect heightened efforts by the PLA to collect intelligence on U.S. personnel and partner countries. Should U.S. and Chinese relations turn overtly hostile, elevating Beijing's perception of threat, PLA proximity to U.S. Army facilities and units in such places as Djibouti or other countries could raise the risk of sabotage.

Chinese interventions driven more directly by heightened threat perceptions of the United States or its allies would likely pose the greatest challenge for the U.S. Army. Ongoing tensions between China and U.S. allies and partners, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan, raise the risk that a crisis could erupt at persistent flashpoints. U.S. Army training and engagement with allies and partners can help build deterrence against coercive Chinese behavior while emphasizing U.S. resolve and commitment to their defense. Beyond these traditional flashpoints, the possibility cannot be discounted that Chinese and U.S. threat perceptions over nonstate actors might diverge at some point. Although no such situation currently exists, China could back government or even nongovernment forces who target groups or states aligned with U.S. interests. The U.S. Army may need to consider how to help partner groups or states defend themselves in such situations while minimizing the risks of the United States getting into unwanted conflict with Chinese-backed forces.

Some PLA military interventions motivated by factors of regional balance of power and concerns about partnerships with host nations could also affect U.S. Army equities. In Asia and elsewhere, the U.S. Army may find the presence of Chinese military forces a competitor for influence with host-nation militaries. For example, PLA assistance, training, and collaborative operations with host nations could undermine efforts by the U.S. Army to shape a favorable security environment. A goal of Chinese influence-building will partly aim to reduce U.S. influence or weaken U.S. alliances and partnerships. Relatedly, Beijing is already seeking to build partnerships that could support close military cooperation in host nations along the Indian Ocean. PLA advisers and leaders can be expected to continue cultivating goodwill with host-nation militaries by offering to provide arms sales, backing efforts to suppress threats to the host-nation government, and providing HA/DR, which could antagonize such countries as India and paradoxically exacerbate regional instability. The U.S. Army should expand its engagement with allied and partner countries in which the PLA is active, both to increase situational awareness and to better equip partner countries to resist Chinese demands that they might regard as unreasonable. Creative engagement with both China and India may help all sides build a more stable Indian Ocean environment, ease tensions, and reduce the risk of conflict.

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Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
HA/DR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NEO	noncombatant evacuation operation
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SOE	state-owned enterprise
UN	United Nations
UNPKO	United Nations peacekeeping operation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

In October 1950, 300,000 Chinese troops operating under the name of the “Chinese People’s Volunteer Army” collided with U.S. troops in Korea. The major offensive stunned U.S. commanders, most of whom had dismissed the possibility of a Chinese intervention. The brutal conflict lasted three more years and cost the Chinese between 400,000 and 1 million dead. American forces lost roughly 37,000 dead and more than 100,000 wounded in the war.¹

Chinese leaders routinely declare their country to be a peaceful one that refuses to carry out hostile military interventions in other countries. The country’s 2019 defense white paper, an official statement of China’s defense policy, declared that “China is opposed to interference in the internal affairs of others” and “will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence.”² Yet, as the example of the Korean War illustrates, these statements best describe more recent Chinese behavior. In the past, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has not been averse to large-scale military interventions and has, in some cases, directed massive armies to fight staggeringly costly wars in the territories of neighboring countries. In this report, we aim to assess which one of these two patterns of Chinese military interventions is likely to predominate in the future and on what factors the answer to this question is likely to depend.

¹ Xu Yan, “The Chinese Forces and Their Casualties in the Korean War: Facts and Statistics,” *Chinese Historians in the United States*, Li Xizo, trans., Vol. 6, No. 2, 1993, pp. 45–58.

² State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing, July 2019.

Defining Chinese Military Intervention

Great powers have frequently employed large, expeditionary military forces engaged in a variety of operations abroad. Some fought wars to defend colonial possessions, while others engaged in bitter fighting alongside besieged allies or undertook other missions throughout the world. As China has ascended in power, observers have debated whether the country might follow a similar path. Yet in the three decades leading to the country's ascent as the second-largest economy in the world, China to date has only deployed relatively modest numbers of troops in nonwar missions, such as maritime patrols, United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs), and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs). Whether that pattern will persist or how it might change is a primary focus of this report.

To assess the prospects for potential future Chinese military interventions, the first step is defining what is meant by a military intervention. China's military, like that of many modern countries, undertakes a wide range of activities abroad. Many day-to-day activities fall under the general category of *military diplomacy* and typically involve little more than a handful of personnel engaged in staff work, such as defense attachés coordinating high-level visits. Other activities consist of groups of military technical personnel, officers, or students involved in academic and other exchanges. Large formations of military units may travel abroad for temporary, peaceful purposes, such as participating in bilateral or multilateral exercises. These may involve thousands of troops but for extremely short durations. Such activities may be important for the security and foreign policy of any country, but they are not generally considered military interventions.

To focus on more-impactful uses of the Chinese military, we define a *Chinese military intervention* as an any deployment of Chinese military forces to another country (or international waters and airspace) during the 1946–2018 period in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged.

The purpose of the size threshold was to create a universe of cases that could be comprehensively and reliably surveyed (smaller interven-

tions may be more difficult to find information on and may be inconsistently reported) and to focus attention on the adversary interventions that are most likely to pose challenges for U.S. forces. To qualify as an intervention on the basis of ground forces, the deployment should have military personnel from any service branch deployed for at least 100 person-years. This size threshold could include 100 troops deployed for one year or a larger number of troops deployed for a shorter period of time (e.g., 200 troops for six months or 1,200 troops for one month).³ However, this person-year size threshold needs to be met in each year of the intervention. Therefore, a deployment of ten troops for ten years would not qualify. To be included as a naval or air intervention, a sizable portion of the adversary's air and naval forces would need to be involved. We also included kinetic activity, such as air or naval strikes and air-to-air combat, even when much smaller portions of the adversary's forces were involved. We considered organized forces that belong to the intelligence services and paramilitary organizations, such as the People's Armed Police and the Chinese Coast Guard, to be outside the scope of this study.

The size criterion gives a sense of the size and scope of activity of interest in this report, but the parameters should not be regarded as inflexible. Some operations of interest may include thousands of troops for a shorter duration, such as a few weeks or months, while others may involve a smaller formation engaged in combat for only a few days. Depending on the circumstances, both may qualify as military interventions. For example, combat operations of any size involving a ground element have been included in this report even if the action involved only a few dozen troops operating over the span of a single day, which is what happened in the skirmish over Johnson Reef in 1988.

³ In some rare instances, force levels during a multiyear intervention might temporarily fall below this threshold for an isolated year (and then again rise above it); as a general rule of thumb, we would nonetheless code it as a continuous mission. However, if there were long periods of time beneath this threshold (either after the withdrawal of major forces or in the run-up to the deployment of major forces), then the intervention would be broken up into different cases or otherwise these years would be excluded.

The purpose of the requirement that the forces involved be engaged in a particular set of activities was to eliminate cases in which a state might forward-deploy forces as a convenient alternative to basing at home but were otherwise engaged in the same activities as if stationed domestically and, therefore, not substantially interacting with or affecting the host state or population. Activities that warrant inclusion as an intervention include foreign internal defense, combat, counterinsurgency, stability operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and deterrence. We provide additional detail and definitions of each activity type in Chapter Three. As an additional criterion, the forces involved must have been part of the country's military; interventions by state-aligned paramilitary forces, proxy organizations, and/or intelligence services are excluded. The study also regards as beyond its scope the activities of nonstate or proxy forces, such as Cold War-era communist movements led by ethnic Chinese in Asian countries.

Geographic considerations pose a complication in identifying incidences of military intervention. Political leaders find it easier to politically defend military operations, especially those involving violence, by invoking a self-defense rationale if at all possible. This provides an incentive to justify military interventions as occurring within a country's own territory even if this is not the case, a political tactic that Beijing has employed on numerous occasions. Distinguishing operations that truly occur on a nation's territory from those that do not is further complicated by the reality of territorial disputes, a well-known primary driver of interstate conflict. Because this study is not focused on resolving contrasting territorial claims, this study will simply accept all cases of military operations within contested territory as *interventions*, because the activities could theoretically occur within the rival state. The 1962 Sino-Indian war, as an example, will be considered as within the scope of the study. This definition also permits the inclusion of significant operations and activities in disputed maritime regions, such as within the South China Sea and near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. A related complication concerns Taiwan, which China regards as a renegade province. Authorities in Taipei, however, reject this claim and regard the island, at least officially, as the right-

ful sovereign of China. Because the Taiwan government governs as a de facto sovereign state, we will treat it as a separate entity, and thus operations and actions against the island, such as those in the 1950s, will be considered within the scope of Chinese military interventions in this study.

Complete details regarding parameters for identifying cases of Chinese military interventions will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Background: China's Military Interventions in the Cold War

During the Cold War, the threat of major Chinese military interventions loomed as a major consideration in the tense geopolitics of Asia. U.S. presidents and military commanders carried out deterrence actions to ward off Chinese aggression against Kuomintang-held Taiwan. Failure to anticipate the scale of China's intervention in Korea strained relations between U.S. political and military leaders to the breaking point, eventually resulting in the firing of United Nations (UN) commander U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur. In the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. leaders imposed strict restrictions on U.S. military operations against North Vietnam in hopes of avoiding a recurrence of the large-scale Chinese military intervention that nearly upended U.S. war efforts in the Korean War. The importance of Chinese military interventions for the U.S. military may be further underscored by a brief consideration of the fact that the threat or actual occurrence of large-scale combat with PLA forces has only occurred within the context of a Chinese military intervention in another country.

Other countries also have borne the brunt of Chinese military interventions. In February 1979, hundreds of thousands of PLA troops poured over the border with Vietnam, resulting in a bloody war that cost 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese dead.⁴ In 1962, PLA forces surprised Indian troops in a cross-border conflict that caused thousands of casualties on both sides.⁵ When tensions escalated with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s, Chinese troops clashed with their communist rivals

⁴ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, Charlotte, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

⁵ Bertil Lintner, *China's India War*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018.

near the Ussuri River in 1969, and both sides deployed massive combat formations along the border to deter potential invasions.⁶ Less often noted, China also sent military assistance and advisory teams to many political allies in North Korea, Vietnam, Africa, and other countries in the developing world in a proxy conflict with both the United States and Soviet Union throughout the Cold War.⁷

That said, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the Cold War largely remained an impoverished, poorly equipped military that frequently endured disruptive political purges and ideological conflict. Lacking assets for long-distance conveyance, the PLA struggled to operate military units more than a short distance beyond the country's borders. Despite these limitations, Chinese leaders directed the PLA to carry out a series of combat and nonwar interventions in neighboring countries.

The death of Mao Zedong, fading of communist fervor, and normalization of ties with the United States and Russia coincided with a considerable diminishment of Chinese military interventions. A significant shift toward a more peaceful security environment contrasted sharply with the incessant bitter rivalry and conflict of previous decades. China has maintained stable cooperative ties with the world's great powers and most neighbors, despite a deepening of tensions with the United States. Chinese leaders assessed as early as 1985 that the country no longer faced a risk of general war and that the main threat came from potential local, limited conflicts near Taiwan and the country's border regions.⁸ Chinese diplomats have sought to capitalize on the country's peaceful situation by proclaiming the country's rejection of both military intervention and overseas military bases. As late as

⁶ Michael Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, Arlington, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2010, p. iii.

⁷ Piet Konings, "China and Africa: Building a Strategic Partnership," *Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2007, pp. 341–367; Rana Mitter, "China and the Cold War," *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁸ David Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of China's Military Strategic Guidelines," in Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College Press, 2007, pp. 69–140.

2000, for example, a government defense white paper declared, “China does not seek military expansion, nor does it station troops or set up military bases in any foreign country.”⁹

Post–Cold War: China’s New Military Interventions

Changes in China’s strategic situation, especially since 2000, have given rise to new forms of military intervention. Years of rapid economic growth have coincided with an expansion of China’s national interests around the world. By 2010, China had become the world’s second-largest economy, surpassing Japan.¹⁰ China’s powerhouse economy depends on distant markets and resources and the hundreds of thousands of overseas Chinese workers who interact with them, many of whom face a variety of nontraditional threats. Terrorism, maritime piracy, organized crime, and localized armed conflicts all threaten to disrupt vital inputs to the economy. Chinese leaders regard as a top priority the furnishing of security for China’s overseas interests. In 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao outlined a set of “historic missions” for the PLA. These included directives for the military to carry out a variety of primarily nonwar operations abroad to protect important economic and other interests and shape a favorable security environment.¹¹ Since then, Chinese official documents have emphasized the importance of security for the nation’s overseas interests. In the words of the 2019 defense white paper, an important mission of the PLA is to “effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations, and institutions.”¹²

A related motivation for China’s renewed interest in interventions abroad stems from Beijing’s desire to burnish its reputation as a global leader. Sensitive to charges that China will follow an established histor-

⁹ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in 2000*, Beijing, October 16, 2000.

¹⁰ “China Overtakes Japan as World’s Second Biggest Economy,” *BBC News*, February 14, 2011.

¹¹ Cortez A. Cooper III, *The PLA Navy’s “New Historic Missions”: Expanding Capabilities for a Re-emergent Maritime Power*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-332, 2009.

¹² State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019.

ical pattern in which rapidly rising powers have engaged in violent conquest, authorities insist the country rejects aggression and stands for world peace and common development. And as competition with the United States intensifies at the Asia-Pacific regional and global level, Beijing finds itself eager to broaden its base of international support by demonstrating the country's appeal as a provider of public goods. Involvement in UNPKOs offers a way to demonstrate China's peaceful intentions and credibility as a leader in global governance. The 2019 defense white paper echoed this message when it claimed China "endorses the central role of the UN in international affairs" and that the country's armed forces "comprehensively promote international military cooperation for the new era and strive for a better world of lasting peace and common security."¹³

These developments have rendered untenable an absolute prohibition on military interventions and overseas basing. Chinese leaders concede this point in their quiet modifications to long-standing foreign policy principles. Official documents have, for example, narrowed a previous broad opposition to military "intervention" to now specify opposition to "unilateral" interventions. Beijing now approves military interventions endorsed by multilateral organizations in which China plays a key part, preferably the UN, in which China's veto power as a permanent UN Security Council member provides a valuable check on relevant operations. And official defense white papers since 2002 have dropped statements opposing China's use of overseas military bases. The 2019 defense white paper stated that China's armed forces "should build far seas forces" and "develop overseas logistical facilities."¹⁴

Although Chinese leaders have warmed to the idea of military interventions, the changed circumstances from the Cold War have resulted in operations and activities of a far different character. Chinese military interventions since the 1990s have generally featured smaller forces engaged in nonwar missions, generally under UN authority or with the permission of host-nation governments. Common contingen-

¹³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019.

¹⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019.

cies include NEOs, maritime counterpiracy operations, escort patrols, and participation in UNPKOs.

Improvements in the PLA's capabilities have raised the appeal of military operations further from China's shores. The PLA has expanded its inventory of ships and aircraft capable of deploying to distant locations. Examples include the fielding of modern destroyers, amphibious assault ships, and other large surface vessels. To date, these platforms have been mostly used for nonwar missions, but they could also support combat operations. China is expanding its inventory of aircraft carriers and has begun producing large transport aircraft.¹⁵ In addition to ships and aircraft, the PLA has begun to add overseas basing facilities. In 2017, China formally announced the establishment of its first foreign military post in Djibouti, which will provide a useful staging point for more operations in the Africa and Middle East regions.

Although Beijing has elevated in importance the protection of far-flung interests, it continues to prepare for large-scale combat interventions closer to its borders. Implied and explicit U.S. security assurances with U.S. allies and partners, such as Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines, raise the risk that a Chinese intervention in a neighboring country could once again provide the setting for a broader war with the United States. Chinese political and military leaders will continue to have to balance managing potential hot spots along the country's border regions with the challenges of protecting more-distant interests.

Chinese Interventions in an Era of Great-Power Competition

The deepening of tensions with the United States in recent years raises additional questions about how Chinese military interventions might evolve.¹⁶ In many ways, current bilateral strains mark a return to the interstate rivalries and antagonisms that characterized the Cold War, albeit thus far in a more muted form. The current era of great-power competition features a higher degree of mutual interdependence and

¹⁵ "China's Y-20 Large Transport Plane to Spawn Several Variants: Chief," *Global Times*, March 12, 2019.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," Washington, D.C., 2018a.

integration with a globalized economy, signified by the fact that the United States and China remain among the top trade partners of one another, despite trade tensions. Yet the competition also occurs within an increasingly fragmented and polarized world order that evokes elements of the Cold War period, with the UN, World Bank, and other international organizations experiencing greater gridlock and great powers reluctant or unwilling to cooperate against major transnational threats, such as mass migration, climate change, and persistently slow economic growth. It is possible that under these conditions, Chinese military actions abroad may take on a more antagonistic tone regarding the United States. Already, Chinese efforts to improve its ability to protect its maritime interests in the South China Sea through the construction of artificial islands have aggravated tensions with the United States and its allies.¹⁷ Similarly, the United States has accused Chinese fishermen operating near the PLA base in Djibouti of trying to blind U.S. pilots with lasers.¹⁸

The PLA's increasing arsenal of weapons and systems capable of contesting U.S. military interventions along China's maritime periphery raises the risk that Beijing could contemplate an aggressive military intervention against Taiwan or rival claimant in the East or South China Seas. However, given the dramatic imbalance in forces in favor of a globally distributed U.S. military in every region except along China's periphery, Beijing likely has little incentive to provoke a clash or conflict in more-distant locales for the foreseeable future.

Over time, growing PLA capacity abroad could introduce new opportunities and challenges for the United States. China's growing fleet of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, replenishment ships, surface combatants, and long-range aircraft provide options for distant deployment not available until recently. The establishment of a military post in Djibouti and the possibility of follow-on dual-use facilities in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean raise the possibility that more

¹⁷ Joel Guinto, "China Builds Artificial Islands in South China Sea," Bloomberg, June 19, 2014.

¹⁸ "U.S. Admiral: China's PLA Uses 'Irresponsible' Tactics in Djibouti," *Maritime Executive*, June 20, 2019.

PLA combat forces may regularly appear in other regions of strategic importance to the United States. With Beijing eager to demonstrate the country's might and the value of friendly relations with China, incentives are growing for Beijing to consider interventions in partner countries grappling with their own varieties of threats. In some circumstances, this may open opportunities for the United States and Chinese military forces to collaborate against shared threats, such as nonstate terror groups. U.S. and Chinese militaries already collaborate in the counterpiracy mission near the Gulf of Aden, and cooperation in UNPKO missions is also likely to continue at some level. Areas of potential military cooperation also include HA/DR and NEO missions. With many U.S. allies struggling to provide military contributions on shared threats and a resource-constrained military straining under its responsibilities, U.S. decisionmakers may have few options but to collaborate with the PLA in some cases. However, in other cases, PLA collaboration with host-nation governments could aim to weaken or undermine U.S. influence or alliances. Although no example currently exists, China could someday choose to militarily back a host-nation government against U.S. interests in a proxy fight. Finding ways to better understand the dynamics that motivate Beijing's approach to military interventions could help U.S. decisionmakers and defense planners better anticipate and prepare for such possibilities.

Research Questions

Given the strategic competition between China and the United States, anticipating potential scenarios of Chinese military intervention carries significant consequences for the prospects for international peace and stability. Although conventional analysis has focused on traditional hot spots involving such Chinese-claimed territories as Taiwan and features in the maritime region, less attention has been paid to the drivers of operations at more distant removes or the factors in both past and present interventions. This study examines evidence of China's approach to military interventions in the past to discern insights into

how Beijing might evaluate potential future military interventions. In particular, the report seeks to answer the following questions:

- How, how often, and where has China used military interventions in the past?
- What have been the main drivers of these interventions, and how have they changed over time?
- What are the factors that are most likely to incentivize Chinese leaders to carry out a military intervention in the coming years?
- What implications do Chinese military interventions carry for the U.S. Army?

This report makes two main contributions to existing work on Chinese military interventions. First, it presents a more comprehensive quantitative account of Chinese use of military forces outside its borders, including the size of forces deployed and the activities conducted. The data used for these analyses are distinct in their level of detail and scope. Second, we combine qualitative and quantitative analyses in this report to explore the key factors shaping Chinese intervention decisions and use these to propose signposts that may warn of future Chinese interventions and corresponding metrics that can be used to track risk over time.

Methodology

To answer these questions, RAND Arroyo Center researchers employed a combination of methods. We reviewed academic literature on potential Chinese motivations for military interventions in other countries since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The literature review included historical analysis, social scientific research, and primary sources. From this review and from a review of past research on military intervention more broadly, we sought to identify groupings of factors likely to influence intervention decisions and, specifically, those factors that may have incentivized past Chinese leaders to direct military interventions.

We also employed quantitative analysis to discern patterns in past Chinese operations. To carry out this analysis, we developed a list of all Chinese military interventions from 1949 to the present. Although existing databases of military interventions provided an initial starting point, we refined and expanded these data by researching historical records for evidence of overlooked activities (e.g., military assistance deployments to Africa in the Cold War) and carefully analyzing all potential interventions to ensure that consistent size and activity type definitions were met (see Chapter Three for further discussion). Each intervention in our data set includes information on its size and duration, type of activities, and assessments of the relative success or failure of the objectives pursued in each operation. Quantifiable data could then be calculated for descriptive statistics and correlations of variables. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Chapter Three.

We also conducted two detailed case studies to illuminate the causal relationships among different variables. These cases were chosen to capture two types of interventions and to provide some deeper insight into factors driving decisions surrounding specific types of interventions. First, because of the enormous potential risks and implications of major combat interventions, we chose a large-scale combat intervention. As an example of this type of intervention, we examined China's most recent large-scale combat intervention, the war with Vietnam in 1979 in Chapter Four. Analysis of available evidence suggests a complex and nuanced set of factors influenced Chinese leaders in their deliberations regarding a military operation that they must have regarded as extremely risky, given the poor state of PLA readiness, but nevertheless undertook.

Second, because of the recognition that the PLA more recently has expanded its participation in a broad range of nonwar missions in other countries, we chose to investigate the drivers that have motivated Chinese leaders to direct such activities. For this purpose, we analyzed Beijing's decision to initiate counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and subsequently establish its first overseas military base in Djibouti

to support the patrols and other nonwar missions in Chapter Five.¹⁹ The Djibouti base will provide the PLA an opportunity to significantly expand its participation in a broad range of nonwar missions, and potentially even limited combat operations, in Africa and the Middle East. The strategic and political significance of China's decision to carry out the counterpiracy patrols and its decision to establish the supporting military base could illuminate Chinese considerations regarding military interventions in regions alongside China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the coming years.

Chapter Six summarizes the principal findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis and explores implications for the United States. That concluding chapter also presents recommendations for the U.S. Army.

¹⁹ Other relevant missions include UNPKOs, HA/DR, NEOs, and maritime counterpiracy patrols.

Identifying Possible Factors: Literature Review

Chinese military interventions in the post–World War II era have ranged from massive combat operations involving hundreds of thousands of troops against U.S. forces in the Korean War to small teams of military advisers engaged in HA/DR. Reasons identified by scholars for these operations have shown just as great a range. Explanations for Chinese large-scale military interventions during the Cold War remain disputed. Scholars continue to debate the roles of outsize leadership personalities (most notably that of Mao), ideology, great-power rivalries, and other factors in the decisions to send major combat formations into Korea, Vietnam, and other countries.

For more recent nonwar missions, scholars and analysts have emphasized (1) the vulnerability of PRC citizens and their assets, (2) the country's dependence on critical shipping routes for energy imports as compelling drivers, and (3) unresolved issues regarding the status of Taiwan and disputed maritime areas. This chapter will review the existing literature for insights into potential drivers of past Chinese military interventions to draw up a list of potential factors that will in turn be used to carry out further investigations through quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Identifying Drivers of Military Interventions

The first half of this chapter provides a slightly modified version of the literature review and framework discussion in Chapter Two of the first report in this series, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*.¹

To identify potential factors that may have influenced Chinese interventions, we developed a generalized framework of factors likely to influence intervention decisions across states. We started our review of existing literature by considering past research on U.S. military interventions, documented in previous RAND reports, and then expanded our focus to include research on factors that determine third-party intervention decisions across interveners. We searched major journal databases, such as Online Computer Library Center First Search and Social Science Abstracts, Google Scholar, and the archives of leading journals in military strategy, political science, international relations, and public affairs. We also reviewed regionally focused journals (e.g., on the Middle East or Eurasia) and used the citations in articles we collected to expand the search further. We included both quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies in the review. Finally, in addition to including relevant foundational literature in our review, we searched for new research to capture findings and analysis relevant to today's geopolitics and that reflected the most up-to-date understanding of intervention decisions across interveners. After collecting articles, we reviewed them for relevance and content, keeping notes on the key factors that each article identified as relevant to intervention decisionmaking.

Our identification of categories for the framework combined inductive and deductive approaches. At the most fundamental level, countries undertake interventions when they assess that the intervention is more likely to accomplish their political goals than not intervening. Intervention is a policy tool like any other, and therefore the decision to intervene reflects the assessment that, all things considered, the

¹ Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Samuel Charap, Timothy R. Heath, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Edward Geist, and Christian Curriden, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-1, 2021.

expected tangible and intangible benefits of an intervention are likely to exceed the tangible and intangible costs. However, this assessment is unlikely to be only about financial benefits and costs and may include an assessment of other domestic, geopolitical, and other factors. Using our past work and this understanding of military intervention decisions, we started with four main categories of intervention drivers: geopolitical, domestic, ideational, and enablers.

Using our review of the literature, we grouped key factors into each of these four categories, giving us ten key factors of interest that appeared consistently across past research as relevant to intervention decisions. Our framework is shown in Table 2.1. In the rest of this chapter, we discuss evidence for and against the relevance of these factors to the decisions that states make about intervening militarily outside their borders. In addition to defining the key factors and what we know about them, we seek to identify metrics that can be used to measure or assess these different factors and to clarify the definition of each factor. These potential metrics will be discussed again when we highlight signposts of future interventions in Chapter Six. Importantly, the ten factors identified here appear to contribute to intervention decisions by third-party states according to our review of existing qualitative and quantitative research, but they do not guarantee an intervention. State decisionmaking on the use of military forces is complex, and single factors in isolation are rarely sufficient to guarantee a particular intervention decision. Instead, these factors should be viewed as potentially increasing or decreasing the risk of an intervention. As an example, the existence of a partnership between two states may encourage one to intervene to defend the other, but it does not necessitate such an intervention. The state may still choose to abstain from intervening, assessing that other factors outweigh its commitment to the partnership, although the partnership makes the intervention more likely than it would otherwise have been.

Table 2.1
Third-Party Intervention Framework

Category	Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty
	Alliance or partnership with host nation
	Regional power balance
	National status concerns
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy
	Coidentity group populations in host country
	Economic interests
Ideational	Ideology
	Leadership and personality
Enablers	Capabilities

Geopolitical Factors

The first set of key intervention drivers is geopolitical. Geopolitical factors are any that relate to the international system or relationships between countries that can drive the decision to intervene at a more macro level.

External Threat to Sovereignty

The logic for why external threats to sovereignty may drive states to initiate a military intervention is straightforward: States that perceive a direct threat to their sovereignties, their citizens, their territory, or their resources might choose to deploy forces abroad to counter or reduce that threat.² We include only actual or threatened infringements on sovereignty, actual or threatened territorial claims, or direct and immediate threats to regime security as part of this factor. The clearest indicators of this factor are relatively straightforward: the existence or threat of

² Hans J. Morgenthau, “To Intervene or Not to Intervene,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 3, April 1967.

an armed attack, the existence of a territorial claim or challenge to the territorial integrity of the intervening nation, the perception or fear of such a claim at some point in the future, or the threat or fear of a forced regime change. Past research suggests that the risk of conflict between two neighboring states is significantly higher when there is a dispute about the location of a shared border or when one state has made a claim to territory the other also believes it owns. In such instances, states might launch an intervention to defend or reclaim a disputed territory.³ Interventions might also respond to a direct attack on a nation's homeland or even the threat of such an attack. Even potential threats can trigger interventions by states seeking to protect their interests or forestall the development and emergence of new threats. For example, RAND research has shown that U.S. decisions to initiate a deterrent intervention and even the number of forces deployed for such a mission are directly linked to the severity of the perceived threat.⁴

Alliances and Partnerships with Host Nation

The second geopolitical factor shown to drive intervention decisions has to do with relationships between countries. States will often intervene to protect or support allies and partners. Past research is clear that the existence of an alliance or partnership is one of the strongest factors shaping intervention decisions.⁵ This relationship seems obvious in the case of treaty allies that have made a commitment to defend each other, but it is also true for countries with other types of partnerships, even informal ones. Relevant partnerships, then, may be identi-

³ Stephen A. Kocs, "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995, pp. 159–175.

⁴ Kavanagh, Jennifer, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Han, *The Past, Present, and Future of US Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017.

⁵ Kavanagh et al., 2017; Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo, "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, November 2006, pp. 828–837; Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining US Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1997, pp. 580–602.

fied by looking first at states with formal treaties and agreements (both defense-oriented and otherwise) and then looking at states with other types of close partnerships, developed through, for example, military or economic aid or past instances of cooperation. Countries may be more likely to intervene to protect allies and partners for many reasons. The most obvious is to respond to a shared external threat or adversary (e.g., an intervention by a rival power, an internal guerilla movement), but the decision to intervene can also be driven by a set of shared interests or goals, historical ties, or the explicit terms of the alliance.⁶ Finally, states may intervene not only to protect an ally but also to support an ally that is intervening elsewhere. Research suggests that such interventions may be more common when there are divergences in the interests and objectives of intervening powers, because this gives each state a greater and more enduring incentive to participate to influence the outcome.⁷ However, alliances and (especially) partnerships do not guarantee an intervention. There are numerous examples of states violating established partnerships in favor of other interests or choosing one partner over another.

Regional Balance of Power

States may also intervene in an ongoing crisis or conflict to ensure a favorable balance of power in a particular region. The purpose may be to maintain the current balance of power or to create a more favorable balance of power.⁸ Past research demonstrates that states consider possible reactions by rivals when deciding to intervene.⁹ More generally, past research suggests that states may use intervention to protect the integrity of their sphere of influence and to head off any threats to the existing international balance of power from a major adversary or a

⁶ Yoon, 1997, pp. 580–602; Findley and Teo, 2006, pp. 828–837.

⁷ Findley and Teo, 2006.

⁸ Stephen E. Gent, “External Threats and Military Intervention: The United States and the Caribbean Basin,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2010.

⁹ Yoon, 1997.

regional challenger.¹⁰ Similarly, states may use intervention to maintain the balance of power within a specific region. This may include efforts to shore up weak states, reduce instability that is affecting the balance of power, or prevent regime or policy changes that would alter regional partnerships or allegiances.¹¹

The *regional balance of power* factor is related to the *external threat to sovereignty* factor, but the two are distinct. Certainly, a threat to one state's sovereignty by another state in the region has the potential to challenge the regional balance of power. However, shifts in the regional balance of power occur even more often in the absence of direct threats or territorial claims. Anything from the expanding economic influence of an adversary, to civil war in a neighbor, to the development of new military technologies can shift the regional balance of power in ways that have the potential to trigger some sort of military intervention.

Shifts in the regional balance of power can be hard to measure objectively. The National Military Capabilities Index is one possible metric to study changes in balance of power. An index of relative economic size is another option, among others. RAND researchers have also developed a metric useful for studying changes in the balance of power regionally.¹²

National Status Concerns

The fourth geopolitical rationale for intervention is national status. States may use interventions to underscore their own capability, as a

¹⁰ Gent, 2010; Yoon, 1997; Mark P. Lagon, "The International System and the Reagan Doctrine: Can Realism Explain Aid to 'Freedom Fighters'?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1992, pp. 39–70.

¹¹ Dursun Peksen and Marie Olson Lounsbury, "Beyond the Target State: Foreign Military Intervention and Neighboring State Stability," *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012, pp. 348–374; Jacob D. Kathman, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2011, pp. 847–876; Roy Allison, "The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation," *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009, pp. 173–200.

¹² Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017.

statement of national power or military strength. Although again related to other geopolitical factors, national status is also distinct. National status is largely about reputation. States may use interventions to maintain or build their reputation. National status can drive an intervention even when there is no threat and no change in the balance of power. States concerned with national status may use interventions to demonstrate military strength or relevance, or their relative place or rank in either the global or regional order.¹³ States may intervene to exercise their ability to influence policy outcomes: in other words, to get a seat at the table.¹⁴ States may intervene to protect interests and assets that are core to their national status (or at least to their perception of their national status).¹⁵ Even participation in multinational humanitarian or other interventions may be influenced by the pursuit of national status. Specifically, states may see their abilities to participate in international operations as a sign of relevance on the international stage.¹⁶

Domestic Factors

States also may be motivated to intervene because of internal drivers (i.e., political, economic, or sociocultural factors that make interventions advantageous or desirable). Some past works found that, in some

¹³ Karen Feste, *Expanding the Frontiers: Superpower Intervention in the Cold War*, New York: Praeger, 1992; Timothy R. Heath, *Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-450, 2016; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018; Lagon, 1992.

