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The Chinese Military's Doubtful Combat Readiness

The People's Liberation Army Remains Focused on Upholding Chinese Communist Party Rule, Not Preparing for War

Being one of the largest and most modern militaries in the world, China's warfighting capacity appears to be formidable. China has more warships than the U.S. Navy and might soon have more combat aircraft than the U.S. Air Force.[1] Moreover, the quality of China's stealth aircraft, warships, submarines, and aircraft carriers lags behind only that of the U.S. military.[2] In some areas, such as hypersonic missiles, China has surpassed the United States.[3] Commentators warn that China has eclipsed the U.S. military to become the "strongest military" in the Indo-Pacific region.[4] Senior officials have similarly claimed that China's military might gain a decisive military edge by 2027, after which the temptation to risk war against Taiwan could prove to be irresistible.[5] In war games simulating a cross–Taiwan Strait war, Chinese military forces frequently inflict punishing losses on intervening U.S. forces.[6]

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Key Takeaways

China's military has experienced impressive modernization gains. However, how well the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can fight with its advanced weaponry and equipment is far from clear. By reviewing evidence of the PLA's role in national security, I present the following key takeaways in this paper:

- The PLA remains fundamentally focused on upholding Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule rather than preparing for war. China's military modernization gains are designed first and foremost to bolster the appeal and credibility of CCP rule.
- Throughout the PLA's history, it has prioritized political loyalty and the enforcement of CCP rule over combat readiness, especially since the Korean War. Recent modernization gains have not fundamentally changed the PLA's political orientation.
- As China's decline accelerates, the PLA's mission of upholding CCP rule will likely gain added urgency, while its mission of improving combat readiness will likely recede even further.
- The prospect of a large-scale, high-intensity U.S.-China war is improbable at this point. If U.S.-China tensions escalate to hostilities, China will face strong incentives to favor indirect methods of fighting over large-scale conventional war.
- U.S. defense planning should consider a threat framework that elevates a broader array of threats alongside the remote possibility of conventional war with China.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) without question fields a large and impressive suite of weapons and equipment. Yet China's ability to translate that materiel power into combat power remains far from proven. History has repeatedly shown that militaries sometimes fail to effectively use their advanced armaments in battle. For example, Qing dynasty troops equipped with qualitatively superior warships lost the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) to their more-skillful and -determined Japanese adversaries.[7] Similarly, during the Chinese Civil War, demoralized and poorly trained National troops, which possessed superior weapons and equipment, lost to their more-resourceful and -resolute Communist adversaries.[8] The illusion of military power fostered by ample inventories of advanced armaments continues. Many experts, being convinced of the overwhelming superiority of Russia's military forces, significantly overestimated Moscow's ability to overrun Ukraine when Russia invaded in 2022.[9]

How well could the PLA fight? Since China last fought a war in 1979, there has not been any firsthand evidence to inform analysts' judgments. Scholars have attempted to shed light on this question by studying the PLA's doctrinal writings, operations, training, and exercises.[10] Results have been mixed at best. On the one hand, the PLA has clearly articulated an ambitious doctrine of joint warfare and demonstrated competence in nonwar missions, including counterpiracy patrols, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and United Nations peacekeeping operations.[11] PLA drills also suggest some ability to execute joint operations—at least in a training environment.[12] On the other hand, China has continued to shy away from any combat operations, and its own media is replete with with-

ering criticisms of the military's inability to execute integrated joint operations and its lack of combat readiness.[13] Moreover, the weak correlation between peacetime training and wartime performance provides additional reasons for doubt.[14] After all, virtually all militaries train and hold exercises. However, few militaries fight as well as the U.S. military does. For example, Russian troops routinely held large-scale exercises to practice combat operations prior to their poor performance on the battlefield in Ukraine.[15]

One approach that has been surprisingly overlooked is to consider the fundamental question: What is the purpose of the Chinese military? The question might seem odd, especially because all militaries share the ostensible duty of protecting the state from external adversaries. Militaries also tend to have some similarities in appearance (e.g., organized formations of uniformed troops equipped for combat). However, the superficial similarities among militaries obscure the starkly different ways in which military power might be wielded to serve the needs of political leaders.

Building a military for certain purposes makes it unsuitable for others. For instance, in countries that have weak and insecure governments, leaders might build militaries to deter coups, maintain domestic order, and fight insurgents. Leaders of such countries might prioritize measures that increase political reliability even if they worsen the military's capacity to fight foreign adversaries. Coup-proofing measures, such as promotions according to loyalty instead of merit, the fragmentation of command structures, and highly centralized command and control networks, reduce the military's effectiveness on the battlefield. Indeed, the more that a military focuses on coup-proofing, the worse that its battlefield performance tends to be.[16]

Conversely, a military that has been built to prevail against external foes might prioritize merit-based promotions, flexible command systems, and a professional ethos that upholds allegiance to political and military institutions over loyalty to individual political leaders.[17] Such a military might prove effective against foreign enemies but poorly suited to domestic political interventions. In short, militaries are inherently political entities that reflect the priorities and imperatives of the states that they serve. Every military is inherently optimized to serve certain functions but not others.

In this paper, I argue that the Chinese military is fundamentally focused on upholding Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule rather than preparing for war. This paper proceeds in the following manner. In the first section, I review the PLA's history, noting its historical tendency to prioritize the realization of the CCP's political goals over combat readiness. In the second section, I argue that the military's modernization is ultimately driven by the imperative to keep the CCP in power rather than prepare for war. In the third section, I explore what might change as China enters a period of prolonged decline. A weakening China is likely to result in a PLA that is ever more focused on the mission of enforcing CCP rule. In the final section, I offer some considerations for analysts and decisionmakers.

