

# China

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## Regional Overview

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) represents the greatest military threat facing the United States today. In April 2025, it was reported that Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, in an internal guidance memo known as the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, had declared that “China is the Department’s sole pacing threat, and denial of a Chinese fait accompli seizure of Taiwan—while simultaneously defending the U.S. homeland is the Department’s sole pacing scenario.”<sup>1</sup> Secretary Hegseth further emphasized the importance of the China challenge during his address at the May 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore:

President Trump and the American people have an immense respect for the Chinese people and their civilization. But we will not be pushed out of this critical region. And we will not let our allies and partners be subordinated and intimidated.

China seeks to become a hegemonic power in Asia. No doubt. It hopes to dominate and control too many parts of this vibrant and vital region. Through its massive military build-up and growing willingness to use military force to achieve its goals, including grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare, China has demonstrated that it wants to fundamentally alter the region’s status quo.

We cannot look away, and we cannot ignore it. China’s behavior towards its neighbors and the world is a wake-up call. And an urgent one.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the PRC has been acting more aggressively in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Taiwan Strait and in its territorial disputes in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea, and along the China–India border.

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) took place from October 16 to 22, 2022. General Secretary Xi Jinping’s report “focused on intensifying and accelerating the People’s Liberation Army’s Ground Force (PLAGF) modernization goals over the next five years, including strengthening its ‘system of strategic deterrence.’”<sup>3</sup> The five-year plan laid out at the 20th Party Congress is part of China’s decades-long plan to achieve national rejuvenation by 2049.

China increasingly views the United States as an adversary thwarting its drive toward national rejuvenation. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) 2025 report on *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*:

Beijing perceives U.S. alliances and partnerships as constraining China’s national objectives, and fears Washington is expanding the scope and scale of its defense partnerships and activities in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2024, Beijing expressed heightened concern over U.S. actions to strengthen defense cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, including U.S. deployments of mid-range and anti-ship missile systems to the Philippines and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Beijing continues to believe that a bipartisan consensus exists in Washington, committed to containing China’s rise. Throughout 2024, Beijing denounced numerous U.S. policy actions

related to competition with China, including export controls on advanced technologies, trade barriers on electric vehicles, and military sales to Taiwan. China condemned U.S. competitive actions as intentionally provocative, intended to suppress China's economic and technological development, and an interference in China's internal affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The DOD report further states that, among other notable developments:

- In the maritime domain, the PLA Navy (PLAN) completed the inaugural sea trials of its third aircraft carrier—Fujian, also known as CV-18—in May. This is the PLAN's first indigenously designed aircraft carrier. It is larger than the PLAN's previous two aircraft carriers and is its first flat-deck carrier.<sup>5</sup>
- The JOINT SWORD exercises demonstrated that the PLAAF has a large number of advanced aircraft capable of conducting operations against Taiwan without requiring refueling, providing it with a significant capability to conduct air and ground-attack operations.<sup>6</sup>
- In September 2024, China launched an unarmed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) into the Pacific Ocean for the first time since 1980. The PLA Rocket Force launched the DF-31B ICBM from northern Hainan Island, and the missile flew approximately 11,000km before impacting the ocean near French Polynesia.<sup>7</sup>
- In December 2024, the PLA launched several ICBMs in quick succession from a training center into Western China, indicating the ability to rapidly launch multiple silo-based ICBMs, as required for an EWCS operation. The PLA has likely loaded more than 100 solid-propellant ICBM missile silos at its three silo fields with DF-31 class ICBMs, which are very likely intended to support EWCS.<sup>8</sup>
- China's stockpile of nuclear warheads remained in the low 600s through 2024, reflecting a slower rate of production when compared to previous years.<sup>9</sup>

- China probably expanded its space-based early warning architecture in 2024 and early 2025 by launching two additional Tongxun Jishu Shiyan (TJS), also known as Huoyan-1, satellites with likely infrared sensor payloads into geosynchronous orbit. China's early warning infrared satellites can reportedly detect an incoming ICBM within 90 seconds of launch with an early warning alert sent to a command center within three to four minutes.<sup>10</sup>
- The PLA almost certainly plans to conduct terrestrial and space-based kinetic and non-kinetic antisatellite (ASAT) operations during a conflict with the United States and will adapt employment strategies as new capabilities are fielded.<sup>11</sup>

The CCP is still heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology.<sup>12</sup> As neatly summarized by Australian expert John Garnaut, “[t]he key point about Communist Party ideology—the unbroken thread that runs from Lenin through Stalin, Mao and Xi—is that the party is and always has defined itself as being in perpetual struggle with the ‘hostile’ forces of Western liberalism.”<sup>13</sup> Today, “[f]or the first time since Mao we have a leader [in Xi Jinping] who talks and acts like he really means it.”<sup>14</sup>

The CCP's ideology consistently animates it to invest in military capabilities and activities that pose substantial challenges to U.S. interests. Moreover, with a GDP in excess of \$19 trillion—second only to that of the U.S.—China has the economic foundations to sustain an unprecedented level of military modernization while advancing efforts to dominate critical next-generation technologies and supply chains that are vital to the health of the U.S. economy and military. From crucial minerals to pharmaceuticals, renewables, artificial intelligence, and missile technology, China is a global economic power and the largest trading partner of a majority of global capitals.

In short, China has become “the greatest external threat America has faced since the collapse of the USSR.”<sup>15</sup>

### American Interests

Three flashpoints are of particular concern to American interests in the region, all related to Chinese territorial claims: the status of Taiwan, the

## U.S. Forces Operate in Chinese Missile Envelope



**SOURCE:** Center for Strategic and International Studies, Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of China," *Missile Threat*, last updated April 12, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/china/> (accessed January 21, 2026).

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TABLE 1

## Breakdown of Chinese Missiles

Missile Name	Range, in KM	Class
DF-11	280–300	
DF-12 / M20	280	Short-range ballistic
DF-15	600	Missile
DF-16	800–1,000	
DF-17	1,800–2,500	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle
DF-21	2,150	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile
DF-26	4,000	Intermediate-Range
DF-4	4,500–5,500	Ballistic Missile
DF-31	7,000–11,700	
DF-41	12,000–15,000	Intercontinental Ballistic
DF-61	12,000–15,000	Missile
DF-5	13,000	
JL-2	8,000–9,000	Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile
HN 1	50–650	
YJ-18	220–540	Cruise Missile
HN 2	1,400–1,800	
HN 3	3,000	

**SOURCE:** Center for Strategic and International Studies, Missile Defense Project, “Missiles of China,” *Missile Threat*, last updated April 12, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/china/> (accessed January 21, 2026).

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escalation of maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and the border conflict with India.

**Taiwan.** China’s escalating efforts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait constitute the greatest risk of conflict between China and the United States. China’s long-standing threat to end Taiwan’s de facto independence and bring Taiwan under the authority of Beijing—by force if necessary—endangers America’s interest in peace and stability in the Western Pacific.

While China’s use of force against Taiwan could take a variety of forms, the possibility of an amphibious invasion has fueled speculation over when such a contingency would most likely occur. Representative Mike Gallagher (R-WI), then chairman of the House Select Committee on the Strategic

Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, has argued that “the U.S. military is entering into a ‘window of maximum danger,’” more commonly known as the “Davidson Window.”<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to then-U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) Commander Admiral Philip Davidson’s statement during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2021 that China is “accelerating [its] ambitions to supplant the United States” and that “the threat [to Taiwan] is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years.”<sup>17</sup> Separately, then-CIA Director William Burns stated that Xi has instructed the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) “to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan,” although he also assessed that Xi and the PLA “have doubts today about whether they could accomplish that invasion.”<sup>18</sup>

Tensions across the Taiwan Strait have worsened because of Beijing’s efforts to pressure and isolate Taiwan’s democratically elected government. Following President Lai Ching-te’s election in early 2024, Beijing initiated several military operations across the strait, on many occasions violating Taiwan’s self-declared centerline and Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Beijing has suspended most direct government-to-government discussions with Taipei and is using a variety of inducements to deprive Taiwan of its remaining diplomatic partners.

