

## China's "Power Projection" Capabilities

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines China's ability to influence conflicts beyond its immediate area through both conventional and unorthodox means. Decision-makers and intelligence analysts at all levels should note America's influence within the Pacific region is becoming increasingly linked to its influence in Africa, the Middle East, and other areas of interest to rising East Asian powers. For the United States to maximise its strategic capabilities, it would need to maintain a robust military presence in all these regions.

The United States has compelling reasons to maintain a commanding military presence in the Western Pacific. This has been apparent since US Commodore Lawrence Kearney's timely intervention to secure American trading privileges with China at the close of the first Opium War, 1839-1842. Nevertheless, at a time when the United States is moving an increasing proportion of its military assets to the Far East as part of a so-called "rebalance" to Asia, those with an interest in strategic affairs do well to ask where the fulcrum of the metaphorical scales might be. If America shifts forces to the Far East at the same time as the emerging powers of that region significantly improve their ability to act where the United States is reducing its presence, Washington may find the challenge of engaging those powers more complicated than ever. Although this shift may remain the wisest course of action, military commanders and civilian decisionmakers would be wise to prepare for its complexities.

The emerging Asian power of greatest interest to the United States is undoubtedly the People's Republic of China (PRC). Happily for American leaders, persuasive scholarly and professional literature suggests the PRC's long-range power projection capabilities remain unexceptional. Such literature, however, rests on a relatively narrow understanding of power projection. This article reviews the PRC's ability to act in potentially violent conflicts beyond its borders and argues Beijing is pursuing a strategy which magnifies its influence beyond what its current military assets seem to allow.

US Army Field Manual 100-7 defines power projection as "the ability . . . to apply any combination of economic, diplomatic, informational, or military instruments of national power."<sup>1</sup> This article suggests China will be able to use civilian political activists, private security personnel, co-operative foreign forces and other non-traditional assets to replace "military instruments" in this mosaic.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, non-traditional assets

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1 US Department of the Army, *Decisive Force: The Army in Theater Operations*, Field Manual 100-7 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 1995).

2 Some material from this article was previously presented by the author in a paper titled "Beside the Obvious: The Beijing-Seoul Security Relationship Beyond the Korean Peninsula" at the 20th Anniversary of the Geneva-Agreed Framework "New Approaches on the Korean Peninsula: Theories and Strategy," Conference, Plaza Hotel, Seoul, October 10-11, 2014.

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will only be available at times, in places, and under political circumstances which favor their use. Such assets will seldom be strong enough to defeat conventional armed forces of any size, but the PRC's current "economic" importance and "diplomatic" situation permit them to combat other non-traditional forces, such as criminal gangs, and even to play a symbolic role in disagreements among states. Field Manual 100-7 goes on to note "an effective power-projection capability serves to deter potential adversaries, demonstrates . . . resolve, and carr[y] out military operations anywhere in the world."<sup>3</sup> This article suggests China's non-traditional forces will be useful for the first two of these purposes and may – in situations of interest to the PRC – even be valuable for the third.

The first section of this article reviews the argument that the PRC's long-range power projection capabilities are modest and easily quantifiable. A second section questions this argument, drawing on the "empty fortress" concept introduced to Western scholars and policy analysts by Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross in their early study of China's post-cold war security policy. A third section re-examines China's developing power projection capabilities taking a wider range of possibilities suggested by the "empty fortress" and related concepts into account. Finally, a conclusion returns to the issue of American policy, noting that although it may be sensible for the United States to base a greater proportion of its forces in East Asia, Washington's challenges remain global and it must maintain its own global power projection capabilities in order to meet them. US commanders and intelligence analysts at all levels must remain conscious of these points.

### **China's Power Projection Capabilities**

Beijing frequently uses low levels of force in international conflicts and is acquiring hardware which will allow it to intervene on a larger scale. Indeed, those inclined toward an alarmist view of China's economic and military development could find the PRC aggressive. Nevertheless, the PRC's most violent interventions are now decades in the past, and even its newest equipment appears insufficient to sustain long-range military expeditions against resistance from a militarily capable state. For these reasons, scholars and military analysts commonly conclude that Beijing, despite its occasional blustering, will pursue conciliatory policies beyond its immediate vicinity. One analyst predicts China will scale back its involvement in Africa, while others question its ability to uphold its current policies even close to its own coastline as the disputed maritime territories in East Asia.<sup>4</sup> If the PRC is unable to use so-called hard power in these places, one may assume any aspirations it might have to intervene in more distant regions such as Latin America are equally doomed.

