

Issue

Brief

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The Global Security Initiative: China Buttresses its Defence Diplomacy

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Abstract

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has historically been a key instrument of state power in modern China, from the time founder Mao Zedong famously said that power flows "from the barrel of a gun." Today, in the era of Xi Jinping, China is strengthening its defence diplomacy through Xi's so-called Global Security Initiative (GSI) that envisions a growing role for the Party-state's arms like the PLA and the Ministry of Public Security. The initiative is driven by both China's aspirations to become the "defender of the Asia-Pacific order", and its perception that the United States is doubling down on efforts with its allies to encircle China. This brief explains the most crucial aims of China's defence diplomacy, and in particular, greater security cooperation through the GSI.

Drivers of China's Defence Diplomacy

Defence diplomacy' is the pursuit of external military relationships through sustained exchange of army personnel, negotiations, arms control talks, cooperation in military intelligence and military technology, global peace-keeping duties, and activities related to military alliances.¹ For China, the aim of defence diplomacy is to bolster the overall national foreign policy, influence the global security environment, and enable the modernisation of the armed forces.² Analysts have also observed that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) deploys military diplomacy to obtain intelligence, improve combat skills, and compare its capabilities vis-à-vis other militaries.³

The following paragraphs discuss the drivers of China's defence diplomacy.

Political discourse and external outlook

China's external outlook was for long restrained by former leader Deng Xiaoping's guiding principle, "*tāo guāng yǎng huì* (to hide one's strengths, and bide one's time)". In 2003, the Communist Party of China (CPC) proposed the notion of China's 'peaceful rise (*héping juéqǐ*)',⁴ and in Hu Jintao's presidency, the slogans of 'harmonious world (*héxié shìjiè*)' and 'peaceful development (*héping fāzhǎn*)' took precedence.⁵ Since Xi Jinping became president in 2013, China appears to have abandoned Deng's dictum. In the past decade, as China has grown to become the world's second largest economy, Xi has been working to strengthen his country's military capability, declaring China's twin goals of "rich nation and strong army."⁶

Changing nature of China's external engagement and PLA reforms

In October 2014, the CPC organised a conclave on the theme of "diplomacy towards the periphery", which resolved to grow China's influence in the country's peripheral regions.⁷ The gathering also pledged to capitalise on the "strategic opportunity" to realise the rise of China. In the same conclave, the CPC hierarchy declared their ambition for "China to be a defender of the Asia-Pacific order" by 2050.⁸ In 2015, a White Paper on Defence urged the PLA to expand military and security cooperation with the armed forces of other nations to create a security environment favourable to China's peaceful development.⁹

Drivers of China's Defence Diplomacy

In 2023, Xi completed a decade at the helm of the Central Military Commission (CMC) that oversees the CPC's vast military. According to Chinese experts, Xi's reforms, in which the land-based army is being pruned in favour of improving aerial, naval and strategic service branches, constitute the largest overhaul of the PLA since the 1990s.¹⁰ In China's mind, attaining dominance in the air, space, and cyber domains will allow it to project power and protect its interests overseas.

Other factors

Xi has also stated that the Party has the right to use force to bring Taiwan back to the fold and complete the "reunification" of China; it is therefore important for the PLA to become a superior fighting force.¹¹ In parallel, China seeks to delegitimise the United States (US) by portraying its military alliances in Asia as a danger to stability, reinforced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi's exhortation to US allies such as South Korea to develop a sense of autonomy.¹²

The PLA's Role in China's Global Strategy

In 2015, at the All-Army Foreign Affairs Work Conference and the Military Attachés Work Conference, Xi underscored the priorities for the PLA to fully implement the CPC's key diplomatic policies.¹³ He added that military diplomacy has taken on a heightened role in the country's overall national diplomacy and security strategy.

