CHINA’S GLOBAL BASING AMBITIONS

DEFENSE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

CRISTINA L. GARAFOLA, STEPHEN WATTS, KRISTIN J. LEUSCHNER
INTRODUCTION
This report synthesizes insights from two longer RAND Arroyo Center reports on China’s development of basing, access, and military capabilities over the next two decades. In the first report, *The People’s Liberation Army’s Search for Overseas Basing and Access: A Framework to Assess Potential Host Nations*, the authors assess China’s motives for seeking to expand its global presence and the potential partners that China is likely to prioritize for its long-term efforts to expand its access and basing (Garafola et al., 2022).

In the second report, *Implications of a Global People’s Liberation Army: Historical Lessons for Responding to China’s Long-Term Global Basing Ambitions*, the authors use case studies to examine the potential strategic implications of China’s changing global posture for the United States (Watts, Boston, et al., 2022). Note that this report reuses some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables, from these other two reports.

While China’s growing economic power began reshaping the global economy in the 2000s, and Beijing’s foreign policy approach has increasingly sought to reshape the international order since the 2010s, the future global role of China’s rapidly improving military, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), remains unclear. In recent years, however, Chinese leaders have articulated Beijing’s determination to become a leading global military power. As General Secretary Xi Jinping famously declared at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), “We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people’s armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces” (Xi, 2017).

Overseas military access and basing is a critical component of China’s global military ambitions. With the opening of its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in 2017, China appeared to take a major step toward global power projection. But the strategic implications of such access and basing outside of China’s immediate periphery are hotly debated. Some Western observers have warned that “China’s government is actively searching for overseas bases to station and rotate military forces” (Ratner, 2018, p. 3), while others have argued that China has yet to show any concrete indication of wanting to become a traditional military actor in regions far from its shores (Heath, 2018).

Faced with this uncertainty about long-term Chinese basing and access ambitions, what should U.S. decisionmakers and military planners do? This short report draws on Chinese sources and historical case studies to address four key questions about China’s future overseas basing and access plans:

**ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFRICOM</td>
<td>U.S. Africa Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRI</td>
<td>Belt and Road Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTCOM</td>
<td>U.S. Central Command</td>
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<tr>
<td>I&amp;W</td>
<td>indications and warning</td>
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<tr>
<td>INDOPACOM</td>
<td>U.S. Indo-Pacific Command</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
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</table>

**Q1** Why might China pursue an overseas basing network?

**Q2** Where is China most likely to pursue bases and why?

**Q3** What are the historical strategic implications of overseas military bases?

**Q4** What can the United States do about competitors’ overseas bases?
**Approach**

To understand where China might seek to gain basing and access for PLA forces abroad and what types of operations they might carry out there, we reviewed the literature on China’s evolving overseas interests to determine trends that will likely continue to shape PLA presence and activities in the 2030–2040 time frame. Leveraging Chinese sources, we developed a framework to systemically assess valuable attributes from Beijing’s perspective, focusing not only on the utility of potential host nations but on China’s ability to secure access. We augmented existing country-level or regional assessments by evaluating 108 countries across three regions, with the goal of understanding which countries and regions may be viewed by Beijing as especially promising host nations for PLA basing or access.

To anticipate what Chinese overseas access and basing might look like in ten to 20 years—that is, in the 2030s—we draw on three case studies of overseas military access and basing among the United States’ competitors:

- Soviet bases ringing the Mediterranean and Red Seas under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982)
- Russian bases in Syria during the ongoing Syrian civil war (2015–present).

Together with the United States, these cases represent the countries with the largest overseas basing networks in the post-World War II era. We used these cases to understand how major powers have conceived of and used strategic basing in the past, including the objectives, facilities, and functions of the bases; the reactions of other states to strategic basing initiatives; and the costs and benefits of such bases. We supplemented the case studies with a review of the academic literature on access and basing, as well as some primary sources, including declassified U.S. government documents (when available) discussing certain key events.

Throughout this report, we will use certain key terms as defined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>A substantial installation supporting a sizeable contingent of uniformed military personnel for at least several years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility</td>
<td>The broader category of both bases and lesser installations that provide important infrastructure, stores, and/or a relatively persistent presence of foreign military personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footprint</td>
<td>Both facilities and other forms of durable support for military operations, such as prepositioned equipment and stocks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>A sovereign state’s granting of permission for foreign military forces to be positioned on, temporarily stop in, or pass across its territory, airspace, or territorial waters; encompasses everything from permanent basing rights to permission for military overflight. Although access can include relatively minimal operations, our particular focus in this report is on long-term or repeated access that could involve significant use of a host nation’s facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power projection</td>
<td>The ability of a state to exercise effective military power, in peace or in war, at a substantial distance from its own territory. Our focus is on operations that leverage access or basing on another country’s territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basing state</td>
<td>A state that maintains military installations (whether bases or lesser facilities) outside of its own territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host nation</td>
<td>A state that grants access or basing rights, or both, to another state.</td>
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**TABLE 1**

**Key Definitions**
CHINA’S BASING STRATEGY AND PRIORITY LOCATIONS
The deployment of PLA forces abroad represents a significant change for a country that has for decades resisted foreign basing and access, and—until recently—largely lacked the ability to project and sustain military forces beyond its immediate periphery. Beijing’s willingness to increase its military operations abroad reflects in large part the reality that its interests and objectives have changed after decades of rapid growth. In this section, we first explore the factors that have shaped China’s growing pursuit of overseas basing and access for the PLA. We then examine a growing body of literature by Chinese military analysts and academic researchers, which explores potential criteria for overseas PLA locations, as well as options for prioritizing locations for future PLA basing or access. Building on this discussion, we develop a framework to evaluate which overseas locations could rank highly over the long term as future PLA basing and access locations from the perspective of Chinese officials. We then evaluate 108 countries in three regions—the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific—as potential host nations for Chinese basing or access and present the results of that assessment.

