How China Fights

in Large-Scale Combat Operations

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Foreword

As the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-2 for the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), I am pleased to introduce this timely paper, *How China Fights in Large-Scale Combat Operations*. This will be the first of a series of papers focusing on our key potential adversaries—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—and we chose to start with the most capable and formidable of the four. In an article I wrote for *Military Review*, I argue that large-scale combat operations (LSCO), will be won and lost at the operational level of warfare. Understanding how China fights at the operational level is the first step in ensuring that the Army will be prepared for any conflict in the Indo-Pacific theater. It is my hope that this paper fills a key gap in our understanding of how the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) approaches warfare.

This document builds upon two seminal TRADOC G-2 publications. The first is TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, *The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations*, which addresses 12 key conditions we assess are present in LSCO and adds another five implications for the U.S. Army when contemplating LSCO. The second is Army Techniques Publication 7-100.3, *Chinese Tactics*, which describes China's military strategy, operational concepts, and the likely characteristics of future PLA operations. This new paper sheds light on how the Chinese Communist Party views its security environment and how this perception shapes the PLA's approach to warfighting, particularly its emphasis on "active defense" and "systems confrontation." The insights presented here are not merely academic; they are essential for informing our training methodologies and force development initiatives.

This paper will be disseminated across the Army, the Joint Force, the Intelligence Community, and to our allies and partners to promote a deeper understanding of Chinese military thought and operational practices. It will drive curriculum development at our schools and centers, inform professional military education, support the writing of Army doctrine, and enhance the realism and relevance of U.S. Army training scenarios at Combat Training Centers. By incorporating the PLA's operational doctrine, tactics, and technological capabilities into our opposing force representation, we can also better prepare our Soldiers and leaders for the challenges they would face in a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific theater. It will help us fulfill our primary mission, which is to know our potential adversaries, and to ensure that our key customers do too.

I encourage all members of the Army community to engage with this material and consider its implications. If we are to visualize how the Army will participate as part of a Joint, Combined, and interagency team in a future conflict in the Indo-Pacific, then we must begin with an understanding of our potential adversary. This paper offers a fine starting point for that visualization.

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"To achieve victory, we must know the enemy.
Knowing the enemy starts with the Operational Environment."

Victory starts here!

Content

Executive Summary

How China Fights in Large-Scale Combat Operations provides a detailed assessment of China's military strategy, operational concepts, and the anticipated characteristics of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ground forces employed in conflict. As China is designated as the United States' pacing threat, the U.S. Army must understand how China fights at the operational level to ensure readiness for potential conflicts in the Indo-Pacific theater. This document builds upon foundational material presented in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, *The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations* and Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 7-100.3, *Chinese Tactics*. TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92 identifies the key Operational Environment conditions that will define large-scale combat operations (LSCO) for the foreseeable future, while ATP 7-100.3 provides insights into PLA tactics. Together, these resources offer a comprehensive foundation for understanding the PLA's approach to conflict and its implications to U.S. Army training and education.

China's leadership perceives the global security environment as increasingly complex and dangerous, with the United States viewed as a primary adversary. The Chinese Communist Party is focused on safeguarding its core interests, including China's internal stability and economic development, while expanding its focus to include overseas interests. Taiwan remains a central point of contention, with China rejecting the possibility of foreign interference on this issue. As a result, China's military strategy is rooted in 'active defense,' combining a strategically defensive posture with offensive operational and tactical capabilities. This strategy has resulted in power projection beyond China's borders, sophisticated antiaccess/area-denial capabilities, and other modernization initiatives designed to counter potential interference with its strategic objectives.

In LSCO, China would employ a whole-of-nation approach, integrating military and civilian capabilities to secure its national interests. This approach would feature operations characterized by joint multidomain integration, prioritization of information dominance, and preparation for potentially protracted conflicts. Central to this strategy is 'systems confrontation,' where the PLA will leverage its offensive capabilities to paralyze enemy systems across multiple domains. Systems confrontation focuses on targeting interconnected systems—such as command and control, intelligence networks, logistics functions, information systems, and fire-support systems—to neutralize an adversary's ability to wage war effectively.

China's emphasis on all-domain warfare underscores its focus on joint multidomain integration and information dominance. The PLA leverages advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and electronic warfare to achieve decisive victories by exploiting vulnerabilities in enemy systems through precision strikes coordinated across services and domains. This concept is embodied in Multidomain Precision Warfare, the PLA's core operational concept that integrates operations across all domains to fuse information from all services and launch effects against identified enemy vulnerabilities.

Anticipating foreign intervention in the Pacific theater, China has developed a comprehensive joint counter-intervention complex aimed at deterring, delaying, and defeating enemy forces before they can arrive in theater at full strength. This campaign involves information operations to disrupt enemy decisionmaking processes, air and sea dominance efforts to control critical theaters, and joint firepower strikes targeting deployment routes and logistics hubs. PLA ground forces will play an integral role in these campaigns through amphibious assaults, airborne maneuvers, strategic defenses, and counterattacks—all fully integrated into joint operations.

Ground forces, which are often underestimated in discussions about Pacific conflicts dominated by air and naval operations, play a critical role in countering China's strategies. The PLA's reliance on ground forces for amphibious assaults, airborne operations, and strategic counterattacks demonstrates their integral role in achieving operational objectives. Similarly, U.S. ground forces are essential for securing key terrain, enabling joint operations, and disrupting adversary systems in contested environments. As the Indo-Pacific theater presents unique challenges due to its geography and the multidomain nature of modern warfare, the U.S. Army must ensure its ground forces are prepared to operate effectively alongside other components of the Joint Force. This preparation is vital not only for deterring aggression but also for ensuring victory in any potential conflict with China.

Introduction

U.S. national security policy designates China as the pacing threat for the United States, with the 2025 Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance emphasizing that "the Department of Defense (DoD) will act urgently to… deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.[1] Therefore, it is crucial for the U.S. Army to understand China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). If the CCP chooses to employ the PLA more assertively to advance its regional and global interests, the U.S. Army must be prepared to play a leading role as part of the Joint and Combined Force in potential future conflicts with China. A thorough understanding of China's military capabilities is crucial to protecting U.S. interests, deterring Chinese aggression, and ensuring victory in any potential Indo-Pacific conflict.

This paper is the first in a series that builds upon the work presented in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, *The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations*. That publication, disseminated in December 2024, established the 12 key Operational Environment conditions of modern large-scale combat operations (LSCO). This paper addresses these LSCO conditions as they apply to China throughout the text, as well as summarizes the key points in a convenient one-page reference aid. Additionally, this paper is divided into sections that provide an analysis of the CCP's security perceptions, its approach and strategy for conflict, and the PLA's organization and warfighting capabilities across all domains.

Importantly, this paper advances work presented in Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 7-100.3, *Chinese Tactics*, and concludes with ground forces-focused vignettes that challenge the common misconception that a conflict in the Pacific would primarily consist of air and sea engagements with little-to-no role for ground forces. While ATP 7-100.3 provides context for how the PLA ground forces might operate at the brigade and battalion echelons, it does not address how echelons above the brigade level would operate. These vignettes seek to fill that gap by illustrating two different scenarios that describe the ways in which the PLA is likely to rely on its ground forces in any campaign involving LSCO in the Pacific. They explain how China would likely organize its forces, integrate joint capabilities, and conduct operational-level maneuver to achieve its strategic objectives. By providing these detailed vignettes, this paper demonstrates the indispensable role of ground forces in the Pacific with the aim of preparing the U.S. Army for the complex, multidomain nature of LSCO in this uniquely critical and challenging theater of operations.

This document is the result of TRADOC analysts' continuous study of China and the PLA. This work also stems from routine collaboration across the Army Intelligence and Security Enterprise, as well as with the Intelligence Community and allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific. TRADOC would like to give special thanks to the National Ground Intelligence Center, U.S. Army Pacific, and the Army War College's China Landpower Studies Center for their support in this effort.

China's View of Its Security Environment

China's leaders see the current security environment as complex and dangerous. Speaking at the 20th CCP Congress, President Xi Jinping provided a snapshot of China's threats stating, "Our country has entered a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and unforeseen factors are rising…we must... be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios…"[2]

Chinese scholars of international relations, Chinese government documents, and state media often depict China as being surrounded by adversaries. Statements from key Chinese leaders, along with party journals and news sources, frequently refer to the United States as instigating a "new cold war" aimed at containing China.[3]

China's core interests, while not precisely defined, primarily encompass economic development, internal stability, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity.[4] To safeguard these core interests, China has expanded its focus to include overseas interests. This expansion was noted in China's 2013 Defense White Paper and is evident in its efforts to establish global military reach, as seen in China's evacuation of its citizens from Libya, where the PLA Navy and Air Force deployed regionally aligned forces to evacuate 35,860 Chinese nationals.[5]

China's interpretation of its territorial sovereignty is broad and has led to territorial disputes with 17 countries (see Figure 1). Among them, Taiwan and its disputed status is of particular concern to the CCP. China's leaders reject foreign interference on the Taiwan issue, democratization, human rights, and their desire to establish China as a world economic and geopolitical power.[6]

Figure 1: China's Territorial Disputes (Source: TRADOC G-2)

China's Approach to Conflict

China's approach to conflict is characterized by a continuum of strategies, ranging from diplomatic engagement to full-scale warfare, leveraging all available means to gain an advantage.[7] This whole-of-nation approach encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including China's United Front work—a blend of influence, interference, and intelligence activities—and the "Three Warfares" (psychological, public opinion, and legal warfare), which are used to advance national interests without resorting to armed conflict, as well as the Chinese military concept of 'active defense.'

Military Strategy: Active Defense

China's active defense concept is the cornerstone of its military strategy, emphasizing a strategically defensive posture with operational and tactical offensive capabilities.[8] It allows China to take full advantage of three interrelated conditions—mass, magazine depth, and interior lines—which in combination mitigate many of its vulnerabilities while forcing opponents to expose their own. The strategy has its beginnings in Mao Zedong's concept of "luring the enemy in deep" but now incorporates elements of deterrence, information dominance, and joint operations to safeguard China's sovereignty and national interest.[9]

Additionally, the scope of active defense has expanded over the past 15 years, shifting from a purely defensive stance to one capable of projecting power beyond China's immediate borders.[10] This evolution includes developing antiaccess capabilities, emphasizing maritime military struggle, and preparing for 'informationized' and 'intelligentized' warfare.[a] The strategy integrates the concept of 'Modern People's War,' which the CCP defines as the mass mobilization of society to confront foreign aggression or protect national unity.[11] While this concept dates to the Chinese Civil War, Chinese strategists note that the concept has evolved to take into account the realities of modern society and remains ideologically sound and relevant to modern warfare.[12] The concept of People's War is relevant in situations where the traditional boundaries between peace and war, rear areas and front lines, and civilians and combatants become increasingly blurred. In this context, there is a greater requirement for attention to the economic and technological aspects of conflict.

A key tenet of China's active defense strategy is 'war control' or 'effective control,' that is, how China manages activities during competition, crisis, and conflict. War control emphasizes the management and containment of conflicts to achieve specific objectives while minimizing risks.

It can be understood as having three main components:[13]

- **Establishing posture** uses nonviolent means during peacetime/competition to address potential weaknesses and maintain stability.

a The PLA concept of informationized warfare introduced digital networks, information systems, and data to military operations. Informationized warfare applies to command and control (C2); intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and cyber operations. Since 2019, the PLA simultaneously began pursuing intelligentized warfare, which incorporates developing technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, big data, virtual and augmented reality, cloud computing, autonomous systems, and the internet of things to support rapid decisionmaking.

- **Crisis prevention and control** employs all national instruments of power and whole-of-nation capabilities to prevent escalation while seizing opportunities to advance interests.
- **War situation control** seeks quick victory at minimal cost while containing escalation in intensity and scope.