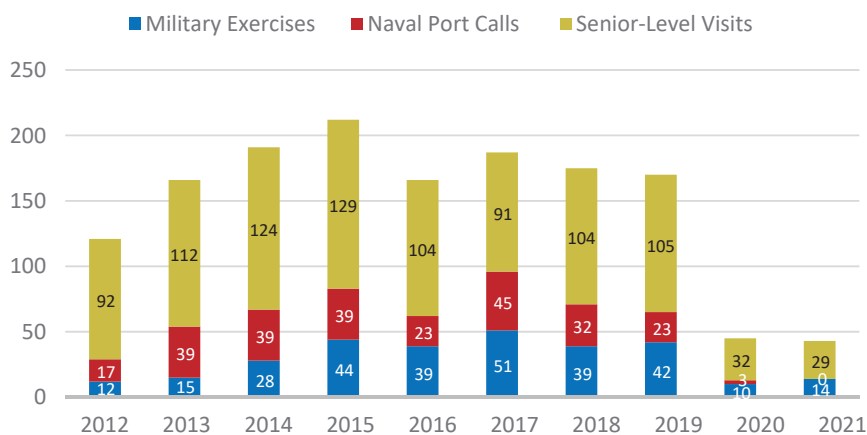
A turning point came in 2020 as the PLA re-evaluated its role. The fifth plenum of the CPC's 19th Central Committee assessed that there were "changes not seen in a century"—alluding to America's decline in the world order—and that it needed to use this opportunity to become a great power.¹⁴ During the plenum, the Party announced that defence modernisation would be among the country's most important tools to fulfil its goals of "rich nation and strong army". The Party surmised that such modernisation would boost the PLA's ability to help fulfill the country's development goals, defend its sovereignty, and promote national security.¹⁵ According to Junfei Wu of the Hong Kong-based think tank Tianda Institute, it was perhaps the first time that the PLA had been considered with respect to the CPC's development goals.¹⁶ Song Zhongping, a Chinese analyst tracking the military, posited that the objective of the defence modernisation was to place the Chinese military on a par with the US army by 2027, which marks the PLA's centenary.¹⁷

In 2022, as head of the CMC, Xi signed a directive on the PLA's tasks other than war, in which he emphasised that the military should safeguard the country's national sovereignty, security, and developmental interests.¹⁸ The PLA, therefore, occupies an elevated position in the CPC's global grand strategy. Unlike other nations where the national armies serve the state, the PLA owes its allegiance to the CPC.

Under Xi, China's defence engagements have increased when compared across the metrics of military exercises, interactions of the military brass, and naval port calls.¹⁹ In 2012 and 2013, there were, respectively, 12 and 15 military exercises with other states.²⁰ The number steadily climbed over the following years, dropping during the COVID-19 pandemic due to restrictions on movement globally.²¹

The PLA's Role in China's Global Strategy

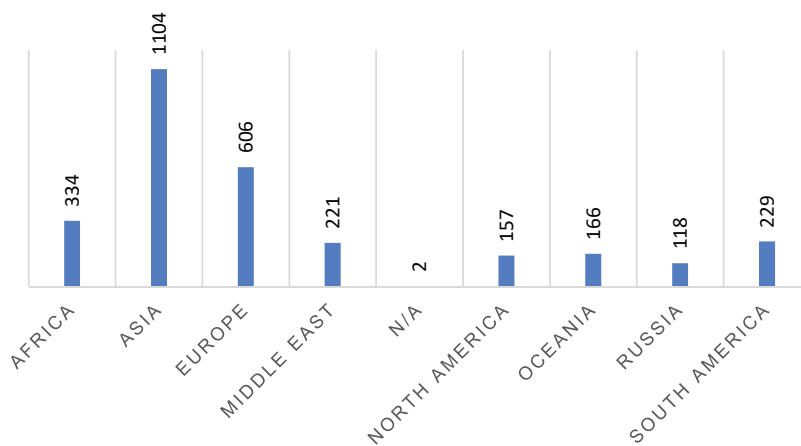
Fig. 1: PLA's Military Interactions



Source: National Defence University²²

Engagements of senior military officers abroad increased from 92 in 2012 to 129 in 2015;²³ and Navy port calls rose from 17 (2012) to 45 in 2017, the same year that China announced its first overseas naval base in Djibouti in East Africa.²⁴

Fig. 2: PLA Military Diplomacy, by Region (2002-2021)