The People's Liberation Army's Historical Mission: Uphold Chinese Communist Party Rule

What kind of military is the PLA? Is China's military built to fight wars? Or is it a military built to help the CCP achieve its political goals? From its earliest years, the PLA's principal function has been defined by its mission to support the CCP's pursuit of political power. Indeed, the PLA was born as the "armed wing" of the CCP and retains this formal identity today.[18] Yet how the PLA has carried out that duty has varied according to China's security situation and the CCP's goals.

During the early 20th century, the CCP fought an insurgent war to seize power amid a war-torn landscape. Accordingly, the CCP urgently needed a combat-effective PLA (or Red Army, as it was called from 1929 through 1949) to achieve its goals. When Mao Zedong declared in a 1938 speech that "power grows from the barrel of a gun," he did so in the context of a China ravaged by civil war and invasion by Japanese forces.[19] In that speech, Mao explained that "whoever wants to seize and retain state power must have a strong army."[20] The CCP needed a lethal military to fight Kuomintang, warlord, and Japanese adversaries. Because of the CCP's need for violence to achieve its political goal of seizing power, there was little trade-off between the CCP's overarching goal of seizing power and its need for a combat-effective military.

However, this period of synergy between the CCP's political goals and military ones for combat effectiveness largely ended after the CCP won the civil war. When the CCP seized power, external threats subsided, although they persisted in reduced form. In the Korean War (1950–1953), China feared that U.S. military forces on its border could invade. Beijing intervened partly to forestall that possibility and partly to deter domestic foes that might rebel against CCP rule.[21] In the 1960s, tensions rose between China and the Soviet Union, which led to major deployments of combat forces along the border. But external threats to CCP rule disappeared in the late 1970s as the Cold War waned. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping declared that China no longer faced the prospect of major war.[22]

In contrast to the gradually diminishing peril of external invasion, the post–Korean War CCP faced a perpetually high level of danger from within the party itself and from the public. Factional strife and ideological disputes nearly ripped the country apart.[23] To cope with these domestic threats, the PLA prioritized political reliability above combat readiness. The PLA underwent relentless indoctrination, strengthened political controls, cultivated loyalty, and involved itself in intraparty feuds. Time and again, the PLA intervened to suppress contending factions and mass protests that might destabilize the entire country. In the 1960s, the PLA stopped internecine fighting during the Cultural Revolution. PLA troops suppressed out-of-control Maoist ideologues in the 1970s and crushed student-led protests in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre.[24]

The PLA's focus on domestic security came at a price—a decline in its fighting ability. When the PLA invaded Vietnam in 1979, the Vietnamese militia inflicted heavy losses on the Chinese military, which was plagued by an outdated doctrine, low morale, poor combat readiness, and weak leadership.[25] The shock of the Sino-Vietnam War helped spur a drive toward modernization, but the PLA experienced only modest improvements in its warfighting ability in the 1980s and 1990s. Following the party's lead,

the PLA immersed itself in commercial ventures and experienced rampant corruption.[26] Yet the central leadership tolerated the corruption and decay in combat readiness during these decades because the PLA reliably performed its mission of controlling factions and upholding CCP rule.

The Reform Era: The Paradox of China's Military Modernization

In 1978, Deng opened a new chapter in the PLA's development when he ushered in a period of reform and opening up. China's leaders turned away from the political chaos of the Maoist era and embraced a new political agenda centered on rapid development through market-friendly policies and a more pragmatic engagement with the world. Yet since the 1980s, China has seen the emergence of a paradox: China no longer faced major threats but nonetheless built a powerful, modern military.

Deng's focus on national development was made possible, in large part, by his assessment of a relatively benign security environment. [27] Subsequent leaders maintained this judgment. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping all upheld the notion that the country faces a low risk of major war and a favorable external environment that is conducive to national development.[28] For example, China's 2019 national defense white paper stated that "peace, development and win-win cooperation remain the irreversible trends of the times."[29] The same source described the Asia-Pacific security situation as "generally stable."[30] These leaders have acknowledged myriad dangers, including the threat of Taiwanese independence, international competition, disputes over territory in the first island chain and along the Indian border, and perils in cyberspace and elsewhere. But none of these dangers directly threaten CCP rule.

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At the same time, the internal threats to CCP rule that pervaded the Maoist era have largely subsided, owing in part to the decline of ideological factions and to changes in the CCP's governance strategy. In addition to introducing market-friendly reforms, Chinese leaders improved the delivery of basic services, expanded economic opportunities, and rolled back controls on the personal lives of individual Chinese, all of which eased public opposition and reduced the risk of large-scale rebellions. The CCP also adopted more sophisticated methods of control, including surveillance and advanced censorship techniques.[31] The atrophy of ideology and improvements in the institutionalization of politics—despite Xi's partial rollbacks—reduced the risk of Cultural Revolution–era factional fights.[32] These changes thus largely eliminated the types of intraparty threats that were commonly seen in the Maoist era.