Military-Civil Fusion

China views 'military-civil fusion,' the concept of a national integrated strategic system and capabilities, as a critical enabler in strategic competition and conflict. Chinese military power integrates and depends upon whole-of-nation support for rapid deployment and protracted sustainment. Chinese officials recognize modern conflicts have lowered thresholds and blurred lines between war and peace, making the connectivity between civilian and military domains increasingly important.[14] In 2015, Xi introduced the concept of military-civil fusion, which is a further refinement of CCP concepts of civilian support to the military. In 2017, the CCP established the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development to oversee its integration.[15] Later renamed the "national integrated strategic system and capabilities," this system was adopted to help China make optimal use of its significant civilian economic power, science and technology sector, and civilian infrastructure to support military development and, symbiotically, to use military research, development, and capabilities for social benefit. China believes the outcome of global competition will be determined by a nation's ability to effectively leverage its entire range of capabilities, and military-civil fusion is essential to achieving this goal.[16]

China has developed initiatives across all segments of society under the rubric of military-civil fusion, which have important implications for its strategic and operational capabilities. Examples of this can be seen across all segments of society:

- China's *2016 Defense Transportation Law* dictates state-owned enterprises build and train to support defense efforts, and it broadens the state's authorities to requisition vehicles, facilities, and materials during wartime.[17] The PLA regularly carries out large-scale exercises involving civilian transports, logistics facilities, and municipalities. Synergies between China's civilian and military R&D ecosystems ensure that the PLA has access to cutting-edge technologies in fields from space to optics.
- As the war in Ukraine has emphasized, resilience of a nation's economy is key to sustaining capacity to fight. This resilience includes the ability to continue economic activity during a conflict, mitigating the impact of disrupted supply chains, avoiding sanctions, and reconstituting logistics nodes and other centers when they are targeted. China has made numerous efforts in this vein, creating its own payment system to supplement the SWIFT banking system, improving energy and food independence, and creating a strategic petroleum reserve.
- The CCP has many civilian bureaus and agencies responsible for carrying out influence operations, increasingly supported by a vast ecosystem of private sector companies carrying out cyberattacks and online influence activity.

Systems Confrontation

China conceptualizes modern warfare against the United States and its allies as a 'systems confrontation' rather than traditional force-on-force or platform-on-platform battles. In Chinese writings, "systems confrontation" is the act of pitting opposing states' defense strategies, systems, and civil-military synergy against each other.[18] This approach aims to paralyze the enemy's operational systems across multiple domains. China's operational system of systems is composed of five key components:

- The **command system** focuses on command-and-control (C2) links that network and connect the component systems. To paralyze the enemy's command system, the PLA will target the networks to degrade situational awareness and delay decisionmaking.
- The **firepower-strike system** is designed to deliver kinetic fires across multiple domains, including air, sea, and land.
- The **information warfare (confrontation) system** aims to achieve information dominance and includes a wide range of information capabilities, including electronic warfare and cyber operations.
- The **reconnaissance intelligence system** is responsible for gathering intelligence and building situational awareness for PLA forces.
- The **support system** provides comprehensive support to the other systems, including logistics and other essential functions.

China believes that targeting and disrupting its enemy's interconnected systems can neutralize the enemy's ability to function effectively, project power, and wage war. This multidomain strategy reflects China's evolving military doctrine, emphasizing the importance of disabling critical nodes within an opponent's complex operational network to achieve strategic objectives. In Chinese texts, a node is any targetable capability whose degradation or destruction affects the performance of other enemy battlefield systems.[19]

At the operational and tactical levels, success is achieved by high-intensity, preferably simultaneous strikes against C2 nodes and key support functions to paralyze the enemy's system of systems. Chinese writings emphasize the importance of simultaneous multidomain lethal and nonlethal fires to deliver shocks to an enemy's systems.

PLA Operational Systems	Types of Enemy Targets by Echelon		
	Strategic	*Operational*	*Tactical*
Command	• National command centers • Theater command centers • Nuclear C2, and communications • Coalition/allied headquarters	• Corps and Army command posts • Joint task force headquarters	• Corps and Army command posts • Joint task force headquarters
Firepower Strike	• Nuclear triad bases • Global strike command • Satellite navigation systems	• Theater ballistic missiles • Corps artillery • Theater air component • Theater naval component • C2 ships	• Division surface fires • Division strike aviation • Naval surface vessels • Tactical aircraft and airfields
Information Confrontation	• Satellite communications • National communications networks • Public opinion/influence operations • Lawfare	• Early warning radars • Satellite communications • Theater networks • Psychological operations	• Fire direction radars • Tactical radios • Tactical networks
Reconnaissance Intelligence	• National ISR platforms • Intelligence community facilities • Satellite ground stations	• Theater ISR assets • Theater intelligence units	• Uncrewed systems • Ground signals intelligence • Human intelligence
Support	• Homeland airports & seaports • Homeland road & rail hubs • Air movement command • Transportation command	• Corps support area • Lines of communication • Overseas ports and airfields	• Field trains • Combat trains • Division support brigade

Figure 2: Types of Targets by Echelon in Systems Confrontation Warfare (Source: TRADOC G-2)

Multidomain Precision Warfare

In 2021, to enable China's systems approach, the PLA adopted Multidomain Precision Warfare (MDPW) as its core operational concept.[20] This concept enables systems confrontation and supports the integration of operations across all domains. It is based on the new domains identified in Chinese military writings, which elevated the cognitive dimension and electromatic spectrum to be coequal with the more established land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains.

MDPW aims to fuse information across services and domains to launch strikes against identified enemy vulnerabilities. This concept emphasizes the use of all available capabilities across services, domains, and spheres of society. Future conflicts involving the PLA under the MDPW operational concept will likely feature the following key characteristics:

- **Joint Multidomain Integration.** China recognizes the importance of joint operations supported by interagency and whole-of-nation power and thus will fight as a joint force, working to integrate efforts across all domains. PLA military writings emphasize that the ability to flexibly use forces from across services is critical to gaining the initiative and sufficient to defeat powerful enemy forces. At the operational level, the PLA has eight key tenets for dismantling an enemy force in close and deep operations: comprehensively use all battlefield spaces; comprehensively use multiple forms of operations and methods of combat; make overall plans and arrangements for each stage of operations; destroy the enemy's command system; destroy the links in the enemy's high-tech weapons systems; destroy the enemy's support systems; and destroy the enemy's morale.[21]
- **Systems Confrontation.** China will execute systems confrontation by leveraging integrated joint operations, networked capabilities, and advanced weapons systems across all domains, resulting in a 'compressed battlespace' within an 'expanded warspace.' The intent is to degrade the enemy's ability to fight and dissuade intervention in Chinese affairs.
- **Information Dominance.** For China, information dominance is essential in modern warfare. China will attempt to influence the cognitive domain with a multifaceted information dominance campaign that uses psychological operations and cyber warfare to sway an adversary's decisionmakers and mold behavior.[22]
- **Intelligentized Warfare.** Intelligentized warfare utilizes advanced technologies and innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, robotics, big data analytics, and hypersonic systems to improve decisionmaking, support rapid information processing, and enhance human-machine collaboration across domains. Additionally, these technologies would be used to disrupt the enemy's situational awareness and ability to comprehend the battlespace effectively.
- **Winning Small Battles for Total Victory.** China prefers small battles with superiority of mass at key times and places, leading to overall victory.[23] At the tactical level, Chinese Academy of Military Science scholars emphasize the aggregation of lower quality forces to overcome a superior enemy, and that winning small battles will lead to total victory. However, China's reliance on converging mass to overcome quality will likely diminish in importance as it fields greater numbers of "new domain forces with new combat capabilities" and joint integration increases.
- **Protracted Conflict.** China desires quick victories but recognizes and is prepared for the possibility of protracted conflict.[24]

The People's Liberation Army

The PLA possesses robust capabilities across all warfighting domains. China's army and air force are modern and formidable, and its navy is growing rapidly and expanding its blue-water and expeditionary capabilities. The PLA Navy is further augmented by China's coast guard which operate more than 1,200 vessels.[25] The Chinese coast guard aggressively patrols the First Island Chain and the South China Sea, often harassing foreign vessels it perceives as infringing on Chinese territorial claims.

In the cyber domain, Chinese state-sponsored cyber actors have been conducting extensive and sophisticated cyberespionage campaigns targeting the United States and its allies.[26] These operations aim to steal sensitive data and intellectual property, acquire emerging technologies, and obtain personally identifiable information.

China has made significant investments in space capabilities over several decades, developing a robust and multifaceted space program. The PLA uses space assets for various purposes, including intelligence collection, communications, and navigation support. Additionally, the PLA has developed and employs counterspace capabilities to disrupt space-based communications, radar, and navigation systems—all vital for military operations—while also conducting cyberespionage against foreign space entities. Chinese defense research is advancing directed energy weapons technology, which could temporarily blind satellite-based sensors or potentially destroy satellite components.[27] Operationally, these capabilities will be employed as part of China's broader strategy to achieve information dominance and space superiority in potential conflicts.

Historically, PLA operations have relied heavily on the PLA Army, its ground force. The PLA Army is large, comprising approximately 51 percent of the PLA's active-duty force. However, the rapid growth and modernization of China's other services, including the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force, have significantly enhanced China's joint combat power. The PLA Navy and PLA Air Force have expanded and modernized their maneuver forces, including the PLA Navy Marine Corps and PLA Air Force Airborne Corps, which now provide China with greater power projection capabilities.

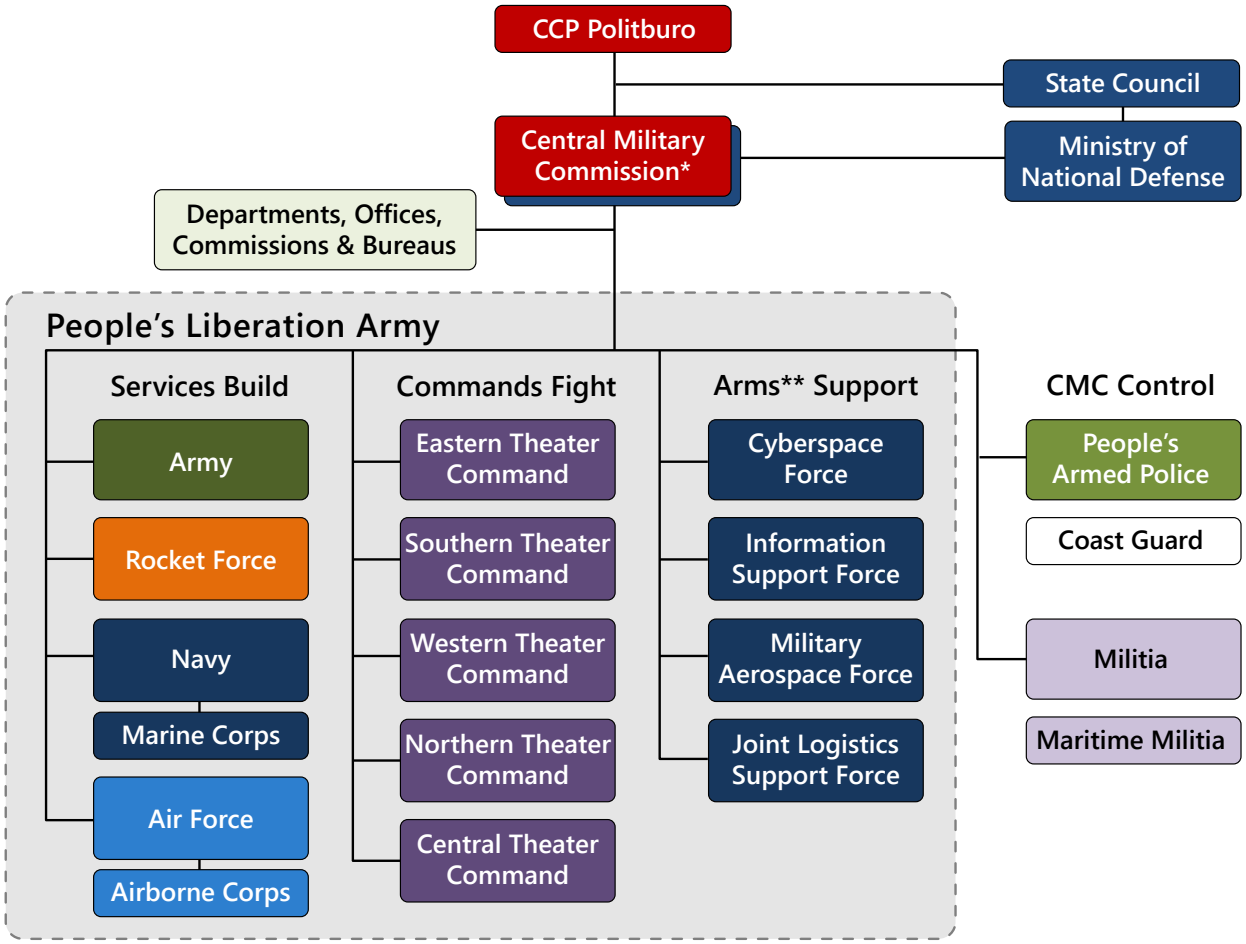
The services build combat power and are supported by other enablers such as the Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force, Military Aerospace Force, and Joint Logistics Support Force.

