



Updated September 26, 2023

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

## Overview

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the military arm of the Communist Party of China, the ruling party of the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). Since 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has referred to China as the “pacing challenge” for the U.S. military. DOD reported in November 2022 that China's leaders aim to use the PLA, in part, to “restrict the United States from having a presence in China's immediate periphery and limit U.S. access in the broader Indo-Pacific region.” Congress has responded in part by focusing on resourcing and conducting oversight of U.S.-China security competition.

## PLA Organization

Established in 1927, the PLA predates the founding of the PRC in 1949. The PLA encompasses four services: the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force, as well as two quasi-service entities, the Strategic Support Force and the Joint Logistics Support Force. The Communist Party oversees these forces through its Central Military Commission (CMC), which serves some of the same functions as the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. The CMC also oversees a paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (which includes the China Coast Guard), and China's militia forces. Xi Jinping, who serves concurrently as Communist Party general secretary and PRC president, has chaired the CMC since 2012.

In 2015, Xi launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. This overhaul likely had two overarching objectives: (1) reshaping and improving the PLA's structure to enable joint operations among the services; and (2) ensuring PLA loyalty to the Party and Xi. The PLA continues to fine-tune and institutionalize these changes.

Opacity surrounding high-level personnel changes has led some observers to raise questions about political cohesion and the status of anti-corruption efforts in the PLA. In the summer of 2023, Xi removed the top two officials in charge of the PLA Rocket Force. CMC member Li Shangfu, who serves concurrently as State Councilor for defense affairs and Minister of Defense, had not been seen in public for several weeks as of late September 2023. U.S. officials reportedly assess that Li is under investigation.

## China's Military Strategy and Goals

The stated goal of China's national defense policy is to safeguard the country's sovereignty, security, and development interests. The concept of “active defense”—the defining characteristic of PRC military strategy since 1949—prescribes how China can use defensive and offensive operations and tactics to achieve these goals in the face of a militarily superior adversary.

Authoritative PRC sources indicate China's military strategy focuses primarily on preparing for a conflict involving the United States over Taiwan—the self-ruled island of 23 million people off the coast of mainland China over which the PRC claims sovereignty. (See CRS In Focus IF12481, *Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues*, for a discussion of Taiwan's security.) The PLA also focuses on securing and defending China's territorial claims over disputed areas in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and along the China-India border. As China's economic and diplomatic interests have expanded beyond its immediate periphery, PRC leaders have tasked the PLA with global missions such as distant sea lane protection and United Nations peacekeeping operations. The PLA established its sole overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. According to DOD, the PRC may be considering the establishment of multiple new military bases around the world.

## PLA Modernization and Key Capabilities

Since 1978, China has engaged in a sustained and broad effort to transform the PLA from an infantry-heavy, low-technology, ground forces-centric military into a leaner, more networked, high-technology force with an emphasis on joint operations and power projection. Xi has set the goal of transforming the PLA into a “world-class” force by 2049, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC's founding and the year by which Xi has stated he aims to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

A guiding principle of PLA modernization and strategy since the mid-2000s has been the concept of “informatization,” or the application of advanced information technology across all aspects of warfare. More recently, China's leaders also have called for the “intelligentization” of the PLA, reflecting widely-held expectations that artificial intelligence and related technologies will have a transformational effect on warfare.

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

- An approximately 340-ship **navy** that includes modern and advanced platforms such as submarines, aircraft carriers, and large multi-mission surface vessels, advancing the PLA's ability to conduct naval combat operations in its immediate periphery and sustained non-combat operations further afield.
- **Air forces** increasingly capable of conducting joint and over-water missions, featuring a fighter fleet with several hundred fourth-generation fighter aircraft and growing numbers of fifth-generation fighters. (China

and the United States are the only countries to have developed fifth-generation stealth fighters.)

- A **conventional missile force** designed to enable China to deter third-party intervention in a regional military conflict, featuring at least 1,950 missiles, including approximately 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles, missiles armed with hypersonic glide vehicles, and anti-ship ballistic missiles to target adversary surface ships.
- An expanding and diversifying **nuclear force**. (DOD estimates China's nuclear warhead stockpile exceeds 400 with the potential to reach 1,500 by 2035.)
- A Strategic Support Force that centralizes **information warfare** capabilities in the cyber and space domains (the PRC refers to these as the “new commanding heights in strategic competition”) as well as electronic and psychological domains.

