

About the Author

Dr. Joel Wuthnow is a Research Fellow in the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at National Defense University.

Key Points

- ◆ China has gradually expanded its military footprint in the Red Sea region, an area of critical importance for global maritime commerce and energy production. Key aspects include a People's Liberation Army role in United Nations peacekeeping, anti-piracy patrols, and a new base in Djibouti.
- ◆ China's military presence—its largest outside the Indo-Pacific—supports Beijing's diplomatic relations in the region, contributes to China's maritime security interests, and provides useful lessons in building an expeditionary capability.
- ◆ U.S. officials need to address operational safety and counterintelligence issues and determine whether China's presence—which also includes military diplomacy and arms sales—is eroding traditional U.S. advantages as a security partner.
- ◆ Opportunities for military cooperation should be explored in areas where U.S. and Chinese interests align, such as disaster management and maritime safety.

The PLA Beyond Asia: China's Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region

by Joel Wuthnow

China's establishment of a military base in Djibouti in 2017 was an important "first" for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which had never operated a base on foreign territory. It was also a milestone in a gradually expanding PLA presence in the Red Sea region. Over the previous decade, China deployed peacekeepers to conflicts in the oil-producing states of Sudan and South Sudan, conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and increased its military diplomacy throughout the area. By the time the Djibouti base opened, the PLA was already maintaining a presence of more than 2,000 personnel in the region—far more than in any other area outside the Indo-Pacific. While PLA capabilities have remained largely concentrated in Asia, its Red Sea presence showcased an increasing ability to project power to other regions and suggested that additional deployments may occur as China seeks to defend its overseas interests.¹ The PLA role in the region has also entered the Chinese popular imagination: the navy's evacuation of Chinese and foreign citizens from Yemen in 2015 was the basis of *Operation Red Sea*, one of China's top grossing films of 2018.

Assessing China's presence in the region has value for several reasons. First, analysts increasingly see the Red Sea not as a barrier between the African and Asian continents but as a security "zone" in which conflicts span both sides.² While the PLA is not a major actor, its growing presence could affect conflict dynamics and regional governance. Second, the United States has clear interests in the region, including freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and its two chokepoints and the stability of littoral countries that produce a large volume of global oil supplies. China's military activities in the region may influence those interests in various ways. Third, the lessons the PLA learns from its deployments in the region may enhance its ability to conduct expeditionary

operations elsewhere, and could even contribute to its combat readiness in the Indo-Pacific as PLA personnel gain real-world experience. Finally, the ways in which the PLA behaves in the Red Sea—including its interactions with the U.S. military—could provide an indication of how it may act in other theaters.

This study sketches the contours, drivers, and implications of these developments. The key finding is that PLA presence in the Red Sea area, while currently modest, creates several challenges that U.S. officials will have to address, including questions of operational safety as U.S. and Chinese forces come into contact, risks of exposing the PLA to sensitive U.S. operations and capabilities, and the possibility that the attractiveness of the United States as a regional security partner could wane as China takes on increasing roles in this arena. The study provides suggestions for how the Department of Defense can manage those risks while also pursuing the sometimes overlooked principle of U.S. defense strategy that “we remain open to cooperate where our interests align.”³ Indeed, the study argues that there are some avenues of additional cooperation that should be discussed in future U.S.-China military-to-military engagements.

A Complex Geopolitical Situation

Describing the PLA role in the region requires a brief discussion of the area’s political geography. At the center is the 1,400-mile Red Sea, which links the Mediterranean and Arabian seas via the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb, respectively. Europe-Asia trade valued at \$700 billion transits the sea annually, including 6.2 million barrels/day in oil (roughly 9 percent of the world total).⁴ The region is also home to several major oil-producing countries including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman; Sudan and South Sudan also both produce oil in smaller quantities as well as other natural resources, such as copper and chromium. Ports on the African side of the Red Sea, many built by Arabian Peninsula countries, provide exporters a chance to tap into Africa’s growing consumer class.⁵ Consumer

spending on the African continent is slated to rise from \$1.4 trillion in 2015 to \$2.5 trillion in 2030, with Red Sea littoral countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan among the largest potential consumer markets.⁶

Regional peace and stability are complicated by several problems. Somali piracy has waned in recent years due to international anti-piracy efforts, but al Qaeda-linked terrorists continue to carry out attacks. Civil conflicts also plague Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen. Regional instability has been aggravated by two sets of rivalries, one involving a competition for influence between the Gulf states, Egypt, and Turkey, and the other between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In both cases, regional powers “see Africa as a new arena for competition and building alliances, particularly as the Horn is poised for strong economic growth over the next generation.”⁷ Moreover, Saudi-Iran tensions have spilled over into proxy conflicts and have resulted in direct attacks on commercial shipping, some carried out by Houthi forces in Yemen.⁸ Prospects for conflict are exacerbated by the lack of an effective regional security architecture: Saudi Arabia’s bid to establish a security forum has foundered due to regional rivalries.⁹

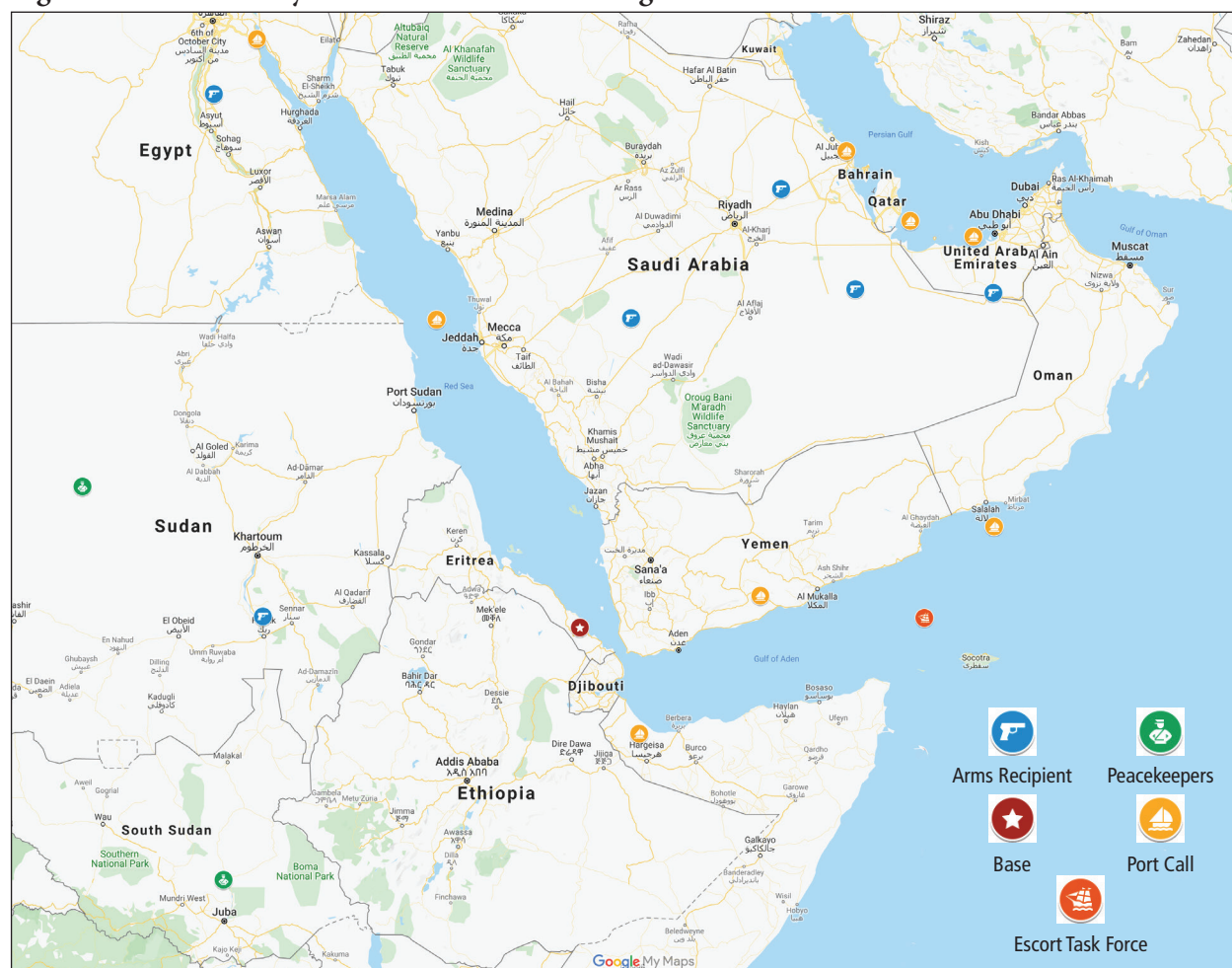
Great power maneuvering adds an additional layer of complexity in regional politics. Russia, driven by pursuit of market opportunities, access to raw materials, and larger ambitions to promote a “multipolar world,” has increased its economic and security role in the region, including plans to develop military bases in Sudan and Eritrea.¹⁰ China, as discussed below, has growing trade and investment stakes in addition to maritime security interests, which have led to a larger military footprint. U.S. interests include counterterrorism, stability of global oil markets, countering Iran’s pursuit of regional hegemony, and freedom of navigation, which are protected in part by a U.S. military presence in Djibouti and the Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain. The conflux of Russian, Chinese, and U.S. interests and presences has led to speculation about intensified Great Power Competition in this theater.¹¹