¹⁴ Lagon, 1992, pp. 39–70; Dmitri Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers,” New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

¹⁵ Trenin, 2016.

¹⁶ Justin Massie and Benjamin Zyla, “Alliance Value and Status Enhancement: Canada’s Disproportionate Military Burden Sharing in Afghanistan,” *Politics & Policy*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2018, pp. 320–344.

cases, the impact of domestic factors could overwhelm the effects of geopolitical factors when explaining why states intervene.¹⁷

Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

The most commonly proposed domestic drivers of interventions are those having to do with domestic politics and legitimacy. According to this family of arguments, political leaders may use interventions and their timing for political purposes to build support among their constituency or enhance their domestic political legitimacy. The diversionary theory of war suggests that leaders may use interventions to increase their chances of reelection, distract from economic or other problems at home, or shore up their own support through a “rally around the flag” effect. Although these explanations are appealing in theory and seem to describe some individual cases fairly well, they have mixed empirical support.¹⁸ Some past research suggests that leaders can successfully use intervention to bolster their chances for reelection, but this relationship seems to exist under a narrow set of circumstances. In cases when it does work, these successful interventions seem to allow these leaders to rebuild their popular support. Losing interventions, however, can end political careers.¹⁹ Empirical work is clear that, although rally effects

¹⁷ Patrick James and John R. Oneal, “The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President’s Use of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 1991, pp. 307–332; Charles W. Ostrom, Jr., and Brian L. Job, “The President and the Political Use of Force,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2, June 1986, pp. 541–566.

¹⁸ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005; Amber Aubone, “Explaining US Unilateral Military Intervention in Civil Conflicts: A Review of the Literature,” *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2013, pp. 278–302; Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, “Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, December 1997, pp. 814–834.

¹⁹ Karl DeRouen, Jr., and Jeffrey Peake, “The Dynamics of Diversion: The Domestic Implications of Presidential Use of Force,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002, pp. 191–211; Ostrom and Job, 1986; Kyle Haynes, “Diversionary Conflict: Demonizing Enemies or Demonstrating Competence?” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2017, pp. 337–358; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Stephen E. Gent, “Scapegoating Strategically: Reselection, Strategic Interaction, and the Diversionary Theory of War,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2009, pp. 1–29.

can occur following a new intervention, those effects are not guaranteed and are smaller and more short-lived than many might expect.²⁰

Aside from using interventions to win elections, leaders might use interventions to shape their public image: for example, to demonstrate their toughness in the face of the adversary, which could increase political support in some contexts.²¹ Also, leaders might base their intervention decisions on public support, intervening when public support is high (typically when the stakes are high and perceived costs are low) and not when the public does not support the intervention.²²

There is also a body of work focused on the role played by the institutional characteristics of the domestic polity: political party of the leader, the regime type, timing of elections, and even the type of democracy. Empirical evidence on the relevance of these factors is mixed. First, the type of democracy and, specifically, the decisionmaking process a country's leaders use to make intervention decisions can have an effect on whether the intervention occurs. Parliamentary and presidential democracies, for example, may be differentially influenced by domestic politics, because the constraints placed on the executive are different in each context.²³ The relevance of regime type extends

²⁰ Aubone, 2013; Tim Groeling and Matthew A. Baum, "Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 4, October 2008, pp. 1065–1085.

²¹ James Meernik, "Domestic Politics and the Political Use of Military Force by the United States," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 2001, pp. 889–904.

²² There is also an extensive body of literature on the topic of what drives public support for military operations and interventions. Past research has identified what is at stake, the expressed consensus of elites, and the perceived costs as key variables. Some work also suggests that media coverage may influence public support. For this literature, see, for example, Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-231-A, 2005; Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4, 2007, pp. 975–997; Louis Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2002, pp. 417–437; and James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, "Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Military Force," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2018, pp. 44–71.

²³ Juliet Kaarbo, "Prime Minister Leadership Style and the Role of Parliament in Security Policy," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018, pp. 35–51;

even to authoritarian leaders, who may be accountable to their inner core of supporters for continued loyalty but who have much greater flexibility when launching interventions and may have different priorities when weighing the costs and benefits of an intervention decision.²⁴ Evidence for a relationship between interventions and executive political party or other related institutional factors seems weaker. Past research does not find a consistent relationship between political party and intervention behavior or between election timing and intervention decisions, although there are differences across individual leaders, discussed in more detail later in this chapter.²⁵

Finally, there are arguments about bureaucratic politics and the role it can play in driving states into interventions. These arguments suggest that government decisions, including those to intervene militarily, are the result of negotiations and trades made by various bureaucratic actors within the government. Under this argument, a decision to intervene is really just the end result of dozens of smaller interactions and choices made by political actors, including but usually not only the chief executive, acting in the name of a variety of interests.²⁶

Coidentity Group Populations in Host Country

Past research also suggests that countries may be more likely to intervene to protect coidentity or coreligious group populations living elsewhere.²⁷ The rationale for this seems straightforward: States are moti-

Wolfgang Wagner, "Is There a Parliamentary Peace? Parliamentary Veto Power and Military Interventions from Kosovo to Daesh," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018, pp. 121–134.

²⁴ Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, 2012, pp. 326–347; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005.

²⁵ Michael T. Koch and Patricia Sullivan, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Partisanship, Approval, and the Duration of Major Power Democratic Military Interventions," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 3, July 2010, pp. 616–629; Meernik, 2001, pp. 889–904.

²⁶ Graham T. Allison, and Morton H. Halperin, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications," *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. S1, 1972, pp. 40–79.

²⁷ David Carment, and Patrick James, "Third-Party States in Ethnic Conflict: Identifying the Domestic Determinants of Intervention," in Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri, eds.,

vated to protect those with whom they share common cultural and other ties. Existing research consistently finds that a strong transnational link across kinship groups can increase the risk of conflict and military intervention, as well as the intensity of that conflict or intervention.²⁸ This effect can be significant. For some states, particularly those with high ethnic fractionalization and a dominant ethnic group, ethnic kinship is one of the most significant and determinative factors driving intervention decisions.²⁹ The influence of ethnic and religious ties in explaining intervention decisions extends across types of interventions. Existing work finds that ethnic and religious kinship networks can shape the decision to intervene in civil wars and the side on which the intervene state aligns itself.³⁰ Other research explores the willingness of states to take on peacekeeping interventions on their own (outside a multilateral framework) and finds that ethnic ties are one of the most influential factors.³¹ Research also underscores that religious ties can be as influential as ethnic ones in shaping intervention decisions.³² The mechanism for this relationship appears to operate both through ties between elite in the intervening and host states and through public pressure in the intervening state. Specifically, a

Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 11–34.

²⁸ Lars-Erik Cederman, Luc Girardin, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2009, pp. 403–437; Mehmet Gurses, “Transnational Ethnic Kin and Civil War Outcomes,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2015, pp. 142–153.

²⁹ Ada Huibregtse, “External Intervention in Ethnic Conflict,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010, pp. 265–293.

³⁰ Martin Austvoll Nome, “Transnational Ethnic Ties and Military Intervention: Taking Sides in Civil Conflicts in Europe, Asia and North Africa, 1944–99,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2013, pp. 747–771.

³¹ Nicolas Rost, and J. Michael Greig, “Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: An Analysis of the Determinants of State-Conducted Peacekeeping in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2011, pp. 171–184.

³² Joshua Su-Ya Wu and Austin J. Knappe, “My Brother’s Keeper? Religious Cues and Support for Foreign Military Intervention,” *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2016, pp. 537–565.

survey experiment that assessed the willingness of respondents to support a military intervention found that, when respondents shared religious ties with potential intervention hosts, they were more willing to intervene.³³ The most straightforward way to operationalize this factor would be to consider the percentage of various coidentity or coreligious group members in various target countries. In regard to the United States, this might mean considering the percentage of U.S. citizens who may come from or have relatives in a given country, the argument being that the United States could be more likely to intervene in states from which there is a larger diaspora in the United States. For China, a country that is a traditional source of immigration, rather than a recipient, metrics could include the percentage of Chinese citizens or the percentage of ethnic Chinese in a possible intervention target.

Economic Interests

The final domestic consideration focuses on economic interests. We consider economic interests as domestic considerations because a state's focus in economic pursuits, even those outside its borders, will advance its domestic economy. There are several possible ways in which economic interests may factor into state intervention decisionmaking. First, states might use military interventions to protect their economic interests, especially when access to resources or national property overseas is threatened.³⁴ U.S. interventions to protect economic interests in Central and South America in the early part of the 20th century is one example of this type of intervention. Second, states might intervene to secure new economic assets or access, including access to natural resources, ports, or markets. Some research has found that economic gain (specifically, in the form of access to oil reserves) can be a strong motivation for interventions, particularly for states with high demand

³³ Wu and Knappe, 2016.

³⁴ Benjamin O Fordham, "Power or Plenty? Economic Interests, Security Concerns, and American Intervention," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2008, pp. 737–758; Yoon, 1997.

for oil.³⁵ Related work finds a similar relationship for other lootable natural resources.³⁶ Other research asserts that access to ports and markets can be similarly powerful motivators.³⁷ Importantly, however, there is research on the opposite side of this argument that finds little or no relationship between economic gain and intervention decisions. RAND researchers in 2017 did not find access to oil markets as a significant predictor of U.S. intervention decisions, for example.³⁸ Third, domestic leaders might seek to use interventions abroad explicitly to boost economic growth. Specifically, states might launch interventions to spur their domestic manufacturing or other industries, using military intervention as a sort of economic stimulus aimed at improving the approval or popularity of the executive.³⁹ The economic basis for this strategy is weak, however. There is some empirical evidence that military intervention can help certain industries, but it is often hard to attribute any economic gains to the intervention per se.⁴⁰ Finally, it is worth noting that the relative importance of domestic economic factors to intervention decisions has consistently been shown to be less than that of domestic political or strategic drivers.⁴¹

Finally, although interventions can bring economic gains, they can also have significant economic costs, not the least of which is the

³⁵ Vincenzo Bove, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Petros G. Sekeris, "'Oil Above Water' Economic Interdependence and Third-Party Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7, 2016, pp. 1251–1277.

³⁶ Michael G. Findley and Josiah F. Marineau, "Lootable Resources and Third-Party Intervention into Civil Wars," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2015, pp. 465–486.

³⁷ Fordham, 2008; Trenin, 2016.

³⁸ Kavanagh et al., 2017; Frederic S. Pearson, and Robert A. Baumann, "Foreign Military Intervention and Changes in United States Business Activity," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1977, p. 79; Karl R. DeRouen, Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1995, pp. 671–695.

³⁹ This final motivation bleeds into the domestic arena, but we keep it in this section so as not to split up "economic interests" in many places.

⁴⁰ Pearson and Baumann, 1977.

⁴¹ Yoon, 1997; DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 2008.

potential for serious disruptions to international trade or loss of access to international markets either because of trade restrictions or other disruptions to supply chains and economic integration. When making decisions about whether to intervene, states are likely to weigh the possible economic gains from access to new markets and resources against possible losses from such disruptions. In other words, economic interests can serve as an inducement to interventions, but they can also serve to limit or prevent an intervention, depending on the context.

There are several potential ways to measure economic interests as they relate to intervention decisions. First, one can look specifically at access to key strategic resources, such as warm water ports, oil, or other key resources. Second, one can use measures of economic growth and trade, especially over time, to understand how economic resources may relate to intervention decisionmaking. Notably, we distinguish between economic interests as defined here and such factors as regional power balance. Although changes in economic fortunes can shift the international balance of power, such an interpretation considers economics as one factor among many and in relative terms. Here we focus specifically on a state's economic condition and opportunities, apart from those of other states.

Ideational Factors

The third category of factors that emerged from our review is ideational factors: factors that emerge not from politics or economics, but from ideas, personality, and other more abstract, intangible factors.

Ideology

Ideology may also shape or determine intervention decisions, with states intervening to uphold or advance (or counter) a set of principles, beliefs, or norms. In the U.S. context, the most commonly cited ideological driver of military intervention is that of democracy promotion. The United States has used the cause of democracy as the rationale for intervention since its earliest days and as recently as the 2003 intervention in Iraq. Although democracy seems to be a relevant ideological

driver of intervention, evidence that authoritarian regimes might intervene to promote authoritarian ideologies is mixed.⁴²

Humanitarian interventions may similarly be driven by ideological factors, specifically the emerging norm of “responsibility to protect.” Evans, Thakur, and Pape describe responsibility to protect as “the normative instrument of choice for converting shocked international conscience about mass atrocity crimes into decisive collective action.”⁴³ In other words, the concept serves as an ideological driver of humanitarian interventions that is not transactional or political.⁴⁴ For non-Western states, ideology may serve to favor restraint rather than interventions.

Literature on third-party intervention also identifies efforts to counter specific ideologies (e.g., communism, jihadism) as strong motivators for intervention. Some past research finds that preventing the spread of communism during the Cold War years was, perhaps, the most significant and consistent driver of U.S. military interventions. For U.S. interventions in developing countries, for instance, one of the strongest drivers of intervention was whether the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was involved and whether there was a risk of communist victory.⁴⁵ Since 9/11, countering transnational terrorism has similarly provided an ideological motivation for interventions by the United States and others.⁴⁶

Nationalism is a final relevant ideology that may drive interventions. Here we consider nationalism as an ideology focused on the creation of a nation state and a national myth. In comparison to the

⁴² Lucan A. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion: The Case of Russia in the ‘Near Abroad,’” *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2015, pp. 691–706.

⁴³ Gareth Evans, Ramesh Thakur, and Robert A. Pape, “Correspondence: Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2013, pp. 199–214.

⁴⁴ Charles E. Ziegler, “Contesting the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2016, pp. 75–97.

⁴⁵ Yoon, 1997.

⁴⁶ Tim Dunne, “Liberalism, International Terrorism, and Democratic Wars,” *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009, pp. 107–114.

national status factor, nationalism as defined here is inwardly focused, rather than focused on national position on the international stage. Van Evera argues that when a state believes that portions of its diaspora or pieces of territory that are rightly part of an imagined “homeland” exist outside the state’s borders, the state might choose to use military force to work toward that homeland.⁴⁷ In other words, “unattained nationalisms” may drive conflict as a state seeks to unify its territory and build its national narrative. This may be especially true if the land or diaspora to which the state lays claim is contiguous to the state’s borders and is homogeneous in nature.⁴⁸

It is, of course, worth noting that ideological motivations can often be used as covers for a country’s true intentions. For example, some Cold War interventions (e.g., intervention in the Dominican Republic) executed in the name of efforts to counter communism were often actually undertaken for more self-interested reasons.⁴⁹

Developing metrics to operationalize and assess the presence or strength of ideology would be exceedingly difficult and is outside the scope of this report. One option could be to develop a taxonomy of relevant ideologies and assess their presence and absence across a range of intervention cases (and potential cases) and adversaries. For example, we could note that although earlier Chinese interventions sought to spread Mao’s revolutionary model, this particular ideological driver has no longer been as visible since the mid-1980s.

Adversary Leadership and Personality

In addition to ideology, the personality of the leader making the intervention decisions has also been shown in past research to shape a state’s intervention behavior.⁵⁰ Most theories that focus on the role played by

⁴⁷ Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994, pp. 5–39.

⁴⁸ Van Evera, 1994; Barry R. Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993, pp. 80–124.

⁴⁹ Kavanagh et al., 2017.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011.

individual leaders start from the premise that leaders generally act in self-interested ways to retain power when faced with domestic or international challenges to their regime. However, even given this baseline, different leaders may have different tolerance for risk, different attitudes toward the use of force as a political tool, and different preferences about involvement in conflict more generally.⁵¹ One set of arguments focuses on the aggressiveness of a leader's posture toward other states. In the U.S. case, Meernik argues that a president's "reputation" for aggressive use of force in the past is a strong predictor of that leader's willingness to intervene in the future. Under this argument, the decisions that leaders make about use of force are generally consistent and even influenced by their past behavior or reputation for use of force.⁵²

Saunders offers a more nuanced perspective on the role of personality, arguing that leaders across countries and political systems develop worldviews that are either internally oriented (focused on domestic threats and outcomes at home and in other states) or externally focused (emphasizing external, international outcomes and threats) prior to assuming office. This worldview then influences each leader's cost-benefit calculations and decisions about when to use force and when to exercise restraint. Leaders, under this view, differ in the types of crises and events that they will respond to, rather than in their fundamental propensity to intervene.⁵³ Leader personality may also affect a leader's decisionmaking process in ways that affect intervention outcomes. Past research has indicated that leaders differ in how much they involve advisers, parliamentary bodies, and other experts in foreign policy

⁵¹ Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018, pp. 2072–2086; Ulrich Pilster, Tobias Böhmelt, and Atsushi Tago, "Political Leadership Changes and the Withdrawal from Military Coalition Operations, 1946–2001," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2015, pp. 463–483.

⁵² James Meernik, "Presidential Decision Making and the Political Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 1994, pp. 121–138.

⁵³ Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2009, pp. 119–161.

decisions and that their approach to the decisionmaking process can affect the outcomes of those decisions.⁵⁴

A final set of arguments considers the role of the leader's background and personal experience. This work suggests that a leader's life experience prior to their position of political power is likely to shape their subsequent decisions about the use of force. For instance, a 2014 study finds that leaders with prior military experience but no combat experience or those who have been members of rebel groups are most likely to initiate new wars and interventions. The authors suggest it is the leader's past experience with use of force that guides their decisions about future military action.⁵⁵

Although the body of research on the role of leadership in military intervention has been growing, this is an area where it will be difficult to define a single metric or even a set of metrics to measure and operationalize the factor. Attempts to use leader personality as a guide to an adversary's intervention choices will be complicated and only as successful as the quality of information available.

Enablers

The final factor that emerged from our literature review did not have to do with state motivations at all, but instead focused on capabilities, primarily military and economic resources that allow a state to successfully launch and sustain a military intervention. Here, we refer to capabilities as *enablers*, meaning that they are resources that enable or allow a state to successfully launch a military intervention. Without sufficient economic resources to fund an intervention and support the defense-related costs (and without the needed military technology and capabilities), states will not be able to undertake interventions they might otherwise prefer to take on. In particular, we focus on changes

⁵⁴ Kaarbo, 2018.

⁵⁵ Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 2014, pp. 527–559.

in capabilities: new economic resources or new military capabilities that may encourage states to launch interventions that they would not have otherwise. As with many of the individual motivations discussed earlier, such enablers are unlikely to drive an intervention decision on their own. For example, a state is not likely to decide to intervene simply because they have the economic or military capacity. A state would also likely need a motivation like those discussed earlier in this chapter. However, given persistent motivations to intervene, changes in enabling capabilities can help to explain why a state intervenes at one point in time and not in another.

Military and economic capabilities may shape intervention decisions in a few key ways. First, military capabilities may shape intervention feasibility. A state might have the desire to intervene but ultimately decide not to because they do not have the military capabilities or the economic resources required to launch the intervention or because decisionmakers assess that they do not have the military or economic capability to achieve desired objectives.⁵⁶ Second, past research suggests that, for the most part, states only pursue interventions where they expect to be able to achieve the desired outcome at a reasonable cost. This understanding of military interventions as based on, in part, military and economic capabilities is consistent with realist arguments that focus first on military power and state self-interest.⁵⁷ However, it is worth noting that states might choose to intervene even in cases in which they are overmatched and unprepared if other factors (such as those described earlier) demand such an intervention and overwhelm concerns about possible constraints.

In terms of metrics used to assess these capabilities, there are many options. One approach would be to focus on changes in capabilities. Significant increases or decreases in economic resources or military technology could be identified and recorded as a marker of states

⁵⁶ Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

⁵⁷ Rost and Greig, 2011, pp. 171–184; Paul K. Huth, “Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918–1988,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 6, December 1998, pp. 744–770.

that might suddenly be more able to conduct military interventions than in the past. Another approach would be to focus on absolutes. For example, military spending, military size, gross domestic product per capita, or variables that denote possession of key technologies (e.g., nuclear weapons) are all ways to measure capabilities as they pertain to the ability of a state to launch an intervention.

Table 2.2 summarizes these factors and the possible metrics to assess or measure them in different contexts.

Table 2.2
Drivers of Third-Party Interventions

Category	Factor Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions	Definition
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty	Actual or threatened attack, territorial claim, or forced regime change
	Alliance/partnership	Formal or informal relationship that encourages a state to support another through intervention
	Regional power balance	Assessment of the impact on the regional balance of power of a potential intervention
	National status	Opportunity to preserve or increase international standing through a potential intervention
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy	Domestic political dynamics can drive interventions: • leader popularity and survival • bureaucratic politics • regime type • party politics and elections
	Coidentity group populations in host country	Presence of coidentity group populations in intervention target, especially if threatened
	Economic interests	Protection of economic assets, access to resources, pursuit of economic opportunities and trade

Table 2.2—Continued

Category	Factor Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions	Definition
Ideational	Leadership and personality	Leadership type and propensity to launch intervention or use military force
	Ideology	Set of beliefs or worldview that drives intervention to advance or counter that ideology
Enablers	Capabilities	Military and economic resources required to support an intervention

Drivers of Chinese Military Interventions

With this framework, the next step was to use existing research to explore and identify intervention drivers from the general categories identified earlier that have historically been most relevant to Chinese intervention decisionmaking. The insights drawn from this review create expectations that we will explore further in our quantitative and case study analyses. For the China-specific review, we examined a diverse range of sources, including Western scholarly works and articles on past conflicts, declassified U.S. government assessments, and news reports about contemporary Chinese military operations. We also examined Chinese official documents and commentary for insight into Chinese perspectives on past incidences.

Reading the literature on past Chinese military interventions quickly yields the insight that PLA interventions in the Cold War differed significantly from those of the post–Cold War era. This distinction appears in the discussion of virtually all factors. However, in a few cases, scholars have mentioned factors that have resurfaced, albeit in different forms. Moreover, changes in the current strategic environment, especially the reinvigoration of great-power competition, could invite in some form the return of factors that featured more promi-

nently in the Cold War. Where possible, these continuities and evolutions will be highlighted.

Geopolitics

As noted earlier, this broad category concerns factors related to a country's international situation. It includes considerations of the country's status and prestige, calculations regarding the balance of power in a regional or global system, and the variety of external threats to the basic security of the regime or nation or that of an ally. It also includes considerations about the need to protect or assist an ally or partner country.

Regional Power Balance

Calculations about the importance of balancing powers and enhancing China's strength underpinned some of the most important military interventions of the Cold War, reflecting in part Beijing's lack of other tools to shape its environment. In the current era, however, a wealthy China has favored nonmilitary instruments for increasing its influence and balancing countries against one another.

Some scholars view China's interventions in Southeast Asia as designed to weaken rival powers, including France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. According to Qiang Zhai, a professor at Auburn University, the "two strands" in China's policy toward Vietnam from 1950 to 1975 consisted of "cooperation and containment." He explained that Beijing cooperated with Hanoi in its struggle against France and the United States to "eliminate a hostile imperialist presence from its southern border." At the same time, Chinese leaders sought to "contain [Vietnam's] tendency to establish its domination over Laos and Cambodia."⁵⁸

Nicholas Khoo, lecturer at the University of Otago, New Zealand, drew from neorealist theory, for example, to argue that China's decision to attack Vietnam owed primarily to Beijing's desire to discredit Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union, then China's primary

⁵⁸ Qiang Zhai, *China & The Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: Chapel Hill Press, 2000, p. 217.

rival.⁵⁹ Xiaoming Zhang, a professor at the Air War College, similarly emphasized how growing Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the late 1970s intensified enmity between Vietnam and China, a dynamic accelerated by Vietnam's deepening ties to the Soviet Union.⁶⁰

Thomas Christensen highlighted the importance of China's position in the regional system as a factor in decisions to use force.⁶¹ Scholars, such as David Finkelstein, have noted how China's perceptions of threat tracked with shifting balances of power throughout the Cold War.⁶² Also reflecting the view that realist considerations inform Chinese considerations of the use of force, a 2000 RAND study concluded that China has occasionally surprised its adversaries by employing military force to create a "sense of crisis" and create favorable geostrategic opportunities.⁶³

External Threats to Sovereignty

External threats to China's sovereignty loom as a key driver of all military operations, including those abroad. Threats range from challenges by neighboring countries to borders to dangers of large-scale invasion or war. External threats can also exist far from a country's borders, in the form of perils faced by citizens and their assets in more-distant lands. In the tumultuous Cold War decades, the country experienced severe internal weakness and bitter rivalries with both the United States and the Soviet Union, where at times the prospect of direct conflict with these superpowers on Chinese territory seemed high. After 1990, however, Chinese military analysts have emphasized the role of both

⁵⁹ Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁶⁰ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, pp. 150–151.

⁶¹ Thomas Christensen, "Windows and War: Trend Analysis and China's Use of Force," in Iain Johnston and Robert Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006.

⁶² Finkelstein, 2007, pp. 69–140.

⁶³ Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky, *Patterns in China's Use of Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1160-AF, 2000.

persistent threats to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity and nontraditional threats to more far-flung interests.

Scholars emphasize the threat posed by the United States and the Soviet Union in China's decisions to military intervene in conflicts during the 1950s and 1960s. Thomas Christensen has observed, for example, that Beijing viewed the U.S. intervention in the Korean civil war against a communist side as evidence that the United States was willing to militarily intervene in a civil war on the Asian continent. Christensen argued that an acute sense of vulnerability drove Mao to not only intervene in Korea but to do so with such an extremely aggressive manner designed to achieve total victory.⁶⁴

Allen Whiting similarly argued that intervention in Korea was motivated by a combination of "threats both inside and outside China." Whiting argued Beijing feared that "a superior power in proximity will seek to take advantage of our domestic vulnerability."⁶⁵ At a more theoretical level, some scholars have interpreted China's combat interventions as efforts to improve its security by asserting a sphere of influence. Changhee Park, a scholar at Korea National Defense University, argued that an acute sense of vulnerability drove China to launch "armed interventions against its neighbors to regain control" over what he called the "crucial space," which he defined as "a geographic area that has strategic value vital to national security."⁶⁶

Chinese leaders also worried over threats to border security in operations against antagonists such as India and Vietnam.⁶⁷ According to declassified documents, the Central Intelligence Agency assessed in 1977 that Beijing "limited the use of combat forces beyond China's borders to circumstances where Peking has seen real and imminent

⁶⁴ Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 166.

⁶⁵ Allen S. Whiting, *The Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1975, p. 202.

⁶⁶ Changhee Park, "Why China Attacks: China's Geostrategic Vulnerability and its Military Intervention," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2008, pp. 263–282.

⁶⁷ Whiting, 1975, p. 44.

threats to Chinese territory or to vital Chinese interests.”⁶⁸ Feuding over perceived threats to China's sovereignty in the South China Sea also underpinned military action against Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁹

Since the 1990s, Chinese officials and most scholars have emphasized a different set of threats. Enjoying decades of a relatively peaceful and stable international security environment, China today faces both the persistence of traditional threats to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity and a growing array of nontraditional threats to its interests abroad. The country's 2019 defense white paper highlighted both the persistent threat posed by Taiwan “independence forces” and the tensions with neighbors over disputed maritime areas. It also noted that China's overseas interests have been “endangered by immediate threats such as international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy,” observing that “Chinese diplomatic missions, enterprises and personnel around the world have been attacked on multiple occasions.”⁷⁰ The potential for U.S. involvement in a conflict involving China and a U.S. ally or partner has provided a strong impetus for the PLA to develop a robust set of capabilities to deter or defeat a U.S. military intervention, in addition to expanding its military capability to threaten neighbors such as Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam.⁷¹ Other scholars have concluded that concern over threats posed to overseas interests provides a strong incentive for the PLA to develop capabilities to deploy forces to distant locations.⁷²

⁶⁸ National Intelligence Council, “National Intelligence Estimate: China's Military Policy and General-Purpose Forces,” in John K. Allen, Jr., John Carver, and Tom Elmore, eds., *Tracking the Dragon: National Intelligence Estimates on China During the Era of Mao, 1948–1976*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2004, p. 605.

⁶⁹ Larry M. Wortzel, “China's Foreign Conflicts Since 1949,” in David A. Graff and Robin Higham, eds., *A Military History of China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Westview Press, 2002, p. 280.

⁷⁰ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019.

⁷¹ Timothy R. Heath and Andrew S. Erickson, “Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2015, pp. 143–156.

⁷² Matthieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift Away from Non-Interference*, Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International

National Status Concerns

As the leaders of an ancient civilization with a proud history, Chinese leaders have generally shown considerable sensitivity to China's reputation. Concerns about national status and prestige took different forms during and after the Cold War, however. In the early decades following the PRC's founding, Chinese leaders sought to establish the country's status as a rising great power and leader of the communist world, often leading to disastrous movements to rapidly industrialize, as in the Great Leap Forward. Chen Jian, a professor at Cornell University, drew from archival sources and interviews with retired Chinese policymakers to argue that Mao saw the Korean War as an opportunity to demonstrate the power and superiority of the newly established PRC.⁷³ Chinese clashes with India and the Soviet Union could be seen, in part, as efforts to demonstrate the country's status as a major power. After China's break with the Soviet Union, the concern for status took added meaning as Mao led China in a struggle for leadership within the communist bloc.⁷⁴

After the Cold War, Chinese leaders esteemed national status for different reasons. Since the 2000s, China has generally sought to extend its influence and leadership through existing multilateral frameworks and organizations, such as the UN, or by creating new ones that include countries with a broad array of political values and systems, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The political value of Chinese involvement in UNPKOs may help explain Beijing's enthusiasm for such operations. In 2013, Xi Jinping pledged to double the number of Chinese troops in UNPKOs, despite already furnishing the most personnel of the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council.⁷⁵ The desire to demonstrate Chinese leadership may underpin

Peace Research Institute, June 2014.

⁷³ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 121.

⁷⁴ Donald Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict: 1956-1961*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 152.

⁷⁵ "Chinese President Xi Jinping Pledges 8,000 UN Peacekeeping Troops, US\$1 Billion to Peace Fund," *South China Morning Post*, September 28, 2015.

high-profile operations that otherwise have little military value. For example, scholars have noted that despite a dramatic drop in piracy near Somalia, China has continued to maintain a continuous naval presence off the Horn of Africa.⁷⁶

Alliance and Partnership Concerns

This factor refers to the sense of obligation China might have regarding the need to assist a partner country that faces a threat. The partner country could invite Chinese intervention, which happened in the Korean War, or it may be the victim of an attack. Included in this factor are those instances in which China employed military interventions to signal opposition to the actions and policies of countries that threatened China's allies or partners. For example, scholars have noted how Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping claimed the attack on Vietnam "punished" Hanoi for its attack against Chinese partner Cambodia.⁷⁷

Although China eschews alliances, it has established an increasing network of partnerships with countries around the world. Eager to establish the credibility of Chinese power and appeal of closer cooperation, Chinese leaders have directed more efforts to demonstrate the benefits of friendship with China to other countries, especially in regions featuring large investments and infrastructure projects related to the BRI. An example is the SCO, involving countries in central Asia (e.g., Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan), Russia, and other countries. For years, Chinese military forces have carried out combined counterterrorism military exercises with partner SCO nations, although to date no actual combat operation has taken place within the SCO structure. Scholars have noted that China's desire to demonstrate its utility as a partner has also provided a strong incentive

⁷⁶ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence*, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, June 2015.

⁷⁷ King Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1987.

to increase arms sales and military training with partner nations in Africa.⁷⁸

Domestic Factors

Domestic factors loom large in Cold War–era military interventions, owing to the contentious and unsettled nature of Chinese politics. This grouping includes factors related to elite politics and legitimacy, pursuit of security for economic interests, and the role of concern for people of shared ethnicity in the host nation.

Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

Analysts have emphasized the role of elite infighting and domestic political struggles as a key driver in military interventions in the Cold War. Since the 1990s, by contrast, elite politics has seen fewer violent struggles. However, scholars have argued that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may have directed PLA missions abroad, in addition to a broad array of other growth-oriented domestic and nationalist foreign policies, in order to capitalize on nationalist sentiment to bolster the party's political support.

Scholars have discussed the role that elite power struggles may have played in driving Chinese leaders to direct military conflicts. Michigan State University professor Michael Colaresi argued that threat outbidding proved useful as a way for Mao to stay in power. Colaresi noted that Mao's rival, Wang Jiaxing (head of the CCP's International Liaison Department), questioned Mao's designation of the Soviet Union as a threat and instead argued the country should focus on domestic issues. Mao responded that he wanted to "fight and grow at the same time." Colaresi noted similar instances of "threat outbidding" in China's struggles with the United States, concluding, "Domestic pressure on Mao, to a large extent created by his own rhetoric," provided an incentive for Beijing to increase its military involvement in Vietnam.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Neil Melvin, "The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region," SIPRI, April 2019.

⁷⁹ Michael Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005, p. 193.

