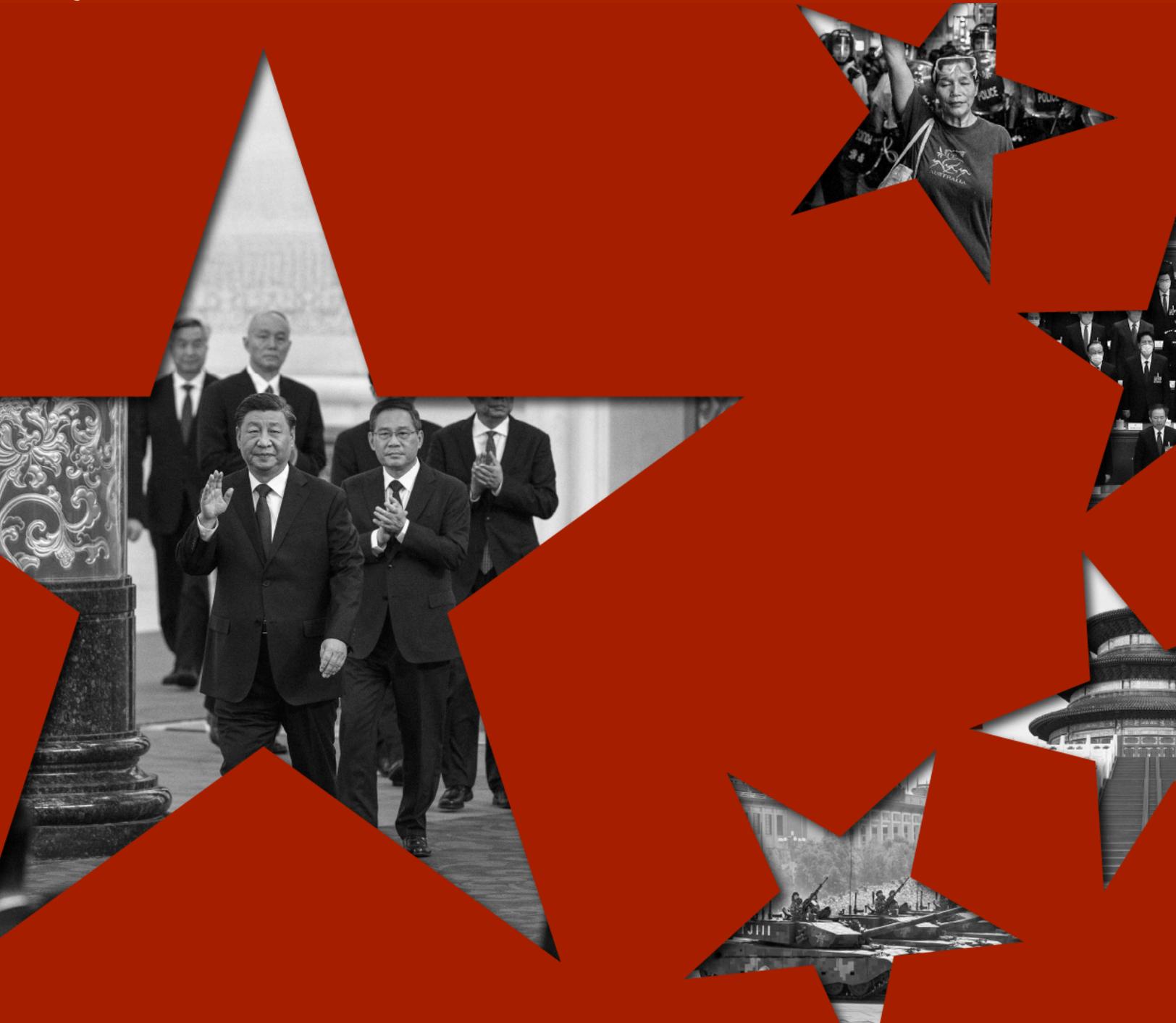


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China Brief

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In a Fortnight



General Secretary Xi Jinping and the Politburo Standing Committee lead a rendition of the wartime song “Unity is Strength” at the New Year’s Eve tea party of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. (Source: Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)

Xi Projects Confidence in Shorter New Year’s Speech

Arran Hope
January 10, 2026

Executive Summary

- Exuding confidence, Xi’s new year’s eve speech heralded the start of a new five-year plan, praised advances in artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies, and declared that the country’s comprehensive national power had reached a new stage.
- Military matters were unusually prominent in the speech, with the September 2025 military parade in Beijing eulogized near the beginning of his remarks. He also used this section to praise the establishment of “Taiwan Retrocession Memorial Day.”
- Xi’s speeches have become shorter in terms of both word count and duration in his third term. The choreography of the speech has also become less personal and more austere.

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The key sentence came toward the end of President Xi Jinping’s New Year’s message: “We must anchor our goals and tasks, bolster our confidence, and seize opportunities to press ahead” (我们要锚定目标任务, 坚定信心、乘势而上), he said ([Xinhua](#), December 31, 2025). This was the tone Xi had decided to strike to kick off 2026: projecting confidence, emphasizing unity, and focusing on success. Such themes have been common to all of Xi’s new year speeches, but recent iterations have rarely been positive to quite this degree. By contrast, Xi more or less avoided the candor deployed in previous years to acknowledge people’s hardships and problems in executing policies.

Key Themes: The 15th Five-Year Plan and Innovation

New Year’s Eve signaled the end of the 14th Five-Year Plan period and heralded the beginning of the 15th. This is a significant moment in the trajectory of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and as such received top billing in Xi’s remarks. The first paragraph—the longest of the entire speech—valorized the achievements of the past five years. He described these as “extraordinary” (极不寻常), saying that people’s sense of gain, happiness, and security had relentlessly increased (获得感幸福感安全感不断增强). He acknowledged that “results have not come easily” (成绩来之不易), and that “we have overcome many difficulties and challenges” (克服重重困难挑战). But by eliding these vague references to hardships over a five-year period with discussions of success, Xi avoided dwelling on any specific episodes from recent memory.

An important statement in this first substantive paragraph was a quote from the readout from the 20th Central Committee’s fourth plenary session in October. Xi said that the country’s “economic strength, scientific and technological strength, national defense strength, and comprehensive national power, have all reached

new stage” (经济实力、科技实力、国防实力、综合国力跃上新台阶). As the analyst Erik Quam has argued, changes in PRC behavior are likely informed by changes in calculation of the country’s comprehensive national power. The assessment that the PRC has reached a new stage therefore suggests that Beijing is in the middle of a shift in its approach to the world ([China Brief](#), January 6).

The Central Committee’s recommendations for the new five-year plan indicated that the Party is doubling down on its pursuit of dominating innovation and the research and development of emerging technologies. This came through clearly in Xi’s speech, too. The Party’s shorthand for innovation-driven, high-quality development, “New quality productive forces” (新质生产力), was mentioned; and the annual list of technological breakthroughs was topped by “AI large models” (人工智能大模型)—likely a nod to private firm DeepSeek’s breakout year—followed by advances in “chip self-sufficiency” (芯片自主).

The PRC president’s New Year’s Eve addresses traditionally targeted an external audience. This has changed in recent years, but the leader’s remarks continue to include comments on the PRC’s role and standing in global affairs. This year was no different. Xi repeated language from previous speeches about how the PRC continues to embrace the world, but he also chose to highlight areas in which Beijing has begun to try to shape the international environment in ways that are more responsive to its interests. September’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tianjin featured prominently, as did the PRC’s four global initiatives. These include, most recently, the Global Governance Initiative (全球治理倡议), which Xi reminded listeners was his own personal contribution. He continued to have a bleak assessment of the international system, however, noting that “the world today is fraught

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with turmoil and conflict” (当今世界变乱交织).

The international section of Xi’s new year’s addresses generally avoid mention of other countries, though the United States is never far away from Xi’s considerations. In a speech delivered the same day to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference at the organization’s annual tea party, Xi alluded to U.S. actions taken in 2025, saying that the PRC economy had “forged ahead against pressure” (顶压前行) and “demonstrated remarkable resiliency” (展现强大韧性和活力)—likely a reference to U.S. competitive actions, such as President Donald Trump’s “liberation day” tariffs. He also noted that the PRC had faced “external risks and challenges” (对外部风险挑战) but had persisted in “protecting national sovereignty, security, and development interests” (坚决维护国家主权、安全、发展利益) (Xinhua, December 31, 2025). His confident tone, both here and in his new year’s remarks, have been echoed by other senior officials. A January 8 article in the *People’s Daily* written by International Liaison Department director Liu Haixing (刘海星), for instance, is a disquisition on what the world can learn from the PRC’s governance model (People’s Daily, January 8).

Military Might Front and Center

Military matters usually do not feature prominently in Xi’s new year’s speeches. This is because Xi delivers them in his capacity as state president, not as Party general secretary or chairman of the Central Military Commission. Nevertheless, last year’s September 3 military parade provided an opportunity for Xi to celebrate the growing military capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in his capacity as head of state, both to the country and to assembled world leaders, including Russian president Vladimir Putin and North Korean

supreme leader Kim Jong Un.

Xi made it clear in his speech how important he sees “national defense strength” (国防实力). The second paragraph—coming before the list of technological achievements—discussed the parade, which Xi characterized as “unforgettable” (令人难忘的). He also reminded listeners that the PRC had used its commemorative activities of the “80th anniversary of the victory in the people’s war of resistance against Japanese aggression and the world anti-fascist war” (中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利80周年) by establishing “Taiwan Retrocession Day” (台湾光复纪念日) (China Brief, October 28, 2025). [1]

Accompanied in the CCTV broadcast by over 30 seconds of b-roll footage of the spectacle and new capabilities such as the Type 003 aircraft carrier, Xi said:

“These grand national events were majestic and powerful, and the glory of victory will shine through the pages of history. They inspire all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation to remember history, honor fallen heroes, cherish peace, and create a better future. They are rallying a mighty force for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (国之盛典威武雄壮，胜利荣光永载史册，激励中华儿女铭记历史、缅怀先烈、珍爱和平、开创未来，凝聚起中华民族伟大复兴的磅礴伟力) (CCTV, December 31, 2025).

Underscoring this importance, Xi repeated much of this language verbatim at the CPPCC tea party, an event that finished with a rousing group rendition of “Unity is Strength,” an anti-Japanese war song written in 1942. (State media in 2015 selected the song as one of the nation’s top ten songs from the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression) (Baidu/团结就是力量, accessed January 9). This song is sung annually

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at the CPPCC tea party,

though it perhaps took on renewed significance this time in light of the war commemoration events of the past year and Beijing's current saber-rattling against Japan, which the PRC government claims is geared toward "preventing the revival of Japanese militarism" ([Xinhua](#), December 31, 2025; [MFA](#), January 6).

Shorter Speech was Less People-Centered

Without wishing to overanalyze the production of Xi's new year's set piece, his latest new year's speech provided further evidence of his drift toward aging autocrat status. Over the past several years, his new year's speech has become shorter, both in terms of word count and duration of delivery. And, as with last year's broadcast, the camera spent much of the monologue cutting away from Xi to show various propaganda footage from the past year.

Perhaps as a result, Xi comes across increasingly distant from those he governs. Last year, for the first time since 2017, Xi was not seated in his office for his speech. No longer seated behind a desk stacked with papers and bookshelves displaying a curated set of pictures and other items, Xi instead appeared behind an enormous, empty table, next to a PRC flag, and in front of a large mural of the Great Wall. This, coupled with the avoidance of the more people-centered substance of his first-term new year's speeches, suggests a leader who is less involved in the day-to-day running of national affairs. This is something that is also evident in his reduced travel schedule over the last two years and his apparent increased willingness to delegate to his colleagues on the Politburo Standing Committee ([China Brief](#), [November 15, 2024](#), [July 26, 2025](#); [China Leadership Monitor](#), November 30, 2025).

Conclusion

Xi's speech provided few concrete clues for what he has in store for 2026. A brief paragraph previewing the year ahead was the shortest in the entire speech. Perhaps this was because, as he remarked, "the blueprint has already been drawn up" (蓝图已经绘就), and so all that remains is to ensure that the Party follows the plan, continuing to focus on new quality productive forces at home, advancing resilience against instability overseas, and corralling the people to engage in further struggle on the long road toward national rejuvenation and Chinese-style modernization. Global events at the outset of the year, however, including the U.S. military operation in Venezuela and widespread popular protests throughout Iran, already conspire against Beijing's interests. While not directly damaging for Xi at this stage, they serve as a reminder that the best-laid plans can often go awry.

Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief.

Notes

[1] Beyond the mention of Taiwan Retrocession Day, other language used to discuss Taiwan and cross-Strait relations was in line with Xi's new year's speeches of the last two years.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



A replenishment ship from the 47th Escort Task Group, Gaoyouhu (高邮湖舰), conducts replenishment for the Type 052D destroyer Baotou (包头舰). (Source: PRC MND)

Near-Seas Force Locking Reshapes Gulf of Aden Naval Missions

Yu-cheng Chen and Yang Shang-wei
January 7, 2026

Executive Summary

- The 46th and 47th Gulf of Aden escort task groups of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) set consecutive records for deployment length, suggesting a deliberate shift from high-frequency rotations to extended tours. The escort mission is increasingly being reconfigured into a low-density, long-duration batch-deployment model.
- Rising near-seas operational demand (in the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, and South China Sea) has created a force-locking effect, shrinking the pool of high-end surface combatants available for distant deployments. At the same time, the Red Sea crisis has raised the cost and risk of task-group handovers, incentivizing the PLAN to keep in-theater units on station longer.