Why Might China Pursue an Overseas Basing Network?

We drew on Chinese official documents and Chinese and western literature to identify factors that could shape demand for PLA overseas activities and Chinese interests and perceptions of threats that could shape the PLA’s military activities. Our analysis identified multiple key trends that we assess will significantly shape demand for PLA activities abroad.

Several Trends Shape Demand for PLA Overseas Activities

**Shifting balance of international power.** The coming decades are likely to see the structure of global politics shift as the developing world, with China at the fore, gains more power relative to the developed West. Protecting and expanding economic ties, particularly with developing countries, will be key for China’s continued growth. This provides an incentive for China to prioritize the building of bilateral and multilateral security partnerships with other developing countries to help shape an international order that better suits Beijing’s needs (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019).

People gather to view a PLA Navy frigate in Cape Town, South Africa.
However, expanding PLA presence abroad could nevertheless affect U.S. interests as China deepens security partnerships with other countries. The pursuit of a China Dream gives rise to three areas of emphasis in Chinese foreign policy: building new China-led networks of partnerships, supporting multilateral security forums (as opposed to others’ unilateral or Western-led initiatives), and seeking to erode established security alliances. Although in the post–Cold War era China has maintained that it is opposed in principle to military intervention, officials and analysts now argue that Chinese military involvement in other countries does not violate the non-interference principle if it occurs with the consent—or at the request—of host nations and under certain multilateral conditions. One PLA mission, as articulated in China’s 2019 defense white paper, is to “provide a strategic support to protecting China’s overseas interests,” which requires the PLA to improve its ability to protect overseas personnel, resources, shipping lanes, and interests (Yan, 2019).

Our review of China’s core interests and how threats could emerge in coming decades implies a wide range of potential PLA operations and activities abroad, including peacetime military diplomacy, partnership-building activities, and potential combat operations with partner nations. Intensifying competition with the United States and other rival Asian powers also could motivate the PLA to consider a broader range of operations abroad than the military conducts today, including some form of combat operations.

China’s Expanding Interests Drive Requirements for Overseas Military Power

Chinese leaders’ responses to these trends are also informed by the priorities and policies that Chinese leaders have set for the nation. These include fulfillment of the “China Dream,” achieving a high living standard for all Chinese citizens and the country’s revival as a prosperous, great power under CCP rule (Xi, 2017). In expanding the PLA presence abroad, Beijing seeks to both protect and advance these interests, particularly to pursue continued economic growth as the foundation of CCP legitimacy. Its motives are thus fundamentally based on achieving domestic priorities, such as economic growth, to sustain the regime’s legitimacy and are at most only secondarily about competing with or imposing costs on the United States or any other country.
Finally, drawing on our assessment of Beijing’s view of global trends, interests, and perceived threats, we identified three likely priority regions for China to pursue basing and access over the next one to two decades: the Middle East, Africa, and the broader Indian Ocean region, including the Indo-Pacific beyond the first island chain.

Where Is China Most Likely to Pursue Bases and Why?

Given China’s expanding overseas interests and Chinese leaders’ ensuing commitments to protect them, the direction of senior leaders since 2004 that the PLA will need to be increasingly capable of operating overseas has been shaping China’s long-term pursuit of overseas basing and access locations. This next section focuses on where PLA bases and access points might be located. Although we do not attempt to definitively predict what China will do with its growing capabilities, we assess China’s long-term priorities for stationing forces abroad and the potential security implications for the United States if China does pursue an array of overseas access and basing locations.

A Mix of Factors Shape China’s Pursuit of Overseas Locations

A growing body of literature by Chinese military analysts and academic researchers explores the potential criteria for overseas PLA locations, as well as options for prioritizing locations for future PLA basing or access. Building on this discussion, we developed a framework comprising 17 indicators that we used to assess and rank potential host nations across two dimensions with a focus on the 2030–2040 time frame: (1) desirability, or utility for overseas Chinese military operations; and (2) feasibility, or China’s ability to obtain basing or access in a given country. Table 2 summarizes the full set of indicators that we identified for each dimension. Although we categorize indicators as either relevant for desirability or feasibility, indicators across the two may be correlated, meaning that a two-dimensional framework may artificially separate non-independent indicators. However, a robustness check comparing the two-dimensional scores with an alternative scoring system demonstrated that some elements of feasibility are important and relevant to consider separately from desirability.

Key indicators in the desirability dimension of our framework include the military utility of a potential host nation, its utility for protecting China’s economic interests, and low or acceptable political or other risks to China of basing forces in the country. The feasibility dimension of our framework highlights the potential host nation regime’s alignment with the People’s Republic of China, China’s influence in the country, and potential obstacles in China’s relationship with the country.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DESIRABILITY</th>
<th>FEASIBILITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1. Known Chinese interest in basing and access</td>
<td>F1. Authoritarian regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2. Within rapid steaming distance of China</td>
<td>F2. Aligned voting with China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3. Within military airlift range of China</td>
<td>F3. Perceptions of corruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4. Coastal country</td>
<td>F4. Partner engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5. Close proximity penalty</td>
<td>F5. Arms sales or transfers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D6. Level of human development</td>
<td>F6. Tensions in relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7. Level of Chinese investment</td>
<td>F7. Official recognition of the People’s Republic of China over the Republic of China (Taiwan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8. BRI member or participant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9. Political stability and absence of violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10. Risk of climate change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Table 3.1 in Garafola et al., 2022.
Although Chinese officials and authoritative sources do not explicitly lay out new or emerging roles and missions that the PLA may be called on to fulfill overseas, we find some key elements relevant for overseas power projection noted in PLA sources, including the need for maritime replenishment and strategic airlift. This literature suggests that Beijing’s pursuit of overseas basing and access is likely to diversify beyond the PLA Navy to encompass other services and a wide array of forces and units. PLA analysts also recognize that sending troops overseas will impose greater requirements on networking the force, building overseas logistics capability, coordinating across civilian and military bureaucracies, increasing the level of personnel training and skills, and determining how best to leverage overseas commercial assets.