The history of Chinese power projection is colorful. In 1974 and again in 1988, the PRC seized strategically valuable islands from Vietnam. The 1988 incident featured a naval battle in which Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> US Department of the Army, *Decisive Force: The Army in Theater Operations*.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Holslag, "China's New Security Strategy for Africa," *Parameters* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 36; Jeffrey W. Hornung and Alexander Vuving, "Beijing's Grand Strategy Failure," *The National Interest*, January 10, 2014.

warships sank three Vietnamese vessels.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the People's Republic has made a series of incursions into territory it disputes with the Philippines. Meanwhile, PRC forces have enforced Beijing's claims to other regions in the South China Sea by boarding non-Chinese ships and detaining their crews.<sup>6</sup> Farther north, Chinese warships joust with their Japanese counterparts over the disputed pieces of land known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Senkaku Islands in Japan.

Beijing also dispatches forces to more distant conflicts. Since 2008, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Chinese naval officers have expressed an interest in acquiring land bases in the region, and in expanding their operations to the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, as of early 2014, the PRC deploys ground troops and police in nine African countries.<sup>8</sup> On the other side of the world, China has provided police for recent peacekeeping operations in Haiti.<sup>9</sup> After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Chinese emergency personnel were among the first non-Haitian relief workers to arrive on the scene.

Since the 1988 clash, however, China's more provocative expeditions have rarely demonstrated any particularly formidable military capabilities. The Chinese forces responsible for challenging Filipino territorial claims, for instance, have often been fishermen. Their weapons have frequently been buoys used to mark disputed maritime areas as Chinese.<sup>10</sup> The PRC has gone farther in asserting its claim to the islet known as Mischief Reef. Even there, however, China's actions have consisted of little more than covertly building structures on the disputed piece of land. Some of these structures may have had value as fortifications, but even that is unclear.

China and the Philippines challenged each other more directly in the Scarborough Shoal affair of 2012. That incident began when Chinese fishing vessels entered disputed waters, escalated when a Filipino warship attempted to arrest the alleged trespassers, and became a two-sided military confrontation when naval units belonging to the PRC came to the fishermen's defence. The fact that both sides openly deployed military forces is ominous. It is, however, worth noting that the Filipino vessel which initially attempted to apprehend the fishermen was a frigate.<sup>11</sup> Beijing challenged it with a pair of patrol boats.

There may have been a variety of reasons PRC commanders entered this confrontation so outgunned. It is possible that they failed

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5 Jeff W. Benson, "South China Sea: A History of Armed Conflict," *USNI News*, June 20, 2012, updated February 5, 2013, <http://news.usni.org/2012/06/20/south-china-sea-history-armed-conflict>.

6 National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2013), 228.

7 Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, "Piracy's Next Frontier: A Role for China in Gulf of Guinea Security?" *The National Interest*, December 10, 2013; and Daniel J. Kostecka, "Places and Bases: The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review*, 64, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 59-78.

8 United Nations, "UN Mission's Summary Detailed by Country, 31 August 2014," [http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2014/aug14\\_3.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2014/aug14_3.pdf).

9 Nicholas Thomas, "Interventions with Chinese Characteristics," in *China and International Security: History, Strategy and 21st-Century Policy*, Vol. 3, Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, eds (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 290-291.

10 Stanley Meyer, *Incident at Mischief Reef: Implications for the Philippines, China and the United States* (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College, 1996), 7.

11 National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013*, 225.

to anticipate such an event, and the patrol boats were the only assets they had available. Nevertheless, the fact they were willing to respond in the way in which they did suggests they had little intention of resolving the dispute violently. Chinese leaders almost certainly intended to remind their Filipino counterparts the odds in a more general war would be somewhat different, but the actual confrontation remained largely symbolic.