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Executive Summary (continued)

- Improved sustainment capacity at the PLA's Djibouti support base enables longer forward presence but Beijing continues to pursue a selective escort posture that preserves operational and political autonomy rather than joining coalition strike operations. This reflects continued constraints in munitions replenishment and risk tolerance.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is quietly rewriting the tempo of its most routine far-seas mission ([Global Times](#), September 30, 2024). Since December 2008, Gulf of Aden escort deployments have been among the PLAN's most predictable overseas operations, typically lasting four to six months per rotation ([People's Daily](#), December 25, 2018). That regular rhythm served multiple purposes: it provided a steady pipeline for far-seas training, stress-tested logistics and sustainment, and supported Beijing's narrative of contributing to international maritime security ([Global Times](#), December 25, 2023).

In 2024–2025, however, the long-standing pattern broke. The 46th escort task group—Type 052D destroyer Jiaozuo (焦作号), Type 054A frigate Xuchang (许昌号), and Type 903A replenishment ship Honghu (洪湖号)—sailed in February 2024 and returned to Zhanjiang only on January 24, 2025, completing a 339-day deployment ([Xinhua](#), January 24, 2024). The follow-on 47th task group reportedly departed on December 15, 2024 and returned to Zhoushan on December 18, 2025, setting a new record of 368 days ([PLAN](#), December 19, 2025). Taken together, these two consecutive “year-long” tours indicate an emerging model in which the PLAN sustains its Indian Ocean presence by keeping fewer ships deployed for longer periods, rather than maintaining earlier high-frequency rotation cycles. This model is driven by a dual dynamic: a near-seas “push” created by competing operational demands and finite high-

end hulls, and a far-seas “pull” shaped by evolving mission requirements and risk conditions along the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden corridor. [1]

Lengthening Escort Deployment Cycles

For roughly 16 years, the PLAN's Gulf of Aden escort mission followed a notably stable operating pattern. Over the period 2008–2022, Beijing generally maintained a rhythm of three escort task groups per year, with deployments departing at roughly four-month intervals. Most task groups spent approximately three to four months on-station in the Gulf of Aden, with total deployments typically lasting five to six months (including transit). [2] The mission has therefore been one of the PLAN's most regularized far-seas operational tasks and has served as a primary channel for accumulating experience in sustained out-of-area operations ([CISS](#), December 27, 2021).

A shift began with modest adjustments in the 45th task group cycle and became fully visible in the 46th and 47th rotations. The 46th task group's 339-day deployment spanned Asia, Africa, and Europe and reportedly covered more than 160,000 nautical miles ([China Military Online](#), January 27, 2025). More importantly, the follow-on 47th escort task group—comprised of the Type 052D destroyer Baotou (包头舰), the Type 054A frigate Honghe (红河舰), and the Type 903A replenishment ship Gaoyouhu (高邮湖舰) pushed deployment duration to an historic high. These consecutive rotations suggest that the PLAN is extending the overall escort cycle: handover intervals are lengthening, and each individual task group is deployed for longer periods.

The ‘Push’ Factor: Near-Seas Force-Locking Effects

The PLAN's decision to extend the deployment

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length of its Gulf of Aden escort task groups is likely rooted in a worsening security environment along the PRC's maritime periphery. Chinese analysts have pointed to frictions in PRC–Japan relations, heightened cross-strait tensions, and PRC–Philippines disputes in the South China Sea as key variables directly shaping Beijing's overall security outlook (CNR, December 20, 2025). In April 2023, during an inspection of the South Sea Fleet, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to “firmly and flexibly conduct military struggle” (坚定灵活开展军事斗争), improve the ability to respond to complex contingencies in a timely manner, and resolutely safeguard the PRC's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, while maintaining stability in the surrounding environment (CCTV, April 13, 2023). This guidance suggests that the PLAN's top operational priority is increasingly concentrated on maritime competition and crisis management in the near seas.

This prioritization matters because the platforms routinely assigned to Gulf of Aden escort missions—most notably Type 052D destroyers and Type 054A frigates—are also core

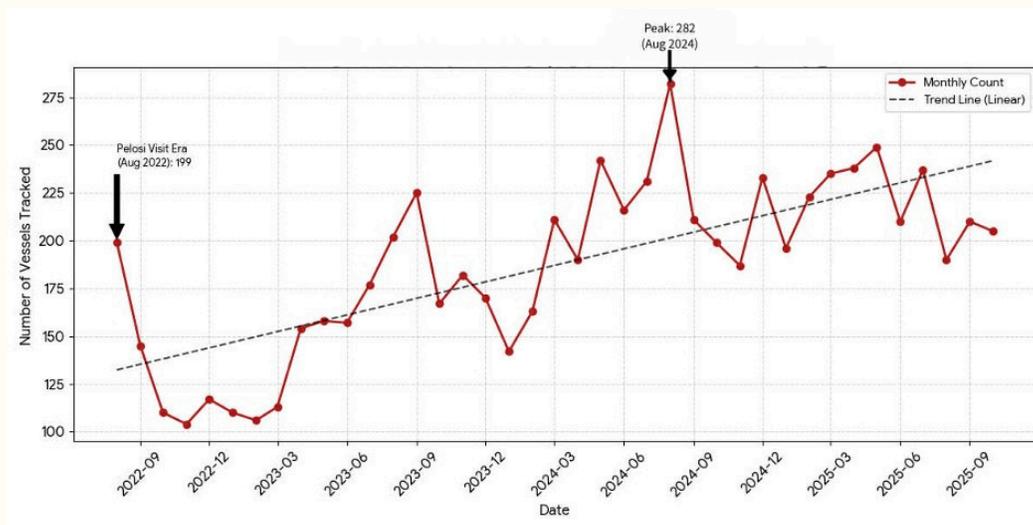
assets for anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) operations within the first island chain (Global Times, August 12, 2021, June 2, 2025). Although the PLA has promoted the “normalized and diversified” (常态化多样化) employment of military power, competing mission demands impose hard tradeoffs. When priorities diverge, Beijing is likely to privilege near-seas contingencies and preparations for escalation (PLA Daily, November 25, 2022).

Evidence from Taiwan, Japan-adjacent waters, and the South China Sea points to a sustained near-seas surge that locks in the PLAN's most capable surface combatants, making longer, lower-frequency Gulf of Aden deployments a rational way to preserve distant presence while freeing hulls for higher-priority contingencies.

High-Pressure Testing in the Taiwan Strait

In 2023 and 2024, the PLA conducted multiple blockade-oriented exercises targeting Taiwan, including “Joint Sword–2024A” and “Joint Sword–2024B” (China Brief, July 26, 2024, November 1, 2024). These activities emphasized seizing critical maritime chokepoints and, by

Figure 1: Number of PLA/Governmental Vessels Active Around Taiwan (August 2022–October 2025)



(Source: Created by the authors based on Taiwan's Ministry of Defense press releases)

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implication, cutting Taiwan’s energy imports, restricting external reinforcement routes, and constraining Taiwan’s access to the outside world (*Global Times*, April 2, 2025). Carrier-strike-group coordination further elevates the demand signal for 052D destroyers and 054A frigates, which have become principal escort and screening platforms for Chinese carrier operations (*CCTV*, December 17, 2025).

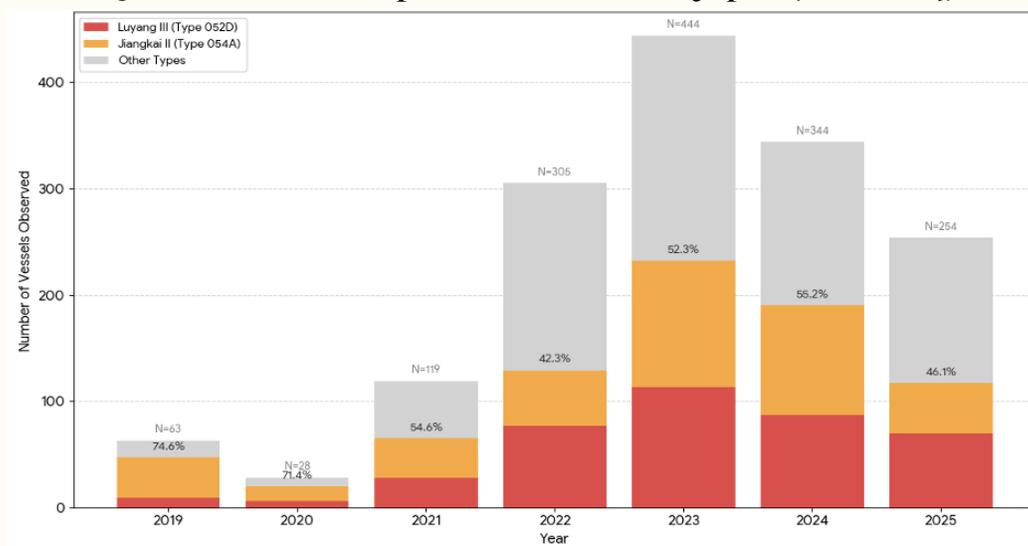
Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) reporting, as shown in Figure 1, indicates a clear step change in PLA and PRC government vessel activity around Taiwan beginning in mid-2022. Monthly counts rise sharply after that point, remain elevated throughout 2023, and reach new highs in 2024, including a peak of 282 vessels in August, before stabilizing at levels well above the pre-2022 baseline. Although the data do not disaggregate by ship class, the persistence and intensity of this operating pattern imply sustained heavy tasking of modern PLAN surface combatants that underpin blockade exercises, carrier screening, and routine presence operations.

The key implication is the normalization of high-tempo near-seas operations that absorb high-end hulls over extended periods, tightening the PLAN’s force-generation margins and reinforcing incentives to sustain distant missions such as Gulf of Aden escorts through longer, lower-frequency deployment cycles.

Japan-Adjacent Waters: Expanding Tempo and Wider Strait ‘Penetration’

Japanese scholar-compiled data show a steady rise in PLAN warship observations around Japan from 43 (2021) to 71 (2022), then jumping to 107 (2023) and reaching a new high of 108 (2024) (see Figure 2) (*SPF China Observer*, September 8, 2025). Importantly, the surge includes sustained high-end surface combatant activity: Type 052D observations increased from 11 (2021) to 28 (2023) (and remained high at 27 in 2024), while Type 054A rose from 15 (2021) to 33 (2024). Overall, the 2023–2024 peak suggests intensified near-seas tasking around key approaches and straits, reinforcing the argument that near-seas demand is absorbing modern surface combatants and

Figure 2: PLA Warships Observed Around Japan (2021–2024)*



*Counts reflect observed warship appearances as compiled by Japanese researchers; Type 052D (Luyang III) and Type 054A (Jiangkai II) are highlighted. (Source: Created by the authors based on SPF China Observer/Japanese scholar compilation)

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tightening the pool available for far-seas rotations.

The pattern shift is also geographic. Japanese analyses highlight the Okinawa–Miyako Strait as the clearest growth corridor: transits rose from 3 in 2020 to 31 in 2022 and peaked at 41 in 2024, suggesting it has become a principal artery for PLAN access to the Philippine Sea. By 2024, activity was no longer concentrated in a single route; frequent passages were also recorded through the Tsushima Strait, Ōsumi Strait, the Amami–Yokoate corridor, and the Taiwan–Yonaguni channel ([SPF China Observer](#), September 8, 2025). The expansion toward the Taiwan–Yonaguni and Yonaguni–Iriomote waterways is especially relevant to Taiwan contingencies because it reflects routine presence-building east of Taiwan, which is an area central to denial operations and crisis signaling.

The net effect of more hulls, more routes, and more repetitions is that near-seas tasking pressure is increasing on the same classes of ships that normally anchor Gulf of Aden rotations.

South China Sea: Persistent ‘Holding Missions’ That Consume High-End Hulls

Philippine monitoring data point to a similar force-locking effect in the South China Sea, where routine coercive operations function as an attritional holding mission. During a single week (September 17–23, 2024), Philippine reporting counted 251 PRC vessels in the West Philippine Sea, including 16 PLAN warships ([Philippine News Agency](#), September 24, 2024). In 2025, Philippine reporting suggested local peaks of PLAN warships in May, June, and July, detecting a total of 57 warships ([Philstar](#), July 9, 2025).

Operational risk has risen alongside tempo. On

August 11, 2025, a reported high-speed collision near Scarborough Shoal between a China Coast Guard vessel and a PLAN destroyer underscored how routine confrontation can generate escalation risks and mishaps ([USNI](#), August 11, 2025). Subsequent reporting suggested that by November, 19 PLAN warships were present across multiple locations in the West Philippine Sea, consistent with a broad, sustained pressure posture rather than episodic patrols ([Philstar](#), December 3, 2025). For fleet management, these missions matter because they are “sticky”: they require continuity, command-capable escorts, and frequent re-tasking, precisely the kind of demand that shrinks the residual inventory available for distant rotations.

‘Pull Factors’: The Red Sea Crisis and Selective Escort

The deterioration of the Red Sea threat environment has created an operational “pull” that makes longer PLAN escort deployments in the Gulf of Aden more attractive. Since late 2023, Houthi forces have repeatedly targeted merchant shipping with missiles and drones, impacting vessels linked to Chinese interests ([CNA](#), March 24, 2024). Combined with Beijing’s doctrinal emphasis on protecting strategic sea lanes and overseas interests, the crisis provides a plausible military logic for keeping a seasoned task group on station rather than repeatedly rotating fresh crews and platforms into a high-threat environment ([SCIO](#), May 26, 2015).