China's Expanding Military Presence

China's military presence in the region has gradually expanded since November 2007, when the first batch of Chinese peacekeepers arrived in Darfur, Sudan. Well over 2,000 PLA personnel are in the region at any given time, distributed between ground forces assigned to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in Sudan and South Sudan; sailors taking part in anti-piracy escort operations in the Gulf of Aden; and marines located at China's inaugural overseas base in Djibouti. Other Chinese military activities in the region include frequent high-level visits, port calls, participation in regional exercises, and arms transfers to a number of recipients (see figure). Each category is discussed in turn.

UN Peacekeeping. China has more than 1,400 personnel assigned to two UN peacekeeping missions in the region, Darfur (UNAMID) and South Sudan (UNMISS), representing about two-thirds of deployed Chinese peacekeepers worldwide.¹² PLA personnel in both countries are drawn from several group armies based in the Beijing area and serve for 12 month rotations.¹³ China's presence in Darfur includes 225 engineering and medical troops primarily responsible for building and repairing roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, and providing medical support to other peacekeepers and local citizens.¹⁴ Since June 2017, China has also allocated a squadron of four Mi-171 multipurpose helicopters, which conduct missions such as air patrol and transportation.¹⁵ China's contribution to UNMISS, which began in September 2011, includes a 331-person engineering

Figure. China's Military Presence in the Red Sea Region



Source: Author using Google MyMaps in compliance with Terms. ©2019 Geobasics-DE/BKG (©2019). Google, Inst. Nacional, Maps GISrael, ORION-ME.

and medical contingent with responsibilities similar to those in Darfur.¹⁶ Since February 2015, China has also deployed a 700-person infantry battalion to South Sudan, which has assisted in guarding UN convoys, facilities, and internally displaced persons camps.¹⁷ In July 2016, two Chinese peacekeepers assigned to this mission were killed when militants tried to enter a UN compound.¹⁸

Anti-Piracy Patrols. The PLA Navy has conducted regular anti-piracy escort operations in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008. These operations have provided protection for more than 6,000 Chinese and foreign civilian ships.¹⁹ This mission emerged from an upsurge in Somali piracy in the mid-2000s, which also spurred the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union (EU) to establish an anti-piracy presence in the region, but has continued despite a major decline in piracy incidents in recent years.²⁰ To date, China has carried out more than 30 escort task forces (ETFs), with each serving for 3 to 4 months before rotation. ETFs typically include 3 to 4 surface vessels such as destroyers, frigates, and replenishment ships (manned by 600 or more sailors), drawn from all three navy fleets. Since 2013, China has also deployed submarines with some ETFs, prompting widespread foreign speculation about China's true military ambitions (discussed below).²¹ While China's ETFs operate independently, Beijing has participated in regional anti-piracy coordination and information-sharing mechanisms.²²

Djibouti Base. In August 2017, China opened its first overseas military installation in Djibouti, a tiny African country located adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb. China thus became the latest foreign country to lease a base in Djibouti, alongside the United States (which operates Camp Lemonnier, home to 4,000 U.S. personnel), France, Japan, and Italy.²³ Beijing's 10-year lease on the property requires annual payments to the Djiboutian government of \$20 million.²⁴ The PLA base, according to Chinese accounts, is designed to support other military activities in the region, including peacekeeping, anti-piracy, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) missions.²⁵ Key facilities include barracks, eight hangars and a tarmac

for helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles, and underground facilities.²⁶ The base is operated by a PLA Marine Corps mechanized infantry company, which, in addition to operating the base, has conducted live-fire counterterrorism exercises at a nearby training facility.²⁷ China is also constructing a dedicated naval pier at the commercial Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port that will be long enough to "accommodate multiple ships at the same time by nesting ships outboard one another."²⁸

Military Diplomacy. China's presence in the region also includes a variety of cooperative activities. According to a U.S. National Defense University (NDU) database, the PLA conducted 178 activities with 10 Red Sea countries between 2002 and 2018, including meetings of senior officials held both in China and in the region, port calls (usually conducted by ETFs returning from the Gulf of Aden), and participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises (see table 1).²⁹ For example, in January 2017, an ETF visited the Saudi port of Jeddah, where it held a deck reception for local Chinese citizens and various exchanges with the Saudi navy.³⁰ As in many other countries, China maintains defense attaché offices in embassies across the region, which typically consist of between 2 and 10 PLA officers.³¹ In addition to their responsibilities in managing host-country military relations, those personnel act as overt intelligence collectors. Opportunities for officers from partner states to enroll in degree- and short-term programs at China's NDU and other academies also support China's military relationships in the region.³²

Arms Transfers. Over the last 15 years, most Red Sea countries have purchased Chinese military weapons and equipment. Data collected by the international think tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reveal that Chinese arms exports during this period included multiple rocket launchers, surface-to-air missiles, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, and other assets (see table 2). In the last few years, the most common Chinese export items have been large unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) such as the Wing Loong-1 and -2, which have been purchased in bulk by Egypt, Saudi

Table 1. Chinese Military Diplomacy with Red Sea States, 2002–2018

	Exercises	Port Calls	Visits to China	Chinese Visits to Country
Bahrain	0	1	1	1
Djibouti	1	26	4	3
Egypt	1	3	13	28
Eritrea	0	0	2	1
Ethiopia	0	N/A	3	6
Oman	1	27	2	1
Qatar	0	1	4	1
Saudi Arabia	1	8	4	3
Sudan	3	1	9	3
UAE	1	3	3	2
Yemen	0	11	1	2

Source: NDU Database. Note: no records were found for Somalia.

