

# The Consolidation of Political Power in China Under Xi Jinping

Implications for the PLA and Domestic Security Forces

## Addendum

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CT-503/1

Document submitted April 11, 2019, as an addendum to testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on February 7, 2019.



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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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*The Consolidation of Political Power in China Under Xi Jinping: Implications for the PLA and Domestic Security Forces*

Testimony of Timothy R. Heath<sup>1</sup>  
The RAND Corporation<sup>2</sup>

Addendum to testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Submitted April 11, 2019

Following the hearing on February 7, 2019, the commission sought additional information and requested answers to the questions in this document. The answers were submitted for the record.

## Question 1

*Would Beijing's skepticism of the PLA's operational capabilities be the same if China were involved in a conflict with one of its neighbors rather than with the United States?*

- *How would the PLA's perceived operational deficits constrain Beijing if it were contemplating a confrontation with a non-treaty ally of the United States, like Vietnam or India?*
- *How might the PLA's perceived operational deficits constrain Beijing if it were contemplating a confrontation with a treaty ally of the United States where U.S. intervention might be in question. For example, if China attacked Philippine non-governmental boats operating in areas of competing maritime claims? What about a conflict with Japan if U.S. intervention was in doubt?*

## Answer

Before exploring how Beijing's skepticism of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s operational capabilities would affect any potential conflict with its neighbors, it is important to first define what we mean by *operational deficits*. I will then examine how concern about these

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vulnerabilities might affect Beijing's considerations regarding different types of military confrontations.

Scholars have long debated the Chinese military's ability to fight high-end wars. Outside a few critical shortages in equipment for large-scale operations, such as amphibious transportation, the PLA has ample inventories of the types of armaments and weaponry relevant to the contingencies it is most likely to face. However, critical questions remain about how well the PLA can use its equipment. The PLA has not fought a war since its invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and efforts to modernize an obsolete command structure, imbue the military with a joint force mentality, and control corruption remain far from complete. A Chinese leadership that has, in the reform era, shown considerable caution in employing military force thus has ample reason to question the military's ability to carry out complex combat operations against a competent, conventionally equipped adversary. Thus, when I use the term *operational deficit*, I refer principally to the political leadership's skepticism about the PLA's ability to competently execute assigned missions, although the term does not exclude the possibility that shortfalls in equipment may impair the execution of some military tasks. Concerns about the PLA's *combat readiness* communicate an analogous idea. The biggest obstacles to the PLA's ability to prevail in an operation lies less in the quality or quantity of military materiel, or in its peacetime preparations, than in the military's ability to operate available assets to achieve desired effects. Thus, for these responses, I use the terms *operational deficits* and *concerns about combat readiness* to convey Beijing's doubts about the PLA's ability to execute assigned missions in a satisfactory manner, given available resources and ample preparation.

In terms of potential contingencies with neighboring countries that do not involve U.S. military forces, Beijing's views of the PLA's readiness could prove an important factor. Greater confidence in the PLA might spur Beijing to contemplate more-ambitious operations that could achieve greater results, while lower confidence might incentivize caution and more-conservative operations. In situations in which the Chinese military believes that it has seriously overmatched its adversary, there could be a risk of overconfidence, although this may be tempered by the PLA's sensitivity to its reputation after 40 years without combat. The PLA's readiness to prevail in combat would also have to be weighed against that of its adversary. Countries like India and Vietnam have formidable militaries, although direct comparisons with the PLA are complicated by the significant variation by service in each military and by the nature of the contingencies in question. For example, the PLA may appear to overmatch a rival country in warships but have less of an advantage in ground forces, especially in tough geographic conditions. Neither may have fought a war with such forces in decades, which further complicates comparisons.