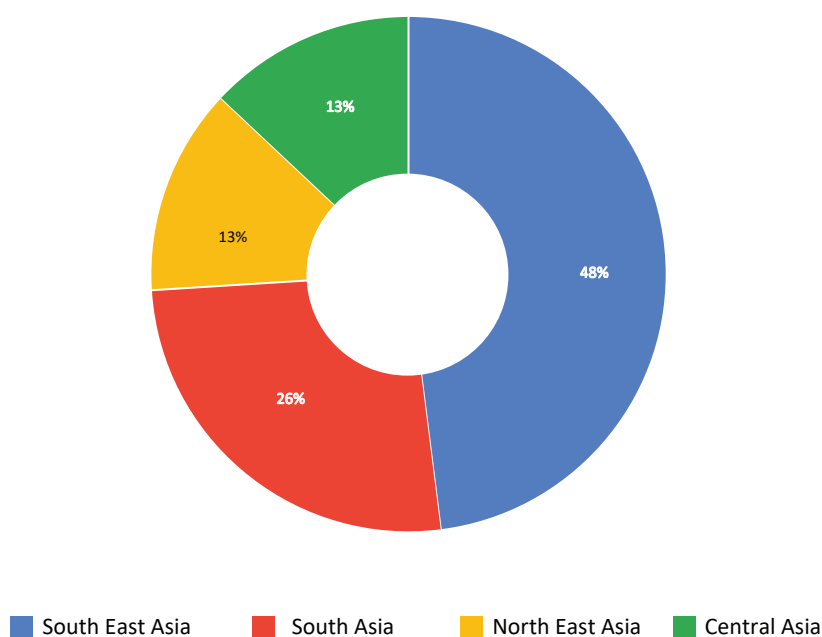


Source: National Defence University²⁵

Considering China's aspiration to be "a defender of the Asia-Pacific order"²⁶ by 2050, Asia is an important priority for its defence diplomacy engagements that reached over 1,000 between 2002 and 2021. This is followed by Europe and Africa, at 606 and 334, respectively, over the same period.

PLA's Military Interactions in Asia

Fig. 3. PLA Interactions in Asia



Source: National Defence University²⁷

Of the 1,104 defence-diplomacy engagements within the continent between 2002 and 2021, China had more with countries in South-East Asia (48 percent of the total number) and South Asia (26 percent) as compared to Central Asia (13 percent) and North-East Asia (13 percent). These numbers are underpinned by geopolitical and economic factors.

In South Asia, for example, Pakistan accounts for a bulk of the PLA's interactions, mainly due to the India-Pakistan and India-China contestations. Chinese scholars describe the rivalry between India and China as "complex", given how both perceive themselves to be rising powers.²⁸ China finds utility

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in Pakistan in its effort to balance India, with the PLA leveraging the combat experience of the Pakistani Army that has fought against the Indian Army in a number of direct conflicts.^a

The Indian Ocean and South China Sea are key corridors for China's energy requirements from West Asia, and China's trade with Africa that accounts for the strategic salience of South and Southeast Asia for the PLA. In addition to hard power, the Chinese state also seeks to leverage relationships through soft power in the form of humanitarian and relief missions through PLA's medical vessels such as 'Peace Ark'. The ship, equipped with advanced medical facilities and having medical professionals among its crew, can tend to nearly 1,000 patients at a time.²⁹ During the last 16 years, the vessel has visited 43 regions and nations, providing medical treatment to some 250,000 people.³⁰ Both constant defence engagements and benign soft-power initiatives aid in the PLA's understanding of the security situation in those regions.³¹

“China aims to push its military power on a par with that of the US army by 2027, which marks the PLA's centenary.”

a India and Pakistan have had wars against each other in 1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999.

China's Perceptions of Warfare and Neighbourhood Threats

For the PLA, China faces difficult challenges due to the campaign of containment by the US and its allies.³² It is of the view that warfare in modern times is dependent on a state's overall national strength, not just on military capability. China should thus build the PLA's capabilities through continuous military engagement and exercises with other armies, international tours of duty involving peacekeeping missions, and through induction of advanced technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI).

According to the reading of some Chinese scholars, the aim of American policy towards China has been to suppress it; in the recent years under Biden, the US has worked to attract allies and form blocs in this regard.³³ This includes, according to the PLA, mediating a rapprochement between South Korea and Japan after a hiatus of more than a decade.³⁴ Chinese analysts view a threat in such a resumption of friendly relations, and is gearing up the PLA to be vigilant amid regular military drills between the US, Japan, and South Korea.³⁵ The same analysts anticipate that military cooperation in Asia between these three countries could serve as a foundation for the 'Five-Eyes' intelligence-sharing arrangement between the US, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. The perception is that the US will cement a NATO-like trilateral military bloc and intelligence-pooling arrangement in Asia, and that a "perilous" nuclear arms race in China's backyard could emerge; Chinese observers point to a recent agreement whereby the US can deploy US nuclear-armed submarines in South Korean waters.³⁶