Thomas Christensen argued that Mao's need to mobilize capital and labor for the Great Leap Forward was a major factor in China's decision to begin shelling Taiwan in 1958. Government efforts to amplify a potential threat to China provided the justification for land seizure and extremely high government accumulation rates." Mao carefully regulated the scale and scope of bombardment of Taiwan's offshore islands to minimize the risk of escalation. According to Christensen, Mao "did not want war, just conflict."⁸⁰ Chen Jian also argued Mao relied on the demonization of the United States and Soviet Union to facilitate mobilization of the masses to achieve domestic policy goals.⁸¹

Some scholars have judged that China's surprising decision to attack an erstwhile communist comrade nation, Vietnam, may have stemmed in part from a desire to mobilize and motivate the Chinese military to modernize. Xiaoming Zhang claimed Deng sought to test an ill-equipped, obsolete PLA and to instill some fighting prowess after the disruptions suffered by the PLA through the Cultural Revolution. The conflict coincided with a major modernization drive that aimed to rehabilitate and improve the fighting prowess and competence of the PLA.⁸²

Allen Whiting also emphasized the insecurity of China's domestic situation as a driver of the decision to intervene in both the Korean War and the Sino-Indian War. He noted that China's internal opposition in 1950 consisted of "remnant Kuomintang forces, traditional secret societies, non-Chinese peoples, and mountain bandits." He noted that the failure of the Great Leap Forward "aroused anxiety that external enemies would exploit PRC vulnerability," a critical factor that informed Beijing's decision to engage Indian forces.⁸³

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, elite politics featured far lower levels of political violence than was the case in previous decades. Although Xi has overseen a controversial concentration of power

⁸⁰ Christensen, 1996, pp. 217–222.

⁸¹ Chen Jian, 2001.

⁸² Xiaoming Zhang, 2015.

⁸³ Whiting, 1975, p. xxii.

since 2012, such actions scarcely seem connected to the relatively modest nonwar missions abroad, with possibly the exception of coercive actions regarding Taiwan and the maritime regions. However, political analysts have posited that the ruling CCP increasingly cultivates nationalist enthusiasm to bolster popular support to offset the declining appeal of its Marxist ideology.⁸⁴ Seen from this perspective, military interventions abroad showcase the country's military prowess and could garner the regime public approval for muscular action to protect vulnerable citizens abroad. Oriana Skylar Mastro observed that "domestic public support for the development of expeditionary capabilities is coalescing as more Chinese nationals find themselves in dangerous situations" abroad.⁸⁵ Data on popular support for Chinese involvement in UNPKOs remain scarce but probably is lower than for missions that directly save Chinese lives or defend the country's interests. Most scholarship on UN missions tends to emphasize the strategic rationales outlined by Chinese leaders and commentators, suggesting that the PLA's involvement in these missions is driven primarily by foreign policy rather than domestic calculations.

Coidentity Group Populations in Host Country

Chinese officials cited threats to Chinese citizens as a justification for undertaking military interventions in some cases, although the nature of the perceived threats has changed over time. Authorities have implied a sense of obligation over the welfare of ethnic Chinese in border regions. However, in general, Beijing has most clearly and consistently tied potential uses of military force in the defense of citizens, not ethnic Chinese. In the Sino-Vietnam War, official media organ Xinhua claimed Chinese citizens living across the border region had been harmed by Vietnamese forces, but authorities did not cite the fate of such individuals as a reason for military intervention in offi-

⁸⁴ Anna Fifield, "China's Xi Looks to Stoke Nationalism as Tiananmen Anniversary Approaches," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2019.

⁸⁵ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Nationalism, Domestic Politics, and China's Global Leadership Role," *The Future of the Global Order Colloquium*, Fall 2017.

cial statements.⁸⁶ Scholars noted that China also sent PLA troops into Burma in 1969 to arm and equip primarily ethnic Chinese communist guerillas after anti-Chinese riots in previous years.⁸⁷ Repeated coercive actions and occasional bombardments against Taiwan in the Cold War sought to intimidate or influence perceived compatriots on the island. However, the role of Chinese citizens did not play a significant role in some of the most important Cold War interventions, such as the Korean War.

In recent years, Chinese officials have cited the imperative to protect citizens and their assets abroad as a reason for expanding the PLA's overseas nonwar missions. According to Chinese authorities, 30,000 of the country's enterprises are overseas and more than 100 million Chinese citizens travel abroad annually.⁸⁸ Western scholars agree that nonwar missions, such as NEOs, are designed primarily to protect the lives of Chinese people living in perilous areas. However, operations to promote stability, such as UNPKOs, can also improve security for Chinese workers and citizens living in affected areas, although Chinese leaders also consider other strategic and political reasons for direct PLA involvement in such multilateral nonwar missions.⁸⁹ Some scholars have detected a growing tendency in Chinese policy to blur the lines between Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese; however, in the post-Cold War era, the government has so far limited its employment of military forces only in cases involving citizens of the PRC.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Timothy R. Heath, "China's First War in the Global Era: Leadership Signaling in the Sino-Vietnam War," *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2010, pp. 37–41.

⁸⁷ Robert Holmes, "China-Burma Relations Since the Rift," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 8, August 1972, pp. 686–700.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi Delivers Speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies of the US," webpage, February 26, 2016.

⁸⁹ Duchâtel, Brauner, and Zhou, 2014, p. 5; Stefan Stahle, "China's Shifting Attitude Towards United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," *China Quarterly*, No. 195, September 2008, pp. 631–655.

⁹⁰ Leo Suryadinata, "Blurring the Line Between Huaqiao and Huaren: China's Changing Policy Towards the Chinese Overseas," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2017, pp. 101–114.

Economic Interests

Security for economic interests has loomed as a major factor for contemporary nonwar military interventions abroad but played a far smaller role in the Cold War, when an autarkic Chinese economy had little economic incentive to use force beyond its borders.

Both Chinese officials and Western scholars emphasize the importance of securing maritime trade routes to explain China's deployment of a counterpiracy force off the Horn of Africa since 2008 and China's greater focus on building a blue-water capable navy. Activities to strengthen China's presence in the South China Sea also are designed, in part, to protect sea routes. According to Michael Yahuda, China's "new assertiveness" in the South China Sea has arisen, in part, from the "expansion of its national interests to include the maritime domain in its nearby seas and trade routes."⁹¹ China's 2019 defense white paper similarly highlighted the importance of the maritime domain, observing that in terms of homeland defense, "disputes still exist . . . over maritime demarcation." It also highlighted as a top responsibility of the PLA the "safeguarding of China's maritime rights and interests."⁹²

Chinese dependence on energy imports, which has surged in recent years, provides another incentive. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, China imported more than 57 percent of its petroleum in 2015.⁹³ Both the South and East China Seas hold energy resources, although estimates vary. Approximately 85 percent of China's petroleum imports pass by sea through the Malacca Straits. In terms of natural gas, China depends principally on sources in central Asia. In 2014, for example, China imported 44 percent of its natural gas from Turkmenistan via pipeline, through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁹⁴ PLA missions to support the consolidation of control over the

⁹¹ Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 81, 2013, pp. 446–459.

⁹² State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019.

⁹³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "China," April 2016.

⁹⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2015.

Senkakus and islands and reefs in the South China Sea, counter maritime piracy, protect vital shipping lanes, and promote stability in areas featuring large investments all appear driven, at least in part, by concern for economic interests. However, other contemporary missions do not directly address economic interests, such as HA/DR or NEOs.

In the post–Cold War era, Beijing has also favored UNPKOs and some multilateral actions to promote stability that could affect Chinese economic interests. Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Taylor Fravel attributed the PLA's growing willingness to participate in multilateral interventions and other nonwar missions to the importance of stability for sustained economic growth. He argued that Chinese leaders may “use their forces to help maintain stability in their international security environment, as such stability allows leaders to concentrate resources on domestic affairs.”⁹⁵ However, beyond these few missions, Chinese leaders have tended to avoid aggressive military interventions. Instead, a wealthy China has favored less-escalatory approaches, such as major economic initiatives (e.g., the BRI), influence operations, economic diplomacy, and other tactics to extend its influence and weaken that of such rival powers as Japan and the United States. In the maritime domain near China, efforts to overwhelm rival claimants in the East and South China Seas through “gray zone” coercive tactics involving both military and paramilitary forces can be viewed, in part, as an attempt to extend Chinese influence.⁹⁶

Ideational Factors

This grouping includes factors related to the predispositions, prejudices, and preferences of particular leaders that appear separate from other national-level motivations. These may originate primarily with the personality of a national leader, or they may stem from a particular ideology promoted by the Chinese regime.

⁹⁵ Taylor Fravel, “Economic Growth, Regime Insecurity, and Military Strategy: Explaining the Rise of Noncombat Operations in China,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2011, pp. 177–200.

⁹⁶ Lyle Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2942-OSD, 2019.

Leadership and Personality

Scholars have also emphasized the role of Mao in initiating costly interventions in the Korean War and other Cold War–era conflicts. The role of leadership personalities in contemporary nonwar missions is less clear, in part because other factors, such as economic interests and the external threats posed to them, appear to provide more-compelling drivers.

Mao's comments and observations about international politics provide insight into possible personal reasons that the supreme leader may have had for directing major interventions. Proposed motivations have included calculations to leverage international incidents for domestic advantage, personal beliefs about the value of war for constructing a communist society, and fears of domestic consequences for failure to take action.⁹⁷

Scholars continue to debate the role of the supreme leader in contemporary nonwar operations abroad. Although Xi's forceful and authoritarian political style arguably played an important role in the country's adoption of coercive tactics in the maritime domain near China's shores, its influence in missions farther abroad is less clear. The PLA increased its participation in UNPKOs and carried out NEOs and similar missions under predecessor Hu, who was widely regarded as a bland and more passive technocrat. PLA interventions abroad under Xi appear to have primarily changed in their increasing frequency.

Ideology

The desire by Beijing to demonstrate its commitment to communist and national liberationist ideology informed several efforts to intervene militarily, especially in developing countries during the Cold War. However, the role of ideology in contemporary nonwar missions abroad is less clear.

During the Cultural Revolution, for example, Chinese leaders sought to export revolutionary communist ideology. China occasionally sent military advisers and troops while relying primarily on politi-

⁹⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution*, New York: Viking Press, 1972, p. 71.

cal methods. For example, scholars have argued that Mao's decision to furnish military aid and advisers to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam throughout the 1950s and 1960s reflected, in part, a political imperative to demonstrate China's support for Communist national liberationist movements. Qiang Zhai regarded the "need to form a broad international united front against both the United States and the Soviet Union" as a primary driver of Beijing's decision to furnish military aid and advisers to Vietnam.⁹⁸ Andrew Scobell emphasized China's ideological commitment to a "cult of the defense" as a factor in decisions to use force.⁹⁹

Scholars note that Beijing's decision to increase its role in military assistance to countries in Africa and throughout the developing world owed, in part, to its competition for influence and status with the Soviet Union to be leader of the communist world and to its desire to spread a liberationist ideology. Robert Scalapino, a political scientist at the University of California at Berkeley, noted, for example, how China's engagement in Africa spanned military assistance and also political and economic help. He assessed that such activities supported Chinese policy aimed at "establishing a series of dual images: A China dedicated to revolution and the overthrow of imperialism everywhere, but also a China committed to peaceful coexistence and non-interference in the internal affairs of states having a different social system."¹⁰⁰

Today, the CCP has downplayed the role of Marxism in its foreign policy dealing. A more pragmatic set of deals upheld by Beijing centers on the role of the UN in international politics and ideas about how disputes should be resolved. The Chinese government has held the position that interventions in other countries should be authorized by the UN as a way to uphold the international order and minimize the risks posed by unilateral military attack. An example is Chinese participation in UNPKOs. A study of China's criticism of the "Right to Protect" concept noted that China has typically preferred multilateral

⁹⁸ Qiang Zhai, 2000, p. 146.

⁹⁹ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Scalapino, "Sino-Soviet Competition in Africa," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1964, p. 1.

approaches authorized by the UN. Beijing has also tended to insist that “all peaceful means should be tried before the international community takes the military choice.”¹⁰¹

The example of Taiwan suggests evidence of yet another ideology that appears to influence Chinese motivations to undertake military interventions. In this case, it is nationalism driving Chinese attitudes about intervention across the Taiwan Strait. China has not undertaken a large-scale intervention to date targeting Taiwan, although it did engage in several more-limited interventions in the early Cold War period. This nationalism manifests in a strong and continued desire to unify Taiwan with the mainland, with PRC leaders continuing to regard Taiwanese independence as a likely trigger for war. Chinese nationalism in this case may increase the risk of a future Chinese military intervention against the island.

Enablers

To carry out interventions in distant locales, key military capabilities may be required, such as long-distance transportation, overseas basing, and forces organized for expeditionary activity. In China’s case, a weak and impoverished PLA intervened against its neighbors closer at hand despite a lack of adequate capacity. Military enablers play a more important role in contemporary operations, because of the distances involved. However, the relatively modest size of these nonwar missions has resulted in a relatively low level of military requirements, which the PLA has easily met.

In major combat interventions ranging from the Korean War to the Sino-Vietnam War, logistics remained a weakness. In the Sino-Vietnam War, analysts noted how artillery pieces were often pulled by hand and supplies were often lagging or wanting.¹⁰² Despite inadequate infrastructure and a fragmented logistics system, the PLA carried out large-scale combat operations in wars from the 1950s to the 1970s.

¹⁰¹ Liu Tiewa, “China and Responsibility to Protect: Maintenance and Change of its Policy for Intervention,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2012, pp. 153–173.

¹⁰² Ed O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, New York: Routledge, 2007.

However, the same limitations prevented the PLA from operating any farther than across borders and within a few short miles offshore.

Decades of rapid military modernization since the 1970s have yielded the buildup of key capabilities vital to the PLA's ability to conduct operations in distant locales, such as the Gulf of Aden. In particular, sturdy modern surface ships, replenishment vessels, and long-distance transport aircraft provide a reliable means of conveying troops far from China. The PLA's requirements for the relatively modest set of nonwar missions to date can be met with such assets, although the limited inventory of aircraft imposes constraints on operational tempo.¹⁰³

Conclusion

The literature review suggests that the incentives and conditions that underpinned interventions in the Cold War differ significantly from military interventions undertaken by the PLA more recently. Beijing today finds itself confronted with a significantly different strategic situation and a host of new security challenges different from the preceding era. The early leaders of the PRC grappled with the formidable task of establishing the new government's authority over an unsettled domestic political situation and autarkic economy while confronting a hostile international environment characterized by powerful and menacing ideological rivals. China today faces a relatively stable and peaceful domestic and international situation. Its rapid rise has exacerbated problems of vulnerable far-flung interests, however, even as Beijing continues to manage persistent hot spots near Taiwan, the Indian border, and the maritime domains that could spark into full-blown conflicts requiring large-scale combat interventions.

Table 2.3 summarizes the evidence we found both for and against each potential factor we considered in the existing research. According to past work, during the Cold War, perceptions of external threat,

¹⁰³ Christina L. Garafola and Timothy R. Heath, *The Chinese Air Force's First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2056-AF, 2017, p. 30.

domestic legitimacy concerns, ideology, and the importance of allies and partnerships played key roles in driving Chinese interventions. By contrast, existing work suggests that post–Cold War military interventions appear to have been driven more by concerns about economic interests, nontraditional threats, and concern about national status. Existing research identified several factors that have contributed to intervention decisions in both periods, although they may have manifested in different forms. These factors include concerns about Chinese citizens, the nation’s status, various external threats, and the importance of regional and global balance and stability.

Scholars have noted how some factors appeared to influence certain type of operations but not others. For example, the role of Chinese citizens in driving Beijing to direct military interventions can be clearly established in such activities as NEOs. In other cases, however, this factor can be irrelevant, as in Chinese activities to tighten control of desolate reefs in disputed maritime regions or in HA/DR missions for African countries. Similarly, economic considerations may loom in PLA missions to safeguard shipping lanes and counter maritime piracy but play a far less significant role in such missions as participation in UNPKOs.

Despite the apparently sharp divide between Cold War and more recent Chinese military interventions, however, the possibility cannot be ruled out that some conditions evocative of the Cold War period might resurface, albeit in less-acute forms. In particular, a growing sense of threat from the United States and its allies, and tumult from Xi’s divisive political style, could steer the future of Chinese military interventions more in the direction of its earlier pattern, especially if tensions with the United States occur over issues where there remains strong Chinese nationalist sentiment.

Table 2.3 is an initial assessment of these factors based on past research and a set of expectations that we explore further in Chapters Four and Five of this report.

Table 2.3
Potential Factors in Chinese Military Interventions from Literature Review

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Assessment from Literature
Regional power balance	Interventions have acted against any change in the distribution of capabilities; operations in Korean War restored stable, divided peninsula; invasion of Vietnam restored Chinese influence; PRC backing weakened French and U.S. influence in Southeast Asia; Beijing today is concerned about the stability in areas related to the BRI and maritime shipping lanes	No military invasions in post-Cold War era to counter U.S. efforts to build coalitions and strengthen alliances	Military intervention was a useful tool for this purpose in Cold War, but a wealthier contemporary China relies more on nonmilitary tools to promote favorable balance and weaken rivals' influence in a less risky way
External threat to sovereignty	Cold War leaders cited threat posed by the United States and the Soviets as primary reasons for most interventions; contemporary Chinese leaders cite traditional threats of Taiwan separatism, challenges to PRC control of maritime regions, nontraditional threats as reasons for PLA modernization	Some contemporary missions do not appear to address any threat, such as persistent Gulf of Aden patrols after piracy largely suppressed	The source of the threat has changed, but a need to counter both traditional and nontraditional threats to sovereignty remains a primary driver of Chinese military interventions
National status concerns	Contemporary rulers cite PLA role in countering global threats as reflective of great-power status; Cold War leaders determined to show PRC's credibility	Does not clearly explain variation in intervention behavior; limited contemporary interventions against global issues yield minor gains in status	A contributing factor, especially in periods of strategic competition, such as the Cold War and the current period of strategic competition; other factors likely more directly affected intervention choices

Table 2.3—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Assessment from Literature
Alliance or partnership concerns	Korean intervention undertaken on behalf of North Korean ally; Chinese alliance with Cambodia justified attack on Vietnam; Chinese leaders promote benefits of contemporary partnerships in Africa and developing world	China no longer maintains alliances; only one military base abroad (Djibouti) today.	An important factor in key Cold War conflicts but plays a lesser role in the nonwar interventions of today
Domestic politics and legitimacy	Insecure CCP regime in Cold War, elite rivalry; fear of internal enemies contributed to major combat interventions; military actions to protect Chinese citizens abroad today remain very popular	Little evidence (beyond general support) that domestic politics played a key role when Hu directed PLA to carry out nonwar missions abroad in 2004	A key role in the Cold War, and the popularity of overseas missions to protect Chinese citizens endures as a factor; however, it is difficult to disentangle this factor from other pillars of popular support for contemporary CCP, such as prosperous, growing economy
Economic interests	Chinese nonwar missions today generally aim to protect sea lanes, investments, infrastructure, workers abroad	Impoverished China had little to gain economically from Cold War–era interventions.	Economic interests matter far more for a globally integrated China today than it did when Mao oversaw an autarkic China
Coidentity group populations in host country	Ethnic Chinese mistreatment cited as reason for invasion of Vietnam; some nonwar missions today are aimed at protecting citizens abroad, such as NEOs	Not a factor in key Cold War–era conflicts, such as the Korean War and Sino-Indian War; not a factor in some nonwar missions today, such as UNPKO and countermaritime piracy	A contributing factor to some Cold War conflicts and an important driver of NEOs, but it is not a factor in other interventions

Table 2.3—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Assessment from Literature
Leadership and personality	Mao's towering personality was a key factor in key Cold War clashes; Deng played a major role in Sino-Vietnam clash; Xi's forceful personality likely contributes to tougher stance on disputes	Interventions under Xi are mostly consistent with those of technocratic predecessor Hu.	A clearly important factor in high-stakes Cold War clashes; less decisive in contemporary era of nonwar missions
Ideology	Revolutionary enthusiasm, competition with Soviets infused clashes in Vietnam, Korea, and military assistance operations against Soviet proxies during the Cold War; nationalism also is a factor, especially about Taiwan	Contemporary interventions rarely accompanied by ideological proclamations beyond pledges of Chinese peaceful intentions, visions of "China Dream"	An important factor in the Cold War but less relevant in current nonwar missions; nationalism retains salience as a potential driver of intervention over Taiwan
Enablers	Decades of modernization have resulted in military forces capable of conveying more forces at greater distances today; more economic resources to support military activities	PLA intervened despite adequate logistics and capabilities in its bloodiest wars (i.e., Korea, Vietnam); contemporary nonwar missions do not have especially demanding military requirements	This is a contributing factor for contemporary interventions but was less relevant for Cold War-era conflicts

Patterns in Chinese Military Interventions

To anticipate future Chinese military interventions, it is helpful to first understand where, when, and under what circumstances China has intervened since 1946. Whereas the literature review in the previous chapter highlighted several broad patterns in Chinese interventions, this chapter reviews the results of our effort to provide a more systematic look, using the data set we collected of every Chinese military intervention since 1946.¹ First, we describe how we collected this information, including our definition for military interventions and the additional variables describing characteristics of these interventions that we coded. We then present several descriptive statistics and graphs that illustrate key patterns in the historical data of Chinese military interventions. We conclude with a brief examination of patterns in the data that relate to hypotheses discussed in Chapter Two.

Identifying Chinese Military Interventions

Per the definition provided in Chapter One, we define a *Chinese military intervention* as any deployment of military forces to another country (or international waters or airspace) during the 1946–2018 period in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the

¹ This effort is part of a larger effort to collect all military interventions by U.S. adversaries, detailed in Kavanagh et al., 2021. Although there were no Chinese military interventions until 1949, other adversaries intervened earlier—therefore, the technical start of the data is 1946.

size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged.²

The purpose of the size criteria was to eliminate very small uses of force that may be more difficult to track consistently over time and instead focus attention on those uses of force by adversaries most likely to present challenges of capability and capacity for U.S. forces. This threshold means that our data will not capture many of the smaller activities carried out by adversaries—and, for some adversaries, this is a meaningful portion of their overall activities. Still, the analysis presented captures important insights for military planners and policy-makers aiming at a different set of threats.

The purpose of the requirement that the forces involved be engaged in a particular set of activities was to eliminate cases in which a state might forward-deploy forces as a convenient alternative to basing them at home but in which the forces were otherwise engaged in the same activities they would have been doing inside the country and were not substantially interacting with or affecting the host state or population. As an additional criterion, the forces involved must have been part of the country's military; interventions by state-aligned paramilitary forces, proxy organizations, and/or intelligence services are excluded. More details on the size and activity type criteria are included next.

² Implicit in this definition is some ambiguity regarding the sovereign status of disputed territories, which is relevant for any determination of when a country's military can be said to have intervened outside its borders. In this study, we consider sovereign countries to be those included in Correlates of War's country code list. Additionally, to determine whether individual adversary incursions into disputed territories constituted a foreign intervention per se (versus a deployment of forces within a country's borders), we referred to the Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims data set to determine whether, in disputed territory, the actor was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed to have possession of the territory) or the challenger was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed not to have possession of the territory, and, therefore, it was assumed that this territory was a possible location for a military intervention). See Correlates of War Project, "State System Membership (v2016)," undated; and Bryan A. Frederick, Paul R. Hensel, and Christopher Macaulay, "The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2001," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017, pp. 99–108.

Force Size Threshold

To warrant inclusion, either the deployed ground, naval, and/or air forces of the Chinese intervention force had to cross minimum size thresholds, which were designed to be relatively inclusive. The minimum size thresholds included different specifications depending on the domain in which forces were operating: land, sea, or air. To qualify as an intervention on the basis of ground forces, the deployment had to include military personnel from any service branch deployed for at least 100 person-years. This size threshold could include 100 troops deployed for one year or a larger number of troops deployed for a shorter period of time (e.g., 200 troops for six months or 1,200 troops for one month).³ This person-year size threshold needs to be met in each year of the intervention, however. So, a deployment of ten troops for ten years would not qualify.

To qualify as an intervention on the basis of the naval forces involved, the deployment had to involve the presence of a substantial portion of China's naval forces rather than the isolated deployment of a small number of ships. This relatively higher bar for inclusion (in comparison with ground forces) was adopted because of the inherently more mobile nature of naval forces to avoid coding a large number of naval-only interventions involving the deployment of one or two ships that may not even have been explicitly decided on or authorized by national-level decisionmakers. In the RAND U.S. Military Intervention Dataset, on which this effort was modeled, a U.S. carrier strike group or larger force was required for a naval intervention to be identified.⁴ Given the smaller number of carriers in the navies of non-U.S. states, we did not use this same criterion, but we attempted to use a

³ In some rare instances, force levels during a multiyear intervention might temporarily fall below this threshold for an isolated year (and then again rise above it); as a general rule of thumb, we would nonetheless code it as a continuous mission. However, if there were long periods beneath this threshold (either after the withdrawal of major forces or in the run-up to the deployment of major forces), then the intervention would be broken up into different cases or otherwise these years would be excluded.

⁴ Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra Stark, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Matthew Povlock, Lynn E. Davis, and Edward Geist, *Characteristics of Successful U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3062-A, 2019.

standard that represented an approximately equivalent proportion of that state's naval forces. In addition, interventions involving any substantial kinetic naval activity, such as battles, skirmishes, or strikes using naval aircraft or missiles, were included regardless of the number and/or class of naval ships involved.

We took a similar approach to coding a Chinese intervention on the basis of the air forces involved. Whereas the deployment for the United States was required to involve either roughly one wing-year of aircraft (e.g., about 80 planes employed for a year or 160 planes for six months), the size threshold was interpreted proportionally when identifying Chinese interventions according to the relative disparity in baseline air force sizes. In addition, substantial instances of air-to-air or air-to-ground combat or strikes were included without needing to meet the plane-year size threshold.⁵ This methodology permits a manageable set of incidents for purposes of analyses but admittedly is imperfect. The threshold of 100 person-years means that the majority of smaller-scale Chinese nonwar missions in the post–Cold War period are omitted from consideration, since they involve smaller deployments for generally short durations. Although the omission is an important one for China because of its relatively limited experience with military activities abroad, we nevertheless upheld the threshold as a useful means of focusing attention on larger operations that could hold more salient implications for the U.S. Department of Defense.

Force Activity Type

Beyond meeting these size parameters, the forces involved must have conducted at least one of the following ten activity types to satisfy our definition of a military intervention. Intentionally absent from this activity type taxonomy are categories for NEOs and general logistics, support, and communications.⁶ Additionally, we do not include in our

⁵ Minor air-to-air incidents, such as the downing of a single fighter in contested airspace, would not meet this threshold. Likewise, in most cases, instances involving limited artillery or mortar fires across international borders at random targets would generally not constitute a foreign intervention absent other conditions.

⁶ We exclude NEOs because they almost always fall below our 100 person-year threshold, making it difficult for us to reliably capture these activities universally. There would be a

definition of foreign interventions general forward-deployments of troops and/or supplies and weapon depots, unless they also satisfy one of the following activity types (e.g., a clear deterrent function). The ten activity types are

1. **advisory and foreign internal defense.** Interventions involving military advisers or trainers. The focus of these interventions is typically on preparing host-nation personnel to operate on their own.
2. **counterinsurgency.** Interventions involving counterinsurgency activities, including “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.”⁷
3. **combat and conventional warfare.** Interventions characterized by formations of organized military forces deployed to conduct kinetic operations. The majority of interventions in this category involve the application of violent force by the intervener, but we also include cases in this category in which an intervener enters the territory of another state prepared for such an action but does not meet with armed resistance, and therefore violence does not result.
4. **deterrence and signaling.** Interventions involving activities intended to send a signal to a potential adversary or other state regarding the intentions or capabilities of the intervener. Most cases in this category involve the deployment of military forces for deterrent purposes, but forces might be deployed in other instances to signal aggressive intent, intimidation, or coercion. In China’s case, an example would be the in-country deployment of PLA troops as a deterrent to U.S. invasion of North Vietnam.

strong recency bias, with these activities being more likely to be recorded during the post-Cold War period, for which we have better data. As a type of activity, however, NEOs could be considered a type of security operation, in that they protect personal safety.

⁷ Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 25, 2018, p. iii.

5. **HA/DR.** Interventions involving humanitarian and relief operations, including responses to natural disasters and conflict. These must be sizable efforts to meet the study threshold, involving at least 100 person-years' worth of activity. Smaller-scale efforts involving one or two transport aircraft or small crews of personnel, which includes most of the PLA's HA/DR experiences, are not considered here.
6. **security.** Interventions involving protection of the adversary's assets (e.g., embassies, corporations) or civilian personnel during periods of threat or unrest.
7. **stability operations.** Interventions involving operations to stabilize or maintain peace in postconflict situations. These may include operations following coups or other situations causing unrest among the civilian population. These may also involve participation in multilateral peacekeeping operations, such as UNPKOs.
8. **interdiction (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations to interdict foreign military ships or aircraft, trade or arms shipments, or refugees or migrants (e.g., naval blockades, no-fly zones).
9. **lift and transport (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on movement of people and supplies (not applicable to ground interventions).⁸

⁸ Of the possibly activity types, lift and transport is distinct in some ways. Most notably, it is a supporting function in some ways, often but not always intended to enable other functions. This taxonomy was developed in an earlier project for the coding of U.S. military interventions. In that context, we felt it necessary to add this code to capture the tremendous contributions of air and naval forces to a few types of interventions. Although transport of troops and supplies to support combat or stabilization missions is one category, another category is transport of humanitarian supplies. In this second type of intervention, the supply of humanitarian materials was not an enabler but was *the objective* of the mission. Examples include the Berlin Airlift in 1948 (also coded as deterrence) and the Congo Airlift in 1960 (no other coding). In the adversary context, there are few cases in which lift and transport was the only naval and air activity, but we leave the activity code here for consistency and apply it when adversary and air and naval contributions exceed the threshold.

10. **intelligence and reconnaissance (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on intelligence or reconnaissance functions (not applicable to ground interventions).

In some cases, only one or two activity types may have been relevant to a given case; in others, more than three could arguably apply. For each intervention, the adversary database thus codes up to three activity types for each force type involved in the case (ground, naval, air), denoting the dominant or most common activity for each force, followed by the secondary and tertiary activity for each.

Researching Cases of Intervention

To identify the universe of Chinese cases satisfying the definitions noted earlier, our research proceeded in three broad steps. First, with the intent of casting a wide initial net, we collected and aggregated case information from a variety of respected data sets on historical military interventions, such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset, the International Crisis Behavior data set, the Correlates of War Inter-State Wars data set, the Correlates of War Intra-State Wars data set, the Militarized Interstate Dispute data set, the Military Interventions by Powerful States data set, the International Military Intervention data set, and the International Peace Institute Peacekeeping Database.⁹ We further

⁹ Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, September 2002; Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000; Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Whelon Wayman, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-State, Extra-State, Intra-State, and Non-State Wars, 1816–2007*, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010; Glenn Palmer, Vito D'Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane, "The MID4 Dataset, 2002–2010: Procedures, Coding Rules and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2015; Faten Ghosn, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart A. Bremer, "The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2004; Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996; Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5, September 2009; Frederic S. Pearson and Robert A. Bau-

supplemented this preliminary list by crossing it with other secondary reference resources, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *The Military Balance*, and hundreds of declassified U.S and foreign government documents, academic and think tank reports, and news articles.¹⁰

Second, this preliminary case list of Chinese interventions was divided among RAND subject-matter experts, who expanded, vetted, and refined it with primary and secondary resources. During this secondary stage of in-depth case-by-case investigation, many preliminarily identified potential events were deemed not to meet all of the definitional parameters described earlier and were ultimately excluded from the case universe. Finally, the refined case universe was subjected to multiple rounds of iterative, case-by-case reviews by different research team members to ensure consistent case inclusion coding standards were applied across all actors and cases.

Key Variables Collected

Having identified a case of Chinese military intervention, we then collected several additional pieces of information about each case. Some of these variables have already been noted earlier: detailed information about the size of the intervention and the activities in which the forces were engaged. This information was collected both at the intervention level (including typical or average values) and at the location-year level, enabling an understanding of how the size or activities of an intervention force may have changed over time. This also allowed us to specify the forces and activities associated with specific countries in instances where an intervention might take place in multiple countries.

Beyond the size and activity type variables, we also collected detailed information on the political objectives motivating the inter-

mann, *International Military Intervention, 1946–1988*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 6035, University of Michigan, 1993; Emizer F. Kisangani and Jeffrey Pickering, *International Military Intervention, 1989–2005*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 21282, University of Michigan, 2008.

¹⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2020*, London: Routledge, February 2020.

vention and the degree of success that China had in achieving them.¹¹ When collecting the list of political objectives, we made a distinction between political and military or operational objectives.¹² We further collected the specific years in which each political objective was being pursued, allowing objectives to change over the course of the intervention. Although state policymakers in some cases were forthcoming about their objectives for an intervention, they appear to have been less so in other cases. Therefore, we relied not only on public statements but also on historical and other analyses that gave additional clues as to the true motivations of policymakers in pursuing an intervention.