- The **Cyberspace Force** is responsible for offensive and defensive cyber operations; national cyber border defense; and integrated reconnaissance, attack, and defense. It employs advanced technologies and tactics, including vulnerability exploitation and third-party compromise, to conduct stealthy and agile operations. The force works in conjunction with other PLA arms and services, ensuring coordinated development and application of network information systems.
- The **Information Support Force** is responsible for developing and applying network information systems, protecting military information from cyber and electronic warfare, and integrating AI into military operations. It works in conjunction with other PLA arms to enhance joint combat capabilities and information support for multidomain operations, reflecting China's emphasis on informatization and intelligentization in modern warfare.[28,29]
- The **Military Aerospace Force** is responsible for ensuring China's access, use, and control of space. It controls all of China's military satellites and is tasked with developing doctrine, space-specific culture, training, and capabilities to enhance Chinese space power and achieve space domain superiority.[30]

- The **Joint Logistics Support Force** is designed to unify joint logistics forces at the strategic level and focuses on improving joint operations, joint training, and joint support capabilities, including military-civilian integration. It also serves as a critical purveyor of basic supply classes in crisis and conflict, provides precision logistics support for high-tempo joint combat operations, and achieves strategic unity of effort through an integrated joint logistics command system.[31]

Additionally, enablers that fall outside of the PLA architecture, such as the People's Armed Police and militia, play a critical role in whole-of-society mobilization efforts. These enablers are undergoing substantial modernization and reorganization to better enable mobilization in support of combat operations, forming a comprehensive operational system of systems that China could deploy in a conflict.[32,33,34]

The Central Military Commission (CMC) is the highest decisionmaking body in the Chinese armed forces, led by Xi and typically composed of six uniformed members of the PLA, including two vice chairmen. Through the CMC Joint Operations Command Center (JOCC) in Beijing, the CMC exercises "overall leadership and centralized, unified command over the PLA."[35] The separate CMC Joint Staff Department plays a central role in developing all military plans. However, certain operations, such as nuclear strikes, require the authorization of the Supreme Command, which, while not clearly defined in authoritative sources, is understood to be Xi and the highest levels of the CCP, such as the Politburo Standing Committee.[36]



*The Central Military Commission is the main decision authority directing China's Armed Forces

**Designated Arms after the April 2024 abolition of the PLA Strategic Support Force

Figure 3: Organization and Hierarchy of China's Armed Forces (Source: TRADOC G-2)

Joint operations are coordinated by the JOCC, and each of China's five joint theater commands has its own JOCC to support the theater commander with a joint operations team. The JOCCs contain intelligence centers, which are also represented in command posts across echelons down to regiment level.

Descriptions of the PLA's C2 architecture emphasize unity, with a distinction between operational control and operational coordination, particularly for strategic forces such as nuclear, space, and cyber operations.[37] The theater-level JOCCs exercise control over other services through domain-specific operational subcenters, ensuring coordinated command at lower levels.

The centralized and unified command structure of the CMC, coupled with the integrated joint operations capabilities of the JOCCs, enables China to coordinate complex military operations efficiently. This setup is designed to allow for swift decisionmaking and execution, particularly in critical scenarios such as nuclear strikes, making China's military coordinated and formidable.

Joint Theater Commands

China's joint theater commands act as the sole and highest-level joint operations command organizations within their respective strategic areas of responsibility. These theater commands are organized regionally:

- The **Eastern Theater Command** covers the densely populated and economically vital eastern part of China and has responsibility for operations involving the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea.
- The **Southern Theater Command** is responsible for China's southern-most land and maritime borders, including the volatile border with Burma, and the complex web of territorial claims in the South China Sea that regularly lead to tense interactions with its neighbors.
- The **Western Theater Command** covers almost one-third of China's landmass, including the Tibetan Plateau and the Xinjiang Uyghur region. Much more sparsely populated than the rest of China, it is nevertheless important due to contested borders with India and concerns of separatist movements and Islamist extremism. There are additional subcomponents in this region, including the Xinjiang, Nanjiang and Xizang (Tibet) Military Commands, which provide C2 over these sensitive provinces.

Figure 4: PLA Theater Commands (Source: TRADOC G-2)

- The **Northern Theater Command** is responsible for a broad swath of north-central and northeastern China, which includes borders with Mongolia, Russia, and North Korea. It includes the Shandong Peninsula, which juts out into the Yellow Sea, and the joint forces stationed there would play a major role in any contingency on the Korean Peninsula.
- The **Central Theater Command** covers the region from the Bohai Gulf to the interior of China, and its responsibilities include capital defense and acting as a reserve force for the other theater commands during a contingency.

Each theater command is designed to focus exclusively on combat-related issues, enhancing their joint operations capability through integrated training and command. They are responsible for planning joint operations, evaluating combat and support capabilities, and allocating military forces necessary for combating threats within their strategic scopes.[38]

Theater Joint Operations Command Centers

The PLA fights with joint forces task-organized according to the scale and requirements of the conflict.[39] Large-scale operations are those undertaken by two or more theater commands, medium-size operations as those handled by a single theater, and small-scale operations are those undertaken by only a few or single corps-echelon units.[40]

The PLA's wartime C2 structure centers around theater joint operations command centers (T-JOCCs), which organize joint formations, execute operations, and facilitate command at lower levels.[41] The T-JOCCs exercise control over other services through operational subcenters. The T-JOCC structure includes six subcenters: land operations, maritime operations, air operations, conventional missile operations, joint logistics operations, and multidomain operations.

In wartime, services with ground forces that are typically subordinate to the Central Military Commission during peacetime, such as the PLA Navy Marine Corps and PLA Air Force Airborne Corps, would likely have elements of their forces attached to the theater-level land operations subcenter.[42] This arrangement allows for more effective employment of joint ground forces. Similarly, the People's Armed Police, Coast Guard, and militia would likely operate under a coordinating mechanism like the other operational subcenters, ensuring integration of available forces.

A key aspect of the wartime organization is unity of command. Consequently, with few exceptions, theater service commands (e.g., Army, Navy, Air Force, etc.) would likely not retain operational control during wartime. This centralization of command aligns with the PLA's goal of improving joint operations capabilities and streamlining decisionmaking in combat situations.

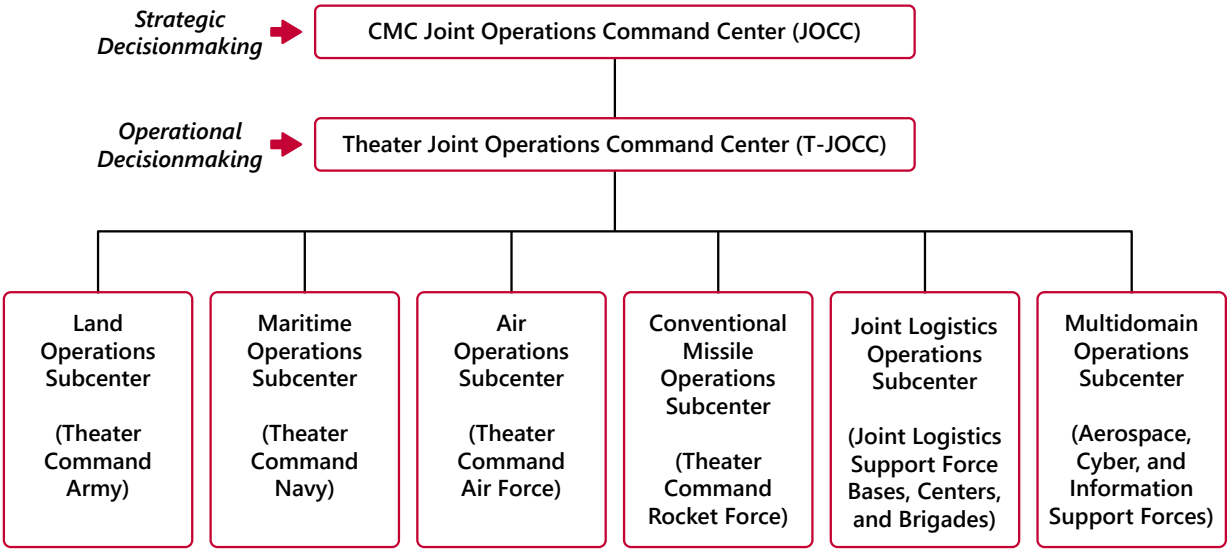


Figure 5: PLA Wartime Command and Control (Source: TRADOC G-2)

Ground Forces in Joint Operations

In a joint operation, the PLA would employ a variety of maneuver forces from different branches and services, notably from the PLA Army, PLA Navy Marine Corps, and PLA Air Force Airborne Corps. The primary responsibilities of the ground maneuver forces are to execute ground combat operations, support joint operations, and integrate with other services to achieve strategic objectives. They will have two main operational roles in support of joint operations. First, ground forces would lead amphibious-assault and land-based operations, particularly in scenarios such as a landing campaign focused on island seizure or a joint blockade campaign involving naval and air blockades with supporting land-based operations. Second, ground forces would conduct strategic defensive operations before transitioning to counterattacks to regain the initiative.

China's ground forces would operate within a structured and integrated framework. Each of the five joint theater commands have 2-3 PLA Army group armies, with joint components present under multiple PLA Air Force air bases, a navy fleet (for the three coastal theater commands), and Joint Logistics Support Force units assigned as required.

Each theater command army also has a long-range rocket brigade, intelligence and reconnaissance brigade, pontoon bridge brigade, information support brigade, and electronic countermeasure brigade. The Southern and Eastern Theater Commands oversee seven and four coastal defense brigades, respectively.

In wartime, these forces might include attached units from the PLA Navy Marine Corps, PLA Air Force Airborne Corps, and PLA Rocket Force. These forces might be further enabled by the Joint Logistics, Cyber, Aerospace, and Information Support Forces, as well as by reserves, People's Armed Police (including Coast Guard), and militia units (including maritime militia forces) to execute an operation.

The ground forces would likely be formed into operational groups, similar to the U.S. Army's task organization concept.[43] These groupings would likely be responsible for specific tasks or missions in support of the greater joint operation or campaign.[44]

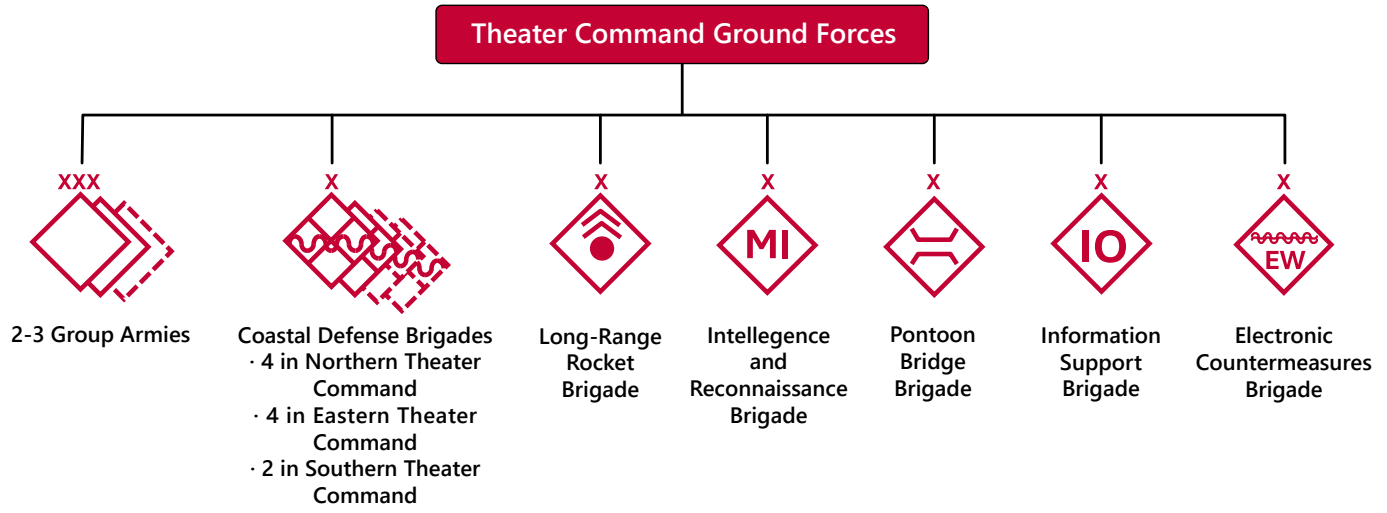


Figure 6: Theater Command Ground Forces (Source: TRADOC G-2)

