



# STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

## PUSHING THE ENVELOPE CHINA'S NONWAR MILITARY ACTIVITIES

*By May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Sharon De Cet*

### ABSTRACT

China's nonwar military activities, including peacekeeping operations, legal maneuvering, hybrid tactics and more, reflect a strategic approach to expanding its influence while avoiding direct conflict. This paper examines how China leverages international law and military resources to push geopolitical boundaries and the reach of the influence of the Chinese Communist Party. Through peacekeeping missions, China enhances its global legitimacy and reshapes the global order, while legal gamesmanship such as reinterpretation of maritime law reinforces territorial claims and ensures the Party's core interests are met. Additionally, hybrid tactics, including nonwar military activities, are a tool for Beijing to reshape regional security dynamics. By analyzing these strategies, this paper highlights how China navigates the fine line between cooperation and coercion in pursuit of its strategic objectives.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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In her South China Sea- focused article examining China's assertive power projection activities, Övgü Küçüksolak claims that "rather than engaging in open military confrontation in the SCS [South China Sea] dispute, China skillfully synchronizes the military, political, economic, cyber and information sources of power in different operational domains to influence, intimidate and coerce the competing claimants."<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s 360° approach combines legal, semilegal and illegal activities, "blurring traditional dichotomies and creating ambiguity and uncertainty."<sup>2</sup> Drawing on military assets without waging kinetic operations, the CCP employs thereby a broad portfolio ranging from legal gamesmanship, to hybrid threats including cognitive warfare, to military operations other than war (MOOTW), now mostly referred to as nonwar military activities (NWMA).<sup>3</sup>

With operations conducted by a country that follows the principle of rule *by* law instead of rule *of* law, execution shows a particular, sui generis interplay of using international law, constructed legitimacy and legality, psychological warfare, influence by training, and other approaches that apply traditional tools in unprecedented ways, combining military assets with nonmilitary approaches in unique ways. This article identifies, analyses, and illustrates the way the CCP is using and interweaving military tools, techniques, and training as well as related areas of international law, hybrid warfare, and international conduct to effectively pursue its objectives below the threshold of kinetic warfare, intentionally blurring the lines between legitimate, legal, and illegal activities.

After exploring the main drivers and underlying paradigms of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) recent modernization and the guiding CCP outlook and doctrine, the article will outline the different understandings and applications of legal gamesmanship and international law. The article will also examine various components of NWMA including peacekeeping, military exercises, and professional military education. The analysis provides insights into the CCP's particular way of employing military assess, tactics, and methodologies for achieving its interests under the threshold of conventional war.

## MILITARY MODERNIZATION

Since 2013, there has been a genuine apprehension about regime stability among the Chinese Communist Party leadership shaping the Party's worldview. This is particularly true with regard to the deteriorating strategic context facing China, and the challenges facing the PLA and its core mandate of keeping the CCP, the entity to which the PLA has pledged allegiance, in power.<sup>4</sup> Military modernization is a common theme throughout the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>5</sup> During the Hu-Wen administration—Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao—there was recognition of the United States' efforts to bolster its military presence and alliances in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> As such, this sense of rising insecurity was present from the very beginning of Chinese President Xi Jinping's mandate: the Chinese leader has repeatedly conveyed to the PLA that "profound changes (are) occurring in both domestic and international security environments" and that provocations from "a major power" are aiming to encircle and restrict China.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Övgü Kalkan Küçüksolak, "The 'New Normal' in China's Assertive Power Projection in the South China Sea: Maritime Hybrid Threats," *Siyasal: Journal of Political Sciences* 30, no. 2 (2021): 261, <https://dergipark.org.tr/>.

2 "Community of Interest (COI) Strategy and Defence," European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (website), n. d., accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/>.

3 Jonathan G. Odom, "Legal Gamesmanship: How China and Russia Use International Law in Geopolitical Competition," in *The Future Faces of Irregular Warfare: Great Power Confrontation in the 21st Century*, ed. Varsha Koduvayur, James Kiras, and Richard Newton (Washington DC: Irregular Warfare Center Press, 2024), <https://www.researchgate.net/>; and Kevin Bilms, "Beyond War and Peace: The PLA's 'Non-War Military Activities' Concept," Modern War Institute (website), January 26, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>.

4 Timothy R. Heath, Howard Wang, and Cindy Zheng, *Political Legitimacy and the People's Liberation Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025), <https://www.rand.org/>.

5 Cynthia Watson, "The Chinese Armed Forces and Non-Traditional Missions: A Growing Tool of Statecraft," *China Brief* 9, no. 4, February 20, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/>.

6 See Bonnie S. Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "US Pivot to Asia Leaves China Off Balance," *Comparative Connections* 13, no. 3 (January 2012), <https://cc.pacforum.org/>.

7 Xi Jinping, "Jiandingbuyi Shenhua Guofang he Jundui Gaige [Unswervingly Deepen Reform of National Defense and the Military]," in *Xi Jinping guanyu Guofang he Jundui Jianshe Zhongyao Lunshu Xuanbian* [Selections of Important Discussion by Xi Jinping on Building National Defense and the Military], ed. Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Political Department (Beijing: PLA Publishing House, February 2014).

For Xi and the CCP, the current international arena represents a hostile environment, with the United States' "pivot to Asia" actively shrinking Beijing's space of influence in the Indo-Pacific region, traditionally a crucial building block for the CCP's ideological and identarian narrative and for China's territorial integrity.<sup>8</sup> In the PLA's view, the overall war space has increased, while the kinetic space is not as expansive as it was in the past.<sup>9</sup> The PLA has signaled a switch from multidimensional operations, occurring on land, air, and sea, to "full dimensional operations," in which commanders will be required to plan and execute operations across all domains, emphasizing actions in the intangible space, especially space and cyber.<sup>10</sup>

The first wave of military modernization under Xi began with the creation of the Strategic Support Forces (SSF) to support the PLA's combat operations in the space and cyber warfare domains.<sup>11</sup> Concurrently the PLA pursued civil-military integration, commonly referred to as "military-civil fusion" (军民融合).<sup>12</sup> This entails capitalizing on dual-use technological progress and harnessing civilian expertise. Notably, cyberspace has been emphasized as a key domain in China's national strategy for military-civil fusion, with a specific emphasis on personnel training and human capital issues. For example, the SSF established partnerships with over nine educational institutes and enterprises, such as the University of Science and Technology of China and the China Electronics Technology Group, to focus on "fostering high-end talent," including through education, training, cooperation, and exchanges.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the Strategic Support Forces (dissolved in April 2024, with its information warfare functions assigned to organizations under the control of the CCP's Central Military Committee) embodied the quintessence of Xi's military modernization and the specific features of China's approach under the threshold of kinetic war in which "the boundaries between peacetime and wartime are ambiguous . . . in peacetime, civilians hide the military, [while] in wartime, the military and the people, hands joined, attack together."<sup>14</sup> This blurred distinction between wartime and peacetime and between military and civilian activities underpins both the PLA operational framework and the ideology that the CCP is promoting under its whole-of-society approach to national and international security.

