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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



## China's military strategy for a 'new era': Some change, more continuity, and tantalizing hints

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### ABSTRACT

In 2019, China's Central Military Commission adopted a new strategy for the People's Liberation Army, titled the 'military strategic guidelines for the new era.' This was consistent with the past but framed by Xi's political consolidation, growing threats from the United States and Taiwan, and a new military structure. This article documents the strategy and asks what would drive a more fundamental adjustment. It concludes that the strategy reflected a determination to focus the PLA on the necessary and the achievable, but a new direction could be influenced by changes in the strategic landscape, rapid modernization, or new operational concepts.

**KEYWORDS** China; strategy; People's Liberation Army; joint operations; Taiwan

### Introduction

In its 2020 report on Chinese military power, the U.S. Department of Defense indicated that China had changed its national military strategy.<sup>1</sup> This assessment was based on Xi Jinping's remarks during an expanded meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC), in which Xi called on the PLA to 'thoroughly implement' the 'military strategic guideline for the new era.'<sup>2</sup> Chinese sources on Chinese defense policy, including a senior official from the CMC's Joint Staff Department and an article in the journal *China Military Science*, confirm that China changed its strategy in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

**CONTACT** Joel Wuthnow  [joel.wuthnow.civ@ndu.edu](mailto:joel.wuthnow.civ@ndu.edu)  Senior Research Fellow, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, National Defense University, Washington, DC, USA

<sup>1</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), pp. 26–7; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2021), pp. 32–3. The latter document cited references to implementing the new strategy following the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in October 2020.

<sup>2</sup>'Xi Jinping chairs a CMC work meeting and delivers an important speech' [习近平出席中央军委军事工作会议并发表重要讲话], *Xinhua*, 4 January 2019 [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-01/04/content\\_5354931.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-01/04/content_5354931.htm)

<sup>3</sup>Cai Zhijun [蔡志军], 'Guidance for China's national defense in the new era is implementing the Military Strategic Guideline for the New Era' [新时代中国国防的战略指导是贯彻落实新时代军事战略方针], *State Council Information Office*, 24 July 2019 <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwbfbh/wqfbh/>

Amid its dramatic rise, substantial increases in defense spending and more than two decades of military modernization, any change in China's military strategy is an important and significant development with regional and global implications. Moreover, any state's military strategy can illuminate its broader intentions and the conditions under which it is more likely to use armed force to achieve political goals. As the rivalry between the United States and China deepens, changes China's military strategy may shape the intensity of competition between the two states. Nevertheless, although the sources above note that a China adopted a new military strategy in 2019, they do not describe the content of the changes that were made, examine the reasons or rationale for the change, or assess its implications. This article seeks to fill this gap by answering the following questions: What is the content of new strategy? Why did the PLA adopt a new strategy in 2019? What are the implications for PLA modernization?

In answering these questions, we draw several conclusions. First, despite being described as the military strategic guideline of the CCP's 'new era,' the new strategy largely represents a rebranding or relabeling of the one adopted in 2014. In this way, it reflects a minor adjustment in China's strategy and not major change or departure that would require the PLA to transform how it plans to wage war. Unfortunately, historically and today, China has never openly published the content of its military strategic guidelines when they change. Thus, following best practices in the field of PLA studies, our conclusion is based on an in-depth review of authoritative and authoritative but not definitive sources on military affairs. Authoritative sources would include those that speak for the PLA or the CCP on military affairs, such as white papers, public statements by defense spokespersons or other party documents. Authoritative but not definitive sources (or 'semi-authoritative') would include those publications by PLA organizations or individuals from within the PLA likely to have knowledge of topics such as the PLA's military strategic guidelines, including leading research institutes such as the Academy of Military Science and its experts on strategy, tactics, and doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Using

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[39595/41105/zy41109/Document/1660290/1660290.htm](https://39595/41105/zy41109/Document/1660290/1660290.htm). Also, see Chen Zhou [陈舟], 'Historical Evolution and Characteristics of the Defensive National Defense Policy Over the Past 70 Years Since the Founding of the PRC' [新中国70年防御性国防政策的历史演变及特点], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学] No. 4 (2019), p. 13.

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<sup>4</sup>We avoided reliance on popular commentary, such as articles in the *Global Times*, unless when authored by a noted, active-duty PLA expert or officer. For discussions of authoritativeness in Chinese sources, see Michael D. Swaine, 'Chinese views of U.S. decline,' *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 September 2021 <https://www.prcleader.org/swaine-2>; and Michael D. Swaine, 'Chinese leadership and elite responses to the U.S. pacific pivot,' *China Leadership Monitor*, 12 July 2012 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/17/chinese-leadership-and-elite-responses-to-u.s.-pacific-pivot-pub-48871>; and Paul H.B. Godwin and Alice L. Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Its Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), pp. 29–34.

these sources, we identify whether the terminology associated with the six components of any strategic guideline changed after January 2019. Apart from the name or label of the strategy itself, our review did not reveal any changes in terminology that would be consistent with a major change in strategy. In this way, the 2019 strategy may be exceptional compared to the nine previous military strategies adopted from 1949 to 2014, all of which contained at least minor substantive changes.

Second, we examine the rationales or drivers for the change in strategy in 2019. The main driver appears to reflect political considerations and, strictly speaking, not military ones. That is, the change both aligned the PLA's strategy with the CCP's 'new era' under Xi Jinping and further consolidated Xi's control over the military. In this way, the 2019 strategy is the PLA's only military strategy since 1949 that has been adopted in response primarily to political factors and considerations. Our analysis also indicates that two other factors may have shaped the adoption. One would be an updated strategic assessment that highlighted perceptions of growing threats from Taiwan and the United States and the need to prepare for them. Another would be to highlight the completion of the unprecedented military reforms that began in late 2015 and the need to implement new operational doctrine and other changes required for deepening joint operations under the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan.

Third, although the 2019 strategy constitutes a minor and not major change in strategy, our review of available Chinese sources foreshadows the contours of the next change in strategy, which is likely to be more significant. Changes in strategic landscape and threat assessments, breakthrough technological developments, or updated operational concepts could prompt a change in the direction of China's military strategy – perhaps a change akin to the 1993 guideline that set the PLA on the course it continues to follow today. Chinese sources provide some clues on what the next major revision could encompass, including more attention to 'intelligentization' as the next phase of modernization and updated concepts of joint operations. The groundwork for the next strategy is taking shape even if the CMC chose conservatively to keep the PLA focused on what is most needed in the near term.

The article proceeds in six sections. The first reviews history and purpose of the military strategic guidelines. The second sets a baseline by detailing the key contents of the 2014 strategy, which was the first to be adopted under Xi. The third demonstrates that a new military strategic guideline was released in 2019 but was largely consistent with the 2014 strategy. The fourth argues that a new strategy was needed to signal Xi's political control over the PLA, update the strategic assessment informing PLA modernization, and set the stage for a new period of reform within the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. The fifth considers when we might expect a more significant overhaul of the strategy, and the form it might take. The conclusion explains the caveat that the PLA will

continue to modernize and conduct high-intensity regional operations even if the next major change in strategy takes years to materialize, and returns to the question of Xi's role in the process.

## China's approach to military strategy – The military strategic guidelines

In the PLA's approach to military affairs, a 'military strategic guideline' (军事战略方针) contains the essence of China's military strategy at a given point in time. The PLA itself defines this concept as containing the 'principles and plans for preparing for and guiding the overall situation of war.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, when seeking to understand China's military strategy, analysts focus on the content of the PLA's military strategic guidelines and attach great importance to moments when the strategy is changed or modified.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of the strategic guideline has a long history in the PLA. It was first used in the early 1930s to provide operational guidance to counter repeated Nationalist efforts to invade the Jiangxi Soviet and destroy the Red Army. It was then used to provide high-level guidance for the party's military operations before 1949, including during the Long March, the period of the war against Japan, and in all phases of the civil war starting in 1946.<sup>7</sup> After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the PLA has used the concept of the strategic guideline to outline China's national military strategy. In the early 1990s, perhaps to differentiate military strategy from other strategic guidelines, the term 'military strategic guideline' replaced the more generic strategic guideline.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of the military strategic guidelines is to answer core questions that, in turn, provide guidance for the PLA's operational doctrine, force structure, and training. As Chief of the General Staff Zhang Wannian said when devising the PLA's 1993 guideline, any strategy should answer following questions: 'With whom will we fight? Where will we fight? What is the character (性质) of the war that we will fight? How will we fight?'<sup>9</sup>

In the vocabulary of Chinese strategy, these questions identify the six components of any military strategic guideline. Below, we use these six components to assess whether China changed its strategy in 2019 and

<sup>5</sup>Academy of Military Sciences All-Military Terminology Management Committee [军事科学院在全军军事术语管理委员会], *Military Terminology of the People's Liberation Army* [中国人民解放军军语] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2011), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>This section builds on M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 39–71.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup>Guo Xiangjie, ed., *Biography of Zhang Wannian, Part Two* [张万年传, 下] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2011), p. 60.

the depth of the changes that occurred.<sup>10</sup> First, ‘with whom’ will China fight identifies China’s strategic opponent and the PLA’s operational target, based on a strategic assessment of China’s security environment and the perceived threats to China’s national interests. Second, ‘where’ China will fight identifies the ‘primary strategic direction’ (主要战略方向) which refers to the geographic theater that will decisively shape the overall conflict as well as China’s military deployments and war preparations. They also sometimes articulate one or more ‘secondary strategic directions’ (次要战略方向) where the PLA also needs to prepare for conflict. Third, ‘what is the character of war’ refers to ‘basis of preparations for military struggle,’ which describes the ‘form’ or ‘pattern’ of wars and, fourth, the ‘main form of operations’ that the PLA should be able to conduct. Fifth, ‘how China will fight’ is contained in the ‘basic guiding thought for operations,’ which outlines the basic principles to govern operations in the strategy. Sixth, starting in the late 1980s, ‘strategic guiding thought’ was incorporated into the guidelines to govern the role of using China’s armed forces in crises and for deterrence.<sup>11</sup> With the shift from total wars focused on defeating an invasion to local wars over limited aims, the potential uses of military forces broadened to focus the specific deterrent uses of military power and crisis management, for which strategic guiding thought provided general principles.