Potential Host Nations for Future Chinese Basing and Access Locations

Our framework identified 24 countries that may be especially well suited to Beijing’s pursuit of basing and access over the next one to two decades. Figure 1 depicts these 24 countries, which scored in the top 50th percentile of all countries evaluated for both desirability and feasibility, with flag icons in three colors:

- Red flag icons indicate countries that scored highly in both the desirability and feasibility dimensions. These four countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar) have attracted significant attention in both PLA and Western analyses as future basing or access locations for China. Pakistan and Myanmar have been listed in PLA studies as promising potential host nations (Li, Chen, and Jin, 2014; Wang, Qi, and Hai, 2018).
- China’s inaugural host nation of overseas forces, Djibouti, is depicted with a black flag icon. Djibouti’s scores of medium desirability and high feasibility echo analysis by some PLA researchers that Djibouti is a highly feasible location to secure military presence given its willingness to host foreign troops from multiple countries. However, these researchers viewed some of Djibouti’s desirable attributes as counterbalanced by its relatively low level of economic development (Luo, Wan, and Li, 2019, p. 143).
- Orange flag icons indicate countries that scored either high or medium in both desirability and feasibility, but not high for both dimensions. These 20 countries (19 in orange, plus Djibouti) include various Middle East countries that could become strategic part-
FIGURE 1
Top Potential PLA Basing and Access Locations Based on Framework Dimension Scores

NOTE: Flag icons represent the top 50th percentile of countries in both dimensions of desirability and feasibility. Icon placement is approximate and does not reflect specific potential basing or access locations within these countries.
Because potential host nations can also shape feasibility over the 2030–2040 period of our project, 13 additional countries that scored relatively poorly in terms of feasibility may offer additional options for Beijing depending on future decisions made by those countries’ leaders. Figure 2 visualizes countries that scored relatively well in our assessment. It lists the 24 high-scoring countries in the top-left four rectangles (all shaded boxes) and the 13 additional potential partners in the bottom-left two rectangles, in contrast to relatively less-desirable partners in the three rectangles of the right-hand column.

**FIGURE 2**
Assessed Desirability and Feasibility of Potential PLA Basing and Access Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desirability</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>LOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PAKISTAN</td>
<td>CAMBODIA</td>
<td>IRAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BANGLADESH</td>
<td>MYANMAR</td>
<td>DJIBOUTI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UZBEKISTAN</td>
<td>YEMEN</td>
<td>EQUATORIAL GUINEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LAOS</td>
<td>EGYPT</td>
<td>LIBYA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SYRIA</td>
<td>REPUBLIC OF CONGO</td>
<td>SUDAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BAHRAIN</td>
<td>INDONESIA</td>
<td>KUWAIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OMAN</td>
<td>SRI LANKA</td>
<td>UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAUDI ARABIA</td>
<td>THAILAND</td>
<td>MALAYSIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KIYRGYZSTAN</td>
<td>LEBANON</td>
<td>MALDIVES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GABON</td>
<td>KENYA</td>
<td>SINGAPORE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MOROCCO</td>
<td>TANZANIA</td>
<td>TIMOR LESTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IRAQ</td>
<td>ALGERIA</td>
<td>OMANS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAURITANIA</td>
<td>MOZAMBIQUE</td>
<td>QATAR</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CAMEROON</td>
<td>NIGERIA</td>
<td>GAMBIA</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GUINEA</td>
<td>NEPAL</td>
<td>SENEGAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MOZAMBIQUE</td>
<td>SIERRA LEONE</td>
<td>MADAGASCAR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Reproduced from Garafola et al., 2022.

NOTE: Countries are listed in alphabetical order based on their location within the respective U.S. combatant commands’ areas of responsibility. DoD countries of concern are listed in the U.S. Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) 2020 annual report to Congress on China as countries in which China is interested in obtaining basing or access (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). We scored Djibouti along with the other countries even though China has already established a base there. The top-left shaded rectangle, Tier 1, consists of countries that scored in the top quartile of all 108 countries’ scores across both dimensions. The surrounding three rectangles, Tier 2, consist of countries that scored in the top 50 percent across both dimensions but lower than the Tier 1 countries. The five unshaded rectangles, Tier 3, consist of countries that scored in the top 75 percent across both dimensions, but lower than the Tier 2 countries. We do not depict the countries whose scores placed them in Tier 4, which is the bottom 25 percent of either dimension, reflecting countries with the lowest level of either desirability or feasibility (or both). Fifty-one of the 108 countries that we assessed fell into this lowest tier. AFRICOM = U.S. Africa Command; INDOPACOM = U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; UAE = United Arab Emirates.
LESSONS FROM HISTORICAL CASES:
How Competitors Have Used Overseas Bases and U.S. Response Options
Assuming that China does establish an expanded global military presence, what is it likely to do with it? To explore potential issues, we turn to our historical case studies.\(^6\) We first look at when countries obtain basing rights. Next, we discuss the potential utility of overseas military bases, followed by a discussion of the risks posed by operating overseas bases in unstable regions. Finally, we consider what the United States can do about competitors with an expanding global military footprint.