Having identified the set of political objectives states pursued in each intervention, we then coded the degree of success they had in achieving them. We coded success using a straightforward three-part scale: *success*, *some success*, and *no success*. The success of each objective was assessed by multiple coders with familiarity with the case, and discrepancies were adjudicated by the larger project team. The data on political objectives and success do not bear directly on the key questions in this report of anticipating when and where China is likely to undertake future military interventions, but we present descriptive statistics of these data next and aim to pursue the implications of these data further in future research.

¹¹ Further discussion of our objective and success codings can be found in Kavanagh et al., forthcoming.

¹² Political objectives, generally speaking, went to the *why* of the intervention: What motivated state decisionmakers to undertake the intervention? What were they hoping to accomplish? Therefore, we did not include military or operational objectives, the *how* of the intervention, that leaders may have also established as means or signposts toward achieving the political objectives. For example, the U.S. intervention in Iraq after 2003 had a political objective of stabilizing the country. In service of that political objective, United States set a host of military or operational objectives, such as benchmarks for the numbers of Iraqi police trained and for provinces with reduced levels of insurgent activity. The data we collected on objectives were entirely focused on the former, political type.

Table 3.1
Chinese Military Interventions, 1949–2018

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
Post–Chinese Civil War Clashes with Taiwan/Battle of Dongshan Island	Dongshan Island (Taiwan occupied)	1950	1950
Korean War	South Korea, North Korea	1950	1953
Post–Chinese Civil War Clashes with Taiwan/Hainan Island Campaign	Taiwan/Hainan Island	1950	1950
First Indochina War (Advisory/Assistance Mission)	Vietnam	1950	1956
Chinese Incursions into Disputed Burmese Territory	Burma/Myanmar	1952	1956
Post–Korean War Reconstruction of North Korea	North Korea	1953	1958
First Taiwan Straits Crisis	Taiwan (Taiwan Straits)	1954	1955
Second Taiwan Straits Crisis	Taiwan (Taiwan Straits)	1958	1958
Sino-Indian Border Crisis at Longju	India (Longju region)	1959	1960
Chinese Incursions into Burma Against Kuomintang Guerrilla Bases	Burma/Myanmar	1961	1961
Sino-Indian War	India (Assam)	1962	1962
Vietnam War	North Vietnam	1965	1971
Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Nathu La and Cho La	India	1967	1967
Chinese Road Construction and Defense in Laos	Laos	1967	1978
Myanmar Insurgency	Burma/Myanmar	1968	1971
Sino-Soviet Border Conflict	Soviet Union (Ussuri River and Zhenbao Island)	1969	1969
Battle of the Paracel Islands	Paracel Islands	1974	1974

Table 3.1—Continued

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
Chinese Advisory and Training Mission to Angolan Guerrillas in Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo	Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo	1974	1975
Sino-Vietnam Border Clashes	Vietnam	1975	1979
Chinese Training and Advisory Mission in Cambodia	Cambodia	1977	1978
Sino-Vietnam War (Third Indochina War)	Vietnam	1979	1979
Naval Activities in the South China Sea	South China Sea	1981	Ongoing
1981 Sino-Vietnam Border Clash	Vietnam	1981	1981
Chinese Occupation of Laoshan and Dongshan	Vietnam	1984	1992
Sino-Vietnam Naval Battle in the Spratly Islands/Johnson Reef Skirmish	Spratly Islands	1988	1988
UNPKO in Cambodia	Cambodia	1992	1993
UNPKO in Democratic Republic of the Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo	2003	Ongoing
UNPKO in Liberia	Liberia	2004	2017
UNPKO in Lebanon	Lebanon	2006	Ongoing
UNPKO in Sudan	Sudan, South Sudan	2006	Ongoing
Counterpiracy Mission to the Gulf of Aden and Base in Djibouti	Djibouti, Gulf of Aden	2008	Ongoing
UNPKO in Darfur	Sudan (Darfur)	2008	Ongoing
UNPKO in Mali	Mali	2014	Ongoing

NOTE: China's South China Sea naval activities are coded as an intervention in our data. However, as discussed earlier, we rely on Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims coding to determine which territories where ground forces may be located are considered "abroad" for a given adversary. According to the coding in Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims, China's South China Sea military bases do not meet this criterion and, therefore, are not included in our list of interventions.

Table 3.2
Illustrative Examples of Additional Recent Chinese Activities Below Size Threshold

Intervention	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
NEO	Libya	2011	2011
Ebola virus response	West Africa	2014	2015
HA/DR	Nepal	2015	2015

Describing Chinese Military Interventions

Using this approach, we identified 33 Chinese military interventions undertaken since 1949. A complete list of the interventions we identified is found in Table 3.1.

In Table 3.2, we also include three operations that do not meet the size threshold for inclusion in our data set to provide an illustrative look at an increasing number of small, nonwar operations undertaken by the PLA in recent years: the NEO from Libya in 2011, the Ebola virus response in West Africa from 2014 to 2015, and the HA/DR mission to Nepal in 2015. Each of these operations involved as many as several hundred PLA personnel but usually for a very brief time of days to weeks: Therefore, the three do not meet the threshold for inclusion in our data set. Nonetheless, we list them here for reference because they were among the larger-scale operations of their type and they help to provide additional context regarding the types of operations increasingly undertaken by PLA forces in recent years.

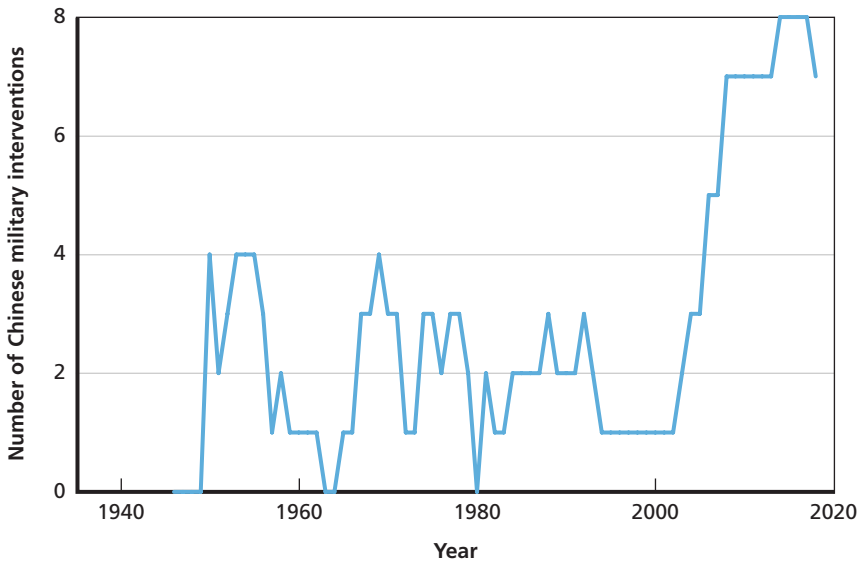
In the remainder of this chapter, we use these data to answer our first set of research questions: How, how often, and where have China's military forces intervened abroad?

How and How Often Has China Intervened?

The number of military interventions being undertaken by China since 1949 can be seen in Figure 3.1.

As Figure 3.1 shows, the number of Chinese military interventions has increased dramatically in recent years. However, as shown in Figure 3.2, these newer interventions have been quite limited in scale

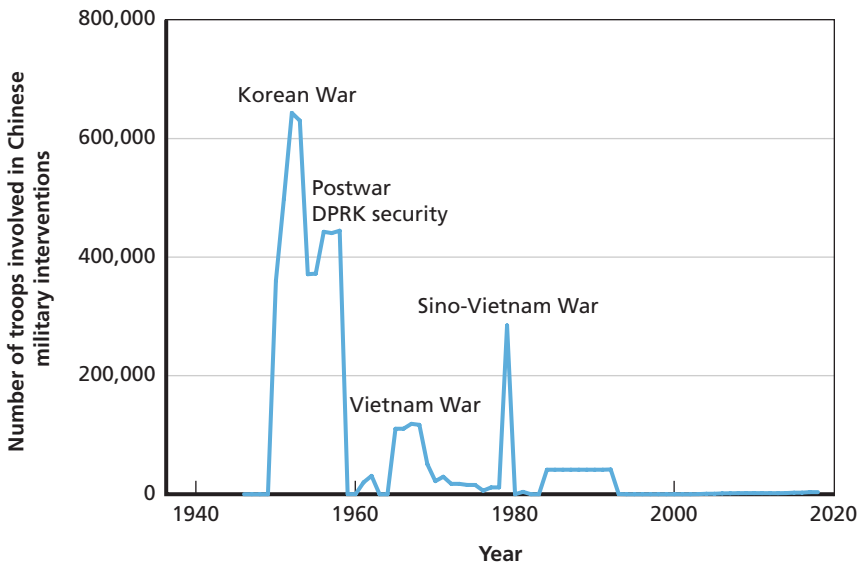
Figure 3.1
Number of Ongoing Chinese Military Interventions, 1949–2018



in comparison with those undertaken in earlier periods. This pattern is consistent with the dramatic change in China's threat perceptions that occurred in recent decades. During the Cold War, acute perceptions of external and domestic threats, intense ideological competition, and obligations to military partners drove major interventions. By contrast, a more stable and peaceful post-Cold War security environment and increasing concern about issues of economic interests have occasioned smaller-scale nonwar interventions in recent years.

Large spikes in the numbers of troops involved in Chinese interventions can be seen around the Korean War and its aftermath, as well as multiple clashes with Vietnam in the late 1970s and 1980s. The intensity of Chinese perceptions of threat from its Cold War rivals, the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies (as noted in Chapter Two), might explain these patterns. The more recent increase in the number of interventions (shown in Figure 3.1) all involve relatively limited numbers of forces (see Figure 3.2). This suggests that concerns about economic interests and China's status as a great power,

Figure 3.2
Number of Troops Involved in Chinese Military Interventions, 1949–2018



SOURCE: RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

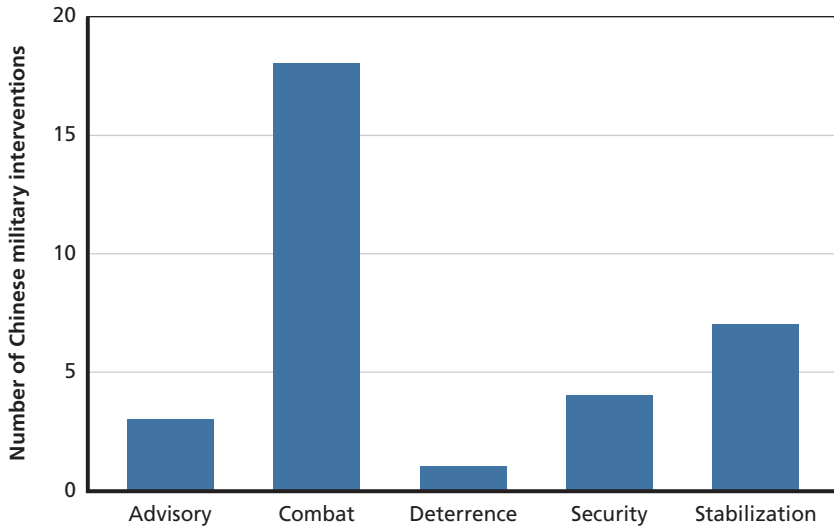
NOTE: DPRK = Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

which seem to be driving Chinese intervention decisions during this period, have provided weaker motives for interventions abroad, given the country's generally peaceful and stable security environment in the post–Cold War era.

Chinese interventions have also varied substantially by their primary activity type, as shown in Figure 3.3.

Interventions where the primary activity was combat have been by far the most frequent type of Chinese military intervention for operations involving more than 100 person-years. Stabilization missions have been the next most common. These include the counterpiracy missions near the Gulf of Aden. Although these types of missions historically have been the most common, there are important temporal and regional patterns regarding when and where they have typically taken place. As shown in Figure 3.4, for example, combat interventions have been concentrated in earlier periods. The deterrent mission cap-

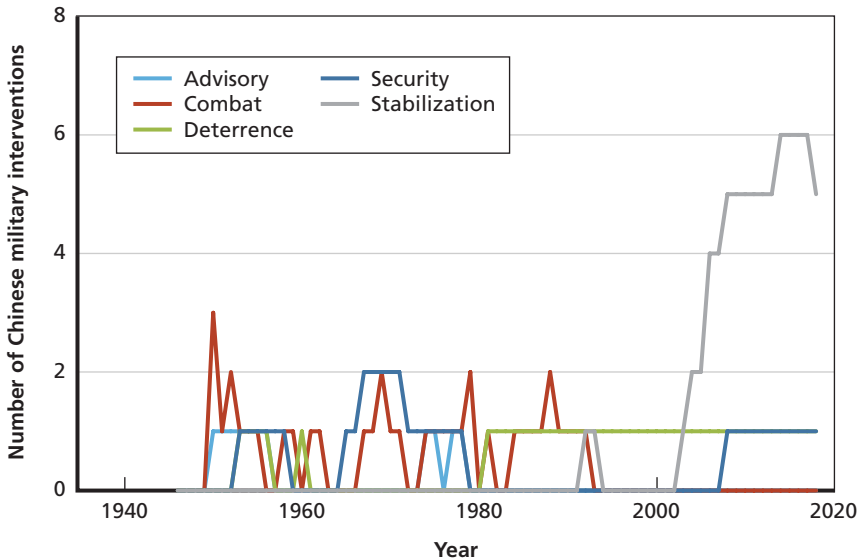
Figure 3.3
Number of Chinese Military Interventions, by Activity Type (1949–2018)



tured in the data is the PLA's deployment of troops to deter the United States from sending troops into North Vietnam. Since the end of the Cold War, the PLA has participated in dozens of nonwar missions, including HA/DR, NEO, and personnel recovery, but the small sizes of the forces and brief duration of relevant activities mean that most of these operations do not meet the threshold for consideration and thus fall outside the scope of this report and are not captured in our data.

China has not undertaken a new combat mission since the 1980s, although such efforts were quite common during the Cold War. Chinese stabilization missions, meanwhile, have increased dramatically since 2000. Some of these have been undertaken under the auspices of the UN. However, as noted in Figure 3.2, the scale of these recent stabilization missions should not be overstated. Figure 3.5 shows that although these missions may be increasing in number, they do not represent a substantial commitment of Chinese troops in comparison with several larger historical interventions. The same is true of PLA involvement in other nonwar missions, such as NEOs and HA/DR activi-

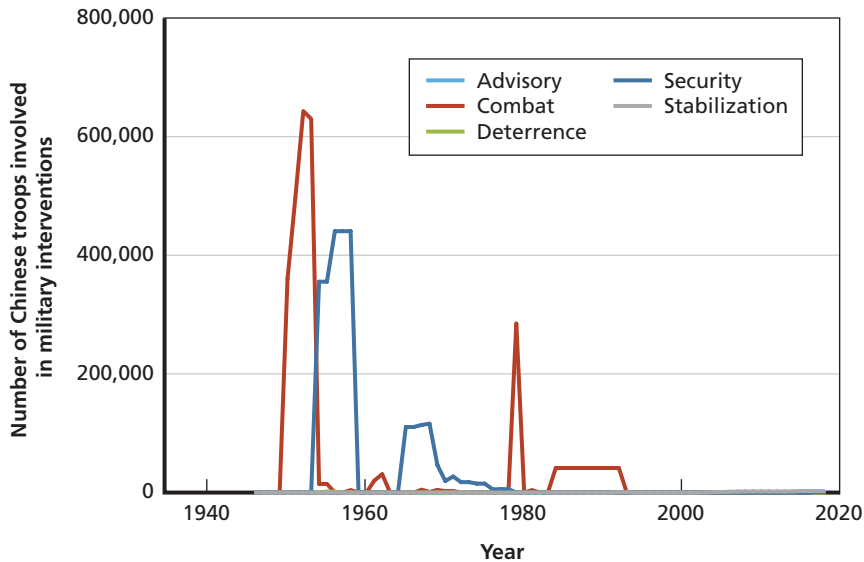
Figure 3.4
Number of Chinese Military Interventions Over Time, by Activity Type (1949–2018)



ties, many of which involve so few troops that they are not counted in our data set. The contrasting Cold War and post–Cold War drivers highlighted in the preceding chapter suggest Beijing has found smaller-scale, nonwar military interventions sufficient for its pursuit of economic interests, bolstering of China’s national status, and protection of citizens abroad.

Historically, Chinese forces committed to combat and security missions have involved the largest number of troops; those committed to other activities, including the recent increase in stabilization missions, have been notably smaller. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that stabilization, deterrence and signaling, or advisory missions are not significant in political or strategic terms, only that they typically involve dramatically smaller numbers of Chinese troops. As noted in the previous chapter, the nature of the threat faced by Chinese forces provides one important explanation. In the Cold War, Chinese leaders faced an acute sense of danger from powerful rivals, such as the United

Figure 3.5
Number of Chinese Troops Involved in Military Interventions, by Activity Type (1949–2018)



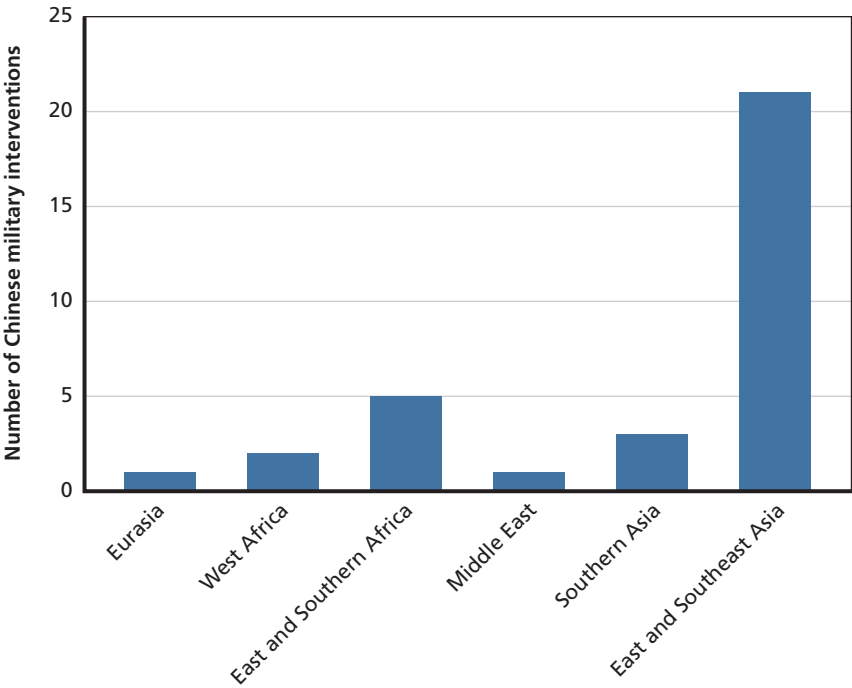
States and the Soviet Union. In such an environment, combat interventions could help weaken a rival, forestall more threatening attacks, or deter adversaries. The more benign environment faced by China in the post–Cold War period has mitigated this incentive, permitting smaller-scale interventions for the more-limited purposes of addressing primarily nontraditional threats.

Where Has China Intervened?

Figure 3.6 shows the number of Chinese military interventions undertaken by geographic region, highlighting the fact that most Chinese interventions have occurred in China’s region.¹³ Taking a closer look at China’s home region, we found that six of the 21 PRC interventions there have been in Northeast Asia, while the remaining 15 have been in

¹³ These regional divisions were based on a network analysis of the density of linkages among states. For more information, see Watts et al., 2017, p. 38–41.

Figure 3.6
Number of Chinese Military Interventions, by Region (1949–2018)



SOURCE: RAND Arroyo Center analysis

Southeast Asia.¹⁴ It is also worth noting that the last PRC intervention in Northeast Asia ended in 1958. Since that time, Chinese interventions in this region have been confined to Southeast Asia.

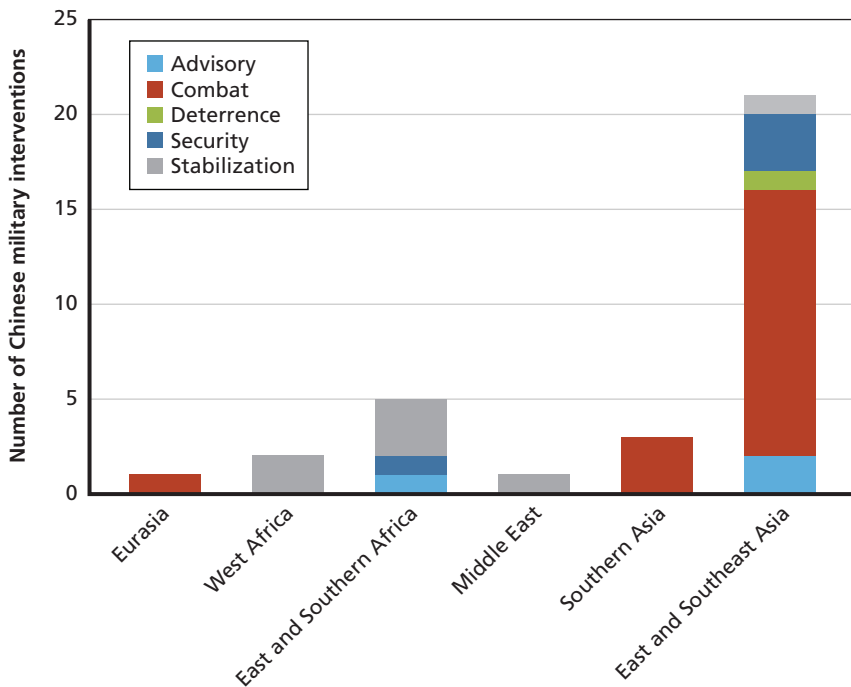
Although China has intervened as far away as West Africa, the large majority of its interventions have been relatively close to home. Beyond East and Southeast Asia, the next most frequent region has been East and Southern Africa, followed by South Asia. We identified no Chinese military interventions since 1949 in Europe or the

¹⁴ In this counting, Northeast Asia includes South Korea, North Korea, Japan, Russia, and Taiwan. Southeast Asia includes all of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations states and interventions in the South China Sea. Although there have been no PRC interventions there, there is a third potential subregion that includes the Pacific Island states and Oceania.

Americas. China sent a limited number of personnel to take part in a UN mission to Haiti in the 2000s, but they were law enforcement, not military personnel.¹⁵ This pattern likely reflects the combined effect of lower levels of Chinese interests in these latter regions, lower levels of transnational threats to Chinese interests from these regions, and limitations on Chinese power projection capabilities.

Putting together the regional and activity type lenses further illustrates the clear regional differences in how China has used its military forces abroad (see Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7
Number of Chinese Military Interventions, by Activity Type and Geographic Region (1949–2018)



SOURCE: RAND Arroyo Center analysis

¹⁵ Wu Chong, “UN: China ‘Remarkably Efficient’ in Haiti Aid,” *China Daily*, January 20, 2010.

China has undertaken combat missions frequently in East and Southeast Asia and, to a lesser extent, in other regions that it directly borders. Within its home region, five of the six interventions in Northeast Asia have been combat missions, involving either Korea or Taiwan, with the other focused on security. PRC activities in Southeast Asia have been somewhat more mixed, with nine of the 15 interventions involving combat (mostly in Vietnam or Myanmar), with the remainder split among advisory, security, stabilization, and deterrence missions. The combat missions in Eurasia and South Asia include China's conflicts with the Soviet Union and India in the 1960s. This pattern underscores the importance of intense threat perceptions, especially in the Cold War, as drivers of Chinese intervention behavior and the role of territorial disputes in aggravating those threat perceptions. Outside of these adjacent regions, however, China has not engaged in a combat intervention. Instead, Chinese interventions in Africa and the Middle East have been largely focused on stabilization, with limited advisory and security missions. The threats to Chinese interests in these regions have been primarily nontraditional in nature, such as threats to economic interests from civil wars and upheaval or natural disasters. In some ways, China's focus on interventions outside Asia underlines the general security and stability of its situation in Asia. Figures 3.6 and 3.7 together suggest that there may be two distinct geographies in how China thinks about military interventions: a "near abroad" where combat has been frequent (albeit not since the end of the Cold War) and regions further afield where Chinese forces may be present but only in more-limited numbers and only engaged in less-violent activities.

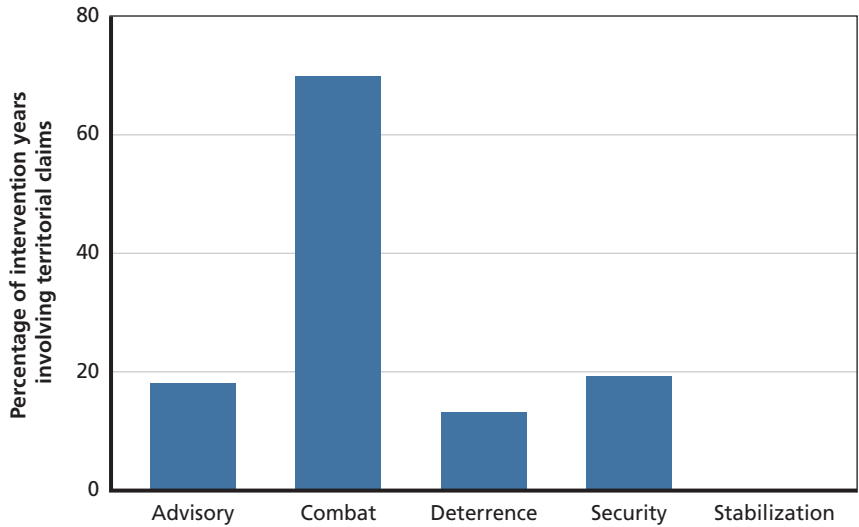
This section has presented basic patterns in Chinese military interventions. One key observation is the dramatic shift between Cold War and post-Cold War intervention behavior. This trend is likely explained by the changing nature of the external threat and of Chinese security interests across these two periods, key factors highlighted in our review of past work in Chapter Two. The significant change in the size, number, and type of Chinese military interventions after the Cold War, apparent in the trends shown in this chapter, provide additional evidence of the importance of these factors as driving Chinese intervention decisions. In particular, the striking patterns in large-scale

combat operations of the Cold War, and their absence thereafter, reflect the acute sense of domestic and international threat, fervent ideological competition, and struggle to meet the obligations of partner countries under threat from China's rivals in this period. The smaller-scale, more-distant interventions that are characteristic of the post-Cold War period reflect, by contrast, the more benign security environment confronting a prosperous China and the country's deepening dependence on external economic interests and interest in promoting China's prestige as a participant in multilateral peacekeeping operations.

However, there is one additional pattern worth presenting that will bear directly on these issues: the possible role of territorial disputes in prompting Chinese military interventions.¹⁶ Figure 3.8 shows the relative frequency with which Chinese military interventions overlapped with territorial disputes with which China was engaged with the host or target nation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese combat interventions have been substantially more likely to take place in countries with which China has an ongoing territorial dispute. Such interventions have occurred roughly 70 percent of the time in countries and at times when China and that country were engaged in a territorial dispute, although many other factors were involved in each case. Interventions involving other types of activities do not share the same pattern, generally overlapping with territorial disputes in less than 20 percent of intervention years. Meanwhile, there are no instances of Chinese stabilization missions overlapping with Chinese territorial disputes. For comparison, China was involved in territorial disputes from 1949 to 2013 in approximately 19 percent of all dyad (or pair of states) years involving other countries in East and Southeast Asia. Therefore, combat interventions, which have taken place primarily in this region, are more likely to occur when a Chinese territorial dispute is present, although the same cannot be said for other types of Chinese military interventions. This assessment is based on correlation only, not causation, and there are likely many factors that are shaping China's decision to use combat forces in these instances (including fac-

¹⁶ This factor will be discussed in detail in the subsequent case study on the Chinese war with Vietnam.

Figure 3.8
Percentage of Years of Chinese Military Interventions in States in Territorial Disputes with China, by Activity Type (1949–2013)



SOURCE: RAND Arroyo Center analysis based on Frederick, Hensel, and Macaulay, 2017.

NOTE: Territorial disputes identified from the Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims data set are limited to those involving medium or high salience. More details on this coding are available in Frederick, Hensel, and Macaulay, 2017.

tors that shape both China's intervention decisions and the existence of territorial disputes in certain regions). In other words, the data do suggest a relationship between the likelihood of combat interventions and territorial claims, but we cannot say with any certainty based on the analysis here that territorial claims guarantee or cause Chinese combat interventions.¹⁷

¹⁷ More generally, as will become clear in later chapters of the report, identifying causality when explaining why military interventions occur is exceedingly difficult because of the many different factors at play and the idiosyncrasies of decisions about military interventions. The factors we identify as shaping Chinese intervention decisions may increase the likelihood of such interventions but do not guarantee that they will occur.

In sum, Chinese military interventions outside of Asia are less likely to feature large-scale deployment of combat troops, and this may be, in part, due to the absence of territorial disputes and clear threats to Chinese sovereignty in these regions. By contrast, potential PLA interventions in any territory contested by China—all of which are in Asia—likely carry a higher risk of armed conflict.

Conclusion

The review of patterns in past Chinese military interventions reveals several key points. First, China's experience with military interventions has generally fallen into two archetypes. The first, which may be called an "old" type of interventionism, occurred primarily in the Cold War. These tended to feature combat and deterrence and signaling operations that took place almost exclusively on China's periphery. The size of the formations involved were large in many cases, with the largest involving hundreds of thousands of troops in the Korean War. Antagonistic relations with neighboring countries over territory and other issues contributed to a pattern of interventions of a largely hostile character. The patterns in activity noted in this chapter are generally consistent with the drivers posited in the literature review. In particular, the acute threat perceptions from Cold War rivals, obligations to partner nations (such as North Korea and North Vietnam) in their own wars with China's enemies, intense ideological conflict, acrimonious territorial disputes, and the role of outsize leadership personalities all provided strong incentives for China to engage in more combat interventions in the Cold War period, which the data have corroborated.

By contrast, the closing of the Cold War has seen the emergence of a new type of interventionism. These missions have occurred on a more frequent basis than in the Cold War but involve far smaller-sized forces, typically no more than a few hundred personnel at most, and with the important exception of the maritime patrols near the Gulf of Aden and activities to patrol and administer the South China Sea islands, generally for brief durations. The units operate at greater distances from China, as far away as sub-Saharan Africa, although the majority of activities

still occur in Asia. PLA units abroad have not engaged in combat missions but have rather tended to operate as part of multilateral efforts, principally under the auspices of the UN. The PLA has also undertaken several tens of other small, nonwar missions, such as HA/DR or NEOs, usually of a very limited scale involving no more than one to two transport aircrafts or a few dozen personnel (although not included in our intervention data set). Again, these findings appear to corroborate the points made in Chapter Two about the changing nature of incentives for contemporary interventions. In particular, a more benign security environment and shift in threat perceptions to nontraditional dangers, increased attention to economic interests, and desire for national prestige provide incentives for China to seek smaller-scale nonwar interventions at more distant removes from its shores.

As long as the main factors underpinning China's recent focus on nonwar interventions persist, they provide a strong motivation for Beijing to maintain its current pattern in intervention activity. But future developments could affect how this pattern evolves. For example, a flare-up in tensions with Taiwan could increase the risks of a large-scale military intervention there. Further afield, the establishment of a military post in Djibouti in 2017 opens possibilities to increase the tempo and variety of missions for PLA forces in a theater where that previously seemed infeasible.

The potential factors that could alter future Chinese intervention patterns will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six. In the next two chapters, we present two detailed case studies of Chinese interventions from each of its main historical intervention patterns: (1) a case study of the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam and (2) a case study of the counterpiracy intervention that led to the establishment of China's first overseas base in recent decades in Djibouti. These case studies are used to explore potential explanations for these representative types of interventions.

Case Study 1: 1979 Chinese Invasion of Vietnam

This chapter presents the first of our two case studies and is focused on China's most recent large-scale combat intervention in 1979. We use it to further explore the drivers of China's decisionmaking about military interventions, in this case with a specific focus on combat interventions.

Background

China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam shocked the world and has left many historians puzzled ever since. How could two countries go from fighting side by side to fighting one another in just five years? The PRC had helped midwife the North Vietnamese state into existence: It was Vietnamese soldiers and Chinese guns that defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu.¹ Between the fall of the French in the north and the large-scale deployment of U.S. conventional ground units in 1965, China continued to provide Vietnam with a steady stream of aid, despite its misgivings over Hanoi's aggressive aid to the Viet Cong in the South.²

When U.S. conventional ground forces became heavily involved in South Vietnam in 1965, Chinese assistance to Hanoi reached new heights. China redoubled its material aid to North Vietnam, and more than 100,000 PLA "volunteers" braved U.S. air raids to build, repair,

¹ King Chen, 1987, p. 12.

² Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69," *China Quarterly*, No. 142, June 1995, p. 385.

and defend transportation routes from China into Vietnam, freeing up Vietnamese soldiers for combat in the South. These forces suffered many casualties to protect their Vietnamese brethren.³ The Chinese also made it clear that if U.S. ground troops were involved in an invasion of the North, then regular PLA units would stand ready to help the Vietnamese to fight them off like they did in Korea, despite the massive casualties and risks that this would entail.⁴

After the Vietnamese communists succeeded in reuniting their country, their top priorities were economic development and dealing with longstanding border disputes, which they had been too weak to address in the past.⁵ This led to immediate conflict with China, with whom Vietnam shares a long and, at the time, largely disputed land and sea border. Small-scale clashes along the land border increased from 100 in 1974 to 900 in 1976, and the Vietnamese retracted their earlier recognition of Chinese sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which Vietnamese officials said was only given because their need for Chinese aid left them no other choice.⁶

Border disputes exacerbated disagreements over aid, some of which had been simmering since the late 1960s. Zhou Enlai reportedly promised the Vietnamese that Chinese economic assistance would be maintained at 1973 levels for five years, but after Vietnam's unification in 1975, China began to drastically cut aid.⁷ Vietnamese importation of raw materials from China, the majority of which was funded by aid or concessionary loans from the PRC, plummeted from 750 million yuan to 43 million yuan in 1977.⁸ These reductions stung Vietnam,

³ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 366–371.

⁴ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 369.

⁵ Kosal Path, “China’s Economic Sanctions Against Vietnam, 1975–1978,” *China Quarterly*, No. 212, December 2012, p. 1043.

⁶ Path, 2012, p. 1043. Note that this logic bears some similarity to the PRC’s rationale for repudiating pre-PRC Chinese treaties they considered “unequal” (i.e., that such treaties were invalid because they were forced on China during a moment of weakness when Beijing could not have said no).

⁷ Path, 2012, pp. 1046–1050.

⁸ Path, 2012, p. 1049.

which had been counting on continued high levels of aid for its five-year economic plans. Vietnam also felt entitled to continued support on account of its heroic sacrifices as the frontline of a successful struggle against global imperialism.⁹ Furthermore, as China was decreasing its aid to Vietnam, it was increasing economic and military aid to Cambodia's new communist regime. The new Cambodian government was virulently hostile to Vietnam, and the two countries fought a series of increasingly bloody border wars through the late 1970s, many of which were clearly instigated by Cambodia. Although China cited its own economic hardship as a reason for this major cutback in aid (and there may have been some truth to that characterization of the early cutbacks from 1975 to 1977), it became increasingly clear as the 1970s progressed that aid reductions were meant to punish Vietnam for its aggressiveness on the border question and its mistreatment of ethnic Chinese living within its borders.¹⁰ Beijing was also incensed by Vietnam's courtship of the Soviet Union, which was China's primary strategic adversary at this period.

In late 1977 and 1978, Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated further. Vietnamese persecution of the Hoa (ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam) drove many to flee across the border, causing a refugee crisis and economic turbulence at a moment when Beijing sought a stable environment for its economic modernization program.¹¹ Border negotiations started in October 1977 were used by both sides as cover to seize more disputed land and improve their position on the ground, further militarizing the border dispute.¹² Over the course of 1977 and 1978, the Chinese progressively cut more aid projects and pulled more of China's experts out of Vietnam until summer 1978, when Beijing pulled its remaining aid workers out and canceled its last projects following Vietnam's admittance into COMECON, the Soviet-led inter-

⁹ Path, 2012, pp. 1044–1045. Note that even Vietnam's future allies in Moscow and Eastern Europe would quickly become tired of Hanoi's insatiable desire for aid.

¹⁰ Path, 2012, pp. 1053–1054.

¹¹ Path, 2012, pp. 1044, 1052–1054.

¹² Path, 2012, p. 1052.

national economic cooperation organization.¹³ In November 1978, the Vietnamese and the Soviets signed an agreement of cooperation and friendship, further angering the Chinese.¹⁴

The PLA leadership had been discussing the border incidents since 1976, and the idea of launching some sort of attack on Vietnam was first proposed at a September 1978 PLA General Staff meeting.¹⁵ Initially, the PLA generals only envisioned launching a small-scale attack to destroy an isolated Vietnamese regiment. At this stage, the operation was seen as a bilateral affair, unconnected with China's larger anti-Soviet strategy.¹⁶ After reviewing intelligence that showed that the Vietnamese were preparing for a major invasion of Cambodia, however, the generals agreed that a larger intervention would be needed, sufficient to have a significant impact on Vietnam's ability to engage in military aggression.¹⁷ From September 1978 to December 1978, Chinese officials warned Vietnam that there would be dire consequences if it invaded Cambodia or continued to violate the border.¹⁸ On December 8, the PLA's Central Military Commission, made up of senior party and army leaders, issued orders to the Kunming and Guangzhou military regions to be ready to launch a two-week military invasion of Vietnam by January 10, 1979.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Deng encouraged his negotiators to finish an agreement on the normalization of relations with the United States as

¹³ Path, 2012, p. 1055.

¹⁴ Hyer, Eric, *The Pragmatic Dragon: China's Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements*, Toronto, Canada: UBC Press, 2015, p. 203.

¹⁵ Xiaoming Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 184, December 2005, p. 856. Xiaoming Zhang notes that the *Far Eastern Economic Review's* Nayan Chanda claimed that the decision was made to invade Vietnam at a July 1978 Politburo meeting but argues convincingly that the memoirs of various PLA generals involved in the process detail that an invasion was most likely first discussed in September 1978.

¹⁶ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

¹⁷ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

¹⁸ Hyer, 2015, p. 204; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

¹⁹ Xiaoming Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to Go to War with Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer 2010, p. 14.

quickly as possible. To expedite the process, Deng capitulated on the issue of arms sales to Taiwan. The two countries normalized relations on January 1, 1979, even though Washington made no commitment to halt weapons sales to the island.²⁰ The formal establishment of Sino-American relations just months before the Chinese invasion gave the impression of U.S. support for the endeavor, despite misgivings from Washington.²¹ During his January 28, 1979, trip to the United States, Deng informed President Jimmy Carter of his plans to invade. Carter encouraged Deng to rethink his decision but did not condemn it; therefore, Deng returned to China confident that, even if U.S. officials did not offer vocal support, they at least would not join in any international movement to condemn the Chinese.²² Diplomatically speaking, all the pieces were in place.

China began the war on February 17, 1979, with a massive artillery bombardment of Vietnamese positions and a 100,000-soldier assault force.²³ The Chinese leadership launched the attack a day after the expiration of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which had been signed 30 years before.²⁴ At first, things went well. The PLA had achieved strategic surprise—at the time of the invasion, both the Vietnamese chief of staff and premier were in Cambodia.²⁵ As planned, the PLA launched two main efforts, one from Yunnan aimed at Lao Cai and Cao Bang, and the other from Guangxi aimed at Lang Song. All PLA troops were under strict orders

²⁰ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 16–17.

²¹ David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-768-RC, 2014, p. 123.

²² Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 23–25. A U.S. proposal to operate a listening post targeting the Soviet Union on Chinese territory further built Deng's confidence that the war would not alienate Washington.

²³ King Chen, 1987, p. 106.

²⁴ People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, *The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union*, Moscow, February 14, 1950.

²⁵ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 863.

not to proceed more than 50 km from the border or engage in battle on the Red River plain.²⁶ As Deng predicted, the United States remained neutral, while the Soviets did nothing more than issue dire warnings and airlift supplies to the Vietnamese.²⁷

Once they entered Vietnam, however, PLA forces were quickly bogged down in the dense jungle and rugged mountains of the borderlands. The terrain was inhospitable, and local Vietnamese border defense and militia units used it to great effect. China's massive invading force was forced to break up into company- and platoon-sized units to fight the dispersed, entrenched enemy hill by hill and tunnel by tunnel.²⁸ Chinese generals had envisioned a lightning strike similar to the 1962 invasion of India, but they were slowed by a logistical system that often relied on porters and animals to move supplies.²⁹ Outdated "human wave" and "fire wave" tactics eventually proved effective in capturing enemy strong points but were costly in terms of casualties and time.³⁰ Although significant disagreements exist on how many PLA soldiers were killed or wounded, conservative estimates suggest that China suffered 21,900 casualties, while others put the number as high as 62,000.³¹ Estimates for the number of Vietnamese casualties also vary widely, from 10,000 to more than 60,000.³²

On a tactical and operational level, the PLA performed quite poorly. Chinese soldiers were armed with outdated weaponry and supported by an underdeveloped logistical system.³³ Perhaps even more seriously, the army lacked experience, many lower-level commanders were unable to take the initiative and make their own decisions, and

²⁶ King Chen, 1987, p. 106.

²⁷ King Chen, 1987, pp. 107–108, 110.

²⁸ King Chen, 1987, pp. 106–108.

²⁹ King Chen, 1987, p. 106.

³⁰ Chen, 1987, p. 108.

³¹ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 866–867.

³² King Chen, 1987, pp. 113–114; Nguyen Minh Quang, "The Bitter Legacy of the 1979 China-Vietnam War," *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2017.

³³ King Chen, 1987, pp. 106, 114–117.

many units suffered almost mutinously low morale.³⁴ Although Vietnam diverted some forces from Cambodia to meet the Chinese invasion, the attack did not seriously affect operations there. Ultimately, the PLA captured a few cities but failed to annihilate any regular Vietnamese divisions as intended. PLA forces retreated after a month of operations.³⁵

Factors to Be Assessed

Although primary and secondary sources differ over which factors were most important in driving China and Vietnam to war in 1979, they tend to agree on a rough universe of possible factors. First, Vietnam's relationship with the Soviet Union and the fear that it engendered in Beijing are almost always mentioned, frequently as among the decisive factors in China's decisionmaking.³⁶ Second, almost every work on the war mentions the territorial dispute.³⁷ In a circular distributed to party organizations soon before the invasion, Deng, the war's chief architect, justified it as necessary to safeguard China's territorial integrity.³⁸ Third, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and desire to dominate all Indochina is mentioned by most scholars, and it is often seen as a major driver of the conflict.³⁹ In that circular issued before the invasion, Deng also argued that China needed a safe external environment to complete the ambitious reform and modernization program he had

³⁴ King Chen, 1987, pp. 114–117.

³⁵ Gompert, 2014, p. 124; King Chen, 1987, pp. 114–117.

³⁶ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 192; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 153–855; Khoo, 2011, pp. 1–3; King Chen, 1987, Ch. 2–3.

³⁷ Womack, 2006, p. 192; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 853–855; Khoo, 2011, p. 3; King Chen, 1987, Ch. 2–3; David R. Dreyer, "One Issue Leads to Another: Issue Spirals and the Sino-Vietnamese War," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 2010, p. 304.

³⁸ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 19, 25–26.

³⁹ Womack, 2006, p. 192; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 153–855; Khoo, 2011, p. 3; King Chen, 1987, Ch. 2–3; Dreyer, 2010, p. 304.

in mind, and subsequent comments made it clear that by this he meant that the PLA would need to strike out against Moscow and Hanoi's domination of Indochina.⁴⁰ Fourth, many sources mention the political conflict between China and Vietnam, often explaining it in terms of Beijing's expectation of deference from Vietnam, whether from an ethnic chauvinism that harkens back to China's imperial past, an insistence on the central position of China and Maoism in the global national liberation and socialist movements, or the belief that Vietnam owed China because of the vast quantities of Chinese aid that made possible Hanoi's long war to dominate Vietnam.⁴¹ Although Deng was not generally as explicit about the ideological conflict between China and Vietnam, he made it clear that he felt that Hanoi owed Beijing deference in its ideological and foreign policy on account of the aid from China and that he was deeply affronted when such deference was not forthcoming.⁴² Finally, the Sino-Vietnamese dispute over Vietnam's persecution of the ethnic Chinese living in its territory is frequently brought up, but many sources argue that this was not a decisive factor in China's decisionmaking.⁴³

At least the first four of these issues are worth focusing on because they would constitute China's key demands of Vietnam in years to come. Following the 1979 war, China continued to raid the border region, bombard Vietnamese bases and settlements from across the border, occupy Vietnamese-claimed territory, and threaten a second massive invasion. When Chinese and Vietnamese negotiators met off and on through the 1980s seeking to mend relations, the Chinese had a relatively consistent list of demands. First, before solving the border

⁴⁰ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 19, 25–26.

⁴¹ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 853–855; Khoo, 2011, p. 3; King Chen, 1987, Ch. 2

⁴² Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 12.

⁴³ Womack, 2006, 192; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 853–855; Khoo, 2011, p. 3; King Chen, 1987, Ch. 3; Dreyer, 2010, p. 304; Chang Pao-min, "The Sino-Vietnamese Dispute over the Ethnic Chinese," *China Quarterly*, No. 90, June 1982, pp. 195–230. Note that even Chang, who analyzes the controversy far more closely than other scholars, comes to the conclusion that, while it was not unimportant, it was not the primary driver behind China and Vietnam's decision to go to war.

issue, China demanded Vietnamese capitulation on several “matters of principle,” which included pulling out of Cambodia, not seeking to dominate Indochina, repudiating its relationship with the Soviet Union, and agreeing not to join any military alliances in the future.⁴⁴ The Chinese also demanded that Hanoi accept its “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”: (1) respect of sovereignty and territory, (2) non-aggression, (3) noninterference in domestic affairs, (4) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence. Although these principles are rather innocuous (Vietnam would use them to condemn China’s actions), they showed that Beijing wanted to be the one dictating the moral foundations and expectations for the relationship.⁴⁵ Finally, Beijing wanted a satisfactory settlement of the border dispute, but only after Vietnam had agreed to these principles.⁴⁶

One of the key conclusions drawn from our analysis of these factors is the ways in which they resonated with and exacerbated one another. Although the border dispute may itself have been enough to spark a small-scale conflict, the broader context of Sino-Soviet rivalry and Vietnamese domination of Indochina provided the impetus for the massive scale of the Chinese invasion. Cold War rivalries, China’s sense of injury, and Vietnam’s persecution of ethnic Chinese people within its borders gave the border issue an emotional edge that helped further increase China’s willingness to incur great risks and costs to teach Vietnam a lesson. The perfect storm created by all of these factors made these two onetime comrades into bitter enemies and locked them into conflict for more than a decade.

Factor 1: Regional Power Balance: The Vietnamese Alliance with the Soviets

Throughout its struggle with Washington and Saigon, Hanoi relied heavily on aid from both Moscow and Beijing and, therefore, tried to

⁴⁴ Hyer, 2015, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 386.

⁴⁶ Hyer, 2015, p. 206.

avoid antagonizing either power.⁴⁷ As the Sino-Soviet split deepened over the course of the 1960s, however, remaining in the good graces of both China and the USSR proved increasingly difficult. The Vietnamese Communists were increasingly annoyed at Chinese insistence that Beijing maintain total control over the transshipment of Soviet aid (which included many advanced weapons systems that could not be provided from China) and that such transshipment “be interpreted as a favor from Beijing to Hanoi.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Beijing was increasingly bothered by what it interpreted as Hanoi’s continued favoritism for its rival, Moscow. When Soviet and Chinese personnel working in Vietnam found themselves at odds, Vietnam tended to favor the Soviets.⁴⁹ In 1966, a Soviet ship was allowed to unload its aid supplies before the Chinese aid ship Hongqiao, even though the Hongqiao had arrived first. When the Soviet ship was unloading, the Hongqiao was savaged by a U.S. air raid, leading the Chinese to upbraid their Vietnamese counterparts for their unfairness.⁵⁰ Throughout the 1960s, China would remain frustrated by Hanoi’s refusal to condemn the Soviets and Hanoi’s use of the defeat of past Chinese invasions to stoke nationalist sentiment in Vietnam.⁵¹

Despite China’s suspicions, Hanoi was reluctant to fully commit to Moscow. Although the Vietnamese military was happy to quietly cooperate with the Soviets, who could provide higher quality equipment and training than the PLA, Vietnamese economic planners recognized that Chinese aid would be essential for economic development. They also had high hopes for the potential of the vast Chinese market.⁵² In 1975, Hanoi rebuffed requests from Moscow for a naval base at Cam Ranh

⁴⁷ Path, 2012, pp. 1040–1041, 1050.

⁴⁸ Chen Jian, 1995 p. 383.

⁴⁹ Chen Jian, 1995 p. 383. Note that this may have had more to do with the revolutionary aggression the Chinese Cultural Revolution encouraged the Chinese personnel to show toward their ideological enemies (i.e., the Soviets) than with any particular favoritism on Hanoi’s part.

⁵⁰ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 383.

⁵¹ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 381–382.

⁵² Path, 2012, pp. 1046–1050.

Bay and to join COMECON, the Soviet-dominated international economic cooperation organization. Thus rejected, the Soviets cut aid to Vietnam down to a trickle in 1976.⁵³ Even so, both nations kept the door open to further cooperation.

Throughout 1976 and 1977, Vietnam repeatedly sent requests to China for additional aid more in line with what had been provided during the war and was repeatedly rebuffed.⁵⁴ The 1970s was a decade of intense economic and political upheaval in China that would not be fully resolved until around the time of the 1979 war, and Chinese officials repeatedly cited their economic hardship as reasons why they could not provide more.⁵⁵ As the 1970s progressed, it became increasingly clear that Beijing was deliberately withholding aid as a way to punish Hanoi for what it considered to be anti-China policies, including Vietnam's continued friendship with the Soviet Union, aggression on the territorial question, and the persecution of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam.⁵⁶ As Kosal Path put it, "Chinese aid had been predicated on Hanoi's political and ideological concessions. At stake in such concessions was Hanoi's acceptance of Beijing's counselling on foreign affairs and control over Soviet aid, and acquiescence to China's revolutionary leadership in Indochina."⁵⁷ Although Hanoi was willing to refrain from joining an alliance with the Soviets, it was not willing to take Beijing's side in the Sino-Soviet dispute or give ground on the border question, on its relations with Cambodia, or in its treatment of the ethnically Chinese Vietnamese.⁵⁸

⁵³ Path, 2012, p. 1046.

⁵⁴ Path, 2012, pp. 1047–1049.

⁵⁵ Path, 2012, pp. 1047–1049.

⁵⁶ Path, 2012, p. 1053–1054.

⁵⁷ Path, 2012, p. 1040.

⁵⁸ Note that the issue of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam was a bit more complicated. Vietnam's most serious persecutions of this group (and China's complaints about it) did not begin until the other issues had already seriously soured the relationship, and the mistreatment of these people may have been as much a result of deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations as a cause thereof.

Vietnamese need for aid but unwillingness to accept it on Chinese terms, coupled with its increasing fear and distrust of China's intentions, pushed it to reconsider its earlier decision to keep itself somewhat aloof from Moscow. In June 1978, Vietnam decided to finally accept Soviet pressure to join COMECON, in part to convince the Soviets to take over the completion of abandoned Chinese aid projects.⁵⁹ In November of that year, the USSR and Vietnam signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation, and both countries seemed to have the need to protect Indochina from Chinese ambitions in mind.⁶⁰ Soon after the 1979 war, Soviet ships and aircraft would be based at Cam Ranh Bay.⁶¹

Many scholars on both sides of the Pacific see Vietnam's "flirtation" and later "affair" with the Soviets as the decisive factor in convincing China that Hanoi must be taught a lesson.⁶² As Nicholas Khoo notes, once China has identified a key adversary, it tends to view all states through the prism of their relation to that adversary.⁶³ Beijing thus tended to blame all offensive Vietnamese behavior on Moscow.⁶⁴ This made issues that would otherwise have been mere irritants seem sinister, and even moves that would likely have offended Beijing under any circumstances (such as aggression along the border or the invasion of Cambodia) were seen not as regional affairs but part of a global plot to stymie or destroy China.⁶⁵ Ultimately, a myopic focus by Beijing on the Soviet threat and by Hanoi on the Chinese threat meant that

⁵⁹ Path, 2012, p. 1055.

⁶⁰ Kevin Klose, "Soviets and Vietnamese Sign Treaty, Warn Chinese," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1978.

⁶¹ Alvin H. Bernstein and Paul Gigot, "The Soviets in Cam Ranh Bay," *National Interest*, No. 3, Spring 1986, pp. 17–18.

⁶² Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 26; Khoo, 2011, p. 4.

⁶³ Khoo, 2011, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Path, 2012, p. 1053.

⁶⁵ Path, 2012, pp. 1043, 1053; Womack, 2006, p. 194.

both nations tended to underestimate the extent to which their actions would appear menacing to the other.⁶⁶

By the 1970s, Chinese leaders had come to see the Soviet Union as the primary strategic threat to China and had crafted a “horizontal line” strategy, whereby Soviet ambitions to constrict and dominate China could be countered by a line drawn through the United States, Japan, China, and Europe to contain the Soviets.⁶⁷ The USSR and Vietnam’s joint pursuit of domination over Indochina was a clear threat to this strategy, giving Moscow and its allies a large and expanding base outside the line and on China’s southern border. In Deng’s eyes, the horizontal line strategy was also threatened by the unwillingness of the United States, Japan, or the Western European powers to militarily challenge Moscow or its minions, meaning that China had to take the lead by settling its issues with Vietnam.⁶⁸ He believed that invading Vietnam would help forward both the horizontal line strategy and China’s modernization process by improving relations with Washington and demonstrating China’s usefulness as an ally against Soviet expansionism.⁶⁹

Chinese statements and actions make it clear that, whatever the case may have been in September 1978, by the time China invaded Vietnam, the war was seen as part of a larger strategic struggle against Moscow and its allies. In April 1979, soon after the PLA had withdrawn, Deng told a group of U.S. Senators visiting Beijing that “teaching Vietnam a lesson was not based on a consideration of what was happening between China and Vietnam or in Indochina, but based on a contemplation of the matter from the angle of Asia and the Pacific, and in other words, from the high plane of global strategy.”⁷⁰ In making the case for the invasion to fellow party elites, Deng frequently made reference to China’s need for a peaceful periphery in order to complete its

⁶⁶ Womack, 2006, pp. 191–193.

⁶⁷ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 12–13.

⁶⁸ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 12–13, 19.

⁶⁹ Gompert, 2014, pp. 120, 125.

⁷⁰ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 19.

ambitious modernization project. This meant that the Chinese could not allow the Soviets and their allies to surround or restrict their access to needed resources.⁷¹ Deng further argued that without a military strike of some kind to deter further aggression, Moscow's system of allies and bases around China, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world's energy sources and trade routes would grow ever stronger and bolder, constricting Beijing and preventing it from completing its modernization project.⁷²

In his work on China's many border disputes, Eric Hyer discovered a similar pattern, arguing that at least under Mao and Deng, when faced with a dangerous international environment, China tended to respond flexibly to territorial issues, subordinating them to its overall strategic needs.⁷³ This is evident in the Sino-Vietnamese negotiations following the war. Although Vietnam would have been happy to conduct a narrow discussion of the border, Beijing demanded that Vietnam renounce its relations with the Soviets and its designs of dominating Indochina as a part of any settlement and continued to kill Vietnamese troops along the border and threaten a second invasion until Hanoi acquiesced.⁷⁴

Factor 2: External Threat to Sovereignty: The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute

External claims to or possession of what a state considers to be its homeland territory constitute a key type of external threat. In the case of China and Vietnam, feuds over territory provided a long-standing irritation that frequently brought the two countries into conflict. China and Vietnam share a land border more than 1,000 km long, which was largely ill-defined at the time of Vietnamese unification in 1975. Although the Chinese considered the French treaties of 1887 and 1895

⁷¹ Gompert, 2014, p. 120.

⁷² Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 25–26.

⁷³ Hyer, 2015, pp. 265–266.

⁷⁴ Hyer, 2015, pp. 206–207.

on which the land border was based to have been unequal, they were willing to accept them as a historic reality and proceed to demarcate the border in accordance with the principles they contained.⁷⁵ Both sides' positions over ownership of the Gulf of Tonkin were further apart: Vietnam claimed the majority of the bay on the basis of the French treaties, while China demanded that both nations must apply modern principles of oceanic territorial rights.⁷⁶ Finally, China and Vietnam both laid claim to the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. So long as these issues remained unresolved, China faced the prospect of threats to what it considered to be part of its territory.

During most of the Second Indochina War (in which North Vietnam and China fought together against the United States, South Vietnam, and other allied nations), both sides were willing to put off a definitive settlement of the issue. Even so, when South Vietnam occupied the Paracel Islands (claimed by China and both Vietnams), North Vietnam remained silent despite loud Chinese protests that Saigon had violated its territory. Although China acted quickly to seize these islands from South Vietnam before the North Vietnamese could move in, North Vietnam managed to take and occupy South Vietnamese outposts in the Spratlys before China, much to Beijing's chagrin.⁷⁷

Once Saigon fell, reclaiming lost territory was at the top of Hanoi's agenda.⁷⁸ Although economic development was also a key priority, and Vietnam needed Chinese resources and access to the Chinese market to make its economic dreams a reality, it did not shy away from jeopardizing these benefits by forcefully asserting its claims to territory it viewed as stolen.⁷⁹ The number of reported conflicts between officials, soldiers, and civilians from the two sides along the border skyrocketed from 100 in 1974 to 900 in 1976.⁸⁰ By 1978, these clashes had grown

⁷⁵ Hyer, 2015, p. 202.

⁷⁶ Hyer, 2015, pp. 202, 211.

⁷⁷ Path, 2012, p. 1043.

⁷⁸ Path, 2012, p. 1043.

⁷⁹ Path, 2012, pp. 1040–1044.

⁸⁰ Path, 2012, p. 1043.

large, vindictive, and bloody, including deliberate ambushes of border patrols and the use of hundreds of troops to occupy disputed high ground.⁸¹ The dispute was further complicated by independent land grabs by the patchwork of local officials and commanders on both sides under pressure from their respective capitals to defend their national territory.⁸²

In addition to entering into negotiations with Beijing over their shared border, Hanoi also demonstrated its commitment to aggressively reclaim lost territory by a satisfactory border settlement with Laos and Cambodia. The Vietnamese communists had a high degree of control over the Laotian communist party and state, and negotiations over the Vietnam-Laos border went smoothly. The fiercely independent Khmer Rouge government, on the other hand, refused Vietnamese demands and violently pressed its claims, leading to a series of bloody border wars that would eventually culminate in the December 1978 invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam.⁸³

Given both China and Vietnam's known willingness to wage war to press their territorial claims, a border dispute between the two states made some sort of conflict highly likely.⁸⁴ Just a few years earlier, the PLA had demonstrated its willingness to fight and kill South Vietnamese sailors and marines to assert its claim to the Paracel Islands.⁸⁵ Vietnamese soldiers had similarly been fighting and killing the troops of Chinese ally Cambodia in border disputes for years before the 1979 war.⁸⁶ Xiaoming Zhang called the border disputes the "triggering ele-

⁸¹ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 6.

⁸² Path, 2012, p. 1052.

⁸³ Path, 2012, p. 1043. Note that there were multiple reasons for Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, but the border dispute and the progressively large and bloody raids it entailed were key factors.

⁸⁴ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Toshi Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle: A Campaign Appraisal," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2, Spring 2016, pp. 41–65.

⁸⁶ Chang Pao-min, *Kampuchea Between China and Vietnam*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985.

ments to prompt Beijing to consider the use of force against its Southern Neighbor.”⁸⁷

Factor 3: Alliance or Partnership Concerns: The Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia

Throughout the mid- to late 1970s, China developed a patron state relationship with Cambodia, providing arms and equipment to the Khmer Rouge insurgents in their successful campaign against the royalist government. Over the same period, Vietnam and Cambodia fought a series of increasingly bloody border actions. These involved aggressive action by both sides, and they escalated to involve tens of thousands of troops by the late 1970s.⁸⁸ On December 25, 1978, Vietnam defied Chinese warnings and launched a massive, 150,000-to-200,000-man invasion of Cambodia, capturing the capital within weeks and driving the China-allied Khmer Rouge government into the mountains along the Thai border.⁸⁹

Vietnam’s invasion of China’s client, Cambodia, was clearly a major factor in Beijing’s decision to invade Vietnam in early 1979, and some see it as the decisive factor.⁹⁰ Vietnam’s vision of an Indochina led from Hanoi clearly clashed with China’s hope that an independent Cambodia would be a counterweight to Vietnam’s power in Southeast Asia, preventing Vietnam from dominating the whole region and turning all of its resources to the service of the Soviets.⁹¹ The potential for conflict was also exacerbated by the lack of understanding from Vietnam and China of each other’s worldviews. To the Vietnamese, the invasion of Cambodia was a totally justifiable move to eliminate a

⁸⁷ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 868–869.

⁸⁸ Chang, 1985.

⁸⁹ Merle L. Pribbenow, “A Tale of Five Generals: Vietnam’s Invasion of Cambodia,” *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 2, April 2006, pp. 459–486.

⁹⁰ Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War*, New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 156.

⁹¹ Dreyer, 2010, p. 304.

threatening neighbor and escape Chinese domination. Beijing, on the other hand, viewed the conflict through the lens of its global conflict with the Soviet Union, and Vietnam's alliance with Moscow meant that the invasion of Cambodia meant a tightening of the Russian noose on its southern flank.⁹² Although these competing visions may not have necessarily led to war, they would almost certainly have led to hostility, particularly given Cambodia's frequent aggression against Vietnam.

Although it is difficult to know whether the invasion of Cambodia itself would have resulted in the 1979 war, there is ample evidence that it expanded the scope of the war considerably. Before Vietnam invaded, Deng and other Chinese officials had repeatedly asserted that any major attack on Cambodia would have military consequences for Vietnam.⁹³ According to the memoirs of Zhou Deli (a key PLA leader at the time), when PLA leaders considered intelligence on Vietnam's impending invasion of Cambodia in September 1978, they quickly decided that instead of only launching a limited action to warn Vietnam away from further adventurism along the border, a major strike was needed that would impair Vietnam's military ability to dominate Indochina.⁹⁴ Then, days after Vietnam launched its invasion, the Chinese Politburo decided to further expand the war plan, extending the duration of operations and adding a third column that would fight its way through Laos to assault Dien Bien Phu.⁹⁵

In the border negotiations following the war, China refused to agree to any treaty on the border until Vietnam had pulled out of Cambodia. By this time, "China was . . . attempting to use a possible boundary settlement to induce Vietnamese concessions on other issues of strategic concern (i.e. Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and alliance with Moscow)."⁹⁶ For the next ten years, Chinese aggression across the border would be tied to Vietnamese operations in Cambodia.

⁹² Womack, 2006, p. 193.

⁹³ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

⁹⁴ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

⁹⁵ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 19.

⁹⁶ Hyer, 2015, p. 206.

Whenever Vietnam would launch a new offensive into the mountains to destroy the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, China would launch new salvos of artillery at Vietnamese positions or launch renewed assaults to occupy high ground in Vietnamese-claimed territory.⁹⁷ Ultimately, although these tactics would not prevent Vietnam from dominating Cambodia, they raised the cost of occupation by forcing the Vietnamese to keep a large body of troops defending the northern border.⁹⁸

Although Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and Cambodia's alliance with the Soviet Union were closely linked, our analysis suggests that the invasion of Cambodia merits inclusion as a distinct factor for several reasons. First, even if Cambodia were not allied to Moscow, China would still likely have been offended by the invasion of its ally and frightened by Vietnam's control over all of Indochina. A divided Indochina would be far less likely to threaten Chinese security than a united one, especially one united under a country that was clearly hostile toward Beijing. Furthermore, during the Korean War, China had already proven its willingness to launch a large-scale war to defend one of its regional allies. Vietnam's actions were certainly made far more threatening when seen as a part of a larger strategic struggle against Moscow, but they were also quite threatening on the local level.

Factor 4: National Status Concerns: China's Sense of Entitlement to Vietnamese Deference

Since at least 200 BC, the Imperial Chinese court was generally able to exercise some degree of suzerainty over the people and states of Vietnam. Vietnam, however, was often an unruly vassal. Although it tended to look to its northern neighbor for guidance culturally and at times politically, it also jealously guarded its territorial integrity and autonomous identity, and valiant resistance of Chinese domination became a key part of modern Vietnam's national self-image.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Hood, 2015, p. 158.

⁹⁸ Gompert, 2014, p. 121.

⁹⁹ Hood, 2015, p. 155; Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 381–382.

After its founding in 1949, the PRC officially repudiated Imperial China's domination of its smaller neighbors, but many argue that the middle kingdom's self-image as the moral center of the world was echoed in Mao's frequent assertions that China should take the lead of the world's national liberation and socialist movements.¹⁰⁰ Vietnam certainly thought so and accused the PRC of trying to re-create its old imperial domination over the states along its periphery.¹⁰¹ For its part, China insisted that all nations should be treated as equals, but Chen Jian has noted that this very insistence belied a belief in Beijing it "occupied a position from which to dictate the values and codes of behavior that would dominate their relations with their neighbors."¹⁰² Chen's conclusion is reinforced by China's frequent insistence that other countries accept its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as the basis for their relationships.¹⁰³ In dealing with border issues, the PRC was often quite willing to base negotiations on treaties that had been forced onto Imperial China and make generous territorial concessions, but usually only after the state in question recognized China's position that the treaties themselves were unfair and unequal.¹⁰⁴

Even during the war to unify Vietnam, conflicting senses of moral superiority from Vietnam and China caused friction. Desiring to present itself as a revolutionary model, China charged the engineering and air defense detachments it dispatched to South Vietnam in 1965 to act as agents of public diplomacy, providing service and medical care. The Vietnamese authorities, however, quickly put a stop to these activities, and within months Beijing was forced to reverse its directive, instructing soldiers instead to remain more circumspect.¹⁰⁵ As early as 1966, Chinese personnel in Vietnam noticed that relations

¹⁰⁰ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 386; Path, 2012, p. 1041.