The establishment of a new strategy should be viewed through the lens of how the CCP makes policy overall. With one exception, each guideline has been formulated by the CMC, with the final consent of the party’s paramount leader. The new strategy is revealed in a speech or report delivered at an enlarged meeting of the CMC, not in a document that is widely circulated throughout the force. This speech is similar in many ways to a work report at one of the CCP’s national party congresses. New guidelines are often adopted to ‘unify thought’ (统一思想) so that the PLA leadership and rank-and-file align their individual work toward the same objectives. As a guideline, the strategy represents the start of the process of implementing a new military strategy and thus does not contain a detailed plan. Instead, the principles in the strategy will guide development of an implementation plan. Thus, a new guideline can be adopted quickly, as circumstances require, but take time to be fully implemented.

<sup>10</sup>For discussions of the components of the strategic guidelines, see Wang Wenrong [王文荣], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 1999), pp. 136–139; Gao Rui [高锐], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 1987), pp. 81–85; Peng Guangqian [彭光谦] and Yao Youzhi [姚有志], eds., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2001), pp. 182–186; and Fan Zhenjiang [范震江] and Ma Bao’an [马保安], eds., *On Military Strategy* [军事战略论] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2007), pp. 149–150.

<sup>11</sup>Chen Zhou [陈舟], ‘Expert Unpacks the White Paper on China’s Military Strategy’ [专家解读中国的军事战略白皮书], *National Defense* [国防] No. 6 (2015), p. 18.

Since 1949, the PLA has adopted nine military strategic guidelines before the potential change in 2019 that this article examines. The first five strategies, adopted between 1956 and 1980, focused on how to defeat an American or Soviet invasion of China. These were strategies designed to enable China to prevail in a total war, in which an adversary sought to conquer the country, countering either a U.S. amphibious landing on the Shandong Peninsula or a Soviet armored attack from the Mongolian steppe. The 1956, 1960, and 1980 strategies emphasized a forward defense to buy time for a nation-wide mobilization to defeat the invader in a protracted war. Some of these strategies, in 1964 and 1977, emphasized strategic retreat and decentralized operations in the spirit of 'luring the enemy in deep' from the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> The last four strategies, adopted between 1988 and 2014, have addressed how to prevail in local wars over limited aims on China's periphery. The PLA envisions that local wars will primarily be conflicts involving Chinese sovereignty, from the mid-1990s especially over Taiwan. Local wars were also possible in other strategic directions, such as the south (South China Sea) or the southwest (or the border with India).

Some of the PLA's strategies were more important than others in terms of their impact on the PLA's organization and approach to war-fighting. The strategies adopted in 1956, 1980, and 1993 constituted major changes in the PLA's approach to strategy, containing a new vision of warfare that required transformation of the PLA's approach to operational doctrine, force structure, and training. Five of the strategies reflected minor changes or adjustments and refinements of existing guidelines. These minor changes, however, are not insignificant, unimportant, or consequential, in that they usually continued to guide the development of operational doctrine, force structure and training to enhance PLA capabilities in ways that address the perceived threats the strategy seeks to address. They are minor changes only in the sense of not requiring or calling for the PLA's wholesale transformation to be able to wage war in a new way or with different adversary. For example, the 1960 strategic guideline of 'resist in the north, open in the south' was a minor change because it remained premised on defeating a US amphibious invasion through positional warfare in northern areas, but clarified that a forward defense would not be pursued in some southern province and redeployed some force north.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the 2004 strategy was a minor change in that remained focus on developing joint capabilities but identified 'informatization' as the essence of 'high technology conditions' outlined in the 1993 strategy.

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<sup>12</sup>Fravel, *Active Defense*, pp. 107–138.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 103.

## The 2014 military strategic guideline

Any assessment of the PLA's change in strategy and its implications require a review of the core components of the strategy it replaced. This was the strategic guideline of 'winning informatized local wars' (打赢信息化局部战争) adopted in July 2014, a minor change in strategy that marked the second adjustment of the strategy adopted in 1993. The 1993 strategy was a watershed, highlighting the application of high technology in warfighting and the start of the PLA's shift to joint operations, thereby propelling the PLA's modernization to this day.<sup>14</sup>

The 2014 strategy contained important elements of continuity with these previous strategies. First, the 2014 strategy was premised on how to prevail in local wars on China's periphery. China has not yet adopted a strategy with broader objectives than those contained in the 1993 and 2004 strategic guidelines. Second, within the context of local wars, the main operational target remained a conflict over Taiwan. Likewise, the borders with India and the South China Sea remained secondary strategic directions. Third, the 'main form of operations' was joint operations, which the PLA conceptualized in 2004 as 'integrated joint operations.'<sup>15</sup> Fourth, the 'strategic guiding thought' in the 2014 strategy emphasized crisis prevention, crisis management, and escalation control under the slogan of 'shape favorable situations, comprehensively manage crises, contain wars, and win wars' (有效塑造态势, 管控危机, 遏制战争, 打赢战争).<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the 2014 strategy also featured several important differences with previous strategies. First, the primary strategic direction was likely expanded to include parts of the Western Pacific that would be relevant for the mobilization and transportation of U.S. forces in a Taiwan conflict.<sup>17</sup> Second, the basis of preparations for military struggle – what kind of wars the PLA should be prepared to fight – was adjusted to further highlight the importance of informatization in warfare. Informatization refers to the collection, processing, and utilization of information in all aspects of warfighting to seamlessly link individual platforms from across the services to gain leverage and advantage on

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, pp. 230–234.

<sup>15</sup>Luo Derong [骆德荣], 'Guidelines for Armed Forces Building and Preparations for Military Struggle – Understanding of the Military Strategic Guideline in the New Situation' [军队建设与军事斗争准备的行动纲领 – 对新形势下军事战略方针的几点认识], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学] No. 1 (2017), p. 95; and *China's Military Strategy*, Xinhua, 27 May 2015 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm)

<sup>16</sup>Luo, 'Guidelines for Armed Forces Building and Preparations for Military Struggle'.

<sup>17</sup>Wang Hongguang [王洪光], 'Looking at China's Strategic Directions Today from a Historical Perspective' [从历史看今日中国的战略方向], *Tongzhou Gongjin* [同舟共进], No. 3 (March 2015), p. 48.



the battlefield. The 2014 strategic guideline indicated that informatization is not just a condition (条件) under which wars will be fought, but the dominant feature or characterization of war.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most important difference was the emphasis on the maritime domain. Specifically, the new strategy called for 'Highlighting maritime military struggle and preparations for maritime military struggle.'<sup>19</sup> This marked the first time that any domain was singled out in a strategic guideline at the strategic level. Previous guidelines implied the dominance of the land domain, either alone or in the context of joint operations with air and naval forces. As discussed below, the maritime domain was elevated not as an independent domain but, because of its importance in the key scenarios in which China would use force (especially Taiwan but also maritime conflicts in the East and South China Seas) and in the protection of overseas interests. Nevertheless, the phrase 'maritime military struggle' has only been mentioned 17 times in the *PLA Daily* between 2015 and 2021, suggesting that the concept remains under development or was not fully developed during this period, perhaps due to the reforms.

Based on the limited sources that are available, the strategic guideline was likely adjusted in 2014 for two reasons. The first and most important reason was to provide an overarching rationale or justification for the reforms that were launched in late 2015. The previous strategic guidelines adopted in 1993 and 2004 had called for the PLA to be able to conduct joint operations, but reforms were never implemented to enable the PLA to be able to conduct such operations. The link between the strategic guideline and reform appeared in the 'decision' of the third plenum in November 2013. In the preamble to the section on defense issues, this document called for both 'improving the military strategic guideline of the new period' and 'reform of the military leadership system.'<sup>20</sup> In this way, a change in the strategic guideline was linked directly to military reform. In December 2013, during a speech at an enlarged meeting of the CMC, Xi made this link clear: 'we have extensively explored the command system for joint operations, but the problem has not been fundamentally solved,'<sup>21</sup> citing numerous deep challenges.

<sup>18</sup>Wen Bin [温冰], 'Pinpointing the basis of preparations for military struggle' [定准军事斗争基点], *Study Times* [学习时报], 1 June 2015 p. A7. See also: Guo Yuandan [郭媛丹], 'Fight a war at sea? China should prepare for maritime military struggle' [要打海上战争? 中国应作海上军事斗争准备], *Huanqiu Shibao* [环球时报], 26 May 2015 <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnLnPo>

<sup>19</sup>*China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>20</sup>'Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening reform' [中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定], Government of the People's Republic of China, 13 November 2013 [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content\\_2528179.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content_2528179.htm)

<sup>21</sup>Xi Jinping [习近平], *Compendium of Xi Jinping's Important Expositions on National Defense and Military Building* [习近平国防和军队建设重要论述选编] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2016), p. 220.

