



# China's Pursuit of Overseas Security

Timothy R. Heath

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## Preface

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In recent years, China's military has begun to expand its presence abroad. Yet the pace and scope of Chinese international military operations and activities remains modest compared with the country's expanding array of economic and strategic interests. This report seeks to better understand how China is pursuing security for its overseas interests. It surveys the threats facing Chinese interests abroad, the range of forces available to counter those threats, and the missions and tasks that are likely to be undertaken by security-related forces. This report also considers some implications of China's approach for the United States.

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## Summary

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China's ascent as the world's second-largest economy has brought the country tremendous prosperity, but integration into the global economy has also exposed growing numbers of its citizens and their assets to potential harm. According to Chinese authorities, 30,000 of the country's enterprises are located overseas, and more than 100 million Chinese citizens travel abroad annually.<sup>1</sup> Dangers in distant lands menace the markets, resources, and investments upon which China's economy now depends. In the words of the country's 2015 Military Strategy White Paper, China has become "more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, and serious natural disasters and epidemics."<sup>2</sup> Chinese leaders have accordingly elevated in priority the provision of security for the country's overseas interests.

This report examines the question of how China can provide security for its growing array of overseas economic and strategic interests. It also seeks to understand how China's approach might provide opportunities or raise concerns for the United States. The report seeks to answer the following questions:

- How will China protect its citizens and their economic assets in distant countries?
- What sort of military capabilities or other arrangements might China pursue accordingly?
- What will China's approach to security abroad mean for the United States and its allies and partners?

How China decides to protect its overseas interests carries important implications for international politics and for the country's own economic prospects. The size and strength of any military forces stationed abroad could affect the course of an international crisis or prospects for collaboration with the United States on shared concerns. Insight into China's approach to protecting overseas interests can also shed light on the economic feasibility of major Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure investment projects in fragile states. If China lacks a reliable way to protect its interests in unstable countries, ambitious infrastructure and investment projects could suffer heavy losses or remain unrealized.

History offers precedents in which rising nations struggled with the security implications of their increasing integration into an international economy. Many of history's most powerful countries fueled their growth, in part, through trade and investment abroad. To secure

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "'Full Text' of PRC FM Wang Yi's Speech at U.S. Center for Strategic and International Studies," webpage, February 26, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Full Text: China's Military Strategy," People's Republic of China Government, May 26, 2015a.

their overseas interests, these nations frequently relied on expeditionary militaries and imperial conquest. In previous centuries, European empires and imperial Japan raised large armies and navies, subjugated other countries, and established colonies in part to ensure access to vital resources and markets. The United States established military bases on some of its imperial conquests, such as the Philippines and Guam. However, after World War II, the United States expanded its international presence through an extensive network of military bases located in allied countries. The relevance of these examples for China is unclear. Given international norms proscribing imperialism, China's own renouncement of military aggression, a lack of international allies, and the Chinese military's limited power projection capabilities, Beijing has little incentive to mimic the examples of either past imperial nations or the United States.

Drawing from analysis of publicly available databases and academic studies, as well as Chinese language official documents and scholarly writings, this paper argues that China is likely to pursue an approach distinctly different from that taken by past imperial countries and the United States. China's approach will be characterized by an overlapping mixture of People's Liberation Army troops, paramilitary forces, civilian contractors, and local security forces provided by nations hosting major Chinese assets. State-owned companies will likely also play an important role in providing needed ports and bases, as well as logistics and maintenance support. Many of these forces are likely to be charged with narrowly defined tasks and may cooperate with one another only sporadically, if at all.

In some ways, China's likely approach to overseas security operations and activities replicates in exaggerated form trends already apparent in western countries. Declining defense budgets, low public tolerance for costly overseas entanglements, and the persistence and seeming insolubility of security threats in diverse parts of the world have led the United States and Europe to involve more defense contractors in their overseas operations, press partner countries to step up contributions on security affairs, and narrow the focus of their combat operations to address only the most pressing threats, while leaving broader security problems unresolved. China shares some of these concerns and assessments, and its own limitations and inclinations provide strong incentives for it to borrow many of these practices even as it develops its own path.

China's approach suggests both opportunities and limits to the prospects of cooperation with the United States in the international arena. Paradoxically, the prospects for cooperation may be highest in domains suited to military operations, especially such nonwar missions as disaster relief and countering maritime piracy, because of U.S. strengths in these domains and clearer shared interests between the two countries. However, areas featuring a Chinese reliance on paramilitary and Chinese-backed host-nation security forces may offer more limited areas of cooperation. Paramilitary forces are more likely to operate under the authority of laws or frameworks influenced by Chinese political values that may be at odds with those of the United States. Differing interpretations of terrorism, for example, could continue to impair collaboration between the two countries in countering some threats, for example. In some cases, China's pursuit of security abroad could encroach on U.S. interests. In particular, Chinese efforts to arm and equip friendly host-nation-provided security forces in areas of South Asia, the Middle East, or Africa could complicate U.S. efforts to promote its security and those of its allies and partners in the same areas. China's desire to cultivate ties with Iran—a key energy supplier—could lead Beijing to provide advanced weapons that Tehran could employ against countries allied with the United States, or against U.S. forces themselves. Similarly, Beijing may step up arms sales to help equip the governments of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and others

to suppress domestic insurgencies that threaten Chinese investments. Growing dependence on China for security could expose those same countries to pressure from Beijing.



## Acknowledgments

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## Abbreviations

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BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMHI	China Merchants Holdings International
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
HA/DR	humanitarian assistance/disaster relief
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
LCAC	landing craft, air cushioned
LPD	landing platform dock
NEO	noncombatant evacuation operation
ODI	overseas direct investment
PAP	People's Armed Police
PKO	peacekeeping operations
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SLOC	sea lines of communication
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

UK United Kingdom  
UN United Nations



## Introduction

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For the first five decades following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's military focused principally on homeland defense and social stability missions. Over the past two decades, however, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has shifted its focus outwards to support the country's expanding array of global economic and political interests. The PLA Navy (PLAN) initiated its first antipiracy deployment off the Horn of Africa in late 2008, a mission it has continuously upheld since then. In 2011, PLA forces in Libya carried out the country's first large-scale evacuation of citizens from a foreign country.<sup>1</sup> Establishing its status as a rising great power, China announced in 2015 its first overseas naval supply port in Djibouti.<sup>2</sup>

Demand for Chinese security-related operations and activities is likely to grow. China has about 30,000 businesses around the world, and many of these have shown a willingness to operate in areas considered too unstable or dangerous for Western firms. More than 100 million Chinese people now travel abroad annually, and many individuals work and live in politically fragile countries.<sup>3</sup> These businesses and citizens expect the Chinese state to offer some protection from overseas perils, such as maritime piracy, terrorism, attacks from insurgencies, and disorder and violence arising from weak governance or civil wars.

This report examines how China can provide security for its growing array of economic and strategic interests around the world, and how its approach might provide opportunities or concerns for the United States. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- How will China protect its citizens and their economic assets in distant countries?
- What sort of military capabilities or other arrangements might China pursue accordingly?
- What will China's approach to security abroad mean for the United States and its allies and partners?

As a country with which the United States has had a mixed relationship featuring both competition and cooperation, China's expanding military presence abroad has drawn scrutiny. The 2016 Report to Congress by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

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<sup>1</sup> Xinhua, "29,000 Chinese Nationals Pulled Out of Libya," *China Daily*, February 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, "China Retools Its Military with a First Overseas Outpost in Djibouti," *New York Times*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "'Full Text' of PRC FM Wang Yi's Speech at U.S. Center for Strategic and International Studies," webpage, February 26, 2016.

carried a section on “China’s Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the threat posed by its counterintervention capability in Asia, however, many observers regard the PLA’s limited capability to project power as posing a low threat to U.S. interests. Indeed, some scholars see opportunities for cooperation in the PLA’s operations abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Experts debate the future evolution of the PLA’s power projection capabilities, however. Some have speculated that China may seek an expeditionary force similar to that of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Others have dismissed such a possibility, citing the country’s slowing economy and the complex demands of its security situation.<sup>7</sup> Noting both financial and geostrategic constraints, a 2012 study concluded that China’s overseas military presence would remain largely symbolic for years to come.<sup>8</sup>

This debate often presumes that a definitive assessment hinges on a comparison of the PLA against the U.S. military as an archetype of an expeditionary military. But there are compelling reasons to question this assumption. First, the U.S. military developed its expeditionary capability on the foundations of a post–World War II global network of alliances that China conspicuously lacks. The alliances both enabled and drove demand for a powerful U.S. military presence abroad. The United States fought major wars in Korea and Vietnam, for example, in part to defend key allies and uphold the credibility of its security commitments. Because China has no such network, it faces little demand for such a robust capability.

Contrasting threat pictures pose a second important difference. The United States emerged from World War II a global military super power that faced a powerful rival, the Soviet Union, which led its own global network of allies. Partly to counter its geopolitical adversary, the United States maintained a large forward-deployed military capable of fighting major combat operations around the world. The United States also found forward-deployed military forces extremely useful for coping with nontraditional threats, but the United States generally regarded these dangers as secondary to those posed by the militaries of the Soviet Union and other adversary countries. For China, threats to its overseas interests stem *primarily* from nontraditional sources such as terrorism, civil conflict, and maritime piracy. To be clear, China does face a growing rivalry with the United States, and the possibility, albeit remote, of a major war cannot be discounted. But in the unlikely event of conflict, such a clash would be fought principally along China’s periphery, where flashpoints continue to fester and the PLA poses the largest threat to U.S. forces. Beyond Asia, China has little conventional capacity to contest U.S. power, and little incentive to develop such a capability, given the overwhelming combined power of the United States and its allies. Thus, a far more limited military power projection capability is likely to be sufficient for China’s needs.

Third, important political and economic differences inform the evolution of the respective militaries between the two countries. The United States built a robust expeditionary military during a period in which it enjoyed exceptional security along its periphery. Moreover, the

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<sup>4</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2016 Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C., November 2016, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “A Global People’s Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Asia Policy*, Number 22, July 2016, pp. 131–155.

<sup>6</sup> Gabe Collins, “China’s Military Gets Expeditionary,” *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Kyle Mizokami, “The Chinese Military Is a Paper Dragon,” *Real Clear Defense*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Scobell and Andrew Nathan, “China’s Overstretched Military,” *Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2012, pp. 135–148.

post-war period saw the U.S. economy at its most prosperous, enabling generous funding of a globally distributed force. By contrast, China maintains substantial military forces near its borders to keep a watchful eye on many of its neighbors, with whom China has uneasy relations. And as the country's economy slows, the population ages, and demand for social services increase, the desire to field a more capable military abroad will likely compete with other pressing spending priorities.<sup>9</sup> These realities provide an incentive for China to commit a smaller portion of its military forces abroad than the United States could afford and to minimize the expense of overseas military commitments.

In addition, unique features of China's political system, traditions, and geopolitical situation suggest non-PLA entities will play important roles in furthering the nation's security abroad. In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays a leading role in managing security affairs that has no counterpart in the United States. Chinese officials may also have a more flexible view of ways to advance security that depends less on military operations. Scholars have noted, for example, how Chinese authorities employ diplomacy or arms sales to counter threats to overseas interests. Steve Childs noted that in contrast to previous decades in which China sold weapons to generate income for its defense industry, Beijing today sells arms to a much wider range of clients. Some of the sales do not generate a profit, but they do involve countries that have considerable natural resources or are otherwise politically important, suggesting at least some arms sales appear to be driven principally by security and strategic considerations.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kane has similarly suggested that the widespread exclusive focus on the PLA's limited expeditionary capabilities obscures the fact that China relies on a network of host-nation security forces and civilian contractors to protect key assets and citizens abroad.<sup>11</sup>

This report will argue that these factors are likely to influence how Chinese leaders intend to provide security for the country's overseas interests. While recognizing the important role played by diplomacy and intelligence, this report will center on the actions by *security forces*, which it defines as organized groups of personnel charged with security-related responsibilities that are accountable to state authorities. The particular focus will be on the role of China's military and paramilitary forces, security contractor firms, state-owned enterprises, and the armed forces provided by host nations in carrying out operations and activities to protect Chinese interests abroad.

The report deliberately avoids employing terms commonly used to describe China's military activities abroad, such as "expeditionary forces" and "power projection." China may share with its predecessors an interest in expanding the capabilities of its military, but to call the PLA's international presence an "expeditionary military," as some Western commentators have done, is misleading at best.<sup>12</sup> For most Western analysts, an expeditionary military is a mili-

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<sup>9</sup> John Lee, "China's Economic Slowdown: What Are the Strategic Implications?" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, October 2015, pp. 123–142; Michael Chase, "The Dragon's Dilemma: A Closer Look at China's Defense Budget and Priorities," Progressive Policy Institute, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Steven J. Childs, "Sino-American Global Security Strategy: A Network Perspective," in *China and International Security: History, Strategy and 21st-Century Policy*, Vol. 3, Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, eds., Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2014, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Kane, "China's 'Power Projection' Capabilities," *Parameters*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Winter 2014–2015, pp. 27–38.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, 2011.

tary force that can be deployed abroad to carry out major operations, including campaigns.<sup>13</sup> A typical expeditionary military may be augmented by small numbers of civilian contractors, usually for logistics purposes, and may operate in conjunction with allied militaries, but it is characterized foremost by formidable military capable of executing major combat operations. This archetype fits China's case poorly. To be clear, the PLA is developing a nascent capability to transport and operate troops in other countries. But this capability is fairly small, and for the foreseeable future will only enable a limited array of primarily nonwar missions. To close the gap between the PLA's limited expeditionary capacity and the country's needs for security abroad, China will likely have little recourse but to rely heavily on non-PLA forces.