Beijing has also undertaken significantly escalated military activities directed at Taiwan. For example:

- Throughout the first half of 2025, China conducted several “joint readiness” drills. In February, the PLAN and PLAAF conducted live-fire drills in an area just 40 nautical miles from Taiwan. Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported sorties consisting of J-11 fighters, KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, other types of main and auxiliary fighter aircraft, and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles). The MND spotted 22 aircraft crossing the median line.<sup>19</sup> In May, the PLA carried out Strait Thunder-2025A, a drill focused on cross-service coordination that involved encircling Taiwan through coordination of maritime militia, coast guard, and naval forces.<sup>20</sup>

- In May 2024, the PLA’s Eastern Theater Command (ETC) conducted Joint Sword 2024A in response to President Lai’s inauguration. PLA aircraft and ships engaged in joint operations at nine locations, including several areas surrounding Taiwan’s mainland and offshore islands Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin.<sup>21</sup> The ETC “noted that the 2-day exercise will focus on joint sea-air-combat-readiness patrols, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision strikes on key targets.”<sup>22</sup> In October, the ETC carried out Joint Sword 2024B, a similarly structured military exercise involving official ships and support and fighter aircraft.<sup>23</sup>
- In February 2024, following the capsizing of a PRC fishing boat near Kinmen Island, Beijing dispatched five Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships into restricted waters around Kinmen, announcing that the CCG would monitor waters off the southern coast of Xiamen.<sup>24</sup>
- In January 2024, following then-Vice President Lai Ching-te’s victory in Taiwan’s presidential elections, the PLA conducted “military maneuvers around Taiwan, consisting of joint air and naval patrols, during which 11 aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait centerline.”<sup>25</sup>
- In 2023, the PLA entered Taiwan’s ADIZ 1,641 times, and PLA aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait centerline at least 712 times that same year.<sup>26</sup>
- During then-presidential candidate and Vice President Lai Ching-te’s transit in the U.S. in August 2023, “[t]he PLA sent 25 aircraft across Taiwan’s claimed centerline while nine ships were on patrol around Taiwan.”<sup>27</sup>
- In April 2023, China escalated to then-historic records of military activity around Taiwan, allegedly in response to the transit of then-President Tsai Ing-wen through the United States, although such routine travel stops had not drawn similar responses in the past. On the final day of these “exercises,” a dozen Chinese warships and 91 Chinese aircraft—a then-new record for a single day—practiced “joint shock

and deterrence and island closure and control,” essentially another rehearsal for a blockade.<sup>28</sup>

- China used former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s August 2022 visit as a pretext to increase the quantity and provocativeness of aerial incursions around Taiwan with a historic record of 446 aircraft entering Taiwan’s ADIZ and more than 300 of those 446 aircraft crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait. Chinese aircraft had last crossed the median line in September 2020 with 48 aircraft involved that month.<sup>29</sup>
- PLA air and naval activity around Taiwan surged again in 2025. Taiwan’s MND “recorded 248 [PLA sorties] in 2025—1.75 times greater than the previous peak in January 2022.”<sup>30</sup>

Chinese leaders from Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping have consistently emphasized the importance of ultimately reclaiming Taiwan. The island—along with Tibet—is the clearest example of a geographical “core interest” for the CCP, seen as essential for its claim to unchallenged rule. China has never renounced the use of force against Taiwan and continues to employ political warfare against Taiwan’s political and military leadership.

For the Chinese leadership, the failure to effect unification, whether peacefully or by using force, would reflect fundamental political weakness. CCP leaders therefore believe that they cannot back away from the stance of having to unify the island with the mainland, and the island remains an essential part of the PLA’s “new historic missions,” shaping its acquisitions and military planning.

It is widely posited that China’s A2/AD strategy—the deployment of an array of overlapping capabilities, including anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), submarines, and long-range cruise missiles, satellites, and cyber weapons—is aimed largely at forestalling American intervention in support of friends and allies in the Western Pacific, including Taiwan. By holding at risk key American platforms and systems (for example, aircraft carriers), Beijing seeks the capability to delay or even deter American intervention, thereby allowing the PLA to achieve a *fait accompli*. The growth of China’s military capabilities is specifically oriented toward countering America’s ability to assist in the defense of Taiwan.

Moreover, China's efforts to reclaim Taiwan are not limited to overt military means. The "Three Warfares" highlight Chinese political warfare methods, which include legal warfare (lawfare), public opinion warfare, and psychological warfare. The PRC employs such approaches to undermine both Taiwan's will to resist and America's willingness to support Taiwan. China's goal is to "win without fighting"—to take Taiwan without firing a shot or with only minimal resistance before the United States can organize an effective response.

**Escalation of Maritime and Territorial Disputes.** The PRC and other countries in the region see active disputes over the East and South China Seas as matters of territorial sovereignty, not as differences over the administration of international common spaces. As a result, the threat of armed conflict exists between China and American allies, including Japan and the Philippines, as well as nascent American security partners such as Vietnam.

China has escalated maritime and territorial disputes for both economic and geopolitical reasons, steadily expanding its maritime power, including its merchant marine and maritime law enforcement capabilities, and acting to secure its "near seas" as a Chinese preserve. Because its economic center of gravity is now in the coastal region, China has had to emphasize maritime power to defend key assets and areas and depends increasingly on the seas for its economic well-being.<sup>31</sup> With global trade heavily dependent on shipping networks, China has sought to develop "shipbuilding, port infrastructure, and sea logistics."<sup>32</sup> The ability to apply pressure in disputed areas also offers China a useful geopolitical tool against rival claimant states that complements Beijing's other means of coercion and inducement such as its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This toolset has contributed to a lack of pushback against China's effort to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, including from countries that are directly affected by China's territorial aggression.

In both the East China and South China Seas, China has sought to exploit "gray zone tactics," gaining control incrementally and deterring others with means that lie below the threshold of war.<sup>33</sup> China uses military and economic threats, bombastic language, and legal warfare (including the employment of Chinese maritime law enforcement vessels) as well as military bullying. Chinese paramilitary-implemented, military-backed encroachment in

support of expansive extralegal claims could lead to an unplanned armed clash.

In the East China Sea, China has intensified its efforts to assert claims of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands of Japan. Beijing asserts both exclusive economic rights within the disputed waters and recognition of "historic" rights to dominate and control those areas as part of its territory.<sup>34</sup> Chinese fishing boats (often believed to be elements of the Chinese maritime militia) and CCG vessels have been encroaching steadily on the territorial waters within 12 nautical miles of the uninhabited islands around twice per month.<sup>35</sup> China first deployed a naval unit (as opposed to the CCG) within the contiguous zone of the Senkakus between 12 miles and 24 miles from shore in 2016.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the CCG has routinized incursions within 12 miles of Senkaku features. In 2022 and 2023, the CCG set successive records for time lingering within this area: 72 hours in December 2022 and more than 80 hours in April 2023.<sup>37</sup> Official PRC government ships were spotted in adjacent zones around the Senkakus for 352 days in 2023 and 355 days in 2024, again gradually increasing the time in contested waters.<sup>38</sup> In May 2025, a CCG helicopter flew into Japanese territorial airspace, marking the first incursion by a PRC helicopter.<sup>39</sup>

In 2013, Beijing unilaterally declared an ADIZ over the East China Sea.<sup>40</sup> This is part of a broader pattern of using intimidation and coercion to assert expansive extralegal claims of sovereignty and/or control to restrict lawful air travel over the East China Sea. For example:

- In June 2016, a Chinese fighter made an "unsafe" pass near a U.S. Air Force RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft in the East China Sea area.
- In March 2017, Chinese authorities warned the crew of an American B-1B bomber operating in the area of the ADIZ that they were flying illegally in PRC airspace, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry "urged the U.S. and other countries to respect its declared airspace."<sup>41</sup>
- In May 2018, the Chinese intercepted a U.S. Air Force WC-135, also over the East China Sea.<sup>42</sup>
- From late 2017 through 2018, Chinese vessels targeted U.S. aircraft with "blinding laser

## Chinese Fault Lines



**China-India Border.** The Line of Actual Control represents one of the world's longest disputed borders and has been the site of several standoffs between the Chinese and Indian militaries in recent years, including a border crisis in 2020 that resulted in the first casualties from hostilities at the border in more than 40 years.

**Taiwan.** The sovereignty of Taiwan remains unsettled. The People's Republic of China disputes this status and regularly conducts provocative military maneuvers near Taiwan.

**East China Sea.** China claims the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are currently administered by Japan. In recent years, Chinese aircraft and naval vessels have entered the airspace and territorial sea around the islands with growing frequency.

**South China Sea.** Several territorial disputes between China and Taiwan and its Southeast Asian neighbors involve the South China Sea. China's unlawful claims in the sea and attempts to restrict freedom of navigation there have also produced

tensions with the U.S., which has sent aircraft and naval vessels through the South China Sea to signal its objections to the nature of China's claims. This has resulted in a number of confrontations between Chinese and U.S. vessels.