Sweeping organizational changes, however, would require a new overarching and strategic rationale that only adopting a new strategic guideline could provide.

The second reason is the growing importance of the maritime domain to Chinese interests. As noted in the 2015 white paper on Chinese military strategy, 'It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests.' Chinese sources identify growing threats in the maritime domain, including in the South China Sea as well as in a Taiwan conflict, along with potential threats to China's growing interests overseas. The emphasis on the maritime domain also provided the naval pillar of China's aspirations to become a maritime power, as first codified at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Toward this end, the PLA Navy's service strategy was altered from focusing only on the 'near seas,' or defense of Chinese sovereignty interests in East Asia, to gradually combine 'near seas defense' (近海防卫) with 'far seas protection,' (远海护卫) or a focus on interests beyond the region.<sup>22</sup> The former emphasized warfighting in China's littoral areas whereas the latter reflected SLOC security and non-combat missions such as non-combatant evacuation.

### Old wine in a 'new era' – the 2019 military strategic guideline

In this section, we turn to assessing the content of the 2019 military strategic guideline. As noted in the introduction, we tap authoritative sources from the PLA and CCP to determine whether terminology associated with the main components of any strategic guideline having changed. New or revised terminology would indicate that an important element of the guideline had been changed. The continuation of existing terminology would suggest continuity with the previous strategy.

The CMC revised the strategy again sometime after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2017. As early as March 2018, Lieutenant General He Lei, then serving as the vice president of the Academy of Military Sciences, speaking in his role as a delegate to the National People's Congress, called for the 'research and development' (研究制定) of a 'military strategic guideline for the new era' that would consider five factors: Xi Jinping's 'strong military thought,' a new 'global revolution in military affairs,' evolution in the character of war, new missions, and a reformed PLA organizational structure.<sup>23</sup> This meant that new a new guideline was being considered roughly four years after the last iteration was approved in mid-2014. Although this may appear to be relatively quick, such a timeline is not without precedent: the 1956 strategy was also altered four years after it was introduced, and the 1988 strategy was replaced after only five years.

<sup>22</sup> *China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>23</sup> 'A new era exhibits a new atmosphere, new missions call for new actions' [新时代呈现新气象, 新使命呼唤新作为], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 8 March 2018 [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-03/08/content\\_201156.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-03/08/content_201156.htm)

On 4 January 2019 Xi stated at a CMC work meeting that the PLA should ‘thoroughly implement’ (深入贯彻) the ‘military strategic guideline for the new era’ (新时代军事战略方针) implying that the change in strategy had already taken effect, possibly at an enlarged meeting of the CMC in December 2018.<sup>24</sup> Afterwards, *PLA Daily* references to this term largely replaced those to the 2014 revision, known as the ‘military strategic guideline under the new situation’ (see Figure 1 below). In July 2019, a senior Joint Staff Department official confirmed that the ‘military strategic guideline for the new era’ had been ‘formulated and rolled out’ (制定出台).<sup>25</sup> The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, a key teaching volume for senior PLA officers at the PLA’s National Defense University, explained that the CMC had ‘established’ (确立了) a new strategy after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress as the ‘basic guidance for realizing the party’s strong army goals in the new era, developing world-class armed forces, and winning informatized wars.’<sup>26</sup>

Chinese sources, however, do not indicate any changes to the core military judgements in the new strategy. First, the primary contingency or ‘strategic direction’ remains a conflict against Taiwan and the United States off China’s southeast coast, with missions to counter U.S. intervention stretching into the Western Pacific.<sup>27</sup> The 2019 defense white paper described ‘resolving the Taiwan issue and realizing national unification’ as a ‘basic interest of the Chinese people’ (中华民族的根本利益), using pointed language reserved only for this single issue, and stated that the PLA would ‘resolutely defeat’ Taiwan independence and ‘defend the unity of the country at all costs.’<sup>28</sup> When asked specifically to identify the ‘primary strategic direction,’ a member of a visiting high-level PLA delegation referred to the Taiwan language in the 2019 defense white paper, giving no reason to suspect any change on major contingencies or opponents.<sup>29</sup> More broadly, the 2019 white paper also noted that the ‘preparations for military struggle should take the maritime direction as a center of gravity,’ repeating the emphasis on this domain in the 2015 white paper.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Xi Jinping chairs a CMC work meeting and delivers an important speech’.

<sup>25</sup>Cai, ‘Guidance for China’s National Defense in the New Era Is Implementing the Military Strategic Guideline for the New Era’.

<sup>26</sup>Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>Fravel, *Active Defense*, p. 232.

<sup>28</sup>*China’s National Defense in the New Era* [新时代的中国国防], State Council Information Office, 24 July 2019 [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content\\_5414325.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm)

<sup>29</sup>Author’s interaction with a PLA delegation, 2019.

<sup>30</sup>The 2015 defense white paper noted that informatized local wars would ‘highlight maritime military struggle and maritime preparations for military struggle’. *China’s Military Strategy*. The emphasis on the maritime stretched back to the Hu era. See Michael McDevitt, *Becoming a Great ‘Maritime Power’: A Chinese Dream* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016).

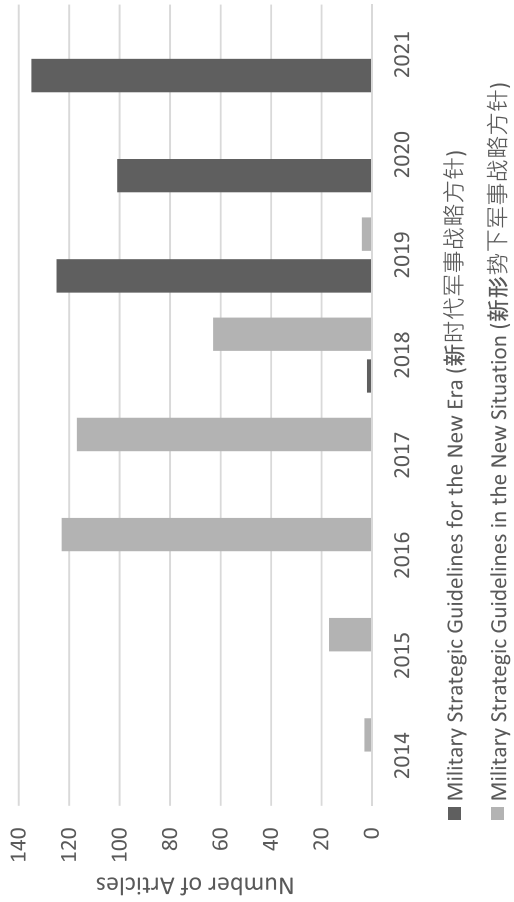


Figure 1. Changing Military Strategic Guideline Titles in *PLA Daily*, 2014–2021.

Second, there were no new judgements in the types of operations the PLA would need to conduct. The ‘basis of preparations for military struggle’ likely remained ‘informatized local wars’ (信息化局部战争). This phrase was used more than 100 times in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, and it was employed in a revised 2021 version of the *Military Service Law*, though *PLA Daily* has used abbreviated variations of this term over the years, sometimes omitting ‘local’ or ‘informatized’ (see Figure 2 below).<sup>31</sup> The ‘basic form of operations,’ as confirmed by a CMC Training and Administration Department official, remained ‘integrated joint operations’ (一体化联合作战).<sup>32</sup> A new CMC ‘joint operations outline’ (联合作战纲要) issued in November 2020 was also based on ‘integrated joint operations,’<sup>33</sup> indicating that the 2019 strategy did not adopt a new joint operations concept (even as PLA theorists, as discussed below, have been discussing new approaches to joint operations in recent articles).

Third, there were no indications of change to the ‘basic guiding thought’ for operations, which in 2014 had been defined as ‘information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, joint operations to gain victory’ (信息主导, 精打要害, 联合制胜).<sup>34</sup> Another sign of consistency was that the defense white paper, which had previously confirmed changes, did not identify any new judgements in its 2019 edition.<sup>35</sup> The only notable change, discussed below, was the repackaging of the ‘strategic guiding thought’ component of the guideline as ‘Xi Jinping Military

<sup>31</sup>Xiao, *Science of Military Strategy*; ‘Revision of the Military Service Law: Consolidate a Strong Force That Loves National Defense and Supports the Military’ [兵役法修订: 凝聚热爱国防, 支持军队的强大合力], *National People’s Congress Magazine* [中国人杂志] No. 17 (2021), <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/202109/dd6ec8fc9889438ea00b58af7dcee8dc.shtml>

<sup>32</sup>Cheng Ronggui [程荣贵], ‘Strong army forum: Set up iron rules for joint operations’ [强军论坛: 立起联合作战的铁规矩], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 29 November 2020 [http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2020-11/29/content\\_4874776.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2020-11/29/content_4874776.htm). On ‘integrated joint operations’, see Edmund J. Burke et al., *People’s Liberation Army Operational Concepts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), pp. 6–8.