This paper will also avoid use of the term "global power projection" favored by some Western commentators.<sup>14</sup> Because the term suggests the ability to deploy and sustain substantial military forces worldwide for deterrence or strategic purposes, "global power projection" inaccurately describes China's approach to protecting overseas interests. While the PLA is indeed increasing its international presence, its capability so far remains modest and limited to a handful of nonwar missions. Nor does China yet have a doctrine for deploying military forces worldwide for purposes of deterrence or warfighting. At most, the PLA may be regarded as having ambitions to develop a limited power projection capability involving a small number of forces that can exert influence in Asia and as far as Africa, but not worldwide. If the PLA engages in any combat operations, these will most likely consist of small teams fighting alongside host-nation forces against nonstate actors. Moreover, some of the forces involved in protecting Chinese interests abroad include those provided by host nations, security contractors, or Chinese state-owned companies involved in local commerce and are not "projected" in any meaningful way. Therefore, to avoid confusion with Western concepts, this report will employ the term *limited power projection* to describe relevant aspects of the PLA and *security operations and activities to protect interests abroad* to describe China's overall approach to overseas security.

The focus on security forces excludes important organizations and activities related to overseas security. The report does not cover the work undertaken by diplomatic officials to help protect citizens abroad. Neither does the important work of China's intelligence services feature in this study, although they undoubtedly play an important and likely growing role. Finally, this report does not cover some of the military's international activity designed to foster a favorable security environment, such as exchanges, visits, and other features of military diplomacy. Follow-on research can perhaps integrate China's diplomatic, intelligence, and military diplomacy activities into the research findings of this paper.

This report builds on a budding scholarship on the ways in which countries like Russia and China employ paramilitary, law enforcement, or proxy forces to counter threats along their respective borders.<sup>15</sup> This line of analysis has already borne rich fruit in the study of Chinese strategic behavior, especially in the South and East China Seas. Scholars have described how Chinese maritime militia and the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) have engaged in direct

<sup>13</sup> Joint Publication 1-02, *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, as amended through August 2017.

<sup>14</sup> *Defence Review Asia*, "Flexing Its Muscles: Chinese Power Projection Capabilities," March 24, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan Frier, Charles Burnett, William J. Cain, Jr., Christopher D. Compton, Sean M. Hankard, Robert S. Hume, Gary R. Kramlich II, J. Matthew Lissner, Tobin A. Magsig, Daniel E. Mouton, Michael S. Muztafago, James M. Schultze, John F. Troxell, and Dennis G. Willie, *Outplayed: Regaining the Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 7, 2016.

confrontations with rival claimants, with military forces playing mostly a supporting role. In the standoff over oil rig Haiyang 981 in 2014, maritime militia and CCG ships harassed and rammed Vietnamese fishing vessels protesting the oil rig's presence in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>16</sup> CCG vessels also carry out much of the patrolling and enforcement of Chinese administration of disputed waters in the near seas. Similarly, Chinese state-owned companies have built artificial islands and related ports and harbors, most of which appear designed for both civilian and military uses. These facilities have enabled China to increase its naval and air force presence in the South China Sea, but, even so, the forces remain small in number. Insufficient for fighting a major war, the military presence in the South China Sea nevertheless provides an important deterrent to rival claimants.

China's approach to protecting overseas interests shares many features in common with the methods employed in the near seas (an area roughly delimited by the first island chain running from the Ryukus through Taiwan and including the South China Sea). In both cases, China has found non-PLA forces useful as a means of defending national interests in a manner that minimizes the risk of war. The military plays an important, but limited, role that is mostly restricted to deterrence and the execution of specialized tasks, such as reconnaissance. Moreover, in both cases, China has relied on state-owned companies to build facilities that could be used for either commercial or military purposes.

However, despite some overlap, the challenges posed by operations beyond the first island chain differ significantly from those related to China's near seas. The proximity of the East and South China Seas to the coast allows China to enlist domestic law enforcement forces and other administrative measures (however contested) to bolster its control of disputed regions—an option not available when operating in other countries. The nature of the interests involved and types of threats posed also call for different responses. In the near seas, Chinese authorities face challenges by other states over the status of disputed waters. Abroad, however, the main threats stem from terrorism, transnational crime, civil war, and natural disasters.

## Methodology and Organization of This Report

For data, this report drew from publicly available Chinese and Western media reports, publicly available databases, and official Chinese documents. It reviewed Western databases on Chinese energy imports, investments, and trade, as well as Chinese media reports on the numbers of overseas workers and travelers to understand the country's international overseas interests. For insight into threats to those interests, this report looked at academic studies of trends in international armed conflict, maritime piracy, and other hazards. It examined Chinese media reports on PLA, paramilitary, and commercial security forces for insight into the size and capabilities of available forces. The report also examined Chinese and Western reporting on Beijing's diplomatic and security relationships with countries that host major investments, as well as publicly available databases of arms sales for insight into some of the more important security partnerships that could influence the formation of armed forces provided by host nations.

Chapter Two reviews the principal drivers of China's security operations and activities abroad. It looks at the array of economic and security interests around the world, including

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<sup>16</sup> Tobias J. Burgers and Scott N. Romaniuk, "Hybrid Warfare in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2016.

energy, natural resources, sea lines of communication (SLOC), and citizens. It also reviews the most important threats to those interests, such as maritime piracy, civil war, and terrorism. Chapter Three explores the types of forces available to China to carry out this range of overseas security-related activities. It not only examines the power of the PLA to deliver and operate forces abroad, it also considers the role of the People's Armed Police (PAP), civilian security contractors, state-owned enterprises, and host-nation-provided security forces. Chapter Four surveys how these diverse security forces might be employed to carry out a variety of missions, operations, and activities required to protect the country's international economic and strategic interests. Chapter Five concludes with observations on some implications for the United States.

## Overseas Interests, Threats, and Domestic Influences

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As Chinese businesses expand their presence around the world to carry out commerce, growing numbers of citizens are living in, and traveling to, foreign countries. Many Chinese enterprises have shown a willingness to operate in areas considered too unstable or dangerous for Western firms. Perils facing Chinese personnel and their assets include maritime piracy, insurgencies, civil wars, and disorder arising from weak governance. How China responds to these threats is informed by the country's political traditions, economic constraints, and other domestic factors. The following sections review the country's relevant economic and strategic interests, the international threat environment, and the domestic influences that inform its approach to security operations and activities abroad.

### China's Overseas Interests

For decades, the impoverished economy of the PRC limited the country's involvement in the international economy. Following its turn to reform and opening up in the late 1970s, however, China expanded its export industries, fueling rapid growth. By the 1990s, the globalization of production drove a large number of multinational companies to relocate at least part of their industrial capacity to China to take advantage of low labor costs and gain access to a burgeoning market. In turn, China's integration into globalized production networks increased its dependence on international shipping lanes. Moreover, demand from a rapidly expanding industrial sector soon outstripped domestic sources of energy and raw materials. To fuel growth, Chinese companies required reliable, secure imports of energy and natural resources. And an increasingly prosperous China has vastly increased its investments in foreign companies abroad and infrastructure projects that could facilitate sustained trade. Deepening Chinese involvement in the global economy has also resulted in ever-growing numbers of citizens living and traveling abroad. These interests are reviewed next.

### Energy

Chinese dependence on energy imports has surged in recent years. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, China imported more than 57 percent of its petroleum in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 85 percent of China's petroleum imports pass by sea through the Malacca Straits. To reduce the vulnerability posed by its dependence on this vital sea-lane, China has constructed crude oil pipelines from Russia and Kazakhstan. However, the pro-

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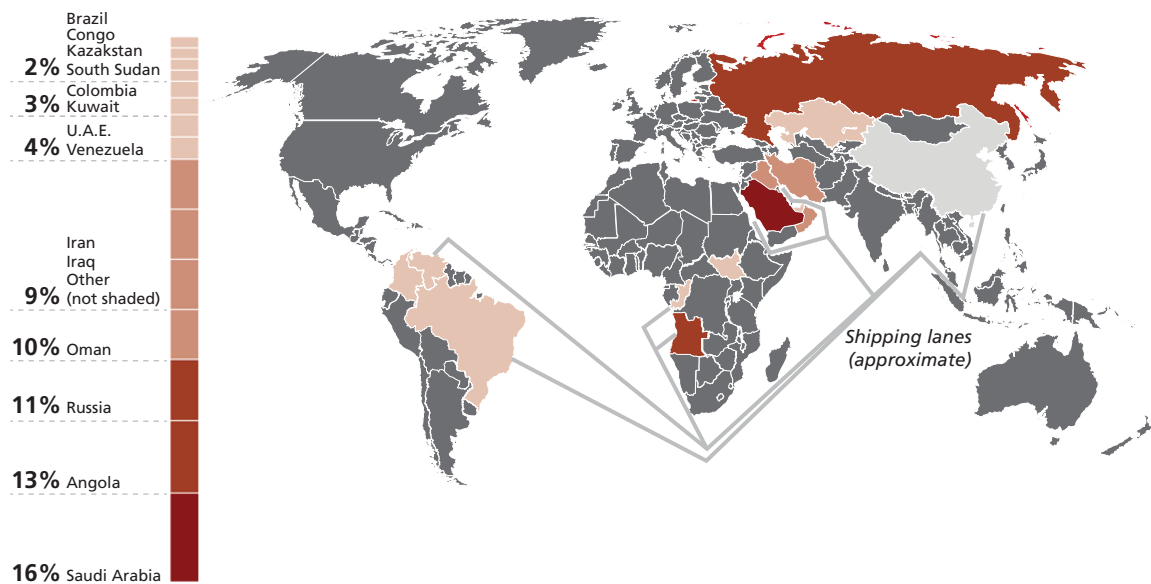
<sup>1</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, "China," May 24, 2016.

jected volume from these overland sources will scarcely mitigate China's dependence on maritime routes. China also has major energy interests in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Iran among the country's largest suppliers of oil. Chinese oil companies also operate in Iraq, Syria, and other countries in the region (Figure 2.1). In terms of natural gas, China depends principally on sources in central Asia. In 2014, for example, China imported 44 percent of its natural gas from Turkmenistan via pipeline, through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup>

### Trade and Investment

In 2013, China became the largest trader in goods for the first time, overtaking the United States. About a third of the trade consists of the assembly and re-export of goods elsewhere, although the amount of processing trade is declining.<sup>3</sup> Outward direct investment from the mainland has exploded as well, increasing fortyfold since 2002 (Figure 2.2).<sup>4</sup> Outbound overseas direct investment (ODI) surpassed foreign direct investment into China in 2015. In 2016, China's ODI totaled USD\$170 billion and involved 7,961 overseas enterprises in 164 countries, according to the Ministry of Commerce.<sup>5</sup> Chinese manufacturers depend on access to crucial raw materials, including timber, minerals, and ore, especially from Africa, Southeast

**Figure 2.1**  
Crude Oil Imports by Source



SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015.

RAND RR2271-2.1

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2015.

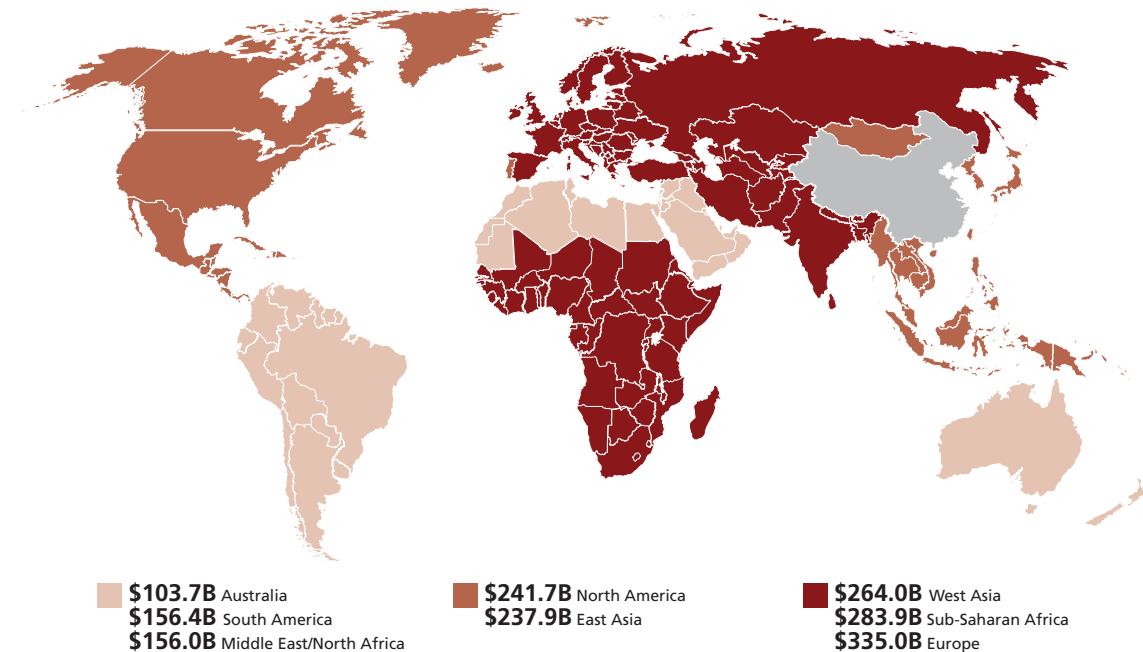
<sup>3</sup> Jamil Anderlini and Lucy Hornby, "China Overtakes U.S. as World's Largest Goods Trader," *Financial Times*, January 10, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Nargiza Salidjanova, "Going Out: An Overview of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 30, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Xinhua, "China's ODI Up 44% in 2016," January 16, 2017a.



