



China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations



Edited by
Scott D. McDonald
Michael C. Burgoyne

13 China's Military Diplomacy

Dr. Phillip C. Saunders and Junwei Shyy¹

1 The views and recommendations expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

The international profile of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has grown significantly over the last decade, with a notable increase in the frequency and complexity of its activities with partners abroad. As the Chinese military participates in multilateral meetings and engages foreign militaries around the world, it is strengthening diplomatic relations, building the People's Republic of China's (PRC) soft power, and learning how to deploy and support military forces overseas for longer periods.

What are the PLA's objectives in conducting military diplomacy? Which partners does the PLA interact with most? What trends are evident in the pace and type of activities the PLA carries out? Which aspects of PLA military diplomacy should concern United States (US) policymakers, and which may present opportunities?

This paper draws upon a National Defense University open-source database that tracks PLA diplomatic interactions with foreign militaries from 2002-2018. Our analytic emphasis is on activities where sufficient open source information is available to discern trends and assess PRC motivations. The data on high-level visits, military exercises, and port calls is fairly complete, and has been validated and updated to cover 2017 and 2018 activities.² Available data on functional exchanges, dialogues, and military educational exchanges is much spottier and is therefore not incorporated in our quantitative analyses.

OBJECTIVES OF CHINESE MILITARY DIPLOMACY

The PLA has historically been an insular institution with only limited contact with foreign militaries, especially after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960 and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). China's opening and reform (starting in 1978) created new opportunities for contacts with other countries, and the PLA was able to expand gradually its interactions with foreign military counterparts. However, an organizational culture that emphasized secrecy and the importance of avoiding embarrassment by revealing the limits of PLA capabilities meant that most interactions consisted of high-level visits or staged demonstrations. The PLA's limited power projection capabilities also restricted its ability to exercise with foreign counterparts or to undertake overseas deployments or port calls.

2 For a description of database sources, see Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, July 2017), 6. Data from 2003-2016 has been refined and validated as part of the database updating process, so some information in this paper may not match the earlier publication.

Many of these constraints no longer apply and today's PLA is a much more active practitioner of military diplomacy. Chinese military writings over the last decade highlight the growing importance of military diplomacy. Stated objectives are derived from broader PLA missions and include supporting overall national foreign policy, protecting national sovereignty, advancing national interests, and shaping the international security environment.³ Xi Jinping cited several specific goals for Chinese military diplomacy in a January 2015 speech to the All-Military Diplomatic Work Conference (全军外事工作会议), including supporting overall national foreign policy, protecting national security, and promoting military construction (e.g., military force-building). Xi also highlighted the goals of protecting China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.⁴ Military academics reiterate these goals; a lecturer at the PLA Nanjing Political College notes that a major role of Chinese military diplomacy is to "support overall national foreign policy and the new era military strategic direction" and other scholars highlight "shaping the international security environment and promoting military modernization" as additional objectives.⁵ In addition to these openly acknowledged objectives, the PLA uses military diplomacy to gather intelligence, learn new skills, benchmark PLA capabilities against those of other nations, and build interoperability with foreign partners.

Much of the PLA's current military diplomatic activity is focused on protecting and advancing specific Chinese strategic interests and managing areas of concern.⁶ Chinese foreign policy emphasizes managing strategic relations with great powers, such as the United States and Russia, and engaging countries on China's periphery; Chinese military

3 See Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy*, 7-11.

4 Yang Lina and Chang Xuemei, eds., "Xi Jinping: Start a New Phase of Military Diplomacy [习近平: 进一步开创军事外交新局面]," *Xinhua*, 29 January 2015, available at <http://pc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0129/c64094-26474947.html>.

5 Jin Canrong and Wang Bo, "On Theory of Military Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics [有关中国特色军事外交的理论思考]," *Pacific Studies Report* [太平洋学报] no. 5 (2015), 22, available at <http://www.cssn.cn/jxx/201601/P020160104312124234558.pdf>; Wan Fayang, *Chinese Military Diplomacy—Theory and Practice* [中国军事外交理论与实践] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2015), 294-309; Chen Zhiyong, "Retrospect and Thinking of the 60 Years of Military Diplomacy in New China [新中国60年军事外交回顾与思考]," *China Military Science* [中国军事科学] 5 (2009), 35-36; "Chinese Military Diplomacy and Military Messaging to the Outside [中国军事外交中的军事对外传播]," *PLA Daily*, January 2, 2014, available at http://www.81.cn/jkhc/2014-01/02/content_5716684.htm.