<sup>33</sup>“PLA Joint Operations Outline (Trial)” promotes the liberation and development of the PLA’s joint combat capabilities’ [‘中国人民解放军联合作战纲要(试行)’推动解放和发展我军联合作战能力], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 26 November 2020 [http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2020-11/26/content\\_4874624.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2020-11/26/content_4874624.htm); ‘PLA Daily commentator: Designing future wars, innovating policies for victory’ [解放军报评论员: 设计未来战争, 创新制胜之策], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 14 November 2020 [https://81.cn/yw/2020-11/14/content\\_9936409.htm](https://81.cn/yw/2020-11/14/content_9936409.htm). For an analysis, see David M. Finkelstein, *The PLA’s New Joint Doctrine: The Capstone of the New Era Operations Regulation System* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2021).

<sup>34</sup>This judgment is more tentative. The phrase was not repeated in the 2019 white paper but is still in use in *PLA Daily*. See Hu Yushan [胡玉山], ‘To educate people for war, value is in the teacher’ [为战育人贵在得师], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 25 February 2020 p. 7.

<sup>35</sup>For instance, the 2015 defense white paper confirmed that the ‘basis of preparations for military struggle’ had shifted from ‘local wars under informatized conditions’ to ‘informatized local wars’. *China’s Military Strategy*. The 2010 defense white paper confirmed that ‘integrated joint operations’ had become the ‘basic form of operations’, though this revelation lagged the 2004 military strategic guideline by several years. *China’s National Defense in 2010*, State Council Information Office, 31 March 2011 [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7114675.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm)

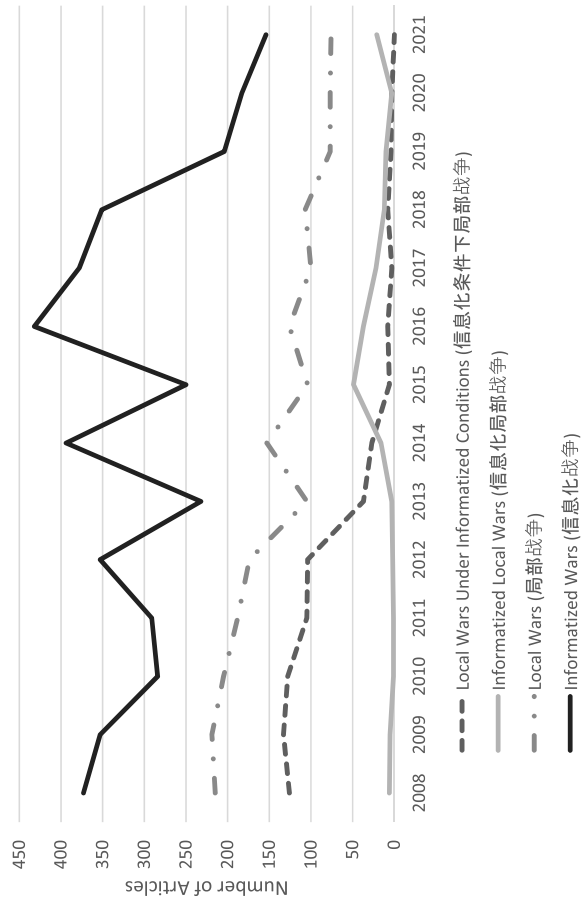


Figure 2. Variations in 'Local Wars' Terminology in *PLA Daily*, 2008–2021.

Strategic Thought’ (习近平军事战略思想).<sup>36</sup> Thus, Chinese sources suggest that while the CMC promulgated a second military strategic guideline during the Xi era, its substance reflected far more consistency than change.<sup>37</sup> The Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Explaining the 2019 change in strategy

If the ‘military strategic guideline for the new era’ contained no major new military judgements in the core components of a strategic guideline for the PLA, then what was the rationale for the revision? Why was the strategy changed less than five years after the 2014 version? The answer arguably lies in a changing political, strategic, and institutional context. Although the basic military objective remained focused on joint operations against Taiwan and the United States, the PLA was facing important new realities that needed to be codified into strategic guidance for the force. A revised strategy did not launch the PLA in a new direction but underscored Xi’s leadership of the PLA (and leadership of the formulation of strategy) and encouraged the military to redouble its commitment to the current approach.

Table 1. Comparing the 2014 and 2019 Military Strategic Guidelines.

Guideline Component	2014 Strategy	2019 Strategy
Strategic Opponent (战略对手)	Taiwan, United States	Taiwan, United States
Primary Strategic Direction (主要战略方向)	Southeast, Western Pacific	Southeast, Western Pacific
Basis of Preparations for Military Struggle (军事斗争准备的基础点)	Informatized Local Wars (信息化局部战争)	Informatized Local Wars (信息化局部战争)
Basic Form of Operations (基本作战形式)	Integrated Joint Operations (一体化联合作战)	Integrated Joint Operations (一体化联合作战)
Basic Guiding Thought for Operations (基本指导思想)	‘information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, joint operations to gain victory’ (信息主导, 精打要害, 联合制胜)	‘information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, joint operations to gain victory’ (信息主导, 精打要害, 联合制胜)
Strategic Guiding Thought (战略指导思想)	Shape the situation, comprehensively manage crises, resolutely deter wars, fight and win wars (塑造有利态势, 综合管控危机, 坚决遏制和打赢战争)	Same formulation, but described as Xi Jinping Military Strategic Thought (习近平军事战略思想)

<sup>36</sup>Cai, ‘Guidance for China’s national defense in the new era is implementing the Military Strategic Guideline for the New Era’. Using slightly different verbiage, the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* stated that ‘the Central Military Commission clarified that Xi Jinping Military Strategic Thought has become the fundamental (根本) guiding thought of the Military Strategy for the New Era’. Xiao, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup>There were also no indications that China’s nuclear strategy, which has historically been treated as separate from the strategic guidelines, had been revised as part of this process.

### Putting Xi at the center

The most important factor in the adoption of the 2019 strategy is Xi's consolidation of political power. The concept of a 'new era' is not unique to the PLA but was a theme of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>38</sup> It alluded to the idea that the People's Republic of China had entered a third phase of governance led by Xi, following the Mao era and the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao.<sup>39</sup> References to the 'new era' in *PLA Daily* increased following the party congress, overshadowing references to the earlier formula, 'new situation' (新形势), that Chinese officials had frequently used under Hu (see Figure 3 below). Yet the 2014 military strategy retained the title 'new situation,' creating a dissonance with the party's new guidance and preferred terminology. Promulgating a new guideline for the 'new era,' and popularizing it through *PLA Daily*, eliminated this inconsistency, harmonizing the description of China's military strategy with the party's overall guidance. Similar changes were made to highlight Xi's centrality in other arenas, such as when Chinese officials began talking about a 'diplomacy in the new era.'<sup>40</sup>

Rebranding the strategy also provided opportunities to burnish Xi's reputation as a military strategist and to highlight his leadership and control of the PLA.<sup>41</sup> As a senior official from the Joint Staff Department described, the revised guideline was a product of Xi 'grasping the key development trends of the new era.'<sup>42</sup> The treatment of 'strategic guiding thought' in the 2019 strategy provides a useful illustration of the political rationale for changing the guideline. On the one hand, the content of the strategic guiding thought remained unchanged from 2014, namely, to 'shape favorable situations, comprehensively manage crises, contain wars, and win wars.' On the other hand, this strategic guiding thought is now

<sup>38</sup>In November 2021, the CCP declared that the 'new era' began with the conclusion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012, which heralded Xi's ascendance to power, even though the terminology did not become popularized for about five years. See 'Full text: Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the major achievements and historical experience of the party over the past century,' Xinhua, 16 November 2021 [https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202111/16/content\\_WS6193a935c6d0df57f98e50b0.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202111/16/content_WS6193a935c6d0df57f98e50b0.html)

<sup>39</sup>Susan L. Shirk, 'China in Xi's "New Era": The Return to Personalistic Rule,' *Journal of Democracy* 29/2 (2018), pp. 22–36; Daniel Tobin, 'How Xi Jinping's "new era" should have ended U.S. debate on Beijing's ambitions,' CSIS, 8 May 2020 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-xi-jinpings-new-era-should-have-ended-us-debate-beijings-ambitions>

<sup>40</sup>See, e.g., Yang Jiechi [杨洁篪], 'Based on Xi Jinping's Foreign Affairs Thought, Deeply Implement Foreign Affairs Work in the New Era' [以习近平外交思想为指导, 深入推进新时代对外工作], *Qiushi* [求实] No. 15 (2018), [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-08/01/c\\_1123209510.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-08/01/c_1123209510.htm)

<sup>41</sup>This followed other attempts to position Xi as more influential within the PLA than Jiang or especially Hu. Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, 'Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping', in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), pp. 519–555.

<sup>42</sup>Cai, 'Guidance for China's National Defense in the New Era Is Implementing the Military Strategic Guideline for the New Era'.