**Figure 2.2**  
**Chinese Global Investment, 2005–2017**



SOURCE: American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, “China Global Investment Tracker,” undated.  
 RAND RR2271-2.2

Asia, and Latin America.<sup>6</sup> The following section provides some detail about Chinese economic interests in some regions of the world. The regions of South, Southeast, and Central Asia are covered in a subsequent section on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

*Africa.* China has developed a robust political and economic relationship with the developing economies of Africa, building on a decades-long partnership that stems from the Cold War. Chinese companies are building a USD\$3.8-billion railway that will link the Kenyan port city of Mombasa with Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan.<sup>7</sup> In August 2014, China completed the USD\$1.83-billion reconstruction of a railway connecting Angola, Zambia, and southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. China has been building a USD\$4-billion, 740-km electric railway that connects Addis Ababa and Djibouti, as well as the USD\$5.6-billion Chad railway network since 2012.<sup>8</sup> In Djibouti, China is financing a railroad, as well as an expansion of port terminals, fuel and water pipelines, a natural gas liquefaction plant, highway upgrades, two proposed airports, and several government buildings.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Economy and Michael Levi, *By All Means Necessary: How China’s Resource Quest is Changing the World*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Yun Sun, “Picking Up Steam: The Expansion of Chinese Railways in Africa,” Brookings Institute, September 26, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Sun, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Monte Reel, “Djibouti: How a Forgotten Country Became a Hub of International Power Games,” *Bloomberg*, March 23, 2016.

*Europe.* Chinese shipping company China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) is expected to invest more than USD\$552 million in the Greek Port of Piraeus within the next five years. COSCO uses Piraeus as a transshipment hub for Asian exports to Europe arriving on container vessels from China, given its proximity to the Suez Canal in Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

*Latin America.* As a major destination for Latin America's raw materials, China has growing interests on the continent. China allocated USD\$100 billion in ODI to the region between 2010 and 2014. More than half of China's loans to the region from 2007 to 2015 went to Venezuela, with Brazil as the second-largest borrower at 18 percent of total loans. Chinese lending has prioritized oil deals and some infrastructure projects. However, China also halted at least some projects, such as a major railway, in Venezuela because of the country's ongoing economic crisis.<sup>11</sup>

*Australia.* China is Australia's top trade partner, with more than 25 percent of Australia's manufactured imports originating from China. Australia's exports include coal, iron, energy, and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> A Chinese USD\$1-billion plan to invest in the Port of Darwin has raised concerns among the nation's authorities, given the port's proximity to military facilities that are occasionally used by U.S. Marines.<sup>13</sup>

*Arctic.* With the Arctic ice melting, the region's abundant supplies of oil, gas, and minerals have become newly accessible, as have shortened shipping routes and open water for commercial fishing. China is one of a few countries that have sent icebreaker ships through the Arctic.<sup>14</sup>

### **Belt and Road Initiative**

China's leadership has highlighted the BRI as a major foreign policy and economic initiative (Figure 2.3). The USD\$900-billion BRI aims to deepen connections between Asia, Europe, and Africa and their surrounding regions. The goal is to tap the market potential of the regions, promote investment and consumption, and create job opportunities. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. It aims to link China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia. It also aims to connect China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road consists of two routes. The first is designed to go from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The second is designed to go from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific.<sup>15</sup>

In Pakistan, China has pledged to invest USD\$46 billion in transport and energy projects as part of a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which Beijing considers a part of the BRI. For China, CPEC offers a shorter route to the Indian Ocean, without going through the

<sup>10</sup> Nektaria Stamouli, "China Cosco to Invest Over \$552 Million in Port of Piraeus," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> David Dollar, "China's Investment in Latin America," Brookings Institute, *Geoeconomics and Global Issues*, Paper No. 4, January 2017.

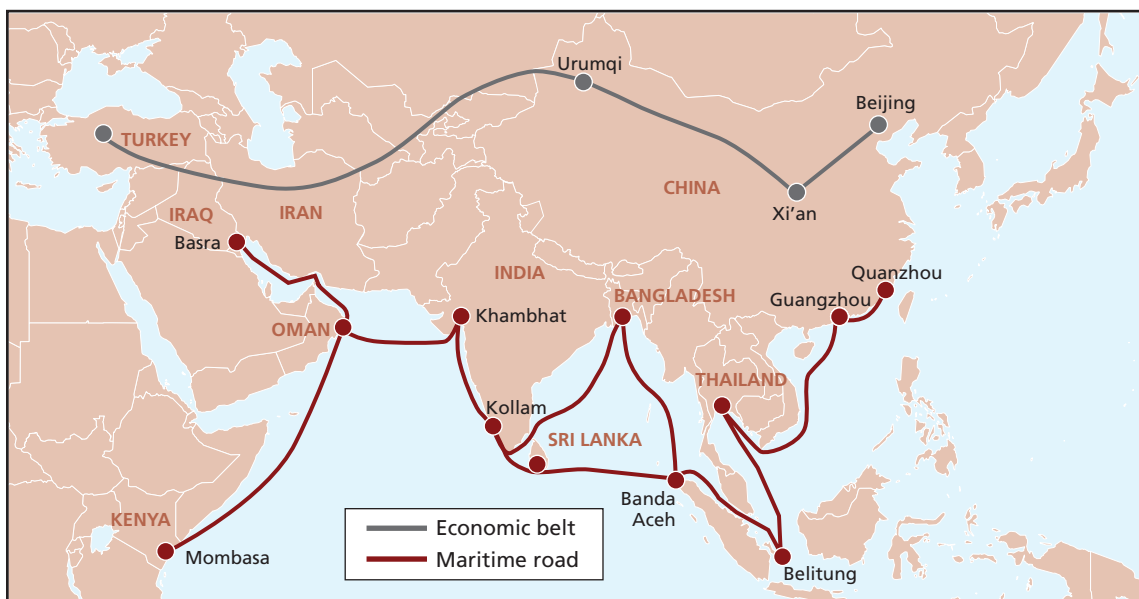
<sup>12</sup> Ann Holmes, "Australia's Economic Relationship with China," webpage, Parliament of Australia.

<sup>13</sup> Jamie Smyth, "Australia Port Project Highlights Schisms in Chinese Investment," *Financial Times*, July 17, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Lee Meyers, "Arctic Council Adds 6 Nations as Observer States, Including China," *New York Times*, May 16, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> PRC, "Full Text: Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative," website, March 20, 2015a.

**Figure 2.3**  
**Belt and Road Initiative**



SOURCE: Xinhua, "Oman Wants to be China's Key Partner in Belt and Road Initiative, China Envoy," July 1, 2015.

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congested and strategically vulnerable Strait of Malacca. CPEC also offers the possibility of providing China access to a port in the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup>

Outside of Pakistan, Sri Lanka has been the leading beneficiary of Chinese infrastructure investment in South Asia. From 2009 to 2014, China invested nearly USD\$15 billion into various infrastructure and other projects.<sup>17</sup> In 2015, China became Sri Lanka's biggest donor and made a USD\$1-billion investment to develop the southern port at Hambantota.<sup>18</sup> India remains sensitive to China's military presence on the island; however, for this reason, Beijing is likely to seek dual-use port facilities that serve ostensibly commercial purposes but also service passing naval ships.

China has committed more than USD\$320-million worth of aid to Afghanistan in hopes that long-term stability will allow railways, roads, electricity, and water projects in the country to develop as part of its Silk Road Economic Belt. However, projects like the Mes Aynak copper mine—a USD\$3.5-billion project in Logar province—remain stalled because of ongoing security threats and inadequate infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

Among central Asian countries, China has displaced Russia as the top trade partner, with trade volume in 2013 topping USD\$46 billion. In 2013, China announced USD\$30 billion in deals with Kazakhstan, including a stake in Kashagan, the world's largest oil discovery in recent decades. China also reportedly signed USD\$15 billion in oil, gas, and uranium devel-

<sup>16</sup> Faseeh Mangi, "China's New Silk Road Hinges on a Small Pakistan Port," *Bloomberg*, September 29, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Miller, "The Perils of Leadership," *Gavekal Dragonomics*, April 14, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Namini Wijedasa, "China Gets Controlling Stake at Hambantota Port," *The Sunday Times*, October 19, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Curtis, "China's South Asia Strategy," testimony before U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission, Washington, D.C., March 10, 2016.

opment deals with Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup> In addition to its value as a source of raw materials, central Asia provides a critical conduit to European markets. Kazakhstan forecasts that rail freight will grow to 7.5 million 40-foot containers by 2020, from just 2,500 transported from western China to Europe last year—although, even at 7.5 million containers, rail freight transiting Kazakhstan would still be only a tenth of ocean freight between Europe and Asia.<sup>21</sup>

*Southeast Asia.* Chinese economic links to Southeast Asia are expanding rapidly, with trade expected to increase from USD\$366 billion in 2014 to \$1 trillion by 2020, but realizing this potential will require investments in infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> Among projects, China has proposed a rail line that should eventually stretch through Thailand and Malaysia to Singapore.<sup>23</sup> In general, the Maritime Silk Road has progressed more slowly than its overland counterpart.

### Citizens Abroad

A growing number of Chinese citizens travel and live outside the country. According to a study by Texas A&M University, there were 40 million ethnic Chinese living abroad in 148 countries in 2010, although not all ethnic Chinese are citizens of the PRC. In 2010, the top three countries with the highest number of overseas Chinese were Indonesia (8 million), Thailand (7.5 million), Malaysia (6.5 million). According to the study, more than 70 percent of overseas Chinese live in Asia, but this represents a relative decline from the 1990s, when 90 percent of overseas Chinese lived in Asia. The population of overseas Chinese has grown on all continents in past decades. However, since the 2000s, by far the largest percentage increase has been in Africa (6.1 percent), owing to China's deep economic ties to the continent. In 2011, the number of Chinese in Africa was 250,000, which is smaller than on almost all other continents; however, if the current growth rate continues, the population could reach 1 million by 2033. According to the study, Africa is likely to be the continent with the greatest relative increases in the population of overseas Chinese in coming decades.<sup>24</sup>

The number of PRC citizens studying and traveling abroad has surged in recent years. In 2013, Xinhua, China's official news agency, reported that the country sent 400,000 students to other countries.<sup>25</sup> In a 2016 speech, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated China has "30,000 enterprises spread all over the world" and that "120 million citizens go abroad each year."<sup>26</sup> Increasing numbers of citizens have reported threats. According to reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Consular Protection Center, from 2008 to 2010, Chinese citizens reported 177 incidents involved damage or threats to people or personal property. At least 23 of the incidents resulted in the deaths of Chinese citizens. A 2013 study by Wang Duanyong, a researcher at the Shanghai International Studies University, has documented an increasing number of incidents over time, reflecting the growing volume of travelers. Examining the geographic

<sup>20</sup> *The Economist*, "Rising China, Sinking Russia," September 14, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Bradsher, "Hauling Treasures Along the Silk Road," *New York Times*, July 20, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Luis Blanco Pitlo, "China-Southeast Asia Connectivity: Opportunities and Challenges for Maritime Silk Road," *China U.S. Focus*, August 15, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> *VOA News*, "China, Laos Say Rail Project to Go Ahead, Pending Environment Study," July 29, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Dudley Poston, Jr., and Juyin Helen Wong, "The Chinese Diaspora: The Current Distribution of Overseas Chinese," *The Chinese Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2016, pp. 348–373.

<sup>25</sup> Xinhua, "China Becomes Largest Source of Overseas Students," August 2, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016.

distribution of reported incidents, Wang found the greatest number occurred in sub-Saharan Africa (27 percent), followed by the Asia-Pacific area (22 percent).<sup>27</sup>

Chinese leaders recognize that the future of the country's economic growth will require deeper integration into the world. President Xi Jinping has outlined a vision of global engagement, pledging that China will “keep its doors open” and advancing major diplomatic initiatives aimed at expanding regional and international trade.<sup>28</sup> China's energy dependence, overseas personnel, and investments abroad will grow, exposing major vulnerabilities and increasing the demand for security. As the 2013 Defense White Paper observed, “overseas interests have become an integral component of China's national interests.”<sup>29</sup>

### **International Factors: Security Environment and Threats**

The expansion of China's economic and strategic interests occurs within the context of a mostly stable but fragmenting international order. In contrast to its experience in the Cold War, China does not have deeply antagonistic relations with any great powers. Despite growing tensions, Beijing's relations with the United States, Japan, and others remain largely cooperative, and the prospect of major war remains remote. At the same time, a fragmenting international order has seen the proliferation of transnational threats, including terrorism, maritime piracy, and armed conflict. Climate change has, in some cases, exacerbated problems of natural disaster and armed conflict.

Chinese official documents recognize these trends. The 2015 Military Strategy White Paper observed, “The forces for world peace are on the rise, so are the factors against war.” However, it noted, “the world still faces both immediate and potential threats of local wars.” It cited, in particular, threats from terrorism and “hotspot issues,” such as “ethnic, religious, border and territorial disputes.” It observed, “small-scale wars, conflicts and crises are recurrent in some regions.”<sup>30</sup> Chinese writings acknowledge security challenges regarding major foreign economic initiatives such as the BRI.<sup>31</sup> The following section provides a survey of some of the major threats confronting China's overseas interests.

#### **Armed Conflict**

As interstate wars have decreased in frequency since World War II, global conflict has become dominated by civil wars. Although both the numbers of conflict and battlefield deaths increased in 2013 and 2014, principally because of Syria, the overall total remains far lower than during the Cold War. In 2015, 97,000 people died as a direct result of armed conflict, a slight decline from the 104,000 deaths in 2014. Portions of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia have been the geographic regions most prone to conflict in recent

<sup>27</sup> Wang Duanyong, “The Safety of Chinese Citizens Abroad,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2013, pp. 167–198.