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Yet, despite relatively low threats to CCP power from external and factional sources, China oversaw an astonishingly rapid and extensive modernization of its military. Beginning in the 1990s, the PLA fielded various advanced submarines, aircraft, ships, and missiles, many of which posed a potential threat to U.S. forces that might intervene in a war between China and Taiwan.[33] From 2000 to 2016, China's military budget increased annually by about 10 percent, although this growth subsequently slowed to about 5–7 percent per year.[34] According to People's Republic of China (PRC) government sources, China's defense budget was $231 billion in 2024, second to only that of the United States.[35] By contrast, in 2003, the PLA's official budget was about $22 billion.[36]

The massive increases in defense spending spurred global concern. Reflecting America's growing apprehension, the U.S. Department of Defense, starting in 1999, published details on the Chinese military's growing strength in its annual report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*.[37] U.S. fears increased in subsequent decades as the PLA added more advanced weaponry and equipment. Alarm over the PLA's warfighting capacity accelerated after Xi gained power partly because of Xi's more truculent tone regarding such territorial disputes as Taiwan and the South China Sea.[38] But this alarm also stemmed from developments in the Chinese military. Xi directed structural reforms to overhaul the PLA's organization and doctrine to improve its ability to fight as a joint force.[39] In 2015, the PLA undertook reforms to improve its combat effectiveness and established a national joint command system and joint theater command system.[40] Senior leader speeches also repeatedly highlighted the importance of war preparation.[41] On multiple occasions, Xi demanded that the PLA be "combat ready" and develop the capacity to "fight and win wars."[42] Combined with the cumulative improvements in military hardware, these changes fueled fears that the Chinese military had at last begun to make warfighting a top priority. By 2015, RAND researchers warned of a "receding frontier of U.S. dominance," noting that China's military had "narrowed the gap" in capabilities.[43] A few years later, Western media routinely asserted that China's military rivaled the U.S. military and could perhaps defeat it in battle.[44]

Paradoxically, rapid military modernization gains coincided with clear evidence that the PLA remained unprepared for war and focused on upholding CCP rule. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2010 annual report to Congress on China's military and security developments observed that PLA commanders had "little or no training for, or experience operating in, a joint environment."[45]

Among challenges, it noted a "shortage of commanders and staff qualified for such operations; a lack of understanding of the capabilities, equipment, and tactics of the other services; and a lack of advanced technology to enable communication and information sharing among the services."[46] Moreover, China's political and military leadership affirmed that the PLA's top job remained to ensure CCP rule.[47]

Analysts struggled to explain the contradiction among rapid modernization, low combat readiness, and a continued focus on upholding CCP rule. Experts on China's military have emphasized the role of Taiwan as China's "Main Strategic Direction," suggesting that the PLA's modernization is fundamentally driven by the mission to subdue Taiwan.[48] Experts warned that China's unification with Taiwan has become central to CCP legitimacy and that Beijing intends to eventually deploy military force to achieve that goal if peaceful methods fail.[49]

This logic underpins much of the U.S. defense community's approach to China. U.S. officials have acknowledged that the PLA faces challenges but argue that overall modernization trends could position it to risk war against Taiwan in the future.[50] Similarly, the 2023 annual report to Congress on China's military and security developments features sections comparing the military forces of China and Taiwan. Like its predecessors, the 2023 report also analyzes potential PLA courses of action to subdue the island, implying that China's military buildup is aimed largely at a war between China and Taiwan.[51] Military wargames that simulate battles around the Taiwan Strait and numerous studies and reports that explore how a China-U.S. war near Taiwan might unfold have proliferated since the 2010s.[52]

However, the notion that Chinese leaders are undertaking a military buildup to conquer Taiwan is problematic. There are three issues with this line of analysis: (1) Taiwan's importance for CCP legitimacy is far from clear and likely overstated, (2) Chinese leaders have shown no interest in starting a war, and (3) the PLA has made little to no preparation for a war over Taiwan.

The first problem with this line of analysis is that Taiwan's importance to CCP legitimacy is far from clear and very likely seriously overstated in Western scholarship. The fact that the CCP has thrived without owning Taiwan for more than 70 years discredits the claim that the CCP's legitimacy depends on unification. But Chinese leaders provide even more direct evidence. In many of their speeches that outline top threats to CCP rule, senior leaders scarcely ever mention Taiwan. Instead, they consistently highlight such dangers as corruption, unemployment, crime, and subversion.[53] While Xi has insisted on unification with Taiwan, he has done so using relatively formulaic language in reports and venues that are largely consistent

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with those of his predecessors.[54] Despite ample speculation by Western commentators, Chinese leaders have not issued any ultimatums or deadlines for unification. Chinese leaders very likely hope to gain control of Taiwan but do not appear to have given up hope on nonwar methods of doing so. China's 2022 white paper about Taiwan declared "reunification" to be "indispensable to national rejuvenation" but described "development" as the "key factor" to achieving the goal of "peaceful reunification."[55]

Second, Chinese leaders have shown little interest in starting a war. This point is important because the central leadership sets the demand signal for war preparation. Political leaders who believe that war to be imminent or desirable will demand that the military be combat ready.[56] Such leaders tend to cultivate a sense of urgency about war by warning of its impending nature, airing grievances, and relentlessly demonizing the anticipated adversary. Subordinate government officials and state-controlled media amplify the message in interviews, speeches, and articles. Diplomats fan out to shore up international support and isolate the enemy. Following a playbook well established by virtually all belligerent countries, Mao and Deng promoted prowar media coverage, made belligerent speeches, and carried out diplomatic activity to make the case for war and demonize their respective adversaries.[57] Russian President Vladimir Putin similarly aired his grievances and demonized his anticipated adversary in state-controlled media and his speeches to cultivate domestic and international support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[58] Autocrats are not the only leaders who follow this pattern. For example, in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush, his father, and senior administration officials repeatedly made the public case for war. They highlighted Iraqi atrocities, and denounced Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein as "worse than Hitler."[59] U.S. diplomats also cultivated international support through bilateral engagements and public speeches in high profile venues, including Secretary of State Colin Powell's report alleging Iraqi production of weapons of mass destruction at a United Nations meeting.[60]