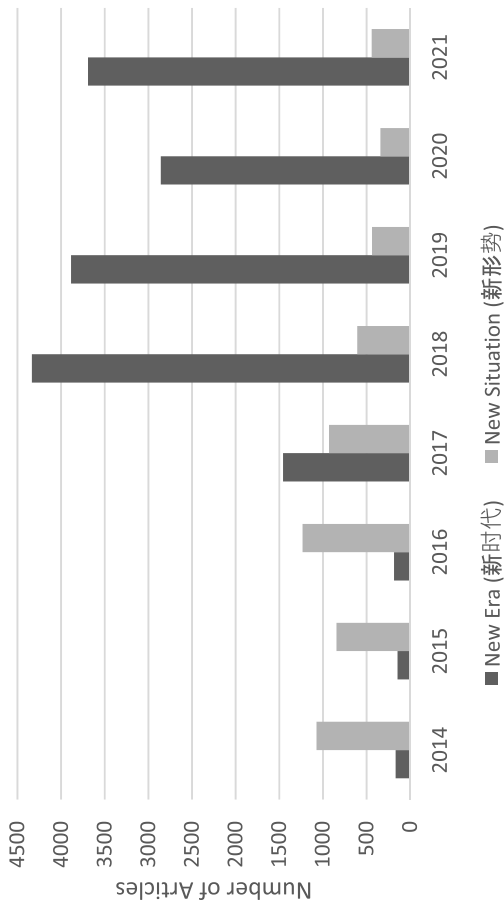


Figure 3. References to 'New Situation' vs. 'New Era' in *PLA Daily*, 2014–2021.

described as 'Xi Jinping Military Strategic Thought,' elevating its importance and linking the new strategy directly to Xi.<sup>43</sup> Thus, PLA sources still employ this phrase, but now place it within the context of Xi Jinping's thoughts.<sup>44</sup>

The personalization of China's military strategy not only signaled Xi's political dominance over the military, but also allowed him to burnish his legacy with achievements that might have otherwise been afforded to his predecessors. While the core judgements of the 2019 strategy largely reflected the views reached during the Jiang Zemin era (being only a minor revision to the landmark 1993 strategy), revising key terminology allowed Xi to present the strategy as his own, blurring the achievements of Jiang and Hu.<sup>45</sup> This was not exceptional. Another example was the Belt and Road Initiative, which as a political label is strongly associated with Xi and his 'new era.'<sup>46</sup> Yet the focus on strengthening trade and investment connectivity through Eurasia predated Xi and several key projects that came to be linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, commenced under Jiang or Hu.<sup>47</sup> What mattered more was the political benefit for Xi's legacy than a substantive policy shift.

Historically, the closest parallel to political rationale for the 2019 change in strategy may be the adoption of the 1977 strategic guideline. To be sure, the context was different, as Mao had recently died, while the PLA had swelled in size during the Cultural Revolution, becoming acutely politicized and much less effective as a fighting force. The strategic guideline the CMC adopted at a special plenary meeting in December 1977, 'active defense, luring the enemy in deep,' affirmed the basic principles of the strategy that had been in place since 1964. Yet in the context of the PLA's internal fissures, the purpose of affirming Mao's ideas was 'to unify operational thought' to support the rebuilding the PLA without creating further divisions within the force. The only other somewhat analogous change in a strategic guideline in terms of relabeling occurred in 1960, when it was renamed (despite containing the same overall content as the 1956 strategy) to help consolidate

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>'Persist in promoting the innovative development of military strategic guidance' [持续推进军事战略指导创新发展], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 1 October 2019 p. 9.

<sup>45</sup>On the 1993 strategy, see David M. Finkelstein, 'China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the "Military Strategic Guidelines"', in Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2007), pp. 95–127; and Fravel, *Active Defense*, pp. 182–216.

<sup>46</sup>Joel Wuthnow, 'China's Belt and Road: One Initiative, Three Strategies', in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szlwinski, and Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), pp. 213–218.

<sup>47</sup>On infrastructure projects predating Xi, see Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 7–42.

Lin Biao's leadership of the PLA when he replaced Peng Dehuai. In a similar way, the superficial nature of the 2019 version, highlighting Xi's new era, reflects a political imperative to change at least the branding of strategy, although the purpose is to strengthen Xi's position and not rebuild the PLA.<sup>48</sup>

### *New problems from old adversaries*

The second factor contributing to adoption of the 2019 concerns China's strategic environment. Historically, David Finkelstein argues, the guidelines have included a 'strategic assessment' (战略判断) that explains the context in which PLA developments are occurring.<sup>49</sup> Available evidence suggests that the new guideline contained an updated strategic assessment. Some details are available in new trends highlighted in the 2019 defense white paper, which a senior Joint Staff Department official confirmed reflected the contents of the new strategy, and other sources.<sup>50</sup> One trend was a deterioration in cross-strait relations. The document stated that 'separatism is becoming more acute,' capturing Beijing's frustration with Tsai Ing-wen since her election as Taiwan's president in January 2016.<sup>51</sup> This was in line with more strident rhetoric towards Taiwan by Xi, who in 2019 reaffirmed that China reserved the right to use 'all necessary means' against the Island.<sup>52</sup>

Another trend was the intensification of the Sino-U.S. rivalry. Even before the Trump administration's emphasis on U.S.-China competition, Chinese observers increasingly focused on military challenges from the United States. For instance, *PLA Daily* contained increasing references to 'strong enemy' (强敌) in *PLA Daily* (the term is a euphemism for the United States) after 2014 (see Figure 4 below). The 2019 white paper accused the Trump administration of 'provoking great power competition, acting unilaterally, and strengthening alliances,' a more concerning judgment than the 2015 white paper, which only noted that Washington was 'rebalancing to Asia.'<sup>53</sup> This assessment mirrored increases in discussions of 'strategic competition'

<sup>48</sup>On the 1960 and 1977 strategies, see Fravel, *Active Defense*, pp. 107–181.

<sup>49</sup>On the 'strategic assessment', see Finkelstein, 'China's National Military Strategy', pp. 97–103.

<sup>50</sup>A senior Joint Staff Department officer specifically related the 'military strategic guideline for the new era' with the release of the 2019 defense white paper. See Cai, 'Guidance for China's national defense in the new era is implementing the Military Strategic Guideline for the New Era'.

<sup>51</sup>The 2015 white paper noted 'positive trends' under then-president Ma Ying-jeou. *China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>52</sup>Chris Buckley and Chris Horton, 'Xi Jinping warns Taiwan that unification is the goal and force is an option', *New York Times*, 1 January 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/01/world/asia/xi-jinping-taiwan-china.html>

<sup>53</sup>*China's Military Strategy*.

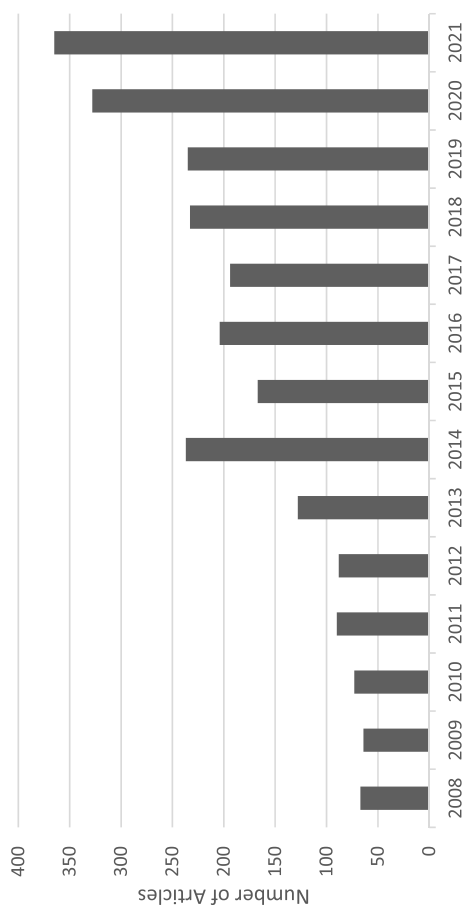


Figure 4. References to 'Strong Enemy' in *PLA Daily*, 2008–2021.

(战略竞争) and ‘great power competition’ (大国竞争) in *PLA Daily* after January 2018, when Trump issued a new *National Defense Strategy* focused on that themes.<sup>54</sup>

ZA final trend in the new strategic assessment was an intensifying global military competition, featuring the development of ‘long-range precision, intelligent, stealthy, or unmanned weaponry and equipment’ among major militaries, combined with concerns that the PLA had not yet ‘basically achieved mechanization’ and was facing a ‘growing technological generation gap.’ An updated ‘strategic assessment’ in the 2019 strategy would have been a reminder to the PLA to avoid becoming complacent – not losing steam as important reforms were completed – but rather to accelerate progress on modernization and on operational concepts that would be essential in keeping pace with growing challenges, especially from Taiwan and the United States.<sup>55</sup> However, because the strategic assessment did not identify fundamentally new threats, there was no reason to revisit the main opponent or strategic direction.

### *Setting the stage for further reform*

Programmatic considerations also likely contributed to the new strategy. As discussed earlier, the 2014 strategy laid the groundwork for key structural changes, including a 300,000-person downsizing, the dissolution of the general departments, a revised CMC bureaucracy, the creation of new theater commands, the establishment of the Strategic Support Force, and ‘below-the-neck’ changes to army and air force structure that were carried out from late 2015 and early 2017.<sup>56</sup> Major General Chen Zhou, a senior scholar at the Academy of Military Sciences who has been deeply involved in compiling the defense white papers, describes these changes as key features of the ‘new era.’<sup>57</sup> A new strategy coming towards the end of that process would thus constitute something of a capstone for the reforms, signaling their completion and linking their success to a guideline more firmly associated with Xi.