6 For an overview of the geographical distribution of Chinese foreign policy interests, see Phillip C. Saunders, *China's Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers, and Tools* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2006). Also see US Department of Defense, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, December 2018), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

diplomacy emphasizes interactions with the United States, Russia, and countries in the Asia-Pacific region.⁷ China is increasingly dependent on oil and natural gas imported from the Middle East and Africa; the PLA Navy's counter-piracy presence in the Gulf of Aden facilitates strategic ties in the Middle East and Africa, helps guarantee China's energy security, and provides operational experience in protecting China's sea lines of communication. Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy contribution is the One Belt, One Road (OBOR; 一带一路)⁸ initiative; PLA interactions with militaries in Europe, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia reinforce this effort.⁹

For analytic purposes, Chinese military diplomacy objectives can be divided into strategic and operational categories. Strategic objectives include supporting overall PRC diplomacy by providing public goods and engaging key countries, and shaping the security environment by displaying or deploying PLA capabilities. Operational goals include collecting intelligence on foreign militaries and potential operating areas, learning new skills and tactics, techniques, and procedures and benchmarking PLA capabilities against other militaries. See Table 1 (next page) for a summary of how different types of military diplomacy activities advance different Chinese objectives.

7 China's Asia-Pacific white paper provides numerous examples of the role of military diplomacy in advancing China's regional policy and relations with the United States and Russia. See State Council Information Office, *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, 11 January 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2017-01/11/c_135973695.htm.

8 The Editors have chosen to conform to the "One Belt, One Road" formulation of the initiative as initially propagated and as it is still discussed in Chinese language documents. For a complete explanation of this decision, see the introduction to this volume, p 9.

9 Peter Cai, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2017), available at <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative>; Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 12 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, October 2017).

Table 1: Chinese Military Diplomatic Activities and Objectives

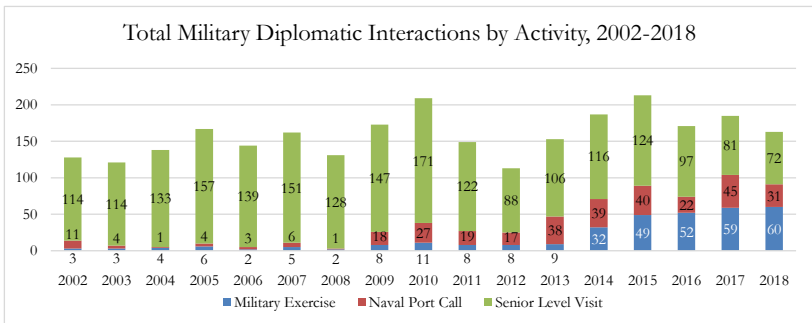
Activity	Strategic Goals		Operational Goals	
	Support PRC Diplomacy	Shape Security Environment	Collect Intelligence	Learn New Skills and Benchmarking
Senior-Level Visits				
Hosted	x	x	x	
Abroad	x	x	x	
Dialogues				
Bilateral	x	x	x	
Multilateral	x	x	x	
Military Exercises				
Bilateral	x	x	x	x
Multilateral	x	x	x	x
Naval Port Calls				
Escort Task Force (ETF)	x	x	x	x
Non-Escort Task Force	x	x	x	
Functional Exchanges	x		x	x
Non-Traditional Security Operations				
HA/DR	x	x	x	x
Peacekeeping	x	x	x	x

CHINESE MILITARY DIPLOMACY, 2002-2018

This section analyzes the expansion of PLA diplomatic activities, with an emphasis on senior-level visits, exercises with foreign militaries, and port calls. The data reveal five main conclusions. First, senior-level visits have fallen in number from their 2010 peak, but visits and meetings still make up the overwhelming majority (76.5 percent) of military diplomatic interactions. Second, military exercises have increased sharply since Xi Jinping took power. Third, naval port calls have increased over time, with escort task forces (ETF) focused on replenishment port calls during their four-month operational patrols and friendly visits afterwards and non-ETF port calls overwhelmingly consisting of friendly visits. Fourth, the PLA has robust academic and functional exchange programs with various countries, although detailed information is lacking. Fifth, the PLA is actively engaged in non-traditional security cooperation, especially UN peacekeeping operations and antipiracy activities.

Figure 1 shows the aggregate trends in overall military diplomacy. The data show that military diplomatic interactions expanded from a relatively low base through 2010, and have remained relatively constant since then. Senior-level visits have fallen in number from their 2010 peak but visits and meetings still make up the overwhelming majority of Chinese military diplomatic interactions. The data also show a steady increase in the number of military exercises and port calls beginning in 2009, with these making up an increasing share of PLA interactions with foreign militaries.

