

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4721 | JUNE 21, 2017

Sounding the Warning: DOD Report Examines the Growing Security Challenge from China

Dean Cheng

Consistent with the fiscal year 2000 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Department of Defense (DOD) recently released its annual report to Congress on Chinese military and security developments. The report lays out the official views of the DOD and the U.S. intelligence community on the state of the Chinese military and Chinese security activities. Its issuance has been protested annually by the People's Republic of China (PRC) as furthering perceptions of a "China threat."

The report makes clear that China's military capabilities are steadily expanding in every potential warfighting domain: land, sea, air, outer space, and information space.

- In the air, the PLA Air Force is fielding two new fifth-generation (i.e., stealthy, advanced maneuverability) fighters, air-launched cruise missiles, and a variety of support aircraft, such as airborne early warning and electronic-warfare aircraft essential for modern air operations. In addition, China is developing a new long-range bomber, which will potentially have both nuclear and conventional roles.
- At sea, the PLA Navy is deploying multiple new classes of submarines and surface combatants. It is also expanding its fleet of amphibious ships, with implications for the East and South China Sea, as well as Taiwan. China has already launched an indigenously produced aircraft carrier to complement the *Liaoning*, which is already in service.
- On the ground, the PLA Army is deploying a range of new systems from tracked and wheeled self-propelled artillery to a variety of armored fighting vehicles.
- Responsible for China's nuclear deterrent, the PLA Rocket Forces is now deploying MIRV'd intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that are capable of hitting multiple targets, new mobile ICBMs (the DF-41), and medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles that can reach Guam and the central Indian Ocean with both nuclear and conventional warheads.
- The new PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), responsible for operations in space and in the information domain, will have at its disposal a variety of new satellite systems. It will also be incorporating various cyber warfare units, such as Unit 61398, previously identified as a PLA unit engaged in economic cyber espionage.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4721>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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The report provides some much-needed insight into these various growing capabilities, especially the PLASSF, which is central to the PLA's focus on fighting and winning future "informatized local

wars.” The PLASSF will likely undertake key missions to help establish dominance of the key domains of outer space and cyber space in the event of conflict.

The implications of this new PLASSF, and the broader PLA modernization effort, are significant. The report discusses China’s disregard for the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the associated Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rulings on China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines, a member of UNCLOS, had filed the complaint with the PCA, under the terms of UNCLOS; Beijing (also a signatory to UNCLOS) ignored both the filing and the subsequent findings, which were overwhelmingly opposed to China’s positions. Indeed, China is now fortifying many of the artificial islands it has built in the area, despite the promise of Chinese President Xi Jinping to President Barack Obama that China would not “militarize” the islands. China’s decision to ignore the PCA makes clear that it will act as it sees fit to defend its perceived national interests, even when they infringe upon international common spaces that are covered by international agreements and solemn promises.

For the United States, the report highlights the ongoing need to reassure our allies and deter potential adversaries. While the report itself does not contain policy recommendations, certain courses of action are necessary.

- **Continue publishing the annual report.** One of the most important actions is to continue to produce the report. Beijing has worked assiduously for the past 17 years to have the United States cease its production, arguing that it jeopardizes U.S.–China relations and only gives ammunition to the “China threat” perspective. The report provides the world with the American point of view, including detailing China’s military modernization efforts, and is an essential means of providing scholars, analysts, and policymakers with an up-to-date, reliable, authoritative source of information about the PLA and PRC security policy. Suspending the report would signal that the United States is prepared to defer to China on the presentation of even basic facts.
- **Establish a more robust presence.** For three years, from 2012–2015, the United States conducted no Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, even as China

was busily constructing artificial islands. In the subsequent two years, the United States only conducted a handful of “innocent passage” operations, which muddied, rather than clarified, the American position, as they seemingly endorsed China’s position that its artificial islands exert a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea claim. It is time to reverse this trend, as with the USS *Dewey*’s recent FONOP near Mischief Reef, not with a single passage, but with sufficient numbers of them to make clear that this is routine and normal behavior.

- **Improve U.S. military readiness.** A robust presence demands forces capable of undertaking sailings, flights, and military deployments on a regular basis. Unfortunately, it is clear from recent testimony by top U.S. military leaders that the forces available for action in Asia are grossly deficient in readiness. Any meaningful “pivot” must start with the forces on hand being properly trained and equipped before any expansion of capabilities can be contemplated. Confronted with another “hollow military,” it is vital that readiness of the available American forces be improved if they are to successfully deter the rapidly modernizing Chinese military.
- **Address sequestration.** The decline in readiness is due, in no small part, to Congress and the President being unable to address the broader budget. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has called upon Congress to pass a defense budget, but that will only improve the situation if the larger budget is also addressed—including ending sequestration. Congress needs to face the hard choices involved in balancing military and non-military demands—and the larger issue of entitlements that looms over all.

The Chinese are clearly intent upon dominating the western Pacific in order to secure their environment. This will affect not only U.S. allies, but the United States itself. How will America respond?

—*Dean Cheng is a Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute, at The Heritage Foundation.*