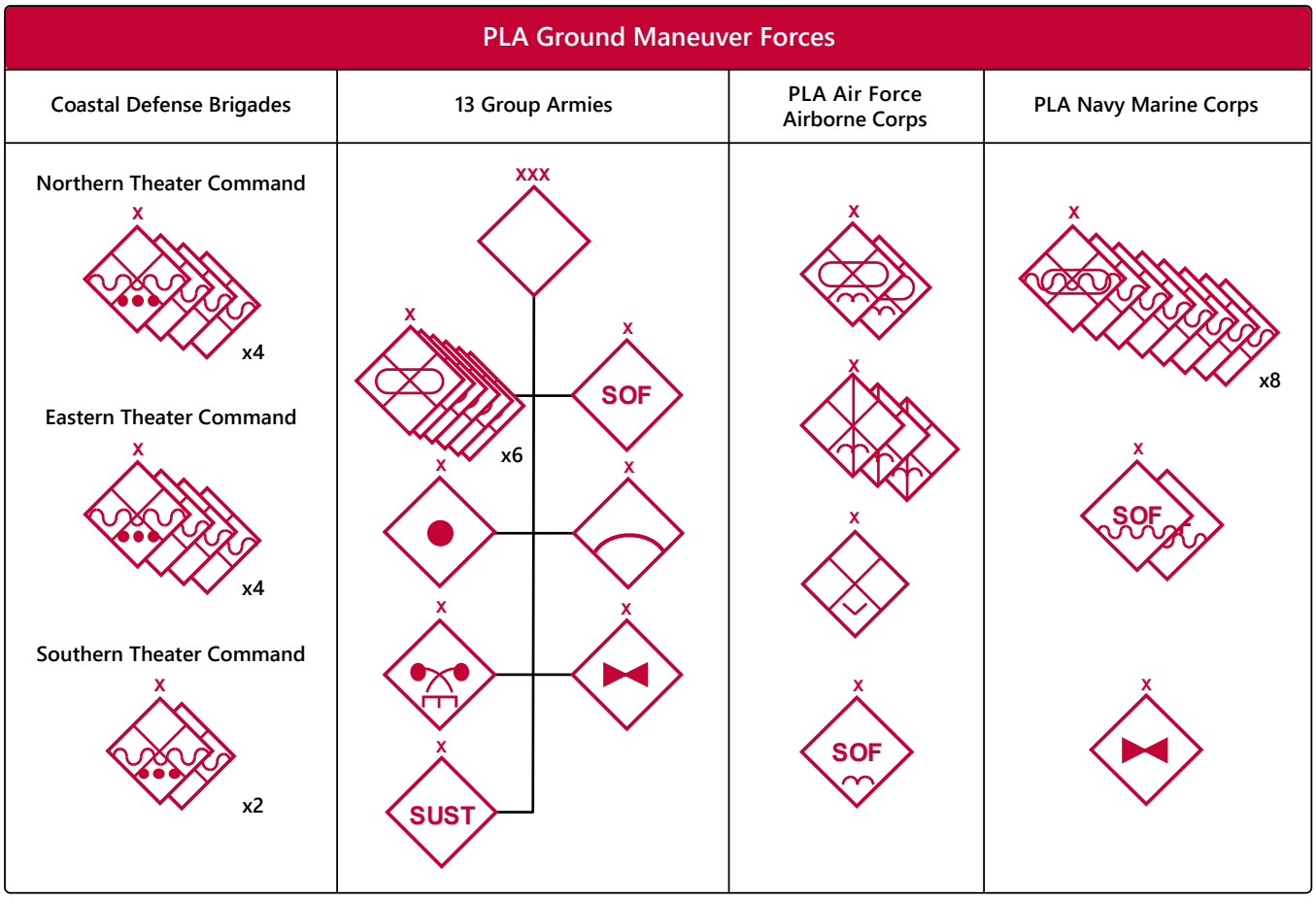


Figure 7: China's Ground Maneuver Forces (Source: TRADOC G-2)[b]

Most PLA land maneuver forces, including those from the Marine Corps and Airborne Corps, use a brigade-battalion structure. The battalion serves as the primary unit of maneuver, but the brigade is the lowest echelon with 24/7 operations capability. Each brigade typically consists of four maneuver battalions, as well as support battalions for functions such as artillery, air defense, reconnaissance, combat support, and sustainment.

b For symbology descriptions, see FM 1-02.2, Military Symbols, https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1030416.

The Joint Counter-Intervention Strategy

The PLA will employ a comprehensive counter-intervention strategy across all domains to repel any intervention by a "strong enemy" that seeks to disrupt its military operations.[c] China's strategic objective is to prevent enemy forces from arriving on schedule and at full strength. Anticipating U.S. intervention in various scenarios involving Chinese military action in Asia, China has developed an offensive military architecture designed to systematically target and neutralize U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific while disrupting key technological enablers of maneuver. Counter-intervention also aims to delay and destroy reinforcements from the U.S. West Coast and bases in allied nations closer to China, contesting U.S. maneuver across the strategic depth afforded by the vast Indo-Pacific area of operations.

The joint counter-intervention strategy's primary tasks include blocking or counterattacking an enemy's intervention, containing and limiting the enemy's ability to increase combat power, reducing the impact of the enemy's intervention, and ensuring execution of the CCP's strategy and the smooth implementation of joint campaigns. Counter-intervention strategy will be divided into three major phases:

Phase 1: Actions impacting the entire Pacific region and continental United States, including strategic political actions and nonlethal fires.

Phase 2: Military operations directed against U.S. and allied forces in the eastern and central Pacific.

Phase 3: Tactical engagements occurring at or near the objectives of U.S. intervention.

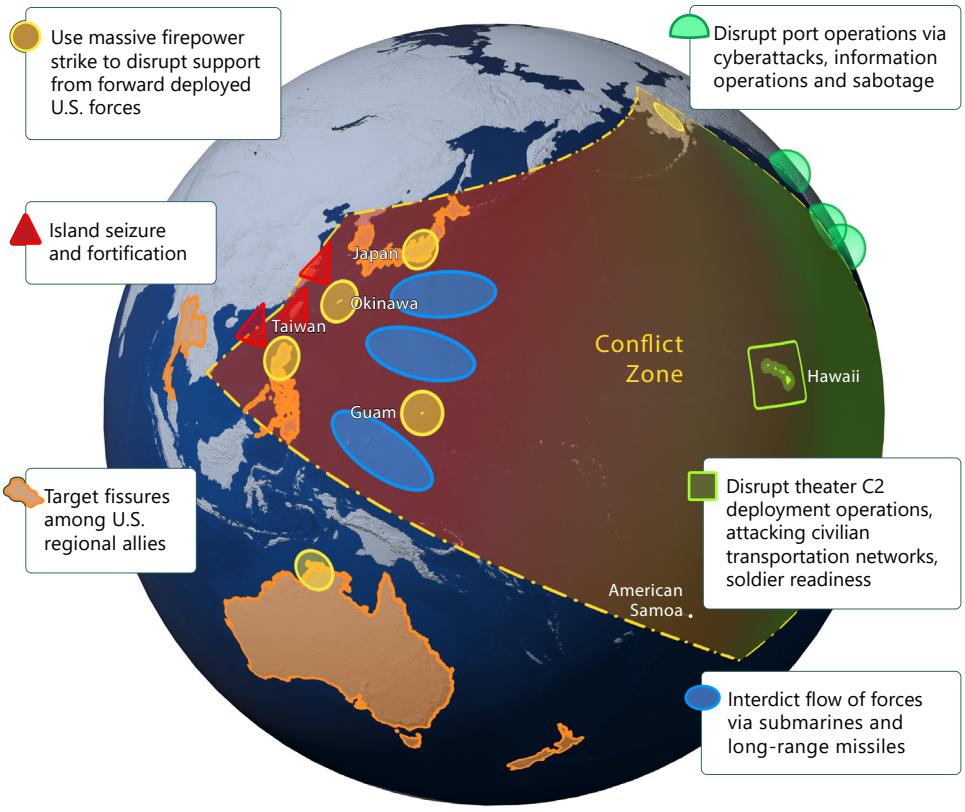


Figure 8: Notional Western Pacific Counter-Intervention CONOPS (Source: TRADOC G-2)

c China's military doctrine explicitly identifies the "strong enemy" [强敌] as its primary strategic focus, a term widely interpreted as referring to the United States.

Information Dominance Campaign

Information dominance is a critical component of China's counter-intervention strategy, designed to shape the battlespace before and during conflict. China's information dominance campaign integrates psychological operations, cyber warfare, and intelligence collection to influence adversary decisionmaking and behavior. Through sophisticated AI-driven propaganda and targeted disinformation, China aims to manipulate military and civilian leaders' perceptions through the cognitive domain[d] to cause hesitation or paralysis in critical decisionmaking processes. These operations are supported by China's global intelligence apparatus that will collect on the intervening enemy's military and civil activities to gain information and provide early warning. China's expansive intelligence collection capabilities include satellites, high-altitude balloons, unmanned aircraft systems, human intelligence assets, and open-source intelligence operations.

To achieve information dominance, China's aerospace forces will launch cyber, kinetic, and directed energy counterspace operations against the enemy's communications; positioning, navigation, and timing; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to deny the enemy the ability to communicate, navigate, and understand enemy intentions. Simultaneously, China's Cyberspace Forces, national-level cyber actors, and civilian hackers will likely conduct network attacks against command, control, communication, and computer networks, as well as transportation nodes and other critical infrastructure, to disrupt and delay foreign forces' decisionmaking and deployment into theater.

The ultimate goal of this campaign is to dominate the information space and control the cognitive domain. By merging influence, cyber, and intelligence capabilities, China aims to deter intervention and weaken enemy resolve before the enemy has an opportunity to engage in the conflict.

Air Dominance Campaign

The PLA's concept of air dominance differs from the U.S. concept of air superiority. The PLA focuses on denying air superiority to the enemy rather than securing it for themselves. Aircraft from all of China's military services will target early warning aircraft, electronic warfare aircraft, stealth aircraft, cruise missiles, and refueling tankers—in that order of priority—to deny enemy forces sanctuary in the area of responsibility and the ability to mass air power. Targeting for air dominance includes striking bases and facilities supporting enemy air systems.

Fixed-wing aircraft will conduct counterair, maritime, and land-based strike operations as a part of the PLA's broader disruption efforts.[45] Fixed-wing air operations are integrated into the PLA's wider air defense system, working alongside ground-based defenses to complicate enemy air operations. PLA Navy aircraft operating from aircraft carriers will fulfill both fleet defense and counterair roles. Fortified island airfields can support approximately one squadron of modern strike fighters, which are deployed there temporarily to extend their operational range. This deployment strategy likely mirrors the approach the PLA Air Force would use in a counter-intervention campaign: pushing fixed-wing assets forward on a temporary basis to increase their useful combat radius.

Rotary-wing aircraft serve critical roles as rapid transport and supply platforms. This capability has been enhanced by the PLA's significant investment in modernizing its transport helicopter fleet.[46] Surface ships and transport aircraft are likely to be top-priority targets for the PLA as it tries to cut sea lines of communications and isolate ground forces on newly seized terrain.