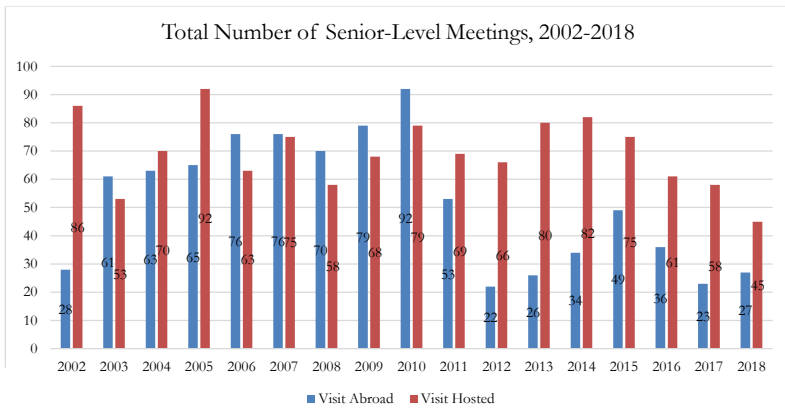
Figure 1. Military Diplomatic Interactions



Senior-level visits

Senior-level visits mostly involve PLA officers who are Central Military Commission (CMC) members or theater commander grade and above. The Minister of National Defense takes the lead in engaging foreign military leaders, but the CMC Vice-Chairs, service commanders, commanders of the CMC Joint Staff Department (JSD) and the CMC Political Work Department (PWD), and the JSD deputy commander with the foreign affairs and intelligence portfolio, also meet regularly

Figure 2. Senior-Level Meetings



with foreign counterparts.¹⁰ Figure 2 shows PLA senior-level interactions with foreign militaries.

The data show several interesting patterns. The first is that PLA senior-level visits peaked in 2010 and are down significantly since then. Second is that before 2010, there was rough parity between visits abroad by PLA officers and visits hosted in China, in keeping with the expectation of reciprocity. Since then, senior PLA officers have been less willing to travel overseas to visit foreign counterparts, and foreign military officers and defense officials have become more willing to visit China without a reciprocal visit. This likely reflects tighter travel restrictions as part of the anti-corruption campaign and greater demands on senior PLA officers due to military reform efforts.¹¹ The data also reveal a pattern

¹⁰ These are post-reform positions; for the pre-reform equivalents see Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy*, 16-17.

¹¹ Detailed planning for the reforms began in 2013, and execution of the reforms started in late 2015 and will continue through 2020.

that corresponds to the 5-year Chinese political cycle; overseas visits by senior PLA officers are down significantly in years with a party congress (2002, 2007, 2012, 2017) and peak during their third full year in office (in 2005, 2010, and 2015). The year 2007 is an exception, but was an unusual party congress year where the CCP general secretary, premier, and the two CMC vice chairmen all kept their positions. The data also reflect increased senior PLA officer participation in multilateral meetings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defense Ministers' Meeting, the ASEAN Region Forum (ARF) Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the Shangri-La Defense Dialogue in Singapore, and the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing. Senior PLA officers attending these meetings often schedule multiple bilateral counterpart meetings in conjunction with these multilateral meetings.

The timing of visits hosted and visits abroad fluctuates according to the military relations planning cycle. PLA visits abroad typically spike in May and September and fall dramatically during October for the PRC's National Day and during the Chinese lunar New Year holiday in late January or early February. Hosted visits spike in April and November.

Military Exercises

In 2002, the PLA began conducting exercises with other countries, which they refer to as "joint exercises" (联合演习) even if they only involve a single service; this paper uses US terminology which considers these "combined exercises."¹² China's combined exercises are categorized as joint or single-service, bilateral or multilateral, and by function. Combat exercises emphasize combat skills against conventional military targets, including live-fire drills and combat simulations; combat support activities involve logistics, intelligence, minesweeping and explosive ordnance disposal, surveillance, or other capabilities that support traditional combat operations. Anti-terrorism and anti-piracy exercises are lower intensity activities against terrorists or pirates that may include some live-fire elements. Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) include

search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), medical exercises, and basic military skills. Competitions involve PLA soldiers or units competing with other militaries in performing a standard set of skills.

¹² The term *joint* is used in PRC English-language media. Chinese media use 联合, which can mean *combined*, *combined arms*, or *joint* in US military parlance.