**SOURCE:** Heritage Foundation research.

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attacks” more than 20 times according to media reports citing US INDOPACOM.<sup>43</sup>

- In June 2022, a Chinese fighter jet released chaff and flares into the engines of an Australian plane.<sup>44</sup>
- On December 21, 2022, a PLAN J-11 fighter pilot performed an unsafe maneuver while intercepting another U.S. Air Force RC-135, coming within 20 feet of the RC-135’s nose and forcing it to engage in evasive maneuvers.<sup>45</sup>
- On May 26, 2023, a PRC J-16 fighter pilot performed an aggressive maneuver while intercepting a U.S. Air Force RC-135 aircraft. The RC-135 was forced to fly through its jet wake after the J-16 flew “directly in front of the [RC-135’s] nose.”<sup>46</sup>

China has asserted an illegal territorial claim to virtually the entire South China Sea, which overlaps with Bruneian, Philippine, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Taiwanese claims.<sup>47</sup> Various of the South China Sea claimant states’ proposed boundaries overlap, and this has generated long-standing political and diplomatic disagreements, but China’s actions to advance its territorial ambitions and restrict other claimants’ use of the area are unparalleled and have resulted repeatedly in confrontation.

The most significant development in the South China Sea since Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the CCP has been China’s reclamation and militarization of seven artificial islands or outposts. In 2015, Xi promised President Barack Obama that China had no intention of militarizing the islands. That pledge was not honored.<sup>48</sup> “The PRC,” according to the DOD, “has added more than 3,200 acres of land to the seven features it occupies in the Spratlys. The PRC has added military infrastructure, including 72 aircraft hangars, docks, satellite communication equipment, antenna array, radars, and hardened shelters for missile platforms.”<sup>49</sup> The defensive and offensive capabilities on these islands are now “the most capable land-based weapons systems deployed by any claimant in the disputed [South China Sea] to date.”<sup>50</sup>

China–Vietnam tensions have flared sporadically in the South China Sea in recent years. In 2020, CCG vessels rammed and sank Vietnamese fishing

boats twice near the disputed Paracel Islands.<sup>51</sup> Chinese vessels have interfered repeatedly with Vietnamese energy-exploration blocks. One instance in May 2023 involved a 14-vessel fleet of CCG and paramilitary ships.<sup>52</sup> Vietnam has also protested China’s decision to create additional administrative regions for the South China Sea, one centered on the Paracels and the other centered on the Spratlys.<sup>53</sup> More recently, in early 2025, China conducted a live-fire military exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin following Vietnam’s attempt to redefine contested territorial waters.<sup>54</sup> This is part of Beijing’s “legal warfare,” which employs legal, military, and administrative measures to underscore China’s claimed control of the South China Sea region. For this reason, friction often occurs around Chinese enforcement of unilaterally determined fishing bans in international waters that are claimed by China.<sup>55</sup>

Given that the United States shares a defense alliance with the Philippines, tensions between Beijing and Manila are the most likely to prompt American involvement in these disputes. There have been several volatile incidents between the two parties since the 1990s. The most contentious occurred in 2012 when a Philippine naval ship operating on behalf of the country’s coast guard challenged private Chinese poachers in waters around Scarborough Shoal. The resulting escalation left Chinese government ships in control of the shoal after the U.S. helped to broker an agreement by which both sides agreed to withdraw from the standoff site. The Philippines complied; China did not.

Following the Scarborough Shoal crisis, the Philippines successfully challenged Beijing in the Permanent Court of Arbitration regarding its rights under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The tribunal found that many of China’s claims in the South China Sea were unlawful. China has simply ignored the ruling, and the ongoing presence of the CCG around Scarborough Shoal remains a source of tension.<sup>56</sup>

The Philippines began to publicize instances of Chinese aggression at sea in 2023. In February, the Philippines condemned the CCG for “dangerous maneuvers and the use of a military-grade laser on members of the Philippine Coast Guard” who were “undertaking a mission in support of the regular rotation and resupply mission for the BRP Sierra Madre in Ayungin [Second Thomas] Shoal, the Philippines’ permanent presence on the feature.”<sup>57</sup> The

Philippine Coast Guard released photo evidence of the laser incident, which reportedly temporarily blinded Philippine crewmen. In all of these cases, tensions have been exacerbated by rising Chinese nationalism.

To impose its demarcations, China patrols contested waters with the CCG. In early 2025, CCG ships, supported by a navy helicopter, demanded that a group of Philippine vessels cancel their operation, citing violations of territorial sovereignty. The incident occurred near Sandy Cay, an uninhabited sandbar that China claims falls within its self-proclaimed 10-dash line.<sup>58</sup>

In the event of armed conflict between China and the Philippines or between China and Japan, either by design or as the result of an accidental incident at sea, the U.S. could be required to exercise its treaty commitments.<sup>59</sup> In recent years the U.S. government has clarified that its treaty obligations to Japan and the Philippines extend to disputed territories claimed by China. The risk of an incident escalating and involving the United States is a growing threat, particularly in the East and South China Seas, where naval as well as civilian law enforcement vessels from both China and the U.S. operate in what the U.S. considers to be international waters. If China ultimately tries to assert its authority by declaring an ADIZ over the entire South China Sea as some have speculated it might, its action could further increase tensions.<sup>60</sup>

**Border Conflict with India.** India claims that China occupies more than 14,000 square miles of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin along its northern border in Kashmir, and China lays claim to more than 55,000 square miles of India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. The latter dispute is closely related to China's ongoing efforts to control Tibetan Buddhism and the presence in India of the Tibetan government in exile and the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Buddhists worldwide.

The possibility of armed conflict between India and China poses an indirect threat to U.S. interests because it could disrupt the territorial status quo and raise nuclear tensions in the region. A border conflict between India and China could also prompt Pakistan to take advantage of the situation, thereby increasing regional instability. The long-standing border dispute that led to a Sino-Indian war in 1962 has become a flashpoint again in recent years. In April 2013, the most serious border incident

between India and China in more than two decades occurred when Chinese troops settled several miles within northern Indian territory on the Depsang Plains in Ladakh. A visit to India by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2014 was overshadowed by another flare-up in border tensions when hundreds of PLA forces reportedly set up camps in the mountainous regions of Ladakh, prompting Indian forces to deploy to forward positions in the region. This border standoff lasted three weeks until both sides agreed to pull their troops back to previous positions.

In 2017, Chinese military engineers were building a road to the Doklam plateau, an area claimed by both Bhutan and China. This led to a confrontation between Chinese and Indian forces, the latter requested by Bhutanese authorities to provide assistance. The crisis lasted 73 days. Both sides pledged to pull back, but Chinese construction efforts in the area have continued.<sup>61</sup> Improved Chinese infrastructure not only would give Beijing the diplomatic advantage over Bhutan, but also could make the Siliguri corridor that links the eastern Indian states with the rest of the country more vulnerable.

In 2020, the situation escalated even further. Clashes between Indian and Chinese troops using rocks, clubs, and fists led to at least 20 Indian dead and (as the Chinese authorities later admitted) at least four Chinese dead in the Galwan Valley area of Ladakh.<sup>62</sup> It was the first loss of life due to hostilities at the border in nearly 50 years and plunged China-India relations to a contemporary low point. Dozens of rounds of negotiations between China and India eventually resulted in at least partial deescalation and pullback from several standoff sites in Ladakh. A new agreement governing patrolling arrangements followed in October 2024 during a mild thaw in bilateral relations.<sup>63</sup> However, both sides maintain elevated forward-deployed forces all along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh. India claims it is engaged in the largest peacetime military deployment to one of its borders in its modern history.<sup>64</sup>

In 2025, China played a role in the brief but intense military conflict between India and Pakistan. Following a bloody terrorist attack against Indian citizens in Kashmir specifically targeting Hindus, India launched Operation Sindoor, striking several terrorist targets inside Pakistan. Beijing issued a strong statement in support of Islamabad, and Pakistan reportedly employed the Chinese-made

PL-15 beyond-visual-range missile during the conflict. The two countries have since accelerated plans to deliver advanced Chinese J-35A fifth-generation stealth fighter jets to the Pakistan Air Force.<sup>65</sup> The first batch of J-35As is now expected to arrive by early 2026, marking a major leap in Pakistan's aerial capabilities and signaling deepening military ties between Beijing and Islamabad.<sup>66</sup>

### Threats to the Homeland

America's critical interests in the international commons, across sea, air, space, and cyberspace, have a direct impact on the security of the continental United States. These interests include ensuring the free flow of global commerce and maintaining military access to these domains to protect the homeland. Washington has long underwritten the security of the Indo-Pacific's common areas, and this in turn has supported the region's remarkable economic development. However, China is taking increasingly aggressive steps—including the construction of islands atop previously submerged features—to advance its own interests and is pursuing expanded military access and basing globally.