Beijing’s pursuit of this “pull” without coalition integration reinforces a selective escort posture designed to preserve political and operational autonomy. U.S. officials have described efforts to encourage the PRC to cooperate—citing Djibouti-based forces and past counter-piracy precedents—while the PRC Ministry of National Defense publicly has insisted the 46th escort was a “routine” (常态化) deployment unrelated to the crisis and framed it under the “Global Security

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Initiative” (全球安全倡议) ([PRC MND](#), February 29, 2024). This approach prioritizes route security and limited protection for Chinese (and selected) shipping while avoiding coalition command chains and shared rules of engagement. [3] This shows that the Red Sea crisis can explain why a task group is “held” forward longer but not why rotations slow, unless the PLAN is also reallocating scarce high-end hulls back to near-seas priorities.

Djibouti Support Base Maturation Enables Shift

The PLAN’s move toward low-density, long-duration escort cycles would be operationally difficult without forward sustainment. The shift has therefore led to a maturation of the Djibouti support base from one focused on replenishment and limited maintenance support to one in which overseas-base support is the primary pillar, complemented by foreign port calls and domestic backup ([HK01](#), June 14, 2022; [PLA Daily](#), January 3, 2024). This reduces the operational penalty of keeping a three-ship task group deployed for 11–12 months and turns the “time-for-hulls” trade into a workable substitute for high-frequency rotations.

Chinese analysts further link Djibouti to a broader ambition to expand global logistics networks—combining accompanying replenishment, forward support, and overseas commercial nodes—to sustain distant operations. [4] State media messaging similarly implies that as blue-water tasks grow, the PRC will seek additional overseas support points ([CCTV](#), July 12, 2025).

Djibouti is best read as an enabler, however, and not the primary driver of PLA blue-water operations. It makes extended deployments feasible while the underlying impulse to stretch rotations suggests competing near-seas missions are forcing the PLAN to economize on escort

task groups rather than increase them ([CMSI](#), August 13, 2024). In this way, the Red Sea crisis “pulls” the escort force forward and Djibouti makes long stays possible. But the reason the rotation cycle has changed is that Beijing appears to be conserving high-end surface combatants for intensifying near-seas demands.

New Ambitions and Material Constraints

The PLAN’s escort rotation cycle adjustment offers a case study of how Beijing allocates its most capable surface combatants under multi-theater pressure. The new rhythm reflects a deliberate tradeoff: when the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, South China Sea, and Red Sea all impose operational demands, the PLAN appears to prioritize retaining more high-end hulls in the near seas while sustaining a minimum-cost presence in the Indian Ocean. Three implications can be derived from this.

First, longer escort deployments underscore an interest-driven logic of force employment. Today, military power is expected not just to defend territory but also to protect “development interests,” including energy sea lanes and overseas investments. Nevertheless, safeguarding core national interests remains the overriding principle. When development and sovereignty compete in force allocation, the latter takes absolute priority ([Qiushi](#), June 25, 2022).

Second, the PRC’s far-seas missions are likely to become more diverse. As the Djibouti support facility matures, a three-ship task group can now remain in-theater for 11–12 months without returning to a home port, signaling growing confidence in logistics support, maintenance capacity, and crew endurance. Operationally, this resembles a scaled-down forward-deployed naval posture: personnel and systems can be sustained through in-theater support, while the PLAN learns to conduct extended cruising far

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from the mainland to secure sea lanes, sustain influence, and build practical far-seas mission competence. New large surface combatants continue to enter service and the PLAN has also expanded large-formation activities in the North and South Pacific in recent years, providing additional indicators for tracking the PRC's evolving blue-water capabilities (China Brief, [March 11, 2025](#), [July 25, 2025](#)).

Third, a “selective escort” approach highlights strategic autonomy while exposing ammunition and risk constraints in high-threat environments. Chinese commentary has noted that during the Red Sea crisis, PLAN escort task groups deliberately avoided substantive participation in coalition strikes against the Houthis, reflecting limits in ammunition sustainability and political risk tolerance. Even if the PLAN can sustain a routine presence around the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea remains a high-intensity air-defense and counter-unmanned systems operating environment; once an escort task group is drawn into a coalition-style operational tempo, shipborne air-defense missiles and intercept munitions could be expended rapidly. The key issue is not whether replenishment is possible in principle but whether the PLAN can rearm at the forward edge in sufficient quantities and at sufficient frequency ([Guancha](#), December 19, 2025). Open sources do not confirm that the Djibouti support base maintains the forward munitions stockpiles and rapid rearming capacity required to sustain prolonged high-tempo engagements. Beijing thus has strong incentives to adopt a “selective escort” posture. This involves maintaining a visible presence and a minimum level of route security along critical sea lanes, prioritizing the protection of PRC-linked and selected friendly shipping, and avoiding integration into U.S.- and Europe-led coalition command chains and shared rules of engagement. This approach reflects a political preference for autonomy but also underscores practical constraints on

firepower sustainability and risk tolerance in high-threat, out-of-area operations.

Conclusion

The PLAN's 46th and 47th Gulf of Aden task groups mark a structural shift from frequent rotations toward longer single-deployment cycles. This shift is downstream of push and pull factors. The push comes from intensified near-seas tasking along the first island chain that locks in the availability of 052D and 054A vessels, while the pull comes from a deteriorating Red Sea threat environment that raises the operational risk of frequent handovers.

Beijing's preference for “selective escort” shows that forward rearm limits and political risk calculus still constrain blue-water operations, even though the Djibouti base lowers logistical barriers to an annualized rotation model. Going forward, key indicators to watch include changes in escort rotation intervals and overlap patterns, the composition of escort task groups (especially the share of 052D and 054A vessels versus newer large combatants), the frequency and purpose of Djibouti maintenance and replenishment activities, and third-port calls during extended deployments.

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the National Defense University, the Ministry of National Defense, or the government of ROC (Taiwan).

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Notes

[1] This article builds on analysis by Dennis J. Blasko from mid-2024 in his paper “Recent Changes in the PLA Navy’s Gulf of Aden Deployment Pattern” (CMSI, August 13, 2024).

[2] The main exception was the 26th escort task group, whose tour coincided with the formal opening of the PRC’s logistics support base in Djibouti on July 11, 2017, and became the only rotation at the time to extend to roughly eight months (CRNTT, December 4, 2017).

[3] Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], ed. *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学]. Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020. p. 321-323.

[4] Guo Feng [郭峰] and Suqin Zhang [張素琴]. “An Exploration of an Equipment Support Model for Far-Seas Defense Based on Civil–Military Integration” [基於軍民融合的遠海防衛裝備保障模式探索]. *Value Engineering* [價值工程], 2020 (39)4: 26-27.

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Former People's Bank of China Governor Yi Gang in Beijing in 2019. (Source: Getty)

Beijing Accelerates Clearance of ‘Naked Officials’ from Top Ranks

Youlun Nie
January 9, 2026

Executive Summary

- In late 2025, Beijing initiated a systemic clearance of “naked officials”—those with spouses or children residing abroad—from senior leadership ranks, marking a decisive shift from previous restrictions to summary removal.
- This campaign aims to eliminate coercion vulnerabilities by compelling senior functionaries to repatriate immediate family members or face ouster, thereby neutralizing potential Western leverage.
- By prioritizing political security, Beijing is actively constructing a human capital firewall, accelerating its decoupling from the West, and signaling the end of the reform-era technocratic governance model.

In November 2025, the 14th Session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a top advisory body of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), unexpectedly offered a window into the seismic shifts occurring within Chinese high-level politics. The official announcement of a sweeping personnel reshuffle included prominent figures such as Yi Gang (易纲), deputy director of the Committee on Economic Affairs (and former governor of the People's Bank of China), and Wang Rong (王荣), deputy director of the Committee on Liaison with Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Overseas Chinese (former chairman of the Guangdong Provincial CPPCC) ([Xinhua](#), November 1, 2025). They are among at least 20 officials who were removed from their primary positions in the latter part of 2025 (see Table 1). [1]

The sudden exit of these heavyweights garnered significant attention. Their removal was unusual, as they had not reached the mandatory retirement age, nor were they implicated in any public corruption scandals. The phrasing used to describe their removal was that they “no longer held” (不再担任) their specific leadership roles—a distinction from the formal “dismissal” (免去) typically associated with disciplinary adjustments. That most of the officials targeted in the reshuffle retained their CPPCC membership (全国政协委员) suggests a nuanced political sidelining rather than a traditional purge.

This shift, initially visible at the periphery of Beijing's power structure, was not an isolated incident but the visible tip of a broader overhaul. In the months surrounding the CPPCC's actions, similar announcements stating that incumbents “no longer held” their posts or had “resigned” appeared across various regions and sectors. Prominent examples include Liu Duo (刘多), vice mayor of Shanghai ([CPC News](#), September 26,

2025); Yan Aoshuang (闫傲霜), vice chairman of the Beijing Municipal People's Congress Standing Committee ([Beijing Daily](#), November 29, 2025); Lin Shangli (林尚立), president of Renmin University of China and former deputy director of the Central Policy Research Office ([Ministry of Education](#), November 28, 2025), and Zhang Guangjun (张广军), former vice minister of Science and Technology and later party secretary of Huazhong University of Science and Technology ([Ministry of Education](#), October 17, 2025).

These individuals all shared one commonality: significant overseas backgrounds and immediate family members residing abroad for extended periods. In other words, they were “naked officials” (裸官)—those whose spouses or children have emigrated. Analysis of these disparate personnel changes suggests that the CCP is recalibrating its organizational line through a campaign in which such officials are no longer carefully managed but actively excluded in pursuit of reinforcing national security ([BBC Chinese](#), November 10). The imperative is to systematically excise elements vulnerable to Western sanctions or influence from critical nodes of national governance.

Regulatory Policy Shifts to ‘Zero Tolerance’

Over the past 15 years, relevant policies have progressed through three distinct phases, each corresponding to an escalation in Beijing's perception of external threats. The evolution of the CCP's regulatory framework concerning “naked officials” demonstrates the magnitude of the current clearance campaign.

Beijing's regulation of “naked officials” began in the late Hu Jintao era. In the first phase (2010–2013), the policy tone was defined by “registration and management” (登记管理). The “Provisional Regulations on Strengthening the Management of State Functionaries Whose

Spouses and Children Have Both Emigrated Abroad” (关于对配偶子女均已移居国(境)外的国家工作人员加强管理的暂行规定), issued in 2010, did not impose strict prohibitions on “naked officials” holding office ([Xinhua](#), July 26, 2010). Instead, the focus was on information gathering to prevent asset flight and combat corruption. During this period, the system adopted a relatively tolerant attitude toward high-level intellectuals and technocrats with international connections, often viewing them as assets for connecting with the international community rather than security liabilities.

Under Xi Jinping, regulations tightened significantly. With the release of the “Measures for the Management of Posts Held by State Functionaries Whose Spouses Have Emigrated Abroad” (配偶已移居国(境)外的国家工作人员任职岗位管理办法) in 2014, the policy entered its second phase (2014–2024), characterized by “restriction and barring” (限制任职). These regulations explicitly list five categories of key positions barred to “naked officials,” including military, diplomatic, national security, confidential, and key leadership roles ([Legal Daily](#), December 23, 2014). Having family abroad quickly became a glass ceiling for career advancement, though implementation retained considerable flexibility. High-ranking technical officials, particularly those outside core confidential departments, were often treated more leniently, especially if they adopted a “one family, two systems” (一家两制) arrangement where a spouse returned while children remained abroad.

Signs since early 2025 indicate that the policy has now entered a third phase: a “comprehensive clearance” (全面清理). Emerging enforcement patterns suggest that internal directives no longer distinguish between the sensitivity of positions nor tolerate compromise solutions. The current mandate reportedly presents bureaucrats of vice-ministerial rank or

higher with a stark binary choice: repatriate family members or resign from office. The logic has shifted completely, from preventing corruption to preventing infiltration and ensuring political security. The ousters at the 14th CPPCC session demonstrate this zero-tolerance enforcement. Even second-tier political advisory roles or university presidencies are no longer admissible for senior-ranked officials with overseas family ties ([Trivium China](#), November 6, 2025).

Traditional ‘Political Shields’ Fail Completely

The most striking feature of this clearance campaign is its indiscriminate intensity. To thoroughly eliminate potential internal vulnerabilities, the CCP leadership has established “political security” (政治安全) as the supreme imperative. Under this new logic, factors that previously served as political shields have been rendered ineffective.

Technocratic expertise, previously valued by the Party, no longer grants immunity. The forced departure of Yi Gang is perhaps the most indicative case. Yi had long been regarded as a quintessential “scholar-official” (学者型官员), holding a PhD from the University of Illinois and a tenured professorship at Indiana University. He spearheaded financial reforms, and international investors viewed him as a rational voice within the PRC’s economic decision-making circles ([Caijing](#), March 12, 2023). Previously, despite restrictions, Yi successfully navigated his career due to his wife’s return to the PRC and his unique value to U.S.–PRC financial diplomacy. Under the zero-tolerance regime, however, the fact that his children remained overseas became an insurmountable obstacle ([SingTao Headline](#), November 3, 2025). Yi’s fall sends a chilling signal that when political security overrides all other considerations, even internationally recognized professional value is no longer a defense against

political scrutiny.