Thus, China sees that amid its contest with the US, the latter is invigorating its historical alliances. In contrast, as China watchers argue, China is a "partial power"³⁷ since its security presence overseas has not evolved in the same manner as traditional great powers on the metrics of formalising alliances, stationing troops abroad, projecting power globally, or fighting in conflicts either on its own or through proxy actors.³⁸ China has no allies, but its most proximate relationships are with nations like Russia, North Korea and Pakistan that are regarded as "rogue states" with great amount of deficit in trust from the international community.³⁹ Russia, for instance, is a neighbour with which China has to deal with, but not a partner that it can rely on.⁴⁰ Despite Xi signing a no-limits partnership with Russia, analysts say, China must distance itself from Putin in the aftermath of the Ukraine aggression.⁴¹

Defence Engagement as Bedrock of China's Global Security Initiative

Chinese strategists argue that in the current scenario there must be an effort to redress the security deficit. China has made a case that influence between ‘East and West’, ‘South and North’ are evolving in a balanced direction, amid a global shift in the balance of power as the West declines and the East rises.⁴² There is a “bloc mindset” as far as China is concerned, reinforced by a “new Cold War” with states asserting supremacy through belligerent action. With China’s assessment that American supremacy is in decline and its rise is inevitable, it is moving in to fill the security deficit.

Soon after the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out, Xi announced the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022, referencing the concept of “indivisible security”—i.e., that the security of one nation cannot come at the expense of another’s; he warned that there were efforts to build “small circles” (read: power blocs) or provoke conflict along ideological lines.⁴³ A year later, China announced plans to train 5,000 security personnel from developing countries over the next five years.⁴⁴

Beijing plans to create more international platforms for exchange and cooperation to address security challenges in areas such as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, biosecurity, and emerging technologies, with a view to improving governance capacity in non-traditional security. China has announced more exchanges and cooperation among university-level military and law-enforcement academies. China’s efforts to boost multilateral and bilateral security training programmes have expanded in recent years, spreading to countries in the Pacific Islands and Central Asia. Through such capacity-building programmes, China looks to build links with the security and military elites in other nations.

Linking Security and Economic Cooperation

While defence diplomacy is being consolidated through institutionalised mechanisms like the GSI, there is also a greater resonance of the national security in China's domestic discourse. Xi has emphasised averting risks to China's modernisation and incorporating the security element in every domain as some of the requirements of his conceptualisation of national security.⁴⁵ Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which Xue Li from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences then stated was a route for China to transform itself from a regional power with global influence to a global power possessing comprehensive strength.⁴⁶ Wang Yiwei from China's Renmin University compared BRI to the US's post-Second World War Marshall Plan,^b stating that it was an opportunity for China to use its economic growth for the greater good of the global community as opposed to Western-style globalisation that was unsustainable.⁴⁷

As Chinese human capital and corporate entities began to operate in foreign lands, Guo Xiaobing from China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations posited that it was imperative for China to improve its capability to protect its nationals residing overseas since it had a bearing on China's economic security.⁴⁸ This must also be seen in context with Xi's 2022 directive, discussed earlier in this brief, that the security establishment should protect China's development interests.⁴⁹ Indeed, there have been reported attacks on Chinese nationals in recent times. In April 2022, three Chinese educators attached to Karachi's Confucius Center, a Chinese-language training institute, were killed in a suicide bombing for which a group from Pakistan's Balochistan province claimed responsibility.⁵⁰ Local groups are said to be behind several attacks on Chinese nationals working in Balochistan, where the Gwadar port and other large-scale infrastructure projects backed by China under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are located. Earlier, in November 2021, the Solomon Islands witnessed disturbances in a locality predominantly populated by Chinese nationals, following allegations that then Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare was influencing legislative voting using Chinese funds.⁵¹

These incidents show that China cannot avoid getting entangled in local political currents as it expands to new territories, and its interests may collide with those of other actors. This also means that China cannot rely solely on the assurances of foreign governments to secure its economic interests. Thus, during the BRI Security Cooperation Dialogue in 2017, Guo Shengkun, then Minister

^b After World War II, President Harry Truman promulgated the Economic Recovery Act in 1948 to provide assistance to rebuild economic infrastructure in conflict-ravaged Europe.