Two things are clear: China and the United States do not share a common conception of international space, and China is actively seeking to undermine American predominance in securing international common spaces. Together, these dynamics pose tangible risks to U.S. national security.

**Dangerous Behavior in Maritime and Airspace Common Spaces.** The aggressiveness of the Chinese navy, maritime law enforcement forces, and air forces in and over the waters of the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait, coupled with ambiguous, extralegal territorial claims and assertion of control in these areas, poses an incipient threat to American and overlapping allied interests. Chinese military writings emphasize the importance of establishing dominance of the air and maritime domains in any future conflict.

Although the Chinese may not yet have sufficient capacity to prevent the U.S. from operating in local waters and airspace, the ability of the U.S. to operate within the First Island Chain at acceptable costs in the early stages of a conflict has become a matter of greater debate.<sup>67</sup> A significant factor in this calculus is the fact that China has “fully militarized at least three of several islands it built in the disputed South China Sea, arming them with anti-ship and

anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby.”<sup>68</sup> China also has been intensifying its challenges to long-standing rivals Vietnam and the Philippines and has begun to push toward Indonesia's Natuna Islands and into waters claimed by Malaysia.

It is unclear whether China is yet in a position to enforce an air ADIZ consistently, but the steady two-decade improvement of PLAAF and PLAN naval aviation will eventually yield the necessary capabilities. Chinese observations of recent conflicts, including wars in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and Afghanistan, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine and, as of 2025, the military clash between India and Pakistan and the Israel–Iran conflict, have emphasized the growing role of airpower and missiles in “non-contact, non-linear, non-symmetrical” warfare.<sup>69</sup> This growing parity, if not superiority, constitutes a radical shift from the Cold War era when the United States and its allies clearly would have dominated air and naval operations in the Pacific.

China has also begun to employ nontraditional methods of challenging foreign military operations in what Beijing regards as its territorial waters and airspace. It has employed lasers, for example, against foreign air and naval platforms, endangering pilots and sailors by threatening to blind them.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, Chinese military aircraft have been performing dangerous intercepts of American and allied aircraft in international airspace, especially since 2022. For example:

- In February 2025, a Chinese PLAAF fighter jet popped flares close to an Australian P-8A fighter aircraft, “[posing] a risk to the aircraft and personnel.” Manila has voiced similar concerns, citing two instances in which Philippine Air Force transport planes were harassed in 2024.<sup>71</sup>
- In 2023, the DOD reported “more than 180 coercive or risky intercepts by Chinese military aircraft since 2021” with “100 such incidents involving allied and partnered nations.”<sup>72</sup>
- In June 2022, a Chinese fighter jet released chaff and flares into the engines of an Australian plane.<sup>73</sup>

- On June 3, 2022, in the Taiwan Strait, China further escalated its aggressive conduct when the “PLAN LUYANG III DG 132 (PRC LY 132) executed maneuvers in an unsafe manner” by crossing the USS *Chung-Hoon*’s bow twice, “violat[ing] maritime ‘Rules of the Road,’ of safe passage in international waters” and forcing the *Chung-Hoon* to slow “to avoid a collision.”<sup>74</sup>
- On December 21, 2022, a PLAN J-11 fighter pilot performed a similarly unsafe maneuver while intercepting another U.S. Air Force RC-135, coming within 20 feet of the plane’s nose and “forcing the RC-135 to take evasive maneuvers to avoid a collision.”<sup>75</sup>
- On May 26, 2023, a PRC J-16 fighter pilot performed “an unnecessarily aggressive maneuver” while intercepting a U.S. Air Force RC-135 aircraft, flying “directly in front of the nose of the RC-135” and “forcing the U.S. aircraft to fly through its wake turbulence.”<sup>76</sup>

**Expanding Global Military Footprint.** As China expands its naval capabilities, it will be present farther and farther away from its home shores. In 2017, it established its first formal overseas military base pursuant to an agreement with the government of Djibouti. Since then, China’s overseas military infrastructure has continued to expand. China has laid the groundwork for a second, undeclared military base in Cambodia, is creating logistics facilities and other military construction around the world, and controls a number of dual-use commercial facilities that could support power projection in future contingencies. The U.S. Intelligence Community reportedly has concluded that China plans to “build a global military network that includes at least five overseas bases and 10 logistical support sites by 2030.”<sup>77</sup>

In 2019, China and Cambodia reportedly signed a secret agreement providing for the PLA’s use of Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base.<sup>78</sup> Officials from both countries publicly deny plans for a Chinese base,<sup>79</sup> but other governments and public reporting have confirmed that work continues toward a significant PLA presence at Ream.<sup>80</sup> According to the DOD, “[t]he PRC’s military facility at Ream Naval Base in Cambodia will be the first PRC overseas base in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>81</sup> Since June 2022, China has financed

significant development of Ream, including multiple new piers and buildings, dredging of the harbor to support larger ships, and site development for further construction.<sup>82</sup> The base officially reopened on April 5, 2025, showcasing extensive technical upgrades and office refurbishments.<sup>83</sup> The U.S. Department of the Treasury has sanctioned Chinese state-owned Union Development Group for (among other reasons) the potential militarization of nearby Dara Sakor airport.<sup>84</sup>

China is also pursuing or already operating additional facilities abroad for explicit military purposes. Chinese paramilitary units have operated from a base near the Afghan border in Tajikistan since at least 2016, and the Tajik government reportedly has offered to transfer ownership of the facility to China in return for further military construction and aid.<sup>85</sup> As part of an effort to secure a military presence in the Atlantic, China has made inroads through the potential development of a naval facility in Equatorial Guinea and a purported joint training facility with Gabon.<sup>86</sup> According to the DOD:

The PRC has likely considered Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Tajikistan. The PRC has probably already made overtures to Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. The PLA is probably most interested in military access along the SLOCs from the PRC to the Strait of Hormuz and Africa.<sup>87</sup>

China is also leveraging its extensive network of commercial ports developed under its BRI, both for current overseas military operations and for potential future basing. Chinese firms, overwhelmingly state-owned, have participated in the development of at least 200 ports globally and have an ownership or operating interest in 95 ports.<sup>88</sup> The PRC uses commercial infrastructure to support all of its military operations abroad, including the PLA’s presence in other countries’ territories, such as at its base in Djibouti. The DOD reports that “[s]ome of the PRC’s BRI projects could create potential military advantages, such as PLA access to selected foreign ports to pre-position the necessary

logistics support to sustain naval deployments in waters as distant as the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, and Atlantic Ocean to protect its growing interests.”<sup>89</sup>

In Sri Lanka, for example, Chinese military vessels have visited Chinese-developed commercial ports in both Colombo and Hambantota in recent years. U.S. intelligence agencies believe that since 2021, China has been building an undisclosed military facility in Abu Dhabi’s Khalifa port, where Chinese state-owned shipping giant Cosco operates a terminal.<sup>90</sup>

**Increased Military Space Activity.** One of the key force multipliers for the United States is its extensive array of space-based assets. Through its various satellite constellations, the U.S. military can track opponents, coordinate friendly forces, engage in precision strikes against enemy forces, and conduct battle-damage assessments so that its munitions are expended efficiently.

Because the American military is expeditionary—meaning that its wars are fought far from the homeland—its reliance on space-based systems is greater than that of many other militaries. Consequently, it requires global rather than regional reconnaissance, communications and data transmission, and meteorological information and support. At this point, only space-based systems can provide this sort of information on a real-time basis. No other country is capable of leveraging space as the United States does, and that is a major advantage. However, this heavy reliance on space systems is also a key American vulnerability.

China aims to be “a broad-based, fully capable space power” and is “second only to the U.S. in the number of operational satellites.”<sup>91</sup> The PLA has been developing a range of anti-satellite capabilities that include both hard-kill and soft-kill systems. The former include direct-ascent kinetic-kill vehicles (DA-KKVs) such as the system famously tested in 2007, but they also include more advanced systems that are believed to be capable of reaching targets in mid-Earth orbit and even geosynchronous orbit (GEO).<sup>92</sup> The latter include anti-satellite lasers for either dazzling or blinding purposes.<sup>93</sup> This is consistent with PLA doctrinal writings, which emphasize the need to control space in future conflicts. For the Chinese, “seizing command of space has become a prerequisite condition for seizing information dominance, command of the air, and command

of the sea, and has become crucial in seizing and holding the initiative in warfare; it directly affects the course and outcome of the war.”<sup>94</sup>

Orbital threats are growing as well. The DOD reports that the PRC is continuing to develop four counterspace capabilities: direct ascent, co-orbital, electronic warfare (EW), and directed energy. Such measures are designed to “contest or deny an adversary’s access to and operations in the space domain during a crisis or conflict.”<sup>95</sup> The PRC’s Shijian-17 satellite has a robotic arm that can physically redirect satellites. In January 2022, the Shijian-21 “moved a derelict BeiDou navigation satellite to a high graveyard orbit above GEO.”<sup>96</sup>

It should also be noted that soft-kill attacks need not come only from dedicated weapons. The case of Galaxy-15, a communications satellite owned by Intelsat Corporation, showed how a satellite could disrupt communications simply by always being in “switched on” mode.<sup>97</sup> Before it was finally brought under control, the satellite had drifted through a portion of the geosynchronous belt, forcing other satellite owners to move their assets and juggle frequencies. A deliberate such attempt by China (or any other country) could prove far harder to handle, especially if conducted in conjunction with attacks by kinetic systems or directed-energy weapons.