In contrast, Chinese leaders have made no speeches that glorify war, advocate for war, or otherwise characterize war as inevitable or desirable. In addition, there is no evidence that the country is mobilizing for war or otherwise putting itself on a war footing.[61] Chinese leaders have not even permitted popular media to dwell on the possibility of major war as a possible means of building awareness and support for such a war. In the Maoist era, the movie industry generated numerous propaganda films that relentlessly demonized China's enemies and urged popular struggle and violence against those enemies.[62] However, reflecting Beijing's disinterest in encouraging this line of thinking, Chinese media have produced nothing analogous to *Red Storm Rising* (the 1986 novel by Tom Clancy) or other fictional depictions of a major war involving China against the United States or Taiwan. Chinese leaders do not seem interested in building a constituency for war, even though there is currently no constituency among the Chinese elite or the public for war to achieve unification.[63]

A third problem with this line of analysis is that the Chinese military seems to have made virtually no planning or preparation for such a war. Although speculation on a U.S.-China war is rife in U.S. defense circles, detailed analysis of how such a war might unfold is absent in Chinese military writings.[64] No study on how China's military could defeat U.S. forces has surfaced in any academy affili-

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ated with the Chinese military. China's military has not even published a study on how it might occupy and control Taiwan. Chinese military journals are full of theoretical expositions on how military units might conduct strategies, campaigns, and tactics, but these are abstractly formulated.[65] Reflecting political sensitivities, these sources generally carry only oblique references to potential adversaries, such as Taiwan or the United States.[66] Research to support specific, high-priority military missions, such as how to defeat U.S. forces, which would be standard in U.S. defense circles, does not appear to exist.

It is likely that some sort of plan to fight the U.S. military exists in classified form. After all, the PLA's Joint Staff Department is responsible for "combat planning."[67] However, the lack of any unclassified supporting research raises questions about how detailed and robust any such PLA plan for fighting and defeating the U.S. military might be. The lack of any rumors or leaked reports in either Taiwanese or U.S. media about such a sensational plan also raises questions about how much effort the PLA is really applying to such preparations. Why would the PLA be reluctant to do such work? The most plausible answer is politics. The CCP has stated that war with the United States will not happen, so the PLA apparently cannot do research on a topic that the CCP has stated is not possible.[68]

In sum, China's military modernization poses a paradox. On the one hand, China has invested vast sums to improve the PLA's combat capabilities. On the other hand, Chinese leaders acknowledge that the country faces a relatively benign external environment and that the PLA's top job remains to uphold CCP rule. Although analysts claim that the modernization might be driven by the CCP's determination to conquer Taiwan, evidence for this conjecture remains extremely weak. On the contrary, Chinese leaders have shown no urgency about using military force to resolve Taiwan's status. The PLA has similarly put virtually no effort toward planning for such a war.

The resolution to this paradox is recognizing that China's military modernization gains are not designed to conquer Taiwan through military attack. Instead, China's military modernization is designed to help the PLA more effectively carry out its longstanding mission of upholding CCP rule. The improvements to combat effectiveness remain secondary in priority and even though the gains are real, they are limited at best.

Upholding Chinese Communist Party Rule: The Real Driver of People's Liberation Army Modernization

The primary mission of upholding CCP rule remains consistent, but the ways in which the military is expected to fulfill that mission have changed. Military modernization has become essential to the PLA's function of upholding CCP rule because the CCP's own methods of staying in power have experienced modernization. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Chinese officials relied on totalitarian control, political campaigns, and mass violence to stay in power.[69] During that time, the PLA dutifully carried out its mission of upholding CCP rule by participating in political campaigns, suppressing unrest, and intervening in politics to eliminate threats to the supreme leader.

Deng overhauled the CCP's governance strategy and thereby eliminated the old dangers of ideologically infused factional fights. However, the improved stability came at the cost of new challenges to CCP rule. The new challenges stemmed from the party's success in overseeing decades of rapid economic growth. Popular satisfaction with the pragmatic growth strategy initiated by Deng heightened expectations that the CCP could deliver jobs, higher living standards, social welfare benefits, fair treatment by courts, a cleaner environment, and less corruption. But the state's resources have proven inadequate to meet these demands. As Xi explained, the central problem for CCP rule is the "contradiction" between the "ever growing needs of the people for a better life" and the country's "unbalanced and inadequate development."[70] Because popular expectations often exceeded what the party could deliver, instability has surged. Since 2011, the budget for internal security has exceeded the defense budget, and authorities have increased repression to maintain order.[71]

Chinese leaders have recognized this new challenge to CCP rule since the 2000s, when they defined the public's expectations, or demands, in both *material* and *spiritual* terms.[72] Popular material demands included resources that can improve the standard of living, whereas spiritual demands included national dignity and the maintenance of China's political system. These demands formed the essence of the nation's "core interests," which authorities deemed necessary for the state's—and CCP's—survival and development.[73]

Since 2004, the PLA's role in national strategy has focused accordingly on aiding the CCP's delivery of these material and spiritual goods. To meet the people's material demands, the PLA has been tasked with aiding economic development through the protection of workers and assets abroad, the promotion of international stability, and the protection of key shipping lanes.[74] Relevant missions include noncombatant evacuation operations, United Nations peacekeeping operations, and counterpiracy patrols. Through the 2000s, China's military increased its involvement in these types of nonwar missions. Indeed, all Chinese military interventions abroad since its 1979 war with Vietnam have consisted of nonwar operations.[75]

To meet the people's spiritual demands for national dignity, the PLA helps burnish patriotic fervor, national pride, and the nonwar defense of the country's interests through deterrence, parades, drills, and exercises, which frequently receive lavish coverage in Chinese media.[76] Showcasing modernization achievements in China's technological prowess, such as the fielding of aircraft carriers, stealth aircraft, and other technological wonders, also helps

instill patriotic enthusiasm. The military helps bolster popular trust in authorities by saving lives. Despite the ostensible divorce from domestic security missions, the PLA has frequently intervened to help with natural disaster and humanitarian assistance. Military forces have frequently responded to earthquakes, floods, and pandemics in China.[77]

Muscle-flexing demonstrations that do not actually entail combat are another important way for the military to bolster popular support for the CCP. China's uncompromising position and coercive actions on disputes, such as the first island chain, Taiwan, and the Indian border, can boost confidence in the leadership as a defender of the nation's interest in a manner that costs China (and the Chinese public) little. Military diplomacy also contributes to the party's prestige through highly publicized engagements, such as port visits, humanitarian assistance, senior leader visits, and multilateral training events.[78] All of these activities help bolster the CCP's authority, but none of them require the PLA to become an effective fighting force.