Arabia, and the UAE. Beijing has apparently focused on this market because most other UCAV producers are banned from exporting them due to restrictions under the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Wassenaar Agreement.³³

Explaining China's Military Presence

China's growing military footprint in the Red Sea region advances three broad objectives: supporting China's larger economic and diplomatic agenda in select countries; ensuring sea line security in a region critical for Chinese trade, not only by countering piracy but also by monitoring U.S. operations; and gaining experience in conducting expeditionary ground and naval operations, which can be applied globally.

Supporting Broader Foreign Policy Objectives. One of Beijing's priority goals is maintaining access to crude oil supplies. In 2017, five Red Sea states provided roughly 22 percent of China's oil imports; at the top of the list were Saudi Arabia (\$20.5 billion in sales) and Oman (\$12.4 billion).³⁴ The region is thus integral to China's strategy of diversifying oil imports among many different partners. China also has important trade and investment interests in several states, most notably Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Egypt. In 2017, Chinese exports to those three states, which are among China's "comprehensive

strategic partners," surpassed \$30 billion.³⁵ Over the past decade, China has also signed major investment and infrastructure development deals in the region totaling more than \$13 billion.³⁶ Many of these are now branded as Belt and Road Initiative projects. Examples include China Ocean Shipping Company's 20 percent share in the Suez Canal terminal, China Merchants Group's 24 percent stake in the port of Djibouti, and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation's (Sinopec's) 38 percent share in a Saudi oil refinery.³⁷ Diplomatically, Beijing relies on support from regional partners on controversial issues such as China's treatment of Uighurs to offset criticism from Washington and other Western states.³⁸

The PLA's role in defending these interests is largely indirect. In the case of South Sudan, despite foreign media assertions to the contrary, PLA infantry has not deployed to protect oil fields or Chinese oil workers.³⁹ Those troops have instead been tasked with various force protection missions in and around the capital Juba. The link between the PLA and China's oil interests in South Sudan, which includes an agreement whereby China will acquire one-sixth of its oil output in return for infrastructure loans,⁴⁰ is more convoluted: China agreed to provide the battalion to persuade the UN Department of Peace Operations to support Beijing's petition to have the protection of South Sudan's oil industry included in the UNMISS mandate.⁴¹ Beijing originally preferred to deploy

Table 2. Chinese Arms Transfers to Red Sea States, 2003–2018

Recipient	Years Delivered	Items
Bahrain	2016	Self-propelled MRL
Djibouti	2014	WMA-301 assaulter; Y-12 transport aircraft
Egypt	2012–2018	K-8 trainer; ASN-209 UAV; Wing Loong-1 UCAV; Wing Loong-2 UCAV
Ethiopia	2012–2014	Type-89 APC; AS365 helicopter; VN-4 APC; VP3 APC
Oman	2003	WZ-551 APC
Qatar	2017–2018	BP-12A SSM; SY-400 MRL
Saudi Arabia	2008–2017	PLZ-45 self-propelled gun; CH-4 UCAV; Wing Loong-1 UCAV; Wing Loong-2 UCAV
Somalia	2017	Tiger APV
Sudan	2003–2018	A-5C attack aircraft; WZ-551 infantry fighting vehicle; BT-6 trainer; FN-6 SAM; Red Arrow-8 anti-tank missile; WS-1 MRL; FB-6 SAM; FN-6 SAM; FTC-2000 trainer; Python-3 SRAAM
UAE	2013–2017	Wing Loong-1 UCAV; Wing Loong-2 UCAV; AH-4 towed gun

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database.

Note: No records were found for Somalia.

Key: APC: armored personnel carrier; APV: armored personal vehicle; MRL: multiple rocket launcher; SAM: surface-to-air missile; SRAAM: short-range air-to-air missile; UAE: United Arab Emirates; UAV: unmanned aerial vehicle; UCAV: unmanned combat aerial vehicle.

PLA troops to oil-producing regions, but agreed to send them wherever they were needed as part of the deal.⁴²

Several PLA activities augment China's public diplomacy in host nations. Though not directly connected to China's oil interests, PLA peacekeepers in Sudan and South Sudan have supported China's cultivation of "soft power" by building and repairing infrastructure and providing medical services.⁴³ Another example is the dispatch of the Chinese naval hospital ship *Peace Ark* to the region. In late 2010, for instance, the ship visited Djibouti, Kenya, and other countries, where it "provided medical care to more than 15,500 people and performed 97 major operations."⁴⁴ China's 2019 defense white paper applauded personnel at the Djibouti base for donating "over 600 teaching aids to local schools."⁴⁵ Such activities not only counter negative impressions of China in the region but also provide an argument Beijing can leverage on the international stage to reduce fears about China's rising power.⁴⁶

China's military also supports stronger relations with host countries at the elite level. Senior leader interactions are a chance for Chinese officials to reaffirm support for China's larger "strategic partnerships" with

these states and to explore avenues for further cooperation among their respective armed forces. Moreover, travel to the region by senior officials, involving costly time commitments, is itself a sign of China's investment in building these partnerships.⁴⁷ Top PLA officials have visited most countries in the region, but their travel patterns reveal that some countries (for example, Egypt and Ethiopia) have been prioritized over others (see table 1). Arms sales, particularly of assets that can only or most cost efficiently be acquired from China, offer Beijing another opportunity to develop influence with elites in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, supporting broader foreign policy objectives in these states.

Safeguarding Maritime Security Interests. Beijing has two basic interests in protecting maritime traffic through the Red Sea. The lesser interest is ensuring crude oil shipments through the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb. Closure of either chokepoint would put a fraction of China's oil imports at risk, potentially requiring substitutions from other sources. However, the effects would be modest in comparison to a disruption of the Strait of Hormuz or Strait of Malacca, through which a much larger percentage of global oil supplies and Chinese

imports travel.⁴⁸ China's greater interest lies in protecting seaborne trade routes to and from Europe. China's total trade in goods with the EU in 2018 surpassed \$500 billion, with a majority of it traveling through the Red Sea.⁴⁹ Threats to commercial shipping from state or nonstate actors could raise prices for Chinese firms and consumers by increasing maritime insurance rates or forcing ships to use the much longer Cape of Good Hope route.⁵⁰ It is thus no surprise that the Red Sea forms a key link in the "Maritime Silk Road," the oceanic component of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵¹

Driven by limited power projection capabilities and financial incentives to free ride, Beijing still largely relies on the U.S. Navy and others to maintain security in critical sea lanes. However, China's naval presence in the Red Sea reflects at least an incipient desire to avoid overreliance on U.S. largesse. One reason was the explosion of Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden in the mid-2000s, which required a comprehensive multinational effort to combat. Encouraged by Washington, Beijing responded to a UN Security Council call for all capable states to assist in those efforts, even if its primary focus was on protecting Chinese-flagged vessels. Somali piracy has declined significantly in recent years, though occasional upticks create an ongoing rationale for China's ETFs.⁵² China's base in Djibouti supports those operations by providing rest, replenishment, and resupply services for Chinese naval crews.⁵³

While piracy has been the most common threat to Chinese maritime shipping, the more serious (but less likely) threat is a potential U.S. interdiction of Chinese supply routes in a future conflict. Chinese analysts have expressed concern about the ability of the U.S. Navy to blockade Chinese trade in multiple regions, including the Red Sea. Senior Captain Liang Fang, a professor at China's NDU, includes the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb among 16 global maritime chokepoints "that the United States wants to control, which poses great threats to both China's military and economic activities."⁵⁴ Free riding on the U.S. Navy thus carries a strategic risk. The ETFs provide some "far seas" experi-

ence to Chinese surface and submarine crews, which is a necessary first step in preparing to counter a U.S. blockade. Moreover, one purpose of China's Djibouti base is to monitor U.S. naval activities near the Bab el-Mandeb, which could provide opportunities for Chinese forces to consider ways in which U.S. operations targeting Chinese shipping could be frustrated.