Most recently, China has landed an unmanned probe at the lunar south pole on the far side of the Moon.<sup>98</sup> This is a major accomplishment because the probe is the first spacecraft ever to land at either of the Moon’s poles. To support this mission, the Chinese deployed a data relay satellite to Lagrange Point-2, one of five points where the gravity wells of the Earth and Sun cancel out each other, allowing a satellite to remain in a relatively fixed location with minimal fuel consumption.<sup>99</sup> The satellite itself may or may not have military roles, but its deployment highlights that China will now be using the enormous volume of cis-lunar space (the region between the Earth and the Moon) for various deployments. This will greatly complicate American space situational awareness by forcing the U.S. to monitor a vastly greater area of space for possible Chinese spacecraft. The Chang’e-5 lunar sample retrieval mission in 2020 and China’s recent landing on Mars underscore the PRC’s effort to move beyond Earth orbit to cis-lunar and interplanetary space.

**Cyber Activities and the Electromagnetic Domain.** As far back as 2013, the Verizon Risk

Center reported that “96% of espionage cases [in its dataset] were attributed to threat actors in China” and that this “could...mean that China is, in fact, the most active source of national and industrial espionage in the world today.”<sup>100</sup> Verizon also listed China as the country of origin for 30 percent of the world’s threat actors—the largest percentage among the world’s top 10 countries of origin.<sup>101</sup> Given the difficulties of attribution, country of origin should not necessarily be conflated with perpetrator, but forensic efforts have associated at least one Chinese military unit with cyber intrusions, albeit many years ago.<sup>102</sup>

In 2023, Microsoft uncovered one of the largest and potentially most damaging cyberattacks linked to China. Hackers affiliated with the PRC gained access to local network systems using compromised credentials, infiltrating sensitive data across sectors that included “communications, manufacturing, transportation, construction, maritime, government, information technology, and education.”<sup>103</sup>

Since the 2015 summit meeting between Chinese President Xi and U.S. President Obama, during which the two sides reached an understanding to reduce cyber economic espionage, Chinese cyber actions have shifted. Although the overall level of activity appears to be unabated, Beijing seems to have moved toward more focused attacks.

China’s cyber espionage is often aimed at economic targets, reflecting China’s much more holistic view of both security and information. Rather than creating an artificial dividing line between military security and civilian security, much less information, the PLA plays a role in supporting both aspects and seeks to obtain economic intellectual property as well as military electronic information.

This is not to suggest that the PLA has not emphasized the military importance of cyber warfare. Chinese military writings since the 1990s have emphasized a fundamental transformation in global military affairs. Future wars will be conducted through joint operations involving multiple services, not through combined operations focused on multiple branches within a single service, and will span outer space and cyberspace in addition to the traditional land, sea, and air domains. Outer space and cyberspace will be of special importance because the introduction of information technology into all areas of military operations has caused the goal of warfare to move beyond establishing

material dominance (characteristic of industrial-age warfare) to include establishing information dominance.

Consequently, according to PLA analysis, future wars will most likely be “informationized local wars.” That is, they will be wars in which information and information technology will be both widely applied and a key basis of victory. The ability to gather, transmit, analyze, manage, and exploit information will be central to winning such wars: The side that is able to do these things more accurately and more quickly will be the side that wins. This means that future conflicts will no longer be determined by platform-versus-platform performance and not even by system against system: Conflicts are now clashes between rival systems of systems.<sup>104</sup>

Chinese military writings suggest that a great deal of attention has been focused on developing an integrated network and electronic warfare (INEW) capability. This would allow the PLA to reconnoiter a potential adversary’s computer systems in peacetime, influence opponent decision-makers by threatening those same systems in times of crisis, and disrupt or destroy information networks and systems by cyber and electronic warfare means in the event of conflict. INEW capabilities would complement psychological warfare and physical attack to secure “information dominance,” which, as noted, Chinese military writings emphasize as essential for fighting and winning future wars.

It is essential to recognize, however, that the PLA views computer network operations as part of information operations, or information combat. Information operations are specific operational activities that are associated with striving to establish information dominance. They are conducted in both peacetime and wartime with the peacetime focus on collecting information, improving its flow and application, influencing opposing decision-making, and effecting information deterrence.

Information operations involve four mission areas:

- **Command and Control Missions.** The ability of commanders to control joint operations by disparate forces is essential to the success of information operations. Command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) structures therefore constitute a key component

of information operations by providing the means for collecting, transmitting, and managing information.

- **Offensive Information Missions.** These are intended to disrupt the enemy's battlefield command and control systems and communications networks as well as to strike the enemy's psychological defenses.
- **Defensive Information Missions.** Such missions are aimed at ensuring the survival and continued operation of information systems. They include deterring an opponent from attacking one's own information systems, concealing information, and combating attacks when they do occur.
- **Information-Support and Information-Safeguarding Missions.** The ability to provide the myriad types of information necessary to support extensive joint operations and to do so on a continuous basis is essential to their success.<sup>105</sup>

Computer network operations are integral to all four of these overall mission areas. They can include both strategic and battlefield network operations and can incorporate both offensive and defensive measures. They also include protection not only of data, but also of information hardware and operating software.

Finally, computer network operations will not stand alone; they will be integrated with electronic warfare operations as reflected in the phrase "network and electronics unified." Electronic warfare operations are aimed at weakening or destroying enemy electronic facilities and systems while defending one's own.<sup>106</sup> Techniques include jamming and anti-jamming technologies that deny space-based communications, radar systems, and GPS navigation.<sup>107</sup> The combination of electronic and computer network attacks will produce synergies that affect everything from finding and assessing the adversary to locating one's own forces, weapons guidance, logistical support, and command and control. The PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) was created to integrate these forces and make them more complementary and effective in future "local wars under informationized conditions."<sup>108</sup>

## Force Assessment

With more than 2 million active-duty military personnel, the PLA remains one of the world's largest militaries, and its days of largely obsolescent equipment are in the past.<sup>109</sup> In March 2025, China announced a draft defense budget of \$245 billion, an increase of 7.2 percent over the previous year.<sup>110</sup> The PRC defense budget has increased each year for three decades, sustaining China's position as the world's second-largest military spender.<sup>111</sup> From the late 1990s to the mid-2010s, China's official defense budget increased by double-digit percentages nearly every year.<sup>112</sup>

China's official numbers, as large as they are, conceal the sheer scale of the country's military buildup. It is widely believed that China spends considerably more on defense than it officially acknowledges: Estimates of real defense spending run as high as \$711 billion.<sup>113</sup> This spending has been complemented by improvements in Chinese military training and, in 2015, the largest reorganization in the PLA's history.<sup>114</sup> The PLA has shed 300,000 personnel since those reforms even as its overall capabilities have increased as newer, much more sophisticated systems have replaced older platforms.<sup>115</sup> Notably, since mid-2023, Beijing has dismissed or placed under investigation more than a dozen top generals for alleged corruption—a move that could affect the PLA's morale and credibility in the short term but also could improve its efficiency in the long run.<sup>116</sup>

**PLA Ground Force (PLAGF).** The PLAGF has mostly completed the major force restructuring required by reforms announced in 2016 and 2017.<sup>117</sup> The force has steadily modernized its capabilities, incorporating both new equipment and a new organizational structure. The PLAGF currently "has approximately 965,000 active-duty personnel in its service" and is the PLA's "primary ground force."<sup>118</sup> The force is increasingly equipped with modern capabilities, such as advanced unmanned systems, C-UAS systems, electronic warfare capabilities, and helicopters.<sup>119</sup> The PLAGF also appears to be absorbing lessons from the Russia–Ukraine War: The International Institute for Strategic Studies has reported that the dominance of UAVs in the conflict appears to be driving "discussion of the concept of 'low altitude dominance' in relation to the PLAGF's own UAV, surveillance, and air-defense capabilities."<sup>120</sup>