<sup>54</sup>See, e.g., Fu Qiang [付强] and Chen Hanghui [陈航辉], ‘America’s new strategy is full of old thinking’ [美国新战略充斥旧思维], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 25 January 2018 p. 11; and Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo [赵小卓], ‘Outdated thinking and wrong actions’ [过时的思维, 错误的举动], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 23 January 2018 p. 4.

<sup>55</sup>As evidence of such concerns, *PLA Daily* reminded service members in 2020 that ‘the more critical the period, the more it is necessary to take advantage of the momentum. If you relax a little bit, you may lose all your previous efforts and lose your success.’ ‘Strengthen confidence and face difficulties – Resolutely achieve the 2020 national defense and army building target tasks series talks’ [坚定信心 迎难而上 – 坚决实现国防和军队建设 2020 年目标任务系列谈], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 10 June 2020 p. 6.

<sup>56</sup>Fravel, *Active Defense*; Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2017). A few major changes, including the creation of the Joint Logistic Support Force and reforms to the People’s Armed Police and reserves, came later.

<sup>57</sup>Chen, ‘Historical Evolution and Characteristics of the Defensive National Defense Policy over the Past 70 Years Since the Founding of the PRC’, p. 14.

There is also evidence that a new strategy is designed to set the stage for further reform and modernization. Chen argues that in the 'new era' the PLA should 'fully implement an innovation-driven development strategy,' citing the need for innovation in theory, technology, management, talent, practice, and army building, and further developing China's 'military-civil fusion' strategy, referring to developing greater synergy between the military and the civilian scientific and technological community. He also links the 'new era' to the party's updated modernization schedule, with key dates in 2020, 2035, and mid-century (the CCP added a 2027 goal at the 5<sup>th</sup> plenum of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2020).<sup>58</sup> Referencing the mid-century goal, he writes that the PLA should build a 'world-class military commensurate with China's status as a powerful country and capable of effectively safeguarding national security.'<sup>59</sup> Moreover, a delegate to the 2021 National People's Congress urged the PLA to take the new strategy as a basis for the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year armed forces development plan (2021–2025), with a focus on 'joint command, joint operations, and joint theater support.'<sup>60</sup> The revised guideline thus not only signaled an end but also a new beginning. Suggesting that this recommendation was adopted, in December 2021, the National Development and Reform Commission linked the implementation of the new strategy to military goals for the new five-year plan, which included further modernization of theories, organizations, personnel, and equipment.<sup>61</sup>

In sum, the 2019 guideline can be explained primarily as the result of a political motive to strengthen Xi's status and role in the formulation of military strategy, rather than a military imperative to address new challenges or operate in a new way. This was unique in the history of the guidelines. Other factors included admonishing the PLA not to lose sight of accumulating foreign challenges and setting the stage for continued reform.

<sup>58</sup>2027 appears to have replaced 2020 as the new 'first step' in an updated three-step development strategy. The new goal includes 'accelerating the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization', among other targets. See Brian Hart, Bonnie Glaser, and Matthew P. Funaiolo, 'China's 2027 goal marks the PLA's centennial, not an expedited military modernization', *China Brief*, 26 March 2021 <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-pla-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization/>

<sup>59</sup>Chen, 'Historical Evolution and Characteristics of the Defense National Defense Policy over the Past 70 Years Since the Founding of the PRC', p. 14. For analysis on PLA 'world-class military' discourse, see M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's "World-Class Military" Ambitions: Origins and Implications', *The Washington Quarterly* 43/1 (2020), pp. 85–99. On the new timetable, see Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era', Work Report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, 18 October 2017, pp. 47–8.

<sup>60</sup>'Do a good job in starting the work of national defense and army construction during the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and greet the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Communist Party of China with outstanding achievements' [做好 '十四五' 时期国防和军队建设开局起步工作, 以优异成绩迎接中国共产党建党100周年], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], 10 March 2021 [http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-03/10/content\\_4880715.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-03/10/content_4880715.htm)

<sup>61</sup>'Interpreting Article 41 on the Outline of the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan: Accelerating national defense and army modernization' ['十四五' 规划纲要解读文章之41, 加快国防和军队现代化], National Development and Reform Commission Planning Bureau, 25 December 2021 [https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzlgzh/gjfgzh/202,112/t20211225\\_1309729.html?code=%&state=123](https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzlgzh/gjfgzh/202,112/t20211225_1309729.html?code=%&state=123)

## Anticipating the next big shift

Political, strategic, and institutional factors can help explain the new strategy, but why didn't the CMC make more ambitious substantive changes? The answer arguably lies in practical challenges facing the PLA. Preparing for a conflict with Taiwan remains a formidable challenge, constraining it from redefining the 'primary strategic direction,' while other unresolved border and territorial disputes undergird a continuing emphasis on 'local wars.' Other judgements reflect the sense that the PLA is not yet in a position technologically or conceptually to update key concepts, such as 'informatized wars' and 'integrated joint operations.' However, none of these judgements are fixed in stone: a changing strategic landscape or new operational concepts and capabilities could set the stage for a more profound change in strategy. Based on available sources, this section offers a more speculative look at what the next major guideline could entail.

One driver of change would be a resolution of the Taiwan issue. Recent operations, including large-scale amphibious exercises along China's east coast, fighter jet incursions across the Taiwan Strait midline, and air and naval operations around the Island are consistent with the near-term goal of deterring Taiwan independence and expressing displeasure with U.S. support for the Island while readying PLA personnel for a future conflict.<sup>62</sup> Such operations are largely conducted by the Eastern Theater Command, with its three group armies, naval fleet, three bomber regiments, three fighter brigades, and other forces.<sup>63</sup> An actual conflict would also require support from surrounding theaters and national assets, including the marine corps, airborne corps, Strategic Support Force, Joint Logistic Support Force, and conventional missile brigades assigned to Rocket Force, meaning that these forces also need to train for cross-strait operations and associated counter-intervention missions.<sup>64</sup>

Even if it appears unlikely in the short to medium term, Chinese control of Taiwan, either through an agreement or a war, would likely precipitate a shift in military strategy. Just as a reduced Soviet threat along China's northern border allowed the PLA to turn its attention to local wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Taiwan's defeat would allow forces otherwise preoccupied with

<sup>62</sup>The PLA has long carried out amphibious exercises but greater publicity for them in late 2020 appeared to be intended to send a stronger political signal to Taiwan and the Trump administration, which had relaxed restrictions on higher-level engagements. See Joshua Arostegui, 'PLA Army and Marine Corps Amphibious Brigades in a Post-Reform Military', in Joel Wuthnow et al., eds., *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2022).

<sup>63</sup>For an order of battle and description of recent Eastern Theater Command activities, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2021), pp. 98–101.

<sup>64</sup>On 'national assets', see Mark Stokes, 'Employment of National-Level PLA Assets in a Contingency: A Cross-Strait Conflict as a Case Study', in Andrew Scobell et al. eds., *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 35–58.

that contingency to focus on other theaters or responsibilities. A different border region, such as the Korean Peninsula or the Sino-Indian border<sup>65</sup> could be designated as the 'primary strategic direction,' or the PLA could focus with greater intensity on its dispute with Japan or on challenging U.S. operations across the Asian littoral. This outcome would also free up capabilities to protect China's overseas interests. The army, whose argument for resources has rested on its central role in a Taiwan invasion, would have to find another *raison d'être* or risk cuts.<sup>66</sup> Given other offshore territorial disputes and the importance of protecting sea lanes, however, it is likely that a new strategy would still emphasize the maritime domain.

Second would be a focus on major conflict outside the Taiwan Strait. The distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' theaters helps prioritize the allocation of resources among the theater commands. But the diverse range of threats China is facing has already led to a change in rhetoric. While Xi has never mentioned the 'primary strategic direction,' he has called on the PLA to be prepared for challenges in 'all directions and domains' (各方向各领域).<sup>67</sup> This language is consistent with his articulation of a 'holistic national security concept' (总体国家安全观) that focuses less on a single overarching problem and more on threats to the party's survival and interests emanating from all directions.<sup>68</sup> As China has become wealthier, and the PLA stronger and more capable, the need to strictly prioritize strategic directions to conserve resources may also be decreasing.

Two factors could weaken the significance of the 'primary strategic direction' or even lead to its elimination as a planning construct. One would be anticipating simultaneous major conflicts beyond the southeast direction, such as a war with India in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean or a large Korean contingency with a land and sea dimension. The other would involve a major expansion of PLA capabilities that would permit such operations. Driven by necessity or increased capacity, the PLA would be better able to handle 'chain reaction warfare' (连锁反应战争), referring to a series of conflicts that erupts due to opportunism by China's other adversaries during

<sup>65</sup>These regions have sometimes been called 'secondary' (次要) or 'important' (重要) strategic directions. See: M. Taylor Fravel, 'Stability in a Secondary Strategic Direction: China and the Border Dispute with India After 1962', in Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, eds., *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2020), chapter 9; Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 82.

<sup>66</sup>John Chen, 'Choosing the "Least Bad Option": Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Forces', in Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, pp. 85–124.