Attack aviation supports the operation through both direct support to ground forces in contact and by targeting nearby enemy surface vessels and embarked amphibious platforms. The PLA views its attack aviation capability as

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d Cognitive domain operations have been described as "military, political, economic, public opinion, psychological, lawfare and other narrative means in order to achieve strategic purposes for national security, and which affect the cognition of the target to change its decision-making and behavior." Zhao Xiujuan［赵秀娟], Zhang Jinjuan［张金娟］, "Playing Advantages: Improving the Quality and Efficiency of Public Opinion Guidance in Military Conflict Reports—A Preliminary Study on the Continuous Public Opinion Guidance of World Military Magazine in Reporting on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict"［发挥优势：在军事冲突报道中提升舆论引导质效 —《世界军事》杂志在俄乌冲突报道中的持续舆论引导初探］, 27 September 2022. hxxps://www.81.cn/jsjz/2022-09/27/content_10187697.htm

a highly mobile firepower reserve.[47] PLA Navy rotary-wing platforms will conduct antisubmarine and maritime patrol operations, contributing to the regional antisubmarine and maritime surveillance efforts. Chinese fortified islands include extensive rotary-wing support facilities that are both manned by permanent garrison forces and supplemented by forward deployments.

Ground-based air defenses are one of the most critical components to the counter-intervention effort, reflecting the PLA's top priority of denying the enemy free use of the air domain. The PLA emphasizes the deployment of ground-based air defenses, as evident from the strategic deployment of HQ-9 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems to the PLA's fortified islands.[48] Long-range SAMs are, in-turn, defended by both medium-range, missile-based point defense systems that may include an anti-precision-guided-missile capability, and short-range gun and missile systems that target low, slow targets such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) and helicopters, as well as any low-altitude penetrators.

Taken together, this PLA air defense network presents a formidable combined-arms problem set for an intervening force, requiring both significant resources and considerable risk to neutralize.

Sea Dominance Campaign

Similarly, the PLA aims to deny the seas to the enemy. PLA naval and rocket forces will target key enemy ports and vulnerable maritime nodes to preclude movement of forces into the theater. Non-PLA forces, such as maritime militia boats, can be expected to conduct surveillance to aid naval fires and situational understanding, as well as to harass and block ships to delay force arrival.

Surface ships, including carrier groups, will engage approaching enemy vessels with long-range anti-air and antiship missiles, and strike aircraft. PLA Navy ships will also conduct antisubmarine operations that maintain sea lines of communication between the Chinese mainland and distant operational areas while smaller vessels perform escort duties for resupply and transport ships.

Submarines primarily focus on anti-surface-ship warfare, specifically targeting enemy surface vessels within the First Island Chain and extending to the Eastern Pacific Ocean. In coordination with naval aviation, the Navy's submarine force, which includes both fixed-wing and rotary-wing maritime patrol aircraft, plays a significant role in antisubmarine warfare. Submarines collect intelligence and use information from external sources to identify and classify targets that are beyond the range of their onboard sensors. This effort is part of a larger initiative to enhance informatization within the PLA, enabling submarines to operate more effectively at greater distances and remotely.[49]

Joint Firepower Strike Campaign

A joint firepower strike campaign is similar to what U.S. doctrine calls "joint targeting." Chinese doctrine defines a joint firepower strike campaign as coordinated strikes from all military services targeting long-range objectives. The goal is to undermine the enemy's will to fight and compel its leaders to abandon or alter the operation.[50] These capabilities offer scalable support to other campaigns, either as part of a concentrated initial phase or to support other operations. A firepower coordination and control center would be established in the T-JOCC to coordinate and prioritize targets.

Surface fires are a crucial component of the joint firepower strike campaign. They consist of land- or sea-based artillery, rockets, and missiles, all deployed in standoff and counter-amphibious roles. Although PLA doctrine specifically calls out the criticality of ballistic missile fires in support of an island blockade, it is unlikely that ballistic missile units would be forward-deployed due to their size, support requirements, and vulnerability.[51]

Ballistic missile fires may provide support to the campaign from launch points on the mainland, their long range obviating the need to transport them to forward areas. But ballistic missile employment in later phases may be impeded by extensive barrages planned during the PLA's amphibious campaign, which will almost certainly be preceded by a massive joint firepower strike campaign

built largely around ballistic missile systems. Insufficient open-source information exists to determine the PLA's magazine depth and ability to sustain these fires in later phases, though they are estimated to be substantial.[52]

The PLA Army's combined-arms brigades and artillery brigades provide both tube and rocket artillery to complement ballistic missiles with long-range precision and area fires. As part of an island defense, the PLA Army will use coastal defense fires because they provide substantial fire support and counterfire to any ground engagement. The PLA Army may even be able to extend this fire support effort into the maritime domain if required. However, traditional artillery's size and significant sustainment requirements pose a challenge to PLA's ability to deploy and sustain forces.

Shortfalls in ballistic missile magazines can also be offset by short-range cruise missiles, particularly shore-based antiship missiles.[53] Operated by the PLA Navy Coastal Defense Missile Force, these are simple, lightweight, deployable systems that can be easily positioned along nearly any coastline.[54] They provide a direct counter to enemy amphibious forces, as well as enhance the magazine depth of surface ships servicing more distant targets. The simplest shore-based antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) are little more than point-and-shoot, limited by the radar horizon and lacking datalink support. More advanced heavy ASCMs support cooperative over-the-horizon engagements supported by surface ships, manned aircraft, UAS, or satellites. Both present a serious challenge to enemy naval and amphibious forces due to their small size, mobility, and lethality. Shore-based ASCMs are deployed extensively on the fortified islands, and their forward deployment as part of an island blockade is a near certainty.

The PLA Air Force trains to enhance joint firepower strikes using air-launched cruise missiles, as well as guided and unguided munitions, that can be launched from numerous aircraft such as the J-20 stealth fighter, JH-7 fighter-bomber, and the H-6K bomber.[55] The range of tactical aircraft would allow for the PLA Air Force to support most operations within the First Island Chain from mainland China. For extended range missions, runways on manmade islands in the South China Sea will offer forward-basing options.

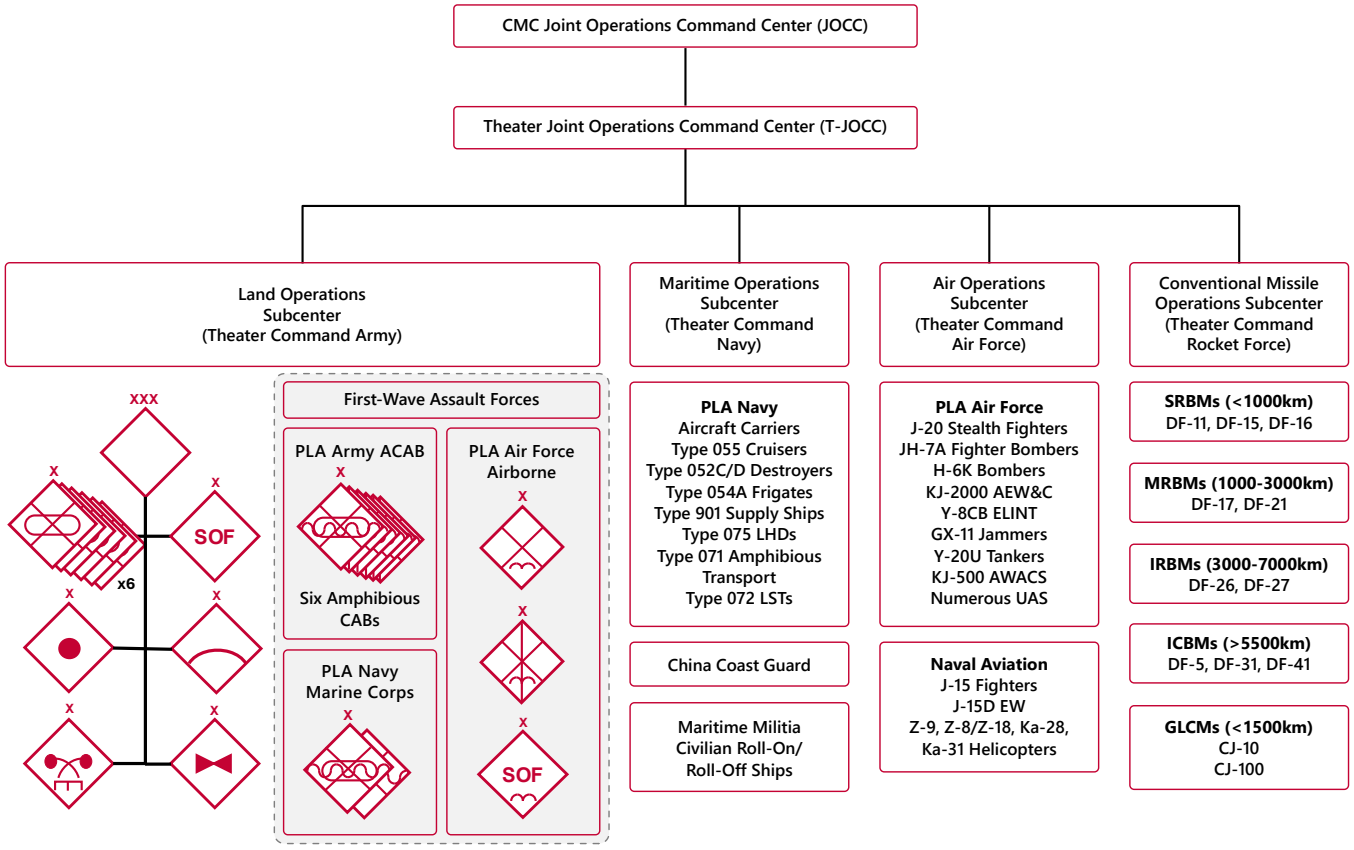
Weapons of Mass Destruction

Although not an established campaign, China may seek to employ weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as part of it counter-intervention strategy. China views WMD as an asymmetric advantage that would have an outsized impact on U.S. operations in LSCO. In a shift from its historical "no first-use" doctrine for nuclear weapons, China is adopting a launch-on-warning posture called "early warning counterstrike." While few authoritative texts regarding Chinese nuclear operations are available, one describes what China calls a "joint nuclear counterattack," which Chinese leaders might use if they perceive that their nuclear threshold has been crossed due to enemy action.[56] Additionally, the counter-intervention strategy could include the use of chemical or biological weapons. According to the 2025 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, "China most likely possesses capabilities relevant to chemical and biological warfare that pose a threat to U.S., allied, and partner forces as well as civilian populations." Although China has no confirmed chemical weapons program, it is the global leader in the production of chemicals, including fentanyl and its precursors. U.S. Government studies conclude that China engages in biological research with dual-use applications, including the possible development of toxins, bacteria, and viruses for use as weapons.[57] As a result, military contingency planning involving a potential conflict with China in the Pacific should consider issues related to WMD force protection.

Ground Force-Focused Vignettes

The following vignettes illustrate China's capabilities and strategies in two different scenarios in which PLA ground forces will feature heavily, thereby necessitating similar ground force commitments from China's enemy. These theoretical explorations are critical for understanding potential PLA approaches, as China has not conducted large-scale combat operations in the modern Operational Environment, leaving their actual performance in peer conflicts untested.

The first vignette examines a joint island landing campaign, an offensive operation in which China would



LHD: Landing Helicopter Dock
LST: Landing Ship, Tank
ELINT: Electronic Intelligence
AEW&C: Airborne Early Warning and Control
AWACS: Airborne Warning and Control System
EW: Electronic Warfare
SRBM: Short-Range Ballistic Missile
MRBM: Medium-Range Ballistic Missile
ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
GLCM: Ground-Launched Cruise Missile

Figure 9: Notional Organization of Theater Forces in Support of a Campaign (Source: TRADOC G-2)[e]

e For symbology descriptions, see FM 1-02.2, Military Symbols, https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1030416.

attempt to quickly seize and secure one or more islands. This campaign would involve coordinated efforts across the PLA's joint force, featuring amphibious assaults, airborne and air assault operations, and support from maritime militia and law enforcement vessels. Ground forces would play a decisive role in consolidating terrain after initial lodgments.

The second vignette examines a joint antilanding campaign, a defensive operation in which the PLA would aim to protect an island from an external threat. This campaign would involve a comprehensive blockade; joint firepower strikes; and integrated land, air, and sea defense to undermine the enemy's ability to intervene. Holding terrain would require the integration of naval, air, and ground-based coastal defense systems, with grounds forces serving an integral role in ensuring territorial control.

Both types of operations would be supported by a joint counter-intervention operation as described above. These vignettes provide insights into the PLA's operational doctrine to facilitate understanding of how China would approach joint operations and specifically address the ground forces' role in these operations.