In the past, China occasionally initiated high-risk military operations that generated huge casualties and yielded uncertain results. In those conflicts, political considerations overrode apprehensions about the PLA's combat readiness. This pattern has appeared several times in the history of the People's Republic of China, from the staggeringly costly intervention in the Korean War to the inept invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

Today, however, China's rapid rise and great-power aspirations have significantly changed the calculus. The stakes of the PLA's performance have increased dramatically from the Mao era, when observers expected very little of an impoverished, ineptly led PLA. Outside of a major

operation to invade Taiwan, most plausible conflict scenarios in the maritime domain or Indian border would yield little material benefit to China. Perhaps more valuable could be the gain in prestige. But for China to reap the benefits of heightened prestige, the PLA would have to clearly demonstrate its prowess. A bungled military operation today would severely damage Beijing's credibility as an alternative regional security leader to the United States. For its first battle in the 21st century, therefore, the PLA would have a strong incentive to engage only under the most favorable conditions. However, the range of favorable conditions could expand, depending on evidence of the PLA's competence.

Regarding potential contingencies with U.S. treaty allies, so long as the risk of U.S. intervention remained, political factors would probably be decisive in Chinese calculations about the use of force. In general, the greater the risk of great-power war with Japan or the United States, the more incentive Beijing would have to act cautiously and make its utmost efforts to manage escalation risks. Most likely, Beijing would prioritize diplomatic or economic options to manage a crisis. By contrast, the lower the risk of great-power war, the more latitude Beijing might have to consider potential military operations. In all cases, China could be expected to make extensive political preparations to minimize the risk of U.S. involvement and minimize escalation. In preparing a contingency against Philippine vessels, for example, Beijing could be expected to prepare moral, legal, and political arguments to justify its use of military force and undercut any rationale for U.S. intervention. If Washington signaled that it would not be involved, the operational risks for such a mission would probably be low, and Beijing could be confident of military success.

Potential contingencies involving Japanese forces differ and pose a special case, because of the formidable capabilities of the Japanese military and the risk of escalation. As with potential scenarios involving U.S. forces, political considerations would likely prove more decisive in decisions to engage Japanese forces. Chinese leaders would have to worry about the political implications of failure against a hated foe. Although a disappointing PLA Navy performance could be attributed to the military strength of Japanese forces, the humiliation from such an outcome could drive Beijing to seek revenge by escalating the situation.

Next to political factors, considerations of the PLA's readiness would play a secondary role in deliberations about conflict with U.S. allies. Even so, assessments of the PLA's combat readiness could greatly affect the military course of action chosen. The more confident Beijing felt about the PLA's ability to competently execute missions, the more likely Chinese leaders might entertain a broader range of complex, sophisticated missions. An example might be a combined attack featuring precisely timed joint fires from air, naval, and ground platforms against a broad array of targets far from China's shores. Leaders who lacked confidence in the PLA's readiness, by contrast, would have a strong incentive to direct military leaders to undertake only those actions most likely to achieve their political goals. An example of this type of mission might be an attack that targeted a maritime vessel and that relied exclusively on PLA Navy strike aircraft.

## Question 2

*How might the current state of PLA operational competence potentially affect Chinese senior leadership decision-making concerning the use of the PLA in gray zone operations against China's neighbors to include Japan, India, Vietnam, and the Philippines?*

## Answer

Because the platforms involved in gray zone operations tend to be nonmilitary assets, such as China's civilian fishing fleet, the Chinese Coast Guard, and China's maritime militia, the risks posed by doubts about PLA operational competence are lower. However, because the PLA remains untested in high-end combat, a reliance on gray zone operations will not allow Beijing's leaders to definitively judge the PLA's readiness to execute complex, joint operations. Gray zone operations also can achieve only limited goals, because of the requirement to avoid passing thresholds that could trigger conventional combat. Moreover, to sustain gray zone operations and maintain escalation control, PLA leaders would need assurances that the military could handle any combat situation that might arise from gray zone clashes. A lack of confidence in the PLA's ability in these conditions would encourage Chinese leaders to handle any escalating situation conservatively, and possibly seek off-ramps early. By contrast, Beijing's confidence in the PLA's military readiness could not only incentivize risk-taking behavior in a gray zone-related crisis but also inspire Chinese leaders to plan provocations in a brinkmanship mode. An adversary that tried in such a situation to deter China through escalation could end up playing right into Beijing's hands, resulting in a dangerous situation rife with risks of disastrous miscalculation.