The PRC has used military assets more openly in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. This signifies a certain degree of boldness among Chinese policymakers, since Japan would appear to be a more dangerous opponent than the Philippines. Moreover, the bilateral defence treaty between the United States and Japan explicitly binds the United States to protect Japanese-held islands in the contested region from attack.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, Washington underscored its willingness to uphold this commitment by contributing ships, aircraft, and over 10,000 personnel to a joint US-Japan military exercise which simulated the defence of the disputed territory.<sup>13</sup> Neither Japan's own capabilities, nor its close relationship with the United States, deters the PRC from dispatching warships and military aircraft to assert their presence near the contested zone. Moreover, since the late 1990s, Beijing has mounted such forays with increasing frequency.<sup>14</sup>

Again, however, China typically carries out its most provocative actions with vessels and personnel incapable of holding their own in an actual battle. Chinese warships have typically remained in the background during confrontations in the East China Sea. When Japanese authorities have accused the PLAN of going further, the Chinese have often denied it.<sup>15</sup> Just as Chinese fishing vessels have mounted many of the PRC's challenges to Filipino territorial claims, putatively civilian Chinese political activists have often taken the lead in penetrating Japanese-claimed territory.<sup>16</sup> One may reasonably speculate these activists enjoy at least tacit support from Beijing. However, Chinese authorities would be entitled to counter that Japanese and Taiwanese citizens have also sailed into disputed regions of the East China Sea to assert their nations' claims, indicating, at a minimum, this tactic is widespread.

Beijing has demonstrated its power projection capabilities more convincingly in disaster relief efforts, UN-backed peacekeeping missions and operations against pirates. China's anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Africa are particularly significant, since they prove PLAN warships can carry out military tasks for extended periods, thousands of miles from their home ports. Moreover, the PRC supports these patrols using newly-acquired logistical vessels.<sup>17</sup> From an operational point of view, this allows PLAN personnel to develop their skills at using new equipment to carry out more ambitious operations, and from a political

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12 Alessio Patalano, "The East China Sea, Maritime Strategy and Sino-Japanese Security Relations," in *China and International Security: History, Strategy and 21st-Century Policy*, Vol. 3, Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, eds. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 127.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 128.

15 "China Media: Japan Radar Lock," *BBC News*, March 19, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-21840243>.

16 "Japan Holds PRC Island Activists," *Taipei Times*, March 27, 2004, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2004/03/27/2003107943/1>.

17 Yves-Heng Lim, *China's Naval Power: An Offensive Realist Approach* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 82..

point of view, it signals Beijing's interest in doing so. Meanwhile, the US Department of Defence reports the PRC is reconfiguring its ground forces to make them easier to transport, and may build a new amphibious vessel within the decade.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the PRC has not acquired enough support ships to sustain sufficiently large naval forces to challenge more dangerous opponents. Since maritime transportation is indispensable for supporting expeditionary forces of any size and sea power is the surest means of protecting transport vessels from hostile action, the fact the PRC has such a limited ability to carry out long-range naval operations seems to constrain its overall power projection capability to a similar degree. The PRC's inability to sustain large naval forces at long range will, among other things, sharply restrict the role of its much-publicized new aircraft carrier. Beijing's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) continues to acquire new refuelling and transport aircraft, which may allow the PRC to compensate for the logistical deficiencies of its maritime forces to some degree, but the numbers of new transport aircraft are also modest, and the overall point stands.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the self-described Offensive Realist Yves-Heng Lim concludes, for the "foreseeable future, the primary task of the PLA Navy will continue to be defined at the regional level."<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Holslag, concludes the PRC will remain dependent on the good will of other powers to protect its overseas interests, and it will moderate its policies accordingly.<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey W Hornug and Alexander Vuving add the PRC sometimes ignores the reality of its military weakness and goads distant opponents, which merely exposes its claim to great power status as hollow.<sup>22</sup>

### "Empty Fortress"

Beijing's signals of willingness to use force in external disputes do indeed appear to contain a substantial element of bluff. Scholars Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross would not be surprised. In 1997, they published an influential book suggesting that the rising China would compensate for its various weaknesses by falling back on the culturally hallowed strategy of defending so-called "empty fortresses."<sup>23</sup> Nathan and Ross have reiterated this idea in more recent works, and other authors have taken it up as well.<sup>24</sup> The phrase "empty fortress" comes from the classic Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, presumably written during the Ming Dynasty. In this story, the commander of a depleted army feigns brash confidence in order to scare off powerful

18 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2014*, April 24, 2014, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_DoD\\_China\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf).

19 A former PLA colonel discusses the PRC's military airlift capabilities in Yue Gang, "PLA Must Protect China's Overseas Interests," *China.org*, April 24, 2013, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-04/24/content\\_28642897.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-04/24/content_28642897.htm).