<sup>28</sup> Jamil Anderlini, Wang Feng, and Tom Mitchell, “Xi Jinping Delivers Robust Defense of Globalization at Davos,” *Financial Times*, January 17, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, “Full Text: The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces,” Xinhua, April 16, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015a.

<sup>31</sup> Xinhua, “Xinhua Insight: Belt and Road Initiative Can Help Ease Regional Tension,” October 25, 2016c.

years.<sup>32</sup> These are also areas that feature growing numbers of Chinese citizens and commercial assets. In Africa, Chinese workers and companies operate against the backdrop of chronic instability, armed conflict, and limited government capacity to cope with humanitarian disasters, due in part to the region's lower level of development. Between 2008 and 2010, Chinese authorities reported 73 incidents of injury and death to citizens in sub-Saharan Africa, the highest of any region.<sup>33</sup> In the Middle East, persistent instability, conflict, and terrorism has put at risk Chinese investments in Syria, Iraq, and other countries.<sup>34</sup> To protect its interests, Chinese companies have hired security contractors and sent some PAP troops to guard its embassy in Iraq.<sup>35</sup> China has also sold arms to partner nations in the region, including armed drones to the Iraqi government.<sup>36</sup> In Latin America, political instability and attacks from domestic insurgents can threaten the safety of Chinese personnel and major infrastructure projects. To counter such threats, China has increased arms sales and training to the region, although much of the equipment is of a logistical nature. China has also carried out military humanitarian aid missions and participated in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKO) missions in Haiti.<sup>37</sup>

### **Terrorism, Insurgency, and Crime**

Although data remain sketchy, research institutes have noted significant increases in terrorist attacks and deaths since the turn of the century. According to the Global Terrorism Index for 2015, deaths related to terrorism have increased ninefold since 2000, rising from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014.<sup>38</sup> China has identified “three evils” that pose a security concern, which authorities define as “terrorism, separatism, and extremism.” Of highest concern to Chinese authorities is the threat posed of Uighur separatists in Xinjiang province. In 2009, then-Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde reportedly offered to send troops into neighboring countries to combat terrorists if invited by a host nation.<sup>39</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has featured high-profile military exercises ostensibly aimed at such nontraditional threats.<sup>40</sup>

Threats in South Asia include possible attacks by Islamic terrorists. China has relied principally on the Pakistan security forces to ensure stability and protect key assets related to

<sup>32</sup> Scott Gates, Håvard Mogleiv Nygård, Håvard Strand, and Henrik Urdal, “Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2014,” Conflict Trends Project, Peace Research Institute Oslo, January 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Wang, 2013, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1229-A, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Zi Yang, “China’s Private Security Companies: Domestic and International Roles,” *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 15, October 4, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Boehler and Gerry Doyle, “Use by Iraqi Military May be a Boon to Chinese Drones,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Gabriel Marcella, “China’s Military Activity in Latin America,” *Americas Quarterly*, Winter 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*, New York, November 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Pan Guang, “China’s Policy on the Conflict in Afghanistan,” *Central and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2010, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Xinhua, “SCO Hosts Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercise in Central Russian Region,” August 11, 2017c.

CPEC. Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO also opens opportunities for the PAP and PLA to carry out joint operations against terrorist threats.<sup>41</sup>

Chinese citizens have faced considerable peril in poorer countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Philippines. In 2015, two Chinese diplomats were shot to death in Manila.<sup>42</sup> Chinese citizens have repeatedly been the target of kidnappings and robbery in the Philippines and Malaysia.<sup>43</sup>

### Maritime Piracy

Piracy at sea has fluctuated in the 21st century. According to one study, there were 522 incidents of maritime piracy in 2010. A growing proportion of maritime piracy occurs at sea, rather than in the 12 nm territorial waters of a country.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, Southeast Asia has replaced Africa as the region most prone to maritime piracy, reflecting in part the success of the international counterpiracy operations off the Horn of Africa. In 2015, There were 178 acts of piracy in Southeast Asia—mostly around Malaysia and Indonesia—and none off the Horn of Africa.<sup>45</sup>

### Natural Disaster

Studies suggest that climate change has intensified the frequency, severity, and extent of damage from natural disasters.<sup>46</sup> Extreme weather may also be exacerbating traditional security factors, such as armed conflict. In Syria, for example, a devastating drought led to major crop failures and is believed to have stimulated mass refugee migrations and violent conflict.<sup>47</sup>

The threat picture outlined in this chapter carries several important implications. First, China's lack of alliances leaves little demand for a large, powerful expeditionary PLA capable of fighting major wars abroad. China's rivalry with the United States is intensifying, but relations remain stable. In the unlikely event that U.S.-China relations deteriorated into open hostilities, the most likely settings for conflict would be on China's periphery. In any such potential U.S.-China conflict, the PLA would likely rely primarily on counterintervention capabilities and use only limited power projection forces to subdue Taiwan or capture isolated reefs and islands in China's near seas. Fighting beyond Asia with conventional forces would be pointless for China, given U.S. superiority in most parts of the world and China's lack of military bases and allies. Thus, China has little incentive to prepare large expeditionary forces capable of major combat operations, even for a potential war with the United States.

<sup>41</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, "India, Pakistan Become Full Members of SCO," *The Hindu*, June 9, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Javier C. Hernandez, "2 Chinese Diplomats Shot to Death in Philippines," *New York Times*, October 21, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Aurora Almendral, "Philippines Feels Force of Chinese Travel Warning," BBC, October 22, 2014; *South China Morning Post*, "Chinese Tourist Kidnapped in Malaysia is Rescued by Security Forces," May 31, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Anamika A. Twyman-Ghoshal and Glenn Pierce, "The Changing Nature of Contemporary Maritime Piracy: Results from the Contemporary Maritime Piracy Database 2001–10," *British Journal on Criminology*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2014, pp. 652–672.

<sup>45</sup> Joe Cochrane, "Southeast Asia Replaces Africa as the World's Hotbed of Piracy," *New York Times*, September 17, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Vinod Thomas and Ramón López, "Global Increase in Climate Related Disasters," *Asian Development Bank Economics Working Papers Series*, No. 466, November 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Fountain, "Researchers Link Syrian Conflict to a Drought Made Worse by Climate Change," *New York Times*, March 2, 2015.

Second, cooperative relations with the United States, Russia, and other great powers provide an opportunity to leverage the military strength of other countries to help protect Chinese interests, primarily through the UN, as has occurred in the multinational counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Operating under the UN flag not only allows China to access military resources from other countries, it provides political cover for its own operations. Operations under UN cover also allow China to reconcile its long-standing opposition to the interference in the affairs of another country with its increasing need to influence developments in countries in which it has significant interests.

Moreover, the variety and widespread geographic distribution of nontraditional threats underscores the importance of developing a versatile set of security forces capable of operating in a broad array of environmental conditions and against a diverse set of threats. To cope with many of these perils, China does not require high-end combat capabilities. For some tasks, such as guarding facilities and protecting individuals, personnel with commercially available communications and surveillance technology, transportation, and basic self-defense weapons should suffice. Only for the larger missions of humanitarian aid, disaster relief, counterterrorism, and stabilization operations would China require larger and more capable military equipment, such as hospital ships, large transport aircraft, and contingents of well-trained troops.

### **Domestic Influences: China's History Shapes Approach**

China's response to the challenge of countering threats to its overseas interests is informed by key domestic influences, including its foreign policy traditions, political system, history, and economic situation. Despite a legacy of adherence to the principle of noninterference, China's public and foreign policy decisionmakers today favor greater international involvement to address vulnerabilities. At the same time, China's historical experience as a victim of imperialism, lack of geostrategic allies, tensions with powerful neighboring rivals, and the prospect of economic deceleration provide strong incentives to limit the presence and operations of its military. These traditions and factors provide incentives for China's leaders to employ non-PLA forces to protect overseas interests and to minimize the country's overseas military commitments.

#### **Foreign Policy Traditions**

The PRC has advocated the principles of noninterference in the affairs of other countries as a key tenet of its foreign policy for six decades. The principle of noninterference accompanies the other principles of "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" that collectively comprise the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence." According to President Xi, adherence to these principles means China "neither interferes in other countries' internal affairs nor imposes its will on others."<sup>48</sup> Upholding these principles provides political benefits to China as an advocate for the developing world. Moreover, Chinese observers remain skeptical about the effectiveness of military intervention abroad.

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<sup>48</sup> Xinhua, "Xi's Speech on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence Anniversary," July 7, 2014a.



Nevertheless, authorities have affirmed the country's determination to increase efforts to provide security for the nation's overseas interests.<sup>49</sup> The 2015 Military Strategy White Paper confirmed the military's focus on protecting interests abroad.<sup>50</sup> The shift in official policy appears to enjoy broad public support. As an example, an admittedly nonscientific *Huanqiu Shibao* online poll in 2009 found that 89.6 percent of its 18,873 respondents answered "yes" to the question of whether China should establish overseas military bases to facilitate efforts to protect the country's overseas interests.<sup>51</sup>

Scholars recognize the political conundrum posed by the desire to protect overseas interests and the desire to uphold the principle of noninterference. Chen Zhou, a prominent military expert at the Academy of Military Sciences, described as a "major challenge" to the country's national defense policy the question of how to "safeguard the continually expanding national interests while adhering to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries."<sup>52</sup> Shanghai University scholar Su Changhe has argued that China should "constructively understand and develop" the principle of noninterference. Noting that the expansion of China's overseas interests has made the position of noninvolvement abroad "impossible," Su recommended a distinction between "safeguarding China's rights and interests" and "intervention." Echoing a view common among Chinese scholars, Su advocated participation in multilateral security initiatives led by the UN as an appropriate form of the former.<sup>53</sup>

Officials have also favored the UN as a vehicle for authorized international involvement in other countries as a way to reconcile adherence to the principle of noninterference with the demand for more involvement abroad. The UN is attractive because actions under its authority in theory represent the will of the international community, rather than just China. Accordingly, officials increasingly interpret the policy of noninterference in terms that authorize Chinese involvement in missions abroad, so long as these occur under UN jurisdiction. In 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on the UN and Security Council to take a "leading role" in the "international anti-terror struggle." Wang recommended, in particular, the sharing of information and intelligence, coordinated efforts to counter terrorists in cyberspace and disrupt their access to finances.<sup>54</sup> China also gains considerable political and propaganda value from its participation in UN efforts.<sup>55</sup>

### Historical Legacies

China's history shapes its approach to military operations abroad in two ways. First, China's opposition to military intervention is informed by the country's experience with foreign sub-

<sup>49</sup> Xinhua, "Xi Says China Stays Committed to Upholding World Peace," January 19, 2017b.

<sup>50</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015a.

<sup>51</sup> "This Week's Topic of Discussion: Should China Establish Overseas Military Bases" [中国应该在海外设军事基地吗?], *Global Times* [环球时报], December 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Chen Zhou, "On the Development of China's National Defense Policy Under New Situation" [新形势下中国国防政策发展], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], No. 6, 2009, pp. 63–71.

<sup>53</sup> Su Changhe, "Non-Interference in Internal Affairs Must Not Be Shaken" [不干涉内政不能摇动], *Liberation Daily* [解放日报], April 25, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Working Together to Address the New Threat of Terrorism," webpage, September 25, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis Blasko, "China's Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 18, December 5, 2016.

jugation during the 1900s, a painful historic episode described as a “century of humiliation” by Chinese scholars. Beginning with the Opium War in the 1840s, a weak China suffered military defeats and political humiliation at the hands of invading Japanese and imperialistic Western forces. Chinese leaders have cited such experiences when justifying the country’s rejection of unilateral military intervention and advocacy of policies such as those based on the principle of noninterference. Second, the legacy of China’s nonalignment during much of the Cold War constrains its options for force projection. During much of the Cold War, China avoided siding with either the Soviet Union or the United States. China’s advocacy of a position of “non-alignment” and rejection of alliances in principle may have enabled it to gain influence among developing countries and minimize unwanted foreign commitments, but the stance has also deprived it of potential partners for hosting military bases.

### **Security Environment Along China’s Periphery**

Compounding the country’s lack of allies, any desire to build a powerful expeditionary military capability risks provoking the ire of China’s neighbors. Japan, India, Russia, Vietnam, and South Korea all have formidable militaries and complicated histories involving conflict with China. Many of these countries remain suspicious of Chinese power and, in some cases, maintain ongoing territorial and other disputes. Thus, political sensitivities pose a major obstacle to the pursuit of overseas military bases located next to any of China’s rivals, such as India. Political considerations also constrain the development of a large expeditionary military force, because such a robust capability could be seen as threatening by China’s neighbors.<sup>56</sup>

### **Economic Situation**

China’s efforts to protect overseas interests will also likely be informed by the realities of its own economic situation. China is looking to ramp up its capability during a period in which its economic growth is expected to decelerate. The coming years will likely see defense budgets face increasing constraints owing to the increasing burden of unresolved debt and competing budget priorities stemming from demands for social services for an aging population and to support the country’s transition to a more balanced, consumption-based economy.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the cost of maintaining a professional military featuring advanced platforms and technologies will likely increase.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, some Western scholars anticipate that economic considerations may curb China’s ability to protect its overseas interests.<sup>59</sup>

### **Political System**

The CCP rules the country by embedding party cells and organizations in the country’s government, military, and many commercial enterprises. Ruling authorities have the power to direct commercial entities, in particular the state-owned enterprises, to carry out government policy. Therefore, China has the option of employing all elements of state power to protect

<sup>56</sup> Morgan Clemens, “The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA: A Paper for China as a ‘Maritime Power’ Conference,” Arlington, Va., CNA Conference, July 28–29, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, 2015, pp. 123–142.