¹⁰¹ Chang, 1982, p. 215.

¹⁰² Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 386–387.

¹⁰³ Hyer, 2015, p. 206. Note that this demand was one of the issues of principle on which the Chinese demanded Vietnamese acquiescence before they would negotiate an end to the border dispute.

¹⁰⁴ Hyer, 2015, pp. 32–33.

¹⁰⁵ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 380–381.

between the two countries had begun to sour.¹⁰⁶ This was due, in part, to Vietnamese resistance to Beijing's insistence that the Vietnamese communists model their revolution on the Chinese experience and the thinking of Mao, an insistence that would become more strident as the cultural revolution gained momentum in China.¹⁰⁷ The growing Sino-Soviet split also contributed significantly to Sino-Vietnamese friction. Throughout the 1960s and early-mid 1970s, Hanoi strove to hew a middle ground between the two communist giants and secure aid from both.¹⁰⁸ Vietnam's refusal to explicitly accept China's authority over the world socialist and national liberation movements led to increasing consternation in Beijing, which had assumed that Vietnam would follow its lead in condemning Moscow.¹⁰⁹ As noted earlier, the Vietnamese offended their Chinese benefactors not only by not condemning the Soviets but also by appearing to offer their personnel and ships preferential treatment.¹¹⁰ The Vietnamese were also dismayed at China's rejection of Soviet proposals that the two countries put their differences aside and make a more unified effort to aid Vietnam, as well as Beijing's rejection of Moscow's proposal to build a united corridor through China to increase the amount of aid that could be sent from the USSR and Eastern Europe.¹¹¹ Le Duan's reference to the Soviet Union as his "second motherland" in 1966 shocked the Chinese and may have been at least partially responsible for China's refusal to extend the tour of its second division of volunteer engineers in Vietnam.¹¹²

Sino-Vietnamese tensions came to a head over the Paris talks of 1968. Mao stated that Vietnam had little to gain from talks at that time and strongly encouraged the Vietnamese to refuse to negotiate with the Americans. The North Vietnamese disagreed and proceeded to open

¹⁰⁶ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 381.

¹⁰⁷ Path, 2012, p. 1040.

¹⁰⁸ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 381–382.

¹⁰⁹ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 382.

¹¹⁰ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 382–383.

¹¹¹ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 381–382.

¹¹² Chen Jian, 1995, p. 382.

negotiations with the Americans and South Vietnamese. Offended at this refusal of Chinese advice, by 1969 Beijing recalled almost all of its remaining engineering and air defense units in Vietnam.¹¹³

After North Vietnam's victory, Hanoi's actions continued to injure China's sense of superiority and entitlement to Vietnamese deference. Vietnam continued to refuse to openly side with Beijing in its ideological disputes with Moscow and became ever closer to the Soviet Union. It continued to fight increasingly large-scale battles with China's ally Cambodia despite Chinese warnings. In its persecution of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, Hanoi rejected Beijing's formulation of the issue, which called for gradual, voluntary assimilation (see "Factor 5: Coidentity Group Populations in Host Country: Vietnamese Persecution of the Hoa" in this chapter). In all of these issues, Vietnam's lack of thankfulness and deference for Beijing's substantial aid during the war led both the Chinese people and Chinese elites (including Deng) to angrily accuse Hanoi of ingratitude, and this was often brought up in connection with the need to teach Vietnam a lesson.¹¹⁴

Some scholars have argued that emotional or ideological factors were of secondary importance and that China's decision to invade Vietnam was based mostly on rational geopolitical calculations.¹¹⁵ That being said, China and Vietnam's conflicting views were bound to create friction, with Beijing demanding gratitude and deference for aid given and Hanoi believing that, as the frontline state in the war against imperialism, it was entitled to greater aid and independence.¹¹⁶ Although China's injured sense of superiority and entitlement to Vietnamese gratitude did not create many of the strategic issues that drove apart Vietnam and China, it ensured that Vietnamese intransigence on these issues was seen as a betrayal, eliciting a stronger moral response than would have been the case if China and Vietnam had not had

¹¹³ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 384–385.

¹¹⁴ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 855.

¹¹⁵ Khoo, 2011, pp. 2, 6–7.

¹¹⁶ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 855; Path, 2012, pp. 1044–1045.

such a complicated mutual history.¹¹⁷ As Xiaoming Zhang notes, “the upsurge of emotional nationalism tended to reinforce a Chinese mentality that some kind of punishment on a traitorous erstwhile ally that had turned against China was required.”¹¹⁸ Deng famously referred to the Vietnamese as “sons of bitches” in front of foreign leaders, showing the degree of emotional outrage at Vietnam’s impertinence.¹¹⁹

Following the war, Beijing demanded that an acceptance of China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence be part of any border agreement.¹²⁰ Although Vietnam likely had no particular objection to these principles (respect for territory, nonaggression, noninterference in domestic affairs, cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence¹²¹), it is interesting to note that Beijing made a point of demanding that Vietnam explicitly accept a China-developed moral foundation for their relationship as a condition for improved relations.

Factor 5: Coidentity Group Populations in Host Country: Vietnamese Persecution of the Hoa

By the mid-1970s, more than 1 million ethnic Chinese (Hoa) lived in Vietnam. This population was concentrated in the newly conquered South, and many of them were shop owners and merchants.¹²² Throughout the 1960s, the North Vietnamese ran a relatively effective program of gradual naturalization that had seen most of its Hoa population accept Vietnamese citizenship and integrate into North Vietnamese society smoothly, all with Beijing’s knowledge and bless-

¹¹⁷ Chen Jian, 1995, pp. 385–386.

¹¹⁸ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, pp. 868–869.

¹¹⁹ Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 12.

¹²⁰ Hyer, 2015, p. 206.

¹²¹ Vietnam would later blame Beijing for violating many of these principles, suggesting that they had been internalized as norms of relations.

¹²² Chang, 1982, pp. 196, 202.

ing.¹²³ Following Vietnamese reunification, however, the problem of integrating the Hoa population became much more complicated and controversial. Not only did the South have more ethnically Chinese Vietnamese, but they tended to be prouder of their Chinese heritage, and Vietnamese officials were alarmed at their expressions of fondness and affinity for their mother country.¹²⁴

In 1976, the Vietnamese government moved quickly against the Hoa, closing Chinese schools and newspapers, forcing many to accept Vietnamese citizenship, and imposing punitive taxes and ration reductions for those who refused to do so. None of these measures seem to have drawn any particular criticism from Beijing.¹²⁵ Also harmful to the Hoa were general measures taken by the new Vietnamese government in 1977 against the entire market economy and capitalist class of South Vietnam, which included many Hoa.¹²⁶ During the February 1977 census, Hanoi cracked down harder, inflicting harsh penalties on all those who did not list themselves as Vietnamese citizens.¹²⁷ In what would be an ominous sign of things to come, in April 1977 following a violent border incident, Vietnam began forcing some Hoa living near the border into China.¹²⁸

These incidents came at an awkward time for Beijing. Starting in 1976 and especially in 1977, the CCP began actively seeking to court the “overseas Chinese” (ethnic Chinese living outside of China). Since the founding of the PRC, the government’s attitude toward Chinese abroad had been largely ambivalent.¹²⁹ Beijing’s official stance was that they should be allowed and encouraged to assimilate into their new home countries gradually and voluntarily. But even when overseas Chi-

¹²³ Barry Wain, “The Indochina Refugee Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 1, Fall 1979, p. 174; Chang, 1982, pp. 196–197.

¹²⁴ Chang, 1982, p. 200.

¹²⁵ Chang, 1982, p. 200.

¹²⁶ Path, 2012, p. 1044; Chang, 1982, p. 200.

¹²⁷ Chang, 1982, p. 203.

¹²⁸ Chang, 1982, p. 203.

¹²⁹ Chang, 1982, p. 202.

nese populations were subjected to forced assimilation or to persecution, Beijing did not generally show great concern, as seen by its muted reaction to the murder of thousands of ethnic Chinese by Beijing's ally, Cambodia.¹³⁰

This changed when Deng's aggressive modernization agenda was adopted in the mid-1970s. Suddenly, the overseas Chinese were seen as a potential source of capital and technical expertise, both of which would be needed if Beijing was going to fulfill its dream of bringing its economy and military up to the standard of the world's most advanced nations. In January 1978, Chinese officials announced a new overseas Chinese policy, offering to help protect their rights and interests in their home countries and to welcome back any who chose to return to China. In February 1978, Hua Guofeng made it clear that this policy applied to all ethnic Chinese regardless of citizenship, and that the PRC could work to protect their right to maintain their Chinese citizenship if they so choose.¹³¹ Unfortunately, these promises to protect and provide a home for the overseas Chinese came right as Vietnam's anti-Hoa policies were laying the groundwork for a flood of ethnic refugees to flee across the border.

In September 1977, possibly in response to the escalating conflict with Cambodia, Vietnam began a more concerted attempt to expel Hoa living near the border with China.¹³² Vietnam's anticapitalism and antimerchant policies hit the Hoa community hard, and these policies along with the other anti-Hoa measures mentioned earlier vastly increased the number of refugees fleeing north into China in late 1977 and 1978.¹³³ By June 1978, Hanoi went from tacitly facilitating this movement to actively and deliberately trying to rid its territory of as many Hoa as possible, pushing them north into China and east into

¹³⁰ Khoo, 2011, pp. 5–6.

¹³¹ Chang, 1982, pp. 202–205; E. S. Ungar, "The Struggle Over the Chinese Community in Vietnam, 1946–1986," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 4, Winter 1987–1988, p. 608.

¹³² Chang, 1982, p. 204.

¹³³ Wain, 1979, pp. 163–164; Chang, 1982, pp. 205–207, 212–213; Ungar, 1987–1988, p. 613. Note that Ungar claims that the Vietnamese government began to make a concerted attempt to mend fences with the Hoa and win their loyalty from the PRC after the 1979 war.

the South China Sea.¹³⁴ In July 1978, the number of Hoa refugees in China reached 160,000.¹³⁵

This torrent of refugees put China in an awkward position. Beijing was trying to position itself as both the champion of overseas Chinese rights and a welcoming safe harbor for any who wished to return, hoping that these policies would bring back wealthy and skilled individuals who would help aid its modernization. Instead, it was immediately faced with tens of thousands of penniless refugees who would be a major drain on national resources. It could not turn them away without abdicating its recently touted special relationship with the overseas Chinese, but it clearly did not want to be responsible for however many Hoa refugees Vietnam decided to pack across the border.

As noted earlier, prior to 1977, Beijing did not seem to have raised the issue of the Hoa with the Vietnamese in any significant way. It seems that it was first discussed through official channels in June 1977, when Chinese Vice Premier Li Xiannian brought it up with his Vietnamese counterpart. Li called for Vietnam to return to its previous policy of gradual, voluntary assimilation, and somewhat ominously noted that all nations had the responsibility to protect their citizens abroad.¹³⁶ In April 1978, China first took its concerns over the refugee issue public, and over the spring and summer issued increasingly strident condemnations of Hanoi's Hoa policies.¹³⁷ For its part, Hanoi denied that there was any persecution, asserted that all the people involved were Vietnamese citizens and so the way it treated them was a purely internal matter, and accused Beijing of spreading rumors among the Hoa and instigating their exodus from Vietnam.¹³⁸ Given the variety of issues pushing Hanoi and Beijing apart in spring 1978, it is difficult to determine specific causes, but the continuing refugee crisis

¹³⁴ Chang, 1982, pp. 219–220.

¹³⁵ Wain, 1979, p. 163; Chang, 1982, p. 207.

¹³⁶ Chang, 1982, pp. 203–204.

¹³⁷ Wain, 1979, p. 164; Chang, 1982, pp. 208–209.

¹³⁸ Chang, 1982, p. 208.

seems to have been one reason that negotiations over the border that had stalled in March 1978 were not resumed.¹³⁹

In July 1978, China moved to seal its border with Vietnam to stem the tide of refugees and proposed talks with Vietnam on how to deal with the issue.¹⁴⁰ In addition to calling on Hanoi to stop persecuting the Hoa and driving them out of Vietnam, Beijing offered to take care of the 160,000 refugees already within its territory and suggested that the two countries jointly deal with the refugees stuck at the border.¹⁴¹ Vietnam rebuffed these proposals and accelerated its moves to force the Hoa out of the country. This resulted in several deadly border incidents in 1978, as armed Vietnamese soldiers corralled large crowds of Hoa and forced them to storm Chinese checkpoints. It also may have contributed to border tensions by increasing Chinese patrols in more-remote border areas to prevent the Vietnamese from forcing the Hoa across the border.¹⁴² By the end of the year, the Vietnamese forced an additional 40,000 Hoa across China's supposedly sealed border, bringing the total of refugees in China to 200,000. One especially violent incident occurred in August 1978 at Friendship Pass, and one month later, the PLA began serious discussions of an invasion of Vietnam.¹⁴³

Many scholars have argued that the Hoa issue was not the primary driver of China's decision to invade Vietnam.¹⁴⁴ Chinese officials continued to strike a conciliatory tone on the issue until 1978, by which time other issues had already inflamed the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the persecution and mass killings of ethnic Chinese in Cambodia in the mid- to late 1970s did not reduce China's support for the Khmer Rouge.¹⁴⁶ That being said, it clearly exacerbated

¹³⁹ Hyer, 2015, pp. 202–203.

¹⁴⁰ Chang, 1982, pp. 219–220.

¹⁴¹ Chang, 1982, p. 220.

¹⁴² Chang, 1982, pp. 223–224.

¹⁴³ Chang, 1982, p. 223; Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 856.

¹⁴⁴ Chang, 1982, p. 225; Dreyer, 2010, p. 306; Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Dreyer, 2010, p. 306.

¹⁴⁶ Khoo, 2011, pp. 5–6.

other key issues. The refugee issue accelerated the end of Chinese aid to Vietnam, forcing them into the Soviet embrace despite some reluctance in Hanoi; increased the frequency and severity of border incidents; and stymied diplomatic discussions. Hanoi's rejection of China's proposed framework for dealing with overseas Chinese also presented a clear challenge to China's status and ability to dictate expected behavior in their relationship.¹⁴⁷ The persecution of the Hoa tended to act as a positive feedback loop with other issues because other issues placed stress on Sino-Vietnamese relations, the Vietnamese feared the Hoa would act as a fifth column within their borders and cracked down on them, and those crackdowns led to a further deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations.¹⁴⁸

Other Factors

In the Chinese attack on Vietnam, several factors posited by the overall literature review did not play a significant role in this case. Some have argued that Deng's ascent to power just before the 1979 invasion and his desire to unify the PLA, place his people in key military positions, and force reforms on the military all played a significant role in China's decision to invade.¹⁴⁹ Deng was a key proponent of the war, and his ascendancy to the top of the CCP ensured that he was able to implement his preferred foreign policies. He reportedly said that it was possible that the PLA would fail to achieve 30 percent of its objectives but that these failures would spur reforms and so should not be feared.¹⁵⁰ Ultimately, however, we felt that although domestic politics helped facilitate the war, they were likely not a key driving factor. Deng's ascendancy made war all but inevitable: He was hardly the only one in the CCP supporting aggressive action, and it is entirely possible

¹⁴⁷ Chen Jian, 1995, p. 386.

¹⁴⁸ Dreyer, 2010, p. 297.

¹⁴⁹ Xiaoming Zhang, 2005, p. 858; Xiaoming Zhang, 2010, pp. 20–21; Gompert, 2014, pp. 113–115, 119.

¹⁵⁰ Chang, 1982, p. 88.

that, even without him, the PLA would have marched into Vietnam. His desire to force reforms on the PLA likely reduced the downside of the war in Deng's estimation (because even a loss would help spur reforms), but it does not seem to have been a primary reason for the war. It is impossible to say for certain whether Deng would have gone looking for another war if Hanoi had not conveniently provided him with one early in his reign, but his far less aggressive policies toward other countries suggests that he was not so eager for a fight that he would have created one in the absence of other driving factors.

As noted earlier, Deng cited China's need for a peaceful environment for domestic economic development as a reason for the invasion of Vietnam, but for him, this issue was inextricably linked with Vietnam's domination of Indochina and alliance with the Soviet Union. Deng feared that if the Soviet plan to encircle and throttle China was not met with force in Vietnam, then it would eventually stymie China's economic development. He was not seeking to secure any particular economic resources but to head off a Soviet threat to the economy. Therefore, we included this driver of conflict as a part of the third factor discussed earlier in this chapter (the Vietnamese alliance with the USSR).

Ideology had also been a motivating factor in many of China's conflicts, especially as Mao sought to establish the supremacy of and spread his revolutionary view of Marxism. After the purge of the Gang of Four, however, Deng and other Chinese leaders were less concerned with ideology. Although Mao's demands that Vietnam accept the supremacy of Chinese communism strained relations in the 1960s and 1970s, by the time Deng took over, ideology did not seem to be a significant Chinese consideration. Although the intervention was peripherally motivated by a desire to protect ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam, the motive also appears to have been limited to concern over their treatment within Vietnam rather than a desire to incorporate Hoa-majority areas into China and, therefore, is not a sign of Chinese nationalism as defined in this report.

Summary

The primary reasons China undertook a combat intervention into Vietnam were Beijing's fears that Vietnam would become part of a Soviet strategy to surround and throttle China, the increasingly violent border dispute between the two countries, and Vietnam's invasion of China's ally Cambodia. Although the Hoa crisis and China's sense of entitlement were not direct drivers of conflict, they both worked to exacerbate other issues. Ultimately, all five issues tended to interact together and create positive feedback loops, whereby one exacerbated the other, putting Beijing and Hanoi on a collision course from which neither had the desire nor the ability to escape. Dreyer describes this phenomenon as an "issue spiral," noting that all of these issues reinforce an "enemy image" in the minds of both states, whereby their counterparts are seen as antagonists and all of their actions become fundamentally sinister.¹⁵¹ Although it is possible that the alliance with the Soviets, territorial issue, or the Cambodian invasion could alone have caused some sort of military confrontation, the massive invasion China launched in 1979 is likely a result of the of the dreadful synergy of multiple factors.

Although multiple factors clearly contributed to China's decision to invade Vietnam in 1979, five factors identified in this chapter fall under the heading of geopolitics. Domestic and ideological factors (i.e., China's sense of entitlement and the persecution of the Hoa) played an important supporting role, but Chinese local, regional, and global strategic concerns were the key drivers of the conflict. This is consistent with the quantitative patterns noted in Chapter Three regarding Chinese Cold War combat interventions in general (i.e., that they usually overlap with territorial disputes and occur in regions near China's borders, where Beijing is especially sensitive to local shifts in the balance of power). The case study also reinforces insights from the literature review, which similarly emphasized the importance of external threat, regional stability and balance of power, and alliance or partnership concerns for China's Cold War-era interventions. However, the litera-

¹⁵¹ Dreyer, 2010, pp. 297–303.

ture review also identified factors for that era that played a lesser role in this case, such as the role of leadership personalities, domestic politics, and ideology. This may reflect the fact that the Sino-Vietnam War occurred at a turning point in China's history, when many features of the early Cold War began to fade and the country entered a period of transition toward market economics, greater stability in the international environment, and a more pragmatic political style.

Table 4.1 examines the evidence in this case for and against each key factor.

Table 4.1
Summary of Analysis of Factors for 1979 Vietnam Case Study

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Regional power balance: the Vietnamese alliance with the Soviets	• Statements from officials, noting the strategic nature of the conflict • Irritant in the relationship dating back to the 1960s • China's tendency to see all nations in terms of their relationship to its primary enemy • Invasion of Vietnam was a way to hold the horizontal line strategy • Vietnamese actions were seen as part of a global Soviet plot against China	• Vietnam tried to avoid fully committing to the Soviets until 1978 (one driver for this decision was worsening Sino-Vietnamese relations), suggesting that other factors may have resulted in Vietnam's embrace of Moscow	• Once Hanoi embraced the Soviets, everything Vietnam did took on a menacing overtone • A strike against Vietnam was clearly seen as an effective means of thwarting Moscow's strategic ambitions
External threat: the Sino-Vietnamese territorial dispute	• Official statements • border clashes well before invasion • Vietnam willing to shoulder substantial costs to assert claims • PLA initially floated the idea of invading Vietnam as a limited border issue	• After the war, China demanded strategic and moral concessions before discussing the border • The massive size and scale of the invasion far exceeded what suited a territorial dispute	• The border conflict was greatly exacerbated by broader strategic factors

Table 4.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Alliance and partnership concerns: the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia	• Official statements • Differing strategic visions for Indochina • PLA generals' hope that the invasion would complicate or end Vietnamese operations in Cambodia • Demand for withdrawal in postwar negotiations • Postwar operations were tied to Vietnamese operations in Cambodia	• Would have been less significant if not for the Russian connection	• Although the Soviet connection made this move far more menacing, the invasion would likely have demanded some sort of response in any event • The scope of the invasion, Chinese statements about it, and subsequent military action made it clear that the PLA hoped to complicate Vietnam's ability to operate in Cambodia

Table 4.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
National status concerns: China's sense of entitlement to regional deference	• Official statements angrily condemning Vietnam's ingratitude • China's belief that it had the right to dictate the foundation of relations both angered Hanoi and made Vietnamese actions more irritating to Beijing • Even Vietnamese neutrality (as opposed to outright endorsement of China's position) was seen as a betrayal • China demanded recognition of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as part of the final agreement	• Most of the things that inflamed China's sense of outrage were issues in their own right • In the absence of other issues, it is possible that China's pride would not have been damaged • China fought with the Soviets and the Indians, neither of which had historic vassal relations	• Likely not a driver in its own right; war could well have happened even if this was not an issue • Led to a more emotional response to Vietnamese challenges to China, which may have influenced Deng and China's decision to react with massive force

Table 4.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Coidentity group populations: Vietnamese persecution of the Hoa	- Chinese statements and propaganda - China's attempt to present itself as the champion of the overseas Chinese - The refugees created a major economic burden at a time when China was hoping to create an external environment that would not intrude on its internal reforms - Seems to have been a factor in reducing Chinese aid - Exacerbated border clashes	- The Chinese did not condemn Vietnam until it created a refugee problem - The Chinese sought a peaceful solution until mid-1978 - Military action would only make the issue worse - Chinese aid already substantially reduced by 1978 - By the time the Hoa problem was a major issue in the relationship, other issues had already strained ties between Hanoi and Beijing - No complaints about mass murder of Chinese living in Cambodia	- Almost certainly would not have led to war in itself - Exacerbated major issues, such as territorial disputes - Linked issues and contributed to issue spiral

Case Study 2: China's Gulf of Aden Counterpiracy Mission and Establishment of Djibouti Base, 2008–Present

This chapter examines, as one case of military intervention, China's deployment of a counterpiracy naval task force starting in 2008 and the subsequent establishment of a support base in Djibouti in 2017. We use this case to explore China's intervention decisionmaking surrounding China's increasing use of smaller-scale military forces outside its home region.

On August 1, 2017, the PLA formally opened its first military support base outside of Asia in support of its ongoing counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden.¹ To mark the momentous event, the PLA Navy deployed ships from the South Sea Fleet, and Chinese military forces carried out live-fire exercises for a month and a half after the ceremony marking the founding of the base.² A few months later, President Xi spoke by video teleconference to the troops stationed there. In that address, Xi reportedly encouraged troops stationed there to “help promote international and regional peace and stability.”³

The commencement of the counterpiracy mission near the Gulf of Aden in 2008 and subsequent establishment of a supporting military facility in Djibouti nearly a decade later marks an important new phase in the PLA's approach to military interventions. The mission and overseas base also mark a significant departure from China's long-standing foreign policy prohibition on the stationing of troops abroad and establishment of overseas military bases. As late as 2000, China's

defense white paper affirmed that “China does not station troops or set up military bases in any foreign country.”⁴

The weakening of traditional prohibitions on the deployment of PLA forces in other countries and establishment of a military outpost abroad has spurred considerable speculation about the possibilities for a greater PLA presence around the world and creation of follow-on overseas bases.⁵ A 2019 report by the U.S. Department of Defense suggested China may seek to expand its military activities and access across the “Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific.”⁶ Some experts have warned that China soon will build a military outpost to support patrolling among the South Pacific islands.⁷ Others have predicted a PLA base may appear in Cambodia or other Southeast Asian location to similarly support a persistent PLA Navy presence near the Malacca Strait.⁸ Still others have claimed to have observed a Chinese military base in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.⁹ Chinese military officials continue to reject the principle of unilateral military action but also insist on China’s right to defend its interests abroad. They also no longer deny the possibility of additional military bases to support such distant operations. In an article published by Chinese official media, a PLA general offered that such a decision would depend on whether the base enabled China to better support UN missions and whether the host nation invited China to set up such a post.¹⁰ Sensitive to fears that a rising great power might turn to military force to invade other countries or seize a foreign base, Xi has repeatedly pledged that China “will never engage in expansion no matter what stage of development it reaches.”¹¹

In short, the counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden and subsequent establishment of the Djibouti support base represent a significant milestone in military strategy and foreign policy. Although these developments followed peaceful negotiations with host countries, including Somalia and Djibouti, they have also broken old prohibitions on foreign basing and set an important precedent for China to expand the range and frequency of military interventions overseas.

Background

The initiation of the counterpiracy mission and establishment of the military post in Djibouti followed years of Chinese vulnerability to transnational threats in Africa and the Middle East. In the late 1990s, Chinese leaders issued a “go out” policy that encouraged businesses to seek opportunities around the world for trade and investment.¹² Some Chinese companies sought unrealized profits in regions whose unstable conditions deterred Western companies from operating, including in Africa and the Middle East. Shocking, high-profile tragedies spurred public outcry and added pressure on the government to find ways of better protecting vulnerable citizens. In 2004, for example, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan came under a series of unrelated, but collectively significant, series of attacks, resulting in the deaths of 15 Chinese nationals.¹³ Months later, China's leader Hu directed the PLA to prepare for a broader range of missions to protect the nation's interests abroad, subsequently known as the “historic missions.”¹⁴ In subsequent years, the Chinese military began to carry out a series of nonwar missions abroad.

In December 2008, the PLA began deploying naval ships to the Gulf of Aden to counter the scourge of maritime piracy and protect merchants passing through those waters engaged in commerce with China. In these missions, the PLA Navy typically deployed three to four surface ships for months at a time, after which the task force was typically relieved by another task force traveling from China. The patrols ensured security for Chinese merchant ships, but the PLA Navy has also provided escort duty for other merchant ships passing through the Gulf. To date, the PLA Navy is not known to have killed any pirates, but it has driven off hijackers with water cannons, warning shots, and other tactics. As an illustration of the patrol's activities, the PLA Navy dispatched a helicopter loaded with special forces troops to board a freighter under threat in 2017. The troops secured the freighter, but the pirates fled before the helicopter landed.¹⁵ As of December

¹⁵ Zhang Zhihao, “Naval Forces Save Commercial Ship from Pirate Attack,” *China Daily*, April 17, 2017.

2018, the PLA Navy had rotated through this mission 31 task forces and 26,000 troops, escorted 6,595 ships, and aided or rescued 60 merchant ships over ten years.¹⁶

The counterpiracy mission proved the most notable and striking deployment abroad, but it also reflected a broader trend. In 2011, Chinese military forces carried out a large-scale NEO from war-torn Libya.¹⁷ PLA forces also supported civilian efforts to conduct search-and-rescue operations for the downed Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 airplane in 2014. Although the Chinese public applauded these operations, the PLA struggled to sustain such activities over such vast distances and without support infrastructure nearby.¹⁸ Through the 2000s, Chinese military analysts and scholars began to debate the need for military bases abroad to facilitate more responsive and timely operations along the Indian Ocean and in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁹ As an initial step to expanding logistics support to passing PLA vessels, Chinese SOEs began developing ports and facilities in countries frequently visited by Chinese warships, including Djibouti, Yemen, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.²⁰ Western analysts concluded such arrangements would likely prove unsatisfactory, given the need for secure access and dedicated support to military platforms. Throughout the 2000s, Western commentators speculated as to where China might open its first overseas military base.²¹

¹⁶ Ankit Panda, "China Dispatches New Naval Fleet for Gulf of Aden Escort Mission," *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2018.

¹⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2011, p. 1.

¹⁸ "China's Military Vulnerability Revealed in Search for Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370," *South China Morning Post*, April 23, 2014.

¹⁹ Christopher D. Yung, and Ross Rustici, "'Not an Idea We Have to Shun': Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century," *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 7, October 2014.

²⁰ Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel Collins, "Dragon Tracks: Emerging Chinese Access Points in the Indian Ocean Region," Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, June 18, 2015.

²¹ Sarah Zheng, "China's Djibouti Military Base: 'Logistics Facility', or Platform for Geopolitical Ambitions Overseas?" *South China Morning Post*, October 1, 2017.

In February 2016, China confirmed that it had begun building a military base in Djibouti to facilitate the PLA Navy's operations in the Gulf of Aden.²² Subsequent reporting revealed that China agreed to pay Djibouti \$20 million annually for a ten-year lease. The base spans 36 hectares and has a barracks area, eight hangars for helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles, and naval support facilities. The base also features a 450-meter pier capable of accommodating large warships. The base also reportedly includes large underground facilities measuring approximately 23,000 square meters. Currently, one PLA Navy marine company with armored vehicles is stationed at the base, although analysts have suggested that the base could hold up to 10,000 people.²³

The selection of Djibouti as a location to build a supporting logistics base likely reflected several military and political considerations, all of which makes its establishment in many ways unique. In military terms, Djibouti is ideally situated to provide support to a persistent, ongoing naval mission: specifically, the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. China has no other persistent military operation far from its shores than the counterpiracy mission. Other ports are in the vicinity of the Gulf of Aden, of course, but Djibouti stands out for its security, safety, and political appeal. Ports in Yemen, for example, could provide good access to the Gulf of Aden, but the country remains wracked with civil war and instability. And the fact that Djibouti hosts facilities for the navies of the United States, Japan, and other countries provides a politically ideal location for the PLA Navy. Chinese officials can easily deflect concerns about a PLA base in Africa by pointing out that China is merely following precedents set by the United States and other developed countries. The combined foreign military presence increases the stability for the region, allowing the PLA to operate its first base with greater security. And the coexistence of western militaries in Djibouti opens opportunities for collaboration against maritime piracy and other shared threats, which further legitimizes the Chinese

²² Liu Zhen, "China Starts Work on Horn of Africa Military Base Djibouti, Defense Ministry Confirms," *South China Morning Post*, February 26, 2016.

²³ Melvin, 2019, p. 4.

presence in the region. There are few ports that feature such an ideal combination of military necessity, safety and security, and political feasibility that could permit China to easily replicate the establishment of a port in the manner of Djibouti.

The base differs considerably from the military bases typically occupied by U.S. military forces in allied countries. Unlike major U.S. military bases, China's post in Djibouti has little ability to protect itself from attack. It lacks missile defenses and dedicated air, ground, and naval combat units. Also, China's base cannot offer much by way of supporting large-scale combat operations for power projection forces, given the PLA's limited expeditionary capability and lack of an alliance with Djibouti.

In terms of military functions, the facility has mostly provided logistics support to the PLA Navy ships patrolling the Gulf of Aden to date. But the base also supports other military missions. It has served as a venue for training PLA ground forces and could be used to support exercises with partner nations. Chinese ships and helicopters at the base, if called on, could carry out HA/DR and NEOs.²⁴ Referring to its role in supporting the PLA Navy's counterpiracy patrols and such nonwar missions, Beijing has preferred to characterize the post as a "logistics facility" or "support base."²⁵ A PLA spokesperson explained that the "support base" would "better serve Chinese troops when they escort ships in the Gulf of Aden." The spokesperson explained that the base would also allow the PLA to better "perform humanitarian rescue and carry out other international obligations."²⁶ Similarly, a typical article in the *Global Times*, a populist newspaper owned by the CCP, explained that the base is "mainly used to provide logistical supplies for China's escort task force in the Gulf of Aden."²⁷

The logistics base can also support missions by PLA forces passing through the region. In August 2017, for example, the base provided logistics services to the visiting Peace Ark hospital ship, which went on to treat several hundred individuals in Djibouti and other African

countries.²⁸ Chinese official media have also discussed how the base could support Chinese UNPKOs across the African continent.²⁹

Although obviously not mentioned by Chinese authorities, the base could also facilitate intelligence collection. The base is seven miles from Camp Lemmonier, which supports a variety of U.S. military operations. Sensors on the PLA's base could collect data on the U.S. platforms operating out of Camp Lemmonier. The Djibouti base could also facilitate intelligence collection in countries around the continent, enabling Chinese decisionmakers to more effectively monitor developments on the continent and more effectively advise partner nations.³⁰ The Djibouti base could also support the deployment of small teams of combat troops against nonstate actors. Presumably, any such operation would be undertaken in cooperation with a partner nation. China has already provided arms and training to African and Middle Eastern nations that face domestic insurgencies. In Nigeria, for example, Chinese armed drones have been employed against the insurgent group Boko Haram.³¹ Chinese troops have also conducted live-fire exercises involving armored personnel carriers for potential counterterrorism operations.³² The Djibouti base thus serves as an important enabler of a broad variety of the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and for a far broader array of potential PLA missions in the Middle East and North African theater.