When Do Countries Obtain Basing Rights?

Basing rights offer potential benefits but also involve risk, both for the host nation and the basing state. For the host nation, a key issue is to ensure that the presence of a foreign military base does not threaten the nation’s sovereignty. For the basing state, there are risks of suddenly losing basing rights or of getting pulled into local conflicts.

Global Basing Networks Can Potentially Be Constructed Rapidly

In at least a partial parallel to China today, the Soviet Union built an overseas basing network during the Cold War. Immediately after World War II, the Soviets maintained foreign military bases only in the countries of Eastern Europe as a buffer against the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), much like China currently seeks to build a military buffer in the South China Sea. But beginning in 1955, the Soviets committed to developing global military reach. As Figure 3 illustrates, in the ensuing 20 years, the Soviet Union went from being a purely regional power to being a global military power with military bases in every major region of the world. If China is intent on building a global basing network, the Soviets’ experience suggests that they may be able to do so in the next two decades.

**FIGURE 3**
Map of Soviet Overseas Military Bases in 1955 and 1975

SOURCE: Reproduced from Watts, Boston, et al., 2022.
Basing Rights Are Usually a Product of War or Extreme Insecurity

Basing rights are usually offered only by countries facing extreme insecurity. The largest two overseas bases in our Soviet case study were both located in countries locked in conflict with much more powerful states—Egypt with Israel and Somalia with Ethiopia. In comparison, Algeria and Libya faced lower security threats and correspondingly offered much more limited access to the Soviets. Both countries frequently fended off Soviet entreaties for more substantial bases.

This pattern was repeated in other case studies. French bases were established in extremely weak countries that had just gained their independence from France. The comparatively (on average) wealthier and more-capable anglophone countries in Africa, in contrast, were much less likely to accept continued British military presence.

Basing Rights Provided for Economic Profit Are the Exception, and the Host Nations Often Take Measures to Protect Their Sovereignty

Djibouti stands in contrast to most of the countries granting significant basing rights. Despite not experiencing war or revolution, it offered basing rights to China in 2016, apparently in exchange for economic incentives. Djibouti did not offer such rights just to China: France and the United States have bases there, while other countries, such as Japan, Germany, Italy, and Spain, also have smaller military facilities in Djibouti.

Djibouti seems to follow a pattern characteristic of some very small states that are either financially or militarily dependent on larger powers. The UAE hosts both a U.S. and a French base. Tajikistan hosts a Russian military base, China is constructing guard and training facilities in the tri-border region with Afghanistan, and Chinese paramilitary forces reportedly patrol in Tajikistan as well. These countries have welcomed more than one foreign power—often ones with contending national interests. Such a policy may be a deliberate effort to retain sovereignty by maintaining multiple options for the financial and/or military support that they require.

Why Do Major Powers Seek Overseas Bases, and What Do They Do with Them?

Bases provide the basing nation with a level of military potential that likely could not be achieved with other forms of access. However, bases are also highly vulnerable, especially for states that do not have the level of power projection capabilities enjoyed by the United States.

In Competition, Bases Are Useful for Supporting Persistent Presence and Rapid Reaction During Crises

For a country that seeks to compete against the United States, bases provide some level of military potential that likely could not be realized through lesser forms of access. For example, Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea region grew to many times its previous scale when Moscow obtained access to naval facilities in Egypt and Syria. Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean does not appear to have expanded after the establishment of the Chinese base in Djibouti, but these types of facilities certainly could support an expansion of Chinese persistent naval presence.

Bases also facilitate rapid military reactions to fast-emerging crises. Countries with overseas naval bases are likely to have more warships in the vicinity of a crisis. Countries with overseas bases for their ground and air forces are likely to have prepositioned stocks and local logistics arrangements. Large air and naval bases can facilitate the movement of massive quantities of materiel to local partners during crises.

Finally, states frequently use overseas military bases as learning or training locales for their forces. France used its bases in francophone Africa to maintain a high level of situational awareness and a network of relationships for the forces it deployed to the region. Russia has used its presence in Syria during the Syrian civil war for training and experimentation, especially for its senior officers. China appears to be using its base in Djibouti for similar purposes—so that the PLA can learn how to operate at distances far from China’s borders.

But many forms of power projection are possible—albeit to a lesser extent—without long-
running access agreements or substantial military facilities. Port calls, multilateral military exercises, senior-level military engagements, and other forms of what might be called “military diplomacy” routinely happen on an ad-hoc basis. Chinese military diplomacy in the vicinity of Djibouti, for instance, has not noticeably increased since its establishment of a base there.

Even crisis intervention is possible without overseas bases. The Soviets, for instance, frequently used their basing infrastructure to move sizeable amounts of materiel and large numbers of advisors quickly to crisis spots in the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions. But they also sometimes simply relied on contingency access negotiated as needed with friendly countries or those with aligned interests in a particular crisis. Figure 4 below shows patterns of Soviet airlift in three crises: the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Ogaden War in 1977, and the Angolan civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. The Soviets made widespread use of their overseas military bases, but in many cases, they relied only on contingency access.

**FIGURE 4**

Approximate Soviet Airlift Routes to Crises in the 1970s

SOURCE: Reproduced from Watts, Boston, et al., 2022.