Interpreting PLA modernization through the lens of its long-standing mission to uphold CCP rule carries several analytic advantages over the conventional wisdom that views military modernization as a prelude to a war against Taiwan. First, it is logically simpler: It presumes strong continuity between the PLA under Xi and the PLA of Xi's predecessors. Since 1949, the PLA has consistently prioritized the upholding of CCP rule, a priority that has not changed despite military modernization. Second, it avoids the problems associated with the claim that war with Taiwan drives the PLA's modernization. The Taiwan-focused military modernization argument struggles to explain the CCP's lack of urgency over the issue of Taiwan's unification, Beijing's disinterest in war, and the PLA's lack of war preparation. However, understanding PLA modernization as a means of upholding CCP rule explains these facts easily. The CCP does value Taiwan unification but cares more about urgent, largely domestic social, political, and economic threats to CCP rule. The CCP is not interested in war because it views a major war as unnecessary and potentially catastrophic. Furthermore, the PLA faithfully reflects the CCP's judgments about war in its ambivalence about combat preparations.

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Political Constraints on Combat Preparation

The argument that the PLA's modernization is focused primarily on upholding CCP rule is further strengthened by an appreciation of critical (but frequently overlooked) aspects about the PLA that constrain its ability to fight. As

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noted previously, militaries designed for certain purposes often prove to be ill-suited for other purposes. Because so much of the PLA's identity, culture, and organization are designed to uphold CCP rule, this design leaves little room for the PLA to transform itself into a combat-ready military. Therefore, the gains in war readiness are far more superficial and limited than they appear.

Ensuring CCP rule in the Xi era clearly requires the PLA to become more operationally competent, but only to a certain extent. Chinese officials are not being disingenuous when they call for a combat-effective military. After all, combat is the *sine qua non* of any military. All militaries, even the most inept and ineffective, recognize defense against foreign enemies as a duty and make at least some gesture toward carrying out that duty. A competent military is also critical to deterrence—a chief responsibility for the PLA.

Improvements to combat readiness yields other useful political benefits. Training and preparing for combat operations keeps the military focused on productive tasks instead of wasteful ones, such as involvement in commercial activities. Training for combat against foreign foes discourages the military from getting involved in domestic politics. Preparation for combat also helps maintain discipline and control corruption. Yet, although there many valuable benefits to having a military trained and prepared to fight foreign foes, none of them surpasses the importance of ensuring CCP rule. China's military continues to prioritize its mission of ensuring regime survival and tolerates gains in combat effectiveness only so long as the gains do not compromise the PLA's core mission.

Moreover, the PLA's system of political controls limits how much the military can improve its combat effectiveness. The core of the PLA's system of political controls includes political commissars, party committees, and the political organization system.[79] These controls are designed to ensure the military's subordination to CCP authority, and all come at the cost of reduced potential combat effectiveness.

The political commissar is a military officer whose specialty rests in politics and ideology. The commissar shares coequal command authority with a unit commander. This division of command adds an important political check on the authority of the commander but can impair decisionmaking in war. The fact that the commissar is trained in politics, not military operations, raises questions about the efficacy of a divided command system in which an officer trained primarily in ideology and politics has veto power over a cocommander. Anecdotal reports in Chinese media admit that operational competence remains a serious deficiency among political commissars. Some individuals reportedly lack basic knowledge about military procedures, such as how to issue commands, while others

have been criticized for lacking the physical fitness necessary to operate at the front lines.[80]

Party committees are a second element of political control. The committees operate at virtually every level of the military from the most senior decisionmaking body, the Central Military Commission (CMC), to platoon-level party branches. Each party committee consists of the key decisionmakers in the unit and is responsible for overseeing all important decisions, including those related to combat and noncombat operation. Party committees also oversee the implementation of all relevant CCP policies and directives, political indoctrination, and personnel management. The purview of party committees can be extremely wide. PLA political work regulations state that "that party standing committee . . . meets regularly to 'make decisions on all important issues regarding unit construction through collective discussions.'"[81] As examples of how this works, commanders have sought party committee approval for such decisions as whether a submarine should surface when it suffered a malfunction and whether a ship should rescue stranded fishermen at sea.[82] The necessity of seeking party committee approval for most decisions and the imperative of strictly implementing all higher-level CCP policies and directives raises questions as to how rapidly and timely decisionmaking can be during combat. This system of approvals and top-down control also provides little incentive for commanders to act with initiative.

In addition to party committees and commissars, the PLA features political work departments at all command levels. These units implement the guidance from party committees and commissars on such topics as propaganda, fostering *esprit de corps*, indoctrination, personnel management, culture, and security.[83] The PLA spends up to 40 percent of its training time on political topics.[84] This dedication mirrors a broader shift in China, in which political indoctrination occupies a growing share of education and learning.[85] The trade-off in time that could be spent mastering the essential skills for combat operations further raises questions as to how well prepared the PLA might be for modern war. The concentration of power in the hands of political officers over all personnel matters incentivizes personnel to think and behave in ways that avoid drawing the ire of political authorities. This restraint can breed conformity and lack of creativity. The power of political departments is also virtually unchecked, given the absence of independent institutions. Not surprisingly, the political departments have long been bastions of corruption in the military.[86]

In sum, the PLA commits enormous resources to the tasks of indoctrinating military personnel and ensuring the military's adherence to the CCP's values, ideals, culture, and worldview. The PLA also maintains a massive infrastructure of political controls to ensure the PLA's subordination and focus on the principal task of upholding CCP rule.[87] These systems are designed to minimize deviation from top-down control and leave little room for independent initiative and innovative thinking. Indeed, individuals who dare to cross the party line or exercise initiative that contradicts top-level guidance might be subject to "struggle sessions" in which the individual must confess and repent of his misdeeds before the party committee or receive other forms of discipline.[88] A divided command system also reduces the ability of commanders to respond flexibly and rapidly to emerging situations. These controls are designed to maximize CCP control of the military and thus cannot

be easily dismantled without weakening linkages between the party and military.