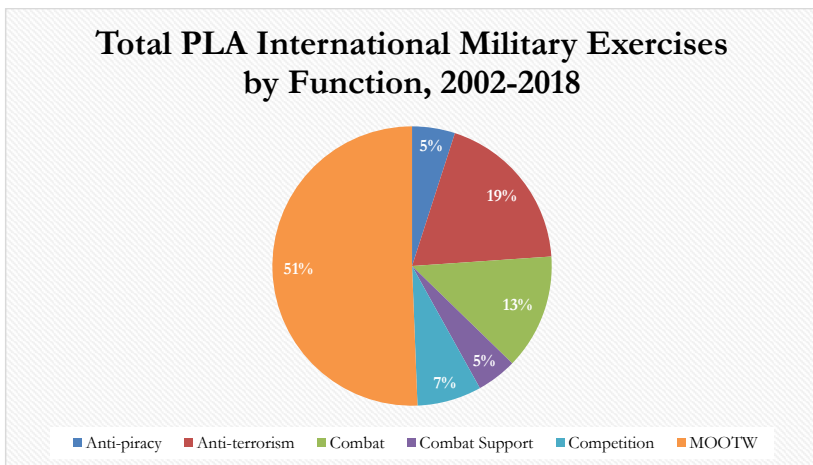
Figure 3. Military Diplomatic Interactions



Figure 3 shows a major increase in the volume of PLA participation in combined exercises with foreign partners, including a significant increase in participation in multilateral exercises. Figure 4 shows the breakout of exercise type by function.

Only 6.6 percent of PLA exercises with foreign militaries involve actual joint operations with more than one service. The PLA Navy (42.9%) and PLA Army (41.5%) are most involved in exercises with foreign militaries; the PLA Air Force conducts the remaining 9.0 percent of exercises and the PLA Rocket Force is not known to have exercised with foreign militaries.

Figure 4. PLA International Military Exercises



Most of the exercises the PLA conducts involve nontraditional security cooperation (MOOTW) or are anti-piracy or anti-terrorism exercises aimed against non-state threats. This makes them politically inoffensive since they involve common interests and are not aimed against third countries. These types of exercises typically do not involve extensive operational interactions or reveal advanced military capabilities.

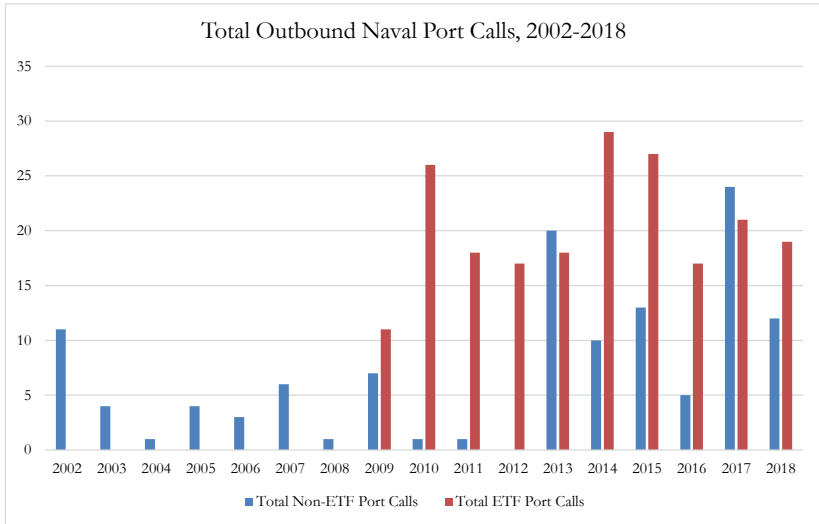
The exceptions include the SCO *Peace Mission* exercise series (since 2007), various bilateral exercises with close security partners such as Pakistan and Thailand, and the Sino-Russian *Naval Cooperation* and *Joint Sea* naval exercises. The SCO *Peace Mission* exercises are described as counter-terrorism exercises but often involve the participation of large units conducting conventional combat operations, including air defense and strike operations. The *Naval Cooperation* exercise series has sometimes been held in sensitive waters such as the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the South China Sea and has evolved to include multiple warfare areas including combined anti-submarine warfare training and amphibious assaults. Such combat-related exercises may help the PLA improve its operational capabilities by learning from advanced militaries, create a degree of interoperability with foreign counterparts, and send a political signal of China's willingness and ability to cooperate militarily with other countries.

Port Calls

From 1985 to 2008, the PLA Navy typically conducted only a handful of port calls per year, most of which were "friendly visits" that did not involve much operational interaction with the host-nation's navy (see *Figure 5 on page 217*). The PLA Navy's ongoing participation in counter-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008 generated new requirements for port calls for ships in the anti-piracy escort task forces to replenish supplies and provided new opportunities to conduct friendly visits to foreign ports. Deploying and sustaining ETFs crowded out port calls by PLA Navy ships other than the *Peace Ark* hospital ship from 2009 to 2012. Since 2013, the PLA Navy has been able to balance the operational requirements of maintaining a continuous counter-piracy presence in the Gulf of Aden while resuming a more robust program of non-ETF port calls.