## HYBRID WARFARE

Some analysts interpret China's South China Sea activities over the last decade as hybrid warfare. "With the advent of nuclear weapons and increased international impetus on human rights, the likelihood of a full-blown war between actors seems less likely. Therefore, it is apparent that concepts of war would again transform to suit a more acceptable form – Hybrid Warfare."<sup>15</sup> In 1998, Chinese air force colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui argued that the United States' overwhelming focus on traditional war was causing American strategists to overlook alternative forms of warfare.<sup>16</sup> They described a large array of means that "seem unrelated to war," including trade, financial, new terror, ecological, psychological, media, network,

8 Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Commentary, Brookings (website), December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Sharon De Cet, "The Impact of China-US Polarization on the Indo-Pacific: A View from China," (in French) *Hérodote. Revue de Géographie et de Géopolitique* 189, no. 2 (June 2023), <http://dx.doi.org/>.

9 Edmund J. Burke, et al., *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), <https://www.rand.org/>.

10 Pan Zhaonian, "Strategic Thinking for Battlefield Construction in Joint Operations under Informatized Conditions," *China Military Science [Zhongguo Junshi Kexue]*, October 5, 2013.

11 John Costello and Joe McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

12 "Reshape Cyberspace Military-Civil Fusion Talent Cultivation [重塑网络空间军民融合人才培养]," *People's Daily Online*, September 15, 2017, <http://media.people.com.cn/>.

13 Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, *Battlefield Singularity: Artificial Intelligence, Military Revolution, and China's Future Military Power* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, November 2017), <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/>; and "The SSF and 9 Local Units Cooperate to Cultivate High-Level Talent for New-Type Forces [战略支援部队与地方 9 个单位合作培养新型作战力量高端人才]," *Xinhua*, July 12, 2017, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/>.

14 See PLA Daily, (2018), 破除和平积弊 提升备战打仗能力 ("Eliminating the Ills of Peace to Enhance Combat Readiness"), published on the website of the Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China (MD PRC), 破除和平积弊 提升备战打仗能力 - 中华人民共和国国防部; Joe Keary, "Four Services and Four Arms' Lifts CCP Control over Information Warfare," *Strategist*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>; and Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Research Department [军事科学院军事战略研究部], *The Science of Military Strategy [战略学]* (Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013).

15 Sarang Joshi and S. Inderjit, "China's Hybrid Warfare in the South China Sea," *Zulfaqr Journal of Defence Management, Social Science and Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2021), 105, <https://zulfaqarjdmssh.upnm.edu.my/>.

16 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999).



technological, fabrication, resources, economic aid, cultural, and international law warfare, as “ultimately becom[ing] the favoured minions of this new type of war.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition, NWMA have developed over the years into potent instruments of statecraft, power projection, and intention signaling. Particularly for the PLA with its core mandate of regime security for the CCP, those nontraditional missions have evolved as an increasingly used tools of statecraft.<sup>18</sup> The following case studies will analyse how the CCP is using the different tools of the hybrid toolbox, including international law and NWMA.

## NWMA: COGNITIVE WARFARE

Cognitive warfare, foreign information manipulation and interference operations, and disinformation are central to the CCP’s hybrid approach in the face of volatile chance of success and shrinking space for kinetic operations. PLA authors consistently discuss the criticality of information-based systems and networks as essential to fighting and winning in the more limited modern battlespace environment.<sup>19</sup> The PRC’s ongoing cognitive warfare against Taiwan provides a standout example of China’s success in integrating its military operations with its practices of this type of hybrid warfare. As evidenced by Taiwan’s experience, Chinese cognitive warfare is often executed by distributed governmental departments and party agencies that deal with Taiwan affairs, including the United Front Work Department, the PLA, and the Propaganda Department, all guided by China’s Taiwan policy.<sup>20</sup>

Another scholar points out that with the general public becoming increasingly dependent on information technology, the growth of so-called “fake news,” and disinformation, and PLA military reforms (e.g., the 2015 establishment of the PLA SSF), the ensuing combination of public opinion, propaganda, and information technology enables traditional propaganda methods to reach target audiences within a short timeframe and, with the help of big data analysis, be tailored to their geographical locations and political affiliations.<sup>21</sup>

Military threats in support of deterrence currently represent the most traditional way in which Beijing operationalizes cognitive warfare. Currently, with this type of NWMA, China aims to manipulate Taiwanese perceptions on the issue of unification and increase domestic consensus by showing off its military might in response to a perceived Taiwanese deviation from unification.<sup>22</sup> A recent example of China’s use of cognitive warfare in support of military deterrence is the information broadcast by Beijing surrounding the permanent increase in PLA Air Force (PLAAF) incursions into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone since US Congresswoman and then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei in August 2022.<sup>23</sup> The “all-in military exercise” on May 23–24, 2024 was publicized as a “punishment for separatist acts” following the inauguration of Taiwan’s newly elected President William Lai Ching-te on May 20, 2024.<sup>24</sup>

In September 2023, the number of PLAAF warplane air intrusions reached an all-time high of 103 in 24 hours (of note, the aircraft ultimately turned back).<sup>25</sup> Chinese state media *Global Times* also cited the 2022 Pelosi visit as the trigger for unprecedented 12-day military drills around the Taiwanese island with live-fire

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17 Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 38.

18 Watson, “Non-Traditional Missions.”

19 See Guo Yunfei, “Zhēngduó zhì nǎo quán, wèilái zhànzhēng yào rúhé cáinéng” bù zhàn ér qū rén zhī bīng 争夺制脑权，未来战争要如何才能“不战而屈人之兵” [“Fighting for Brain Power, How Can We ‘Conquer the Enemy without Fighting’ in Future Wars?”], (China Military Net, *PLA Daily*, June 2, 2020).

20 Zu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, “How China’s Cognitive Warfare Works: A Frontline Perspective of Taiwan’s Anti-Disinformation Wars,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4, December 2022, <https://doi.org/>.

21 Lin, Ying-Yu Lin, “China’s Cognitive Warfare against Taiwan and Taiwan’s Countermeasures,” *Taiwan Strategists* 20, no. 12 (2023), 37–38.

22 See for instance Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “Taiwan in 1999: A Difficult Year for the Island and the Kuomintang,” *Asian Survey* 40, no. 1 (January–February 2000).