The Djibouti base can also be interpreted as the Western anchor in a larger attempt to protect Chinese seaborne trade through the Indian Ocean. Chinese strategic writings have long described the need to establish a stronger naval presence through Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.⁵⁵ Xi Jinping's declaration of a Maritime Silk Road linking Asia with Europe, combined with growing Sino-Indian and Sino-U.S. frictions, put added pressure on the navy to defend China's transregional supply routes.⁵⁶ Djibouti is likely only the first of a series of bases that will provide shelter and logistics support for Chinese forces, with others likely in countries such as Pakistan and Cambodia.⁵⁷ As former U.S. Africa Command commander General Thomas D. Waldhauser noted, China may also establish more bases in Africa, which could play a role in protecting supply routes in a region of growing importance for Chinese exports.⁵⁸ A related sign of China's intent to strengthen its regional presence is the participation of submarines—which play no clear role in anti-piracy operations—in some of China's ETFs.⁵⁹ Submarines would be integral to operations to deny U.S. or Indian forces the ability to target Chinese shipments in a conflict.⁶⁰

Gaining Experience in Expeditionary Operations.

Chinese military strategy does not currently envision conducting major combat operations outside China's immediate periphery, but does regard military operations other than war (MOOTW) in distant regions as a core PLA function.⁶¹ MOOTW, including anti-piracy, HA/DR, and noncombatant evacuations, became more prominent in the early 2000s with an expansion of China's global economic interests and the proliferation of Chinese citizens living abroad and were central to Hu Jintao's call for the PLA to prepare for "new historic

missions” in 2004.⁶² The evacuation of more than 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in early 2011 put a spotlight on the scale and complexity of protecting Chinese interests overseas.⁶³ While multiple services have an overseas role, the navy’s is the most prominent: China’s 2015 defense white paper stated that the navy should strike a balance between its traditional focus on “near seas defense,” with a greater emphasis on “far seas protection,” including sea lane protection.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the PLA’s ability to execute such missions was hindered by limited power projection capabilities, inadequate regional familiarity, and lack of experience operating far from home.

Participation by Chinese ground and naval forces in the Red Sea area of operations has helped to close some of these gaps. UN peacekeeping operations such as those in Sudan and South Sudan afford the ground forces opportunities to hone their ability to plan, manage, and sustain deployments to distant regions. In UNAMID that responsibility includes maintaining a helicopter squadron far from China, and in UNMISS it involves supporting a deployed infantry battalion. These missions are also chances for ground force personnel to learn how to coordinate with external actors (including the UN bureaucracy and other troop-contributing countries) and to acquire some cultural acuity and foreign language proficiency, which may be useful in other expeditionary circumstances. The dangerous conditions in South Sudan, in particular, provide an opportunity for PLA officials to gauge the readiness of army units to respond to similar conditions elsewhere and handle problems related to morale and welfare.⁶⁵

Anti-piracy operations have likewise spurred the PLA Navy to improve its ability to operate in the far seas. Relevant lessons gleaned by the ETFs include the move toward a “port-based refueling structure,” replacing China’s previous overreliance on embedded replenishment ships, and a greater capacity to adapt to “mission-specific details rather than following uniform models” for carrying out escort operations.⁶⁶ These lessons could be useful if the navy is called on to protect sea lanes in other regions, such as Southeast Asia or the

Gulf of Guinea.⁶⁷ Additional lessons were gained from the March 2015 evacuation of nearly 800 Chinese and foreign citizens from Yemen, which required Chinese frigates to divert from the Gulf of Aden and adapt to a rapidly deteriorating situation.⁶⁸ This experience could inform naval planning for future noncombatant evacuations. Participation in ETFs also provides Chinese naval officers and crews a degree of familiarity with the regional operating environment through port calls and bilateral drills.

The PLA’s experience in Djibouti offers China insight into the mechanics of managing a forward base. This includes negotiating a status of forces agreement with a host government, maintaining productive relations with the local population, securing contracting services from local companies, and operating within prevailing laws and cultural norms. Success in these areas implies adequate foreign area expertise within the PLA as well as effective coordination among the PLA and other relevant Chinese actors, including the Foreign Ministry and the Chinese embassy. The experience of Djibouti also requires the PLA to learn how to safely manage relations with foreign forces, one example being deconfliction of military air traffic. Given its proximity to other bases—Camp Lemmonier is less than 10 miles away—Djibouti also provides a vantage point for the PLA to observe how other militaries plan and conduct forward operations. With no prior experience working through these issues, Beijing could face a steep learning curve.⁶⁹ However, the lessons derived from Djibouti could be instrumental as China negotiates, plans, and operates future bases in other locations.

Implications for the United States

As a starting point, there are a number of reasons not to inflate the current and future importance of China’s deployments around the Red Sea. One is that the PLA remains a peripheral security actor. In peacekeeping, China contributes only a small fraction of the personnel assigned to UNAMID (5.3 percent) and UNMISS (6.4 percent); several other countries contribute far more

troops to these missions.⁷⁰ Hence PLA participation, while helpful, is not critical to the success of those operations. In anti-piracy, China is one of many independent deploying nations, alongside India, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, in addition to two multinational initiatives, the U.S.-led Combined Task Force 151 and the EU-led Operation *Atalanta*.⁷¹ An end to China's ETFs would have a limited effect on regional maritime security, due to the declining incidence of Somali piracy and the ability of others to intervene if sea lane security were endangered. In terms of scale, China's three to four naval ships pale in comparison to the dozen or more surface ships and submarines assigned to U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, not to mention the larger regional navies, such as those of Saudi Arabia or Egypt.⁷² Moreover, China's base in Djibouti, while an important "first" for the PLA, is only one of several foreign military bases in that country.

China's military presence is also limited because of the lack of cohesiveness between different PLA units in the region. While the Djibouti base is intended as a transit and logistics hub for different forces, there is no apparent coordination among ground forces deployed to peacekeeping operations in east Africa, the ETFs in the Gulf of Aden, or marines based in Djibouti itself. Moreover, while all these forces are nominally supervised by the joint staff department in Beijing, there is no clear regional joint command structure tying PLA forces together (that is, a Chinese equivalent of a U.S. joint task force). This limits China's ability to carry out joint contingency operations even in terms of MOOTW. In practice, Chinese interlocutors suggest it is likely that disparate forces are supervised by their own service headquarters.⁷³ Unless the PLA can establish a joint mechanism, China's military presence in the region will not be more than the sum of its parts.

Looking ahead, projections of a major increase in PLA deployments are problematic for several reasons.⁷⁴ First, the PLA's primary missions, such as preparing for a conflict with Taiwan or enforcing territorial claims in the South China Sea, are located in the Indo-Pacific region. The need to prepare for combat in China's own neigh-

borhood thus places a constraint on the PLA's ability to contribute to MOOTW elsewhere. Second, China's defense budget growth continues to slow, and will be further impacted by slowing Chinese economic growth.⁷⁵ Resourcing an increase in forces allocated to other regions could thus be a challenge. Third, in terms of maintaining regional stability, Beijing has incentives to continue to rely on others. Peacekeeping in Sudan and South Sudan, for instance, is mostly handled by other states. Counterterrorism operations against al-Shabab are led by the African Union (supported by U.S. special operations forces).⁷⁶ The U.S. Navy and other regional powers underwrite the security of critical sea lanes, including chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz. Thus, even though it has reasons to increase its presence abroad, Beijing will still have financial incentives to continue free riding.