Factors to Be Assessed

Observers continue to debate Chinese motivations for commencing the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and for building a supporting base in Djibouti. Most analysts identify the need to protect a vast array of economic and other interests in Africa and the Middle East as a key driver, given China's ascent as the world's second-largest economy, its extensive commercial presence in dangerous and unsettled locations, and its limited ability to project military power abroad. Analysts have noted in particular the vulnerability of vital shipping routes,

petroleum imports, and commercial investments related to the BRI.³³ The following section reviews some of the factors cited by analysts of China's military development, along with assessments of the relative importance each factor may have played in Beijing's decision to initiate the maritime patrols and establish the military base.

Factor 1: Economic Interests

The need for economic interests provides the clearest rationale for China's decision to initiate the counterpiracy patrols and subsequently build a supporting base in Djibouti. Since the late 1990s, China has seen a dramatic increase in its economic and security interests in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the second-largest economy in the world, in part because of its role as a hub of globalized production and trade.³⁴

China's pursuit of economic growth has domestic motives—it is ultimately aimed at supporting advances in standard of living—but it increasingly depends on overseas markets, trade routes, outbound investments, and imported natural resources. Maritime shipping lanes that pass through the Gulf of Aden remain important to both China's and the world's economy. China has used military intervention to expand its access to resources and markets with the goal of advancing economic interests and feeding the domestic economy and industry. Nearly 4.8 million barrels of oil pass through the Bab el-Mandab Strait every day, which the U.S. Energy Information Administration has labeled as a "world oil transit chokepoint."³⁵ The United States, China, and other world powers cooperated to control maritime piracy in the region in the 2000s because of the reliance of merchant shipping on the vital shipping lanes for global commerce.

Energy resources remain an important economic consideration for Chinese ties to Africa. China overtook the United States to become the world's top importer of crude oil in 2017, required to support a rapidly modernizing society and the demand of its growing middle class. Beijing thus has a strong incentive to seek a stronger relationship with oil-rich nations, including those in Africa, such as Nigeria, Angola,

Oman, and the Congo.³⁶ China also has major energy interests in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Iran among the country's largest suppliers of oil.³⁷ Chinese dependence on energy imports has surged in recent years. According to China National Petroleum Corporation, China imported more than 70 percent of its petroleum in 2018.³⁸

Trade and investment interests also have grown in Africa and the Middle East. In 2013, China became the largest trader in goods for the first time, overtaking the United States. About one-third of the trade consists of the assembly and reexport of goods elsewhere, although the amount of processing trade is declining.³⁹ Outbound overseas direct investment surpassed foreign direct investment into China in 2015.⁴⁰ Chinese manufacturers depend on access to crucial raw materials, including timber, minerals, and ore from Africa, among other trade partners.⁴¹ In Djibouti alone, China has provided about \$1.5 billion in infrastructure financing and helped build a \$3.5 billion free trade zone, Africa's largest.⁴²

To realize these commercial opportunities, large numbers of Chinese citizens have moved abroad. In Africa alone, China had about 10,000 businesses and more than 250,000 laborers in the continent in 2018.⁴³ Africa is likely to be the continent with the greatest relative increases in the population of overseas Chinese in coming decades, according to one study.⁴⁴

In sum, the timing of when China initiated the maritime patrols in the Gulf of Aden and established the first military base abroad is hardly coincidental. During the Cold War, the poor state of China's economy and limited set of interests abroad permitted the luxury of a principled opposition to military deployments in other countries. However, China's deepening integration into the global economy and the increasing demand of its rapidly growing economy and middle-class consumerism, especially since 2000, have coincided with the country's growing dependence on distant trade routes, outbound investments, and overseas resources and markets for sustained growth. Initial efforts by the PLA to provide better security for some of these inputs to the

⁴⁴ Dudley Poston, Jr., and Juyin Helen Wong, "The Chinese Diaspora: The Current Distribution of Overseas Chinese," *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 348–373.

national economy through such operations as the counterpiracy naval task force near the Gulf of Aden struggled with a lack of dedicated support facilities amid vast distances from Chinese shores. Given these economic realities and the vulnerability that overseas interests pose to the nation's economic survival, Beijing faced a compelling incentive to forward-deploy forces to safeguard these interests and establish an overseas base to support these forces.

Factor 2: External Threats to Sovereignty

As a relatively late comer to the global economy, China has found many of the most accessible markets dominated by Western companies. To realize potentially more-lucrative (and largely untapped) opportunities, Chinese companies have opted to operate in regions whose instability and hazards have largely deterred Western companies. This instability has posed direct threats to Chinese citizens and property abroad, thus affecting the sovereignty and integrity of China's international investments and property. China has used military interventions to safeguard these assets and to protect Chinese nationals.

In Africa, Chinese workers and companies operate against the backdrop of chronic instability, armed conflict, and limited government capacity to cope with humanitarian disasters. In the Middle East, persistent instability, conflict, and terrorism have put at risk Chinese investments in Syria, Iraq, and other countries.⁴⁵ Piracy at sea has fluctuated in the 21st century. According to one study, there were 522 incidents of maritime piracy in 2010. A growing proportion of maritime piracy occurs at sea rather than in the 12 nautical miles of territorial waters of a country.⁴⁶ The threat to shipping on which China's economy depended provided the primary impetus for the maritime

⁴⁵ Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1229-A, 2016.

⁴⁶ Anamika A. Twyman-Ghoshal and Glenn Pierce, "The Changing Nature of Contemporary Maritime Piracy: Results from the Contemporary Maritime Piracy Database 2001–10," *British Journal on Criminology*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2014, pp. 652–672.

patrols in the Gulf of Aden. But China took other measures to counter threats by nonstate actors on the ground. For example, Chinese companies hired security contractors, and Beijing has sent the People's Armed Police troops to guard its embassy in Iraq.⁴⁷ The PLA Navy also evacuated roughly 800 foreign nationals and PRC citizens from Yemen to Djibouti in 2015, where they boarded flights for home.⁴⁸ The evacuation followed an even larger operation in Libya in 2011 and smaller-scale NEOs in Chad in 2008 and the Central African Republic in 2012.⁴⁹ To combat nonstate terror groups, China has also sold arms to partner nations in the region, including armed drones to the Iraqi and Nigerian governments.⁵⁰

A clear idea of the scale of danger posed to Chinese citizens living and working abroad can be seen in the reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Consular Protection Center, which was established in the mid-2000s to assist Chinese citizens in other countries. According to the center, Chinese citizens in other countries reported 177 incidents involving damage or threats to people or personal property between 2008 and 2010. At least 23 of the incidents resulted in the deaths of Chinese citizens. According to a 2013 study by Wang Duanyong, a researcher at the Shanghai International Studies University, the number of incidents has increased over time, reflecting the growing volume of travelers. Examining the geographic distribution of reported incidents, Wang found that the greatest number occurred in sub-Saharan Africa (27 percent), followed by the Asia-Pacific area (22 percent).⁵¹

The number of Chinese citizens affected by regional disorder is expected to grow as China's footprint in the Middle East and Africa

⁴⁷ Zi Yang, "China's Private Security Companies: Domestic and International Roles," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 15, October 4, 2016.

⁴⁸ "Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden," *BBC News*, April 3, 2015.

⁴⁹ Duchâtel, Brauner, and Zhou, 2014, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Patrick Boehler and Gerry Doyle, "Use by Iraqi Military May be a Boon to Chinese Drones," *New York Times*, December 17, 2015.

⁵¹ Wang Duanyong, "The Safety of Chinese Citizens Abroad," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2013, pp. 167–198.

expands. Moreover, Beijing can ill-afford to appear passive and inactive in the face of tragic incidents that cost the lives of Chinese citizens. Left unaddressed, the dangers could threaten the ability of Chinese companies to supply resources and access markets that play a vital role in the economy. Serious disruptions could imperil growth, which could in turn fuel popular unrest and social instability among angry consumers and workers. Small wonder that Chinese official documents warned that the country had become “more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, and serious natural disasters and epidemics.”⁵²

Authorities have sought to expand services to protect the lives and property of citizens, but unarmed defense contractors and consular services may be inadequate in the face of the more severe dangers. Past patterns in NEOs and counterpiracy missions underscore the reality that the PLA is already expanding its range of operations in the Middle East and Africa. The enormous distance from China's shores limits the ability of PLA forces to respond to quick-developing situations, however. A military staging point closer to the vicinity of the hazards could greatly facilitate the PLA's ability to flexibly respond to a broader range of crisis situations.

Factor 3: National Status Concerns

China's desire to increase its international profile and demonstrate its leadership provides another strong driver. China has the second-largest economy in the world and one of the world's largest, most rapidly modernizing militaries. And as Chinese leaders have promoted the idea of international leadership, they have grown more sensitive to the reputation of the country both as a provider of goods and as a competent actor that can protect its interests.

Chinese leaders have in part elevated popular expectations of the country through their relentless promotion of Chinese ideals and

⁵² State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “Full Text: China's Military Strategy,” People's Republic of China Government, May 26, 2015.

international leadership. For example, Xi has trumpeted the vision of a “China dream” featuring a revitalized, wealthy, and powerful country. He has insisted that the dream also entails significant benefits in terms of greater peace and prosperity for the world. He has even gone so far as to propose the ideal of a “world dream” of “peace, development, cooperation, and shared benefits,” the realization of which naturally depends on the realization of the China dream.⁵³ Chinese leaders have also insisted the country play a larger role in global governance. At a 2016 Politburo study session, for example, Xi called on officials to “increase China’s voice in international affairs” and “make the international order more reasonable and just.”⁵⁴ In 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on the UN and Security Council to take a “leading role” in the “international anti-terror struggle.”⁵⁵ Another indication of Beijing’s concern for the country’s national reputation can be seen in the rollout of major geoeconomic projects, such as the much-publicized BRI. The \$900 billion BRI aims to deepen connections among Asia, Europe, and Africa and their surrounding regions.⁵⁶

Such ambitions provide a strong incentive for authorities to demonstrate the credibility of Chinese national power, in part by tackling nontraditional threats and contributing to international peace and stability. The PLA is well positioned to play an important role in burnishing the country’s reputation as a world leader and provider of public goods. Chinese military involvement in the counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and UNPKOs has earned Beijing considerable international praise, but the lack of permanent bases in the Middle East and Africa has limited China’s ability to keep forces “on station.” Moreover, Chinese analysts have reported that the consecutive presence in the Gulf of Aden has imposed severe challenges on the military’s logistics system. Arrangements for replenishment remain largely

⁵³ “Xi Jinping’s Dream for China and the World,” *China Daily*, April 13, 2018.

⁵⁴ Xinhua, “Xi Calls for Reforms on Global Governance,” *China Daily*, September 29, 2016.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Working Together to Address the New Threat of Terrorism,” webpage, September 25, 2014.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text: Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative,” webpage, March 20, 2015a.

ad hoc, and crews become fatigued over the long deployments with little opportunity to rest.⁵⁷

Although Chinese leaders appear eager to demonstrate the credibility and value of the country's power, there are many ways to bolster a country's reputation. Beijing has garnered considerable goodwill, especially in the developing world, from the massive investments and development projects related to major "economic diplomacy" initiatives, such as the BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Its contributions on security affairs, by contrast, remain modest. Beyond participation in a handful of UNPKOs and small humanitarian efforts, such as those undertaken by the Peace Ark hospital ship, PLA forces have mostly focused on NEOs and other related missions to protect Chinese nationals and the evacuation of foreign nationals. Even counterpiracy operations have dropped in importance, especially now that the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden has receded. Sustaining its patrols in these critical waters and the establishment of a base in Djibouti could help China maintain a higher profile role as a security provider.

In sum, sensitivities in Beijing to the country's reputation as a leading global power have provided a strong incentive to demonstrate the country's prowess in service of public goods, such as international peace and stability, of which the counterpiracy patrols provided a valuable and high-profile contribution. However, China has arguably garnered more goodwill from its willingness to lend and spend in developing countries through infrastructure and related projects. By contrast, the PLA's contribution to tackling transnational threats remains modest. Even so, the PLA's engagement in operations around the world, however limited, permits Beijing to showcase the country's military might and thereby avoid the opprobrium of "dollar diplomacy" and appearance of military weakness that dogged Japan when it attempted to similarly elevate its international profile in the 1990s, albeit without involving its military.

⁵⁷ Erickson and Strange, 2015, p. 50.

Factor 4: Relationship with Regional Partners

China has no allies in the Middle East or Africa, but it has pursued partnerships with countries in the region. At the 19th Party Congress, Xi called on foreign policy officials to build a “global partnership network,” which Chinese commentators explain is envisioned as a coalition of countries, primarily in the developing world, defined primarily by trade and investment but also by cooperation in political and security domains.⁵⁸

China has developed a robust political and economic relationship with African countries in particular, building on a decades-long partnership that stems from the Cold War. Politically, Chinese authorities have pledged to step up coordination of policies to advance the interests of developing countries. China's 2015 white paper on African policy stated that there is a “need to increase the representation and voice of developing countries, including China and Africa, in international affairs.”⁵⁹ The political significance of China's relationship with Africa can be seen in Beijing's support for the African Union and willingness to host visits by African leaders. Xi met with the president of Djibouti in November 2017, for example, during which both sides pledged to elevate the importance of the relationship into a “strategic partnership.”⁶⁰ In 2018, China also opened a training school in Tanzania as part of a consortium involving South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe.⁶¹

Economically, Chinese companies have become a major presence on the continent, contributing to a growing trade relationship and infrastructure development. Chinese firms are building, for example, a \$3.8 billion railway that will link the Kenyan port city of Mombasa

⁵⁸ Yiqi Zhou, “China's Partnership Network Versus the U.S. Alliance System: Coexistence or Conflict?” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2017, pp. 1–18.

⁵⁹ Xinhua, “Full Text: China's Second Africa Policy Paper,” *China Daily*, December 5, 2015.

⁶⁰ “China, Djibouti Agree to Establish Strategic Partnership,” Xinhua, November 23, 2017.

⁶¹ Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, “Building a More ‘Democratic’ and ‘Multi-polar World’: China's Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries,” *China Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, November 2019, pp. 55–83.

with Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan.⁶² China has also built a \$4 billion, 740-km electric railway that connects Addis Ababa and Djibouti and the \$5.6-billion Chad railway network since 2012.⁶³ In Djibouti, China is financing a railroad and an expansion of port terminals, fuel and water pipelines, a natural gas liquefaction plant, highway upgrades, two proposed airports, and several government buildings.⁶⁴

In addition to political and economic partnership, Chinese leaders have sought to build a security partnership with Africa, primarily in the form of arms sales, military training, and exchanges of military personnel. The maritime patrols in the Gulf of Aden allow Beijing to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining a secure trade route between Africa and China. And establishing a military base on the continent could open more options for the PLA to cooperate with African partner militaries, perhaps with missions to provide HA/DR, or to combat shared threats. A base also facilitates military training, advisory missions, and arms sales. Chinese arms exports to African nations have soared in recent years, as its economic engagement has grown.⁶⁵ Similarly, a base in Djibouti could facilitate China's offer to provide \$60 million in military assistance and support for the "operationalization" of the African Union's standby military force.⁶⁶ It also could support Chinese participation in UNPKOs. China has more than 2,500

⁶² Yun Sun, "Picking Up Steam: The Expansion of Chinese Railways in Africa," Brookings Institute, September 26, 2014.

⁶³ Sun, 2014.

⁶⁴ Monte Reel, "Djibouti Is Hot: How a Forgotten Sandlot of a Country Became a Hub of International Power Games," Bloomberg, March 23, 2016.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Staats, "China's Approach to Africa Takes on Harder Edge," U.S. Institute for Peace, March 31, 2017.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Johannesburg Action Plan (2016–2018)," webpage, December 10, 2015b.

personnel serving in UNPKOs across the African continent, with the largest contingents in South Sudan and Liberia as of 2016.⁶⁷

Despite the opportunities that a military base might provide for partnership-building, China also faces incentives to keep the military presence modest. Historical sensitivities regarding the role of foreign militaries persist in a continent that continues to grapple with the legacy of colonialism, and Beijing has pledged to avoid repeating the precedent of imperialism. African countries likely view with ambivalence the efforts of Chinese and other foreign militaries to suppress pirates in the Gulf of Aden or carry out missions that aim primarily to protect foreigners.

In sum, China clearly hopes to build a more comprehensive partnership with African partner nations that encompasses political, economic, and security domains.⁶⁸ African countries welcome some military missions, such as HA/DR and shared training. However, political sensitivities regarding foreign militaries and the PLA's focus on protecting the interests of Chinese citizens and their assets imposes constraints on the value of a military footprint on the continent. For purposes of partnership-building, a modest military presence, such as the supply base in Djibouti, likely serves Beijing's needs better than a large military buildup would, since the latter is more likely to be perceived in odious terms as an occupying force.

Factor 5: Regional Power Balance

The counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and the establishment of the military base in Djibouti both contribute to regional stability in a geographic region of high interest to Beijing and, in turn, help to promote a shifting balance of influence toward China on the African continent.

⁶⁷ Matthieu Duchâtel, Richard Gowan, and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, "Into Africa: China's Global Security Shift," European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, June 2016.

⁶⁸ Xinhua, 2015.

The variety of transnational threats plaguing the Gulf of Aden and countries in sub-Saharan Africa have long deterred Western companies from committing substantial resources toward those resource-rich regions. China's willingness to exploit these opportunities requires some effort to promote stability and security to allow for greater commercial activity. Chinese participation in the international counter-piracy effort has contributed to a substantial reduction in maritime piracy in that area, allowing international shipping to pass safely in recent years. China's support for UNPKOs and PLA support for other nonwar missions on the African continent, such as HA/DR, similarly promotes stability in a region of strategic importance to Beijing.

These Chinese deployments also affect the balance of influence in the region. China's increasing economic relationship with Africa coincided with a widely perceived weakening of U.S. and European influence. A CNBC article observed, for example, that China's new military base "comes amid expectations for the U.S. to reduce troops in Africa under President Donald Trump's 'America First' policy." The article noted that Chinese arms sales to Africa had surpassed those of the United States in recent years.⁶⁹

Although China's economic presence on the continent overshadows that of virtually all other countries, Beijing's military strength lags far beyond that of its competitors. The United States and its allies France, Japan, and Italy all maintain bases in the area. Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent U.S. base on the African continent, has more than 4,000 troops deployed.⁷⁰ Although the PLA presence in Djibouti pales by comparison, a small military presence does help augment the considerable commercial and diplomatic presence on the continent, which better positions China to bolster its own and counter U.S. influence.

Establishing a Chinese military base is also imperative because Beijing believes it has little reason to trust the United States and its

⁶⁹ Nyshka Chandran, "China Says It Will Increase Its Military Presence in Africa," CNBC, June 27, 2018.

⁷⁰ Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Signs New Lease to Keep Strategic Military Installation in the Horn of Africa," *New York Times*, May 5, 2014.

allies to protect China's interests, owing to deepening strains in the relationship. Underscoring this point, the establishment of a Chinese military presence in Djibouti has itself added to tensions in the U.S. relationship. In 2019, the U.S. African Command Intelligence Director, Rear Adm. Heidi Berg, accused PLA forces stationed at Djibouti of efforts to interfere with American operations at Camp Lemonnier. Berg cited instances in which the Chinese attempted to constrain U.S. aircraft from flying in international airspace. Berg also noted the dangers posed by instances in which personnel used lasers to dazzle U.S. pilots operating near the base.⁷¹ Chinese authorities denied the allegations.⁷²

Some U.S. officials have warned that China may seek to drive the U.S. presence out of Djibouti, using as leverage the massive debt owed by the Djibouti government. U.S. Senators Christopher Coons (D-Del.) and Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) sent a joint letter in November 2018 to the U.S. Department of Defense to express concern about the Djibouti government's decision to nationalize a port contracted by a company from a U.S. ally. Commentators speculated that Chinese pressure may have been a factor.⁷³ However, evidence that China seeks to evict or seriously diminish the U.S. military presence in Djibouti remains elusive.

Leaders in other competitor countries have also viewed China's military base with suspicion. Indian analysts have warned that the Djibouti base foreshadows a broader effort to dominate India's maritime periphery. The establishment of the base coincides with a more active PLA presence along the Indian Ocean, including submarine port calls in Sri Lanka; closer military cooperation with Pakistan, including the proposed sale of eight Yuan-class submarines; and increases in arms sales to Bangladesh and Myanmar. To counter China's growing military presence along its maritime periphery, the Indian military has developed strategic outposts on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands,

⁷¹ David Brennan, "U.S. Commander Says China Tried to Sneak Into American Military Base in Africa," *Newsweek*, June 18, 2019.

⁷² "China Refutes US Allegation of Laser Use in Djibouti," Xinhua, May 4, 2018.

⁷³ Patrick Martin, "Could China Squeeze the U.S. Out of its Only Permanent Military Base in Africa?" *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018.

expanded its naval inventory, and stepped up cooperation with the United States and Japan.⁷⁴

China's deepening economic partnership with Africa occurs within the backdrop of a PLA operational presence on the continent. Maintaining maritime patrols in the Gulf Aden and maintaining a military base in Djibouti enable Beijing to promote regional stability in a critical global shipping lane and in a part of Africa featuring a growing Chinese economic presence. The maritime patrols in the Gulf of Aden and Djibouti base also facilitate the PLA's support to whole-of-government efforts to bolster China's influence on the continent and counter that of the United States. Although the establishment of the Djibouti base has exacerbated tensions in some cases with the United States and India, it serves China's interests in promoting stability on the continent and promoting Chinese influence.

Factor 6: Leadership and Personality

The weakening of the post-Cold War Chinese foreign policy prohibition on military interventions in other countries, exemplified by the counterpiracy patrols and the Djibouti base, coincides with numerous violations of prior political norms that have accompanied Xi Jinping's ascent to power. Xi has brushed aside decades of collective decision-making to concentrate power in his hands through the creation of new small groups, the promotion of a personality cult, and the insistence on pledges of personality loyalty. He has also overseen an aggressive anticorruption campaign that has felled former Politburo members, a move historically seen as taboo.⁷⁵ In foreign policy, Xi has announced hardline stances on territorial and sovereignty disputes, overseen a massive expansion of artificial island construction in the South China Sea, and promoted major geostrategic initiatives, such as the BRI, which are

⁷⁴ Abhijit Singh, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: Strategic Implications for India," *War on the Rocks*, August 21, 2017.

⁷⁵ Susan Shirk, "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2018, pp. 22–36.

designed to bolster the integration of the Eurasian landmass under Chinese leadership.⁷⁶ Given the unusually energetic and ambitious nature of domestic and foreign policies under Xi, some have interpreted the establishment of China's first overseas military base as yet another initiative launched by the unconventional president. A Voice of America report observed, for example, that "President Xi Jinping is overseeing an ambitious military modernization program, including developing capabilities for China's forces to operate far from home."⁷⁷

However, the intervention in the waters near the Gulf of Aden predates Xi. The main impetus for both the counter maritime patrols and initiation of other nonwar missions in Africa and Asia owed to predecessor Hu. In 2004, President Hu directed the military to carry out a series of strategic missions, including the defense of national interests abroad and greater involvement in shaping the international security environment. The PLA subsequently increased its involvement in UNPKOs across multiple continents. In 2008, at the start of Hu's second term as China's top leader, the PLA Navy deployed its first task force to support the counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, where it has continuously maintained a presence since.⁷⁸ Although China established the Djibouti base under Xi's watch, western observers observed a growing consensus among Chinese military writers in favor of an overseas post throughout the late 2010s, under Hu.⁷⁹

Despite the clear military imperative and the important political groundwork laid by Hu, the role of Xi's leadership style in realizing China's first overseas post cannot be fully discounted. Domestically, Xi's government has violated numerous norms, including the arrest of former Politburo members. Beijing's decision to break precedent and build an overseas post is also consistent with an overall more assertive foreign policy. Under Xi, China has seized control of Scarborough Reef from the Philippines, scaled up the construction of artificial islands in

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Economy, "China's New Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018.

⁷⁷ "China Opens First Overseas Military Base," *Voice of America*, November 3, 2017.

⁷⁸ Erickson and Strange, 2015.

⁷⁹ Yung and Rustici, 2014.

the South China Sea, expanded the scale of maritime and air activity near the East China Sea, and announced ambitious geoeconomic projects, most notably the BRI, aimed, in part, at strengthening China's influence across the Eurasian landmass. Thus, the energetic and aggressive political style of Xi may have played a role in the timing of the military base's establishment, even if this influence was likely secondary next to more compelling drivers. However, the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden had little to do with Xi's personality, having begun under Hu's aegis.

Factor 7: Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

Observers of Chinese politics have long anticipated the ruling CCP's increasing cultivation of nationalist enthusiasm to bolster popular support in light of the waning appeal of the party's Marxist ideology.⁸⁰ Some analysts have viewed China's increasing military posture abroad as driven, in part, by nationalist considerations. Mastro observed that "domestic public support for the development of expeditionary capabilities is coalescing as more Chinese nationals find themselves in dangerous situations" abroad.⁸¹

Although rigorous data on the topic remain elusive, studies of Chinese internet activity suggests the maritime patrols in the Gulf of Aden and the Djibouti base enjoy broad support, partly because the patrols help save the lives of Chinese and foreign merchants and the Djibouti base permits the PLA to more effectively carry out such operations as NEOs. If anything, Chinese citizens may feel frustrated that the government is not doing more to protect citizens abroad. In reviewing internet commentary, for example, Mastro noted that netizens routinely complain about the government's reliance on diplomacy instead of military force to protect vulnerable citizens abroad.⁸² Underlining this point, China's most popular movie to date, the 2017 film

⁸⁰ Fifield, 2019.

⁸¹ Mastro, 2017.

⁸² Mastro, 2017.

“Wolf Warrior 2,” centered on a fictional Chinese soldier who protects vulnerable citizens from attacks by a villainous mercenary army in an African country.⁸³ Chinese audiences similarly flocked to a movie based on a rescue mission undertaken by PLA Navy ships operating near the Gulf of Aden (“Operation Red Sea”), suggesting that interest remains strong in the high-profile operation.⁸⁴

Despite some evidence that the patrols and military base enjoy popular support, the precise role that nationalist sentiment played in driving the Chinese leadership to the decisions to carry out those activities is difficult to determine. On the one hand, the multiple incidents in 2004 resulting in deaths of Chinese citizens working abroad and subsequent guidance issued the same year for the PLA to expand its operations abroad suggest that Chinese leaders were sensitive to the criticism that the government had not done enough to protect citizens abroad. On the other hand, Beijing is aware that the public support for the regime ultimately depends more heavily on domestic concerns, especially given that only a tiny fraction of the country's population works and lives abroad. Studies have shown that Chinese citizens regard bread-and-butter issues, such as the economy, corruption, and the environment, as far higher priorities than foreign policy issues.⁸⁵ Therefore, measures to crack down on corruption and address pollution have likely provided a far larger boost to the CCP's popularity than specific foreign policy decisions, such as the counterpiracy mission and establishment of the base in Djibouti.

⁸³ “Wolf Warrior 2: The Nationalist Action Film Storming China,” *BBC News*, August 4, 2017.

⁸⁴ “Success of ‘Operation Red Sea’ Echoes Yemen Rescue Mission,” *China Daily*, March 14, 2018.

⁸⁵ Richard Wike and Bridget Parker, “Corruption, Pollution, Inequality Are Top Concerns in China,” Pew Research Center, September 24, 2015.

Factor 8: Enabling Military Capabilities

The PLA's development and acquisition of military capabilities suitable for the projection of military power abroad helped enable the start of the counterpiracy mission and establishment of the Djibouti military post, but this factor matters more for the former than the latter.

Over the past few decades, China's military has experienced extensive modernization. Although much of the efforts have focused on preparations for combat contingencies near Taiwan and the first island chain, the PLA has also expanded its inventory of platforms to support long-distance operations. Chinese military leaders have also undertaken reforms that could better position the PLA to carry out complex and challenging joint operations far from China's shores.

Insufficient numbers of naval combatant and auxiliary replenishment ships capable of reliably traveling long distances provided a major impediment to sustained operations beyond the Pacific Ocean through the early 1980s. However, advances in naval ship development and acquisitions in the late 1990s overcame this hurdle. A sign of the PLA Navy's progress could be seen in the service's first successful circumnavigation of the world in 2002.⁸⁶

Throughout the 2000s, the PLA has expanded its inventory of naval combatants and, crucially, long-distance replenishment ships.⁸⁷ These modern surface combatants and the introduction of more-reliable and more-durable replenishment ships proved critical to enabling the counterpiracy maritime patrols, given the vast distances that the ships had to travel and lack of support bases on the way.

However, the successful establishment of the Djibouti base did not hinge on any of these capabilities. The PLA has added capabilities that could prove useful for operations staged at the Djibouti base, including naval helicopters, medium to large PLA Air Force trans-

⁸⁶ Eric McVadon, "The PLA Navy as Instrument of Statecraft," Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang, eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2011, p. 228.

⁸⁷ Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C., 2015.

port, and tanker aircraft.⁸⁸ The expansion of the marine corps, in particular, is designed to support overseas missions.⁸⁹ But to fulfill its primary purpose of providing logistics support to naval ships and a launching point for other nonwar missions, the Djibouti base merely required facilities to store equipment, house troops, and service visiting ships and aircraft. Construction undertaken by Chinese SOEs to build up the base and the development of additional air, naval, and ground capabilities has furnished those capabilities.

Summary

China's opposition to military interventions in other countries and establishment of military bases abroad made a virtue out of necessity during the decades when the country was too poor and militarily weak to project power more than a short distance from its borders. However, China's recent rise, coupled with the reality of its deepening integration into the global economy, has introduced new security and political challenges for which its resistance to military operations abroad and opposition to foreign basing to enable those missions proved unsustainable.

Underscoring insights reached in the literature review, the factors most responsible for the initiation of the counterpiracy mission and China's related decision to build its first military base abroad overlap to some degree but center on the increasing vulnerability of economic and strategic assets abroad in an environment defined by deepening tensions with the United States. The large number of people and assets in Africa and the Middle East and China's dependence on the Indian Ocean as a transit lane for merchant shipping and critical energy imports provide the most compelling reason for China to seek a greater military presence in those areas. The shift in geography for Chinese interventions mirrors the findings in the quantitative analysis, which

⁸⁸ "Chinese Large Freighter Plane Enters Military Service," *Xinhua*, July 7, 2016.

⁸⁹ Minnie Chan, "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Percent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017.

noted how interventions had moved away from China's periphery in the post-Cold War period. Closely related, the spread of transnational threats including maritime piracy, terrorism, and armed conflict in the post-Cold War era exposed China's interests to serious dangers. China's decision to deploy a naval task force to the Gulf of Aden beginning in 2008 and its execution of a series of NEOs represented the highest profile and, to date, the most lasting effort to address those concerns.

Other countries that faced similar risks, such as European countries, India, and Japan, might have chosen to rely on the United States to provide security, but China found this option unattractive for several reasons. First, increasing tensions with Washington made it risky for Beijing to rely on its chief competitor to protect its interests. Second, China's ambitions to revitalize as a great power provided a strong incentive to establish its own high-profile military presence. Third, China had strategic reasons to seek a military presence in Africa apart from the task of securing the Gulf of Aden or providing security for its citizens. In particular, Beijing's pursuit of a closer strategic partnership with African countries provided a strong incentive for China to increase its military presence on the continent. The PLA Navy patrols provide a means for China to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring a secure, stable maritime trade route between the two continents. And a PLA base offered Beijing the opportunity to provide a range of security services and collaborative operations with client states and partners that would reinforce the value and importance of relations with China. Military training, arms sales, support for operations, and HA/DR represent some of the types of security-related goods China could now offer to its partner nations, thanks to the Djibouti base. This point supports the conclusion drawn from the literature review that national status concerns and the pursuit of partnerships in areas of economic and strategic importance to China play an important role in driving contemporary interventions.

Other factors played a lesser role in the initiation of the Gulf of Aden patrols and establishment of the military base. Commentators who emphasize Xi Jinping's provocative leadership style frequently overlook continuities in policy between Xi and his predecessor, Hu. However, Xi's role in securing the base cannot be entirely dismissed, as Xi

has proven capable of implementing controversial policies that evaded Hu, such as the 2015 PLA reform. This point reinforces the conclusion made in the literature review, which regarded the role of leadership personalities as less important for post–Cold War interventions.

In terms of political legitimacy, Xi has emphasized nationalist themes more than his predecessors, as seen in the tougher stands on issues ranging from Taiwan to trade, and these have proven popular in China. The counterpiracy patrols and establishment of a small military outpost in Djibouti also have proved popular because of the options these activities offer for evacuating and better protecting Chinese citizens working and living in those regions. But these remain a smaller contribution to the party's legitimacy than stewardship of domestic issues, reinforcing an insight from the literature review about the declining salience of ideology in post–Cold War interventions.