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for Public Security floated the idea that countries which have signed up for the BRI should set up common security and cooperative security mechanisms for the projects.⁵² The Ministry of Public Security has been tasked with creating a law-enforcement cooperation mechanism “bearing Chinese characteristics”.⁵³

In Solomon Islands, China has announced that its Export–Import Bank is providing US\$66 million for building communication infrastructure, with the project being executed by Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei. Port Honiara in the archipelago is being developed by the China Civil Engineering Construction Company, a state-owned enterprise.⁵⁴ The two sides also signed a security cooperation agreement in July 2023, under which they pledged to institute and improve high-level exchanges between governments, legislatures, political outfits and sub-national authorities, and establish a mechanism to share governance best practices and enhance “political trust”.⁵⁵ The deal also seeks to improve cooperation on law enforcement and security issues, with China pledging to assist Solomon Islands in its policing and law-enforcement capacity.

China’s security cooperation is also being driven by competitive international politics as seen in the case of Vietnam. In November 2023, Hanoi and Tokyo raised their ties to one of ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’.⁵⁶ In September 2023, US President Joe Biden made a state visit to Vietnam, following which ties with Washington were elevated to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’.⁵⁷ Xi, for his part, travelled to Vietnam in December 2023 to push for cooperation on security.^c

Japan’s and the US’s efforts to woo Vietnam pose challenges to China more so because the two Communist nations fought a war in 1979, and there were border skirmishes in 1988 too. The agreement that China and Vietnam inked in December 2023 foresees high-level law enforcement exchanges and institutes a dialogue mechanism for political and security issues at the level of Deputy Minister.⁵⁸ The agreement signed between the two nations refers to “risks of colour revolution” posed by “hostile forces”, which will be combatted through the installation of a hotline between the public security departments of the two countries.⁵⁹ It is expected to boost cooperation between China’s law enforcement and security departments and Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security in the fields of personnel training, security, and intelligence-sharing.⁶⁰

To be sure, there is greater awareness about the implications of China pushing security cooperation in different parts of the world. In 2022, at the Raisina

c Xi travelled to only three other nations in 2023—South Africa, Russia, and the US.

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Dialogue, India's premier conclave on geopolitics, Andrew Shearer, Director General of Australia's Office of National Intelligence, warned that China's push for security cooperation with nations like Solomon Islands could potentially lead to greater Chinese military presence around Australia, and that China was organising diplomatic, military, and economic instruments to draw smaller countries into its fold.⁶¹ At a time when China is enhancing its defence diplomacy through initiatives like the GSI, there is backlash building against the activities of Chinese agencies operating beyond national jurisdictions.

There is now evidence of the global reach of Chinese law-enforcement agencies, with nearly 40 Ministry of Public Security officials being charged by the US government of targeting people residing in the US via social media for advocating views that are not in consonance with those of the Chinese regime, engaging in disruptive events marking the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and for advocating for democracy on the mainland.⁶² In South Korea, intelligence agencies and police have launched an enquiry into the functioning of illegal police stations in Seoul and Jeju Island that are said to be acting at the behest of the Chinese government.⁶³ Meanwhile, in Thailand, the government's plan to deploy Chinese police patrols to improve tourist confidence has led to fears that it may be used to target dissidents.⁶⁴

There is hardly any doubt that security plays a bigger role in China's grand strategy in the Xi era, on account of the following factors: First, the changing nature of the Party-state's army, which after reforms seeks to project its capability beyond China's borders. There is also an expectation from Xi that the PLA must become more relevant in military diplomacy, safeguarding development interests and sovereignty.

The PLA's external engagements are also changing across metrics of military exercises, interactions of the military brass, and naval port calls. Greater engagement through defence diplomacy allows Chinese policymakers to gain better insights into the security environment in different regions. Chinese strategists have written extensively on their perceptions of threats posed by the Western-led alliance and its determination of strengthening alliances in Asia. China watchers, meanwhile, argue that China is a partial power and its security presence overseas has not evolved in the same manner as the traditional powers on the metrics of formalising alliances, stationing troops abroad, projecting power globally, or fighting in conflicts on its own or through proxy actors.

The favoured narrative in China is that the West is declining and the East is rising, and that there are deficits in security and governance due to the decline of the Western-led order. It is moving to fill the security void, through the Global Security Initiative which seeks to train law-enforcement personnel in developing nations. Further, over the last decade, China's economic interests have gone global with the expanding footprint of its flagship BRI. China is weaving in economic, military, and diplomatic elements into its grand strategy, and there is greater contestation in the international system to rework the balance of power. Thus, through GSI that is built on defence diplomacy, China seeks to connect economic and security cooperation, and craft alternative frameworks to expand its influence through domains of law-enforcement capacity building and defence. [ORF](#)

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