<sup>58</sup> Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, “Demystifying China’s Defense Spending: Less Mysterious in the Aggregate,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 216, December 2013, pp. 805–830.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Blumenthal, “A Strategy for China’s Imperial Overstretch,” *American Interest*, March 1, 2017.

overseas interests to a higher degree than may be possible for Western industrial nations, which favor a more restrained role for civilian government.

In light of these drivers and influences, Chinese leaders can be expected to seek an approach to protecting overseas interests that avoids perceptions of imperialism, limits the PLA's role, and minimizes the need for military facilities in other countries. China is also likely to favor operating military forces under UN authority where possible and to adopt nonmilitary means of advancing security abroad where feasible. The following chapters review the range of forces available and the missions and tasks that they may undertake to address relevant threats.



## Forces Available to Protect Chinese Interests Abroad

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This chapter examines the types of forces that China has available to carry out missions and tasks to protect overseas interests. It argues that because Chinese officials regard the protection of the country's rights and interests abroad as a fundamentally political, not military, problem, they favor an approach that emphasizes government-led efforts that involve diplomacy, law enforcement, and state-directed commercial entities. Military power, from this point of view, plays an important role in carrying out specific duties and in providing a backstop to nonmilitary efforts, but there are also available other types of security forces available to carry out security obligations. Paramilitary forces, most notably the PAP, provide a capable option to tackle nonstate threats, such as insurgents and terrorists. Commercial security forces can be quickly and easily deployed around the world to provide personnel security and help safeguard major assets and investments. Security forces provided by nations that host major Chinese economic interests offer a politically appealing means of countering threats. Through a manipulation of carrots and sticks, Beijing can hope to incentivize host nations to protect Chinese citizens and assets. Each of these types of security forces offers advantages as well as disadvantages. For this reason, Beijing is likely to support all of them in ways that make use of the advantages and offset the drawbacks of one another.

### Official Policies Emphasize Diverse Forces

Policy documents emphasize the state's role in coordinating all elements of national power for the protection of overseas interests. For example, the 2015 Military Strategy White Paper emphasized the importance of military coordination with civil authorities to protect the country's expanding interests.<sup>1</sup> Article 78 of China's National Security Law similarly directs all elements of state power to support work to protect national security. It states, "State organs, mass organizations, enterprises, public institutions, and other social organizations shall cooperate with relevant departments in employing relevant security measures as required by national security efforts." The law makes clear that state authorities bear primary responsibility for national security. The military may play an important role in the protection of overseas interests, but the law does not grant it a leading role in that responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015a.

<sup>2</sup> PRC, "People's Republic of China National Security Law—Full Text" [中华人民共和国国家安全法—全文], website, July 1, 2015b.

Similarly, the counterterrorism law discusses international cooperation against terrorism primarily in diplomatic and law enforcement terms. Article 68 states that the State Council will “represent the Chinese government in counterterrorism policy dialogues, intelligence and information exchanges, and law enforcement cooperation” with relevant counterparts. Local governments are authorized to engage their foreign counterparts to manage efforts across borders. Article 71 of the law provides an explicit legal basis for Chinese public security and state security forces to engage in counterterrorism operations overseas. Article 71 authorizes the PLA and PAP to “send personnel abroad on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission,” although it does not specify the types of activity permitted.<sup>3</sup>

Other laws emphasize the integration of civilian and military resources for the protection of overseas interests. In September 2016, China’s government passed a National Defense Transportation Law designed to facilitate the rapid movement of military forces across the country and around the world. Among provisions, the law obligates state-owned commercial entities with supporting PLA forces in the defense of national interests abroad. The law implies that overseas commercial infrastructure development projects could serve dual-use purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Consistent with the logic outlined in the country’s policy documents, Chinese authorities have pursued a more comprehensive approach to building the forces necessary to carry out the array of operations and activities to protect overseas interests. A review of current developments and official documents suggests that Chinese government officials and commercial entities are already beginning to rely on a combination of state-owned enterprises, commercial security contractors, paramilitary, military forces, and host-nation–provided security forces. However, the linkages between central authorities and some of the involved forces remain unclear.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs likely collaborates with the military’s senior leadership to develop plans for funding and supporting security forces in foreign countries featuring major Chinese investments, but Chinese authorities probably have little influence over host-nation–provided security forces. China’s central government regulates and broadly guides the activities of commercial security contractors, but the companies are also responsive to commercial needs and responsibilities. How much each of these types of forces coordinate with one another to carry out their security duties remains unclear. For some missions, there is little need to coordinate with one another. The tasks of personal and asset security, for example, generally requires little coordination between different security contractors and PLA forces. In situations resembling crisis or extraordinary danger, however, PLA forces may coordinate with all available security forces. Past instances of noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in Libya and Sudan, for example, featured cooperation between PLA forces and state-owned companies to transport civilians. And reports that have established close cooperation between Chinese military and paramilitary forces in the near seas provide precedents for closer cooperation among law enforcement, paramilitary, and military forces abroad.<sup>5</sup> There have also been reports of cooperation between Chinese military and host-nation–provided forces, primarily for training

<sup>3</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text of Counter-Terrorism Law,” Xinhua, December 27, 2015b.

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, “China National Defense Transportation Law” [中华人民共和国国防交通法], September 3, 2016b.

<sup>5</sup> Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, “China’s Third Sea Force, The People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA,” *China Maritime Report*, No. 1, March 2017.

purposes, but the SCO provides China a ready-made venue to enhance collaboration between PLA and host-nation–provided security forces to counter shared threats.<sup>6</sup>

### Host-Nation–Provided Security Forces

Politically, the least provocative way to protect China’s overseas interests is to rely on a host nation to provide security. In this arrangement, China offers economic incentives, arms, and possible advice to enable a host nation to counter threats and improve security for areas featuring Chinese assets and personnel. The low risk to Chinese military forces and the consistency of this method with the country’s noninterference policy provide important political advantages. However, this approach also has the drawback of leaving China in a passive position. If the host nation fails to provide security, Chinese interests may suffer losses. Worse, host-nation–provided forces could instigate unintended crises using Chinese weapons and equipment. Russian experience with proxy forces provides ample evidence of this risk. In 2014, for example, pro-Russian forces in the Ukraine downed a Malaysian Airlines civilian airliner using Russian-made anti-air missiles, spurring a major international crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Illustrations of how China has sought to equip and support host-nation forces may be seen in Pakistan and Africa. Islamabad has pledged to deploy 10,000 soldiers to secure a port development project as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The force will include a newly created brigade of about 600 troops to guard workers and Chinese employees and escort trucks through Balochistan once the trade route is operating.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, China has provided armed drones, satellite imagery, and intelligence to the Nigerian government in its struggle against the insurgent group, Boko Haram, in a country where China has growing energy interests.<sup>9</sup> China’s offer to provide USD\$60 million in military assistance and support for the “operationalization” of the African Union’s standby military force similarly can help build the AU’s capacity to counter transnational threats that could harm the region’s economy and Chinese interests. A China-Africa Cooperation Action Plan (2016–2018) called for a deepening of exchanges of intelligence with African militaries and governments and the provision of Chinese training.<sup>10</sup> In Afghanistan, by contrast, China has stalled a long-promised USD\$3-billion copper mine because of the inability of national authorities to ensure security in the volatile Taliban-controlled region south of Kabul.<sup>11</sup>

Arms sales provide a rough barometer of China’s security relationship with other countries (Figure 3.1). While Beijing may have many political and strategic reasons for cultivating ties with another country, arms sales can also be a useful means for equipping a partner to deal with internal threats that also endanger Chinese assets. Underscoring this point, Chinese arms

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Economy, “What ‘One Belt, One Road’ Could Mean for China’s Regional Security Approach,” Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Unbound Blog, January 12, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> BBC, “MH17 Ukraine Plane Crash—What We Know,” September 28, 2016.

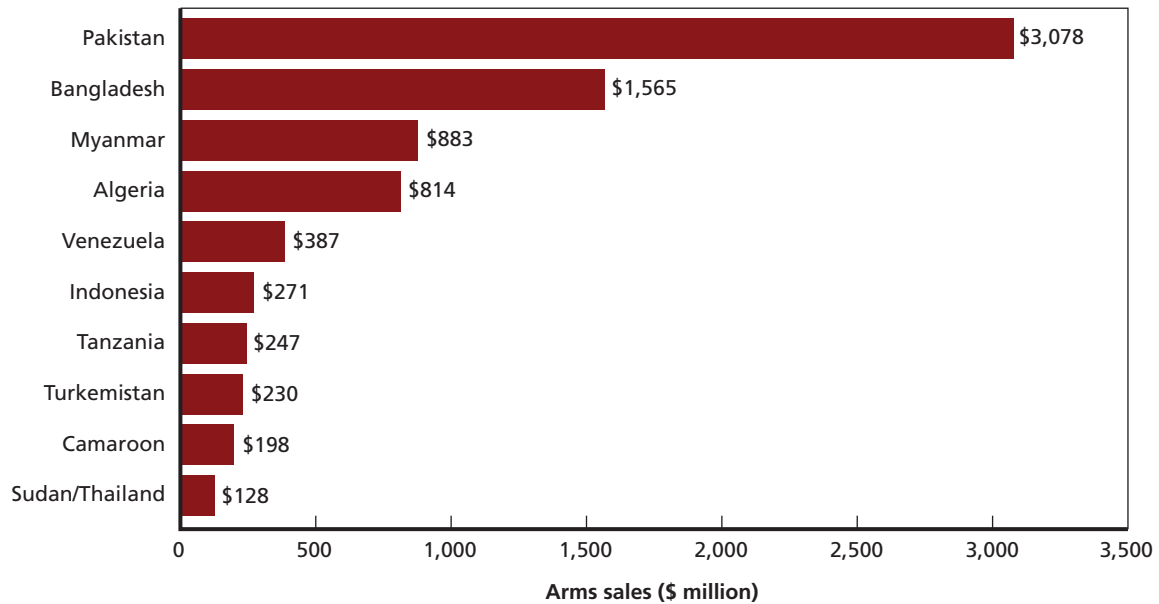
<sup>8</sup> Mangi, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Institute for Peace, “China’s Approach to Africa Takes on Harder Edge,” March 31, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Johannesburg Action Plan (2016–2018),” webpage, December 10, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Zhou, “Is There Still Hope for China, Afghanistan’s Long-Stalled \$3 Billion Copper Mining Deal?” *South China Morning Post*, May 12, 2017.

**Figure 3.1**  
**China's Top Export Destination for Arms Sales, 2012–2016**



SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Arms Transfer Database," webpage, undated.

RAND RR2271-3.1

sales have expanded in recent years to include countries that host major Chinese investments. According to a 2016 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) study, Chinese exports of major arms during the 2012–2016 period increased by 74 percent compared with the 2007–2011 period. China's top arms export destinations included several countries along the routes outlined for the BRI: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The majority of Chinese exports went to Asia and Oceania (71 percent), followed by Africa (22 percent), areas experiencing problems of piracy and armed conflict that also feature important Chinese economic and strategic interests. Chinese arms exports to states in Africa grew the most, expanding 122 percent from 2012–2016 compared with 2007–2011.<sup>12</sup>

### State-Owned Enterprises

In their capacity to serve commercial as well as military purposes and their amenability to government direction, state-owned companies provide a critical and distinctive element of China's approach to protecting overseas interests. Chinese companies play a key role in developing port and basing infrastructure in other countries, and in providing logistics support to military forces deployed abroad. While formally designed to support commercial activity, the facilities can also support military operations. For example, China Merchants Holdings International (CMHI) helped develop the Colombo International Container Terminal in Sri Lanka

<sup>12</sup> Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman, and Nan Tian, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2016," SIPRI fact sheet, February 2017.



for ostensibly commercial reasons. However, PLAN ships have docked at the port.<sup>13</sup> Dual-use facilities allow the PLA capabilities to supply fuel and fresh food as well as offer opportunities for crew rest. They could, in some cases, also allow limited capabilities to repair vessels.<sup>14</sup> In terms of logistics support abroad, China's largest shipping conglomerate, COSCO, has been the PLAN's lead supplier. COSCO reportedly joined an interagency research team in 2007 to establish a PLAN presence in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>15</sup>

The National Security Law also authorizes the government to direct commercial entities to provide ships, aircraft, and other resources to support national security missions.<sup>16</sup> The law confirms a practice observed in some security-related emergencies. In 2011, for example, China relied heavily on chartered merchant vessels and airliners to evacuate personnel from Libya.<sup>17</sup>

## Commercial Security Contractors

Chinese security contractors offer services to protect individuals and assets in dangerous locations. The relationship between the companies and government authorities remains ambiguous. At the very least, government authorities provide general guidance and restrictions on the activities of such companies, such as the prohibition against carrying arms. The National Security Law carries provisions for government authorities to direct these companies to protect national interests in some circumstances.

Contractors play an important role in providing security for overseas interests, and for that reason the government has encouraged their existence. In 2010, the PRC government passed legislation authorizing and regulating the establishment of commercial security firms. According to a report in the *Financial Times*, about 3,200 Chinese commercial security personnel were based abroad in 2016, which is more than the 2,600 PLA personnel serving in UN missions abroad. The report profiled one security contractor company, Dewe, staffed primarily with PLA veterans. Dewe recently announced plans to establish two "security camps" in South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The *Financial Times* article noted that while Chinese companies in the past often employed foreign security firms, government officials have increasingly pressured enterprises to exclusively hire Chinese security contractors because of their political reliability and the government's ability to regulate their activities. As an example, the article described how China's National Petroleum Company once hired guards from the United Kingdom (UK) company Control Risks but in 2010 began to employ guards from Guan'an, a company with links to Chinese oil company Zhenhua.<sup>18</sup> Chinese security contractors provide the advantage of a low political profile, generally lower cost, the ability to carry

<sup>13</sup> Derek Yan and Angela Yu, "Chinese Maritime Silk Road Takes Shape from Sri Lanka to Africa," *IHS Maritime Fairplay*, April 17, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, "Not an Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century," National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives, Report No. 7, 2014, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Erickson and Christopher Carlson, "Sustained Support: The PLAN Evolves Its Expeditionary Logistics Strategy," *Jane's Navy International*, September 3, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> PRC, 2015b.