23 Adrian Ang U-Jin and Olli Pekka Suorsa, “Since the Pelosi Visit, China Has Created a New Normal in the Taiwan Strait,” *Diplomat*, August 10, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

24 Christopher Bodeen, “Taiwan Scrambles Jets and Puts Missile, Naval, and Land Units on Alert over China’s Military Drills,” *ABC News*, May 23, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/>.

25 “China Flies 103 Military Planes toward Taiwan in a New High in Activity the Island Calls Harassment,” Associated Press (AP), September 18, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

across the islands.<sup>26</sup> After Pelosi's visit, the PLA increased its military activities around Taiwan, including almost daily visits by warships, warplanes, and drones that circled around the island as part of China's claim to be simply bolstering coastline military bases across the Taiwan Strait on the mainland.<sup>27</sup>

Another example took place in February 2024 when two Chinese fishermen drowned during a pursuit by Taiwan's coast guard, which accused them of trespassing within about one nautical mile off the coast of Kinmen, an island that lies close to mainland China but belongs to Taiwan. The capsized vessel had "no name, no registration information, and no certificate of port registration," according to the Coast Guard Administration.<sup>28</sup> Despite the circumstances and the apologies by the Taiwan Minister of Ocean Affairs Council, the PLA used the incident to institute regular Chinese Coast Guard patrols, culminating in the boarding of a Taiwanese tourist boat close to Taiwan.<sup>29</sup> Since this boarding, the rates of Chinese Coast Guard patrols of Kinmen's near waters have only increased.<sup>30</sup>

## NWMA: LEGAL GAMESMANSHIP

Xi Jinping's more recent directive introduces a set of trial guidelines aimed at establishing a specific "legal foundation for non-war military operations" within China's domestic legislative framework.<sup>31</sup> This directive, an attempt to establish a legal norm, underscores Beijing's recognition of the significance of NWMA as an official category of activity within the PLA. Among other applications, this categorization of such activities is exemplified by China's conduct of legal gamesmanship.

Gamesmanship has been defined as "the art of winning without actually cheating," and legal gamesmanship has been defined as "conduct by a national-state, or otherwise attributable to a nation-state, which leverages or exploits the structural, normative, or instrumental functions of international law in order to achieve that nation-state's objectives within a competitive environment."<sup>32</sup> An American lawfare scholar refers to three related legal concepts: legal instrumentalism, lawfare—"the strategy of using – or misusing – law as a substitute for traditional means to achieve an operational objective [...] law as a weapon of war,"—and legal warfare.<sup>33</sup> Legal warfare was formally adopted and fully institutionalised (in Chinese "falü zhan, 法律战", literally "legal warfare") by the PRC within the political guidance of "Three Warfares" for the PLA.<sup>34</sup> As early as 1996, then-President of the PRC and CCP General Secretary Jian Zemin told Chinese international lawyers that "our leaders and cadres, especially those of high rank, ought to take note of international law and enhance their skill in applying it. ... We must be adept at using international law as 'a weapon' to defend the interest of our state and maintain national pride."<sup>35</sup>

Legal gamesmanship is visible in China's competition with other claimant states in the East and South China Seas, notably in the cases of Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The PRC has hereby exploited the "structural function of international law in which states are responsible for their action in relation to other states."<sup>36</sup> On multiple occasions, alleged fishing vessels with a Chinese flag have engaged in unsafe and

26 "PLA's 'Taiwan Lockdown' Drills Stun Secessionists, External Forces as Precision Strike, Area Denial Capabilities Proved," *Global Times*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

27 "Taiwan Says China Is Bolstering Coastline Military Bases Facing the Self-Ruled Island," AP, September 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

28 Shawn Deng and Wayne Chang, "Two Chinese Fishermen Drown during Pursuit by Taiwan Coast Guard," CNN, February 14, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/>.

29 Yimou Lee and Fabian Hamacher, "'Turn around Immediately': Taiwan Warns off Chinese Coast Guard Boats again as Tensions Simmer," Reuters, March 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

30 Harold Thibault, "In Kinmen's Disputed Waters, the Chinese Coast Guard Tests Taiwan's Limits," *Le Monde*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>.

31 "Fabu Jundui Feizhanzheng Junshi Xingdong Gangyao (Shixing)" (发布《军队非战争军事行动纲要（试行）》 (Release of the Outline for Military Operations Other Than War [for Trial Implementation]), *People's Daily Online*, June 14, 2022, <https://politics.people.com.cn/>; and Hwang Chun-mei, "Chinese leader Xi Jinping Signs New Rules Governing 'Non-War' Military Operations," Radio Free Asia, June 13, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/>.

32 Stephen Potter, *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship: The Art of Winning Games without Actually Cheating* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1947); and Odom, *Gamesmanship*, 91.

33 Charles J. Dunlap Jr, "Lawfare Today: A Perspective," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 146, <https://www.yalejournal.org/>.

34 Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares," *China Brief* 16, no. 13, Jamestown Foundation, August 22, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/>.

35 Dong Wang, *China's Unequal Treaties: Narrating National History* (Plymouth UK: Lexington Books, 2005), 128.

36 See Odom, "Legal Gamesmanship," 96; and G.A. Res. 56/83, Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, A/56/49(Vol.1)/Corr.4, art. 1 (Dec. 12, 2001), <https://legal.un.org/>.

risky manoeuvres at sea during encounters with other nations' navy and coast guard vessels in the region. When incidences have occurred, Beijing has pushed a narrative that these were merely "patriotic Chinese fishermen" and hence not official PRC government actions.<sup>37</sup> However, as several experts documented, this fishing armada was actually PRC maritime militia and hence funded, instructed, directed, and controlled by the Chinese government.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, "by attempting to employ its maritime militia with plausible deniability, China intended to undermine the efforts of its neighbours to effectively control activities within their respective maritime zones coastal states, and strengthen maritime claims to some of these disputed areas."<sup>39</sup>

## NWMA: STRATEGIC PRECONDITIONING

Chinese lawfare thereby aims not to overturn the law itself but to achieve "strategic preconditioning," for example, to create the legal, military, and perceived context in a way that is favorable to Chinese interests--or in China's core strategist Sun Tzu's words to "win without fighting."<sup>40</sup> The concept of "winning without fighting" represents the core of China's Three Warfare doctrine, which encompasses public opinion-focused, psychological, and legal warfare. The rise of these methods can be categorized as hybrid conflict and shows that China feels comfortable in testing the limits of peace and challenging the status quo by prolonging tensions for years, while at the same time actively avoiding crossing the line into direct, formal aggression involving PLA forces.<sup>41</sup> China's preconditioning is manifested in the form of formal legal positions and statements, as well creating *faits accomplis* in certain situations, as is visible in China's military installations in the South China Sea. China uses these techniques to impose its views on others to draw—and project—a favorable result for its interests, to achieve information superiority, and to gain and maintain off-battlefield supremacy.<sup>42</sup>