Military enablers provided an important role in the start and sustenance of the counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. In particular, the fielding of modern resupply ships and surface warships capable of long-distance voyages proved critical for the mission, especially in the early years when the PLA Navy lacked a supporting base in Djibouti. By contrast, the PLA's expansion of the PLA Navy Marine Corps and its fielding of newer transport aircraft and naval vessels can serve usefully at the Djibouti base, but these innovations were not strictly necessary for the establishment of the facility.

Of the factors posited in Chapter Two as possible drivers of interventions, ideology played the least significant role. Chinese authorities have tended to emphasize the pragmatic issues of threats posed by maritime piracy to Chinese economic interests, the vulnerability of Chinese merchant ships and personnel, and the need for regional stability to enable Chinese commercial activity as justifications for the intervention. Authorities also invoke idealistic language about the need for promoting world peace and common development, and this contemporary rhetoric contrasts sharply with the highly antagonistic and militant ideological language that accompanied the violent interventions of Maoist China.

Table 5.1 examines the evidence in this case for and against each key factor.

Table 5.1
Summary of Analysis of Factors for China's Establishment of Djibouti Base Case Study

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Economic interests	China's economic dependence on energy supplies from Middle East; Africa as an important trade partner; the BRI; leadership directives to address economic interests	Foreign policy principles against military interventions in other countries and overseas military bases; competing security demands along China's periphery	Compelling evidence that this was and remains a primary driver
External threat to sovereignty	Losses in personnel and assets in Africa and the Gulf of Aden from piracy, armed conflict, and terrorism; combined with lack of Chinese military capability for expeditionary forces	No great power threatens China; most threats are fairly low level; reliance on security contractors	The threat may be limited, but a lack of Chinese military capability and large number of citizens exposed to various hazards make this factor a key driver
Alliances and partnerships	Deepening China-Africa relations across economic, political, security domains; military base provides options for supporting partner African states	African countries may not welcome foreign military forces	An important factor, because the maritime patrols and military base demonstrate the value of Chinese partnership
Regional power balance	Chinese companies require stability, security to carry out trade and economic partnership; increased military presence could help complement growing economic influence	U.S. and other foreign militaries help promote security in Gulf of Aden; United States does not currently threaten Chinese interests	An important factor, because China requires stability in the region for its robust economic presence, and growing U.S. distrust means China cannot count on U.S. goodwill to provide security

Table 5.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
National status concerns	Leadership directives to raise China's global leadership; ambitions of a strong military and economy from China dream visions; tensions with the United States	Other ways available to boost Chinese status without maritime patrols or military bases	A likely contributing factor, but not decisive by itself, because there are many other ways China could enhance its international reputation
Leadership and personality	Xi has advanced numerous provocative, norm-breaking policies; Xi's support for modernization and assertive foreign policy	PLA present in the area for years before Xi's ascent; predecessor Hu is responsible for initiating counterpiracy patrols	A minor factor, because Hu oversaw the start of the Gulf of Aden patrols and laid the groundwork for more PLA presence abroad; however, Xi's forceful personality may have helped seal the deal for the Djibouti base
Domestic political legitimacy	Popularity of counterpiracy patrols, overseas base; nationalism an increasingly important part of CCP's political support	Surveys show citizens care most about domestic issues such as corruption, inequality, and the environment	The Gulf of Aden patrols and Djibouti base may be popular, but the CCP's actions regarding domestic issues more important for shoring up public support
Enablers	The acquisition of replenishment vessels and durable surface ships critical to enabling long-distance voyages for counterpiracy operations	PLA power projection capabilities remain weak and can only support limited operations; establishment of Djibouti base did not require especially advanced capabilities	An important consideration for the maritime patrols, but less so for establishing the base

Conclusion

The preceding chapters reviewed the PRC's experience with military interventions since 1949 and the factors that gave rise to specific operations. The review of scholarly writings on past incidents, quantitative analysis of past operations, and the case studies of China's invasion of Vietnam and the PLA's establishment of a military base in Djibouti to facilitate its counterpiracy and other operations in eastern Africa together suggest several findings about how China has conducted military interventions in the past.

Results of Analyses

The first finding concerns the change in the nature and the type of military intervention undertaken by Beijing over time. China has undertaken two broad types of interventions in its post-1949 history, which can be illustrated by the contrasting case studies in this report of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and its initiation of counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 and subsequent establishment of a supporting military base in Djibouti in 2017. The first type, called an "old-style intervention," occurred throughout much of the Cold War, from 1949 through the 1970s. These interventions tended to be fewer in number but of a more aggressive nature, frequently designed to deter or defeat a threatening great-power adversary or its allies. The quantitative analysis demonstrated that the majority of interventions in the Cold War were of a violent nature, and it showed a clear linkage between conflict and territorial disputes. Not coincidentally, the

quantitative data also showed how Cold War-era interventions took place largely along China's periphery. The Korean War provided the occasion for the largest Chinese intervention, involving hundreds of thousands of troops, but other conflicts also involved major formations. The Sino-Vietnam War case study and evidence from the literature review further underscore how perceptions of threat from great-power rivals, territorial disputes, and commitments to client states and partners, such as Cambodia, could motivate Chinese leaders to launch a major intervention, despite military inferiority. Insights from the literature review of Cold War-era conflicts also underscored the importance of such factors as insecurity over the newly founded country's domestic situation, rivalry among political elites, a reliance on military methods to deter great-power rivals, the domineering personality of Mao, and a fervent ideological atmosphere.

A dramatic easing of tensions with the United States after the 1970s and Russia following the end of the Cold War, the abandonment of Maoist ideological fervor, and China's deepening integration into the global economy have reduced or eliminated many of the incentives that underpinned the early large-scale combat interventions while introducing new incentives for different types of interventions. Beginning around the mid-2000s, the PLA began to engage in a growing number of nonwar missions, including participation in UNPKOs, counterpiracy naval patrols in the Gulf of Aden, HA/DR, and NEOs. The quantitative analysis demonstrated that these missions occurred at farther distances from China's borders than was the case in the Cold War, in locales as far away as Africa. And as the literature review and quantitative analysis showed, the new style missions typically involved modest numbers of troops, rarely surpassing more than a few hundred personnel. In contrast to the old-style interventions, the case study on the counterpiracy patrols and establishment of the Djibouti base underscored how concerns about economic interests and the vulnerability of citizens and their assets provided key drivers of these operations. The literature review and case study of the Gulf of Aden patrols and Djibouti base also suggested Chinese decisionmakers have sought to increase the country's prestige and status, as well as bolster domestic popular support, by demonstrating the country's military capabilities

in promoting stability around the world, defending Chinese territorial and sovereignty claims, and protecting Chinese people and their assets abroad. Table 6.1 summarizes the findings about the factors that have contributed to past interventions. In the table, the factors have been listed in order of descending overall importance.

A second finding from our analysis emphasizes the elements of continuity in China's approach to interventions. Beijing continues to plan and prepare for potential major interventions to resolve the status of Taiwan. Chinese leaders must also consider the potential escalation of naval and air skirmishes around disputed maritime regions near the Senkaku Islands with Japan and various neighbors in Southeast Asia regarding the South China Sea and the potential contingencies related to the border with India. Persistent tensions on the Korean Peninsula also provide a compelling reason for the PLA to contemplate potential interventions there, perhaps to control the flow of refugees, stabilize the border, or secure nuclear weapons. Although these hot spot issues persist, a key difference from the past lies in the availability of a much broader array of military and nonmilitary means to advance Beijing's agenda on these contentious issues. In the Cold War, the PLA relied on waves of poorly equipped troops to overwhelm adversaries. Today, by contrast, Beijing has found more fruitful and less risky the use of nonwar methods to exert control and coerce neighbors on these issues, employing gray zone tactics with merchant militia and Coast Guard units and tools drawn from economic diplomacy. The PLA also has at its disposal an increasingly advanced and modern military capable of a broad variety of combat and nonwar missions. These provide the Chinese leadership a broad array of tools, of which the military remains one part, to manage traditional security challenges.

Other continuities can be found in the salience of certain factors that underpin military interventions, even if the factors have evolved. Chinese leaders continue to regard the welfare of ethnic Chinese people as a potential reason for military action in other countries today as in past operations, such as the Sino-Vietnam War. The importance of ethnic Chinese people may be increasing, even if the PLA relies on nonwar operations to provide security. The contemporary PLA forces principally seek to protect Chinese citizens through missions (e.g.,

Table 6.1
Summary of Evidence for Factors to Explain Chinese Military Interventions

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
External threat to sovereignty	A key factor identified in the literature review, case studies, and quantitative analysis underscore the role of rivalries, threat to territorial control in Cold War conflicts	Some contemporary missions do not appear to address any threat, such as persistent Gulf of Aden patrols after piracy largely suppressed	The nature of the threat has changed, but a need to counter perceived threats to sovereignty remains a primary driver of Chinese military interventions
Alliance or partnership with host	Literature review; case studies emphasize this is a contributing factor for interventions	Importance of partnership obligations inferred indirectly in quantitative analysis regarding geographic distribution of interventions	An important factor in key Cold War conflicts but plays a different role today, mainly in providing an incentive for nonwar missions in Asia and Africa
Regional power balance	Literature review, case studies, and quantitative analysis regarding the geographic distribution of interventions (which highlight the role of the pursuit of regional stability); and favorable balance of influence as key factors	The role of these factors varies over time and alone does not seem to determine interventions	Chinese concerns for balance of power in Asia drive nonwar interventions and PLA planning for contingencies, while this factor in the Cold War played an important role in some wars
National status concerns	Literature review and case studies suggest national status concerns are relevant to interventions but not decisive	Difficult to measure	A contributing factor, especially in periods of strategic competition, such as the Cold War and the current period of strategic competition (other factors likely more directly affect intervention choices)

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Domestic politics and legitimacy	Literature review highlights this as an important variable for several high-risk Mao-era conflicts; counterpiracy patrol and Djibouti base case studies suggest a possible factor	Sino-Vietnam War case study did not identify this as a key driver; literature review downplayed this factor in more recent, lower-risk nonwar missions	A potential factor, but role differs widely according to the nature of the leader and the riskiness of the potential intervention
Coidentity group populations in host country	Sino-Vietnam War case study concluded this was a secondary factor; counterpiracy patrols and Djibouti base case study emphasized this was an important factor	Literature review downplayed this factor for most Cold War interventions but noted that it was of growing importance for contemporary nonwar missions	A contributing factor to some Cold War conflicts; an important driver of some contemporary nonwar interventions, especially NEOs and a potential Taiwan conflict
Economic interests	Literature review, case study on counterpiracy patrols and Djibouti base both highlight this as a driving factor of contemporary nonwar missions	Sino-Vietnam War case study concluded this was not an important factor; literature review on Mao-era conflicts tend to discount this factor	Economic interests matter far more for contemporary interventions than for Mao-era operations
Ideology	Literature review identified ideology as an important driver in Cold War-era clashes	Both case studies downplayed this factor; literature review dismisses this factor for contemporary nonwar missions	An important factor in the Cold War but less relevant in current nonwar missions; exception may be nationalism as it relates to potential future interventions in Taiwan

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Leadership and personality	Literature review identified this as a key factor for Mao-era conflicts	Both case studies downplayed this factor.	This is clearly an important factor in early high-stakes Cold War clashes; less decisive for missions in more recent years.
Enablers	Literature review noted this factor for long-distance contemporary missions; case study of counterpiracy mission in Gulf of Aden identified modern warships and refuelers as key enabler	Literature review downplayed this factor in Cold War conflicts because of weak PLA capabilities; case study on Sino-Vietnam War did not identify this as a significant factor	This is a contributing factor for contemporary interventions requiring long-distance deployments, but less relevant for Cold War-era conflicts.

NEOs, maritime patrols) and participation in stabilizing operations (e.g., UNPKOs). However, in coming years, PLA forces could opt for combat interventions against nonstate threats, such as counterterrorism operations, if less violent methods fail to stem threats to Chinese citizens and their assets. Concerns about China's national status and influence have also persisted through the ages, although they have evolved from a contest for leadership in the communist world to a broader contest for influence in status in Asia and globally. Sensitivity to the country's reputation and image could influence Chinese decisionmakers in future crisis situations. In 2004, a series of high-profile attacks on Chinese citizens abroad arguably contributed to Beijing's decision to increase the PLA's operations abroad.¹ A similar highly publicized tragedy or sense of acute threat to vulnerable citizens abroad could drive Chinese leaders to significantly ramp up military operations abroad.

A third finding concerns the recent developments that position China for new directions in its approach to military intervention. In particular, the persistent maritime patrol presence in the Red Sea and establishment of a military post in Djibouti provide options for Beijing to increase the tempo and variety of missions in the Middle East and Eastern Africa. The PLA Navy ships based in Djibouti are well positioned to quickly carry out civilian evacuations in conflict zones in the region, for example, or to support HA/DR to partner countries. Evidence that China is adding dual-use facilities capable of providing logistics support to visiting ships and planes in locations such as Cambodia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and the expansion of the PLA Navy Marine Corps and growing inventory of aircraft carriers, long-distance transport aircraft, and amphibious assault ships also will provide Beijing greater capacity to conduct military interventions at a higher operational tempo and in more locations.² Combined with a greater focus by Chinese leaders to elevate the country's role in global governance and the intensifying competition with the United States for influence in Asia and around the world, the PLA appears poised for a new phase

¹ "Eleven Chinese Workers Killed in Afghan Attack," *China Daily*, June 10, 2004.

² U.S. Department of Defense, "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access," December 2018b, p. 19.

in interventions characterized by more-frequent operations, conducted simultaneously at different locations, and involving more assets than in the past, even if these operations remain largely nonwar in nature.

Signposts of Future Chinese Military Interventions

What does China's past experience tell us about the potential prospects for future interventions? The most-essential drivers of China's new type of interventions seem likely to persist, albeit with more missions occurring simultaneously at different locations and involving slightly larger forces. If no crisis emerges in the hot spots of Taiwan and contested maritime and border regions, future interventions seem most likely to resemble the relatively smaller-scale, nonwar missions that have typified PLA behavior abroad since the mid-2000s. China faces the challenge of providing security for a broad range of economic and other interests around the world, for which its current military posture abroad remains inadequate. If China can successfully avoid a crisis with Taiwan and keep tensions with the United States and other great powers to a manageable level, the main threat to China's overseas interests will consist of nonstate threats, such as maritime piracy, terrorism, armed conflict, and natural disasters. To counter these threats, the PLA is likely to find an expansion of nonwar missions to be the most useful, including naval patrols, counterterrorism operations, and participation in UNPKOs, HA/DR, and NEOs. An expanding inventory of foreign-based supply points, surface ships, replenishment vessels, long-distance transport aircraft, and marine units will provide PLA leaders with greater flexibility to respond to crises and sustain operations in different parts of the world. The area that most experiences PLA interventions will likely remain the Asia-Pacific region, although locations throughout the Middle East and Africa along the BRI routes may also see increasing PLA activity in coming years.

Potential Signposts for Future Interventions

The possibility of a dramatic shift in Chinese security policy toward interventions of an aggressive, combat-oriented nature cannot be ruled out. Signposts of such a shift would differ from the more likely missions

similar to those conducted in recent years, so both will be considered next. For each signpost, indicators are proposed that can be monitored to track relevant trends that might suggest whether Chinese military intervention behavior could be entering a new pattern that departs from the one described earlier. These signposts are summarized in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2
Potential Signposts of Future Chinese Military Interventions

Signpost	Relevant Factors	Indicator
Increased instability in country featuring Chinese interests	Economic interests; coidentity group populations in host; national status concerns; regional power balance and stability	A region featuring substantial Chinese investments and citizen becomes unstable; host country unable to provide security; opportunities for PLA to collaborate with multilateral organizations to conduct stability operations
Stronger partnerships or new military alliances	Alliance or partnership with host; regional power balance and stability	High-level state and military visits; increasing SEO involvement in dual-use port and facility construction; increase in PLA Navy port calls or PLA Air Force transport visits
Perceived increase in nonstate threat	External threat; coidentity group populations in host; domestic politics and legitimacy; enabling military capabilities	High-profile incident resulting in public outrage; host nation incapable of controlling threats; availability of enabling capabilities to deal with threat
Outbreak of crisis in flashpoint	External threat; regional power balance and stability; domestic politics and legitimacy; national status concerns; enabling military capabilities	Growing political crisis over hot spot issue; unusual deployments of forces near scene of dispute; threats by senior leaders; military demonstrations
Level of antagonism with United States	External threat; regional power balance and stability; ideology	Evidence of a military buildup; Breakdown in normal U.S.-China diplomacy and trade; statements by top leaders that designate U.S. a top threat
Emergence of aggressive leadership in China	External threat; domestic politics and legitimacy; national status concerns; adversary personality; ideology, including heightened nationalism	Ascent to power of a leader who upholds an aggressive vision or radicalized ideology; economic or other massive shock; intense domestic political turmoil

Increased Instability in Areas Featuring Chinese Interests

Increasing Chinese investment and commercial activity in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa raises the possibility that an intensification of instability in those countries could drive Chinese decisionmakers to consider interventions to protect Chinese interests and promote stability, such as NEOs, UNPKOs, or HA/DR. This signpost reflects the importance of factors such as the increase in external threat, economic interests, coidentity group populations with host, national status concerns, and regional power balance. The sources of threat would most likely stem from nontraditional sources, such as civil conflict, natural disaster, or political crisis in these regions of high strategic or economic importance for China. Potential metrics to monitor might include measures of regional instability in areas with high or rising accumulations of Chinese foreign direct investment. Relevant measures might include the number of conflicts and crises, the intensity of nonstate actor violence, or possibly the state fragility index.³

The presence of substantial Chinese investments underscores the importance of economic interests, just as the vulnerability of Chinese citizens and their host nation ethnic Chinese counterparts highlights the factor of coidentity group populations. Because of the political significance placed on the BRI (where many of these countries are located), China's leadership has a strong incentive to maintain the country's prestige and national status by taking action to promote stability and maintain relevant projects. This will require maintaining stability in regions surrounding ongoing projects. It is worth noting that regions in Eurasia where BRI projects are being executed have historically had a reasonably high risk of instability and conflict. Beijing may also use interventions to increase its influence through the region. Analysts interested in tracking the risk of a new Chinese intervention, particularly in this region and others where important Chinese interests are present, should focus on reports of greater instability in countries featuring major Chinese investments in which the host nation government appears incapable of controlling the threat. The interven-

³ World Bank, "World Governance Indicators," webpage, undated.

tion in such cases would likely consist of nonwar missions, such as NEOs, participation in UNPKOs, or counterterrorism operations by special forces. However, the risks of a larger-scale combat operation could increase if Beijing perceived a connection in the situation with a broader threat to its interests, such as that posed by a great-power rival to important regional balances of power.

Increased Military Partnership or Alliance-Like Agreements

China's weak military presence beyond its immediate periphery has made it important for China to find ways of establishing partnerships to facilitate greater operations abroad, especially surrounding the Indian Ocean. An increase in military partnership with countries in such strategic locations could result in the establishment of dual-use military supply posts that could support visiting PLA naval ships on a more consistent basis. Furthermore, Beijing would prefer to carry out missions in collaboration with partners and multilateral organizations, if possible, to reduce potential political concerns about military intervention. As a result, the formation of military partnerships or new alliance-like agreements for mutual defense, burden-sharing, or access could signal a shift in China's intentions regarding the use of force.

This type of signpost might include elevation of an existing partnership, perhaps through deepening BRI cooperation or China's efforts to increase its influence in the country and promotion of stability in an area of strategic value. Arms sales, such as those monitored by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, could provide one measurement of China's security relationship with other countries.⁴ Key candidate countries for such a support base include Cambodia, Pakistan, and other countries along the maritime route from China to the Middle East, along with countries in Africa. Indicators that Beijing may be considering an alliance-like commitment worth tracking might include high-level visits by political and military leaders who emphasize the strategic importance of the bilateral relationship, in addition to evidence that Chinese SOEs had built ports or other facilities capable

⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," webpage, March 2019.

of supporting combat operations. Analysts should also monitor reports of rising nonstate or state-backed threats to a host country and Chinese interests therein, as well as reports that Chinese leaders regard existing security-related agreements as unsatisfactory.

Deepening Sense of Threat from Nonstate Actors

Another possible signpost of a more interventionist China would be a marked increase in the external threat posed by nonstate actors. The Chinese public already demands the government do more to protect citizens abroad. A high-profile, disastrous event, such as a major terrorism attack, could spark a “Chinese 9/11” moment in which public outcry motivates the leadership to dramatically scale up the operational tempo of overseas missions and possibly intensify involvement in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. This threat could be aimed at China’s homeland, Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese populations (coidentity group population in host), or important investments or other commercial assets (economic interests). If such an event were to occur, the likelihood of a Chinese military response would likely depend on the degree of public demand for such an intervention. As a result, this may be a secondary signpost of a coming intervention. The development of new military capabilities could also prove an important leading indicator of planned military aggression in such an instance, if the situation called for such specialized abilities as special forces or long-distance conveyance. Unstable parts of Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and countries in Southeast Asia are the most likely areas where such interventions might occur. In addition to direct attacks followed by the markers noted earlier, reports that nonstate actors have developed links with domestic actors for the purposes of carrying out acts of mass violence could also prove an indicator of impending interventions, if Chinese authorities concluded that the linkages could result in serious threats to domestic stability. The likelihood of a potential intervention would increase significantly if such groups and incidents appeared in a country in which authorities lacked the capacity to cope with such threats and in which the host nation government maintained a cooperative relationship with China.

Outbreak of Serious Crisis or Dispute at Flashpoint

The outbreak of a serious militarized crisis in a persistent flashpoint poses an important signpost of a potential combat intervention. If a political crisis related to Taiwan or a border dispute over maritime regions or along the border with India, Chinese leaders might direct a larger-scale combat intervention on a scale not seen since the Cold War. These flashpoints emerge in our analysis as core issues that are highly likely to trigger a large-scale Chinese intervention after passing a certain point. Contingencies could range anywhere from sorties of aircraft and ships for punitive strikes to a large-scale amphibious invasion. It would likely be a confluence of factors that would escalate such a crisis to a military level, an observation which underscores both its low likelihood and the difficulty of quickly deescalating such a situation should it arise. However, the emergence of any sort of crisis should be a key warning for observers of the potential for military conflict.

There are several reasons why the emergence of a crisis at a key flashpoint would provide such a clear warning signal of a potential intervention. The most important factor would be the resulting increase in threat perception. The threat could arise from perceptions that Taiwan might try to secede, or it could be related to perceptions that the United States or some other great-power rival sought to instigate a conflict to harm China's security. A perception that other countries might try to encroach on disputed land or maritime territories could also drive Beijing to act. But other factors also would be in play. Concerns about regional balance of power, such as fears that the region could be headed toward greater support for U.S. leadership and against China, could lead Beijing to contemplate a military resolution to a crisis. Domestic politics and legitimacy, possibly in the form of pressure from a nationalist public outraged by the politics of the crisis, could provide additional incentives. For larger-scale interventions, such as an amphibious assault on Taiwan, enabling military capabilities, such as the availability of sufficient transportation to convey the invading troops, would be essential.

The clearest sign that such interventions could be brewing would mostly likely appear in the political developments that signaled a heightened risk of military crisis, such as a breakdown in political talks

and major disruption in trade relations, acts of coercion or violence, or threats by top leaders accompanied by military demonstrations.

Intensified Rivalry with the United States

A signpost that could indicate a change in the trajectory of PLA interventions abroad concerns the state of China's relationship with the United States and its allies. A deeply antagonistic relationship with the Cold War superpowers aggravated China's perception of threat, contributing to a variety of aggressive interventions against the militaries of the United States, the Soviet Union, or their allies. A return to overtly hostile relations with the United States and the onset of acute threat perceptions could incentivize China to pursue aggressive policies against U.S. allies and partners in Asia or against U.S. forces in different areas around the world. Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Senkaku Islands remain potential flashpoints with the United States, and an aggravation of tensions could spur China to risk larger-scale combat interventions to either resolve those issues or damage America's credibility with its allies. U.S. actions that contribute to an intensification of threat perceptions from the United States and its allies and concern about regional balance of power could trigger an escalatory response, especially if Beijing feared the Asia-Pacific region had decisively tilted in favor of the United States. Such a course of action would be highly risky for China, however. Signs that China may be headed toward more-frequent military interventions in response to this driver might be seen in statements by Chinese leaders designated the United States and its allies as "enemy" nations and as primary threats to the nation's security. Additional signs might be unusual military deployments accompanied by hostile rhetoric against the United States or a U.S. ally with which China may have an additional dispute.

Emergence of an Aggressive Leadership

Although unlikely in the near term, the emergence of a belligerent leadership in China could raise the risk of a more aggressive pattern of military interventions and would serve as an important leading indicator. Some past rising powers experienced sharp turns toward political radicalization that justified aggressive military policies, usually in response to a variety of shocks. A wealthy, powerful China that

had peacefully achieved its goals would have little incentive to begin invading its neighbors, given the high risks and costs of regional war and the relatively low payoff of territorial aggrandizement, especially given projections of population decline. However, a confluence of factors could drive Chinese leaders to a more belligerent policy, including an increase in external threat perceptions, drivers related to domestic politics and legitimacy, national status concerns, the adoption of a combative ideology, and the emergence of a charismatic personality. A high-threat perception related to either a great-power rival or persistent flashpoint involving Chinese nationalism, such as Taiwan or disputed maritime territories, would provide justification for aggressive policies. In terms of domestic politics and legitimacy, the ousting of a conventional leader and rise of a radicalized one, most likely because of some sort of shock, such as massive economic dislocation, could contribute to such a development. The emergence of a charismatic leader or one espousing a radical, belligerent, or strongly nationalistic ideology that justified military aggression would be essential to drive such a dramatic change in the country's foreign and security policies and thereby further elevate the risk of combat interventions. If the country experienced a sudden downturn in its fortunes, anxiety about China's diminishing national status could add another incentive to act aggressively. Indicators of this admittedly improbable development include a massive economic shock accompanied by deterioration in the country's fortunes and status, intense domestic political turmoil, ongoing tensions with some country perceived as a threat, and growing strength of a charismatic leader who espouses a radical ideology that justifies military aggression.

Implications for the U.S. Army

China's increasing willingness and capacity to operate military forces in other countries carries several implications for the U.S. Army. The most likely trajectory of the PLA's interventions abroad poses less of a direct challenge to the U.S. Army, because of the principal nature of the missions, which have been largely humanitarian or stabilization

in nature. In some instances where China undertakes such interventions, the U.S. Army may find opportunities for cooperation with the PLA. However, as discussed next, even a PLA oriented toward these types of missions may pose some challenges to the U.S. Army. In addition, although it remains a remote possibility, China's leadership could direct the PLA to adopt a more-aggressive, combat-oriented approach to military interventions. Such a dramatic shift in Chinese military interventions would pose a far greater challenge to the U.S. Army.

The analysis presented in this report highlights the factors of external threat, regional balance of power, economic interests, and the protection of Chinese citizens as key drivers of Chinese military interventions historically. Many of these factors do not inherently contradict the interests of the United States, although some might. For example, external threats can include concern about terrorist attacks from nonstate actors, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the destructive effects of a major natural disaster, concerns the United States might share. However, in other cases, China and the United States may disagree about a threat. For example, China may regard actions by U.S. ally Japan to shore up its administrative control of the Senkaku Islands as a threat to Beijing's aspiration to control them. Each Chinese military intervention should be closely studied to determine whether the operation poses either a challenge or threat to U.S. interests. Policymakers should not assume every military operation abroad carries a threat to U.S. interests and should look for areas of cooperation where they exist.

In general, PLA operations that focus on threats that are also a concern for the United States, promote stability on terms acceptable to the U.S. government, and seek to promote economic interests and safeguard Chinese citizens may pose little threat to U.S. interests. In some cases, such operations may even pose opportunities for collaboration with relevant U.S. Army assets. In particular, the U.S. Army may find opportunities to cooperate with the PLA against shared concerns, such as epidemics, natural disasters, HA/DR, and search and rescue. If strains in the U.S.-China relationship ease, the possibility for U.S. and Chinese forces to work even more closely against shared threats might arise. Although it has not yet done so, PLA forces at some point might

seek to carry out counterterrorism operations against domestic non-state actors in Chinese partner countries, especially in Africa or South-east Asia. In some cases, the target group may be a shared concern with the United States. For example, PLA forces could seek to collaborate with a host nation and U.S. military forces to fight a transnational terror group, such as ISIS or al Qaeda. Although difficult to envision today, the possibility exists that U.S. and Chinese forces could carry out combined operations against a common enemy. Given the variety of threats and weakening capacity of international institutions to cope with them, cooperation between two of the most capable militaries on shared concerns could yield significant benefits for not just China and the United States but potentially for the world at large.

Even in the cases of cooperation and collaboration of shared threats, however, the reality of a geopolitical competition for influence between China and the United States highlights the need for prudence. Wherever Chinese forces operate abroad, the U.S. Army should expect heightened efforts by the PLA to collect intelligence on U.S. personnel and partner countries. Should U.S. and Chinese relations turn hostile, elevating Beijing's perception of threat, PLA proximity to U.S. Army facilities and units in such places as Djibouti or other countries could raise the risk of sabotage. U.S. Army officials may need to increase security precautions in advance accordingly.

Chinese interventions driven more directly by heightened threat perceptions of the United States or its allies would likely pose the greatest challenge for the U.S. Army. Ongoing tensions among China, U.S. allies, and U.S. partners (e.g., Japan, Philippines, Taiwan) raise the risk that a crisis could erupt at persistent flashpoints, such as the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea. U.S. Army training and engagement with allies and partners can help build deterrence against coercive Chinese behavior, while emphasizing U.S. resolve and commitment to their defense. Beyond these traditional flashpoints, the possibility cannot be discounted that Chinese and U.S. threat perceptions over nonstate actors might diverge at some point. Although no such situation currently exists, China could at some point back government or even nongovernment forces who target groups or states aligned with U.S. interests. The U.S. Army will need to consider how to help part-

ner groups or states defend themselves in such situations while minimizing the risks of the United States getting into unwanted conflict with Chinese-backed forces.

Some PLA military interventions motivated by factors of regional balance of power and concerns about partnerships with host nations could also affect U.S. Army equities. In Asia and elsewhere, the U.S. Army may find the presence of Chinese military forces a competitor for influence with host-nation militaries. For example, PLA assistance, training, and collaborative operations with host nations could undermine efforts by the U.S. Army to shape a favorable security environment. A goal of Chinese influence-building will partly aim to reduce U.S. influence or weaken U.S. alliances and partnerships. Relatedly, Beijing may seek to build partnerships that could support close military cooperation in host nations along the Indian Ocean. This may lead PLA advisers and leaders to cultivate goodwill with host-nation militaries by offering to provide arms sales, back efforts to suppress threats to the host-nation government, and offer HA/DR, which could antagonize such countries as India and paradoxically exacerbate regional instability. The U.S. Army should expand its engagement with allied and partner countries in which the PLA is active, to both increase situational awareness and better equip partner countries to resist Chinese demands that they might regard as unreasonable. Creative engagement with both China and India may be advisable to help all sides build a more stable Indian Ocean environment, ease tensions, and reduce the risk of direct conflict.

Although unlikely today, the risk that Chinese leaders might direct a more aggressive set of military interventions should also be considered. Given the potential of war with the United States or the region to derail China's ambition for national revitalization and the doubtful payoff of seizing more land, Beijing currently has little incentive to adopt a policy of territorial aggrandizement. However, the calculus could change under certain conditions. Whether driven by acute perceptions of threat from the United States or its allies and partners, a clash over issues (such as Taiwan, where strong Chinese nationalism is involved), or domestic political imperatives related to large economic or other shocks, the consequences of an aggressive Chinese military

(more similar to Chinese behavior in the early Cold War period) could be disastrous for peace and security in Asia. The potential devastation posed by a Chinese decision to inflict large-scale attacks against either the United States or its allies and partners such as Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan will continue to loom over concerns over the security of Asia and the world. The U.S. Army can play an important role in reducing such risks by both planning and participating in regional deterrence activities with U.S. allies and partners and increasing its cooperation, where appropriate, on nonwar missions with China.

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ARROYO CENTER

Great powers have frequently employed large, expeditionary military forces engaged in various operations abroad. Some fought wars to defend colonial possessions, while others engaged in bitter fighting alongside besieged allies or undertook other missions throughout the world. As China has ascended in power, observers have debated whether the country might follow a similar path. In the three decades leading to the country's ascent as the second-largest economy in the world, China to date has deployed only relatively modest numbers of troops abroad in nonwar missions, such as maritime patrols and United Nations peacekeeping operations. Whether this pattern will persist or how it might change is the primary focus of this report.

The project summarized in this report employed both quantitative statistical and qualitative analyses to examine patterns in Chinese military interventions. The researchers found that China has undertaken two types of interventions in its post-1949 history, which are illustrated in this report by the contrasting case studies of (1) China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and (2) its initiation of counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and subsequent establishment of a supporting military base in Djibouti in the mid-2000s.

The authors conclude that the pattern of military interventions adopted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) since 2000 is likely to continue to define the general trajectory of Chinese interventions for at least the next five years because of the persistence of the principal drivers underpinning this pattern and the vulnerability of those interests to various nontraditional threats abroad.

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