PLA Navy ETFs conduct two types of port calls. Replenishment visits usually last two to five days, during which the vessels receive

Figure 5. Port Calls



fuel, fresh water, vegetables, and fruits.¹³ Crews are usually met by the Chinese ambassador and military attachés but the vessels are not open for public display and the crew does not interact with the host-country’s navy. Friendly visits generally last two to four days, with the crew usually met by the Chinese ambassador and military attachés, as well as host-country government and naval officials.¹⁴ Chinese expatriates and students in the country attend welcoming and departure ceremonies. Throughout the visit, the vessels are open to the public. Crewmembers also play basketball or soccer with the host navy.

The presence of PLA Navy anti-piracy ETFs in the Gulf of Aden also provides opportunities to visit and interact with foreign escort task forces and personnel. For example, on 4 May 2013, Rear Admiral Yuan Yubai (袁誉柏), commander of ETF-14, hosted the commander of the multinational anti-piracy Combined Task Force 151 on the *Harbin*

13 Examples of a replenishment visit include Wu Di, “Chinese Naval Ship Berths in Salah Port for Replenishment,” *China Military Online*, 8 October 2014, available at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/HomePicture/2014-10/08/content_4542110.htm; and Yao Jianing, “Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Stops at Djibouti Port for Replenishment and Rest,” *China Military Online*, 9 September 2014, available at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-09/09/content_6129544.htm.

14 Examples of a friendly visit include Zhang Tao, “Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Docks in Singapore,” *China Military Online*, 13 October 2014, available at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Defense-News/2014-10/13/content_4543084.htm.

destroyer.¹⁵ Although China has declined to participate in the multinational task force, some Chinese ETFs have participated in combined maritime exercises while deployed. In September 2012, ETF-12 conducted the first combined counter-piracy exercise with the United States and, in August 2013, ETF-14 conducted the second exercise between the two navies.¹⁶ ETF-14 also participated in a March 2013 *Peace-13* (和平-13) multinational maritime combined military exercise organized by Pakistan that involved vessels from 14 countries and special operations forces from 7 countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan.¹⁷

Since the area of operations for ETFs is focused on Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, where the piracy threat is greatest, ETF replenishment port calls have generally been in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Oman and Djibouti. The establishment of China's first overseas logistics base in Djibouti in 2017 has reduced the need for replenishment at other facilities but PLA Navy ETFs have continued to conduct four to six friendly port calls in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia once their four-month operational patrol is complete. The PLA has used non-ETF port calls to engage foreign militaries in other parts of the world. This has included port calls in conjunction with multilateral exercises such as the 2016 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, deployments by independent PLA Navy task forces, visits by cadet training ships, and deployments of the Peace Ark hospital ship to other regions. For example, in 2018 the Peace Ark conducted a long deployment that included port calls and humanitarian work in four South Pacific countries and seven countries in South America and Latin America.¹⁸

Educational and Functional Exchanges

15 Yan Meng and Yao Chun, "CTF 151 Commander Visits 14th Chinese Naval Escort Task-force," *People's Daily*, 8 May 2013, available at <http://en.people.cn/90786/8235569.html>.

16 Lu Yu, "Commentary: Closer Military Cooperation Conducive to Improving China-U.S. Mutual Trust," *Xinhua*, 24 August 2013, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2013-08/24/c_132659450.htm; Chen Lin, "Joint Sea Drill Shows Improved Relations," *China Daily*, August 26, 2013, available at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-08/26/content_16919254.htm; Deng Xiguang, Wang Changsong, and Cai Zengbing, "A Sino-U.S. Joint Anti-Piracy Drill," *China Armed Forces* 5, no. 23 (2013), 23–25.

17 Wang Changsong, Qin Chuan, and Li Ding, "'Peace-13' Joint Maritime Drill [和平-13 多国海上联合演习]," *China Armed Forces* 2, no. 20 (2013), 42–47.

18 Atmakuri Lakshmi Archana and Mingjiang Li, "Geopolitical Objectives Fuel China's Peace Ark," *East Asia Forum*, 13 October 2018, available at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/13/geopolitical-objectives-fuel-chinas-peace-ark/>; "China's Naval Hospital Ship Concludes 205-Day Overseas Mission," *Xinhua*, January 19, 2019, available at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-01/19/content_9408782.htm.