<sup>17</sup> Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation from Libya," *China Brief*, Vol. 11, No. 4, March 11, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Clover, "Chinese Private Security Companies Go Global," *Financial Times*, February 26, 2017a.

out work deemed too sensitive for PLA forces, and some assurance of political reliability. However, a major drawback is the limited protection offered, because Chinese contractors generally cannot carry firearms due to strict domestic gun control laws. An exception is possible for hired security guards who perform escort duty for merchant vessels in international waters. The *Financial Times* article identified one company, Beijing-based Hua Xin Zhong An, that provides security contractors to the PLAN. These contractors are reportedly authorized to carry firearms and use lethal force in self-defense against pirates.<sup>19</sup>

## People's Armed Police

The PAP reports to both the Central Military Commission and the State Council. The PAP is principally charged with internal security, border security, and guarding key facilities and installations. However, the PAP also plays an important role in carrying out China's international counterterrorism efforts. According to the Ministry of Defense website, the PAP has sent personnel abroad to a dozen countries to receive training or provide training. It has also participated in counterterrorism exercises, such as the 2007 event with the Internal Troops of Russia.<sup>20</sup> The elite Snow Leopards Commando Unit, formed in 2002, specializes in antiterror activities and has participated in international exercises.<sup>21</sup> Its members have provided security for Chinese embassies in such volatile regions as Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>22</sup> PAP units appear to have also carried out counterterrorism operations in other countries on a bilateral basis. China's Ministry of Defense has acknowledged that Chinese "law enforcement" forces operating in Afghanistan, probably PAP, have "jointly carried out counterterrorism" operations.<sup>23</sup>

## Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia

China has the world's largest fleet of coast guard vessels. Created from an amalgamation of five separate maritime law enforcement agencies in 2015, the CCG now has over 200 ships, including at least two 10,000-ton ships. China is also one of the few countries to operate a maritime militia, which consists of civilian fishermen and mariners who operate on a part-time basis in a military capacity. The maritime militia serves as a paramilitary force capable of carrying out actions in line with the aims of Chinese authorities, but with a more ambiguous authority than would be the case with government flagged vessels. Estimates of the number of maritime militia vessels range in the thousands.<sup>24</sup> A major advantage of using CCG vessels is that China can justify their activities as "law enforcement," thus providing legal and political cover for a range

<sup>19</sup> Clover, 2017a.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China, "The People's Armed Police Force," webpage, June 1, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Tang Yuankai, "Beijing's Answer to Bond," *Beijing Review*, January 27, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Matheiu Duchatel, "Terror Overseas: Understanding China's Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 26, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> "China Again Dismisses Reports of Military Patrols in Afghanistan," Reuters, February 23, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "Meet the Maritime Militia Waging a 'People's War at Sea,'" *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2015.

of activities and operations. However, this advantage also limits the utility of such a force, as their jurisdiction rests within the seas claimed by China.<sup>25</sup>

## People's Liberation Army

China's military provides the most versatile, lethal, and capable option for providing security abroad. However, the PLA currently retains only a limited capability to project power. Policy constraints, a lack of military allies, and political sensitivities also restrict the role of military power in other countries. Nevertheless, for many tasks, the PLA plays an irreplaceable role, and its ability to operate abroad is expected to grow in coming years.

### PLAN

Regarding the development of a naval expeditionary capability, the 2015 Military Strategy White Paper stated that the military would “develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and developmental interests.” It stated such a force would “protect the security of strategic sea lines of communication and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation.”<sup>26</sup> Some of the more relevant platforms include aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, and replenishment vessels.

*Aircraft carriers.* An aircraft carrier can provide limited air support from sea and can also offer a visible Chinese naval presence along key sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Several carrier groups would be necessary for persistent presence in these areas, however, to allow for periodic maintenance. China is reportedly planning to build between two to four more aircraft carriers. In 2012, China commissioned “Liaoning,” its first aircraft carrier, which is a converted ex-Soviet Kuznetsov class cruiser. In 2017, China launched its first domestically produced aircraft carrier, a 50,000-ton vessel that shares with its predecessor a ski-slope style launch.<sup>27</sup>

*Amphibious assault ships.* Amphibious assault ships can deliver HA/DR, as well as amphibious assault missions. China has built four Type 071 landing platform docks (LPDs), each of which can hold four landing craft, air cushioned (LCAC) and two helicopters. China is likely to build several additional LPDs and may also build landing helicopter docks.<sup>28</sup>

*Modern combatants.* China's larger modern surface combatants can participate in missions overseas, so long as they have adequate replenishment support. China's fleet of destroyers, frigates, and submarines can support limited power projection to the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. For expeditionary operations beyond the South China Sea region, submarines can help with SLOC escort and intelligence gathering.<sup>29</sup>

*Auxiliaries.* Replenishment and auxiliary ships are vital for supporting operations abroad, especially in areas featuring limited port access. China has only limited quantities

<sup>25</sup> *Straits Times*, “China Coast Guard Building Up Fleet,” March 24, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015a.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Boden, “China Launches Its First Domestically Produced Aircraft Carrier,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Naval Technology, “Type 071 Landing Platform Dock,” webpage, May 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, “The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century,” 2015.

of these vessels. According to a 2015 Office of Naval Intelligence report, the PLAN currently has seven FUCHI-class replenishment oilers, three DALAO-class submarine rescue vessels, one DAGUAN large submarine support ship, a DANYAO island resupply ship, two YUAN WANG missile tenders, and one ANWEI hospital ship.<sup>30</sup> China lacks sufficient capability to service ships at sea, however. Currently, in the event of a breakdown, a PLAN ship must pull into a foreign port and have repair parts and technicians flown in.<sup>31</sup>

### PLA Air Force

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) aspires to expand its ability to assist in the protection of national interests abroad. According to the *Science of Military Strategy*, published in 2013, the PLAAF is expected to focus on strengthening its “strategic transport forces,” including its “air strategic delivery capability” (long-distance transport) and airborne forces.<sup>32</sup> In the future, the PLAAF may also participate in strike missions against terrorist groups and other nonstate threats, most likely within a multilateral context.

Overall, PLAAF deployments abroad have primarily centered on two types of operations: participation in exercises with foreign militaries, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. The PLAAF has also carried out an NEO and has begun to participate in international competitions and air shows. However, it has not played a role in PLA peacekeeping operations so far.<sup>33</sup> Although the sample size is small, the PLAAF’s rate of conducting international deployments appears to be on the rise, particularly for HA/DR operations.

*Transport aircraft.* China relies on a limited inventory of aging IL-76 transport planes to carry out the bulk of its HA/DR missions. However, the Y-20 large military transport aircraft, which entered service in July 2017, will bolster the PLAAF’s ability to support PLA-wide contingency operations.<sup>34</sup>

*Refueling tankers.* Tankers can enable expeditionary missions by extending the range and reach of PLAAF aircraft. China’s primary tanker is the H-6U, a variant of the H-6 bomber. The H-6 tanker carries a maximum fuel load of 37 tons and can only support a select number of combat aircraft. China also reportedly has at least one Il-78 tanker, which could refuel J-20 stealth fighters.<sup>35</sup>

*Strike aircraft.* Chinese strike aircraft, such as the JH-7 or J-10, could be useful for operations against terrorist and other nonstate threats, especially if undertaken in coordination with ground forces. Within multilateral exercises held by the SCO, PLAAF aircraft have trained on such missions.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Erickson and Christopher Carlson, “Sustained Support: The PLAN Evolves Its Expeditionary Logistics Strategy,” *Jane’s Navy International*, September 3, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Research Department, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], Beijing, China: Military Science Press, 2013, pp. 222–224.

<sup>33</sup> Xinhua, “Nine Chinese Aircraft Finish Ebola Rescue Task,” November 19, 2014b.

<sup>34</sup> Xinhua, “Chinese Large Freighter Plane Enters Military Service,” July 7, 2016a.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Pilger, “First Modern Tanker Observed at Chinese Airbase,” staff bulletin, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 18, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> “Peace Mission 2009 Improves Anti-Terror Response,” *Global Times*, July 24, 2009.

## Ground Forces

Chinese ground forces can carry out a broad array of missions and tasks to protect overseas interests. Important noncombat tasks include PKO and HA/DR. Small ground force detachments, most plausibly consisting of marines or special forces, could also participate in limited combat missions against nonstate threats.

*Troops in UN PKOs.* As Chinese authorities like to point out, China contributes more troops to UN PKO than any other member of the five permanent members of the Security Council. However, China's contribution ranks 12th in terms of all countries, with Ethiopia providing the most, at more than 8,000 troops in UN PKO per year.<sup>37</sup> In 2014, about 2,800 troops served in UN PKO missions. China has traditionally provided principally support troops, such as medical, engineering, and logistics troops. In 2013, China dispatched comprehensive security forces to Mali and a battalion of combat troops to South Sudan the following year. China is reportedly discussing the deployment of military helicopters to support UN PKO missions.<sup>38</sup> In 2015, President Xi pledged to increase China's contribution to 8,000 troops.<sup>39</sup>

*Marine Corps.* Although the PLAN's marines have not deployed as a force abroad, these forces could carry out many overseas missions. Roughly 20,000 PLAN marines could help guard embassies, support the evacuation of personnel, and carry out limited combat operations to repel threats like terrorist attacks. According to some media reports, China may seek to expand the size of the PLAN's Marine Corps, in part to carry out such overseas missions.<sup>40</sup> Media reports also claim that the PLAN's Marine Corps has expanded training in diverse geographic and climate conditions, skills that could be useful in missions abroad.<sup>41</sup>

*Special forces.* Special forces can carry out specialized tasks in demanding conditions, such as hostage rescue, reconnaissance, and combat missions against such nonstate actors. The PLA Army has expanded the ranks of its special forces in recent years. Each of the China's five theaters of command features at least one special forces unit, usually brigade sized. The PLAN and PAAF 15th Airborne Corps also have special forces units. About 70 PLAN special forces personnel have deployed with each of the counterpiracy task forces deployed to the Gulf of Aden. Small units have also deployed abroad to take part in bilateral and multilateral exercises, usually with a counterterrorism focus.<sup>42</sup>

## PLA Limited Power Projection Enablers

To carry out limited military power projection–related operations, China requires intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that can reach distant parts of the world. Military forces also require basing facilities to rest, resupply, and, in some cases, stage forces for operations.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations, "Summary of Troop Contributing Countries by Ranking," webpage, May 31, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Institute of Peace, "China's Contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping," July 26, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "China's Xi Says to Commit 8,000 Troops to U.N. Peacekeeping Force," Reuters, September 28, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Minnie Chan, "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Percent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Mark R. Cozad, *PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-451, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Dennis Blasko, "Chinese Special Forces: Not Like 'Back at Bragg,'" *War on the Rocks*, January 1, 2015.

*ISR.* Chinese commanders operating in unfamiliar locales will use ISR to support their missions. China has already developed satellite communications and is building up a constellation of Beidou navigation satellites that will give Chinese forces an independent regional navigation and weapons guidance system. China has launched dozens of satellites under the dual-use Yaogan series, which can enhance the PLA's space reconnaissance capability. China has also developed the Haiyang ocean-monitoring satellite and Tianlian satellites, which provide delay relay coverage over much of the Earth's surface.<sup>43</sup>

*Ports and bases.* The establishment of overseas bases and ports that can support military forces is essential to sustain military operations of any duration. However, the most commonly practiced means of acquiring military bases abroad are unlikely to work for China. In previous centuries, imperial powers invaded other countries and established colonies that included ports and bases that could hold forward-deployed military units. The United States built some military facilities in colonies acquired from its wars with Spain, such as the Philippines and Guam, but victory over the Axis powers in World War II also provided the opportunity to establish military bases in Germany and Japan. Security agreements expanded the U.S. military presence in other countries, but these agreements carried the expectation that the United States would aid in the defense of the host countries if attacked. The Soviet Union gained access to a small number of foreign ports and facilities, such as in Cuba and Vietnam, but these hosted a relatively limited number of military forces, mostly in an advisory capacity.