Perhaps aware of these liabilities, officials frequently assert that the political work system can be revised to ensure both combat effectiveness and loyalty to the party. For example, PLA spokespeople have claimed that "combat effectiveness" is the standard for political work and that all political work should be "war oriented."[89] Yet the sincerity of the claims might be doubted. Although the 2020 version of the PLA's political work regulations claims that the PLA aims to improve combat readiness, every previous version stretching back to 1930 also has.[90] In recently promulgated political work regulations, authorities admit that the party's leadership is designed to ensure that "party has firm control over the troops ideologically, politically, and organizationally."[91] Underscoring this point, the regulations added new requirements to bolster the leadership of the CMC and party committees over the military.[92]

In addition, despite Chinese leaders' speeches, the country's leadership has shown little urgency in upgrading the military's combat capacities. Leaders have recognized the PLA's limitations and inability to fight a major war for decades. In 2006, Hu noted that the military's modernization level was "incompatible" with the requirements of modern war.[93] Xi has added his own criticisms, highlighting "inabilities" and "gaps" in the PLA's inability to carry out missions assigned to it.[94] Yet the persistence of these high-level criticisms after 20 years shows considerable tolerance for a slow pace of change.

In short, the PLA does acknowledge a responsibility to prepare for combat, which all militaries do. However, beneath the surface changes, the PLA has prioritized political control and its mission of upholding CCP rule. Improvements to the PLA's combat effectiveness are a secondary consideration. China's leaders value a PLA capable of nonwar missions that bolster CCP rule, but building a combat-effective military is considerably more difficult because of the constraints imposed by the many political controls. China's leadership seems to tolerate the limited gains in combat readiness because the PLA is delivering on its main mission of upholding CCP rule and the leadership does not regard a major war as likely.

The priority placed on ensuring CCP rule above combat readiness can be made even clearer through a closer look at multiple dimensions of the PLA (Table 1). Although a thorough review of the state of China's military modernization lies beyond the scope of this paper, a brief survey of key features of the PLA's personnel, command and control, training, research, operations, and armaments development shows that combat readiness remains a secondary priority.

Personnel

The qualities that are sought and cultivated in a military's personnel and leadership reveal a great deal about the military's identity. A military focused on political control and wary of coups values political loyalty and reliability over all other qualities.[95] Such a military might also tolerate corruption as the price of loyalty.[96] By contrast, a military focused on the goal of prevailing in combat is more likely to esteem professional competence and meritocratic promotions. China's military has made some progress in standardizing promotion criteria and elevating education standards.[97] But politics continues to factor prominently in recruitment and promotion. The PLA selects potential

TABLE 1

Two Kinds of Militaries

Topic	Politics as Priority	Combat Effectiveness as Priority
Personnel	Loyalty, political reliability, and corruption (China)	Professionalism, competence, and meritocracy
Command	Centralized control (China)	Decentralized and delegated
Training	Indoctrination and demonstrations (China)	Rigorous combat realistic training
Research	Ideology and politics (China)	Combat operations
Operations	Nonwar missions that boost political legitimacy (China)	Combat missions to achieve security goals
Armaments	Prestige and nonwar utility (China)	Combat utility (China)

recruits in part according to their political fitness. Promotions are managed by political commissars and party committees that judge candidates partly by their compliance with party values, ideology, and directives. Similarly, discipline is handled by political officers and party committees, which might judge infractions against a party authority differently than a military commander focused on battlefield performance might.[98] Despite a widely publicized anticorruption campaign, graft appears well entrenched in the military.[99] Corruption is extensive and involves routine fraud, including fake and defective weaponry and falsified training certifications and records, that compromises the military's ability to fight in a war.[100]

Command and Organization

The command culture of a military also reveals much about its priorities. A military that is concerned about coups and insecure about its authority favors a high level of centralization and insist on tight control of military operations.[101] Its organization is optimized for political control but not combat. By contrast, a military focused on combat effectiveness might be willing to experiment with arrangements that enhance the flexibility and responsiveness of units to fluid combat situations.

China's military doctrine remains firmly constrained by its adherence to centralized, top-down control and by its resistance to the delegation of command authority.[102] The perpetually halfhearted and incomplete nature of structural reforms designed to improve combat readiness suggests that this goal remains a secondary priority at best. The PLA has declared its intent to become a modern fighting force, but it took more than a decade after top leader Hu directed the PLA to become a joint force for the reforms to even begin.[103] The Chinese military's own assessments reveal confusion and disarray in how and what to modernize even nearly a decade after Xi announced reforms in 2015. Chinese sources admit that they lack competent joint commanders, express uncertainty about how to train personnel to fight as a joint force, and acknowledge that the military's reforms remain incomplete.[104] The halting, plodding pace of reforms does not support the image of a mili-

The PLA commits enormous time and resources to ensure political loyalty and indoctrinate troops in the party's political ideology.

tary racing to prepare for war but rather that of a reluctant bureaucracy making gestures at a mission that it knows its leaders care little about.