The clearance campaign also exposes the limits of factional patronage. Lin Shangli's (林尚立) removal from the presidency of Renmin University of China illustrates the limitations of factional protection. Lin had a long tenure at the Central Policy Research Office, an organ under the CCP Central Committee, and was known as a close associate and core strategist for Wang Huning (王沪宁), a current Politburo Standing Committee member ([Lianhe Zaobao](#), November 17, 2020). Given Renmin University's status as the CCP's "second Party School" (第二党校), its executive tier is typically vetted with extreme care. Nevertheless, Lin's early overseas experience as a visiting scholar and his resulting family ties abroad led to the abrupt termination of his career. This demonstrates that traditional patronage offers no immunity against the supreme directive of national security. Even associates of core leaders must submit to the organizational cleansing logic when fundamental security issues are at stake.

United front assets also have become security liabilities. This shift is exemplified by the sidelining of Sui Jun (隋军). As the incumbent vice chair of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, a key united front body, Sui was long considered a typical "American qiaojuan" (美国侨眷), a term that refers to PRC residents with an overseas Chinese family in the United States ([Caixin](#), May 16, 2018). For years, such connections were considered significant political assets, serving as a bridge for the CCP to the diaspora. However, under the new criteria, this former asset has been redefined as a liability. Beijing seems willing to sacrifice even the convenience of united front channels to eliminate the risk of internal infiltration at the source.

Strategic Repatriation and the Survivorship Bias

Focusing solely on the roster of removed elites risks misinterpreting the full scope of this campaign as merely a loss of talent or a sign of instability. In reality, the list exhibits a clear survivorship bias, in which the individuals publicly displaced represent the minority who refused—or were objectively unable—to comply with the directive to repatriate their family members.

For the majority of senior cadres, especially those in critical positions, the choice was existential. Faced with a political ultimatum, most chose to compel their relatives to return to the PRC. By late 2025, continuing to keep family abroad was widely viewed as a deliberate act of defiance; thus, the return of families under these circumstances is fundamentally coerced. Through these high-pressure tactics, Xi Jinping has achieved a subtle but significant tactical victory: he has successfully "repatriated" the strategic loyalty of the elite.

The logic of the policy shift extends beyond anti-corruption to the elimination of vulnerabilities to coercion. With family members repatriated, the physical pathways for Western intelligence agencies to infiltrate, subvert, or exert leverage through spouses or children are limited. [2] For bureaucrats who choose to recall their relatives to remain in the system, cutting off their overseas retreat is not merely a physical relocation but a "political pledge of allegiance" (投名状). [3] This trend is reinforced by the broadening use of exit bans to impose greater "political discipline and ideological loyalty" on cadres ([The New York Times](#), August 3, 2025). In future international conflicts, these agents of the state, having burned their bridges, will have no choice but to demonstrate absolute loyalty to the system. This policy shift will thus harden the cohesion of Beijing's decision-making core,

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rendering it more monolithic in the face of external pressure.

Reshaping Bureaucracy for Long-term Confrontation

The 2025 clearance is not merely a personnel adjustment but a move in preparation for a more volatile future international environment. The shift was driven in part by Beijing's profound reflection on Russia's war in Ukraine. The devastating impact of Western sanctions on Russian elites was exacerbated by the extent to which their assets and families were located within Western jurisdictions, creating a "soft underbelly" (软肋) for the Russian state. Beijing has internalized this lesson ([CSIS](#), May 3, 2022). By weeding out figures like Yi Gang and Wang Rong who could not (or would not) sever overseas ties, Beijing is constructing a bureaucracy without strategic vulnerabilities. This appears to be a typical "pre-war" preparation, ensuring that in a future Taiwan Strait crisis or other geopolitical conflict, the executive layer will not waver due to concerns over family safety or asset freezes abroad.

The clearance regulations reflect a "political purification" (政治纯洁化) of the bureaucracy, characterized by a shift from internationalization to localization under the conditions of long-term confrontation. By removing technocrats with deep Western backgrounds, Beijing is establishing a new screening standard in which international competence is no longer a bonus but a potential security risk. This aligns with a broader trend observed since the 20th Party Congress, where traditional economic technocrats have been systematically replaced by security-oriented cadres with backgrounds in national security and the military-industrial complex. [4] This may lead to "reverse selection" (逆向淘汰) within the intellectual elite, but it is a cost Beijing sees as necessary and is willing to pay.

The PRC's push for repatriation embodies the ethos of decoupling. Many observers see decoupling as a U.S. containment strategy, but Beijing's actions indicate it is actively constructing an organizational and human capital firewall. By severing the private ties between its decision-making elite and the West, Beijing is preparing for a reality of two parallel worlds. It is sacrificing connectivity to ensure the absolute autonomy and security of its political core, a strategy that aligns with the broader "managed confrontation" architecture formalized in recent Party plenums ([China Brief](#), November 3, 2025).

Conclusion

The purges of late 2025, though conducted without fanfare, will have profound structural implications for the PRC's political landscape. They signal the gradual but definitive decline of the technocratic model that characterized the reform and opening era, under which Western education and global perspectives fueled the country's rise. The new personnel orientation, however, demands that individuals pick a side between career prospects and international connections. This process of political purification inevitably blocks the path for returned overseas Chinese elites to reach high political office, as foreign affiliations are now often viewed as security liabilities rather than assets ([The Conversation](#), September 26, 2023).

The PRC's future bureaucracy is likely to be dominated by two types of individuals: those who are homegrown with no international exposure but are politically reliable, and opportunists who, despite overseas experience, have completely severed ties to prove their loyalty. This will lead to an increasingly inward-looking decision-making layer, lacking the shared intellectual framework necessary for dialogue with the West. Western policymakers should not read these personnel shifts as simple

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anti-corruption news but as a clear signal that Beijing is hardening its organizational structure for a protracted struggle ([China Leadership Monitor](#), November 30, 2023). As a result, traditional channels of influence through personal networks are rapidly closing.

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Notes

[1] See Table 1 on the Jamestown website.

[2] The Ministry of State Security was very vocal about such risks in 2025, warning that foreign intelligence agencies are actively targeting PRC nationals abroad and those with foreign connections for recruitment ([China Brief](#), November 14, 2025).

[3] The term *toumingzhuang* (投名状) historically refers to a pledge of allegiance, often requiring an individual to commit an incriminating act or cut off their retreat to prove loyalty. For analysis of how the CCP's disciplinary apparatus enforces political loyalty, see Ling Li, "Politics of Anticorruption in China: Paradigm Change of the Party's Disciplinary Regime 2012–2017," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28(2019): 47-63.

[4] For an analysis of the diminishing role of Western-trained technocrats under Xi Jinping, see Tai Ming Cheung, "New Leaders in 'National' Security after China's 20th Party Congress," *UCSD Forum on U.S.-China Relations*, November 30, 2022.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



People's Liberation Army Navy vessel during the Justice Mission – 2025 military exercise surrounding Taiwan. (Source: Xinhua)

PLA Justice Mission 2025 Further Rehearses Taiwan Invasion Operations

K. Tristan Tang
January 9, 2026

Executive Summary

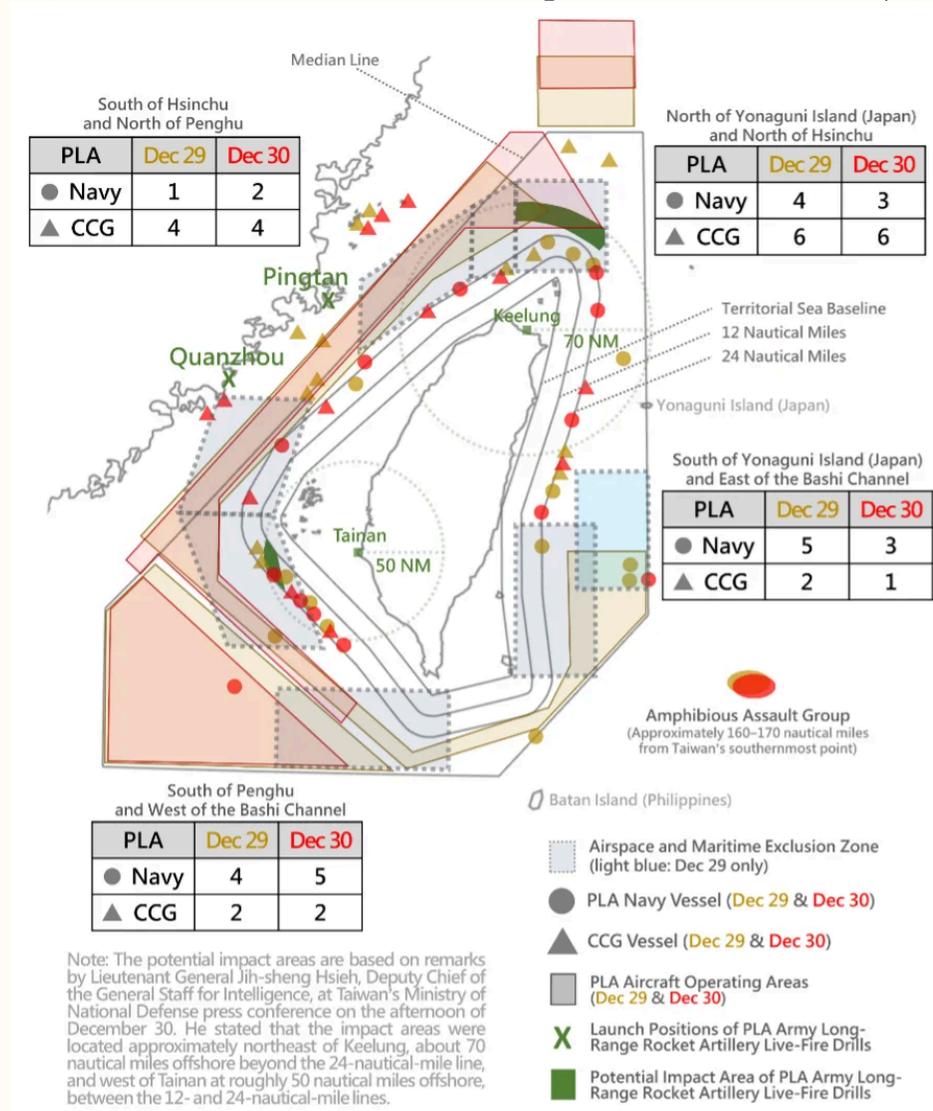
- The PLA launched another military exercise in late December 2025, with force scale and deployment locations broadly similar to previous drills.
- The exercise nonetheless signaled an effort by the Eastern Theater Command to sustain year-round readiness, likely in response to Xi Jinping's directive to achieve the capability to conduct operations against Taiwan by 2027.
- Compared with earlier exercises, this drill advanced invasion-related rehearsals, including scenarios involving the seizure of the Penghu Islands and parts of eastern Taiwan.
- Although China displayed a degree of restraint during this exercise, it also suggested that a future operation without such restraint could carry far more serious consequences, which would likely include significant disruption to air and maritime traffic in the Taiwan Strait and the Bashi Channel.

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At 7:31 a.m. Taipei time on December 29, 2025, Xinhua News Agency announced that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command would conduct military exercises around Taiwan under the name Justice Mission 2025 (正义使命—2025). The announcement designated seven no-fly and no-sail zones for December 30 and stated that the exercise concluded after 6:00 p.m. on December 31 (Xinhua, December 29, 2025, [a], [b], [December 31, 2025](#)). Figure 1 illustrates the deployment of PLA naval and air forces during the exercise from December 29–30 (Liberty Times, [December 29, 2025](#); [December 30, 2025](#)).

A contradictory feature of the exercise was the mixture of apparent restraint amid clear preparations for an invasion scenario. On the one hand, the scale and geographic scope of the exercise did not significantly escalate beyond previous exercises, nor did its activities provoke other countries. On the other, its actions revealed the PLA's intent to strengthen the Eastern Theater Command's ability to maintain constant combat readiness; and it involved rehearsing operations to seize the Penghu Islands and land areas of eastern Taiwan—stepping stones for a subsequent large-scale invasion of Taiwan's main island.

Figure 1: PLA Naval and Air Force Deployments, December 29–30



(Source: Compilation by K. Tristan Tang based on ROC MND press releases)

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The Exercise Largely Remained Within Previous Parameters

Justice Mission 2025 did not differ significantly from previous exercises in terms of the scale of naval and air forces involved, deployment locations, or training content. It was not the largest on record: the number of aircraft sorties and naval vessels detected on a single day was lower than observed in previous exercises (see Figure 2). For instance, a total of 130 PLA aircraft sorties were detected on December 29, which was fewer than during the Joint Sword–2024B exercise that took place in October 2024; while a total of 17 PLA naval vessels were detected on December 30—far fewer than the 27 vessels recorded during the Joint Sword–2024A exercise

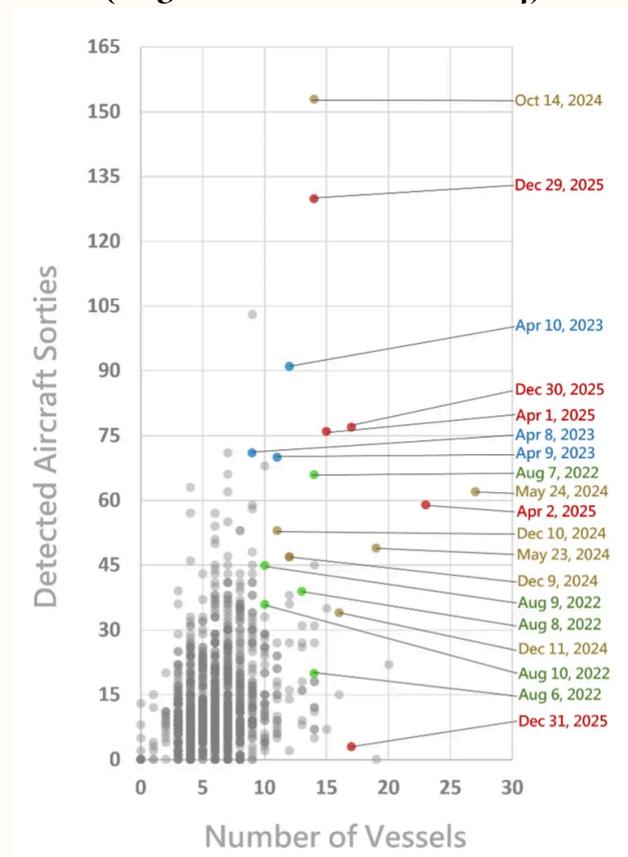
in May 2024.