Joint Island Landing Campaign

The joint island landing campaign encompasses China's strategy to seize and secure an occupied island. The PLA will compose the joint force based on the size of the island, its distance from mainland China, and the strength of the defending forces. PLA documents indicate amphibious operations will employ the following concepts:

- The operation will be controlled by a unified command—most likely a T-JOCC—and forces will be organized into a sea element and a land element.
- Air power will protect the operation.
- Naval gunfire and long-range artillery will target coastal defenses.
- Three-dimensional operations involving airmobile and airborne forces will deploy in the enemy's rear areas to strike C2 nodes and seize key terrain.
- Specialized landing craft will transport ground forces and deliver them to designated beaches.
- The operation will include a mix of assault forces and reserves to close with the enemy, penetrate defenses, secure inland objectives, and establish defensive strong points.[58]

For this type of operation, ground units will be organized into groupings designed for specific tasks. Likely groupings and tasks will include:[59]

- **Forward-attack groups**, consisting of primary and secondary formations, will assault enemy forward and main defensive position.
- A **deep-attack group** will attack the enemy's in-depth defensive positions.
- **Airborne and air assault groups** will seize and control key points in the enemy's rear area or attack enemy units from the rear in coordination with the main forces attacking from the front.
- A **storming attack group** will attack enemy-fortified positions, strong points, defended buildings, or underground facilities.
- **Assault landing groups**, typically divided into primary and secondary groups, will be responsible for attacking and occupying enemy coastal defensive positions.
- A **barrier breaching and clearing detachment** will remove obstacles and open lanes for attacking ground forces.

Information Dominance Operations

Amphibious operations will begin with information dominance operations focused on diminishing the operational effectiveness of the enemy's communication networks. Chinese military doctrine highlights the importance of gaining an advantage over adversaries by disrupting their C2 capabilities, particularly by impairing the effectiveness of individual nodes.[60]

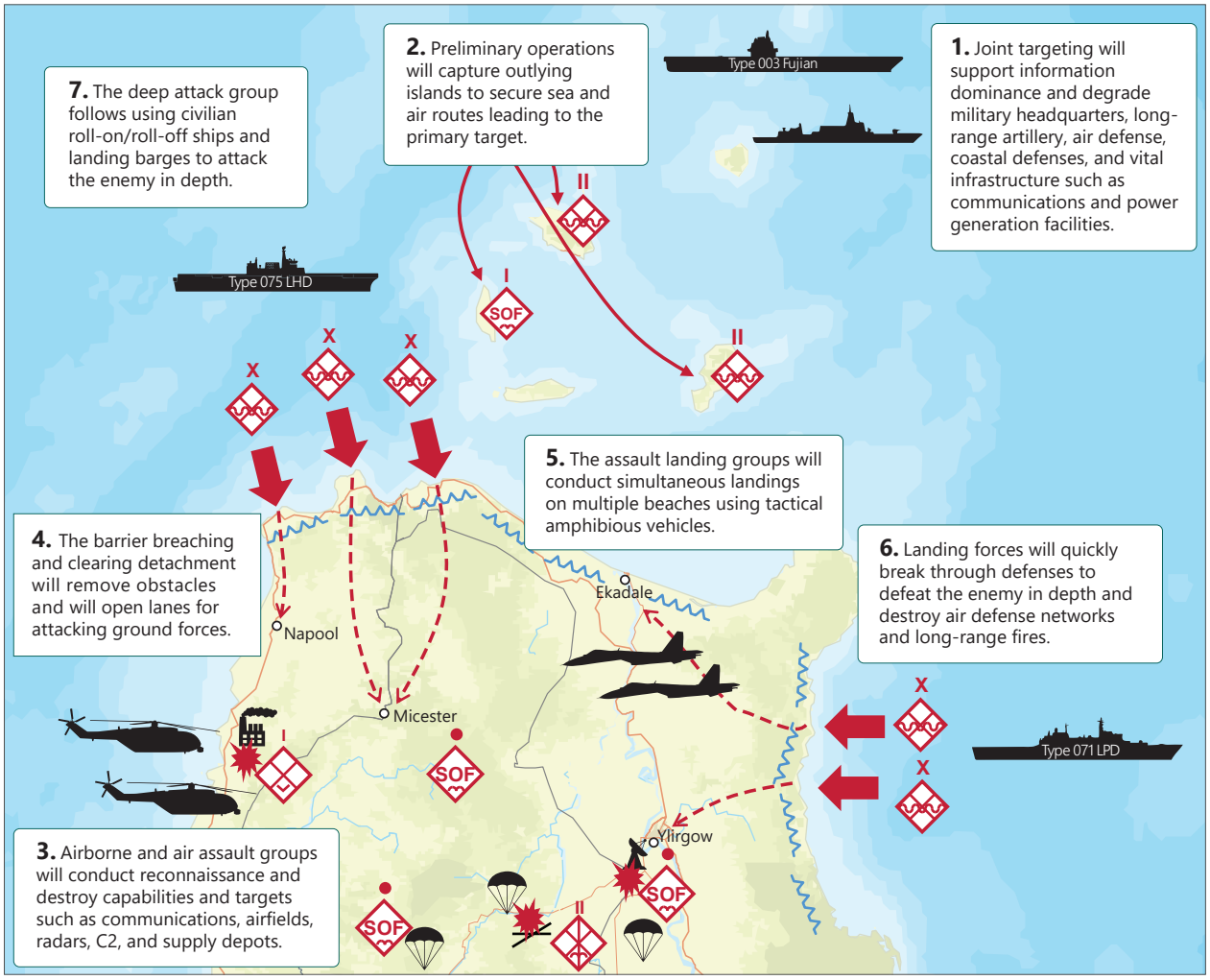


Figure 10: The Seven Sequential and Overlapping Elements of the Joint Island Landing Campaign (Source: TRADOC G-2)

Preliminary Operations: Securing Outlying Islands and Preparing for Main Assault

Early in the joint island landing campaign, the PLA will seek to capture outlying islands to secure sea and air routes leading to the primary target. Key actions from this phase will include:

- **Comprehensive Joint Fires.** The PLA will conduct extensive strikes using artillery, missiles, naval gunfire, and tactical aircraft targeting critical enemy installations, including military headquarters, barracks, long-range artillery, air defenses, and vital infrastructure such as communications and power generation facilities.
- **Amphibious and Air Assault Operations.** While the bombardment continues, amphibious assault troops will storm the shores of the outlying islands. These troops will deploy from PLA Army and PLA Navy landing craft as well as from civilian roll-on/roll-off ships and other civilian transports. Simultaneously, PLA Army and Airborne Corps air assault and special forces will deploy by air to secure strategic inland sites.
- **Reconnaissance and Sabotage Operations.** At the same time as the outer island operations, PLA special operations forces will insert into the primary objective from the air and sea to perform reconnaissance and sabotage operations focused on key infrastructure such as communications networks, power generation facilities, airfields, radar stations, C2 facilities, and supply depots to include munitions bunkers.[61]

Supporting Effort: Joint Firepower Strike Operation

China will initiate a comprehensive series of lethal and nonlethal fires to degrade the target island's military capabilities.

- **Lethal Fires.** China will launch massive strikes from land, sea, and air using cruise and ballistic missiles, rocket artillery, and air-to-surface munitions. According to Chinese doctrine, "Direct firepower barrages and joint destruction of obstacles usually is carried out prior to the various landing formations' deployments, closely following an advance firepower barrage."[62] These strikes will target critical enemy installations, including C2 centers, coastal artillery, naval assets, air defenses, and airfields.
- **Nonlethal Fires.** Concurrently, the PLA will conduct cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare attacks to destroy, disrupt, or degrade the enemy's digital networks, electronic systems, and troop morale.

The objective of the joint firepower strike operation is to reduce the enemy's ability to target PLA amphibious vessels, suppress air defenses to enable PLA Air Force air superiority and PLA Army Aviation freedom of movement, and gain information dominance. The desired end state is to leave the target island unable to see the coming invasion, incapable of communicating, and lacking sufficient firepower to resist the PLA invasion forces.

Main Effort: Amphibious and Airborne Assault

During the early hours of the ground force assault on the main island objective, the PLA will try to shut down government and military communications and control transportation hubs to limit the ability of reserve forces to assemble and deploy. The PLA will seize airfields and ports to enable the landing of follow-on forces and equipment.

The final phase involves securing beachheads and building up forces for a breakout inland to capture strategic objectives and link up separated forces. China will likely conduct simultaneous amphibious assaults on several target island beaches, with a preference for landings near the capital city and other centers of political and military power. The PLA will use modified civilian roll-on/roll-off ferries to launch amphibious combat vehicles to augment the PLA Navy's limited amphibious landing ships.[63] The assault forces will be supported with fires from PLA air and naval assets and mainland-based rocket forces if within range. The immediate objectives will include:

- **Neutralizing coastal defenses** by eliminating any remaining coastal gun batteries and air defense sites.
- **Securing lines of communication** by controlling significant roads and rail lines to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment.

In conjunction with the amphibious landings, airborne and air assault forces will be inserted on the main island at multiple drop and landing zones. Their tasks will include:[64]

- **Seizing air bases and ports** to enable the landing of follow-on forces and equipment.[f]
- **Destroying communication centers** to limit the ability of reserve forces to assemble and deploy.
- **Controlling key infrastructure** such as roads, rail lines, and other strategically important locations.
- **Striking high-payoff targets** that could hinder the PLA's advance.

Surface ships also will operate close to the ground conflict. These ships will act as mobile, long-range, anti-air and antiship missile platforms that can quickly reinforce vulnerable segments of the defensive line.

Following successful amphibious and air assault operations, the PLA will consolidate gains and isolate the island by securing the island's critical air and sea infrastructure. The PLA will immediately commence reinforcement operations with transport aircraft and maritime vessels delivering follow-on forces and heavy equipment to stabilize the beachhead. To isolate the island and prevent external intervention, the PLA Navy will deploy surface combatants and submarines to establish layered defenses along key sea lanes, disrupting the enemy's efforts to reinforce its positions. Simultaneously, PLA Air Force fighter aircraft will maintain persistent combat air patrols to deter and neutralize hostile aircraft, ensuring air superiority.

f In January 2025, China launched three specialized barges designed to support over-the-shore logistics during potential amphibious assaults. These self-propelled jack-up barges feature telescoping bridges that connect the three ships to create a relocatable pier measuring 820 meters. This system allows for efficient delivery of large volumes of equipment and supplies, including unimproved areas and damaged ports. With five docking points for roll-on/roll-off ships, it can transfer hundreds of vehicles ashore each hour. https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/14/

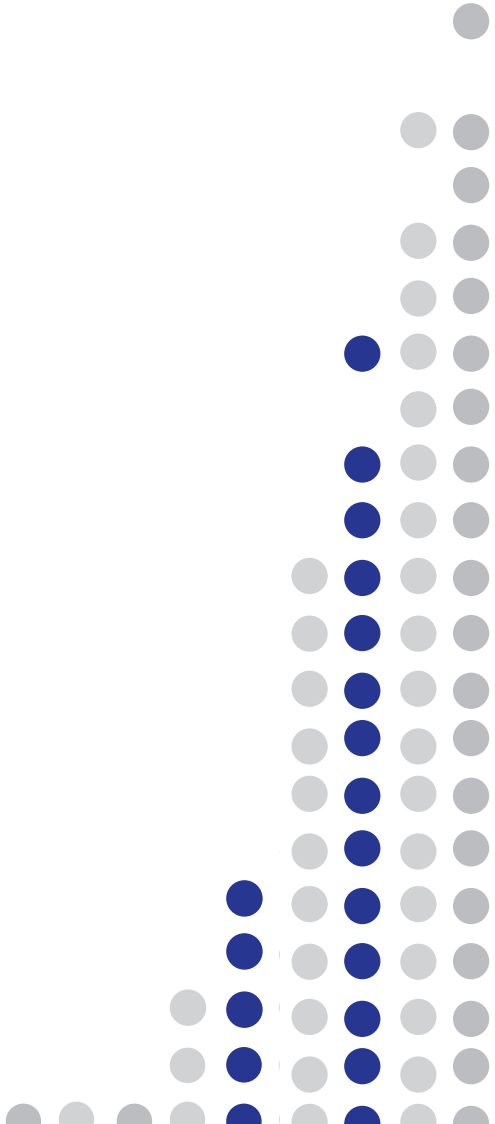
Key Advantages and Challenges

China possesses advantages that will strain any Indo-Pacific country's ability to respond to multiple invasion locations.