It is also doubtful that the PLA will become mired in regional conflicts. One reason is an aversion to casualties when core Chinese territorial interests are not at stake. As one vignette, the death of two Chinese peacekeepers in South Sudan in July 2016 resulted in a situation in which PLA personnel no longer venture "outside of their base except when holding drills."⁷⁷ Even with a UN mandate, it is hard to imagine PLA troops being inserted in highly volatile circumstances such as in Somalia, where they may face their own Black Hawk Down incident. More important, Beijing has adopted a neutral position in regional disputes due to the need to retain positive relations with all sides.⁷⁸ Whereas Washington has been willing to align with Riyadh, most recently by deploying troops to protect Saudi oil fields, Beijing has balanced its relations between Riyadh and Tehran.⁷⁹ An exception is that Chinese arms have made their way onto regional battlefields, with a Chinese-made UCAV reportedly operated by Saudi Arabia shot down in Yemen by Houthi rebels in April 2019. China's desire to remain on the sidelines of regional conflicts means that Beijing will likely avoid selling arms in numbers that would tip the scales in favor of one side or another.⁸⁰

While the PLA's role in the region should not be overstated, U.S. officials will still need to address three evolving challenges. First are operational safety issues. In 2018, Chinese forces in Djibouti were implicated in widely reported incidents in which military-grade lasers were targeted at U.S. military aircrews, resulting in injuries.⁸¹ In June 2019, a senior U.S. Defense Department official revealed that PLA personnel in Djibouti were involved in several other unsafe activities, including attempts to "constrain international airspace" around the Chinese base, using drones to interfere in U.S. military flight operations, and attempts to gain unauthorized access to Camp Lemonnier.⁸² Some of these activities might have constituted probes of U.S. defenses, some perhaps designed to defend China's base (for example, attempting to obstruct U.S. military flights over the base), while others may have been part of a larger pattern in which China has used tools below the threshold of armed conflict to register discontent with U.S. policies.⁸³ In any case, such dangerous actions not only create safety concerns for U.S. personnel but could also cause an incident that might escalate into a direct clash.

The implication is that clear rules of behavior need to be established regulating Chinese activities in Djibouti. Incidents such as lasing, trespassing, and obstructing military air traffic are not governed by existing U.S.-China military agreements on unplanned maritime and air-to-air encounters.⁸⁴ In order to prevent an accident—a goal that serves the interests of both states—U.S. and Chinese officials should pursue similar agreements on how their respective forces can safely coexist in Djibouti. Those rules should guide discussions of incidents between local commanders as well as between more senior U.S. and Chinese officials. Beijing might be reluctant to sign such an agreement due to friction in larger U.S.-China relations or other reasons, but Washington can still raise the idea and put Beijing in the position of playing the spoiler. An alternative would be to pursue a multilateral negotiation over a set of rules involving other foreign military forces in Djibouti and periodic discussions on implementation. The benefit would be to lever-

age U.S. allies, such as France and Japan, that likely share similar concerns about China's behavior. Even if China did not participate, formulating a multilateral framework could help in calling out problematic PLA actions.

A second challenge is avoiding unintentional contributions to the development of PLA warfighting capabilities. As discussed, Chinese participation in peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations has resulted in lessons that may be applied in other circumstances. PLA forces are also undoubtedly drawing lessons from observations of U.S. operations in and around Djibouti. While some of these skills may be most relevant to MOOTW, others could facilitate stronger PLA combat capabilities closer to home. For instance, Chinese interlocutors acknowledge that peacekeeping operations have resulted in improvements in command and control among small army units, which may have value in a future ground conflict with India or on the Korean Peninsula.⁸⁵ Submarine deployments in the Gulf of Aden could provide the PLA Navy with useful operational data and experience that could be employed in a naval clash with India or the United States. Counterterrorism training in Djibouti could contribute to the proficiency of PLA Marine Corps special operations units, which may utilize that expertise in the South China Sea or elsewhere.

The fungibility of certain skills between MOOTW and combat operations means that the United States needs to carefully consider the risks of military exchanges with the PLA in the area. MOOTW-related cooperation is not specifically prohibited under current U.S. law, but participation in some U.S. or coalition activities could provide the PLA insight into restricted areas such as force projection and joint or combined combat operations.⁸⁶ Substantive cooperation, such as Chinese participation in a multinational flotilla targeting Houthi activities off Yemen, would be difficult to manage while mitigating the risks of exposure in these areas.⁸⁷ Counterterrorism cooperation with the PLA, though nominally focused on shared interests such as combating al Qaeda, could also provide insight into U.S. special operations doctrine and capabilities (and could send the

wrong message, as Beijing uses “counterterrorism” as a pretext for crackdowns on dissidents in Xinjiang). Finding the line between cooperation that enables PLA war-fighting capabilities and activities that advance common interests with few negative side effects may be difficult, but the onus should be on those proposing such activities to explain the risks and how they will be mitigated.

Third is the problem of China’s increasing relevance to the region as a security partner. In the context of evolving U.S.-China global competition, China’s influence primarily flows from its status as a top trade and investment partner for many states, while the United States retains important strategic advantages as a military ally and security assistance provider.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Beijing’s development of stronger “strategic partnerships”—which include military, intelligence, and law enforcement components such as dialogues, exercises, arms sales, information-sharing agreements, and counterterrorism cooperation—could weaken U.S. advantages in the security realm. China’s growing attractiveness as a security partner—though bounded by factors such as Beijing’s preference not to take sides in regional disputes and the desire by states to balance their relations between China and the United States—could have several ramifications for U.S. interests, such as a smaller market for U.S. defense firms, an uptick in authoritarianism that could result from Chinese assistance in helping states combat internal dissent, and diminished access for U.S. military forces during peacetime and in a conflict.

China’s ability to compete with the United States in the security arena will vary on a country-to-country basis. Analyzing the problem in greater detail would require a net assessment of the U.S. and Chinese military presence and security assistance activities in select countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This would, by necessity, be a “team effort” since the Red Sea spans two combatant commands (U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Central Command) and two State Department regional bureaus (African and Near Eastern affairs). Such an assessment would inform decisions on where, if at all, Washington needs to increase its level of security coop-

eration to offset China’s gains. In some cases, it may be that continuing U.S. advantages are so strong that little needs to be done. In other cases where adjustments are required, U.S. planners should think through not only the provision of material assistance such as foreign military sales but also other initiatives that demonstrate U.S. commitments, such as more frequent high-level visits or more places reserved for officers in U.S. professional military education courses.

Despite these challenges, the potential value of Sino-U.S. military cooperation in the region should not be completely discounted. As a 2017 chapter co-authored by Randall Schriver, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, points out, there are generally more opportunities for cooperation with the PLA outside than within Asia.⁸⁹ Unlike the Indo-Pacific, China is not seeking to eliminate U.S. alliances in the Red Sea, has no territorial or resource disputes that put it at odds with U.S. allies, and is focusing on MOOTW rather than warfighting or deterrence missions. Beijing and Washington also have a series of common interests in the region, including combating nontraditional security threats and avoiding a broad escalation of tensions that could threaten global oil supplies and put commercial traffic in the Red Sea at risk. PLA contributions to regional security, albeit limited, should be encouraged and avenues of productive cooperation identified.