According to the DOD, “in addition to continued PLAGF deployments to China’s unsettled borders with India and Burma, the PLAGF [has] conducted multiple large-scale exercises in training areas throughout the country.”<sup>121</sup> The PLAGF has also participated in multiple major exercises postured against Taiwan, including Strait Thunder 2025A, Joint Sword 2024A, and Joint Sword 2024B.<sup>122</sup> During the most recent of these exercises (Strait Thunder 2025A), PLAGF units, part of the Eastern Theater Command, conducted long-range live-fire shooting drills in the East China Sea that “involved precision strikes on such simulated targets as key ports and energy facilities.”<sup>123</sup>

**PLA Navy.** Between 2015 and 2020, the types of PLAN ships that count toward the quoted size of the U.S. Navy “surpassed the U.S. Navy in numbers of battle force ships.”<sup>124</sup> Today:

The PLAN is the largest navy in the world with a battle force of over 370 platforms, including major surface combatants, submarines, ocean-going amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, aircraft carriers, and fleet auxiliaries. Notably, this figure does not include approximately 60 HOUBEI class patrol combatants that carry anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM). The PLAN’s overall battle force is expected to grow to 395 ships by 2025 and 435 ships by 2030. Much of this growth will be in major surface combatants.<sup>125</sup>

The PLAN has fielded increasingly sophisticated and capable multirole ships. Multiple classes of surface combatant ships are now in series production, including the *Renhai*-class guided-missile cruisers, *Luyang III*-class guided-missile destroyers, and *Jiangkai II*-class and *Jiangkai III*-class guided-missile frigates.<sup>126</sup> Beijing is building these ships at breakneck pace. As of June 2024, the PLAN had launched 23 destroyers in the past 10 years compared to America’s 11 destroyers; likewise, China has launched eight cruisers since 2017, while the United States has not launched a new cruiser since 2016.<sup>127</sup> The PLAN is also developing the Z-20F helicopter for the *Renhai*, *Jiangkai*, and *Luyang*, bolstering the ships’ anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.<sup>128</sup>

The PLAN has similarly been modernizing its submarine force. The PLAN currently operates

six nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, six nuclear-powered attack submarines, and 48 diesel-powered/air-independent powered attack submarines. The PLAN is expected to expand its burgeoning submarine fleet to 65 units in 2025 and 80 units by 2035.<sup>129</sup> The quality of the submarine fleet is also improving as the PLAN replaces its aging *Kilo*-class submarines, purchased from Russia in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, with *Song*-class and *Yuan*-class submarines.<sup>130</sup>

Evidence suggests that the PLAN has continued to design and build new submarines. In 2024, satellite imagery revealed that the PLAN is building a new class of submarine at Wuchang Shipyard, a yard in Wuhan known for constructing conventional submarines. While details are scarce, evidence suggests that this new submarine may be nuclear powered.<sup>131</sup>

The PLAN has been expanding its amphibious assault capabilities as well. The PLA Marine Corps (PLANMC), for example, is the U.S. Marine Corps’ Chinese counterpart. According to the DOD:

After taking possession of three PLAGF BDEs [brigades] in late 2022, the PLANMC now has 11 BDEs—eight maneuver, two SOF [Special Operations Forces], and one aviation—and an approximate total force composition of 55,000 marines. With the assumption of the three PLAGF BDEs, the PLANMC gained their legacy equipment, which the BDEs continued to train on in 2023. It is expected that the new BDEs will begin updating their inventory to match the other PLANMC BDEs in 2024. The addition of the three new BDEs places PLANMC elements in every theater except for the WTC [Western Theater Command]. The PLANMC maintains a presence at the PRC’s first overseas military base in Djibouti, extending the PRC’s military reach and strategic influence in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>132</sup>

To move this force, Beijing has begun to build more amphibious assault ships. In January 2025, the PLAN launched the new *Yulan*-class amphibious assault ship, which can also launch fighter jets and UAVs because of its electromagnetic catapult and arrestor technologies. The ship has the capacity to hold up to 1,000 marines and associated equipment.<sup>133</sup> In addition to the *Yulan*-class, the PLAN

launched its fourth *Yushen*-class amphibious assault ship in 2024, adding further to its amphibious capabilities.<sup>134</sup>

Earlier in 2025, the PLAN began to experiment with a new type of anti-tank missile platform. The new trials included two HJ-10 top-attack anti-tank missiles mounted atop a ZTD-05 amphibious assault vehicle chassis.<sup>135</sup> This development could mark a shift toward integrating high-precision strike abilities with armored amphibious mobility.

Supporting these expanded naval combat forces is a growing fleet of support and logistics vessels. The 2010 PRC defense white paper noted the accelerated construction of “large support vessels.” It also noted specifically that the navy is exploring “new methods of logistics support for sustaining long-time maritime missions.”<sup>136</sup> These include tankers and fast combat support ships that extend the range of Chinese surface groups and allow them to operate for more prolonged periods away from main ports. Chinese naval task forces dispatched to the Gulf of Aden have typically included such vessels. According to satellite and ground imagery, China also appears to be building a new set of amphibious bridging barges to facilitate a large-scale amphibious operation.<sup>137</sup>

The PLAN also has been expanding its naval aviation capabilities. The most publicized element of this expansion is the growing Chinese carrier fleet, which currently includes not only the *Liaoning*, purchased from Ukraine over a decade ago, but a domestically produced copy, the *Shandong*, that completed its first exercise in 2021.<sup>138</sup> In 2025, the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* travelled farther east than Guam, becoming the first Chinese carriers to reach beyond the Second Island Chain.<sup>139</sup>

Both of these ships have ski jumps to launch their air wing, but China is also building several conventional takeoff/barrier landing (CATOBAR) carriers (like American or French aircraft carriers) that will employ catapults and therefore allow their air complement to carry more ordnance and/or fuel.<sup>140</sup> The first of these new-generation carriers, the *Fujian*, started sea trials in the first half of 2024 and was officially commissioned in November 2025. This new class of carriers can “support additional fighter aircraft, fixed-wing early-warning aircraft, and more rapid flight operations, thus extending the reach and effectiveness of the PRC’s carrier-based strike aircraft.”<sup>141</sup>

The PLAN is also developing new aircraft for its new carriers, including a catapult-capable J-15 variant; the J-35, a carrier-capable variant of the fifth-generation J-31 fighter; the KJ-600, the carrier-borne AEW aircraft; and multiple UAVs capable of vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) to be used for ISR purposes.<sup>142</sup> As its carrier fleet increases, the PLAN is also increasing its operational tempo: In 2023, the PLAN conducted three deployments with the *Shandong* to the Philippines Sea—a record number for any PLAN carrier in a calendar year.<sup>143</sup>

As the PLAN boosts its naval aviation capabilities, it is divesting from much of its shore-based aviation. In 2023, the PLAN transferred a “significant portion of PLAN shore-based, fixed wing combat aviation units, facilities, air defense, and radar units to the PLAAF.”<sup>144</sup> The PLAN also operates fixed-wing, medium-to-large UAVs such as the Xianglong, BZK-005, and ASN-209 from land bases for ISR purposes.<sup>145</sup>

Despite this divestment effort, the PLAN still maintains formidable shore-based aviation capabilities. In particular, the PLAN has retained its fixed-wing ASW assets, including its fleet of KJ-200s and KJ-500s. According to the China Aerospace Studies Institute:

[These aircraft] enable the PLAN to conduct modern combined arms tasks such as ASW, supplement a currently non-operational carrier based fixed wing AEW [airborne early warning] capability, continue to collect electronics intelligence (ELINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT), and enable further range and jointness when fulfilling air defense and domain awareness tasks in the last PLAN controlled air defense area, the South China Sea.<sup>146</sup>

**PLA Air Force (PLAAF).** Together, PLAAF and PLAN aviation form Asia’s largest air force and the world’s third-largest. Of its more than 3,150 aircraft, 2,400 are combat aircraft, including fighters, strategic bombers, tactical bombers, multimission tactical, and attack aircraft.<sup>147</sup> The force has shifted steadily from one that is focused on homeland air defense to one that is capable of power projection, including long-range precision strikes against both land and maritime targets. The DOD notes that:

The PLAAF is seeking to extend its power projection capability with the development of a new H-20 stealth strategic bomber, with official PRC state media stating that this new stealth bomber will have a nuclear mission in addition to filling conventional roles. The PLAAF is developing new medium- and long-range stealth bombers to strike regional and global targets. PLAAF leaders publicly announced the program in 2016; however, it may take more than a decade to develop this type of advanced bomber.<sup>148</sup>