Training

The nature and purpose of training in the military says a great deal about its character. A military that spends much of its time in political indoctrination shows that its main concern remains to ensure regime survival. Exercises and major training events might be highly publicized and staged to maximize propaganda value for the state.[105] By contrast, a military focused on combat preparations prioritizes topics that can improve the lethality and survivability of combat forces. Such training events attempt to be rigorous and realistic. China's military spends a large amount of training on political indoctrination. According to regulations, PLA troopers must spend up to 40 percent of their time in political and ideological education.[106] Many exercises are scripted lavish events that draw extensive media coverage and criticism in some military sources for their staged nature.[107]

Research

The topics that a military researches and studies reveal its attitudes toward war preparations. A military that spends much of its intellectual capital on political and ideological topics is likely to care mostly about keeping the regime in power. By contrast, a military focused on war preparations is more likely to spend its intellectual resources on operations research and on practical matters related to combat. Beyond the PLA's identity, structure, and organization, political work continues to dominate the military's research and academic work. A review of articles and books published by the military's premier think tank, the Academy of Military Sciences, shows that, on average, between one-third and one-half of its intellectual work focuses on political and ideological topics.[108] The PLA commits enormous time and resources to ensure political loyalty and indoctrinate troops in the party's political ideology.[109] The relentless focus on political indoctrination suggests ambivalence and uncertainty about the military's reliability. It also shows that preparations for major combat operations remain subordinate to the more urgent matter of ensuring the PLA's loyalty.[110]

Operations

How a state operates its military shows what it values about military power. A military focused on ensuring

regime survival prioritizes nonwar missions that enhance the appeal and credibility of the state. These tasks could include domestic interventions and suppression of protests (as China did in the Maoist era), parades, demonstrations, and other activities to bolster patriotic enthusiasm. By contrast, a combat-oriented military would regularly engage in combat operations. Since 1979, the PLA has refrained from combat and instead involved itself in a broad variety of nonwar missions to protect Chinese citizens and their property in China and abroad and to boost patriotic support for the CCP. [111]

Armaments Development

How a military equips itself might reveal insights about its character. A political military might favor prestige weapons and weapons with advanced technology to build national pride.[112] China's military might also prioritize platforms and capabilities to carry out nonwar missions that are esteemed by Beijing. Powerful bureaucratic constituencies nurtured by years of generous patronage can also add demand to the production of weaponry and equipment.[113] By contrast, a military focused on combat preparations prioritizes prestige weapons less and building ample inventories of weapons and equipment for anticipated combat operations more. Such a military is also less beholden to interest groups that might demand the production of weapons and equipment for patronage rather than military purposes. The evidence here is admittedly ambiguous. China's rapid modernization gains are partly because of the country's desire to elevate the quality of the military from a very low base in the 1970s.[114] Some capabilities, such as China's counterintervention system of missiles, ships, and aircraft, serve deterrence purposes but could be useful in combat.[115] Other capabilities, such as aircraft carriers, have less utility for combat against such adversaries as the United States and Taiwan but could be useful for prestige and for nonwar missions, including patrols along shipping lanes along the Indian Ocean.[116] Moreover, some acquisition choices seem to prioritize nonwar missions and prestige over combat utility. China has built a handful of capable amphibious landing ships that could be used in small island operations or nonwar missions, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. But the PLA has not built large inventories of dedicated amphibious landing ships that could be useful for conquering Taiwan.[117] In sum, the evidence is ambiguous. However, when details from the other categories are considered, the hardware modernization appears to be most suited to a military committed to keeping the CCP in power through deterrence and nonwar missions.

In short, there is no question that the PLA has made impressive modernization gains. The PLA values operational proficiency and has improved its combat effectiveness, albeit starting from a very low point. But the PLA's focus on upholding CCP rule constrains how much it can truly transform itself into a warfighting machine. Virtually every aspect of the PLA has been optimized to maximize goals related to political control and enforce CCP loyalty.

China's Decline Accelerates the PLA's Focus on Regime Survival

China's military might prioritize loyalty to the party over combat effectiveness but could this change in the future? As China's economic situation deteriorates, some analysts fear

that a desperate Chinese leadership might risk major war to seize Taiwan before the opportunity slips away completely.[118]

China does appear to have entered a trajectory of decline from which it is unlikely to recover. The country's economy continues to decelerate and appears at this point unlikely to return to the heady days of rapid growth and immense wealth generation that the country experienced in the 2000s. Premature deindustrialization and a shrinking labor force compound problems of an inefficient state sector, which renders the prospect of high productivity–driven growth implausible.[119] Social ills, such as severe socioeconomic inequality, diminishing opportunities, and a threadbare social safety net, aggravate these trends and are unlikely to be reversed.[120] Corruption appears entrenched and has scarcely diminished, despite Xi's repeated antigraft drives.[121] Yet, as of 2024, the country's political system appears resilient enough to keep the CCP in power.

The effects of China's decline will likely further weaken the PLA. As the state's legitimacy erodes, the PLA will likely experience a decline in resolve and sense of purpose. The PLA might have little choice but to rely primarily on financial incentives to recruit, retain, and motivate soldiers.[122] The frequent increases in PLA pay and benefits suggest that this trend is already well underway.[123] Incessant efforts to indoctrinate troops about party loyalty only underscore the CCP's dependence on financial incentives to motivate troops and its accompanying fears of the conditionality of that dependence.[124]

Moreover, China's decline occurs alongside signs of U.S. decline. This point matters because a formidable external threat offers the most plausible path for Chinese leaders to drive through the painful changes that would be necessary for the PLA to prioritize combat readiness over political loyalty.[125] China's leaders view many U.S. policies, such as tariffs, cooperation with Taiwan, and military operations in the first island chain, as provocative and infuriating.[126] However, China's leaders also view the United States as experiencing its own weakening.[127] Although U.S. economic strength remains formidable, the country's political weaknesses have intensified.[128] Amid a perennially polarized public and gridlocked political system, U.S. political leaders have expressed some hesitation over long-standing foreign policy commitments.[129] Fragile bipartisan support for tough policies on China masks deep divisions in the U.S. government over China policy.[130] Polls show little support for U.S. involvement in foreign wars.[131] An increasingly self-absorbed United States that is reluctant to risk major war provides little incentive for the PLA to carry out the painful changes that could prepare it to fight well.