The cumulative number of detected PLA aircraft sorties reached 210, which also is lower than the total recorded during the Joint Sword exercise in 2023; while the number of detected naval vessels across the three days totaled 48, which is in line with the two-day Joint Sword–2024A exercise, which registered 46. Table 1 presents a comparison of past major military operations conducted around Taiwan.

The exercise was also broadly similar to previous operations in terms of force deployment. Officially, Justice Mission 2025 consisted of seven designated exercise zones. Information disclosed during a press briefing by Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense, however, indicated that an eighth exercise zone existed in eastern Taiwan. PLA naval vessels operating in that area temporarily announced the establishment of this zone by radio on the morning of December 29 and terminated it around noon on the same day. Figure 3 compares the exercise zones formally announced by the PLA across different periods (Xinhua, [August 2, 2022](#), [May 23, 2024](#); [October 14, 2024](#); [December 29, 2025](#); [CGTN](#), [August 7, 2022](#); [Central News Agency](#), [December 30, 2025](#)).

Two features of the exercise indicate continuity with previous large-scale deployments. First, the spatial distribution of the exercise zones around Taiwan followed patterns seen in earlier drills. Although the total area of the designated zones was the largest on record, the locations themselves had all been used in past exercises. These included the northern and southern ends of the Taiwan Strait, the Bashi Channel, and waters east of Taiwan. Second, although the exercise zones were among the closest to Taiwan’s main island on record, including extending inside the territorial sea baseline off southern Taiwan, they did not vary too much from exercise areas designated during the 2022

Figure 2: PLA Aircraft Sorties and Naval Vessels Detected Around Taiwan (August 2022–December 2024)



(Source: Compilation by K. Tristan Tang based on ROC MND press releases)

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military activities around Taiwan and were also positioned very close to Taiwan’s territorial sea baseline.

The main training components of this exercise did not differ widely from those of previous drills. The exercise included sea–air combat readiness patrols, seizure of comprehensive superiority, blockades of key ports and areas, and three-dimensional external line deterrence and denial (海空战备警巡、夺取综合制权、要港要域封控、外线立体慑阻). The stated purpose was to test the Eastern Theater Command’s joint operational capabilities under realistic combat conditions and its ability to conduct rapid maneuvers, establish an all-domain operational posture, and execute a systemic blockade and control (Xinhua, December 29, 2025, [a] [b]). These all have been covered repeatedly in previous large-scale military activities conducted around Taiwan, according to official press releases and statements.

Enhanced Eastern Theater Command Readiness and Further Taiwan Invasion Rehearsals

Justice Mission 2025 did involve some new developments, even if on the surface it appeared similar to previous PLA activities around Taiwan. First, the timing was unusual. The decision to conduct a large-scale PLA exercise around Taiwan in December for the first time likely was taken to test the Eastern Theater Command’s year-end readiness. [1] December traditionally marks the end of the PLA’s training cycle and is usually less intensive. This pattern began to shift in 2025, as PLA Daily reported that many PLA units have started linking training plans across calendar years (PLA Daily, January 3, 2025). In other words, the exercise functioned as a readiness validation for the Eastern Theater Command. References to “remaining on high alert” (保持高度戒备) carry greater significance in December, which falls outside the PLA’s

Table 1: Comparison of Past PLA Major Military Operations Around Taiwan

Operations	Times	Days	Cumulative Detected Aircraft Sorties	Cumulative Detected Naval Vessels
Joint Sword-2023	April 2023	3	232	32
Joint Sword-2024A	May 2024	2	111	46
Joint Sword-2024B	October 2024	1	153	14
Joint Drill & Strait Thunder-2025A	April 2025	2	135	38
Justice Mission 2025	December 2025	3	210	48

(Source: Compilation by K. Tristan Tang based on ROC MND press releases)

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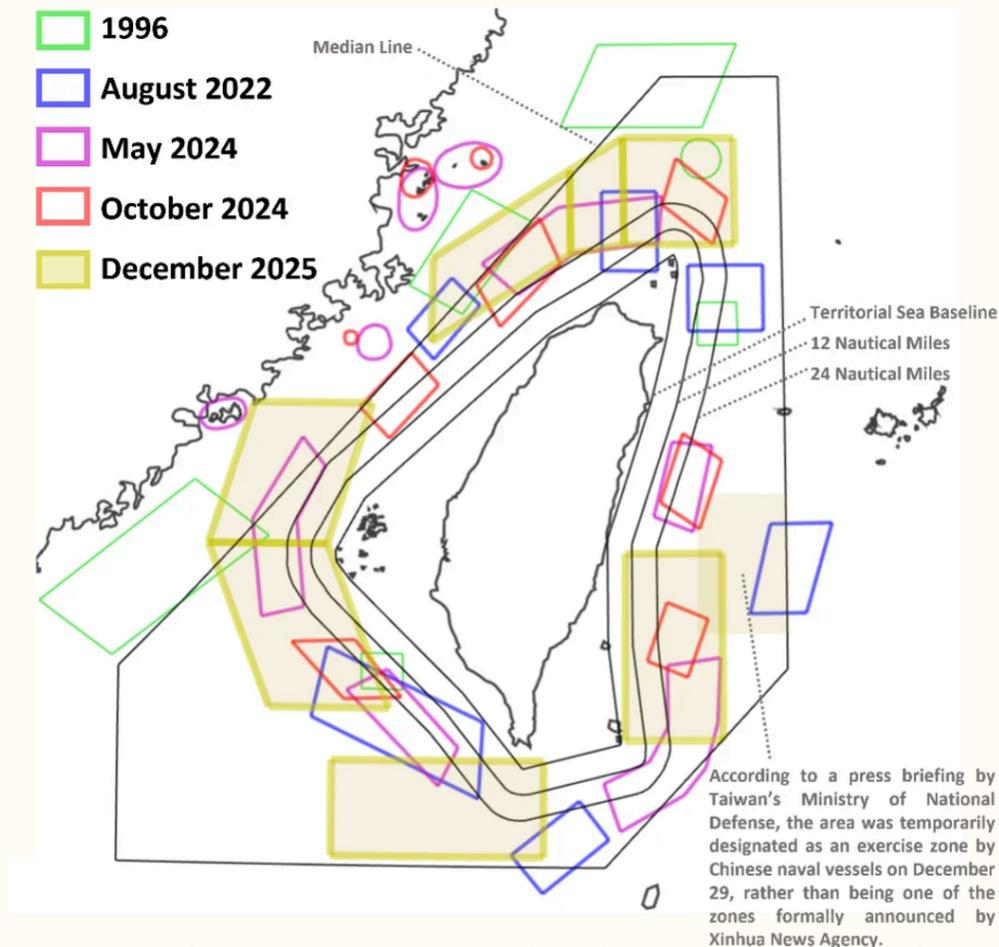
traditional peak training season (Xinhua, December 31, 2025). Sustaining high readiness at this time may indicate preparations to develop operational capability against Taiwan by 2027.

Second, in a step beyond previous drills in terms of invasion-related preparations, the exercise for the first time rehearsed the seizure of the Penghu Islands. This objective can be inferred from the nature of the exercises. Of two impact areas designated for live-fire strikes by PLA Army long-range rocket artillery units, official releases specified that the one off southwestern Taiwan, which is near the Penghu Islands, saw long-range joint firepower strikes conducted by the Army in coordination with the Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force, while those conducted off northern Taiwan involved only Army units (Xinhua, December 30, 2025, [a], [b]). [2] The

focus on multi-service participation in the southwestern impact area signals that it was the primary focus and is strongly suggestive of preparatory shaping operations intended to enable a follow-on occupation of the islands. This is because large-scale, cross-service joint operations require the commitment of substantial military resources and command priority. In wartime, such resource-intensive actions would be directed only against targets of high operational value.

Seizing Penghu would offer such high operational value. Beyond degrading its island-based defenses, it would secure a critical forward staging area for operations against Taiwan proper. It would put southwestern Taiwan within range of Army aviation helicopters, which are a key PLA asset for

Figure 3: Comparison of PLA-Announced Exercise Zones Across Major Exercises



(Source: Compilation by K. Tristan Tang based on Xinhua and Central News Agency)

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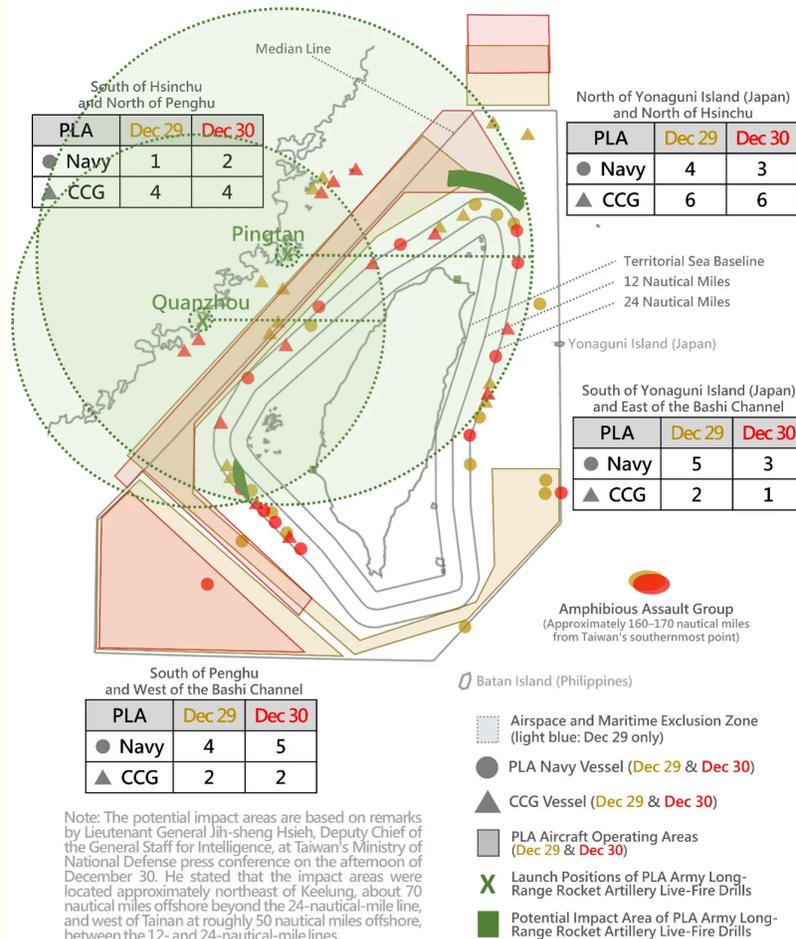
engaging Taiwanese armored formations, including tanks and other heavy ground units.

Figure 4 compares the impact points on December 30 with the corresponding launch distances of PLA Army long-range rocket artillery brigades. The green shaded areas outlined by dashed lines illustrate the approximate firing ranges of the two rocket brigades involved. This suggests that the so-called long-range joint firepower strikes conducted in waters southwest of Taiwan were in fact simulating bombardment of the Penghu Islands. The southwestern impact area is also within range of waters off northern Taiwan, which also suggests that the 27 Army rocket artillery rounds fired on December 30 may have simulated strikes against the Penghu Islands. The decision for the Pingtan-based rocket

brigade to fire northward likely reflected both political and military considerations: politically, shots near northern Taiwan generate stronger coercive signaling toward Taipei; militarily, firing toward the southwest risks being misread as an actual attack on Penghu, raising the danger of miscalculation.

The exercise also rehearsed operations to seize eastern Taiwan for the first time. This was more directly observable through the training activities of the Type 075 amphibious assault ship task force. On December 29, in waters southeast of Taiwan, PLA naval and air forces conducted drills on vessel-aircraft coordination, maritime target strikes, long-distance raids, and comprehensive support. On December 30, PLA naval forces carried out training focused on all-domain force projection, breaching and raids by

Figure 4: Comparison of PLA-Announced Exercise Zones Across Major Exercises



(Source: Compilation by K. Tristan Tang based on ROC MND press releases)

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elite forces, and the seizure of key ports (Xinhua, [December 29, 2025](#), [December 30, 2025](#)). These training items emphasized the establishment of air and maritime superiority and rehearsed tri-domain landings on Taiwan's eastern coast. The drills went beyond traditional amphibious beach assaults and included air assault operations involving helicopter-borne troops.

Type 075 amphibious assault ships operated and trained frequently east of Taiwan over the course of 2025. These activities included the hull number 33 Anhui, which transited through the Miyako Strait into the Philippine Sea in February and May, and the hull number 31 Hainan, which participated in this exercise (Japan Ministry of Defense, [February 12, 2025](#), [May 16, 2025](#); [Liberty Times](#), December 30, 2025). Notably, in February 2025, a Type 075 amphibious assault ship task force also conducted training in waters southwest of Taiwan and even temporarily announced a live-fire drill ([RW News](#), February 26, 2025).