<sup>67</sup>'Xi Jinping: Strengthening clear guidance for preparing for war and comprehensively improving to win in the new era' [习近平: 强化备战打仗的鲜明导向 全面提高新时代打赢能力], Xinhua, 3 November 2017 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2017-11/03/c\\_1121903813.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2017-11/03/c_1121903813.htm)

<sup>68</sup>Timothy Heath, 'The "Holistic Security Concept": The securitization of policy and increasing risk of militarized conflict', *China Brief*, 27 June 2015 <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/06/the-holistic-security-concept-the-securitization.html>



a conflict in the main theater<sup>69</sup>; this would also work to the bureaucratic interests of commanders outside the Eastern theater. At the limit, the CMC could adopt a more ambitious planning construct akin to the Soviet strategy in the 1980s, which required Soviet forces to independently plan and conduct wars on three fronts, or the U.S. model of fighting two 'major regional conflicts' during parts of the Cold War.<sup>70</sup>

A third driver of future change would be escalating hostilities with the United States. Under the current strategy, the PLA anticipates that U.S. forces would intervene on behalf of Taiwan or potentially rivals such as Japan and the Philippines, and has thus developed and fielded long-range strike capabilities to hold U.S. bases and platforms in the Western Pacific at risk or deliver a 'knockout punch' early in a conflict.<sup>71</sup> There have also been concerns that the U.S. Navy could threaten China's maritime imports during a regional conflict, leading the PLA to emphasize a blue-water navy better able to defend critical sea lanes beyond the 'near seas.'<sup>72</sup> However, these activities take place within the 'local wars' rubric that has defined threat assessments since 1988. With stable bilateral relations, Beijing has not prepared for a protracted global conflict with the United States. The 2019 defense white paper reaffirmed that the 'period of strategic opportunity' (战略机遇期) remains open. This term refers to the view, dominant in Chinese circles since the mid-1980s, that a superpower conflict is unlikely.<sup>73</sup>

A stark deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations, however, could lead to a different assessment. The 2019 military strategy was formulated in a period of 'great power competition,' but a future update could go farther by concluding that the 'period of strategic opportunity' has closed and that the United States has become China's 'strategic opponent' and thus the focus of China's military strategy, marking a return to superpower conflict. If this occurred prior to the resolution of the Taiwan issue,<sup>74</sup> Beijing would have to

<sup>69</sup>M. Taylor Fravel, 'Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/4-5 (2007), p. 716; Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War Over Taiwan?* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2020), pp. 9–10.

<sup>70</sup>Director of Central Intelligence, *Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War*, National Intelligence Estimate, June 1985, declassified 1999.

<sup>71</sup>Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007). The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* discusses a 'strategic strike' (战略突击), including strikes against enemy command and control systems, airports, ports, and military bases, as useful primarily early in a conflict (战争开始时). Offensive strikes could be carried out in the 'main strategic direction' (主要战略方向) (currently defined as China's southeast coast) while implementing 'strategic defense' (战略防御) in other theaters. Xiao, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 224–6.

<sup>72</sup>For a PLAN perspective, see Senior Captain Liang Fang [梁芳], *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2011). The 2015 defense white paper added 'far seas protection' as a key navy mission.

<sup>73</sup>David M. Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security: The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999*, (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2000).

<sup>74</sup>One scenario would involve an escalating U.S.-China competition that took place after a failed Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

consider drastically increasing military spending to support a conventional buildup above current levels (for instance, mobilizing state-owned shipyards to produce a larger fleet than already planned).<sup>75</sup> It might also need to deploy forces to distant locations and accelerate the construction of bases far beyond China's periphery where the PLA is at a relative disadvantage.<sup>76</sup> This in turn could prompt Beijing to rethink its reluctance to sign formal defense treaties. Other implications could include a nuclear arms race, accelerated competition in critical technology, such as hypersonics or counter-space systems, and fewer constraints on cyber-attacks. The budget tradeoffs would be less severe if this competition took place following a successful invasion of Taiwan.

Fourth, new thinking about the character of war could also inform a future strategy update. Under the 2019 strategic guideline, the CMC elected to keep a focus of modernization on winning 'informatized' wars. This language has been used since the Hu era to describe a long-term process of bringing the capabilities of different branches and services together into a 'system of systems,' roughly analogous to U.S. concepts of 'net-centric warfare' that circulated in the 1990s. The 2006 defense white paper assigned 'building an informatized army and winning an informatized war' as a goal that would not be completed until mid-century, suggesting a conservative attitude on the pace of modernization.<sup>77</sup> As late as 2019, the defense white paper stated that the military was still 'in urgent need of improving its informatization.'<sup>78</sup>

However, there are signs that the PLA could focus more in future years on the next stage of modernization, which PLA theorists refer to as 'intelligentization' (智能化). This phrase connotes military applications of disruptive technology, often pursued through partnerships with China's civilian science and technological sector, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, unmanned systems, hypersonics, nanotechnology, and biotechnology.<sup>79</sup> The 2019 defense white paper stated that 'intelligentized wars' featuring these kinds of technologies were gradually appearing, while the Ministry of National Defense spokesman said in November 2020 that the PLA had made 'significant progress in informatization' and would focus on the 'integrated development of

<sup>75</sup>For a view of an ambitious naval development plan, see James E. Fannell, 'China's Global Navy – Today's Challenge for the United States and the U.S. Navy', *Naval War College Review* 73/4 (2020), pp. 1–32.

<sup>76</sup>In recent years, defense spending growth has dipped below 10% and declined as a percentage of public budget expenditures, reflecting other CCP priorities. See Phillip C. Saunders, 'Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission', 20 June 2019, pp. 4–5.

<sup>77</sup>*China's National Defense in 2006*, State Council Information Office, December 2006, <http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2006/defense2006.html>

<sup>78</sup>*China's National Defense in the New Era*.

<sup>79</sup>Elsa B. Kania, *Battlefield Singularity: Artificial Intelligence, Military Revolution, and China's Future Military Power* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017).

a mechanized, informatized, and intelligentized' military through 2027.<sup>80</sup> As early as August 2019, former Academy of Military Sciences vice president He Lei wrote that China had *already* entered a period of preparing for 'informatized local wars with intelligentized features' (具有智能化特征的信息化局部战争).<sup>81</sup> PLA *Daily* articles increasingly used that new phrase; in May 2021, for instance, it appeared in a 100-question quiz for military personnel.<sup>82</sup> The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* similarly emphasized 'intelligentization' more than previous editions, arguing that the navy and other services need to quickly bring 'intelligentized' equipment online.<sup>83</sup> Thus, in the future, the CMC could decide that enough progress had been made on 'informatization' that the judgment on 'the basis of preparations for military struggle' could put 'intelligentization' more firmly in the picture.

Changes could also be made to PLA concepts of joint operations. Since 1993, the strategic guidelines have identified some variation of joint operations as the 'basic form of operations.' By 2004, 'integrated joint operations' had followed 'coordinated joint operations' (协同联合作战), signifying a desire for deeper cooperation between the services. Judging by revised language in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, Chinese theorists are working towards a new conception of joint operations. The authors describe 'multi-domain integrated joint operations' (多域一体化联合作战) as both the 'basic form of operations' for 'informatized local wars' and an 'advanced stage' of joint operations featuring information dominance (信息主导), force fusion (力量融合), command and control integration (指挥控制一体), and coordination in multiple domains, including space, cyber, the electromagnetic domain, and the cognitive domain.<sup>84</sup> Other theorists, apparently inspired by U.S. doctrine (especially the U.S. Army's December 2018 paper on Multi-Domain Operations) are also probing the outlines of a more advanced form of

<sup>80</sup> *China's National Defense in the New Era*; 'Regular press conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26,' China Military Online, 29 November 2020 [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-11/29/content\\_4874839.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-11/29/content_4874839.htm). This theme is also present in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*. For a discussion, see Marcus Clay and Roderick Lee, 'Unmasking the Devil in the Chinese Details: A Study Note on the *Science of Military Strategy 2020*', China Aerospace Studies Institute, 24 January 2022, pp. 13–14.

<sup>81</sup> He Lei [何雷], 'Intelligentized wars are not far off' [智能化战争并不遥远], PLA *Daily* [解放军报], 8 August 2019 [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-08/08/content\\_240321.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-08/08/content_240321.htm)

<sup>82</sup> '100 questions on military party affairs knowledge' [军队党务知识100题], PLA *Daily* [解放军报], 10 May 2021 p. 10. The phrase appeared 13 times in PLA *Daily* in 2021, often adding 'to win' (打赢) at the beginning, seeming to mirror terminology used in previous military strategic guidelines. However, there was no authoritative confirmation that this new phrase had replaced 'informatized local wars'.

<sup>83</sup> Joel Wuthnow, 'What I learned from the PLA's latest strategy textbook', *China Brief*, 25 May 2021 <https://jamestown.org/program/what-i-learned-from-the-plas-latest-strategy-textbook/>

<sup>84</sup> Xiao, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 264–7. The volume also contains a modified description of the 'basic guiding thought' that inserts 'multi-domain and integrated' (信息主导, 精打要害, 多域-体, 联合制胜) (p. 264).

joint operations.<sup>85</sup> The CMC could eventually decide to incorporate such ideas into the strategic guideline, triggering revisions of the operational doctrine and training directives.

To recap, the next strategy could be driven by changes in the strategic environment or in PLA capabilities and capacity, such as the completion of informatization and the sense that intelligentization is mature enough to move from the periphery to the core of PLA modernization. Such changes could precipitate expansive new military requirements, such as planning for 'intelligentized' conflicts globally. The release of a new guideline following the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, or the party's centennial in 2021, could have been occasions to announce new missions or concepts. Yet the CMC's reluctance to revisit the basic contours of the previous strategy underscores a sense that even as the PLA fields more advanced and even 'intelligentized' equipment and conducts more ambitious operations across the Taiwan Strait and elsewhere, China's top leaders have not yet concluded that the time is right to push the PLA in a fundamentally new strategic direction.