As it has already done in Djibouti, Beijing may conclude agreements for a small number of ports and bases that offer limited support to military ships and aircraft, but these will lack the extensive services and self-defensive capabilities of American-style military bases. Also, because such facilities are likely to be established without a broader alliance-type agreement, the host nation is likely to restrict the numbers and types of combat forces stationed on its soil. Accordingly, China can be expected to rely on both dual-use ports and a very small number of military facilities, especially in politically sensitive areas near a rival power, such as India. Dual-use facilities (i.e., ports and infrastructure that can serve both commercial and military purposes) can provide a basic level of logistics resupply and perhaps limited maintenance support to visiting naval ships. Analysts have noted a strong correlation between where Chinese antipiracy warships have docked ashore and Chinese-funded port development projects in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. As an added attractive feature, the commercial functions of dual-use ports can help offset the costs of support to military platforms and reduce the political profile of such facilities. A disadvantage of dual-use ports is that they lack self-protective features and the fact that they can only support mostly nonwar types of military operations. They are also vulnerable to domestic political pressure due to their ostensibly commercial natures. The Chinese built port in Sri Lanka may be viewed as a prototype of the dual-use military supply point, and its experience exemplifies some of these issues. Although the port is ostensibly a civilian facility, PLA naval vessels apparently operate without the need to inform the local populace. This practice has raised criticism in local media sources.<sup>44</sup> Other examples

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<sup>43</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Full Text: China's Space Activities," Xinhua, December 27, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Abijit Singh, "PacNet #7—A 'PLA-N' for Chinese Maritime Bases in the Indian Ocean," newsletter, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 26, 2015.

in which Chinese companies are undertaking foreign port construction include Kenya's Lamu, Myanmar's Kyaukphyu, Pakistan's Karachi, and Namibia's Walvis Bay.<sup>45</sup>

Military ports and bases can host armed forces for a longer duration, provide greater security, and support a broader range of operations. China's first overseas military base in Djibouti has gained considerable attention from Western press, although it remains modest in scale and capacity compared with U.S. military bases.<sup>46</sup> Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, the foreign minister of Djibouti, said there are no precise limits on Chinese troop numbers, but the outpost could house no more than 2,000 and would likely have only 300 troops. It will have a single berth for ships and no runway, but possibly a helipad, he said. It will cost China \$20 million annually for ten years, with an option for ten more, and will be Beijing's only military facility in Djibouti.<sup>47</sup> China announced the establishment of a military base only after a state-owned enterprise had invested in and begun to carry out upgrades to the Doraleh Multipurpose Port.<sup>48</sup>

*Prepositioning of strategic supplies.* China's academic community is in the beginning stages of research regarding prepositioning of supplies abroad.<sup>49</sup> In 2011, the "Military Terminology of Chinese People's Liberation Army" for the first time defined *strategic prepositioning*, which it described as "the arrangement or distribution of troops, materiel, and equipment made in preparation for satisfying future strategic needs."<sup>50</sup> Currently, the PLA is exploring the prepositioning of supplies primarily in its own territory. In 2012, the Quartermaster Supply and Fuel Department of the Air Force and Hainan Pacific Oil Corporation, Limited, established storage facilities at a civil aviation airport in Hainan to prestore some aviation fuel for use by certain PLAAF aircraft.<sup>51</sup>

In sum, China has available an array of paramilitary, civilian, military, and host-nation–provided security forces, equipment, and facilities that it can employ to protect the country's interests abroad (see Figure 3.2). The forces may operate in conjunction with one another, alongside one another, or independently with little coordination. Which forces are likely to appear in a country will depend on the nature of China's interests, threats posed, and the types of missions and tasks in highest demand for that country.

China's ambitions regarding the BRI suggests it will increase investment in the different types of forces reviewed in this report in South, Central, and Southeast Asia. Africa also remains a likely area of growing Chinese security-related operations and activities because of the confluence of the region's weak governance, variety of nontraditional threats, and increase in Chinese economic interests. Chinese commercial interests have expanded in other parts of the world, but those areas are less likely to see a significant increase in Chinese security pres-

<sup>45</sup> Stratfor, "Mapping China's Maritime Ambitions," November 23, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Perlez and Buckley, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Page, "China Builds First Overseas Military Outpost," *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, "China's First Overseas Base in Djibouti, An Enabler of its Middle East Policy," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 2, January 25, 2016.

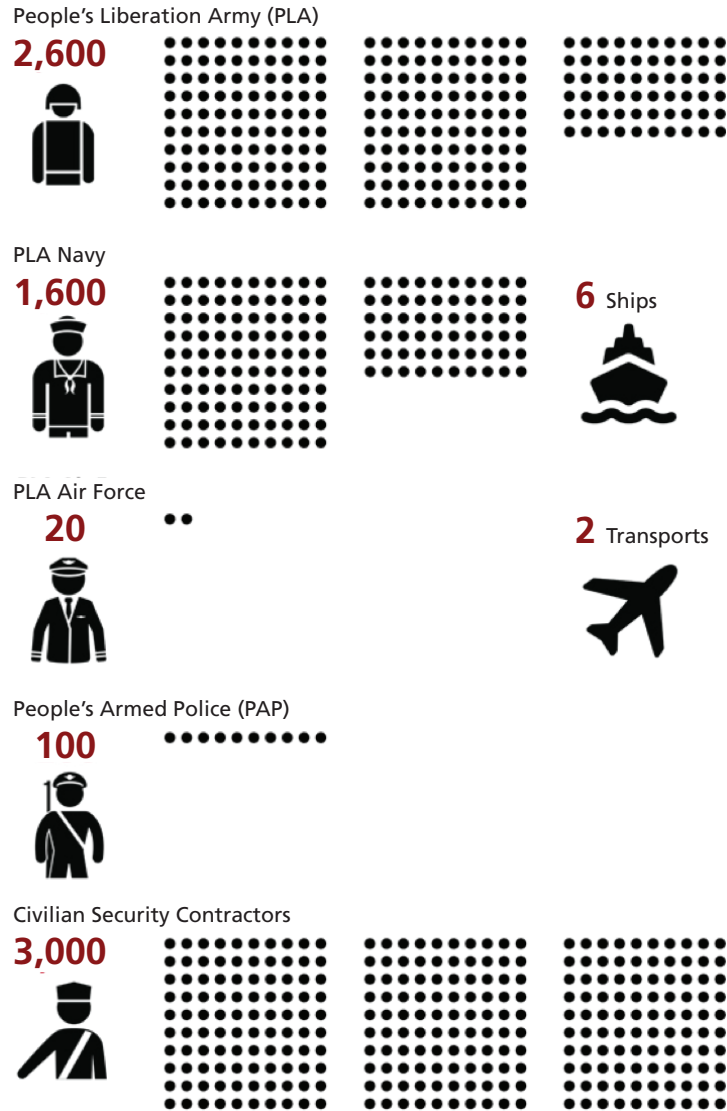
<sup>49</sup> Wei Daiqiang, "A Review of Research on the Concept of Strategic Prepositioning" [战略预置思想研究述评], *China's Military Science Research* [中国军事科学], May 2013, pp. 147–154.

<sup>50</sup> Chinese People's Liberation Army Military Terminology Regulation Committee, *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, Beijing: Military Science Press, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> *Air Force News*, "Coordinated Use of Civilian Support Forces and Construction of Territory-Wide Fuel Support Networks," November 20, 2012, p. 1.

ence because of a lack of pressing threats or serious logistical hurdles to carrying out sustained operations.

**Figure 3.2**  
**Estimated Monthly Average of Chinese Forces Abroad**



Icons: Noun Project Samuel Shank; Adrien Coquet; Gan Khoon Lay; Gregor Cresnar; Francielly Costantin Senra

SOURCE: RAND author's analysis.

NOTE: Each dot represents ten people. PLA army includes 2,500 for UN PKO, 100 in international exercises. PLAN includes three ships, 800 personnel in Gulf of Aden mission, and three ships in transit or exercises. PLAAF represents HA/DR missions. PAP represents Afghan/Iraq embassy guards and engagements.

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## Missions and Tasks

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The challenge facing China's overseas interests consists principally of two imperatives: first, authorities must provide security for citizens, property, and key assets located abroad; and second, authorities need to promote stability in areas that affect Chinese economic activity. The missions and tasks facing Chinese forces abroad aim to address either or both of these imperatives. Missions and tasks that primarily address the former include those of ensuring personal security, asset security, and protection of SLOC. Missions and tasks that principally address the latter include operations and activities to promote a country's internal security, HA/DR, and counterterrorism.

The differing capabilities of available forces suggests some forces may be better suited for certain tasks than others. Where responsibilities are relatively simple or the host nation is unwilling to accept Chinese military personnel operating to suppress threats, China can employ lower-profile forces, such as commercial contractors or host-nation–provided security forces. However, the PLA remains essential for especially dangerous situations or for tasks best addressed using equipment available in military forces, such as naval ships for counterpiracy operations, NEOs, and strikes against nonstate threats. Table 4.1 draws from Chapters Three and Four to list the types of security forces and how these could be used to protect overseas interests.

**Table 4.1**  
**Chinese Forces Capable of Missions to Protect Overseas Interests**

Task	Military (PLA)	Paramilitary (PAP)	Commercial/ Contractor	Host-Nation Security Forces
Personal security	X	X	X	X
Asset security	X	X	X	X
Counterterrorism	X	X	—	X
NEO	X	—	X	—
HA/DR	X	—	—	—
Sea lane protection	X	—	—	—
PKO	X	—	—	—
Combat against nonstate threats	X	—	—	—

## Personal Security

The most basic and widespread security mission facing Chinese authorities is the need to protect the lives and safety of Chinese citizens living and traveling abroad. Because of the sheer volume of people working and traveling overseas, this poses an immense challenge. Security personnel could be in demand in countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and anywhere else Chinese citizens face dangers.

To carry out this mission, responsible personnel may need to be proficient in a range of tasks, including intelligence analysis to provide warning of potential threats, route planning, and travel escort. Citizens with more resources may choose to hire personnel to serve as bodyguards. Individuals charged with personal security need a reliable communications system and means of conveyance. For more demanding tasks, more sophisticated surveillance systems and small arms for self-defense may be required.

The relatively low equipment requirements for this mission set make it one that could be done by a broad variety of troop types. Host-nation–provided security forces offer the most convenient and politically low-profile option, but the reliability and effectiveness of this option vary greatly by country. As an illustration, in one Iraq city, desperate Chinese businessmen reportedly called the Iraqi police after villagers stormed a Chinese-owned company following a property dispute. To their dismay, the Chinese watched as the Iraqi police joined in the looting.<sup>1</sup>

To provide more-reliable security, Beijing has sought to expand the role of Chinese police forces or security contractors. In Europe, the threat of crime and terrorism has spurred Beijing to seek arrangements in which Chinese police liaisons patrol alongside their counterparts in Italy, Spain, and other countries.<sup>2</sup> Commercial security contractors provide an accessible option for many businesses and some travelers, but these forces offer limited protection because of domestic restrictions barring the use of firearms. Many Chinese security contractors reportedly train in martial arts or carry nonlethal self-defense weapons, but the effectiveness of these methods against well-armed threats may be questioned.<sup>3</sup> Paramilitary and military forces play, at most, a small role in this task, because of their limited availability and the government's reluctance to station such troops abroad. In Afghanistan and Iraq, China has deployed PAP special forces to guard embassies.<sup>4</sup> In the future, China may also choose to station additional PAP or PLA marines to guard some of its diplomatic personnel.

## Asset Security

Complementing personal security, protection of infrastructure, factories, and other assets also remains a major security need. Relevant responsibilities include guard duty, surveillance of facilities, physical security, and rapid response to disperse criminal or insurgent attacks. Similar to personal security, the equipment involved to carry out this task can be fairly basic. Guards

<sup>1</sup> Zi Yang, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Eder, Bertram Lang, Moritz Rudolf, "China's Global Law Enforcement Drive," *MERICIS China Monitor*, No. 36, January 19, 2017, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Clover, 2017a.

<sup>4</sup> Duchatel, 2016.

require some means of self-defense, preferably small arms, although, in some cases, this may not be feasible. Individuals charged with asset security may also require surveillance systems, barriers, and other easily available technologies.

As with personal security, this mission can be managed by a variety of troop types, including host-nation–provided forces. Indeed, China has encouraged countries participating in the BRI to increase investments in local security for major infrastructure projects. Pakistan has created a special unit of roughly 800 police and a 13,000-troop Special Security Division to protect Chinese CPEC-related infrastructure projects.<sup>5</sup> Chinese companies have also turned to security contractors to assist with protection of their facilities, although these personnel are unarmed. Some media reports suggest China may send PLA marines to guard bases and key infrastructure projects abroad in the future.<sup>6</sup>

### Sea Lines of Communication Protection

Protection of China's SLOC involves such tasks as the escort of merchant ships, maritime patrols, at-sea hostage rescue, reconnaissance, and combat actions, including antisurface, anti-submarine, and antiair operations to destroy threats to Chinese vessels. The main threat to China's SLOC stems from nonstate actors, such as maritime pirates, although if China's relationship with neighbors such as India deteriorated into hostilities, it could find conventional navies a threat to its SLOC. Accordingly, in recent years, China has increased the variety of naval combatants involved in this mission.

For this mission, the PLAN provides the most relevant capability. The PLAN's counter-piracy operation remains the largest and most mature military operation outside China. From December 2008 to early 2015, the PLAN deployed more than 16,000 sailors, as well as 1,300 marines and special operations forces personnel in its multirotation counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Twenty PLAN task forces escorted 6,000 commercial vessels in more than 800 convoys. These missions have involved more than 30 different PLAN vessels and have lasted as long as six months in duration. Chinese escort ships have also rescued or assisted more than 60 civilian vessels that were being tracked or had been hijacked by pirates.<sup>7</sup> While the military is the best-suited force for this duty, paramilitary coast guard forces play a key role in waters closer to China. Moreover, in some cases, Chinese security contractors have helped repel pirate attacks in the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup> China has also stepped up involvement of other naval ships in SLOC protection, such as submarines. In late 2013, a SHANG-class (Type 093) nuclear-powered submarine accompanied a PLAN task force transiting the Strait of Malacca on the way to and from its home port on Hainan Island.<sup>9</sup> In September 2014, a Song-class (Type 039) conventional submarine visited Colombo, Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Syed Raza Hassan, "To Protect Chinese Investment, Pakistan Leaves Little to Chance," Reuters, February 7, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Chan, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Zhao Lei, "Setting Sail Against a Sea of Troubles," *China Daily*, February 12, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Zi Yang, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *China Military Online*, "PLA Navy Submarine Visits Sri Lanka," September 24, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Vijay Sakhua, "Chinese Submarines in Sri Lanka Unnerve India: Next Stop Pakistan?" *China Brief*, May 29, 2015.

## Noncombatant Evacuation Operation

In some cases, major natural disasters or the sudden escalation of an internal war can threaten Chinese citizens in other countries. To cope with such a situation, Chinese forces may need to transport large numbers of people quickly and safely, using whatever civilian or military means are available.