These advances notwithstanding, many of the capabilities the PLA is developing remain aspirational. In 2022, for example, DOD assessed that the PLA's ability to carry out joint operations to counter third-party intervention beyond the first island chain (which runs from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to enclose the South China Sea) is “in its infancy.” The PLA's battlefield performance is also uncertain: China last fought a war in the 1970s, and it is not clear how successfully the PLA would operationalize its new and largely untested post-reform organizational structure. Moreover, analysts debate the extent to which corruption, opacity, a highly centralized command and control apparatus, and an intensive focus on political education and Party fealty, might affect the PLA's operational effectiveness.

### China's Defense Expenditures

PLA modernization has been enabled by China's growing economy and a defense budget that has increased steadily since the 1990s. China's officially-disclosed defense budget was about \$225 billion in 2023, though PRC military spending likely is much higher. In June 2023, Senator Dan Sullivan stated on the Senate floor that U.S. intelligence officials assess China's military budget to be close to \$700 billion. China seeks to augment its military strength by leveraging commercial advances—particularly in high-tech areas—through a sprawling and ambitious initiative it calls “military-civil fusion.” PRC defense contractors in the aerospace, microelectronics, and other sectors benefit from foreign joint ventures and technology licensing, as well as the alleged theft of technology from the United States and elsewhere. At the same time, China's leaders seek to make PRC defense industries less reliant on foreign technology and supply chains.

### Issues for Congress

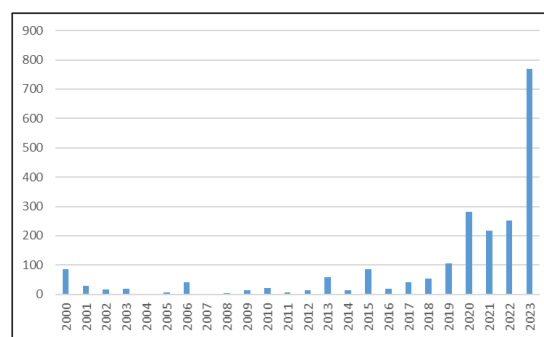
U.S. policymakers and observers increasingly describe China's military buildup as a threat to U.S. and allied interests. This view reflects concerns about PLA capabilities, China's growing economic and geopolitical power, and China's leaders' regional and global intentions.

Congress may face questions of whether and, if so, how the United States should seek to sustain military primacy vis-à-

vis China in various military domains and geographic contexts. Faced with competing priorities and limited resources, policymakers and experts are debating how to respond to China's growing military capabilities. Some argue the United States must maintain military primacy over China to ensure the United States can credibly deter—and if necessary, deny and punish—PRC military adventurism, particularly over Taiwan. Others assess that maintaining long-term U.S. military dominance over China in the Western Pacific is unrealistic given China's growing military resources and “home field” advantages, and U.S. domestic challenges and global commitments. Based on this assessment, some experts argue the United States should adopt strategies to check PRC aggression that do not rely on force-on-force dominance in all domains and scenarios.

The annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is the primary legislative vehicle by which Congress has sought to enhance the United States' ability to compete with China in the national security realm. Recent NDAA's have included numerous provisions explicitly aimed at competing with China, in addition to provisions that relate or could relate to China (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. References to China in the NDAA**



**Source:** National Defense Authorization Acts, FY2000-FY2023.

**Notes:** Includes references to the words “China,” “Chinese,” “Taiwan,” and “Hong Kong.”

The James M. Inhofe NDAA for FY2023 (P.L. 117-263) included dozens of provisions related to China. Among these is the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act, which included provisions to strengthen deterrence of PRC military aggression against Taiwan. The FY2023 NDAA also authorized \$11.5 billion to extend the “Pacific Deterrence Initiative” (PDI) established in the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283) to fund and oversee U.S. military capabilities and cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The House and Senate versions of an FY2024 NDAA (H.R. 2670 and S. 2226) would authorize additional appropriations for the PDI (§1301 in former and §1344 in the latter). Both bills would include reporting requirements. S. 2226 would require reports on the consequences of war with the PRC (§1355) and China's defense budget (§1357). H.R. 2670 would require reports on China's defense budget (§1315), modifications to DOD's annual report to Congress on China's military (§1312 and §1317), and modifications to U.S. government reporting on PRC military-linked companies operating in the United States (§1311).

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