## Conclusion

Looming over the 2014 and 2019 strategic guideline updates has been Xi himself. The former set the stage for the five-year structural reforms of the PLA as an organization, which Xi personally led, while the latter represented a capstone to that process and set the stage for a deepening of reforms in the 'new era,' likely in terms of refining the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations. Unlike previous guidelines, the 2019 strategy can be explained in large part by a political logic of updating key terms to reflect the current brand: the 'new situation' was too closely associated with Xi's predecessors and the 'new era' label was a necessary solution, while describing the conceptual basis of the strategy in terms of Xi Jinping Thought solidifies a higher place for him in the party pantheon than either Jiang or Hu.

The political motive driving the 2019 strategy raises the possibility that political dynamics could, at least to some degree, overshadow professionalism. The party has long sought a balance in expertise between 'red' and 'expert,' but dynamics such as those present in the re-issuance of the military strategy under Xi's name suggest the pendulum is swinging back to the former. Demonstrating the political fealty necessary to survive and excel in a politicized military requires familiarity with the current slogans and the substance of Xi Jinping Thought.

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<sup>85</sup> 'Multi-domain' and 'all-domain' are both used in recent PLA discussions of advanced joint operations. For discussions of the link between U.S. and Chinese doctrinal concepts, see Derek Solen, *Chinese Views of All-Domain Operations* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020); and Greg Graff and Jacqueline Leahy, 'How Does the PLA Assess the Future Character of War?' Paper presented at the 2021 CAPS-RAND-NDU Conference on the PLA, 20 November 2021. On U.S. Army 'Multi-Domain Operations', see 'Defense Primer: Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)', *In Focus*, Congressional Research Service, 22 October 2021.

Already written into new promotion regulations is the admonition that officers must not only achieve solid professional marks, but also exhibit high ‘political quality’ (政治品质).<sup>86</sup> Officers who do not spend the time necessary to master the mantras – reciting if not actually believing them – are unlikely to attain high positions, whatever their professional skills.

Placing Xi at the center of China’s military strategy also has two other implications that could ultimately influence China’s military effectiveness. First is reinforcing the tendency in Leninist militaries to privilege decision-making by the smallest possible elite at the highest level. Centralizing authority in Xi’s hands could paradoxically come at the expense of the prescriptions of the strategy to hone the PLA’s ability to conduct modern joint operations – which requires a high degree of flexibility and initiative among lower-level commanders. Rather than emphasizing those qualities, a strategy premised on the clear reminder of where power lies may dissuade attempts by the PLA to pass authority down to lower echelons, as officers look back up for guidance on what to think and how to act.<sup>87</sup>

Second is whether, by closely aligning China’s military strategy with his own personal legacy, Xi has accepted additional political risk. Hu Jintao, who had a distant relationship with the PLA, could plausibly disassociate himself from PLA mistakes or controversies.<sup>88</sup> By emphasizing his attention to military affairs and reducing the influence of others, such as the CMC vice chairmen, Xi may have exposed himself to risk of being faulted internally or internationally for PLA mistakes. He thus has incentives to gloss over failures and laud PLA accomplishments, even dubious ones such as its reported flawless performance in responding to the 2020 COVID outbreak in Wuhan. The stakes for using large-scale force may also be more apparent for Xi than for his predecessors. On one hand, Xi could take it on himself to decide that the time is right to achieve reunification with Taiwan, but on the other hand, his culpability for an aborted attempt to seize the Island could be greater than Jiang or Hu’s given his political investments.

While driven mainly by political reasons, the lack of a substantive change in the military strategy that the CMC adopted in 2019 should not be equated with risk aversion or a failure to innovate. Chinese operations around Taiwan have become more frequent and intense over the last few years and Beijing has shown itself willing to push

<sup>86</sup> ‘On the new officer system reform, authoritative answers are here’ [关于新的军官制度改革, 权威解答来了], *China Veteran* [中国退役军人], 12 January 2021  
<http://tyjr.sh.gov.cn/shtyjrswj/xyyd/20210112/ec2d4b5d36eb483ebaa8c343f0f9924f.html>

<sup>87</sup> Joel Wuthnow et al., eds., *Crossing the Strait: China Prepares for War with Taiwan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2022).

<sup>88</sup> Andrew Scobell, ‘Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China’s Peaceful Rise?’ *Parameters* 39/2 (2009), pp. 4–22.

back against perceived encroachments by other rivals. An expansion of coercive tactics or even a decision to launch major combat operations against Taiwan, though politically risky for Xi, would not require a substantive revision to the strategy, which, as overhauled in 1993 and slightly adjusted three times since then, is already focused on these contingencies. If anything, rolling out a new strategy as part of Xi's 'new era' reminds the PLA that challenges from the United States and Taiwan are growing and that completion of a round of reforms should not invite complacency but spur the PLA to consider the important next steps.

Specifically, the 2019 strategy likely sets the stage for another period of reform, just as the 2014 strategy presaged reforms that began in 2015. The 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, which the latest strategy informed, requires the PLA to deepen reform in several areas. First is 'speeding up the modernization of military theory,' including creating a 'military strategy system for the new era.'<sup>89</sup> A concrete step was the CMC's issuance of a new joint operations outline in November 2020, signaling the first overhaul of PLA joint doctrine in twenty years.<sup>90</sup> This could spur new thinking on 'multi-domain integrated joint operations,' even if the CMC has not yet formally adopted that concept. A second area is refining military management processes, allowing the PLA to gain 'operational efficiency' at a time when military budgets are no longer growing at double-digit rates.<sup>91</sup> Third are personnel system reforms, focusing on recruiting and retaining 'joint combat command talents.'<sup>92</sup> As one sign of change, in August 2021, the National People's Congress approved a revised Military Service Law that increased the conscription age to 26; this could reflect a desire to recruit postgraduates with strong technical skills.<sup>93</sup>

A fourth area involves upgrades to PLA weapons and equipment, including 'accelerating the development of strategic cutting-edge technology.'<sup>94</sup> As referenced above, the PLA has established a new modernization goal of 2027 that requires the PLA to blend forces at disparate modernization stages: mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization. New systems, some of which are associated with 'intelligentized' warfare, are already being fielded, including ballistic missiles fitted with hypersonic glide vehicles, upgraded integrated air and missile defenses,

<sup>89</sup>'Interpreting Article 41 on the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan'.

<sup>90</sup>Finkelstein, *The PLA's New Joint Doctrine*.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.* On slowing growth of PLA budgets, see Saunders, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Double digit increases ended in 2015; the 2021 budget included a 6.8% increase from 2020.

<sup>92</sup>'Interpreting Article 41 on the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan'.

<sup>93</sup>Regular press conference of the Ministry of National Defense on August 26', China Ministry of National Defense, 26 August 2021 [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-08/30/content\\_4893499.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-08/30/content_4893499.htm)

<sup>94</sup>'Interpreting Article 41 on the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan'.

high-altitude drones, unmanned systems, and surface and subsurface combatants.<sup>95</sup> There is also a push to innovate new ways of performing old missions, such as use of civilian assets to ferry troops and equipment across the Taiwan Strait.<sup>96</sup> Thus, while the new strategy is consistent with the last one, the military retains significant flexibility to determine how that guidance will be implemented – the PLA will by no means be spinning its wheels until a new, more fundamental change to the military strategy is approved.

Nevertheless, while the guidelines provide flexibility, they also establish a clear direction for PLA modernization and operational planning, reducing attention to areas beyond those priorities. Emphasizing Taiwan as the primary theater means that the PLA is not expected to be able to handle more than a single major contingency, unlike other great powers that have prepared for multiple conflicts in different theaters, and the continued focus on ‘local wars’ means that its attention has not expanded to high-end combat far beyond the Pacific theater. Remaining focused on ‘informatization,’ with ‘intelligitization’ framed as an emerging phenomenon, provides a judgment that the PLA should achieve modernization incrementally – with mechanization only completed in 2020, there is still much to do on informatization, a necessary condition for intelligitization.<sup>97</sup> The answers to the major questions contained in the strategy – where, how, and over what the PLA needs to fight – would only change with an erosion of the current strategic and resource constraints. In other words, even as PLA discourse offers clues about changes around the bend, the CMC has kept the strategy fixed on the necessary and the achievable. This suggests that while Xi aims to be seen as an architect of strategy, he has not directed the PLA to do things beyond their capabilities, thus placing himself in a position to be able to take credit for what the PLA ultimately can accomplish.

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<sup>95</sup>For descriptions, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2021); Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 2021); and Mike Yeo, ‘Chinese airshow offers glimpse at military's new drones’, *Defense News*, 30 September 2021 <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2021/09/30/chinese-airshow-offers-glimpse-at-militarys-new-drones/>

<sup>96</sup>Michael Dahm and Conor M. Kennedy, ‘Civilian shipping: Ferrying the People's Liberation Army ashore’, CIMSEC, 9 September 2021 <https://cimsec.org/civilian-shipping-ferrying-the-peoples-liberation-army-ashore/>

<sup>97</sup>‘Regular press conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26’.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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