The large-scale evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011 marked China's first NEO outside China that involved military aircraft. By the evening of March 2, PLAAF IL-76s had moved 1,655 civilians from Libya to Khartoum, Sudan.<sup>11</sup> However, the PLAAF did not participate in the PLA's evacuation of civilians in Yemen in 2015. Chinese civilian planes, with the assistance of Egyptian civilian aircraft, flew Chinese citizens home from Djibouti after the PLAN evacuated them from Yemen to Djibouti.<sup>12</sup>

## Peacekeeping Operations

PKOs can help ensure the internal security necessary for China to conduct economic activity in a country. Relevant tasks include patrolling, dispersal of attacks, guard duty, protection of key facilities, and operations to oversee disarming of factions. Because of the political sensitivities of the task and the risks of combat with factions in a host nation, units charged with this task require military equipment and political authorities from the central government. Thus, the PLA and PAP are likely to do most of the peacekeeping work. However, since 2001, the Ministry of Public Security has also sent small numbers of civilian police to support UN PKO in East Timor, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti, and Liberia.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, China has increased the PLA's participation in multilateral peacekeeping military operations under UN jurisdiction. With about 2,600 troops deployed, China has become the single largest contributor of troops to UN PKO forces. Its troops have deployed to hotspots around the world, from Haiti to Sudan to Cambodia. China finds especially useful the deployment of UN PKO troops to troubled areas featuring large Chinese investments, such as oil production facilities in Sudan. China has also committed resources to building the capacity of partner nations to carry out peacekeeping operations in areas of strategic value. For example, in September 2015, President Xi pledged \$100 million in military aid to the African Union.<sup>14</sup>

## Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism includes such tasks as reconnaissance, surveillance, patrols, and special forces operations to eliminate terrorist personnel. Due to political sensitivities, the potential for combat with armed groups, and authorities required to carry out relevant operations, the

<sup>11</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> "Chinese Ambassador to Djibouti States Yemen Evacuation Work Proceeded Smoothly" [中国驻吉布提大使说也门撤侨工作顺利进行], *People's Daily*, April 1, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "China Sends 9th Peacekeeping Police Squad to Haiti," *People's Daily*, November 2, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Martina and Brunnstrom, 2015.

PLA and PAP are best situated to carry out this task. However, host-nation–provided forces have a vested interest in countering insurgent groups and may carry out their own operations and could act in conjunction with Chinese forces in some cases.

China has expanded the PLA and the PAP’s involvement in international activities to counter terrorism, owing to concerns about potential links between international terror groups and Muslim separatists in Xinjiang. In addition to the deployments of PAP personnel abroad to train counterparts and receive training, the PLA has participated in 15 SCO exercises that focused primarily on counterterrorism.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan established a “quadrilateral mechanism” to enable military collaboration and coordination against “terrorist and extremist forces.” The mechanism enables the four countries to “coordinate and support each other” in the “study of counter terrorism, intelligence sharing, anti-terrorist capability building, and joint anti-terrorist training and personnel training.”<sup>16</sup> China also pursues bilateral counterterrorism cooperation outside the SCO framework, including Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Thailand, and the United States.<sup>17</sup>

## Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief

HA/DR can not only help restore stability to a country, it also provides benefits to the PLA’s image as a globally involved military. Relevant tasks include the delivery of emergency food, water, and shelter. To carry out this mission, involved forces need access to heavy transports, ships, and relief supplies. The military is the best positioned force to carry out such missions.

Overall, the PLA’s international HA/DR operations to date have been characterized by a few common details. In most operations, two to four Il-76s have carried out the mission. Supplies have largely consisted of foodstuffs, water, temporary housing, and power generation supplies, and small boats in the case of flooded areas.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, China has deployed naval hospital ships to support larger-scale relief efforts.<sup>19</sup>

## Combat Against Nonstate Threats

China has, to date, avoided engaging its military forces in combat operations against nonstate threats, such as insurgencies and armed, organized criminal groups. However, in situations in which a host nation’s government lacked effective control over unstable regions, PLA officials may consider combat operations to eliminate threats, most likely under a bilateral or multilateral partnership. PLA special forces, drones, and strike aircraft are the most likely type of forces to be involved in such small-scale operations. In 2013, China reportedly considered lethal drone strikes against a drug lord in Myanmar after he killed 13 Chinese sailors. How-

<sup>15</sup> Economy, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *China Military Online*, “Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Issue Joint Statement on Anti-Terrorism,” August 5, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Duchatel, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Cristina L. Garafola and Timothy R. Heath, *The Chinese Air Force’s First Steps Toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2056-AF, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *China Military Online*, “Chinese Naval Hospital Ship Peace Ark Leaves Span for Sierra Leone,” September 13, 2017.

ever, Chinese authorities backed away from the idea and, instead, opted to capture the fugitive in a joint Chinese-Lao law enforcement operation.<sup>20</sup>

The missions and tasks required to protect Chinese interests abroad mostly involve nonwar missions and guard duties. In general, China's pursuit of security for its overseas interests requires a far lower level of combat capability than might be the case for the United States, which must be prepared to fight major wars to help defend the allies in which some U.S. forces are based. The missions and tasks confronting Chinese authorities carry different requirements for authorities, equipment, and weapons. In some cases, military forces are the only realistic option. However, some of the most in-demand missions, such as personal and asset security, could be done by a broad variety of troop types.

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<sup>20</sup> John Fernquest, "China Drone Strike Plans on Shan Drug Lord," *Bangkok Post*, February 20, 2013.

## Conclusion

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Deepening integration into the global economy has proven critical to powering China's economic ascent. However, growing involvement in international trade and investment opens significant vulnerabilities. As China grapples with the realities of an economy increasingly susceptible to disruption from distant influences, it is developing its own unique approach to providing security for interest abroad.

Past precedents provide a poor model for China. European and Japanese imperialists built large armies and navies to guard access to vital resources and markets. Critical to their approach was the creation of colonies where domestic populations could migrate to and help administer distant lands. The opprobrium cast on imperial invasion makes this model implausible for China. After World War II, the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union favored the forward deployment of army, air, and naval forces at large military bases located in the lands of allies around the world. These two countries struggled for ideological and political supremacy and frequently armed and equipped proxy forces to fight one another in varying parts of the world. Their alliances occasionally entangled the giants in distant wars. Sustaining a large overseas military presence has also proven hugely expensive for the United States. Because China lacks allies and the ability to fund a massive expansion in forward-deployed forces, it is unlikely to follow the path of the United States and the Soviet Union.

China's approach is likely to contrast with both the colonial approach and that of the Cold War super powers in several ways. First, the military will likely play a smaller role in the overall set of forces involved with overseas security. Second, China will rely heavily on non-PLA assets, such as funding for host-nation security efforts and commercial security contractors. Third, due to its limited investment in military power projection capabilities, China may have to accept a higher degree of disorder and risk in some of the countries in which it is expanding its economic presence. In some cases, it may have little choice but to abandon projects because of an inability to ensure security. In June 2017, authorities announced measures to monitor and oversee investments abroad for purposes of "safeguarding economic interests and national security," according to a statement released by the Central Leading Group for Comprehensive Reform.<sup>1</sup> While principally aimed at curbing bad investments and capital flight, it also offers a means of scrutinizing and perhaps reducing investments in dangerous areas. The measure also provides a useful tool for local authorities to pressure partner nations into adequately funding and directing their security forces. Media reports have noted that the added scrutiny has already reduced investment activity. Since the measures were implemented in

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Tang, "Overseas Deals a National Security Matter for China, Xi Says," *South China Morning Post*, June 27, 2017.

2017, outbound investment for the first five months of the year dropped 50 percent compared with that of the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

China's distinctive approach in many ways reproduces in exaggerated form trends already apparent in other expeditionary militaries, including the United States. Western countries have increasingly sought to advance security in distant lands in a way that minimizes the military's role. In Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, U.S. officials have armed and equipped partner militaries to advance U.S. objectives and subdue threats, while seeking to reduce its uniformed presence in the same countries. China, too, appears interested in finding ways to enhance security, while minimizing its military commitments abroad.

The growing role of security contractors in U.S. and European security operations has already gained considerable media attention. At several points during U.S. operations in Afghanistan, security contractors reportedly outnumbered active-duty uniformed personnel.<sup>3</sup> China has similarly expanded the role of commercial security contractors abroad, especially to help with tasks of personal and asset security, and it is likely to expand the ranks of these forces.

China's disinterest in helping states restructure their societies in more stable ways in favor of more narrowly countering direct threats to its people and assets conforms to a broader pattern in which world powers have narrowly focused security operations to eliminate immediate threats, while leaving broader problems unresolved. U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, despite the unsettled and unstable situations in both countries, have left those countries trapped in internecine civil conflict. The rapid disengagement contrasts sharply with U.S. occupation and reconstruction of Japan and Germany after World War II. In Syria, both Russia and the United States have involved small numbers of military forces to counter particular armed factions, but they have shown little interest or ability in seeking ways to ensure a more lasting, stable peace. In an era of stagnant global economic growth, spreading disorder, and constrained defense budgets, China's approach may well offer lessons to other rising countries eager to protect their overseas interests in a politically feasible manner that minimizes costly obligations.

Despite the incentives in favor of a smaller overseas military presence, China is likely to increase its investment in certain capabilities. The PLAAF can be expected to expand the inventory of its heavy transport planes and aerial refueling tankers. The PLAN may expand the numbers of amphibious ships, replenishment ships, and aircraft carriers to assist with SLOC protection and other missions.<sup>4</sup> The PLA may send marines abroad to guard key assets and installations. Special forces from both the military and PAP could participate in occasional combat operations against terrorist threats in collaboration with the armed forces of host nations. However, Beijing is likely to augment these incremental increases in PLA capacity with growing numbers of security contractors abroad and more funding for efforts by host nations to improve security within areas that feature important Chinese assets.

China may choose to step up its focus on developing combat capabilities over the medium to long term if its security situation deteriorates in a significant manner. The most likely shift could be an increase in regional instability due to fragile governments and attacks by nonstate

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<sup>2</sup> Tang, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> James Glanz, "Contractors Outnumber U.S. Troops in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, September 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, 2015.



actors. Of far greater consequence would be a serious downturn in U.S.-China relations. Due to the U.S. global military presence, China would find itself highly vulnerable around the world. Investing in forces and infrastructure to significantly reduce the vulnerability of Chinese economic interests in Africa, Latin America, or South Asia would require a major resource commitment, and even in the best case would offer little useful military capability against U.S. power. Absent this unlikely possibility, however, China's international security presence will most likely increase in modest fashion.

## Implications for the United States

China's approach to protecting its interests abroad carries several implications for the United States. For analysts seeking to understand China's involvement in the security affairs of other countries, focusing on the role of uniformed PLA personnel may not be sufficient. Analysts should take a broader, more expansive view of Chinese efforts to promote security for its overseas interests. In addition to PLA personnel, the role of PAP personnel in international security operations may merit closer scrutiny. More insight into the role of PLA advisers to host-nation security forces and to the activities of commercial security contractors can further shed light on China's security presence in other countries. Although not covered in this report, attention should also be paid to the role of intelligence services, which can aid both host-nation armed forces and Chinese security forces in countering threats.

With only modest increases in military capability abroad, the PLA may not be able or willing to provide the United States much more help against shared threats than it currently does. Instead, the Chinese may decide that accepting higher levels of international instability is a less costly option than trying to provide that stability itself. In such conditions, Beijing may choose to instead concentrate available forces on narrowly eliminating threats to the country's economic and strategic interests and protecting its citizens abroad through drone strikes and other targeted, small-scale operations. Moreover, China will likely remain reluctant to deepen its involvement in intractable problems around the world that could command a sizable military commitment. For those hoping China can "burden share," expectations of how much China can contribute against shared threats may need to be tempered. More likely, Beijing may well continue to rely primarily on U.S. efforts to suppress transnational threats and promote international stability.

The areas in which China is most willing to collaborate with the United States are likely to be those featuring a relatively limited commitment, a low probability of combat escalation, and opportunities to burnish the country's reputation as an international leader. Good candidates for cooperation with the United States that already exist and will continue to persist include HA/DR operations, cooperation between military medical teams to address pandemics, operations to counter maritime piracy, exchanges of information and intelligence on shared concerns, and collaboration in UN PKOs.

China's interest in funding host nations as a lower-risk means of protecting its interests carries potential implications for international security. China's reliance on a combined approach to security abroad raises the possibility that a partner country's agreement to support one type of security force could lead to follow-on to allow other security forces. For example, agreements by countries to allow Chinese state-owned enterprises to build or manage ports could lead to follow-on requests for port calls by PLAN ships. Similarly, although China may

prefer to back host-nation forces to control threats, failures or perceived ineffectiveness by those same forces could drive a Chinese decision to seek greater access for conventional troops to carry out limited combat or other missions to eliminate specific threats.

There is an inherent risk that Chinese-funded, host-nation-provided forces could carry out operations beyond what Beijing expected. In complex situations, forces aligned with Chinese interests could instigate crises or carry out escalatory actions not intended by Beijing. The possibility that Chinese-backed host-nation-provided security forces could contend with those of the United States and its allies and partners cannot be ruled out either. This possibility is most likely in the Middle East, where U.S. alliances with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries struggle for influence with rival Iran, an important partner of both China and Russia. But similar scenarios could also play out in South Asia or Africa. In addition, China's efforts to shape the terms of international law enforcement and paramilitary cooperation to reflect the country's pursuit of separatist activists, officials wanted for corruption, and other political targets has already drawn scrutiny and concern from Western countries.

In coming years, U.S. military officials may find China operates or endorses a variety of military and nonmilitary forces to advance its own security interests. Deepening one's understanding of China's distinctive approach to protecting its overseas interests can help U.S. planners anticipate areas of possible collaboration and competition.

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