20 Yves-Heng Lim, *China's Naval Power: An Offensive Realist Approach*, 165.

21 Holslag, "China's New Security Strategy for Africa," 36.

22 Hornung and Vuving, "Beijing's Grand Strategy Failure."

23 Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), passim.

24 Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), passim; Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley, *China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014), passim.

enemies. Those who find the analogy appropriate might note, in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the ruse worked.

As Hornug and Vuving point out, it is risky to bluff in direct confrontations with superior opponents. In more complex situations, one may use pretense with greater hope of success. Today's PRC enjoys an abundance of convenient complications. Not only do Beijing's circumstances provide it with opportunities to get away with overplaying its hand, they allow it to enter many of the conflicts which interest it the most with forces materially capable of following through on their threats.

Chinese leaders must anticipate situations in which they might wish to defy the will of powerful opponents. As previously noted, the PRC routinely challenges its East Asian neighbours. Sino-Indian relations are also tense. The United States has close relations with most of the PRC's rivals in these disputes, and may also oppose aspects of Beijing's policies for reasons of its own. Nevertheless, the PRC and its state opponents have consistently prioritized the cooperative aspects of their relationships over confrontation.

All of them have compelling reasons to continue doing so. Co-operation is normally a happier state of affairs than conflict, and it typically appears to be even when it is not. Moreover, China, America and the other Pacific Rim states rely upon one another economically to a degree which is exceptional even by twenty-first century standards. The costs of a lengthy crisis, let alone a war, could easily become ruinous for all concerned. The fact that the PRC is a nuclear power gives even its most belligerent state opponents an incentive to behave moderately.

Meanwhile, most of the PRC's occasional rivals have demonstrated a corresponding willingness to become its occasional allies. Vietnam's recent policies provide a typical example of such behavior. Vietnam and China contest ownership of potentially oil-rich regions of the South China Sea, and in 2012, Chinese authorities seized two Vietnamese fishing vessels and their crews in the disputed zone.<sup>25</sup> Events such as this undoubtedly contributed to the Vietnamese government's decision to forge a closer military relationship with the United States. Nevertheless, even as Hanoi explored the possibility of providing logistical support for American warships, it also welcomed opportunities to carry out joint naval operations with the PLAN.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, there are occasions in which the PRC can use its expeditionary capabilities – real and perceived – to strengthen its relations with well-established members of the international community, including the United States. Few would deny Beijing's efforts to provide disaster relief, support UN peacekeeping missions and suppress piracy contribute to the common good. Andrew Erickson of the US Naval War College and Austin Strange of the China Maritime Studies Institute argue that Washington should encourage the PRC to take a greater role in global security affairs in order to promote cooperation between Beijing and other great powers.<sup>27</sup> They are unlikely to be the only influential Western thinkers on security matters to take this position.

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25 National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013*, 228.

26 *Ibid.*, 229-30.

27 Erickson and Strange, "Piracy's Next Frontier: A Role for China in Gulf of Guinea Security?"

As long as these circumstances prevail, the PRC will be able to take advantage of its sailors' increasing experience with patrolling distant waters, its ground forces' increasing capability to deploy far from China and its air forces' increasing capacity to support long-range operations even while its logistical capabilities remain dangerously incomplete. At this time, the PLAN is unlikely to find itself in a position in which it must defend expeditionary forces' lines of communication from hostile navies. Indeed, even the PRC's bolder actions seldom attract the level of diplomatic opposition a so-called rogue state might receive. To the contrary, when Beijing times its provocations wisely, it can use them to pressure potential opponents into accommodation.

The Scarborough Shoal affair reminds us that Beijing faces diplomatic risks when it takes strong positions in external disputes, but it also reminds us that some of the outcomes of such confrontations may well favor China. While the incident was in progress, Washington supported the Philippines.<sup>28</sup> Countries throughout Southeast Asia are actively developing security ties to the United States, and one may reasonably speculate the events of 2012 encouraged them to continue this process with a renewed sense of urgency. Nevertheless, commentators for Japan's National Institute for Defence Studies suggest that the Scarborough Shoal incident also revealed limits to Washington's willingness to confront China.<sup>29</sup> Manila subsequently offered a cool response to suggestions that it might permit US armed forces to make greater use of Filipino territory and the same commentators interpret this as an attempt to compensate for the combination of Chinese assertiveness and American vacillation by placating the PRC.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, even in the forgiving international environment which Beijing currently enjoys, there may be times when it actually wishes to fight. Beijing may, for instance, need to protect its economic interests in war-torn regions. The PRC may wish to protect its supporters in other parts of the world, and to command the kind of influence which states achieve by offering such protection. Once again, the fact the PRC is developing some of the capabilities it needs for long-range operations is relevant, even others remain lacking. Once again, the fact that the PRC is developing a reputation for boldness may enhance the psychological impact of its actions.