While interactions that expose the PLA to sensitive U.S. capabilities and operations should be avoided, some types of cooperation might be feasible. For instance, the two sides might contemplate a regional exchange focused on MOOTW. A model would be the annual U.S.-China disaster management exchange led by U.S. Army Pacific, which typically consists of a tabletop exercise and a small-scale field exchange.⁹⁰ A Red Sea version would consider how both militaries would coordinate and deconflict activities in a future conflict, such as exploring how the two sides could organize a noncombatant evacuation of U.S., Chinese, and third-country civilians. Another option would be a dialogue between China’s ETF and U.S.

Fifth Fleet, which would not only give U.S. observers a chance to gain better insight into Chinese operations but also serve as a platform for reaffirming U.S. commitment to freedom of navigation and other norms, augmenting messages delivered to the PLA in other venues.⁹¹ Yet another possibility is a dialogue in which U.S. and Chinese defense academics would share perspectives on Red Sea conflicts and float proposals for cooperation. Each of these options would involve few costs and risks and could result in mutually beneficial outcomes.

PLA activities in the Red Sea are unique for now: in no other region outside its immediate neighborhood does China maintain anything more than a token military presence. While China's military capabilities will continue to be focused on the Indo-Pacific, the experience it gains in the Red Sea region will be useful as China considers increasing its presence elsewhere. This study suggests that such an expansion would involve certain tradeoffs. On one hand, PLA contributions to MOOTW may bolster regional stability and relieve the burden on others, including the United States. However, the downsides include opportunities to improve PLA combat readiness, the ability to use deployed forces to monitor or create nuisances for U.S. operations, and a possible reduction in the value regional states place on their security partnerships with Washington. The ways that the U.S. Defense Department manages these tradeoffs in the Red Sea, including mitigating risks and exploring cooperation, could set the tone for U.S.-China military interactions in other theaters.

Notes

¹ For discussions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a nascent expeditionary force, see Timothy R. Heath, *Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities*, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 21, 2016; Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities," *Asia Policy* 22 (July 2016), 131–156.

² See, for example, Zach Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf States Are Playing a Dangerous Game in the Horn of Africa," *Foreign Affairs*, January 15, 2019, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2019-01-15/red-sea-rivalries>; Payton Knopf, "Why the U.S. Needs a Special Envoy for the Red Sea," United States Institute of Peace (USIP), October 23, 2018, available at <www.usip.org/publications/2018/10/why-us-needs-special-envoy-red-sea>.

³ *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 1, 2019), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

⁴ "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait Is a Strategic Route for Oil and Natural Gas Shipments," U.S. Energy Information Administration, August 27, 2019, available at <www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>.

⁵ "The UAE Is Scrambling to Control Ports in Africa," *The Economist*, July 19, 2018, available at <www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/19/the-uae-is-scrambling-to-control-ports-in-africa>.

⁶ Landry Signé, *Africa's Consumer Market Potential: Trends, Drivers, Opportunities, and Strategies*, with Chelsea Johnson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, December 2018).

⁷ *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact*, Report No. 206 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019); *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018).

⁸ Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Houthi Naval Attacks in the Red Sea," *Long War Journal*, August 17, 2019, available at <www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/08/analysis-houthi-naval-attacks-in-the-red-sea.php>.

⁹ Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia Seeks New Political Bloc in Strategic Red Sea Region," Reuters, December 12, 2018, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-diplomacy/saudi-arabia-seeks-new-political-bloc-in-strategic-red-sea-region-idUSKBN1OB1Z9>.

¹⁰ Paul Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

¹¹ See, for example, David Shinn, "In Red Sea Region, Competing Outside Powers Complicate U.S. Interests," *USIP Analysis and Commentary*, December 19, 2018, available at <www.usip.org/publications/2018/12/red-sea-region-competing-outside-powers-complicate-us-interests>; Pamela Faber, "Great Power Competition in the Red Sea? Yes, and . . .," *CNA In-Depth*, July 8, 2019, available at <www.cna.org/news/InDepth/article?ID=3>.

¹² As of August 2019, China had a total of 2,152 deployed United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, including a small number of armed police. The other UN peacekeeping operations involving significant PLA presence include Lebanon with 410 peacekeepers, Congo with 218, and Mali with 413.

¹³ The Central Theater Command (TC) is responsible for Chinese participation in both the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur. Other TCs have responsibility for the other UN peacekeeping operations where China has a major presence (in Congo, Lebanon, and Mali). For a discussion of the scale and characteristics of the PLA's UN peacekeeping participation, see Dennis J. Blasko, "China's Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations: Understanding the Numbers," *China Brief* 16, no. 18 (December 5 2016), available at <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-contribution-peacekeeping-operation-understanding-numbers/>.

¹⁴ "China Sends 100 Peacekeepers to Sudan," *China Military Online*, December 11, 2018, available at <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-12/11/content_9375529.htm>.

¹⁵ "China's 3rd Peacekeeping Helicopter Detachment to Darfur Sets Out," *China Military Online*, August 21, 2019, available at <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-08/21/content_9597189.htm>.

¹⁶ "First Echelon of China's 10th Peacekeeping Force to S. Sudan (Wau) Sets Off," *China Military Online*, September 18, 2019, available

at <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-09/18/content_9627913.htm>.

¹⁷ “5th Peacekeeping Infantry Battalion to S. Sudan (Juba) Established,” *China Military Online*, November 8, 2018, available at <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-11/08/content_9338169.htm>.

¹⁸ Zhuang Pinghui, “Two Chinese UN Peacekeepers Killed, Two Seriously Injured in Attack in South Sudan,” *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2016, available at <www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1988348/two-chinese-un-peacekeepers-killed-two-seriously>.

¹⁹ “China Sends New Naval Fleet for Escort Mission,” Xinhua, August 29, 2019, available at <www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/29/c_138348595.htm>.

²⁰ According to the International Chamber of Commerce International Marine Bureau (ICC-IMB), actual or attempted piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden included four in 2014, zero in 2015, one in 2016, and one in 2018. See *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Report for the Period of 1 January–30 June, 2018* (London: ICC-MB, 2018), 6, available at <www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2018-Q2-IMB-Piracy-Report.pdf>. By contrast, attacks between 2007 and 2008 numbered about 100 annually. Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2015), 18–19.

²¹ Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting*, 99.

²² Ibid., 164–167.

²³ For details on other foreign presence in Djibouti and the surrounding area, see Zach Vertin, “Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea,” *Brookings*, January 2019, available at <www.brookings.edu/interactives/red-sea-rivalries/>; and Neil Melvin, *The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2019).

²⁴ Melvin, *The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region*, 4.

²⁵ This includes providing medical support for Chinese personnel in the region. See *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2019), 15.

²⁶ *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), 111.

²⁷ Ibid. See also “PLA Base in Djibouti Conducts Anti-Terrorism Exercise,” *People's Daily Online*, May 15, 2018, available at <<http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0515/c90000-9460275.html>>.

²⁸ According to one analysis, the pier will be able to accommodate all PLA Navy ships other than an aircraft carrier and Type 071 amphibious transport dock. See Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGateno, *China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base* (Arlington, VA: CNA, July 2017), 26.

²⁹ The countries surveyed include Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen. For a 2003–2016 version of the database, see Kenneth Allen, Philip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2017), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1249864/chinese-military-diplomacy-20032016-trends-and-implications/>>.

³⁰ “Chinese Naval Fleet Visits Saudi Arabia,” *China Military Online*, January 10, 2017, available at <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-01/10/content_7446160.htm>.

³¹ *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 26.