PLA educational and academic exchanges (院校交流) include military educational institution leader visits, cadet and professional military education student delegation visits, training foreign military personnel at PLA military educational institutions, and individual PLA officers studying abroad. The PLA also conducts functional exchanges with foreign militaries on specific subjects, including operations, logistics, management, and military medicine. Functional exchanges usually involve visiting expert delegations and often are conducted by individual PLA services under the direction of the CMC Office of International Military Cooperation.¹⁹

Although the PLA has published some aggregate data in its defense white papers, finding specific information on educational and functional exchanges is difficult. The white papers indicate a steady increase in Chinese military personnel studying abroad, from “more than 200 Chinese military personnel” in Russia, Germany, France, Great Britain, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Kuwait in 1999–2000 to “over 900 military students” studying in more than 30 countries in 2007–2008. The 2008 defense white paper also notes that “twenty military educational institutions in China have established and maintained inter-collegiate exchange relations with their counterparts in over 20 countries, including the United States, Russia, Japan, and Pakistan. Meanwhile, some 4,000 military personnel from more than 130 countries have come to China to study at Chinese military educational institutions.” The lack of comparable data makes it difficult to observe any recent trends.²⁰

Nontraditional Security Operations: Peacekeeping and Counterpiracy Operations

The PLA first became involved in United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) in 1990 when it sent five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization. By the end of September 2014, China had deployed more than 27,000 military personnel around the globe to 23 UN peacekeeping missions.²¹ Eighteen PLA soldiers have been killed performing peacekeeping duties. China is one of the top ten

19 See Eric Hagt, “The Rise of PLA Diplomacy,” in *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking*, Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015): 218–248.

20 See Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy*, 38–40.

21 Zhang Tao, “China Sends First Infantry Battalion for UN Peacekeeping,” *Xinhua*, 22 December 2014, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2014-12/22/content_6280182.htm.

contributors of troops and police and the biggest contributor among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. China also pays the second largest share of UN peacekeeping costs. As of December 2018, a total of 2,517 PLA personnel are implementing peacekeeping tasks in nine UN mission areas, with the largest contributions to the UN missions in Mali, Sudan, Congo, and the Central African Republic.²²

Most PLA peacekeeping troops are military observers, engineers, transportation soldiers, and medical officers, but the PLA sent its first security forces to the UN mission in Mali in June 2013 and deployed its first UNPKO infantry battalion abroad to South Sudan in December 2014. The 700-member battalion was equipped with drones, armored infantry carriers, antitank missiles, mortars, light self-defense weapons, and bulletproof uniforms and helmets, among other weapons that were “completely for self-defense purposes.”²³

In addition to deployed troops, China has also established a standing peacekeeping force of 8,000 that is available for UN peacekeeping missions. The force includes six infantry battalions, along with supporting engineering, transport, medical, security, and helicopter units, along with other air and naval transport assets. China has also established a training center for police and military peacekeepers, which has reportedly trained about 500 peacekeepers from 69 countries.²⁴ China derives considerable prestige from its contributions of troops, money, and training expertise to UN peacekeeping operations, which comport with its preferred UN-centric model for global governance and support its claim that a stronger PLA is a force for peace.²⁵ China reportedly attempted to leverage its contributions to UN peacekeeping in order to get a PRC national appointed as Under Secretary General for the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations.²⁶

22 See United Nations Peacekeeping, “Troop and Police Contributors,” accessed 26 January 2019, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

23 Zhang Tao, “China Sends First Infantry Battalion for UN Peacekeeping,” Yao Jianing, “China to Send First Infantry Battalion for UN Peacekeeping,” *China Daily*, 23 December 2014, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2014-12/23/content_6281041.htm.

24 Christoph Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Centre for International Policy Studies, January 2019), 4, available at <https://www.cips-cepi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/30YearsofChinesePeacekeeping-FINAL-Jan23.pdf>

25 See Courtney J. Fung, *China's Troop Contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping*, Peacebrief 212, 26 July 2016, available at www.usip.org/publications/2016/07/chinas-troop-contributions-un-peacekeeping.

26 Colum Lynch, “China Eyes Ending Western Grip on Top U.N. Jobs with Greater Control Over Blue Helmets,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 October 2016, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/02/china-eyes-ending-western-grip-on-top-u-n-jobs-with-greater-control-over>.

China's participation in international anti-piracy ETFs is another of the PLA's most visible nontraditional security activities.²⁷ It began taking part in December 2008, when the PLA Navy deployed the first of its ETFs to the Gulf of Aden, and it has now escorted over 6,500 ships. As of January 2019, the PLA Navy has deployed 31 ETFs to the Gulf of Aden, each consisting of two destroyers and/or frigates and a comprehensive supply ship, along with associated helicopters, medical personnel, and PLA Navy special forces personnel.²⁸

MILITARY DIPLOMACY PARTNERS

PLA military diplomacy appears to place heavy emphasis on great powers, consistent with several strains of Chinese thought on foreign policy and military diplomacy. The United States and Russia are the PLA's two most frequent military diplomatic partners. Both nations participate in a full range of military diplomatic activities with the PLA, including military operations other than war and functional exchanges not captured in the quantitative data. Table 2 (next page) lists the PLA's top 10 partners over the period from 2002-2018.