PLAAF and PLAN aviation currently have a total of 1,900 fighters, more than 1,300 of which are fourth-generation fighters that are comparable to the American F-15, F-16, and F-18.<sup>149</sup> They include the domestically designed and produced J-16, a multirole fighter, and the fifth-generation J-20 stealth fighter.<sup>150</sup> By 2023, China had built more than 225 J-16s and 200 J-20s.<sup>151</sup>

China has made progress on two fifth-generation stealth fighter designs. The J-20, the larger of the two aircraft, resembles the American F-22 fighter and has been operationally fielded. China continues to iterate on the J-20, conducting flight tests on multiple new variants in 2023.<sup>152</sup> Prospective upgrades to the J-20 include “increasing the number of AAMs [air-to-air missiles] the fighter can carry in its low-observable configuration, installing thrust-vectoring engine nozzles, and adding super cruise capability by installing higher thrust indigenous WS-15 engines.” China reportedly has tripled the radar detection range of the J-20 by leveraging advances in semiconductor technology.<sup>153</sup> The J-35, which was officially unveiled at the 2024 Zhuhai Airshow, is the other fifth-generation stealth fighter.<sup>154</sup> Its development continues for export or as a future naval fighter for PLAN’s next class of aircraft carriers.<sup>155</sup>

China also has begun to develop sixth-generation fighters and unveiled the first two in December 2024.<sup>156</sup> Details on these new planes are scant, but a leaked image of the J-36 contains features that make the plane “something of a hybrid between a very heavy fighter and a tactical bomber.”<sup>157</sup> While China’s sixth-generation fighters are still in early stages of development, they will likely include a central manned aircraft supported by drones that possess a high level of autonomy.<sup>158</sup>

The PLAAF is deploying an increasing number of H-6 bombers, which can undertake longer-range strike operations, including operations employing land-attack cruise missiles. Although the H-6, like the American B-52 and Russian Tu-95, is a 1950s-era design copied from the Soviet-era Tu-16 Badger bomber, the updated versions (H-6K) are equipped with new electronics and engines and are made of carbon composites. In addition, China is developing the H-20, a flying wing-type stealth bomber that Chinese state media say will have a nuclear mission in addition to filling conventional roles.<sup>159</sup>

Equally important, the PLAAF has been introducing a variety of support aircraft, including AEW, command and control (C2), and electronic warfare (EW) aircraft. These systems field state-of-the-art radars and electronic surveillance systems that allow Chinese air commanders to detect potential targets. These targets include low-flying aircraft and cruise missiles, and allow the Chinese to gather additional intelligence on adversary radars and electronic emissions more quickly. The Chinese aerial tanker fleet, which is based on the H-6 aircraft, also has been expanding.<sup>160</sup> China’s combat aircraft are increasingly capable of undertaking mid-air refueling, which allows them to conduct extended, sustained operations.

Chinese UAVs have been included in various military parades over the past several years, which suggests that they are being incorporated into Chinese forces.<sup>161</sup> According to the DOD:

The PRC continues its comprehensive UAS modernization efforts, highlighted by the routine appearance of increasingly sophisticated systems across theater and echelon levels. The last three years have seen several key milestones, including the airshow display and operational appearance of the Xianglong jet-powered UAS as well as the unveiling of the supersonic WZ-8 UAS and a redesigned version of the GJ-11 stealth unmanned combat air vehicle. The PLA continues the maritime use of ISR UASs, featuring the venerable BZK-005 and the newer TW-328/TB001. The PRC is expanding the applications of large UASs by demonstrating uses, including disaster communications, anti-submarine roles, firefighting, and weather modification. Advanced small

UASs are increasingly appearing in military and civilian applications, with PRC industry remaining a key exporter of UASs and components of all sizes.<sup>162</sup>

The PLAAF is responsible for the Chinese homeland's strategic air defenses. Its array of surface-to-air missile batteries is one of the world's largest and includes the Russian S-300 (SA-10B/SA-20) and its Chinese counterpart, the Hongqi-9 long-range SAM. The S-400 series of Russian long-range SAMs, delivery of which began in 2018, marks a substantial improvement in PLAAF air defense capabilities because the S-400 has both anti-aircraft and anti-missile capabilities.<sup>163</sup> According to the Department of Defense, "PRC researchers are interested in developing SAMs with a range similar to the DF-17 to provide ultra-long-range air defense using space-based ISR to support in-flight target updates."<sup>164</sup> China has deployed these SAM systems in a dense, overlapping belt along its coast, protecting the nation's economic center of gravity. Key industrial and military centers such as Beijing are also heavily defended by SAM systems.

China's airborne forces are part of the PLAAF. The 15th Airborne Corps has been reorganized from three airborne divisions to six airborne brigades in addition to a special operations brigade, an aviation brigade, and a support brigade. These forces have been incorporating indigenously developed airborne mechanized combat vehicles for the past decade, and this has given them more mobility and a better ability to engage armored forces. According to recent footage on Chinese social media, China's airborne infantry is now using fighting vehicles with GL6 active protection systems, which would likely be useful in a Taiwan invasion scenario.<sup>165</sup>

In line with the capability improvements, the PLAAF is also rapidly modernizing its fighter pilot training programs. At several institutions that offer the required three years of officer training and education, including the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy, old training programs have been entirely replaced by new curricula. This overhaul has streamlined and centralized the training process, reducing the completion time by a year.

**PLA Rocket Force.** Chinese nuclear forces are the responsibility of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), one of three services created on December 31, 2015. China's nuclear ballistic missile forces include

land-based missiles with a range of 13,000 kilometers that can reach the United States and CSS-4 and submarine-based missiles that can reach the United States when the submarine is deployed within missile range. The DOD estimates that China has more than 600 operational nuclear warheads in its stockpiles and plans to have 1,000 by 2030.<sup>166</sup> The PLARF has approximately 400 ICBMs, including fixed and mobile launchers capable of launching unitary and multiple reentry vehicles.<sup>167</sup>

The PRC became a nuclear power in 1964 when it exploded its first atomic bomb as part of its "two bombs, one satellite" program. China then exploded its first thermonuclear bomb in 1967 and orbited its first satellite in 1970, demonstrating the capability to build a delivery system that can reach the ends of the Earth. China chose to rely primarily on a land-based nuclear deterrent instead of developing two or three different basing systems as the United States did.

Unlike the United States or the Soviet Union, China chose to pursue only a minimal nuclear deterrent and fielded only a small number of nuclear weapons: 100 to 150 weapons on medium-range ballistic missiles and approximately 60 ICBMs. Its only ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) conducted relatively few deterrence patrols (perhaps none),<sup>168</sup> and its first-generation submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the JL-1, if it ever attained full operational capability, had limited reach. The JL-1's 1,700-kilometer range makes it comparable to the first-generation Polaris A1 missile fielded by the United States in the 1960s.

After remaining stable for several decades, China's nuclear force became part of Beijing's two-decade modernization campaign. The result has been both modernization and expansion of the Chinese nuclear deterrent. The core of China's ICBM force is the DF-31 series, a solid-fueled, road-mobile system, along with a growing number of longer-range, road-mobile DF-41 missiles that are now in the PLA operational inventory. The DOD reported in 2022 that the PRC was now "fielding the DF-41, China's first road-mobile and silo-based ICBM with MIRV capability."<sup>169</sup> China's medium-range nuclear forces have similarly shifted to mobile, solid-rocket systems so that they are both more survivable and more easily maintained. China also operates the DF-31A ICBMs, which have a range of 11,000 kilometers and can hit most locations in the continental United States (CONUS).<sup>170</sup>

In 2022, China completed the construction of three new solid-propellant silo fields that will cumulatively contain at least 300 ICBM silos. At least some of those new silos reportedly are already filled with warheads.<sup>171</sup> In 2021 alone, “the PLARF launched approximately 135 ballistic missiles for testing and training, more than the rest of the world combined excluding ballistic missile employment in combat zones.”<sup>172</sup> In 2024, the PLARF test-fired an ICBM into the Pacific Ocean, marking the first time China had launched an ICBM into international waters since 1980.<sup>173</sup> The DOD assesses that as China constructs new nuclear facilities, it “intends to use this infrastructure to produce nuclear warhead material for its military in the near term” and that the PRC, which has not produced large quantities of plutonium for weapons since the 1990s, will restart plutonium production this decade to meet the demands of its nuclear program.<sup>174</sup>

Notably, the Chinese are also expanding their ballistic missile submarine fleet:

Over the past 15 years, the PLAN has constructed 12 nuclear-powered submarines—two SHANG I class SSNs (Type 093), four SHANG II class SSNs (Type 093A), and six JIN class SSBNs (Type 094). Equipped with the CSS-N-14 (JL-2) submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) (3,900 nm) or the CSS-N-20 (JL-3) SLBM (5,400 nm), the PLAN’s six operational JIN class SSBNs represent the PRC’s first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent.<sup>175</sup>

In addition, each of China’s *Jin*-class SSBNs “is equipped to carry up to 12 JL-2 or JL-3 SLBMs.”<sup>176</sup>

There is some possibility that the Chinese nuclear arsenal now contains land-attack cruise missiles. The CJ-20, a long-range, air-launched cruise missile carried on China’s H-6 bomber, may be nuclear-tipped, although the evidence that China has pursued such a capability is limited. China is also believed to be working on a cruise missile submarine that, if equipped with nuclear cruise missiles, would further expand the range of its nuclear attack options.<sup>177</sup>

As a result of China’s modernization efforts, its nuclear forces appear to be shifting from a minimal deterrent posture that is suited only to responding to an attack and then only with limited numbers to a more robust but still limited deterrent posture.