Taiwan's military designates eastern Taiwan as a force preservation area. This region includes two critical air bases that host F-16 Block 70 fighters, many of which are stored in hardened, blast-resistant mountain shelters. If PLA ground forces were to seize eastern Taiwan and these key military facilities, Taiwan would suffer severe losses to its remaining combat power.

Third, this exercise made a notable effort to rehearse the isolation or blockade of the Taiwan Strait. The designated exercise zones largely covered the maritime and air routes linking Kinmen and Matsu with Taiwan. As a result, Taiwan's domestic airlines ultimately announced the cancellation of a large number of flights between Taiwan and both Kinmen and Matsu ([Liberty Times](#), December 29, 2025). Maritime traffic, although affected, was not fully disrupted ([Taiwan FactCheck Center](#), December 31, 2025).

Avoiding Escalation Amid Political Tensions

The PLA's frequent training activities involving amphibious assault ships around Taiwan this year, including rehearsals of tri-domain landings against Taiwan, likely reflect an internal assessment that the PLA possesses sufficient combat power within the first island chain and holds a high degree of confidence in its naval and air superiority. On this basis, the PLA appears to be moving toward more intensive training for amphibious operations, which are generally feasible only under conditions of air and maritime dominance, and potentially full air and sea control. This logic may parallel the significance of the dual-aircraft carrier operations conducted beyond the first island chain in June 2025, suggesting that the PLA has concluded that it has achieved a substantial degree of control in this area, including around Taiwan ([China Brief](#), July 25, 2025).

Any restraint shown in the most recent exercise likely stemmed from political concerns, such as a comparatively less intense phase of U.S.–PRC strategic and trade competition. The PLA sought to avoid a force posture that Washington or Taipei might misread as an imminent invasion and that could trigger unintended escalation or accidents, even if it also wanted to signal dissatisfaction with deepening U.S.–Taiwan military cooperation. Amid recent tensions with Tokyo, the placement of the exercise zones at relatively far distances from Japan's southwestern islands, as in the August 2022 and April 2023 drills, is also indicative of a desire to avoid escalation and miscalculation. This was done even at the expense of rehearsing a true blockade, which likely would include cutting off the waters between Taiwan's Yilan and Japan's Yonaguni Island, a narrow corridor of about 60 nautical miles and a key route for Taiwan to maintain external links during wartime, given

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the presence of Taiwan's Suao naval base nearby and the fact that this is one of the closest points between Taiwan and foreign territory. It would also involve enforcing a maritime exclusion zone across all seven exercise zones, halting all commercial shipping traffic in the Taiwan Strait. In contrast, though shipping was affected, it was not halted, and there were no reports of PRC government vessels boarding and inspecting Taiwanese ships. If it wished, however, it could fully implement navigation restrictions in these zones, disrupting transit through the Taiwan Strait and the Bashi Channel or intensifying harassment and boarding of transiting vessels from multiple countries.

Conclusion

In conducting Justice Mission 2025, Beijing signaled the seriousness with which it is preparing its capabilities for an invasion of Taiwan. The exercise constitutes a warning that the world should be more vigilant and undertake more comprehensive planning and preparation. The apparent contradiction between avoiding excessive escalation and forging ahead with rehearsals for offensive operations was likely due to overriding political considerations. It is entirely possible that the next major military exercise will not involve the same level of restraint.

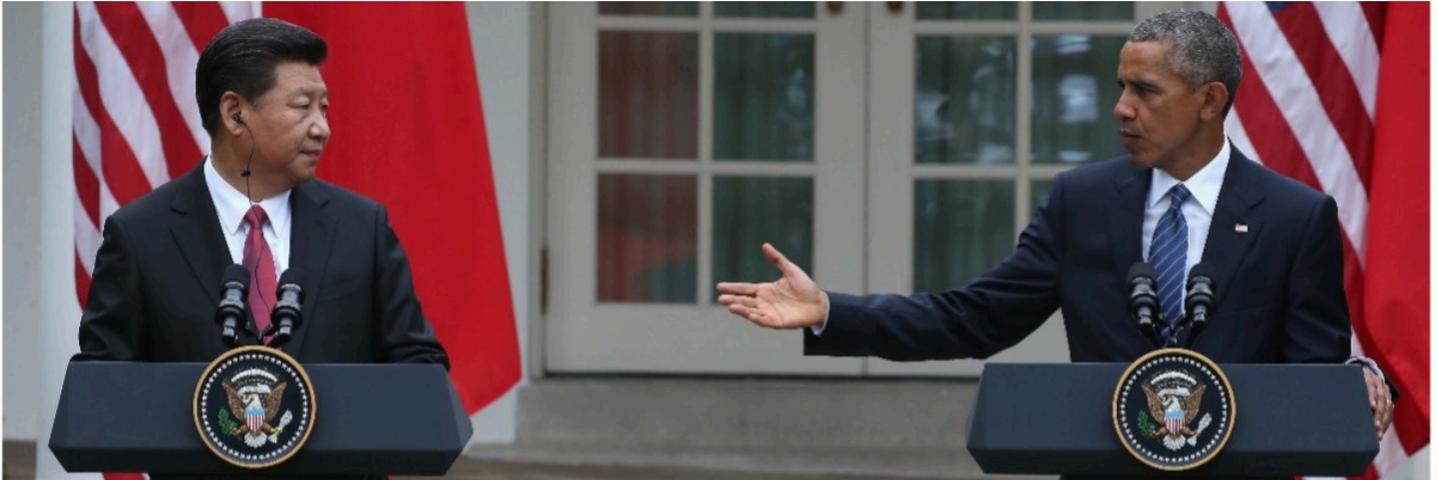
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Notes

[1] Previous major drills occurred in April, May, August, or October.

[2] According to Taiwan's Deputy Chief of the General Staff for Intelligence, Lieutenant General Jih-sheng Hsieh, impact areas were located northeast of Keelung and west of Tainan. In addition, the launch locations of the PLA Army long-range rocket artillery brigades were identified through open-source geolocation analysis conducted by Joseph Wen, project lead of the open-source intelligence project at the Taiwan Defense Studies Initiative, based on Chinese official media footage. The identified sites include a northern launch location and a southwestern launch location (X/Joseph.W 約瑟, December 30, 2025, [a], [b]).

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



U.S. President Barack Obama (R) speaks next to Chinese President Xi Jinping at a joint press conference at The White House on September 25, 2015. At the time, Xi was pushing for a “new type of great power relations,” a framing that the U.S. side did not accede to. (Source: Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

CNP Part III: Growing CNP Drove Foreign Policy Shift

Erik R. Quam
January 6, 2026

Executive Summary

- Beijing’s pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy in the 2010s followed official assessments that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had risen to become the second-ranked country globally in terms of comprehensive national power (CNP). This led to expectations that the PRC should be more active in shaping the international environment.
- Chinese assessments of a narrowing gap between U.S. and Chinese CNP start with the U.S. response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Some Chinese scholars have characterized the U.S. as beginning a “sustained decline” around 2005.
- Changed behavior preceded Xi Jinping’s rise to become Party General Secretary. Examples include trade restrictions to regional partners starting with cutting off rare earth metal exports to Japan in 2010, and the persistent presence of PRC vessels around Scarborough Shoal and the Senkaku Islands following incidents in the South China Sea—likely informed by Chinese assessments of the comparative balance of power.

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Executive Summary (continued)

- Frustration emerged across 2017–2020 as Beijing appeared to conclude that its accrual of CNP had not automatically bestowed upon it global recognition of a new leadership role. This was triggered in part by U.S. rejection of Xi’s framing of a “new type of great power relations” as the basis for the bilateral U.S.-China relationship.
- Beijing has responded by working to build “discourse power” commensurate with its international position. This involves undermining strategic rivals via public opinion warfare, finding common ground with willing partners, and deepening cooperation with those who have overlapping interests with the PRC.

Editor’s note: This is the third article in a four-part series. The first and second articles can be read [here](#) and [here](#).

The Communiqué from the fourth plenary session of the 20th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) central committee described the 14th Five-Year Plan period as a time in which the country’s “economic strength, science and technology strength, and comprehensive national power leaped to a new stage” (经济实力、科技实力、综合国力跃上新台阶) ([Xinhua](#), October 23, 2025). The phrase “comprehensive national power” (CNP; 综合国力) appears once more in the document, where it is collocated with “international influence” (国际影响力)—echoing a formulation that appeared in Xi’s report to the 20th Party Congress in 2022, and has appeared frequently ever since ([People’s Daily](#), November 8, 2022).

In conceptions of CNP within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), what matters is not just the measurement of one’s own national power, but where one sits relative to other countries within the international system. This is important, Chinese experts have argued, for informing policy decisions: Policies that the

PRC pursues should differ depending on its CNP relative to that of other countries. The Party has therefore emphasized using measurements of comparative CNP to shape its understanding of the international system and shifts in the balance of power. Analyzing PRC foreign policy through the lens of official views of the country’s relative CNP provides a structural explanation of significant policy shifts in the 2010s, rather than ascribing policy changes to a more assertive and self-assured leader—Xi Jinping. Xi may be bolder than his predecessors. But changes based on scientific measures of the international system, domestic conditions in the PRC, and comparative CNP provide another plausible rationale for shifting Chinese behavior. These suggest that PRC foreign policy would have changed significantly in this timeframe, with or without Xi. This analysis provides additional evidence that changing assessments within the system on the direction the PRC should take predated Xi’s rise.

PRC Rises to Number Two

Beijing’s pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy in the 2010s followed official assessments that the PRC had risen to become the second-ranked country globally in terms of CNP.

This shift started with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. The 2003 invasion of Iraq further fueled assessments of shifting power dynamics. Chinese analysts viewed it as evidence of the decline of U.S. power due to the erosion of European alliances and the rise of social unrest in the United States as people came out in protest of the invasion. According to theorists of CNP, these factors—robust alliances and social stability—are important indicators of CNP that fall under the broader metric of political strength ([China Brief](#), September 5, 2025).

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By 2005, according to Hu Angang (胡鞍钢), an influential Chinese scholar, the United States had entered a period of “sustained decline” (持续下降型) while the PRC (along with several other countries) were experiencing a period of “sustained rising” (持续崛起) (Guancha, April 5, 2017). Over the following years, a raft of evidence across broad PRC-identified indicators of CNP measurement seemed to reinforce this claim. In 2008, the Olympic Games showcased the PRC’s soft power strength and political strength, while its economic strength was manifest as it became the top trade partner of more than half of the countries in the world and, by the end of 2009, surpassed Germany as the world’s top exporting country (General Administration of Sports of China, November 6, 2006; The Associated Press, January 10, 2010; Lowy Institute, accessed March 15, 2024). The fallout from the global financial crash accelerated the shift. Implicitly acknowledging these developments, General Secretary Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) noted in a 2009 speech that peace and development were still the main themes of the era, but that “[CNP] competition is becoming increasingly fierce” (但综合国力竞争日趋激烈) (FMPRC, July 20, 2009).

At around this time, Chinese observers and policymakers began to assess that the PRC’s CNP was second only to that of the United States. Hu Angang argued that 2008 was the year it had reached that status (China Education Daily, March 3, 2013), though the 2010 and 2011 volumes of China Study (中国情报), an annual journal published by Tsinghua University the Hu edited, both ranked the PRC as the number two power starting even earlier, in 2005 (China Study, 2010, 2011). Other experts, such as Men Honghua (门洪华), wrote in 2016 that the PRC had “reached number two status” (居世界第二位) in terms of CNP in the second decade of the 21st century (Men, 2016). [1]

One of the most significant changes at the time was the PRC’s surpassing of Japan to become

the world’s second largest economy (The New York Times, August 15, 2010). Beijing understood this as a milestone in its economic strength, a key component of CNP. At the time, bilateral relations were worsening (China Brief, September 10, 2010, September 21, 2012). The 2012 “Yellow Book” on international politics and security, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, attributed these growing complications to a “reversal of [CNP]” (综合国力发生逆转), and argued, in deterministic fashion, that prospects for improving Sino–Japanese relations consequently were not strong (Li and Zhang, December 2012). [2] This assessment is consistent with Xi’s framing of the importance of the Innovation–Driven Development Strategy—one of seven national development strategies enshrined in the Party Charter—which is based on an understanding that, as the PRC grew stronger, the West, and the United States in particular, would eventually cut it off from access to Western technology (Xinhua, February 28, 2016; Party Members Net, October 22, 2022; China Brief, September 26, 2025).