NOTE: Flight paths are approximate.
Basing Rights Founded on Insecurity Alone Appear to Be Precarious

If countries offer basing rights to a foreign power out of a desperate need for security, they may well retract such rights if their security situation changes. In fact, this dynamic was apparent in the cases of the Soviet bases in Egypt, Somalia, and elsewhere. When the Egyptians discovered that Soviet aid did not improve the outcomes of their wars with Israel and when the Soviets began to provide military aid to Somalia’s primary adversary, Ethiopia, both countries terminated Soviet access.

Why, then, do some military bases persist for years after a host nation’s extreme insecurity has been ameliorated? This question has come up most frequently in the context of U.S. military bases in NATO member states. Scholars have argued that the United States gained enduring basing rights in Western Europe not only because of the Soviet threat but also because the United States created institutions that placed limits on its own power. These institutions diminished the threat to the host nations’ sovereignty that foreign troops might have represented. Where the United States did not reach such a bargain, such
guarantees that foreign states typically offer in return for basing rights may embolden the regime of the host nation, causing it to behave more aggressively than it otherwise might have. These same factors can provoke counterbalancing behavior among the host nation’s neighbors and potentially fuel arms races and escalation spirals. Finally, because the basing state wants to retain its bases, it may act in ways that have the unintended consequence of fueling war. For instance, the basing state may exaggerate the security threats that the host nation faces (for instance, by providing flawed intelligence assessments) to highlight its indispensability to the host nation. Basing states may also fail to use their diplomatic leverage to restrain aggressive host nations for fear of alienating the host government and thus losing their bases.11

Overseas Bases Can Provoke Counterbalancing Behavior

As major powers develop overseas bases and increase their military presence, they can galvanize reactions among regional actors.

In the cases of French, Russian, and now Chinese basing examined during this project, countries in the regions near these foreign military bases did not appear to feel seriously threatened by them. This low level of perceived threat was likely a function of the limited number of foreign forces present and the limited activities that they undertook outside the host nation.11

In contrast, as the Soviet Union developed a large network of bases throughout the Middle East and Africa, and as it increasingly used those bases to exercise leverage on surrounding states, governments in those regions became increasingly concerned. Saudi Arabia, in particular, took an active role in resisting further Soviet expansion by funneling money to countries that might have been targeted for access or basing by the Soviets.

Overseas Bases Can Entrap the Basing State in Local Conflicts

Because host nations typically only offer basing rights to foreign powers because of acute security threats, these countries can pose high risks to the basing state. In particular, basing states may be drawn into local wars in which they did not want to become involved. Such entrapment can happen in a number of ways. The security assistance or security guarantees that foreign states typically offer in return for basing rights may embolden the regime of the host nation, causing it to behave more aggressively than it otherwise might have. These same factors can provoke counterbalancing behavior among the host nation’s neighbors and potentially fuel arms races and escalation spirals. Finally, because the basing state wants to retain its bases, it may act in ways that have the unintended consequence of fueling war. For instance, the basing state may exaggerate the security threats that the host nation faces (for instance, by providing flawed intelligence assessments) to highlight its indispensability to the host nation. Basing states may also fail to use their diplomatic leverage to restrain aggressive host nations for fear of alienating the host government and thus losing their bases.

Our case studies of Soviet behavior offer several examples of such dynamics. The Ogaden War is one such example. In this case, the Soviets used arms transfers to secure basing rights in Somalia. These arms transfers, in turn, appear to have emboldened Mogadishu into attacking Ethiopia, even though Moscow had discouraged Somalia from doing so. Ultimately Somalia and Ethiopia switched superpower patrons, with the Soviet Union defending Ethiopia despite the fact that it had hoped to maintain close relations with both sides in the war. Moscow’s desire for bases in Egypt may also have contributed to the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. At a minimum, the risk of losing these bases appears to have deterred the Soviets from applying pressure on Cairo to avoid war. But the desire to retain these bases may even have led the Soviets to provide Egypt with intelligence that inflated the threat posed by Israel (and thus the need for the Egyptians to continue providing basing rights to the Soviets), ultimately leading to the 1967 war, even though Moscow may have preferred to avoid such a war.12

The costs of these wars can greatly outweigh any possible advantage gained from an overseas military presence. The Ogaden War, in particular, proved costly to the Soviets, who provided thousands of military advisors and supported tens of thousands of Cuban combat forces to back Ethiopia. This war strengthened the sentiment among many officials in Moscow that military bases in such unstable regions were greater liabilities than assets.
What Can the United States Do About Competitors’ Overseas Bases?

There is a natural inclination among many U.S. decisionmakers and military planners to attempt to thwart competitors’ efforts to increase their overseas military access and basing. The case studies that we examined suggest that, under ordinary conditions, the United States might be able to slow competitors’ gains in access and basing, raise their costs, and potentially push them from more-desirable to less-desirable locations. But the United States has limited ability to block access entirely, and some options for attempting to oppose access, such as security cooperation, pose their own risks.

The United States Has Limited Ability to Block Competitors’ Military Access Under Ordinary Conditions

Even during crises, the United States has had very uneven success in using diplomatic pressure to deny competitors military access to many key states. U.S. efforts to deny the Soviets and Russians overflight rights, such as during the Yom Kippur War, provide one example. In many cases, U.S. competitors simply worked around U.S. diplomatic efforts.