The PRC will still likely field fewer nuclear weapons than either the United States or Russia fields, but it will field a more modern and diverse set of capabilities than its nuclear-armed neighbors India, Pakistan, and North Korea are capable of fielding. If there are corresponding changes in doctrine, China at least will have limited nuclear options from which to choose in the event of a conflict.

This assessment changes, however, if the missiles going into the newly discovered silos are equipped with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). With five MIRVs atop each missile, for example, 300 new ICBMs would have some 1,500 warheads—equivalent to the U.S. and Russian numbers allowed under New START. Even with fewer than 300 ICBMs, the new SLBMs and new bombers would enable China to field as large a nuclear force within a few years as the United States or Russia is capable of fielding.

In addition to strategic nuclear forces, the PLARF has responsibility for medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile (MRBM and IRBM) forces. These include (among others) the DF-21 MRBM, which has a range of approximately 1,500 kilometers, and the newer DF-26 IRBM, which has a range of approximately 3,000 kilometers and is “capable of conducting precision conventional or nuclear strikes against ground targets as well as conventional strikes against naval targets.”<sup>178</sup> A Center for Strategic and International Studies report notes that Chinese missile brigades equipped with these systems may have both nuclear and conventional responsibilities, making any deployment from garrison much more ambiguous from a stability perspective.<sup>179</sup> The expansion of these forces also raises questions about the total number of Chinese nuclear warheads. Moreover, the PLARF may be exploring the development of a conventionally armed intercontinental range missile system that, if developed and fielded, would enable PRC conventional strikes against targets in the continental U.S., Hawaii, and Alaska.<sup>180</sup>

Although it is unclear whether they are nuclear-armed, China’s hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) also pose a growing threat to the United States and its allies. HGVs are slower than ICBMs—Mach 5 for a hypersonic vehicle as opposed to Mach 25 for an ICBM warhead—but are designed to maneuver during their descent, making interception far more difficult. During a Chinese test in August 2021, a

hypersonic vehicle apparently went into orbit.<sup>181</sup> Additionally, the DOD has stated that the PLARF may have developed a long-range DF-27 ballistic missile with an HGV payload option, which would boost its strategic HGV capabilities.<sup>182</sup>

These developments create a fundamentally different threat, as a fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS) could allow attacks from southern trajectories—that is, from over the South Pole—or even the placement of warheads in orbit, which would make them almost impossible to intercept. Even without a nuclear warhead, an orbiting hypersonic vehicle could do enormous damage to a city or a military facility such as an air base or an ICBM silo. Because of the strategic instability that FOBS programs would introduce, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union has pursued them.

**Former PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) and Successor Entities.** In April 2024, the PLA announced the dissolution of the PLASSF and “the creation of a new Information Support Force (ISF) and...alteration of the reporting relationships of two of its departments.”<sup>183</sup> Specifically, the reorganization “eliminated the Strategic Support Force and subordinated the Space Systems Department [SSD] and Network Systems Department [NSD]—now designated the Military Aerospace Force and Cyberspace Force, respectively—to the Central Military Commission.”<sup>184</sup> The ISF, like the former PLASSF SSD and NSD, is now a deputy theater-grade force that reports directly to the CMC.<sup>185</sup> The CMC did not release detailed explanations of the reorganization, but some analysts speculate that the PLASSF was always designed to be a “transitional structure...for disparate space, cyber, and informatization forces until their force structure could be developed enough to stand as independent branches.”<sup>186</sup>

The newly created ISF will likely support the PLA’s push to create an “informatized military—one in which services and theatre commands seamlessly collect and share data.”<sup>187</sup> Its primary mission is to “build and operate a network information system that can support joint and multi-domain operations in any contested environment and under any enemy attack.”<sup>188</sup> The ISF is likely to serve as a driver for the innovation and integration of such cutting-edge technologies as artificial intelligence.

*Cyberspace Force (CSF).* Formerly the SSF Network Systems Department, the CSF inherited the

PLASSF’s information warfare capabilities and mission set. Many CSF units have been responsible for major cyberattacks against the United States.<sup>189</sup> In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice charged PLA officers from Unit 61398, then a unit in the General Staff Department’s 3rd Department, with the theft of intellectual property and implanting of malware in various commercial firms.<sup>190</sup> Members of that unit are thought also to be part of Advanced Persistent Threat-1, a group of computer hackers believed to be operating on behalf of a nation-state rather than a criminal group. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice charged several PLA officers with one of the largest breaches in history: stealing the credit ratings and records of 147 million people from Equifax.

The CSF’s responsibilities, however, extend beyond traditional cyber mission sets like cyber warfare and electronic warfare. The force is also responsible for missions associated with the PLA’s “Three Warfares” concept, which includes psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>191</sup>

*Aerospace Force (ASF).* The ASF, formerly the PLASSF Space Systems Department, is responsible for military space and counterspace operations.<sup>192</sup> The PLA views space superiority as critical for winning “informatized warfare” and likely considers it a deterrent and countermeasure against any possible U.S. military interventions during a regional military contingency.<sup>193</sup> The PRC has been conducting space operations since 1970 when it first orbited a satellite, but its space capabilities did not gain public prominence until 2007 when the PLA conducted an anti-satellite (ASAT) test in low-Earth orbit against a defunct Chinese weather satellite. The test became one of the worst debris-generating incidents of the space age: Many of the several thousand pieces of debris that were generated will remain in orbit for more than a century.<sup>194</sup> In addition, according to the DOD, “the PRC probably is developing advanced nuclear delivery systems, such as a strategic HGV and a fractional orbital bombardment (FOB) system.”<sup>195</sup>

Equally important, Chinese counterspace measures have been expanding steadily. The PLA not only has tested ASATs against low-Earth-orbit systems, but also is believed to have tested a system designed to attack targets at GEO approximately 22,000 miles above the Earth.<sup>196</sup> Because many vital satellites are at GEO, including communications and

## Threats: China

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Behavior		✓			
	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
Capability	✓				

missile early-warning systems, China’s ability to target such systems constitutes a major threat. In early 2022, China’s Shijian-22 towed a dead Chinese satellite into a “graveyard” orbit above the GEO belt.<sup>197</sup> This was officially touted as a servicing operation, but the ability to attach one satellite to another and then tow it also has potential military implications.

China also has a growing civilian space industry that develops space technologies that can serve both a civilian purpose and a military purpose as part of China’s civil–military fusion strategy. According to the DOD, the former SSF “worked with PRC universities and research organizations to incorporate civilian support to military efforts to access high-demand aerospace talent and R&D. The PRC has a growing commercial space sector that supports government objectives, including remote sensing, launch, and communication services.”<sup>198</sup>

### Conclusion

China presents the United States with its most comprehensive and daunting national security

challenge across all three areas of vital American national interests: the homeland; regional war (including potential attacks on overseas U.S. bases as well as against allies and partners); and international common spaces. China is challenging the United States and its allies at sea, in the air, and in cyberspace. It has sparked deadly confrontations on its border with India and poses a standing and escalating threat to Taiwan.

The Chinese military is no longer a distant competitor. It has begun to field indigenous aircraft carriers and advanced missile technology. It is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and conducting live-fire exercises and mock blockades around Taiwan. If current trends persist, the gap between the Chinese and U.S. militaries is likely to narrow further, and the idea that China might surpass U.S. capabilities in some fields is no longer implausible.

This *Index* assesses the overall threat from China, considering the range of contingencies, as “aggressive” for level of provocative behavior and “formidable” for level of capability.

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