Beyond the United States and Russia, the pattern of the PLA's military diplomatic interactions over the last 13 years exhibits a clear geographic focus on Asia. Eight of the PLA's top ten partners are in Asia and 31.8 percent of the PLA's military diplomatic interactions from 2002 to 2018 were conducted with countries in Asia. Many of China's top partners are also US treaty allies (such as Thailand and Australia) or security partners (such as Singapore, Vietnam, India, and Indonesia).

blue-helmets/.

27 Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden* (Newport, RI: US Naval War College, 2013).

28 Emanuele Scimia, "Chinese Navy Makes Waves, Spreads Wings over Gulf, Indian Ocean," *Asia Times*, 22 December 2018, available at <http://www.atimes.com/article/chinese-navy-makes-waves-spreads-wings-over-gulf-indian-ocean/>.

Table 2. The PLA's Top 10 Most Frequent Military Diplomatic Partners, 2002–2018

Overall Rank	Countries	Geographic Region	Military Exercises	Naval Port Calls	Senior-Level Meetings	Grand Total
1	Russia	Russia	42	1	72	115
2	United States	North America	15	6	92	113
3	Pakistan	Asia	36	10	61	107
4	Thailand	Asia	21	7	51	79
5	Australia	Asia	19	8	46	73
6	Singapore	Asia	9	9	41	59
7	Vietnam	Asia	2	4	46	52
8	New Zealand	Asia	5	6	37	48
9	India	Asia	13	4	30	47
10	Indonesia	Asia	8	5	32	45

Figure 6 (*previous page*) and Table 3 show the geographical break-out of PLA military diplomacy by US combatant command areas of responsibility (AOR).

Figure 6. PLA Military Diplomatic Interactions

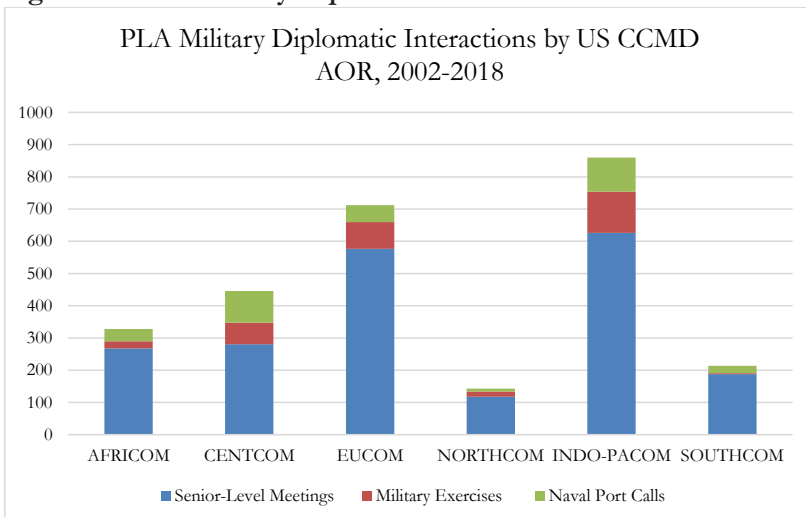


TABLE 3: GEOGRAPHICAL BREAKOUT BY COMBATANT COMMAND, 2002-2018

COCOM	Senior-Level Meetings	Military Exercises	Naval Port Calls	TOTAL	%
AFRICOM	268	15	38	321	12.0%
CENTCOM	281	66	98	445	16.6%
EUCOM	577	79	52	708	26.4%
NORTHCOM	118	16	9	143	5.3%
INDOPACOM	626	121	106	853	31.8%
SOUTHCOM	188	3	23	214	8.0%

The data reflect Chinese priorities, including a heavy focus on Asia and bordering countries (some of which, such as Russia and Pakistan, are outside the INDOPACOM area of responsibility). The distribution of military exercises also reflects these priorities, although it is mediated by the relatively greater ability of European and Asian militaries to exercise with China and the difficulty that African, South American, and Central American militaries have in transporting units to Asia to exercise with the PLA.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- The PLA uses military diplomacy to advance a variety of objectives, with a particular emphasis on supporting overall Chinese foreign policy, learning new skills and benchmarking the PLA against foreign militaries, and shaping the security environment.
 - Military diplomatic interactions present opportunities to collect intelligence but few activities appear to have intelligence collection as their primary focus.
 - Building the capacity of foreign military partners appears to be a means of strengthening bilateral relations rather than an end in itself. Many Chinese capacity-building activities are conducted by non-military actors

such as state-owned arms manufacturers, the Ministry of State Security, and the Ministry of Public Security.