³² Details on foreign officers at China's National Defense University are limited, but an interlocutor explained that students come from “virtually all” countries with which China maintains diplomatic relations. Courses are offered in various languages, including English, French, and Arabic. For a general picture of China's training of foreign officers, see John S. Van Oudenaren and Benjamin E. Fisher, “Foreign Military Education as PLA Soft Power,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 105–118.

³³ *China Military Power*, 107. For additional details, see Greg Waldron, “China Finds Its UAV Export Sweet Spot,” *Flight Global*, June 14, 2019, available at <www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/china-finds-its-uav-export-sweet-spot-457947/>.

³⁴ The source is the UN Comtrade Database, available at <<https://comtrade.un.org/>>. Other suppliers include South Sudan (\$1.3 billion), Egypt (\$888.2 million), and Sudan (\$293 million).

³⁵ Ibid. *Comprehensive strategic partner* (全面战略伙伴) is a label China uses to denote its priority diplomatic relationships.

³⁶ American Enterprise Institute, China Global Investment Tracker, available at <www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ For instance, in July 2019, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council supporting China's position on Xinjiang. See Tom Miles, “Saudi Arabia and Russia Among 37 States Backing China's Xinjiang Policy,” Reuters, July 12, 2019, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-rights/saudi-arabia-and-russia-among-37-states-backing-chinas-xinjiang-policy-idUSKCN1U721X>.

³⁹ See, for example, Nicholas Bariyo, “China Deploys Troops in South Sudan to Defend Oil Fields, Workers,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2014, available at <www.wsj.com/articles/china-deploys-troops-in-south-sudan-to-defend-oil-fields-workers-1410275041>.

⁴⁰ Okech Francis, “China Gets a Sixth of South Sudan Oil Output to Build Highways,” *Bloomberg*, April 5, 2019, available at <www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-05/china-gets-a-sixth-of-south-sudan-oil-output-to-build-highways>.

⁴¹ Colum Lynch, “U.N. Peacekeepers to Protect China's Oil Interests in South Sudan,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2014, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/16/u-n-peacekeepers-to-protect-chinas-oil-interests-in-south-sudan>>.

⁴² Ibid. For further analysis, see *China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Report No. 288 (New York: International Crisis Group, 2017).

⁴³ Effectiveness in shaping public perceptions in these countries is unclear due to lack of survey data. However, fieldwork in a different case (Cambodia) demonstrated that local residents often have a highly favorable view of China following interactions with PLA peacekeepers. See Miwa Hirono, “China's Charm Offensive and Peacekeeping: The Lessons of Cambodia—What Now for Sudan?” *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 3 (2011), 328–343.

⁴⁴ Peter W. Mackenzie, *Red Crosses, Blue Water: Hospital Ships and China's Expanding Naval Presence* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2011), 15–16.

⁴⁵ *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 15.

⁴⁶ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, “China's Blue Soft Power,” *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 1 (2015), 1–21.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of top Chinese leader travel patterns, see Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, “Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012), 163–177.

⁴⁸ One analysis based on 2006 data found that a 100 percent disruption of the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb straits would impact

4.5 and 3.3 million barrels per day, where a 100 percent disruption to the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca would impact 17 and 15 million barrels per day. See William Komiss and LaVar Huntzinger, *The Economic Implications of Disruptions to Maritime Oil Chokepoints* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2011), 26.

⁴⁹ See UN Comtrade Database, available at <<https://comtrade.un.org/>>. While China has opened several freight rail links to Europe, the total value of goods transported over rail in 2016 was only \$22.9 billion. That value is expected to rise to \$76.5 billion by 2020, still a fraction of China's overall trade with the European Union. See Jakub Kakobowski, Konrad Poplawski, and Marcin Kaczmarek, *The Silk Railroad: The EU-China Rail Connections: Background, Actors, Interests* (Warsaw: Center for Eastern Studies, 2018), 5.

⁵⁰ Maritime insurance rates have risen by more than 10 times in conflict-prone areas of the Middle East. See "Marine Insurance Premiums Soar for Middle East Transit," *Insurance Marine News*, June 19, 2019, available at <<https://insurancemarineneews.com/insurance-marine-news/marine-insurance-premiums-soar-for-middle-east-transit/>>. Using the Cape of Good Hope route would add approximately 43 days transit time. See World Shipping Council, "The Suez Canal—A Vital Shortcut for Global Commerce," available at <www.worldshipping.org/pdf/Suez-Canal-Presentation.pdf>.

⁵¹ For an overview, see Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint, "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017), 223–245.

⁵² Kieron Monks, "Piracy Threat Returns to African Waters," CNN, January 3, 2018, available at <www.cnn.com/2017/05/25/africa/piracy-resurgence-somalia/index.html>.

⁵³ Downs, Becker, and deGategno, *China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti*, 30. See also "Chinese Navy Imprints Its Escort Efforts on Embankment of Djibouti," *China Military Online*, March 18, 2019, available at <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-03/18/content_9452242.htm>. China's 2019 defense white paper noted that the base had "provided equipment for the maintenance of four escort task groups" and had "offered medical services for over 100 officers on board." *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 15.

⁵⁴ Liang Fang, *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2011).

⁵⁵ For instance, the 2013 *Science of Strategy* identified the need to expand China's "strategic zone" to cover the western Pacific and northern Indian oceans. See Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Research Department, *Science of Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science, 2013), 13. See also Conor Kennedy, "Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy," *China Brief* 19, no. 6 (March 22, 2019), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-strong-points-and-chinese-naval-strategy/>>.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Wang Hongguang, "Seeing China's Strategic Directions Today from History" [从历史看今日中国的战略方向], *People's Daily Online* [人民网], March 12, 2015, available at <<http://history.people.com.cn/n/2015/0312/c372326-26681791-2.html>>.

⁵⁷ As Christopher Yung and Ross Rustici argue, such a "string of pearls" would not be sufficient for China to "dominate" the Indian Ocean. However, such a structure could enable more frequent PLA Navy patrols in sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean. Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, "Not an Idea We Have to Shun": *Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century*, with Scott Devary and Jenny Lin, China Strategic Perspectives 7 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2014), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>>.

⁵⁸ John Vandiver, "AFRICOM Chief: Expect More Chinese Bases in Africa," *Stars and Stripes*, March 6, 2018, available at <www.stripes.com/news/africom-chief-expect-more-chinese-bases-in-africa-1.515263>.

⁵⁹ Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting*, 98–102.

⁶⁰ According to a U.S. assessment, submarine participation in escort task forces (ETFs) "were probably also conducting area familiarization, and demonstrating an emerging capability both to protect China's sea lines of communication and to increase China's power projection into the Indian Ocean." *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2016), 22.

⁶¹ *Science of Military Strategy*, 161. For a discussion on how the concept *military operations other than war* is defined in different parts of the PLA, see Fan Gaoyue and James Char, *Introduction to China's Military Operations Other Than War* (Singapore: RSIS, 2019), 4–6.

⁶² For an excellent discussion of the "new historic missions," see Daniel M. Hartnett, "The 'New Historic Missions': Reflections on Hu Jintao's Military Legacy," in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner, *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), 81–128.

⁶³ Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2014), 48–51.

⁶⁴ *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2015), available at <http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white-paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm>.

⁶⁵ The most controversial case occurred in July 2016 when Chinese peacekeepers under fire apparently abandoned their posts. A UN report blamed a faulty command structure and "lack of leadership on the ground" for the incident. See "Letter Dated 1 November 2016 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council," US Security Council, November 1, 2016.

⁶⁶ Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting*, 196–197.

⁶⁷ Incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea have been much higher than in the Gulf of Aden in recent years. While China does not have a standing ETF, it has participated in regional exercises. See "Nigeria, China, France, Portugal Navies Combat Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea," *China Military Online*, June 4, 2018, available at <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/04/content_8051363.htm>.