Another example of undermining international law by respectively applying it in a very selective manner is the Chinese – Philippine dispute over the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea). The PRC hereby dismisses a clear and binding ruling by an independent arbitral tribunal established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on China's claims vis-à-vis the Philippines in the South China Sea in 2016. This ruling rendered the PRC's "claims to 'historic rights' within the entirety of the U-shaped, '9-dash line' that it draws on maps of the South China Sea mostly incompatible with the internationally agreed UNCLOS. UNCLOS is clear: entitlements in the sea have to be within areas measured from land."<sup>43</sup>

The tribunal further "ruled that none of the Spratly Islands, nor an isolated reef known as Scarborough Shoal, are capable of supporting human habitation in their natural state. This means that none are entitled to an exclusive economic zone around them. The implication of these two rulings is that the vast majority of the resources in the southern part of the South China Sea belong to the coastal states: the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Vietnam."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Beijing demands the right to control traffic in the area, conduct military movements and also gain access to resources. The resupply and refurbishment of the Philippines' outpost on the grounded BRP Sierra Madre, a World War II-era landing ship deliberately grounded on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal (or Ren'ai Jiao), part of the Spratly Islands, has led to

37 Jonathan G. Odom, "Guerrillas in the Sea Mist: China's Maritime Militia and International Law," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Ocean Law and Policy* 3, no. 1 (2018): 31.

38 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* 1, no. 1 (2017); and Gregory B. Poling, Tabitha Grace Mallory, and Harrison Pretat, *Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2021), <https://www.csis.org/>.

39 Jonathan G. Odom, "Legal Gamesmanship," 97; Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, *China's Maritime Militia* (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analyses, 2016); and Poling, Mallory, and Pretat, *The Curtain*.

40 Sascha-Dominik Bachmann and Munoz Mosquera, "China's Strategic Preconditioning in the Twenty-first Century," Wild Blue Yonder (blog), April 13, 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/> and Mosquera and Bachmann, "How China Uses Strategic Preconditioning in the Age of Great Power Competition," The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs (website), May 18, 2020, <https://www.fletcherforum.org/>.

41 See Pol Bargaúes and Moussa Bourekba "War by All Means: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare," Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), (2022), <https://www.cidob.org/>; and James Holmes, "Win Without Fighting? Sun Tzu, and History, Says You Can," *National Interest*, June 8, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

42 Andrés B. Munoz Mosquera and Nikoleta Chalanouli, "China an Active Practitioner of Legal Warfare," Lawfire (blog), February 2, 2020, fn #18, <https://sites.duke.edu/>.

43 Bill Hayton, "Two Years On, South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rules-Based-Order," Expert Comment, Chatham House (website), July 11, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

44 Hayton, "Two Years On."

increasing attacks from the Chinese side with water cannons, military-grade lasers, and other under-the-threshold-of-robust-action operations.<sup>45</sup>

In opposition to the 2016 ruling, Beijing has insisted that Manila is increasing the tensions in the region by upholding the outpost. In March 2024, China's Defence Ministry warned, "If the Philippines repeatedly challenges China's bottom line, China will continue to take resolute and decisive measures to firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests."<sup>46</sup>

In sum, these examples show a rather cunning combination of military threats, perceptions, psychological warfare, and an attempt to establish alleged legality, all hinting at the possible use of violence that could meet but would not exceed the threshold of actual military confrontation.

## **PEACEKEEPING NWMA: PROTECTING ASSETS AND DIASPORA AFAR**

Kevin Bilms categorizes the PLA's NWMA into four major categories: a) law enforcement (i.e., peacekeeping, maritime security); b) cooperative (i.e., joint security exercises, medical aid and military exchanges); c) confrontational (i.e., antipiracy, counterterrorism) and d) aid and rescue (i.e., humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, overseas security).<sup>47</sup>

At the start of the twenty-first century, China's security strategy primarily revolved around maintaining internal stability and ensuring peace along its borders. The Chinese military activities around Taiwan discussed above represent probably the most well-documented and prominent operationalization of this strategy. However, over the past two decades, the significant increase in Chinese investments abroad, coupled with an increasing Chinese diaspora, has exposed China to a wide range of nontraditional security threats, far beyond its borders and traditional sphere of influence. Consequently, Beijing has endeavoured to enhance its capability to safeguard and assert Chinese interests overseas while employing its dual-use approach of combining military capabilities with nonmilitary approaches. PLA strategists describe China's military engagements abroad as the strategic deployment of "soft power" alongside traditional "hard power."<sup>48</sup> Concurrently, China has aimed to present itself as both a major global power and a responsible stakeholder in the international community.<sup>49</sup> As a result, NWMA and broader international security cooperation have become vital for fulfilling China's new dual role on the global stage.

As a particularly stark example of China's most recent international initiatives, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged as a key booster in Chinese security operations abroad. With the BRI, China deeply intertwined its economy and population with numerous countries worldwide, including those facing precarious security situations. One case in point is the China-Solomon Agreement that also includes security cooperation and the possibility of stationing Chinese security forces on the Solomon Islands.<sup>50</sup> But the CCP's and hence the PLA's portfolio for external influence in security-related areas is much broader.

As discussed above, the Chinese Communist Party's view on security is more comprehensive than the traditional Western construct articulated by philosophers such as Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>51</sup> The PRC's 2019

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45 James Palmer, "China-Philippines Tensions Heat Up," *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

46 Jesse Johnson, "After Clash, China Warns Philippines over Escalation in South China Sea," *Japan Times*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.

47 Bilms, "Beyond War and Peace."

48 Tianliang Xiao and Zhanlue Xue, eds., (2020 Nian Xiuding) 战略学 (2020年修订) [The Science of Military Strategy (2020 Revision)], (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 2020), 312.

49 Beverley Loke, "China's Great Power Responsibilities and the Politics of Hegemonic (Re)Ordering," Australian Outlook, Australian Institute for International Affairs (website), June 1, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/>; Wang Yi, "Written Remarks by H.E. Wang Yi at the Launching Ceremony of the Center for Global Security Initiative Studies and Release of the Report on the Implementation Progress of the Global Security Initiative," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 19, 2024, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>; "Global Development Initiative Supported by China Emphasizes Inclusive Growth," UN Office for South-South Cooperation, September 28, 2023, <https://unsouthsouth.org/>; and Xi Jinping, "Join Hands on the Path Towards Modernization," keynote address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, Beijing, March 15, 2023, <https://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

50 See Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, "China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (website), December 2, 2022, <https://g.jia.georgetown.edu/>; and "China Signs Pact with Solomon Islands to Boost Cooperation on 'Law Enforcement and Security Matters'," AP News, July 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

51 See Chris Van Aller, "Machiavelli and Clausewitz on the Political Determinants of National Security," *Defense Security Analysis* 13, no. 1, <https://doi.org/>.