U.S. efforts to deny basing rights to competitors follow a similar pattern. The United States sought to block Soviet access to Somalia in the 1970s by offering the Somalis an arms package. The Soviets, however, simply “outbid” the United States, offering the Somalis many times the amount of military assistance that the United States was willing to offer. In this case, the United States raised Moscow’s costs for basing rights, but it was not able to deny the Soviets access.

Such a record of uneven and partial successes can justify low-cost U.S. diplomatic initiatives intended to slow China’s expanding access and basing campaign, impose costs on Beijing, and potentially deny China access entirely in circumstances relatively favorable to the United States. But the United States cannot succeed in denying Beijing its goals everywhere and risks bearing costs far out of line with potential rewards if it tries.

As the Perceived Threat Posed by Competitors’ Military Presence Grows, So Too Do Opportunities for U.S. Diplomacy

As a foreign power gains increasing military presence in a region, and especially as it begins to translate that military potential into action, opportunities for U.S. diplomacy appear to increase. As discussed above, increasing Soviet military presence in the Middle East and Horn of Africa galvanized opposition from regional actors. The United States was able to capitalize on this reaction.

China may increasingly be provoking such counterbalancing behavior. Although Australia does not permit foreign nations to establish basing there, it has welcomed a rotating presence of up to 2,500 U.S. marines (Marine Rotational Force–Darwin) in response to China’s more aggressive behavior in the region. Similarly, after initially signaling opposition to continued U.S. military presence in the Philippines and openly courting China, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte renewed the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States in 2021, likely in response to continuing Chinese encroachment on Philippine territorial waters (Jeong and Lendon, 2021). If China continues to expand its military presence in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East, it might provoke similar diplomatic reactions that would work to the advantage of the United States.

Overreliance on Security Cooperation Can Be Dangerous in Unstable Regions

The United States routinely tries to use security cooperation as a means of building relationships and maintaining military access. The United States’ Pacific Deterrence Initiative suggests that security cooperation will be a major component of efforts to counter China (Shelbourne, 2021).

Historical cases suggest, however, that there are risks associated with an overreliance on some forms of security cooperation—arms transfers in particular—when working with unstable partner countries. The Soviets’ reliance on security assistance to Somalia helped to touch off the conflicts that ultimately proved self-defeating for the Soviets. More broadly, in unstable regions, such assistance has been demonstrated to be associated with competitive arms races, domestic repression of political dissent,
Indirect threats, however, were a serious risk, including threats that Moscow might not have intended. For example, many observers—including senior U.S. government officials—were concerned about the possibility of Soviet- and Cuban-backed Ethiopia threatening countries in which the United States would have needed crucial rear-area bases in the event of a Soviet invasion of Iran or the Arabian Peninsula, as illustrated in Figure 5. For this reason, U.S. officials discussed the possibility of providing a security guarantee to Somalia, and part of the intention for creating a rapid-reaction force for Middle Eastern contingencies was to enable the United States to protect these states in the Horn of Africa.

Such proxy wars, although less dangerous than direct wars with another major power, appear to be a type of contingency that might be triggered by competitor overseas bases. They may pose very different military requirements from those posed by conventional wars against peer competitors.

**FIGURE 5**

Hypothetical Soviet Invasion of the Arabian Peninsula

![Hypothetical Soviet Invasion of the Arabian Peninsula](image)

SOURCE: Reproduced from Watts, Boston, et al., 2022.
STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES
As this research indicates, growing overseas PLA presence is not a matter of if, but when. In the immediate near term, for example, there are strong indications that Djibouti will not remain China’s sole overseas naval facility; Cambodia could be the most likely to next join these ranks based on ongoing Chinese activities at Ream Naval Base. In the long term, China’s growing overseas interests are driving Beijing to examine various locations abroad.

Nonetheless, a great deal is uncertain about how China will behave in the long-term future. In some ways, China is likely to be a unique actor. Although its ambition to develop power-projection capabilities appears similar to the Soviet Union’s trajectory, China’s economic might is already much greater than the Soviet Union’s ever was. Consequently, China may be able to avoid some of the mistakes that the Soviets made, such as overrelying on military aid to acquire military access. China’s use of its economic influence is also likely to differ from the ways in which the United States has used its influence.

At the same time, it is not clear that China’s use of its economic leverage will differ in any fundamental way from such efforts in the past. The French exploited the extreme economic dependence of countries in francophone Africa, and the Soviets tried to exploit the Egyptians’ economic vulnerabilities to gain access—with counterproductive results. Similarly, although China may seek to avoid the Soviets’ mistake of overemphasizing security assistance to gain military access, it will not be able to eliminate potential risks.

Perhaps most uncertain of all are China’s intentions and the extent to which it would be willing to accept the risks of confrontation with the United States. China and the United States may find that there are areas where their relationship, although perhaps prickly, is not zero-sum, similar to the dynamics between De Gaulle’s France and the United States in their relations with Africa during that period. On the other hand, there is certainly the potential over the next two decades for intensifying competition between China and the United States to devolve into open confrontation.

In this section, we discuss the strategic implications of China’s pursuit of power-projection capabilities and global access and basing, then provide recommendations, first for the U.S. government as a whole and secondly for the U.S. Army specifically. Our analysis and recommendations follow the guidance of uncertainty-sensitive planning principles: Decisionmakers and planners should be attentive to multiple possible futures, and they should make hedging investments against the potential for the worst outcomes while seeking to maximize the chances of more-positive outcomes.

Strategic Implications

Our analysis of China’s basing options found that China appears particularly likely to seek military access and basing in its immediate vicinity and in the Middle East, although parts of Africa and the Indo-Pacific are also of interest to Beijing. The case studies suggest that China is most likely to find rights for substantial military bases among countries facing acute security requirements that they cannot meet without foreign support. Unfortunately, major powers’ quest for increased military basing in such countries can inflame local and regional sources of tension, leading to both civil and interstate wars. These wars, in turn, may draw in outside powers.

