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

Overview

The two-million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the military arm of the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) ruling Communist Party. The Trump Administration identified strategic competition with China and Russia as “the primary concern in U.S. national security” in 2018 and U.S. defense officials have since said that China is the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD's) top priority. According to a 2020 DOD report, the PLA has “already achieved parity with—or even exceeded—the United States” in several areas in which it has focused its military modernization efforts and is strengthening its ability to “counter an intervention by an adversary in the Indo-Pacific region and project power globally.” See also IF11712 on U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations.

PLA Organization

Established in 1927, the PLA predates the founding of the PRC in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party oversees the PLA through the Party's Central Military Commission, China's top military decisionmaking body, which is akin to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Central Military Commission also oversees China's militia and China's paramilitary police force, the People's Armed Police, which includes the China Coast Guard. Xi Jinping, who serves concurrently as Communist Party general secretary and PRC president, has chaired the Central Military Commission since 2012.

The PLA encompasses four services: the PLA Army, PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force, as well as two sub-service forces, the Strategic Support Force, and the Joint Logistics Support Force.

China's Military Strategy

The stated goal of China's national defense policy is to safeguard the country's sovereignty, security, and development interests. The concept of “active defense”—the defining characteristic of China's military strategy since 1949—prescribes how China can defend these interests and prevail over a militarily superior adversary. Chinese defense writings summarize the general stance of this strategy as “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if we are attacked,” although the strategy does not preclude the use of offensive operations or tactics.

Since 2014, China's national military strategy (known as the “military strategic guideline”) has been to “win informatized local wars,” reflecting the PRC's growing emphasis on what it calls “informatization”: the application of advanced information technology across all aspects of warfare. Military strategic guidelines have identified Taiwan (a self-ruled democracy over which the PRC claims

sovereignty) as the “operational target” of military preparations since 1993. China's defense planners anticipate that a military confrontation over Taiwan could involve “powerful enemy interference,” an apparent reference to the United States. China also has sought military capabilities to dominate its maritime periphery and to support foreign policy and economic initiatives globally.

PLA Modernization and Key Capabilities

Since 1978, China has engaged in a sustained and broad effort to transform the PLA from an infantry-heavy, low-technology, ground forces-centric force into a leaner, more networked, high-technology force with an emphasis on joint operations and power projection. In 2015 and 2016, Xi publicly launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. The reforms have two overarching objectives: reshaping and improving the PLA's command and control structure to enable joint operations among the services and ensuring the PLA is loyal and responsive to the Party and Xi. Although the reforms were originally slated to conclude by 2020, officials have more recently suggested they will be ongoing through 2021-2022. Institutionalizing the reforms' sweeping changes will likely take even longer.

In 2017, Xi set goals for the PLA to “generally achieve mechanization” by 2020, to “basically complete” military modernization by 2035, and to “transform” the PLA into a “world-class” force by 2049—the same year by which Xi envisions China achieving “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” According to Xi, “To achieve the great revival of the Chinese nation, we must ensure there is unison between a prosperous country and strong military.”

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

- **PLA Navy:** An approximately 350-ship navy that includes advanced platforms such as submarines, aircraft carriers, and large multi-mission surface vessels, giving China blue-water capabilities and the ability to conduct sustained operations and project power increasingly far from China's periphery;
- **PLA Air Force:** An air force increasingly capable of conducting joint and over-water missions, featuring deployments of large numbers of fourth-generation fighters, and fifth-generation fighters becoming operational or in late stages of development;
- **PLA Rocket Force:** A conventional missile force designed to enable China to deter or defeat possible

third-party intervention in a regional military conflict, and featuring around 100 intercontinental ballistic missiles and hundreds of theater-range conventional missiles, including anti-ship ballistic missiles designed to target adversary aircraft carriers; and a nuclear force intended to be small but survivable (DOD estimates China's nuclear stockpile is in the "low-200s" and likely to at least double in the coming decade), with progress toward a "nuclear triad" (including land-, submarine-, and aircraft-launched nuclear weapons);