National Defence White Paper provides crucial insights on Beijing's use of military for nonwar purposes.<sup>52</sup> The white paper specifically highlights collaborations with the Russian Federation and areas of historical cooperation between the United States and China, such as humanitarian aid and counterpiracy efforts. Notably, researchers from the National Defense University found a significant uptick in foreign military diplomacy actions by the PRC starting in 2012, coinciding with Xi Jinping's tenure as Secretary-General.<sup>53</sup> These NWMA encompass military exercises, port visits, peacekeeping, and high-level military leader exchanges, all classified as diplomatic military interactions.

## **LAW ENFORCEMENT NWMA: UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS**

An important source of information regarding Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping operations is the Regular Press Conference of China's Ministry of National Defence. On December 28, 2023, the spokesperson for the ministry highlighted the role of China in UN Peacekeeping operations, which must be understood in line with the Chinese vision of working towards a "common destiny for mankind" and the Global Security Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping.<sup>54</sup> Beijing also pledged that China would strengthen peacekeeping capability readiness, hold international training courses on peacekeeping, and conduct exchanges on peacekeeping experiences.<sup>55</sup>

As of January 31, 2025, China was the largest troop-contributing country among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and the second largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget.<sup>56</sup> United Nations peacekeeping operations mainly deploy Chinese troops belonging to engineering, transportation, medical, police, infantry, and helicopter units. In 2023, China had over 2,200 personnel deployed across eight peacekeeping mission areas, including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Lebanon.<sup>57</sup>

In February 2023, the twenty-first Chinese peacekeeping multirole engineering company participated in Exercise Tiger 2023 and Blue Helmets Rescue-2023 drills with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).<sup>58</sup> Exercise Tiger involved over 60 peacekeepers and 20 civilians from 10 countries, focusing on scenarios of conflict escalation, with the Chinese contingent tasked with receiving, protecting, and transferring UNIFIL personnel and families. Similarly, the Blue Helmets Rescue-2023 drill tested the contingent's emergency rescue capabilities in response to simulated earthquake disasters, demonstrating proficiency in road repair, search and rescue, and medical evacuation.

In May, the same Chinese peacekeeping unit engaged in the Angel Rescue Exercise, which simulates the process of first aid and air transportation for injured demining operators, testing coordination among various contingents in response to peacekeeper injuries.<sup>59</sup> Since its deployment in August 2022, this Chinese peacekeeping unit has cleared over 6,500 square meters of minefields and safely disposed of numerous landmines and unexploded ordnance. China's economic interests and military presence in Africa are two sides of the same coin. Naturally, increasing levels of Chinese investment has necessitated an increased

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52 The State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era*, July 14, 2019, <https://english.www.gov.cn/>.

53 Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications," *China Strategic Perspectives* no. 11 (July 2017), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

54 MND PRC, "Regular Press Conference of China's Ministry of National Defense," December 28, 2023, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>; Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024); Seán Golden, "Xi Jinping's 'Common Destiny for Mankind,'" Opinion 744, CIDOB, December 2022; "China Signs Pact with Solomon Islands to Boost Cooperation on 'Law Enforcement and Security Matters,'" AP, July 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>; and "The Global Security Initiative," Concept Paper, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, February 21, 2023, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

55 MND PRC, "Regular Press Conference."

56 United Nations (UN), "Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officer, and Troops as of: 31/05/2025," UN Peacekeeping (website), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>; and UN, "How We Are Funded," UN Peacekeeping (website), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>.

57 MFA PRC, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on May 30, 2023," <http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/>.

58 Chen Z., "Chinese Peacekeepers to Lebanon Hold Earthquake Rescue Drill," <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>; and MND PRC, "Chinese Peacekeepers to Lebanon Participate in Exercise Tiger 2023," February 13, 2023, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

59 Ci Xiaoning, "Chinese Peacekeepers to Lebanon Participate in UNIFIL Angel Rescue Exercise," China Military Online, February 25, 2023, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.



military presence in the region.

Although official rhetoric may convey a sense of unwavering adherence, China's concept of noninterference has undergone a transformation akin to its broader strategic priorities.<sup>60</sup> While the theoretical discourse persists, Beijing has adopted a balanced approach, adhering to the overarching noninterference doctrine while simultaneously exploring avenues to stretch its interpretation of UN peacekeeping operations. An example of this is China's dynamic engagement with South Sudan, which signifies a notable departure from Beijing's traditional stance of noninterference.

## SOUTH SUDAN

Currently, China is engaged in peacekeeping operations South Sudan via the UN Mission in South Sudan, where the Chinese contingent is primarily assigned to supply route maintenance missions. However, the tight economic relationship between China and Sudan have highlighted some instances of intensified Chinese NWMA in the area. In fact, Sudan and China have had a close economic partnership since the 1990s, when the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and an Asian consortium signed an oil development agreement with the Sudanese government, marking the start of China's overseas ventures.<sup>61</sup> Operating with fewer concerns about risks than other companies, the CNPC secured rights to largely untapped oil reserves with limited competition, leading to the subsequent engagement by other Chinese firms and strengthened bilateral ties.

After South Sudan achieved independence in July 2011, Chinese nationals and companies seized the opportunity in an underdeveloped market. However, the region's volatility and risks posed challenges. Oil production disruptions due to pipeline fee negotiations and civil war hampered operations and Chinese citizens faced danger, prompting China's unprecedented intervention to safeguard its interests, support conflict resolution, and contribute to humanitarian efforts. This crisis response also served as a strategic trial run for China's expanding global role and influence.