To better visualize the risks that an increased Chinese military presence might pose in this priority region, Figure 6 combines information on those countries in which China is most likely to seek basing rights with two indicators of instability. As in Figure 1, the icons represent those countries that our analysis suggests are most likely to be targeted by China as potential host nations. The shading of these countries indicates their degree of stability according to the Fragile States Index (FSI) annual report (Fragile States Index Team, 2021). Countries represented in beige are those involved in international rivalries with other states—a potent predictor of future interstate conflict. Countries shaded with cross-hatching are those with high (dark gray) or moderate (light gray) state fragility (or domestic instability).

As shown in Figure 6, both indicators of instability—state fragility or interstate rivalry—are ubiquitous in the countries that appear to be of interest to China. The prevalence of instability in these regions suggests that future Chinese efforts
FIGURE 6
Indicators of Instability in Potential Host Nations for Future Chinese Bases

SOURCE: Reproduced from Garafola et al., 2022.
NOTE: Flag icons represent the top 50th percentile of countries in both dimensions of desirability and feasibility. Icon placement is approximate and does not reflect specific potential basing or access locations within these countries.
to obtain global access and basing run a substantial risk of precipitating violent conflict, particularly in CENTCOM’s and AFRICOM’s areas of responsibility. Pakistan, in particular, stands out as a potential flashpoint, followed by Iran.

Our research suggests that, much like the Soviet Union, China still faces a large deficit in power-projection capabilities relative to the United States’. In terms of the scale and scope of its future overseas presence, China is unlikely to fully close this gap in the next two decades at anything like its current level of defense spending. If this is the case, many of the military risks that China’s pursuit of overseas military access and basing poses to the United States may also be indirect ones. If China were to provide advanced military capabilities to other countries in return for military access, such capabilities could greatly complicate U.S. defense planning.

Increased Chinese basing could also pose risks of inadvertent escalation. In the Yom Kippur War, for instance, the Soviets interposed their warships between the U.S. Sixth Fleet and the warring parties in an effort to deter direct U.S. intervention. The Soviet navy was not a match for the U.S. Navy, but its warships effectively served as a “tripwire” force that implied the risk of nuclear escalation. Were the Chinese to lend similar military support to its partners, the United States could face risks of military escalation with China far from China’s shores.

None of these military risks are likely in the next several years. But the rapid expansion of Soviet basing in the 20 years from 1955 to 1975 suggests that these risks cannot be discounted as U.S. defense planners consider the 2030–2040 time frame.

**Recommendations for the U.S. Government**

In this report, we have focused on the *deep future*—that is, Chinese activities in ten to 20 years. Such a focus limits our ability to make detailed recommendations because of the high level of uncertainty associated with this time frame. We can, however, recommend several broad principles for the U.S. government to adopt now to help shape the environment in which Chinese ambitions for global military presence will unfold.

**Develop indications and warning (I&W) for new overseas PLA locations.** The primary purpose of our framework analysis was to understand Beijing’s likely long-term aspirations for overseas basing and access. Our framework might be adapted, however, to help develop a set of I&W for China’s future pursuit of access and basing in specific locations.
Such a framework might be used to inform U.S. diplomatic and other initiatives intended to deny China military access in key states, impose additional costs on China if its military expansion appears threatening, and slow its rate of advance. In thinking through a potential I&W framework, nine of our 17 indicators are relatively slow to change given that countries’ economies and domestic and foreign policies evolve over many years or even decades. However, eight indicators might change more rapidly (such as within one year) depending on the behavior of China and/or potential host nations. Assessing these eight indicators more frequently may identify potential shifts in potential host countries’ scores for desirability and feasibility. An I&W framework could also include indicators with even shorter time frames, such as weeks or months.

Carefully prioritize where to resist Chinese access and basing and where to reinforce U.S. relationships. The findings suggest the importance of prioritizing efforts to resist expanding Chinese military presence. Diplomatic efforts to rally opinion against such Chinese efforts are inexpensive and should be fully exploited. The United States must focus its scarce resources on those countries that offer the greatest benefit to the United States or conversely would represent the greatest risk to U.S. interests if they were to offer China substantial military access or basing rights. Careful coordination among the various departments within the U.S. government would be required to execute such a calibrated strategy.

More than simply an argument about resource limitations, this recommendation also suggests the benefits that can come from not acting in many cases. As China expands its military footprint, it may provoke counterbalancing behavior among those states threatened by its expanding presence. The

An I&W framework might be used to inform U.S. diplomatic and other initiatives intended to

> deny China military access in key states,

> impose additional costs on China if its military expansion appears threatening, and

> slow its rate of advance.
access may also help to reduce countries’ dependence on Beijing.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Army

Planners should consider what present-day decisions need to be made to hedge against the possibility of a much more capable and potentially more belligerent China operating on a much wider geographic scale in the 2030s. Fortunately, our findings suggest that such hedging investments should likely remain modest, at least until such time that China provides more evidence it has both the capability and will to be a major military actor outside of East Asia.

**Retain forward posture in key regions.** Continuity in U.S. forward posture—in particular, the persistent presence of U.S. military forces in countries where they have long been present—usually appears to contribute to stability by reducing the risk that U.S. competitors will target U.S. allies and partners in the region with hostile measures. Especially if expanding Chinese military presence begins to aggravate underlying fault lines in unstable regions, U.S. forward posture may help protect states that are important to the United States.