⁶⁸ James T. Areddy, "China Evacuates Citizens from Yemen," *Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2015, available at <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-evacuating-citizens-from-yemen-1427689845>>.

⁶⁹ For an excellent analysis, see Eric Kiss, "The Three Enablers: Managing and Assuring Access for People's Liberation Army Bases and Overseas Operations," paper presented at the NBR–Army War College–U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Conference on the People's Liberation Army, October 19–21, 2018.

⁷⁰ See UN Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," available at <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>. Data are from May 2019. Larger troop contributors in the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur include Egypt, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Tanzania. In the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, larger troop contributors are Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nepal, and Rwanda.

⁷¹ Details on CTF-151 are available at <<https://combined-maritimeforces.com/ctf-151-counter-piracy/>>. Details on Operation *Atalanta* are available at <<https://eunavfor.eu/>>.

⁷² Details on U.S. force structure are available at <www.cusnc.navy.mil/Task-Forces/>.

⁷³ Discussions with PLA interlocutors, 2018–2019.

⁷⁴ Some media reports have claimed that China's base has facilities for up to 10,000 PLA personnel, implying a future major expansion of PLA presence in the region. See, for example, Laura Zhou, "China Sends Troops to Military Base in Djibouti, Widening Reach Across Indian Ocean," *South China Morning Post*, July 13,

2017, available at <www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2102422/china-sends-troops-military-base-djibouti-widening>.

⁷⁵ Phillip C. Saunders, testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 20, 2019.

⁷⁶ "Attack in Somalia Kills U.S. Service Member, Wounds Others," *Defense.gov*, June 8, 2018.

⁷⁷ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *China's Evolving Role as a UN Peacekeeper in Mali*, USIP Special Report 432 (Washington, DC: USIP, September 2018), 4, available at <www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/chinas-evolving-role-un-peacekeeper-mali>.

⁷⁸ Ilan Goldenberg and Ely Ratner, "China's Middle East Tightrope," *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2015, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/20/china-middle-east-saudi-arabia-iran-oil-nuclear-deal/>>; Joel Wuthnow, *Posing Problems Without an Alliance: China-Iran Relations after the Nuclear Deal*, China Center Strategic Forum 290 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2016), available at <<https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/654743/posing-problems-without-an-alliance-china-iran-relations-after-the-nuclear-deal/>>.

⁷⁹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "New U.S. Aid to Saudi Arabia Will Include 200 Troops," *New York Times*, September 26, 2019, available at <www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/world/middleeast/troops-defense-saudi-pentagon.html>.

⁸⁰ "Saudi-Led Coalition Drone Downed in Yemen," *Medium*, May 22, 2019, available at <<https://medium.com/dfrlab/saudi-led-coalition-drone-downed-in-yemen-7d465edc37b2>>.

⁸¹ Gordon Lubold and Jeremy Page, "Laser from Chinese Base Aimed at U.S. Military Pilots in Africa's Skies, Pentagon Charges," *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2018, available at <www.wsj.com/articles/laser-from-chinese-base-aimed-at-u-s-military-pilots-in-africas-skies-pentagon-charges-1525351775>.

⁸² Geoff Hill, "Chinese Military Taking 'Irresponsible Actions' Toward U.S. Forces in Djibouti, Intel Chief Says," *Washington Times*, June 16, 2019, available at <www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/jun/16/china-us-military-clash-over-djibouti-airspace/>.

⁸³ Lasing incidents were not confined to Djibouti. In 2017–2018, at least 20 incidents were also reported in the Pacific. See Euan McKirdy, "Suspected Chinese Lasers Target U.S. Aircraft Over the Pacific, U.S. Military Source Says," *CNN*, June 22, 2018, available at <www.cnn.com/2018/06/22/politics/pacific-ocean-us-military-jets-lasers-intl/index.html>.

⁸⁴ Protocols on U.S.-China maritime encounters were signed in November 2014, while an air-to-air annex was signed in September 2015. These agreements are available at <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/141112_MemorandumOfUnderstandingRegardingRules.pdf>

and <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/US-CHINA_AIR_ENCOUNTERS_ANNEX_SEP_2015.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Discussion with PLA interlocutor, 2019.

⁸⁶ The 2000 National Defense Authorization Act restricts cooperation in 12 areas, including force projection operations. Available at <<https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/106-65.pdf>>.

⁸⁷ Phil Stewart, "U.S. Wants Military Coalition to Safeguard Waters off Iran, Yemen," *Reuters*, July 9, 2019, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-usa-coalition/us-wants-military-coalition-to-safeguard-waters-off-iran-yemen-idUSKCN1U42KP>.

⁸⁸ In the context of the Indo-Pacific regional order, see G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia," *Political Science Quarterly* 20, no. 20 (2015), 1–35.

⁸⁹ David M. Finkelstein, Phillip C. Saunders, and Randall G. Schriver, *Joint U.S.-China Think Tank Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations: An American Perspective* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2017), 28.

⁹⁰ "U.S. Army Participates in 14th Annual Disaster Management Exchange in Nanjing, China," *Army.mil*, November 13, 2018, available at <www.army.mil/article/213729/us_army_participates_in_14th_annual_disaster_management_exchange_in_nanjing_china>.

⁹¹ Occasional discussions between China's ETF commander and the CTF-151 commander, who is typically from a U.S. ally/partner country, have taken place. See, for example, "A New Era of Partnership between CTF-151 and China's ETG-150," *Combined Maritime Forces*, July 13, 2014, available at <<https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2014/07/31/a-new-era-of-partnership-between-ctf-151-and-chinas-etg-150/>>.

For helpful comments on previous drafts, the author thanks Gawdat Bhagat and Phillip C. Saunders. This publication also benefited greatly from the author's participation in a U.S. Institute of Peace Senior Study Group on China and the Red Sea. A report based on that group's work is forthcoming in 2020.

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs (CSCMA) within the Institute for National Strategic Studies serves as a national focal point and resource center for multidisciplinary research and analytic exchanges on the national goals and strategic posture of the People's Republic of China. The center focuses on China's ability to develop, eld, and deploy an effective military instrument in support of its national strategic objectives.



The Strategic Forum series presents original research by members of NDU as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from the United States and abroad. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Defense Department or any other agency of the Federal Government. Visit NDU Press online at ndupress.ndu.edu.

Phillip C. Saunders
Director
CSCMA

Laura J. Junor
Director for Research
and Strategic Support

William T. Eliason
Director
NDU Press

Other China titles from **NDU Press**

For online access to NDU Press
publications, go to: ndupress.ndu.edu

China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform

by Joel Wuthnow

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 14, April 2019)

Chinese Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era

by John Costello and Joe McReynolds

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 13, October 2018)

Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications

by Joel Wuthnow

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 12, September 2017)

Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications

by Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 11, July 2017)

Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implication

by Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 10, March 2017)

China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy

by Christopher H. Sharman

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 9, March 2015)

Red China's "Capitalist Bomb": Inside the Chinese Neutron Bomb Program

by Jonathan Ray

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 8, January 2015)

"Not an Idea We Need to Shun": Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century

by Christopher Yung and Ross Rustici, with Scott Devary and Jenny Lin

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 7, October 2014)

China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation

by Paul H.B. Godwin and Alice Miller

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 6, April 2013)

Managing Sino-U.S. Air and Naval Interactions: Cold War Lessons and New Avenues of Approach

by Mark E. Redden and Phillip C. Saunders

(CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 5, September 2012)