In this regard, analysts have noted that China seems to be exploiting the Sudanese crisis to enhance its military operational experience by militarizing its approach to civilian evacuations. In April 2023, Chinese navy ships were sent to rescue citizens from conflict-hit Sudan, with Beijing deploying the guided missile destroyer *Nanning* and the *Weishanhu* supply ship. The supply ship carried essential resources, including a helicopter and over 490 officers and soldiers, including a substantial number of special operations personnel on board to assist with the evacuation.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, the *Nanning* has joined dozens of major PLA Navy exercise missions including far sea training and combat alert patrols, during which it conducted live-fire missile launches. Furthermore, during the drills, the Chinese destroyer joined Iranian and Russian vessels, holding armed rescue exercises.<sup>63</sup>

One Africa expert points out that when circumstances allow, China incorporates military assets into its evacuation endeavors, thereby exploiting rescue missions to train military capabilities and display military prowess.<sup>64</sup> This was evident in the recent Sudan crisis and China's above-referenced use of the *Nanning* and the Type 903 comprehensive supply ship, *Weishanhu*.<sup>65</sup> These vessels were part of the 43rd PLA Navy naval task force engaged in antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, a mission China has been conducting since 2008.<sup>66</sup> China's approach has clearly evolved based on lessons learned from past experiences, particularly its evacuations from Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015. In the case of Libya, China employed four military

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<sup>60</sup> See Mamoudou Gazibo and Abdou Rahim Lema, "What to Make of China's Non-Interference Policy in Africa," London School of Economics Blog, May 11, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/>.

<sup>61</sup> Government of the Republic of the Sudan, China National Petroleum Corporation, Petronas Carigali Overseas SDN BHD, State Petroleum Corporation, and Sudapet Ltd., *Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement*, March 1, 1997, <https://www.ecosonline.org/>.

<sup>62</sup> "China Evacuates 1,300 Citizens, Other Nationals from Sudan," Gulf News, April 27, 2023, <https://gulfnews.com/>.

<sup>63</sup> Lu Xuanzun, "Chinese Destroyer Nanning Returns to Escort Mission after Drills with Iran, Russia," March 22, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

<sup>64</sup> Jevans Nyabiage, "Evacuation from Sudan: How China's Years of African Conflict Experience Led to Successful Mission," *South China Morning Post*, April, 28, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Feature: Chinese Navy Evacuating Personnel from Sudan Tells Story of 'Strong Motherland, Strong Backing'," Xinhua News Online, April 29, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/>.

<sup>66</sup> Li Yun and Tang Siyu, "43rd Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Sets Sail for Gulf of Aden," China Military Online, January 11, 2023, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

transport aircraft and a naval frigate to successfully evacuate nearly 36,000 Chinese nationals and other foreign citizens as the civil war approached Tripoli.<sup>67</sup>

It is important to highlight that China traditionally views its engagement in UN peacekeeping operations as a tool devoid of aggressive intentions, serving as an instrument to extend its power, presence, and impact in the African continent. The region is seen by Beijing as a comparatively secure environment, akin to a testing ground, where Beijing can experiment with and assess the extents of its emerging status and responsibilities as a worldwide influencer and authority.<sup>68</sup>

### **COOPERATIVE NWMA: “MILITARY POLITICAL WORK” AND PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION OPERATIONS**

Alongside participating in peacekeeping operations, since the 1950s, China has been providing training to members of foreign military forces, with many of its programs originating shortly after the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the Cold War, Beijing supported Marxist-oriented movements that later rose to power in their respective countries, such as the ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and the FRELIMO in Mozambique.<sup>70</sup> During this period, military training became more rigorous and professionalized, with soldiers and officers frequently traveling to China for training purposes.<sup>71</sup>

China’s foreign military educational efforts should be seen within the broader context of Beijing’s increasing endeavours to train foreign elites across various fields, via the so-called “military political work” (jundui zhengzhi gongzuo; 军队政治工作).<sup>72</sup> This doctrine describes all the activities of China’s PLA to shape the civilian environment to achieve political, ideological, and military objectives set by the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>73</sup> These include political and ideological awareness-raising across the military personnel, party functions, public affairs, and the “United Front Work,” and educational functions such as professional military education.

The CCP Central Committee’s United Front Work Department gathers intelligence on, manages relations with, and attempts to gain influence over elite individuals and organizations inside and outside mainland China. It focuses particularly on people and entities outside of the CCP, including overseas Chinese diaspora members who hold influential positions in politics, commerce, academia or other significant interest groups. By this the Party seeks to ensure these position holders are positive or useful for the CCP interests and that they keep potential critics divided.<sup>74</sup> Chinese PME operations in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and East Asia have expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting China’s growing influence in these regions.<sup>75</sup>

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67 Ma Li, ed., *National Operation—the Great Evacuation from Libya* (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Publishing House (解放军出版社, 2011), 199–201; “外交部: 中国撤离在利比亚公民行动实现‘四个第一’”, 新华网 [“Foreign Ministry: China’s Evacuation of Nationals in Libya Realizes ‘Four Firsts’”], Xinhua News Online, March 6, 2011; and “Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden,” BBC, April 3, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

68 “Full Text: China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations,” Xinhua, September 18, 2020, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>; and China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan, Asia Report No. 288 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 10, 2017), 9, <https://www.refworld.org/>.

69 Abhishek Mishra, “China’s Growing Security Activism in Africa,” Expert Speak, Observer Research Foundation (website), October 7, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

70 Mishra, “Security Activism.”

71 Hu Yuwei, “Decades of Training Foreign Officers Boost China’s Military Diplomacy,” *Global Times*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

72 Jiang S., ed. *Political Work Dictionary* (zhengzhi gongzuo dacidian; 政治工作大辞典) (Beijing, Military Sciences Publishing House (junshi kexue chubanshe; 军事科学出版社), April 1991), 51–102.

73 Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, “Military Political Work at the CCP’s Centennial,” *China Brief* 21, no. 12 (June 2021), <https://jamestown.org/>.

74 Mareike Ohlberg and Clive Hamilton, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World* (Australia: Hardie Grant, 2017); and Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping,” Woodrow Wilson Center (website), September 18, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

75 Paul Nantulya, “China’s ‘Military Political Work’ and Professional Military Education in Africa,” Spotlight, Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) (website), October 30, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/>; Matthew A. Hughes, “Lessons in the Dragon’s Lair: The People’s Liberation Army’s Professional Military Education Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 7 (September–October 2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Erica Marat, “China’s Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia,” Policy Memos, Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) (website), July 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/>.

## CASE STUDY: CHINESE PME ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA

In Africa, prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic, the PLA was providing education to approximately 2,000 African military officers each year at military and political academies.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, an extra 500 African officers were enrolled in courses at the PLA Naval Medical University. From 2018 to 2021, an additional estimated 2,000 African police and law enforcement personnel underwent training at institutions affiliated with the People's Armed Police (PAP).<sup>77</sup> At the same time, African officers routinely pursue their education in China. According one source, the PLA Army Command College in Nanjing, which oversees China's International Military Education Exchange Centre, is the school with the highest number of African students.<sup>78</sup> The school's alumni include both African military and African civil elite, including 10 African chiefs of defense; 9 defense ministers, and the former presidents of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia, and Tanzania.