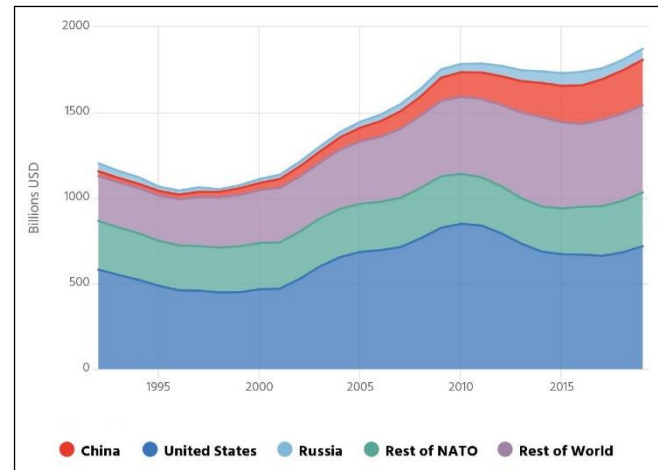
- **PLA Strategic Support Force:** A force that centralizes cyber and space capabilities (referred to by the PRC as the "new commanding heights in strategic competition") as well as electronic and psychological warfare; and
- **PLA Joint Logistics Support Force:** A force that facilitates joint logistics across the PLA to enable large-scale military operations.

The PLA has weaknesses and limitations, including limited combat experience (China last fought a war in the 1970s), a limited capability to conduct joint operations, limited expeditionary capabilities, a new and largely untested organizational structure, and a dependence on foreign suppliers for certain equipment and materials. The PLA is working to address these challenges.

China's Defense Spending

The PLA's modernization has been supported by China's rapidly growing economy, and by the purchase, alleged theft, and domestic development of militarily useful technologies. China's defense budget has risen steadily since the 1990s (see **Figure 1**). Its officially-disclosed defense budget is now the world's second-largest (behind the United States), at \$178.6 billion for 2020, although outside observers assess China's military-related spending to be much higher. China also seeks to resource its military by leveraging civilian commercial advances—particularly in emerging high-tech areas—through a sprawling and ambitious initiative known in China as "military-civil fusion." PRC defense contractors in sectors such as aerospace, microelectronics, and advanced manufacturing benefit from foreign joint ventures and technology licensing.

Figure 1. China's Share of Global Defense Spending



Source: CSIS ChinaPower, "What Does China Really Spend on Its Military?" updated September 15, 2020.

Note: Spending measured in constant 2018 U.S. dollars.

Issues for Congress

U.S. policymakers and observers increasingly describe China's military buildup as a threat to U.S. and allied interests. This view reflects concerns about PLA capabilities (many of which appear designed specifically to counter U.S. military power), China's growing economic and geopolitical power, and uncertainty about China's regional and global intentions. Some Members of both parties in Congress have asserted that meeting this perceived challenge requires the United States to strengthen its military advantages, and address major vulnerabilities, vis-à-vis China.

The annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is a primary vehicle by which Congress seeks to enhance the United States' ability to compete with China in the national security realm. Recent NDAA's have included numerous provisions that reference China (and Taiwan) directly, as well as provisions that relate or could relate to China. For example, the FY2021 NDAA (H.R. 6395) includes 40 provisions with explicit references to China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong on such issues as space capabilities, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, nuclear weapons, cyber theft, and semiconductor supply chain security. Dozens of other provisions arguably relate to or have implications for U.S. policy toward China, but do not refer to it explicitly. Many of these are related to enhancing U.S. competitiveness in existing and emerging technologies, advanced manufacturing capabilities, and basic research and development with military applications.

The FY2021 NDAA also includes a "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" (Section 1251) that authorizes around \$2.2 billion to increase U.S. and allied military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. The initiative, which Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and Ranking Member Jack Reed (D-RI) say "pushes back on Chinese aggression," seeks to establish, oversee, and fund a long-term strategic approach to the region.

Congress requires both regular and one-off reports by the executive branch and other entities to inform its

decisionmaking related to China's military. For example, the FY2021 NDAA includes requirements for annual reports on the U.S. operations of companies linked to the PLA (Section 1260H), and a report on, among other things, China's military capabilities and activities in the Arctic (Section 8424). Since 2001, pursuant to the FY2000 NDAA (P.L. 106-65), Congress has required DOD to submit an annual report on military and security issues related to China. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review

Commission, created by the FY2001 NDAA (P.L. 106-398), reports annually on Chinese defense issues. Congress also solicits information on China's military through hearings, briefings, and committee staff reporting, among other things.

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