- PLA military diplomatic activity has increased in volume and expanded in scope but increased activity does not necessarily translate into increased influence.
 - The country and regional priorities in China's military diplomatic interactions correspond closely with wider Chinese foreign policy priorities, such as building good strategic relations with the United States and Russia and with countries on China's periphery.
 - In many cases, the volume and type of activity may be an indicator of the quality of China's diplomatic relations and security cooperation with a particular country rather than an effective means of expanding Chinese influence.
 - The PLA appears to have expanded its foreign military relations efforts in accordance with directives from the highest levels of China's leadership, meaning that shifts in functional and regional emphasis in the PLA's foreign military relations likely reflect shifts in China's national priorities or shifts in PLA capabilities and interests.
- The PLA is using military diplomacy to shape China's security environment.
 - Many activities, such as port calls by the Peace Ark hospital ship, are efforts to cultivate an image as a benign power that makes positive contributions to regional security in order to assuage neighbors concerned about China's new military might.
 - Since 2010, however, shaping efforts have increasingly displayed Chinese military capabilities rather than downplaying them. Military exercises (especially with Russia) have become more combat-oriented and sometimes appear designed to deter or discourage potential opponents.
- PLA military diplomacy is subject to a number of international and domestic constraints.
 - The PLA is constrained by what activities foreign coun-

terparts are willing and able to do with the PLA. China's increasingly assertive behavior on the international stage could reduce the efficacy of its military diplomatic efforts and reduce the willingness of some militaries to interact with the PLA.

- o Resource limitations, including the small staff of the CMC Office of International Military Cooperation and the demands placed on senior PLA officers by ongoing military reforms, are likely to reduce the number of PLA military engagements for the next several years.
- The nature of the Chinese system and the desire of the CCP to exert tight control over the military limit the effectiveness of military diplomacy as a foreign policy tool.
 - o Chinese culture emphasizes form over substance and China's strategic culture makes it averse to binding security agreements.
 - o PLA officers are subject to top-down directives, tight control of political messaging, and the need to protect information about PLA capabilities, which inhibit candid conversations with foreign counterparts. Most PLA interlocutors are not empowered to negotiate or share their real views, which makes it difficult to build strong personal or institutional ties with foreign counterparts.
 - o Much of China's military diplomatic activity consists of formal exchanges of scripted talking points during senior-level meetings, occasional naval port calls, and simple scripted military exercises focused on nontraditional security issues. These activities support existing relationships but are unlikely to build much strategic trust or support deeper military cooperation.
- The PLA can be expected to use military diplomacy to try to win support for China's diplomatic objectives, such as China's cooperation with Russia to oppose US missile defense deployments and to promote an international code of conduct for space weapons.
 - o These efforts may sometimes erode or modify existing international norms in ways that work against US interests.

- o PLA scholars believe military diplomacy can be used to escalate crises when beneficial to national interests, for example, by cutting off planned military exercises or exchanges, making military diplomatic activities a bargaining chip that Beijing can wield.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The PLA's growing involvement in a web of bilateral and multilateral foreign military relationships can produce pressure for greater transparency and for adherence to international rules and norms.
 - o After blocking agreement on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium for several years, the PLA Navy eventually accepted the agreement while hosting the symposium in Qingdao in 2014 and has subsequently employed CUES in interactions with foreign navies.
 - o Military-to-military relationships have been useful for establishing military hotlines and rules governing air and maritime encounters that can reduce the risk of crisis or conflict.
- US allies and partners will want to interact with the PLA as part of their efforts to manage relations with China, and US policymakers should not try to stop them.
 - o Many countries concerned about an aggressive China or torn between their economic interests in the China market and their security ties with the United States are using military diplomacy to balance their relationships with China and the United States. Australia's hosting of trilateral US-China-Australia exercises is one example; ASEAN's initiation of a China-ASEAN naval exercise in 2018 is another.
 - o The United States disinvited the PLA Navy from participation in the 2018 RIMPAC exercise to express concerns about China's militarization of land features in the South China Sea, but most countries will be reluctant to antagonize China by curtailing their ties with the PLA.
- US policymakers should pay close attention to PLA efforts to use military diplomacy to improve its operational capabilities

or build relationships that give it access to strategic airfields and ports.

- o US allies and partners with advanced military capabilities should be discouraged from helping the PLA learn to conduct advanced combat operations or sharing details about US military capabilities and tactics.

- o Functional and academic exchanges that improve the PLA's warfighting capability may be difficult to measure or detect until well after they have occurred, so the United States should proactively express its concerns to its allies and partners.