New Assessment; New Approach

The PRC’s rise to number two in the world in terms of CNP called for a shift in its approach to the international system. The CNP scholar Huang Shuofeng (黄朔风) lists contributions to international competition as a variable under the category of foreign policy power that is used to calculate CNP (China Brief, September 5, 2025). The changes that experts often suggested were for a more assertive and proactive foreign policy. Yan, writing in 2014, explained that “profound changes” (深刻变化) in the international landscape required the PRC to engage in “major power diplomacy” (大国外交). In the ensuing decade, he wrote, “the gap in [CNP] between China and the United States will narrow, but the gap in [CNP] between the two countries and other countries will also widen” (在中美综合国力将缩小的同时, 两国还将拉大与其

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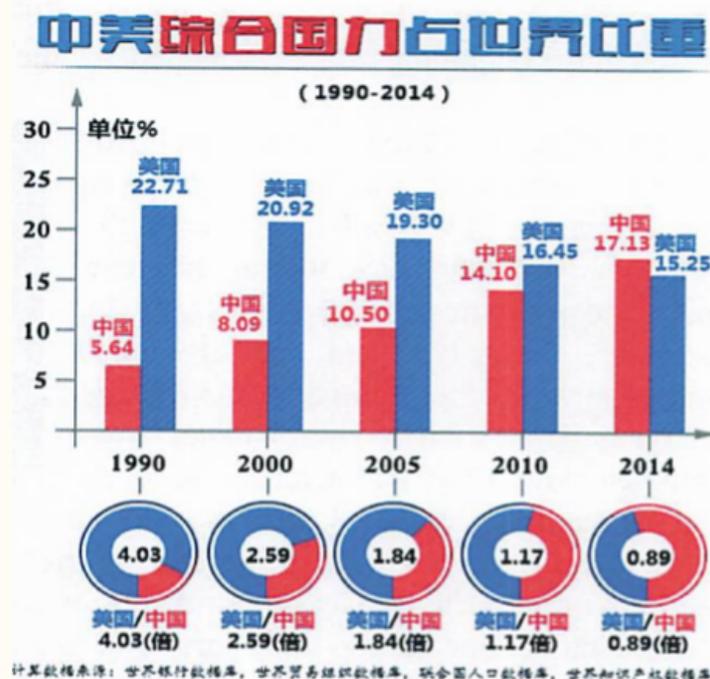
他大国的综合实力差距). The balance of power between the PRC and other countries, therefore, “is no longer ‘weak versus strong’ but ‘big versus small’” (不再是“弱对强”而是“大对小”), and so the PRC’s diplomacy should change accordingly (Tsinghua Institute of International Relations, June 5, 2014). This reflected earlier remarks made by then-foreign minister Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) at the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum that “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact” (中国是一个大国, 其他国家是小国, 而这就是事实) (Reform Data, November 6, 2012).

Yang’s statement at ASEAN sparked debate as to whether China was abandoning its earlier “hide and bide” (韬光养晦) approach to foreign policy. Yan Xuetong alluded to this in a 2015 book in which he said that, in the coming decade, it would not be possible to conceal or avoid the PRC’s status as a major power and so its diplomacy had to change. Yan went on to explain that “not taking the lead” (不当头) in

international affairs made sense in the 1990s when the PRC was comparatively far weaker than the United States, but that as the CNP gap between the two had shrunk significantly, the PRC had to “have the courage to participate in the game of great powers” (勇于参加大国博弈) (Yan, 2015). [3] This validated political scientist Rush Doshi’s analysis of the shift in leadership assessments in 2009–2010 away from “hide and bide” and toward a “new assertiveness” (Doshi, 2021). [4]

Changed PRC behavior is exemplified by CCP reactions to the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 and the 2010 and 2012 Senkakus incidents, which included persistent presence of PRC vessels (See USNI News, October 16, 2012; AMTI, May 22, 2017). In 2010, the PRC cut off rare earth metal exports to Japan (the PRC then accounted for around 80 percent of Japanese rare earth imports) and imposed an embargo on Philippine fruit exports to the PRC in 2012. Both actions were demonstrations of the PRC seeking to translate elements of CNP, in this case economic

Figure 1: Hu Angang’s Rankings of U.S. and PRC Comparative CNP



These data were published on the State Council Webportal in 2015 and remained available as of 2024. The same data are tabulated in an article by Hu published in the *Economic Herald* (经济导刊) in 2016.

(Source: Economic Herald)

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strength, into power to effect change internationally. The writer Meng Lingwei (孟令伟) wrote in 2012 that “if a country with the second largest [CNP] in the world cannot or dare not defend its sovereignty, what is the point of development?” (如果一个综合国力居于世界第二的国家不能或不敢捍卫自己的主权, 那发展还有什么意义?) ([Aisixiang](#), May 30, 2012). Just a year after the Senkakus dispute, the PRC began construction on artificial islands in the Spratly islands, eventually building close to 3,000 acres that are now home to military bases.

Once Xi came to power, it became even clearer that Beijing was seeking a role in the international system that was commensurate with its relative power. In 2013, Xi said the PRC would provide development aid “as China’s economic strength and [CNP] continue to improve” (随着中国经济实力和综合国力不断提高) ([FMPRC](#), March 25, 2013). In 2014, he explained that the country’s rising CNP would increase its “ability and willingness to provide more public goods to the Asia–Pacific region and the world” ([Xinhua](#), November 9, 2014). These statements were followed by substantial policy responses, in the form of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, launched in 2013, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), launched in 2016. These are both part of a program designed to advance CCP views of the principles and values underpinning global development aid. PRC contributions to the United Nations have also increased exponentially, from \$12 million in 2000 to over \$380 million in 2021. It is now the second largest contributor to the UN overall budget and to its peacekeeping budget ([CSIS](#), accessed December 1, 2025).

Chinese assessments of shifting comparative CNP also underpinned Xi’s push for a “new type of great power relations” (新型大国关系) with the United States in 2012–2013. By that point, according to a 2021 assessment by the China

Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank under the Ministry of State Security, analysts assessed that the United States had been in decline for almost a decade (CICIR, 2021). [5] Calls for a “new type of great power relations” (新型大国关系) represented an outward push for recognition that the PRC was an equal great power. A 2012 Xinhua article noted that “the substantial increase in China’s [CNP]” (中国综合国力大幅提升), among other factors, had led to “important changes in the balance of power between China and the United States and in the world structure” (中美实力对比及世界格局发生重要变化的大背景下) ([Xinhua](#), December 19, 2012). A 2013 Xinhua article, meanwhile, explained that the PRC’s proposed “new type of great power relations” would “increase [Beijing’s] shaping and leading role in Sino–U.S. relations” (增加对中美关系的塑造和引领作用). It explained that, as the CNP gap between the two narrowed, the PRC should not “passively adapt” (被动适应) but rather proactively set the agenda for the relationship ([Xinhua](#), June 9, 2013). Hu Angang, writing in 2015, also pointed to fundamental changes in U.S. and PRC CNP as key to establishing a new type of great power relations. Hu and his co-authors went so far as to assess that, based on comparative CNP calculations, the PRC had actually surpassed the United States in 2013, though no other analysts had shared this assessment to date (Hu et al., 2015, p. 26). [6]

The “new type of great power relations” framing became a central feature of PRC messaging around the 2013 U.S.–China Summit President that President Obama hosted in Washington, D.C. At the summit, Xi told Obama that their countries’ relations had entered “a new historical starting point,” and he called for a “new model of major-country relations” ([Obama White House](#), June 7, 2013). This was perhaps the clearest instance of the PRC’s changing assessment of the international balance of power, based on CNP calculations, driving

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foreign policy.

Frustration Prompts Push for Discourse Power

Frustration emerged across 2017–2020 as Beijing appeared to conclude that its accrual of CNP had not automatically bestowed global recognition of a new leadership role for the PRC. The United States had not accepted Xi's framing of the relationship, which Beijing viewed as a rejection of its right to leadership in the international system. Observers in the PRC seemed surprised that the sheer size of the country's CNP did not cow regional neighbors and instead was followed in the United States by a shift to a much more competitive approach that Beijing was unable to prevent. Jia Qingguo (贾庆国), a professor at Beijing University and a member of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, explained in a 2022 *People's Tribune* article that “the outside world, especially countries led by the United States, is not adaptable to and does not accept China's rapid rise in strength” (外部世界，特别是美国为首的西方发达国家，对中国快速强起来的不适应和不接受) (*People's Tribune*, October 25, 2022). [7]

At the heart of this frustration, according to PRC experts, was an inability to control global narratives about the PRC or proactively shape broader international discourse. The China Institute of International Security (CIIS), a prominent think tank under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained in 2011 that competition between the “China threat theory” (中国威胁论) and the “peaceful development theory” (和平发展论) reflected the competition for the “right to speak” (话语权) (Shen, 2011). [8] “The root cause of the ‘bottleneck’” (瓶颈的根源) in the country's international communication work, according to one research article, is that the “colonial system” (殖民主义) still dominates the world. Breaking this “monopoly” (垄断) of

Western communication discourse is therefore key to breaking through the existing “international communication pattern” (国际传播格局) (Chen and Liu, 2022). [9] As Xi has argued in reference to discourse power competition, the PRC has not resolved the issue of “being shouted at/scolded” (挨骂) (*People's Daily Online*, September 7, 2021).

International attention on PRC activities in the South China Sea is a clear example of this. One analyst, writing in 2017, explained that the PRC's 2014 deployment of an offshore oil rig off the coast of Vietnam received wide international condemnation because the PRC lacked maritime discourse power. They noted that the international community did not respect the PRC's “marine rights and interests” (海洋权益) and that some “foreign major countries” (域外大国) supported Vietnam by distorting the facts through media channels they control, while deploying the military around the area to threaten PRC national security interests (*Sun and Wu*, 2017). [10] More recently, in 2023, *People's Liberation Army (PLA) scholars* explained that the United States uses “media propaganda” (媒体宣传) to hype the PRC's “extraordinary actions” (“出格”的举动) in the South China Sea (*PLA Daily Online*, June 30, 2023).

Winning the competition over global narratives is now a central focus of what Xi has tasked the system to accomplish. This reflects efforts to leverage the country's growing CNP to build influence around the world, based on assessments that CNP is the basis of discourse power. As such, this demonstrates a use case for how the Party thinks about using CNP rather than simply tracking how the country is building CNP (*People's Tribune*, November 10, 2019). As Xi explained in 2021, the PRC must “form an international discourse power that matches the PRC's [CNP] and international status” (形成同我国综合国力和国际地位相匹配的国

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际话语权) ([Xinhua](#), June 1, 2021). Chinese analysts talk about the “right to speak” as an asymmetry of public opinion warfare, and an extension and important manifestation of national power, national interests, and national image. They advocate enhancing the PRC’s right to speak amid efforts to “squeeze the space for peacefully rising powers to exist” (挤压和平崛起大国的国际生存空间) ([People’s Forum](#), November 10, 2019). According to a 2017 article published on the PLA’s official website, the PRC offered an alternative development path for countries “hoping to accelerate development while maintaining independence” (希望加快发展又不希望走依附式道路) ([Guangming Daily](#), December 8, 2017).

To do this, efforts target three camps, according to Li Xuanliang (李宣良), Deputy Director of the PLA Branch of Xinhua News Agency. In the first camp are those who see the PRC as a strategic rival. The PRC should have no illusions here, put itself first, and “fight but not break” (斗而不破). Second are those who largely agree with the PRC’s values and want to cooperate. Li suggests that the PRC should seek to find common ground with such countries. Third are those with common interests and “emotional responses” (情感共鸣点多) to Chinese ideas. With this last group, the PRC should strengthen cooperation and deepen its friendship ([PLA Daily Online](#), accessed December 1, 2025).

Efforts targeting the first camp are evident in PRC attempts to undermine U.S. narratives in the South China Sea. It criticizes U.S. “navigation hegemony” (航行霸权) and “militarization of the South China Sea” (南海军事化) and calls the United States the “biggest destroyer” (最大破坏者) of peace and stability in the region. Chinese analysts believe these efforts constitute an improved approach to “public opinion warfare” (舆论战), as it tries to counter what it calls U.S. “hyping and exaggerating” (炒作渲染) of the threat Beijing poses to the

international order ([PLA Daily Online](#), November 25, 2023). This shift also explains the more proactive release of videos of air and maritime encounters with the U.S. military (and others). It is also central to the ongoing, persistent efforts to frame Taiwan’s status within U.N. Resolution 2758 and the “one China principle.”

Efforts targeting the latter two camps can be seen in CCP attempts to push a new approach to the international order. Xi emphasized in the 20th Party Congress Report that the PRC “advocated for and practiced true multilateralism” (倡导践行真正的多边主义), “opposed all hegemonism and power politics” (反对一切霸权主义和强权政治), and worked for the “reform and development of the global governance system” (全球治理体系改革和建设). By extension and as a result of that growth, he said, the PRC’s role in shaping the international system would evolve ([Xinhua](#), October 26, 2022). A week later, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) penned an article in the *People’s Daily*, in which he emphasized the “significant increase” (显著提升) in the country’s CNP and international standing (综合国力和国际地位) over the preceding decade and called for forming an “international discourse power to match” (匹配的国际话语权) ([People’s Daily](#), November 8, 2022).

The rollout of four global initiatives, related to development, security, civilization, and governance, reflect Beijing’s boldest attempt to date to challenge the international order. The first two of these attack key principles underpinning the global order, calling for “common values” (共同价值观) to replace “universal values” (普世价值). This undermines documents such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which Beijing rejects as demonstrating U.S. values hegemony. The Global Development Initiative also seeks to undermine the values and norms that underpin much international aid and development

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assistance. Western countries, including the United States, have long tied provision of aid to certain levels of human rights protections, transparency on governance and how assistance aid is applied, and democratic governance. PRC leaders view these conditions as interference in countries' internal affairs and as tools to protect U.S. hegemony. Beijing continues to press hard on its initiatives, using them as instruments of discourse power to undermine U.S. positions globally and damage the image of the United States on a global scale. By doing so, it frames the United States as a “warlike” (好战的国家) country that causes instability around the world (People's Daily, June 16, 2022; MND, December 26, 2024).

Conclusion

The documented shift in PRC foreign policy behavior in the 2010s is likely the result of a confluence of factors. The theoretical literature from PRC academics on how comparative CNP is supposed to shape and drive policy and strategy, coupled with the Party's emphasis on the importance of CNP to a number of its critical ideological positions, provides strong evidence that one likely driver of behavioral change was a change in calculations of comparative CNP. This was driven by assessments that the PRC had risen to be the second most powerful country in the world. As such, the CCP expected certain perceived benefits in shaping and leading the international system to follow.