This deep collaboration has a double effect. First, it can serve China to cultivate and reinforce connections with target countries not only with military personnel but also among the civil elites. Second, regular and systematic familiarization of foreign officers with Chinese weapons as part of those officers' involvement in PME can create a prosperous market for China's arsenal. Following the African example, between 2000 and 2018, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe procured 90 percent of their arsenals from China, while also having the greatest number of intensive exchanges with the PRC leadership compared with other African regions.<sup>79</sup>

## CONFRONTATIONAL NWMA: JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES IN COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

The CCP leadership shows a significant level of apprehension regarding threats to its sovereignty and internal governance, as many primary challenges threatening the Party's survival originate within China rather than from external sources. As a result, China's military doctrine prioritizes domestic counterterrorism and operations aimed at maintaining stability. These efforts involve measures to suppress domestic unrest and address concerns related to terrorism, separatism, and extremism, collectively known as the "three evils."<sup>80</sup> Beijing considers counterterrorism necessary for ensuring domestic prosperity, and unless tackled appropriately, "social stability will suffer shocks . . . and the broad outlook for reform, development, and stability will be affected," as Xi himself emphasized.<sup>81</sup>

The fact that counterterrorism operations are a responsibility of China's People's Armed Police (PAP) further indicates how the issue is predominantly a matter of party survival: in fact, the PAP serves as the CCP's paramilitary arm and is directly under the authority of the Central Military Commission. The fact that the PLA has served in a secondary position to the PAP in conducting counterterrorism operations within China is also the result of the deliberate will of the CCP to reduce the PLA's involvement in potentially sensitive issues, following the reputational damage suffered by the Party in the wake of the repressions in Tiananmen in 1989.

The PLA's limited engagement in counterterrorism operations abroad is driven by the nature of China's security challenges, in addition to the Chinese foreign policy principle of noninterference that constrains the use of overseas force. Hence, PLA efforts have focused principally on relying on and strengthening host countries' capabilities to address China's security concerns, including on intensifying joint military

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76 Nantulya, "Education in Africa."

77 Paul Nantulya, "China's Policing Models Make Inroads in Africa," Spotlight, ACSS (website), May 22, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/>.

78 Paul Nantulya, *Special Report: Chinese Professional Military Education for Africa: Key Influence and Strategy* no. 521 (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, July 2023), <https://www.usip.org/>.

79 Cullen S. Hendrix, "Arms and Influence? Chinese Arms Transfers to Africa in Context," Realtime Economic Issues Watch (blog), Peterson Institute for International Economics, July 15, 2020, [www.piie.com/](http://www.piie.com/); and Judd Devermont, Marielle Harris, and Alison Albelda, *Personal Ties: Measuring Chinese and U.S. Engagement with African Security Chiefs*, (Washington, DC: CSIS, August 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

80 Enshen Li, "Fighting the 'Three Evils': A Structural Analysis of Counter-Terrorism Legal Architecture in China," *Emory International Law Review* 33, no. 3 (2019), <https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/>.

81 Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detention of Muslims," *New York Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.



exercises via multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>82</sup>

### CASE STUDY: USING THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

Direct involvement of the PLA in confrontational NWMA for counterterrorism purposes started to increase in 2015 when Beijing amended article 71 of its counterterrorism legislation and began allowing the PLA to deploy personnel to assist several countries in their counterterrorism operations.<sup>83</sup> The 2017 Marawi Siege, carried out by the ISIS-affiliated Maute group against Philippines, is a clear example of China-Philippines cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. During the siege, Chinese counterparts supported the Philippine military in urban combat against ISIS militants and, subsequently, Chinese and Filipino companies collaborated to form a consortium for the reconstruction of Marawi City. However, Chinese investment promises failed to materialize and the rapprochement between Manila and Beijing was met with heavy scepticism from the Filipino Muslim community, due to the Chinese government repressions against the Muslim population of Xinjiang.

Hence, while bilateral counterterrorism military cooperation remains limited, China has made extensive use of multilateral platforms such as the SCO to expand engagement on counterterrorism. China successfully persuaded the SCO to include as its primary objective that of fighting the “three evils,” thus responding to Beijing’s fears of Central Asia becoming a channel through which violence and unrest could spread to the PRC, and particularly to its western Xinjiang province.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, two decades of coups and popular uprisings in the post-Soviet space sparked concern within the Chinese leadership that these events could fuel instability and dissent in China or increase Western influence in the PRC’s internal affairs.<sup>85</sup>

China has designed the SCO as a mechanism to address its domestic concerns and a tool to enhance its power projections. In 2002, Beijing collaborated with Tashkent to establish the Regional Anti-Terrorist structure, SCO’s organ for intelligence exchanges on suspected terrorists.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, in a 2022 speech at the SCO Samarkand summit, Xi offered to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel for SCO member states through 2027 and to establish a China-SCO base for training counterterrorism personnel, with the aim of enhancing capacity-building for law enforcement of SCO member states.<sup>87</sup>

The modern Color Revolutions narrative at the SCO helps China attract like-minded nations to the Chinese-led Global Security Initiative, aimed at shaping a global security architecture led by China. The term “color revolutions” recurs often in CCP’s official discourses as a pejorative term to refer to protests that opponents feel foreign nations unduly influence.<sup>88</sup> To this latter point, of particular interest is China’s leveraging of SCO partnerships to export tech-driven authoritarianism. Many of these training programs have a twofold dimension.<sup>89</sup> First, the training programs feature a commercial dimension as the export of Chinese tech-led security management helps support the growth of China’s tech companies and, by extension, that of the Chinese economy.<sup>90</sup> Second, training programs responding to insecurity as perceived by Central Asian actors in turn strengthen China’s own security capacity. By improving Central Asia’s security posture, China secures a stable regional environment shaped by a CCP-influenced mindset and

82 China Military Online. “PLA Joins SCO Anti-Terrorism Exercise in Russia.” *China Military*, September 22, 2021, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

83 Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, *Counter-Terrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China*, December 27, 2015, amended April 7, 2018, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/>.

84 Michael Yahuda, “China’s Relations with Asia, Continuity amid Change,” in David Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, January 30, 2020), 283; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2015 Annual Report to Congress*, 114th Cong. November 2015, 406, 408, <https://www.uscc.gov/>; and Zhao Huasheng, “China’s View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (2013): 439.

85 Jeanne Wilson, “Coloured Revolutions: The View from Moscow and Beijing,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 2–3 (2009), <https://doi.org/>; and Kawashima Shin, “Perception of a ‘Color Revolution’ in China under the Xi Jinping Regime and National Security Implications—Close Interconnection between Domestic Politics and Diplomacy—,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/>.