**Conduct risk assessments for U.S. military activities in affected regions.** U.S. military planners should increasingly emphasize counterintelligence and operations security considerations in their planning for overseas activities as the PLA operates in new regions. Army assessments could focus on specific mission sets that the Army currently conducts and ones that it may be called on to conduct in the future, during periods of both crisis and competition. Two additional lenses may be beneficial: the Army’s ability to conduct Army-specific missions and roles and the Army’s ability to conduct missions and roles that support broader joint force missions and activi-

Not only should the United States avoid exacerbating acute security vulnerabilities, but also it should, to the extent possible, calm local or regional tensions, which may effectively deny China (or other competitors) its most promising opportunity for major bases.
ties. These reviews would identify options to mitigate near-term or less-severe risks, as well as gaps in concepts, capabilities, equipment, personnel expertise, training, and/or posture, which addressing could help increase mission success in a more complex operating environment.

Consider the risks of growing PLA military presence when planning security cooperation. Overreliance on mechanisms such as security cooperation can inflame instability. In the worst-case scenario, a large increase in U.S. military support to a partner nation could make the partner’s neighbors feel threatened and could drive them to seek out Chinese support—potentially offering China the sort of military access that the United States seeks to forestall.

Take appropriate measures to increase U.S. ability to respond rapidly to crises. Thus far, at long distances, the PLA has managed only fairly basic military operations, such as noncombatant evacuation operations. If China shows signs of becoming more militarily active and capable in new regions, however, the United States might pursue the access rights, infrastructure, and prepositioned stocks necessary for responding quickly to crises that had formerly been well outside the PLA’s operating areas.

Maintain or expand the military expertise necessary to react to wider PLA operations. The U.S. armed forces should maintain or expand regional expertise, such as Foreign Area Officers, not only for China but also for those regions that concern the United States most as potential host nations for China to expand its military presence. The United States will also likely need to expand its expertise in certain functional areas, such as counterintelligence, and may need to reestablish an organization like the former Asymmetric Warfare Group to specialize in understanding the tactical implications that such capabilities might pose.

Retain the military capabilities for lower-intensity conflict. After two decades of counter-insurgency, the U.S. military is rightly focused on regaining its capabilities for large-scale combat operations. It would be a mistake, however, to focus on such operations to the exclusion of others. The United States should retain the capabilities needed to protect U.S. allies and partners from regional threats potentially magnified by Chinese overseas bases.
NOTES

1 For a military-focused example, Cuba has reportedly provided access to China for signals intelligence since the 1990s (see Underwood, 2018).

2 We compared our two-dimensional scores with an alternative scoring system of one overall score reflecting all 17 indicators. Although most of the top-scoring countries remained high-scorers using the alternate method, we also found that key U.S. allies rose to the top—the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan—even though it is unlikely U.S. allies would host the PLA given their strong relations with the United States and their own tensions with China.

3 See, for examples, Wang, Qi, and Hai, 2018, pp. 32–34; and Chen, Li, and Zeng, 2019, p. 8.

4 This literature is cited in detail in the “Coordination Across the PRC Government and Military” section in RR-A1496-2.

5 See also Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2020.

6 As a reminder, we conducted three case studies of overseas military access and basing among the United States’ competitors: French bases in francophone Africa during Charles de Gaulle’s presidency, Soviet bases ringing the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, and Russian bases in Syria during the ongoing Syrian civil war. We selected these cases to represent a wide range of competitors and behaviors, reflecting the uncertainty of Chinese behavior ten to 20 years in the future (see case details in the “Approach” section). Most importantly, they represent a range of capability levels and intensities of competition with the United States. These cases vary in other ways as well. They span many decades (including the Cold War and post–Cold War periods), a wide range of host nations (in multiple regions and different levels of development), and differing approaches to gaining access and basing rights (from countries that typically placed more emphasis on security inducements—the Soviet Union and Russia—to those that relied more heavily on economic inducements, such as Gaullist France). The cases also differ in scope, ranging from substantial Soviet bases in six countries to Russia’s current smaller basing presence in Syria. Although we must be careful about generalizing from a small number of cases, the appearance of similar themes across such highly varied cases suggests that such themes may have broad applicability.

7 Egypt also needed Soviet assistance to recover from another conflict, its costly intervention in Yemen.

8 The U.S. presence at Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan, although too small to be considered a base by our standard, may be evidence of a similar pattern. The Russian military predominance in Central Asia may have limited any risk local leaders might have perceived from the U.S. military presence.

9 See, for instance, Vick and Ashby, 2021.

10 The examples listed include Kenya in 2018 (investment threatened), Palau in 2017 (tourism banned), and the Philippines in 2012 and 2014 (exports curtailed and tourism restricted). One report found 100 instances of Chinese coercive diplomacy targeting foreign governments around the world between 2010 and 2020 (see Hanson, Currey, and Beattie, 2020). For detailed examples in the Indo-Pacific, see Lin et al., 2022.

11 France, of course, did use military forces in countries in which it did not have bases, but these interventions were limited solely to francophone African states and were typically in support of the existing regimes and in accordance with defense pacts made with these countries’ leaders.


13 See, for instance, Watts, Rooney, et al., 2022; and Watts et al., 2018.

14 See, for example, Gelpern et al., 2021.

15 For more on uncertainty-sensitive planning, see Davis, 2012.

16 These eight indicators are D1, D7, D8, D9, F1, F4, F5, and F7 (see Table 2). For a more detailed discussion of these indicators, see Garafola et al., 2022.
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