



China's Military Interventions

Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts

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Great powers have frequently employed large, expeditionary military forces engaged in various operations abroad. As China has ascended in power, observers have debated whether the country might follow a similar path. China has undertaken two types of military interventions in its post-1949 history. The report's authors assess which one of two patterns is likely to predominate in China's future and how this pattern might change.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How, how often, and where has China used military interventions in the past?
- What have been the main drivers of these interventions, and how have they changed over time?
- What are the factors that are most likely to incentivize Chinese leaders to carry out a military intervention in the coming years?
- What implications do Chinese military interventions carry for the U.S. Army?



KEY FINDINGS

- The first type of intervention occurred throughout much of the Cold War, from 1949 through the 1970s
- The majority of interventions in the Cold War were few in nature but larger in scale and frequently involved combat operations.
 - These interventions stemmed primarily from heightened threat perceptions, concerns about the regional balance of power, and the role of allies and partners. However, ideology and the personality of key leaders were also important.
 - Cold War–era interventions took place largely along China's periphery, partly because of a lack of military capabilities to project power.

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- The Cold War–era case study highlighted Vietnam’s alignment with the Soviet Union, Vietnam’s war with Chinese ally Cambodia, and unresolved border disputes as key drivers.

The second type of intervention began around the mid-2000s, when the PLA began to engage in a growing number of nonwar missions

- Compared with the previous type, interventions in the post–Cold War period have occurred at a higher level of frequency but involved far smaller numbers of troops and consisted of nonwar missions.
- Post–Cold War interventions have occurred at farther distances from China’s borders, as far away as Africa.
- The case study on the counterpiracy patrols and establishment of the Djibouti base underscored how concerns about economic interests and the vulnerability of citizens and their assets provided key drivers of these operations.
- Beijing continues to plan and prepare for potential major interventions to resolve the status of Taiwan and uphold Chinese claims regarding disputed maritime territories.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- In some cases, the U.S. Army may find opportunities to cooperate with the PLA in military interventions to address shared concerns, such as epidemics, natural disasters, and other nontraditional threats.
- Even in the cases of cooperation against shared threats, however, the reality of a geopolitical competition between China and the United States highlights the need for prudence. Wherever Chinese forces operate abroad, the U.S. Army should expect heightened efforts by the PLA to collect intelligence on U.S. personnel and partner countries.
- PLA collaboration with host-nation governments could aim to weaken or undermine U.S. influence or alliances. Although no example currently exists today, China could someday choose to militarily back a host-nation government against U.S. interests in a proxy fight. The U.S. Army may need to consider how to help partner groups or states defend themselves in such situations while minimizing the risks of the United States getting into unwanted conflict with Chinese-backed forces.
- Ongoing tensions between China and U.S. allies and partners, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan, raise the risk that a crisis could erupt at persistent flashpoints. U.S. Army training and engagement with allies and partners can help build deterrence against coercive Chinese behavior, while emphasizing U.S. resolve and commitment to their defense.
- The U.S. Army should expand its engagement with allied and partner countries in which the PLA is active, both to increase situational awareness and to better equip partner countries to resist Chinese demands that they might regard as unreasonable.