86 “Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” (website), last updated February 7, 2025, <https://ecrats.org/en/>.

87 The State Council of the PRC, “Full Speech of President Xi Jinping at SCO Samarkand Summit,” September 17, 2022, <https://english.www.gov.cn/>.

88 See for instance: Shin, “ ‘Color Revolution’.”

89 Niva Yau, “Chinese Governance Export in Central Asia,” *Security and Human Rights* 32, no. 1–4 (2022), <https://doi.org/>.

90 Yau.

increases the Party's tracking capacity of Chinese ethnic minorities in Central Asia—two factors that Beijing ties to the security of Xinjiang.<sup>91</sup>

Alongside trainings opportunities with Central Asian states, the SCO offers China a crucial platform for Beijing gaining key combat experience via joint military exercises, made possible through an ad hoc agreement.<sup>92</sup> A 2020 US- China Economic and Security Review Commission study notes that between 2008 and 2019, Chinese personnel deployed in SCO member states increased from around 200 to more than 1,000 personnel engaged in exercises conduct involving joint air-ground operations with direct application to conventional warfare.<sup>93</sup>



Figure 1: Map of SCO exercises outside China involving Chinese forces, 2002–19, as compiled by the US- China Economic and Security Review Commission © USCC 2019

The SCO joint military exercises also represent a crucial opportunity for Beijing to boost military collaboration and interoperability with one of its biggest regional allies, Moscow. In fact, joint military exercises have remained a prominent, stable, and recurring feature of the Sino-Russian defence partnership for more than a decade. The umbrella of operations known as “Peace Mission” is the most important manoeuvre in this regard, primarily focused on land forces and typically lasting for one to two weeks.<sup>94</sup>

According to Chinese and Russian official media sources, Beijing and Moscow held 80 joint military exercises from 2003 through mid-2022, both via the SCO and, occasionally, bilaterally.<sup>95</sup> Via the SCO, Beijing and Moscow are fostering military and security cooperation aimed at shaping and promoting a new world order alternative to the US-led model. The recent Sino-Russian joint maritime patrols near Alaska and the signing of a bilateral coast guard agreement in Murmansk near the Finnish border represent the first

91 Yau Tsz Yan, “Smart Cities or Surveillance? Huawei in Central Asia,” *Diplomat*, August 7, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>; and Yau, “Central Asia.”

92 MFA PRC, “Joint Communiqué of Meeting of Council of Heads of SCO Members,” August 23, 2007, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

93 Matthew Southerland, Will Green, and Sierra Janik, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection,” Issue Brief, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (website), November 12, 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

94 Richard Weitz, *Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends* (Washington DC: CSIS, July 9, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/>.

95 China Power Monitor, Database, CSIS, last updated, August 7, 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

signs of this ever-closer military cooperation going in hitherto uncharted waters.<sup>96</sup> Future implications will put the Arctic region in the spotlight, where many analysts have seen a convergence in Beijing and Moscow's objectives, albeit yet to be translated into a more concrete strategy.<sup>97</sup>

## CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

China skilfully synchronizes the military, political, economic, cyber, and information sources of power in different operational domains to influence, intimidate, and coerce competing claimants and pursue the CCP's ultimate goals.<sup>98</sup> The Party's 360-degree approach thereby combines legal, semilegal and illegal activities, "blurring traditional dichotomies and creating ambiguity and uncertainty."<sup>99</sup> Drawing on military assets without waging kinetic operations, the CCP employs thereby a broad portfolio ranging from hybrid threats, including cognitive warfare, to NWMA.<sup>100</sup> The PLA operations that sidestep traditional conflict thresholds and are executed by the PLA in areas or sectors critical to the PRC's survival and core interests show a particular, almost sui generis interplay of using international law, constructed legitimacy and legality, psychological warfare, influence by training, and other approaches that apply traditional tools in unprecedented ways and uniquely combine military assets with nonmilitary approaches.

Authoritarian states such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been skillful in exploiting the lack of "hard law concerning the subject of military exercises" and "readily [seize] the resulting opportunities to create and exploit legal grey zones, as well as to frequently breach international law, while knowing that little can be done against their malevolent conduct."<sup>101</sup> However, while Russia has been socialised in international security organisations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and hence stretches the boundaries from within the system, the PRC has developed a distinctively different approach to intertwining an à la carte approach to international law with hybrid activities and military resources.

Since the early 2000s, the PLA has undergone a profound transformation, rising from a relatively poor revolutionary army to a modern military with, at least in numbers, enormous capabilities, expanding its scope of operations as well—far beyond traditional military endeavours. Today the PLA engages in a diverse array of peacetime operations, showcasing both its increased capacity and political will compared to years past. From conducting military diplomacy through joint exercises and naval port calls worldwide, to participating in peacekeeping operations and engaging in cognitive warfare operations in regional hotspots such as the East and South China Seas, the PLA's nonwar military activities now constitute a substantial portion of its overall endeavours. Concurrently, China has emerged as a significant instigator of global peace and security initiatives, gaining recognition from dozens of countries and international bodies such as the United Nations.

On the more contentious side, China's assertive actions in areas such as the South China/West Philippines Sea where territorial disputes persist, have strained relations with neighbouring countries, increased tensions, and sparked concerns about regional stability. Furthermore, as the PLA expands its international footprint and capabilities, new concerns have surfaced regarding the potential implications for the global security dynamics and world order. Some observers worry China's enhanced expeditionary capability, as evidenced by its participation in peacekeeping missions and strategic alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, will blur the lines between peacetime operations and open warfare. Such developments may embolden Beijing to wield brute force beyond its borders, heightening tensions and exacerbating conflicts in various hotspots.

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96 Michael R. Gordon and Nancy A. Youssef, "Russia and China Sent Large Naval Patrol Near Alaska," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>; and Thomas Nilsen, "FSB Signs Maritime Security Cooperation with China in Murmansk," *Barents Observer*, April 25, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/>.

97 Marc Lanteigne, "A China-Russia Arctic Alliance? Not So Fast," *Diplomat*, February 21, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

98 Küçüksolak, "The 'New Normal'."

99 The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), "COI Strategy and Defence," (website), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/>.

100 Odom, "Legal Gamesmanship."

101 Joanna Siekiera, "International Legal Framework Regulating Military Exercises – Lawfare Potentially Associated with Military Exercises as a Hybrid Threat," *International Law Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (March 2023): 107.



In times of ever-increasing global tensions including wars raging in Ukraine and beyond, this article has aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the Chinese Communist Party's sui generis approach to the use of military resources, international law, hybrid tactics, and the simultaneity of peace and war—or as Mao Zedong has allegedly stated: “Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.”



# STRATEGIC INSIGHTS