As the PRC continues to grow confident in its assessments of the international balance of power and the PRC's place in it, those growing expectations for the PRC may not be met. How Beijing responds should the region not meet its expectations could challenge regional stability. As the country looks to its 2035 goals of becoming a leading power in CNP, navigating to an expected more regionally dominant position while avoiding costly conflict will be a critical

test of the PRC leadership.

All views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Government, Department of War, or U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

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Notes

[1] Men Honghua [门洪华], “China's Rise and the Transformation of the International Order” [中国崛起与国际秩序变革]. *Quarterly Journal of International Politics* [国际政治科学], 2016, 1(1), p. 60–89.

[2] Li Shenming [李慎明], Zhang Yuyan [张宇燕], eds., *Global Politics and Security Report (2012)* [全球政治与安全报告 (2012)]. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, Beijing, China, 2012. p. 53.

[3] Yan Xuetong [阎学通]. *The Transfer of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition* [世界权力的转移: 政治领导与战略竞争]. Peking University Press, Beijing, September, 2015.

[4] Rush Doshi. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Doshi does a good job marking the shift in language to a more assertive and more proactive foreign policy. Where this research shifts from Doshi is by centering the focus on Chinese assessments of these changes globally as being driven by comparative CNP between the PRC, the United States, and the rest of the global community. Doshi's framing of political, economic, and military instruments for “building” (see Page 179) identify three of the 7–8 central elements of CNP shaping PRC understanding CNP.

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[5] China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations [中国现代国际关系研究院]. *Changes Unseen in a Century and National Security* [百年变局与国家安全]. Beijing: Current Affairs Publishing House, 2021. p. 81.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

[6] Hu Angang [胡鞍钢], Zheng Yanfeng [郑云峰], Gao Yuning [高宇宁], “An Assessment of the Comprehensive National Power of China and the United States, (1990–2013)” [对中美综合国力的评估 (1990—2013年)] *Journal of Tsinghua University* [清华大学学报:哲学社会科学版], No.1, 2015 (30). p. 26.

[7] The People’s Tribune (人民论坛) is a platform under the People’s Daily, and consists of three periodicals, three websites, and a think tank ([People’s Tribune](#), accessed December 15).

[8] Shen Yamei [沈雅梅]. “Thoughts on Western Media’s Hot Discussions on ‘China’s Image’” [对西方媒体热议“中国形象”的思考]. *International Issues Research* [国际问题研究]. 2011(4):8–1470.

[9] Chen Yunsong [陈云松], Liu Jiankan [柳建坤], “Contemporary Chinese International Communication: Audience Characteristics and Improvement Path” [当代中国国际传播:受众特征与提升路径]. *Journal of the China Executive Academy, Pudong* [中国浦东干部学院学报]. Pudong, Shanghai, 2022,16(3):129–13684, p.130.

[10] Sun Kai [孙凯] and Wu Hao [吴昊], “Thoughts on Building China’s Maritime Voice-Taking the ‘981’ Platform Incident in the South China Sea as an Example” [关于构建中国海洋话语权的思考—以南海“981”钻井平台事件为例] *Journal of China Maritime University* [中国海洋大学学报], 2017. No.1., p. 23.



Contemporary Amperex Technology Limited (CATL) battery storage facility in Switzerland (Source: Kecko / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-2.0)

Battery Statecraft: Green Tech Minerals are a Military Asset

Tye Graham
January 8, 2026

Executive Summary

- Beijing sees its battery dominance as an emerging instrument of statecraft. By controlling key stages of the value chain, it can impose delay, uncertainty, and selective denial costs on foreign clean-tech and defense-adjacent industries.
- Beijing frames “new energy” supply chains as strategic infrastructure, linking industrial policy to economic security and national defense mobilization. This approach treats exports as leverage and domestic capacity as a hedge against sanctions, embargoes, and wartime disruption.
- The most consequential chokepoints are upstream and midstream inputs such as graphite processing, cathode and electrolyte materials, specialized equipment, and select high-performance chemistries where domestic scale and integration can outmatch alternative suppliers even when cell assembly is diversified.

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Executive Summary (continued)

- For the United States and allies, the core vulnerability is not finished-cell shortages but dependence on Chinese-controlled processing and materials that shape cost, availability, and timelines for electric vehicles, grid storage, and clean-tech manufacturing, especially during trade disputes.

On the edge of a small German town, a Chinese-owned battery plant turns stacks of graphite-coated anodes and lithium-rich cathodes into cells bound for European electric vehicles (EVs) ([Xinhua](#), July 23, 2025). The Chinese-processed lithium, graphite, and other inputs are powering the EV industry while also powering the motors, guidance electronics, and energy stores for future missiles, radars, and unmanned systems. In 2023, exports from the People's Republic of China (PRC) of “new three” (新三样) products (EVs, lithium-ion batteries, and solar cells) passed \$150 billion, up nearly 30 percent year on year. Chinese factories produced roughly 70 percent of global output of lithium-ion batteries ([Xinhua](#), January 12, 2024; [U.S. International Trade Commission](#), June 2024). The PRC maintains not only pricing power in civilian markets but also a growing edge in the power systems, logistics backbone, and coercive leverage that underpin its next generation of military strength ([PLA Daily](#), August 23, 2024; [Sina Finance](#), October 10, 2025).

Emerging Battery Empire as a ‘New-Quality Productive Force’

Beijing now treats its domestic battery complex as a strategic asset, not just an export engine. Power and storage installations across vehicles and new energy projects climbed past 435 GWh in 2023, and firms like CATL and BYD now sit at the top of global rankings. The PRC increasingly controls the midstream where cathodes, anodes, cells, and battery packs are designed and built

at scale ([The Beijing News](#), February 29, 2024). The National Energy Administration's 2025 storage report adds that the PRC holds more than 40 percent of global new-type energy-storage capacity, of which lithium batteries make up over 96 percent. This ties grid storage directly back to the same lithium and materials base that feeds EVs ([National Energy Administration](#), July 31, 2025).

Chinese leaders frame this battery complex as a prime example of “new-quality productive forces” (新质生产力), their label for advanced, innovation-driven industries ([Chinese Academy of Sciences](#), March 5, 2024; [China Brief](#), June 30, 2025). Work reports and People's Daily articles cast new energy vehicles and power batteries as pillars of a modern industrial system, and General Secretary Xi Jinping has called on Jiangsu Province to become an “important front” (重要阵地) for these new forces, prompting provincial planners to put EVs and battery materials at the center of dense, AI-enabled energy and manufacturing clusters ([National Development and Reform Commission](#), March 20, 2024; [People's Daily](#), June 14, 2024, October 21, 2025).

These new-quality productive forces rest on a few midstream inputs that the PRC nearly monopolizes. Chinese industry figures estimate that in 2024 Chinese plants supplied roughly 96 percent of global anode shipments and in early 2025 accounted for more than 98 percent of global production of lithium-battery anode materials ([Sohu](#), January 24, 2025; [Shanshan Technology](#), April 22, 2025). Government and industry reports suggest a similar story for cathode materials ([Sina Finance](#), February 27, 2025; [ITDCW](#), January 20, 2025). Most EV and storage cells still depend on graphite anodes, lithium salts, and cathode powders that come out of Chinese factories, which gives Beijing leverage at the material level before a single pack reaches a vehicle or weapon.

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Beijing is now locking its midstream leverage into law. Under the 2020 Export Control Law and a 2024 Dual-Use Items Export Control Regulation, high-risk exports pass through a national dual-use licensing system run by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology; an October 2025 MOFCOM–Customs Announcement No. 58 adds high-energy lithium-ion cells, key cell-production equipment and synthetic-graphite anode processes to a controlled list (MOFCOM, accessed December 19, 2024, October 9, 2025; China Brief, May 23, 2025, October 17, 2025). These build on the same licensing and end-use checks already applied to rare earths to ration supply to specific users (Defense One, July 9, 2025). The result is a framework that lets Beijing transform its dominance in battery and graphite inputs into a targeted tool of “battery statecraft,” including against foreign defense supply chains.

From Civilian Battery Scale to Military Power Systems

Chinese battery scale is already bleeding directly into military platforms. An assessment by Taiwan’s Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR) notes that lithium iron phosphate batteries are now widely used in green energy storage and unmanned vehicles and argues that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) sees them as a safer, longer-life replacement for legacy lead-acid systems in many roles (INDSR, April 2022). In parallel, the 14th Five-Year Plan on Modern Logistics instructs civilian agencies to replace diesel trucks, forklifts, and depot equipment with new-energy models. This creates a domestic base of electric assets that double as a ready template for electric fuel convoys, autonomous supply vehicles, and battery-backed depots that can be mobilized or mirrored in wartime (MOFCOM, May 17, 2022).

On the PRC’s frontiers, the PLA is already wiring this battery ecosystem into border defense. A joint program between the National Energy Administration and the Central Military Commission (CMC) has connected hundreds of high-altitude and island outposts to the national grid or local microgrids, with Chinese reporting claiming more than 700 posts now rely on mixes of grid power, solar, wind, and batteries instead of fuel convoys alone (Global Times, January 14, 2024; Sina Finance, January 19, 2025). The NEA’s 2025 new-type storage report names lithium batteries, especially stable long-life lithium iron phosphate units, as the core of these systems, while Chinese firms field extreme-temperature military packs to keep radars, communications nodes, and maneuver units operating in plateau and polar conditions (Liwei Battery, accessed December 19, 2025).

Chinese defense journals show that lithium-based power has moved beyond logistics into front-line systems. Recent articles report that lithium-ion and lithium-polymer batteries now power most unmanned underwater vehicles, torpedoes, conventional submarines, and deep-diving vehicles, highlight energy density and safety under high-pressure seawater as key design challenges, and note that platforms such as the “Wenhai-1” ARV use lithium iron phosphate packs to sustain 24-hour missions (Ren et al., January 8, 2023; Liu Huimin, October 14, 2025; Liu Hao et al., November 15, 2025). [1] Together, they show that the same chemistries that dominate EV and grid storage are being engineered into long-endurance undersea platforms for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), mine warfare, and anti-ship operations.

PLA theorists treat “new energy” (新能源) as a core ingredient of “new-quality combat power” (新质战斗力) (China Brief, December 21, 2025). A CMC discussion of a “new military energy support system” (军事能源保障新格局) calls for

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accelerated use of solar, wind, ocean energy, hydrogen, and advanced storage in weapons, new-type forces, and key facilities to break wartime energy bottlenecks (Ministry of National Defense, June 6, 2022; National University of Defense Technology, March 25, 2024). INDSR reporting on the PLAN's latest conventional submarines points to lithium batteries as a way to increase underwater speed and endurance, cut acoustic signatures, and ease maintenance, with boats like the Type 039C framed as testbeds for wider fleet adoption (INDSR, February 22, 2022). This shows how abundant cheap batteries and maturing storage technologies let the PLA design electric logistics fleets, hardened base microgrids, distributed sensor networks, and drone swarms as parts of a single energy web, which is how a civilian glut of EV packs starts to translate into endurance advantages on the battlefield.

Conclusion: EV Policy as Power Projection

Beijing sells its EV and battery push as a climate service, while state media use complaints about “overcapacity” (产能过剩) to argue that U.S. and EU trade measures are protectionist and that the world needs Chinese EVs, batteries, and solar gear to hit green targets at reasonable cost (People's Daily Online, May 28, 2024; China Brief, November 1, 2024). That narrative frames the PRC's dominance in new-energy supply chains into both a shield against Western pressure and a rebuttal to “containment,” since any sharp cut in Chinese exports would hit foreign economies and energy transitions long before it constrained the PLA (People's Daily, April 26, 2025). At the same time, Western studies warn that cheap Chinese clean-tech goods are deepening this imbalance by flooding markets and undercutting local producers, slowing efforts by allies to build alternative capacity (Centre for European Reform, December 9, 2025).

Beijing's export control architecture weaponizes external dependence to create a tool that can dial up in a crisis. MOFCOM is empowered to slow or deny permits to chosen firms for key technologies and materials. It has already extended similar controls to rare earths, magnets, battery items, and some exports to U.S. defense contractors, raising costs in peacetime and threatening delays for the high-performance batteries that allied forces need in a contingency. Policies branded as EV or green-industrial strategy therefore also shape the energy depth of future battlefields, making “battery statecraft” another channel for Beijing to turn its civilian build-out into power projection.

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Notes

[1] Ren Zhong [任翀], Li Nan [李楠], and Du Zhaopeng [杜照鹏]. “Current Status and Development Trends of Unmanned Underwater Vehicles” [大深度无人潜航器研究现状及发展趋势]. *Digital Ocean & Underwater Warfare* [数字海洋与水下攻防]. 2023, 6(1): 63–71.

Liu Huimin [刘慧敏], Shan Rui [单瑞], Li Yuhua [李玉华], et al. “Status and prospect of navigation technology development for deep-sea autonomous/remotely-operated hybrid underwater vehicle” [自主遥控混合式水下机器人导航技术发展现状分析]. *Marine Geology Frontiers* [海洋地质前沿]. 2025, 41(11): 15–28.

Liu Hao [刘浩], Song Deyong [宋德勇], Hu Zhen [胡震], Zhan Jianfeng [占剑锋]. “Application status and development trend of lithium-ion battery in underwater equipment” [锂离子电池在水下装备的应用现状及发展趋势]. *Ship Science and Technology* [舰船科学技术], 2025, 47(15): 1–5.

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