- **Force Size.** The PLA's size advantage will play a critical role overwhelming enemy defenses by conducting simultaneous attacks across multiple locations. The PLA Army alone fields nearly 1 million soldiers, contributing to a total PLA force of over 3 million, including reserve and paramilitary forces—far surpassing Taiwan's total military strength of roughly 1.8 million service members.[65] More importantly, almost 80 percent of Taiwan's maneuver brigades are in reserve, which may limit their ability to mobilize quickly in conditions where they will have limited advance warning.[66]
- **Mobilization Disruption.** A key to the PLA's success will be its ability to hinder the mobilization of the enemy's reserves. This will be achieved through various tactics, including deception measures such as preparatory fires at false landing sites, misleading electronic activity, and performing "deceptive ferry exercises" to confuse the enemy about true landing sites.[67]
- **Emphasis on Speed.** Speed will be a critical element for the PLA in a joint island landing campaign. Rapid and continuous assaults will be crucial for establishing defensible beachheads quickly. This speed will be enabled by the PLA's development of high-water-speed amphibious vehicles like the Type-05 and improved mechanized maneuver and assault capabilities for airborne forces.[68,69]

Despite these advantages, China will face several challenges during a joint island landing campaign.

- **Limited Sealift Capacity.** The PLA has limited capacity to transport large numbers of vehicles and troops by sea, which will likely constrain the scale of the initial assault operations.[70] However, once ports are secure, civilian roll-on/roll-off ships will be used to deliver reinforcements and additional armor vehicles.
- **Reliable Sustainment.** Intensive combat operations like those typical in a beach assault or dense urban terrain are very resource intensive. While there is evidence of experimentation to ameliorate these conditions, the PLA services and Joint Logistics Support Force will likely struggle with the "final mile" problem of logistics, exacerbated by enemy fire and geography.
- **Unpredictable Weather and Maritime Conditions.** The PLA's amphibious landing operations will likely be complicated by unpredictable weather cor tides, and currents.
- **Defensive Positions and Obstacles.** In sor island landing operations, China will proba defending forces that have prepared de positions and emplaced obstacles, making amp landings difficult and potentially resulting casualties.
- **Joint Operations Experience.** China's experience coordinating operations between branches of the PLA and special operation will present a challenge during a complex joi landing campaign.



Joint Antilanding Campaign

The joint antilanding campaign encompasses China's strategy to secure and defend an island or coastal area against an attacking enemy. For this type of operation, ground units will be organized into groupings designed for specific tasks. Likely groupings and tasks will include:[71]

- A **forward defense group** will protect front-line positions and will typically be divided into primary and secondary defense groups.
- A **deep defense group** will be responsible for defending in-depth positions against enemy penetrations and encirclement operations.
- A **mobile annihilation group** will be responsible for conducting mobile attacks to eliminate enemy forces, particularly those attempting encirclements or penetrations.
- **Covering groups** will be employed to obstruct enemy reconnaissance, delay enemy advances, or compel the enemy to deploy prematurely.
- **Reconnaissance and sabotage raid teams** will conduct reconnaissance and raids to assess the enemy's offensive intentions, strike high-payoff targets, and disrupt or delay the enemy's advance.

The joint antilanding campaign will typically consist of four phases: ***joint counter-intervention***, ***positional defense, counterattack***, and ***consolidate gains***. Each of these phases is addressed below in detail.

Phase 1: Joint Counter-Intervention Operation

PREPARE TO DEFEND

In the initial phase, the PLA will aim to delay, disrupt, and destroy the enemy from approaching the defended coastline or island. This effort will involve robust reconnaissance and surveillance from all domains. The goal is to locate the enemy and apply lethal and nonlethal fires to disrupt their movement, delay their arrival, and reduce their capability. A successful counter-intervention campaign sets the stage for defending forces to defeat the enemy with direct and indirect fires.

As support to the main defense, the forward defense group will actively resist the enemy landing by taking offensive actions against the enemy force. Air assets will continue working to deny air superiority to the enemy force while naval assets will target surface ships with submarine-launched torpedoes and coastal defense missile strikes. On land, ground forces will conduct anti-air-raid campaigns that maximize the use of terrain for cover and concealment of forces and physically harden their defenses.

PLA Army amphibious combined-arms brigade (ACAB) capabilities are well-suited to the requirements of the antilanding mission. In particular, the advantages of the ACAB's concentration of short-range firepower—direct and indirect fire systems ranging out to approximately 10 kilometers—are amplified due to the influences of mission and terrain. Direct fire systems include armored assault gun and infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) main guns, self-propelled anti-aircraft guns employed in a surface-attack role, a wide variety of antitank guided missiles, man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), crew-served machine guns, and small arms. Indirect fire systems mix light self-propelled guns with large concentrations of heavy and medium automatic mortars to create an extremely dense network of close-range fire support. Additional longer-range fire systems are also available from the ACAB's dedicated artillery battalion.

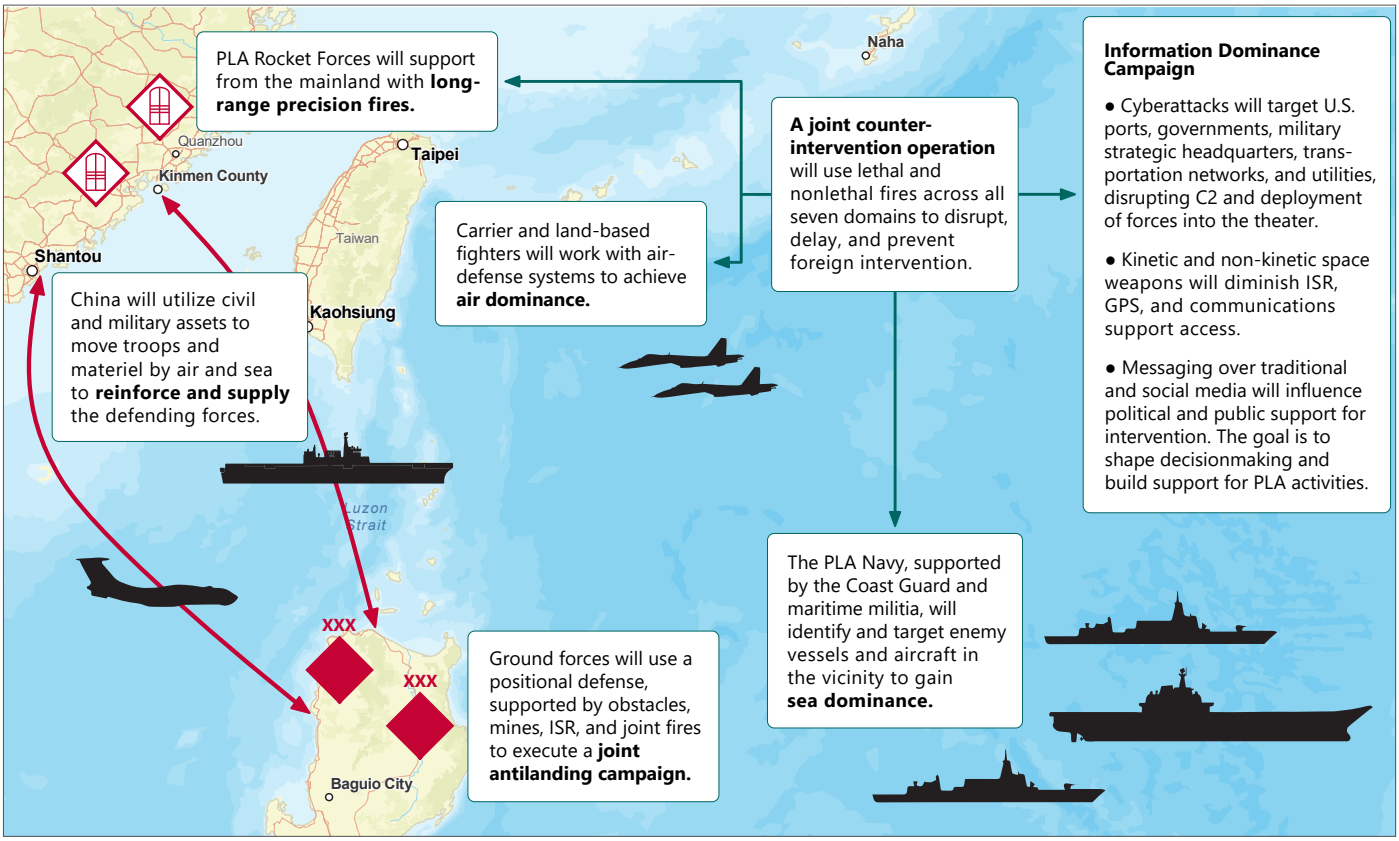


Figure 11: PLA Joint Counter-Intervention Operations (Source: TRADOC G-2)[g]

Phase 2: Positional Defense

BLOCK PENETRATION

As support to the main defense, the defensive group will actively resist the enemy's assault by taking offensive actions against the enemy force. Integral to the defense, the PLA will seek to maintain air and sea superiority while simultaneously executing a joint firepower strike campaign, targeting enemy ships, landing craft, and ground forces as they arrive on land. The enemy is most vulnerable immediately after the inherent chaos of an amphibious assault, airborne operation, or helicopter insertion; the PLA will therefore mass fires before enemy forces can organize for follow-on operations. PLA ground forces will employ anti-air-raid campaigns from hardened and camouflaged positions, using natural and manmade cover and concealment.

The sea-superiority operation will include PLA Navy, Coast Guard, and maritime militia boats emplacing sea mines and using small craft to clog landing channels, obstructing enemy forces from reaching shore. Meanwhile, PLA Army engineering forces, supported by militia forces, will erect obstacles on shore to delay the enemy advance, deny terrain, and canalize landing forces into designated kill zones.

Light infantry units will likely deploy as the forward-defense group, forming the main line of defense for invasion beaches and key avenues of approach. Wherever possible, these units will fortify themselves and integrate heavier firepower platforms. Light armor and IFVs operating as the deep-defense group will provide a mobile reserve and counterattack force. Due to the restrictive terrain and the assumption of isolation when under enemy attack, these groups will likely be organized into combined-arms teams at very low echelons. The PLA ground force strategy is to disrupt enemy formations with concentrated firepower, fix the enemy in position, and then launch decisive short-range counterattacks to defeat enemy penetrations or isolate enemy formations.

Supported by the People's Armed Police and militia, the deep-defense group will work to disrupt encirclement efforts by screening flanks and rear areas. The anti-airborne and antilanding effort will rely heavily upon the People's

g For symbology descriptions, see FM 1-02.2, Military Symbols, https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1030416.

Armed Police to harass, disrupt, and delay penetrating forces. The mobile annihilation group will then attack and destroy enemy forces trying to encircle the PLA Army formation.

Phase 3: Counterattack

DESTROY THE ENEMY

Once the enemy's attack has been successfully thwarted, PLA joint defense doctrine requires a transition to the offense. In this situation, the mobile annihilation group will lead the counterattack by clearing out remaining enemy forces and preparing to support future operations. The PLA will continue to employ joint fires to attack high-payoff targets, supporting maneuver forces as they close with and destroy the enemy.

Phase 4: Consolidate Gains

PREPARE TO DEFEND

Following a successful defense, PLA forces will quickly consolidate gains and prepare for follow-on operations, which could include additional offensive operations inland or preparing to defend against additional enemy attacks. The PLA will resupply and bring in reinforcements by sea and air. Indigenous engineering equipment, construction equipment, and materials will be used to fortify and harden defensive positions.