Could Taiwan drive the PLA to prioritize combat readiness? It is true that Taiwan's refusal to embrace unification poses a serious political challenge to China's leadership. However, in military terms, Taiwan no longer poses much of a threat. Taiwan's military is outclassed by China's military by any conceivable margin.[132] Even with all its corruption, inefficiencies, and other shortcomings, China's lumbering military could probably subdue Taiwan, as long as it did not also have to fight the U.S. military. However, if the U.S. military could get involved, the potentially catastrophic risks give Beijing little reason to start a war. Having ample economic, political, and military means to deter rash moves by Taipei toward independence, China can bide its time until a more favorable situation surfaces.[133] Therefore, Beijing's best option for Taiwan is the one

that China's government seems to have adopted: Wait for a better time to resolve Taiwan's status.[134] For example, China could wait for a favorable time to strike a deal with a U.S. president that conclusively ends any U.S. obligation to Taiwan and thereby render the task of subjugating Taiwan infinitely easier. This process could take years or even decades. But for the long game to work, the CCP needs to stay in power. Keeping the PLA focused on the mission of ensuring CCP rule, paradoxically, thus remains China's best option for Taiwan.

China's Military in Perspective: The Multiplying Threat Picture

None of what I claim is meant to downplay tensions between the United States and China. Nor should my claims be construed to suggest that conflict of some sort is impossible. U.S. differences with China are deeply rooted and unlikely to be resolved any time soon.[135] Tensions persist and could worsen over time. The possibility that U.S.-China relations could turn hostile cannot be ruled out.

However, if U.S.-China relations turn hostile, China will have to operate within the constraints of its political and military weaknesses. Unlike America's great-power rivals of the 20th century, such as imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union, a hostile China would have to fight using a military that is not designed to fight a war. The threat of war could motivate China to overhaul the military to be more combat-effective, but carrying out the transformation could be a risky endeavor given the importance placed by Chinese leaders on a compliant and loyal PLA.

Keeping the PLA focused on the mission of ensuring CCP rule, paradoxically, thus remains China's best option for Taiwan.

China has other options that are better suited to its political and military liabilities. One option would be to arm and equip U.S. rivals and enemies, including Iran, North Korea, Russia, and violent nonstate actors. PLA forces would play a relatively modest role, primarily as trainers and providers of technical support.[136] U.S. alliances could prove a major vulnerability as much as they have been a source of strength. To maintain the credibility of U.S. alliances and partnerships, Washington would feel obligated to support its ally or partner, potentially leading to extremely high resource commitments. In a reversal of the Cold War, the United States could find itself at risk of exhausting its national strength through massive defense expenditures to assist besieged allies and partners, while China mainly plays the role of spoiler with far lower resource costs. A step in this direction can perhaps be seen in China's aid to Russia in its war against U.S.-backed Ukraine.[137]

In sum, despite appearances to the contrary, the PLA has far more in common with other militaries of the

developing world than it does with the U.S. military or even those of imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union, which tend to be the mental models that many analysts appear to have in mind when they highlight China's potential military threat. As China's internal problems worsen, the country will likely face growing incentives to favor indirect methods of contending with the U.S. military in the event tensions escalate into hostilities.

Moreover, the future of the U.S.-China rivalry will unfold under conditions that will make it even less likely that either the United States or China will be able to carry out large-scale, high-intensity wars. Trends, such as the spreading of international disorder, weakening state legitimacy, fragmenting societies, slowing and imbalanced economic growth, the proliferation of threats, and the changing nature of warfare, have already made it nearly impossible for countries to carry the types of societal mobilizations that fueled the industrial age's total wars.[138]

In many ways, China's prioritization of regime survival reflects the leadership's acute awareness of these sorts of trends and the danger they pose to all governments, including CCP rule in China. The weakening of state capacity and legitimacy has accelerated under the destabilizing effects of governance shortfalls, pandemics, transnational terror and criminal groups, and intrastate conflict. The result has been an alarming spread of disorder, state breakdown, and political and military crises worldwide. Left unaddressed, the cumulative impact of intensifying international disorder threatens the security of all states, including that of the United States and China.

Although the United States has focused principally on the danger of a great-power war after World War II, its actual experience underscores the reality of spreading international disorder and myriad threats.[139] Among the conflicts in which the United States has been involved since 1991, none of them have directly involved a peer military.[140] Focusing only on the prospect of fighting a high-intensity, conventional war against such a country as China might provide some benefits in terms of focusing planning and accelerating technological innovation, but it also opens the United States to being surprised by unanticipated dangers. The U.S. Department of Defense might need to rethink how it handles a crowded threat picture in which the remote conventional military threat from China competes with equally urgent and far more proximate dangers that collectively threaten the security of the United States and its allies and partners.

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About This Paper

In this paper, I argue that the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is fundamentally driven by the imperative to keep the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in power rather than to fight a war. I analyze the political, organizational, and other features of China's military to show how its focus on political loyalty constrains the PLA's combat effectiveness. In this publication, I argue that China's anticipated decline will likely intensify the PLA's focus on upholding CCP rule and further reduce any incentive to risk war.

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