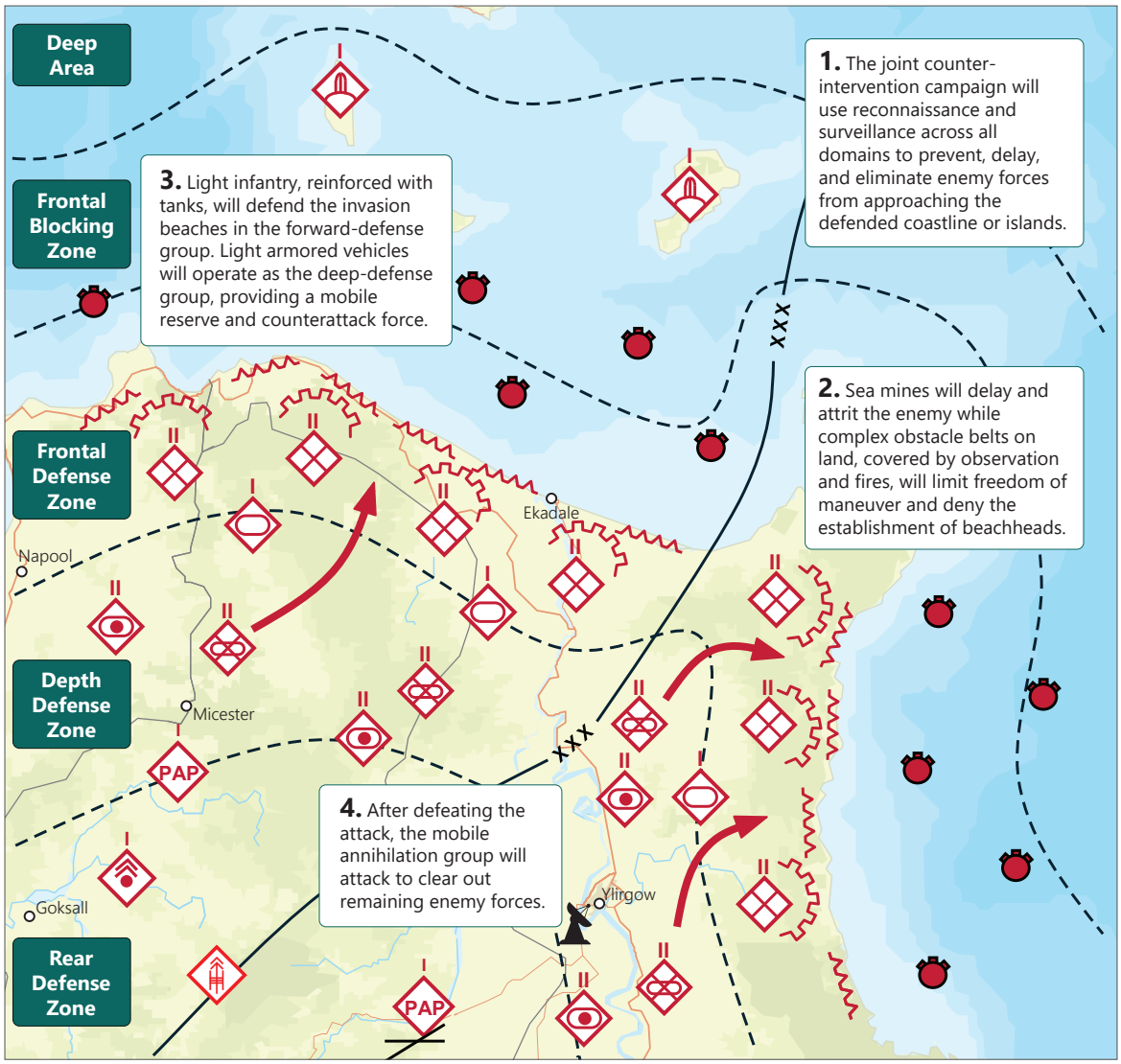


Figure 12: The Four Sequential and Overlapping Phases of the Joint Antilanding Campaign (Source: TRADOC G-2)[h]

h For symbology descriptions, see FM 1-02.2, Military Symbols, https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1030416.

Key Advantages and Challenges

China enjoys advantages that will benefit a joint anti-landing campaign.

- **Proximity to the Mainland.** The most likely coastal defense scenario will occur either on mainland China or within the First Island Chain no more than 1,000 miles from mainland China. The relatively short lines of communication will aid resupply, reinforcement, and joint fires support.
- **PLA Navy and Coast Guard.** The PLA will benefit from having the largest navy in the world with more than 370 vessels, including more than 140 primary surface combatants.[72] Additionally, the Chinese Coast Guard has more than 150 large vessels (those displacing greater than 1,000 tons each), many of which are equipped with 76-mm naval guns and 20-mm to 30-mm cannons. China's combined naval power will create havoc for enemy forces approaching by sea. Additionally, PLA Navy and Air Force tactical aircraft and ground-based air defense systems will make approaches by air equally hazardous.

Despite these advantages, China will face several challenges during a joint antilanding campaign.

- **Limited Time To Prepare.** A scenario in which China invades a neighboring island will allow the PLA a limited amount of time to prepare defensive positions before facing a potential foreign intervention.
- **Maintaining Sea Lanes and Air Corridors.** Within the First Island Chain, to include the South China Sea, China will have to account for numerous potential adversaries that could form an alliance and work to isolate Chinese occupying forces, cutting off vital supply lines.
- **Joint Operations Experience.** China will have to overcome its limited experience coordinating joint operations; it has not conducted combat operations on foreign soil since the Sino-Vietnam war in 1979.

Conclusion

This assessment aligns with and expands upon the judgments presented in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, *The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations*, particularly regarding the complexity of the OE and the multidomain nature of contemporary LSCO. To achieve victory, the U.S. Army must know the enemy. Knowing the enemy starts with the OE.

China's potent combination of economic strength, technological prowess, and a grand strategic vision are driving a military modernization that presents a significant challenge to the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Efforts by CCP leaders to employ its growing military power to achieve strategic objectives, such as the seizure of Taiwan, will feature PLA ground forces in a variety of critical roles. The analysis presented in this paper underscores the criticality of ground forces in potential Indo-Pacific conflicts, challenging the misconception that such engagements will rely primarily on air and sea domain capabilities.

For the U.S. Army, the importance of understanding the PLA's emphasis on active defense and systems confrontation across all domains of warfare cannot be overstated. China's strategy aims to defeat an enemy's critical operational systems, much like the U.S. military's approach, leveraging information dominance, concerted and concentrated multidomain fires, and joint operations. The U.S. Army must prepare for a battlefield characterized by unprecedented complexity, transparency, and lethality, where traditional safe havens and domain superiorities can no longer be assumed.

The paper's discussion of the PLA's joint counter-intervention strategy stresses the difficulty U.S. forces will have in accessing the theater and later moving within the theater. Similarly, the vignettes illuminate the PLA's potential employment of its ground forces in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the indispensable role of U.S. Army forces in countering these operations. These scenarios underscore the U.S. Army's need to consider China's approach to conflict when making decisions on doctrine, force structure, materiel, and training to meet the unique challenges of the Indo-Pacific theater.

The U.S. Army remains a linchpin of the Joint Force in the Indo-Pacific as the key component for developing the area's security network and infrastructure. The Army's readiness for LSCO in the Pacific theater is crucial in the event of conflict while serving as an effective deterrence to maintain peace and stability in the region. A thorough understanding of China's military capabilities is crucial to protecting U.S. interests, deterring Chinese aggression, and ensuring victory in any potential Indo-Pacific conflict.

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Appendix A:

The LSCO Conditions and China

China, like the United States, will have to contend with Operational Environment conditions that will define LSCO for the foreseeable future. This section details how the 12 conditions identified in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, *The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations*, will shape China's ability to operate in LSCO.

All-domain Competition and Warfare: The PLA can operate in and employ fires across all domains, degrading an opponent's freedom of movement on land, sea, and air, as well as space-based capabilities.

Mass vs. Precision: China is rapidly advancing its precision-guided munitions stockpiles to complement its vast arsenal of area-effect weapons, enhancing its ability to conduct multidomain precision strikes while maintaining the flexibility to mass fires.

Proliferation of Uncrewed Systems: China is rapidly expanding its development of uncrewed systems, which play a crucial role in the PLA's air and sea dominance campaigns, while contributing to ground combat lethality and sustainment support.

Magazine Depth and Range: China's domestic manufacturing base can produce vast quantities of military equipment and supplies, which will afford the PLA a significant advantage, especially within the Indo-Pacific region.

Transparent Battlefield: China's ability to collect and connect information across all domains, particularly within the Indo-Pacific region, will limit an adversary's ability to maintain concealment and disguise movement and operations.

Increased Lethality: The PLA's large numbers of advanced precision-guided munitions and long-range weapons, supported by all-domain ISR, enable it to deliver and sustain lethal effects over a wide area.

Antiaccess/Area Denial: The PLA's extensive multidomain precision fires are essential to its antiaccess/area-denial capabilities, which form the core of China's counter-intervention strategy.

Contested Logistics: China's long-range lethal fires and nonlethal capabilities can disrupt an adversary's logistics at their home stations and throughout the lines of communication, making it difficult for troops, equipment, and supplies to reach the Indo-Pacific theater.

Homeland Defense: China's extensive intelligence collection and conventional, hybrid, and irregular warfare capabilities create unprecedented Homeland defense challenges for the United States.

Dense Urban Warfare: The PLA consistently trains for operations in densely populated urban areas, which would likely feature heavily in a conflict over disputed territories with some regional actors such as India, Taiwan, or Vietnam.

Information Advantage: China's doctrinal commitment to establishing information dominance, which it considers at least as important as firepower or maneuver, enables it to swiftly shape the information landscape and challenge its adversaries' ability to gain information advantage.

Weapons of Mass Destruction: China is swiftly modernizing its nuclear forces, with the objective of increasing its arsenal to more than 1,000 warheads by 2030 and enhancing survivability by developing a comprehensive nuclear triad of land-, sea-, and air-based capabilities.

Appendix B:

Tradecraft and Sources

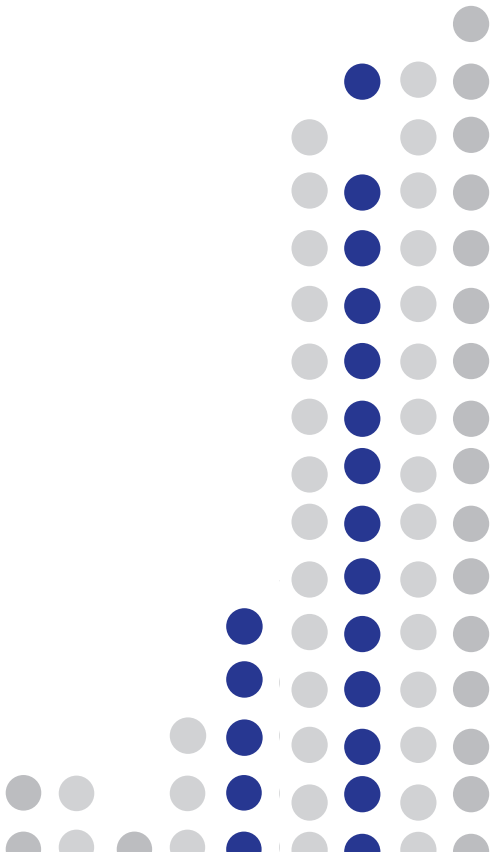
Analytic Assumptions and Caveats

China does not publish its military doctrines and tactics, so much of this assessment relies on publications by the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences and its National Defense University, which respectively, are understood to have the lead for conceptualizing Chinese doctrine and educating the PLA's senior officers. While the rapid evolution of PLA capabilities creates some uncertainty about the lasting utility of these publications, we have moderate confidence in their continued importance due to continued similarities in rhetoric to other contemporary authoritative Chinese media reporting. Chinese military media reporting on exercises are intended to have domestic and external audiences and effects, but this body of reporting is probably broadly representative of real activity, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Notes on Terminology

The nature of Chinese-English translation and differences in terminology used by authoritative sources, such as China's White Papers on Defense, can lead to confusing or controversial differences in translation. The following are some clarifications for these terms.

- This paper generally distinguishes between "China" broadly and the "People's Liberation Army (PLA)" specifically for several important reasons. The PLA is only one component of China's Armed Forces, which also include other elements, including the People's Armed Police and militia. LSCO with China would involve joint operations supported by these other forces. Using "China" acknowledges the full scope of potential conflict, encompassing military, governmental, and societal aspects beyond just the PLA.[73]
- The "People's Liberation Army Army" is the official term used for its ground force. Some sources in English use ground force since [解放军陆军] is literally PLA Ground Army, but in this paper we use PLA Army for consistency with official sources.
- China uses the term "joint" to mean more than one service or force working together, whereas it uses the term "combined" to mean multiple branches of the same service.
- China also uses "detachment" or "flotilla" (sometimes Romanized as *zhidui* [支队]) for division-grade units, while it uses "group" (Romanized as Dadui [大队]) for regiment- or battalion-grade units.[74]



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