### Layers of Chinese Capability

Moreover, Beijing cultivates indirect means to apply force in places far from China. Often, other states with greater access to the areas in question may be willing to act on the PRC's behalf. When official forces are inadequate or unavailable, the PRC may supplement them using politically or financially motivated civilian organisations. A 2014 article in *China Daily* describes how Chinese energy companies operating in Iraq defend their assets using "three 'layers'" of security, with Iraqi government security forces offering "wide-ranging protection," police

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28 National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review* 2013, 227.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 228.

operating under direct corporate control guarding worksites and armed Chinese nationals providing “the innermost cover.”<sup>31</sup>

This arrangement appears reasonable. Other firms based in other countries rely on similar types of protection. The *China Daily* article is significant, however, because it confirms that Chinese corporate managers in a strategically critical industry view assets nominally under the control of other countries’ governments as “layers” of their own security establishment. One may assume they will use similar multinational combinations of state and private forces elsewhere when it suits their purposes, and other PRC-based concerns, including the government, will do the same. The fact China’s largest petroleum companies either are, or recently were, state-owned reinforces the hypothesis that the PRC’s political leadership recognizes the various “layers” of proxy forces as instruments of foreign policy.

The PRC is expanding its access to potential proxies. Scholar Steven Childs illustrates one aspect of Beijing’s quest for overseas supporters with his 2014 network analysis of patterns in Chinese exports of military hardware. Once, Childs notes, Beijing’s arms trading policies focused on generating income to support its own defense industrial base.<sup>32</sup> Today, he finds, it seems increasingly interested in selling military hardware to a wider range of states, even when its new trading relationships are not particularly profitable.<sup>33</sup> Childs also finds Beijing’s new customers tend to be located in areas which are rich in natural resources, or which are, for other reasons, politically important to China.<sup>34</sup>

Childs infers Beijing has restructured its dealings to emphasise the goal of establishing closer ties to strategically valuable partners.<sup>35</sup> As Childs notes, a body of academic research confirms arms providers gain influence over their customers’ security policies.<sup>36</sup> One might also observe this method of cultivating allies has the potential to increase interoperability between forces from the importing and exporting states. This interoperability facilitates combining various types of organizations from various countries concerned in “layers.” The PRC also actively pursues joint military exercises with states throughout the developing world, and this activity serves similar purposes.<sup>37</sup>

The deepest layer of forces protecting China’s oil interests in Iraq consists of civilian Chinese security guards. Beijing enjoys expanding access to these assets as well. As recently as 2006, researchers Allison Stanger and Mark Eric Williams note the PRC had virtually no domestic private military companies (PMCs) and would be unlikely to “sanction

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31 “Concern Surrounds Chinese security forces in Iraq,” *China Daily*, June 24, 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-06/24/content\\_17612002.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-06/24/content_17612002.htm).

32 Steven J. Childs, “Sino-American Global Security Strategy: A Network Perspective,” in *China and International Security: History, Strategy and 21st-Century Policy*, Vol. 3, Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, eds. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 187.

33 *Ibid.*, 201.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 187.

36 *Ibid.*

37 The PRC’s Ministry of Defence discusses its policies on multinational training exercises in some depth in its 2013 White Paper. See “Safeguarding World Peace and Regional Stability” in *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2013), [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content\\_4442756.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content_4442756.htm).



[their] development.”<sup>38</sup> This was, in fact, misleading even at the time. At least one PRC-based firm had allegedly been recruiting veterans of the People’s Armed Police and the Chinese military’s special forces to provide a worldwide bodyguard service since 2004.<sup>39</sup> Since then, China’s private security industry has expanded dramatically, in size, visibility, and the range of international operations which it routinely undertakes.<sup>40</sup> Since Stanger and Williams were correct to suggest this industry could not exist in the PRC without state approval, and equally correct to note Beijing “jealously” guards its military assets, including intangible resources such as “strategies and skill sets,” one may infer the Chinese government expects these private security firms to be useful and is confident it can control them.

Moreover, Beijing will often find growing populations of Chinese people in the places which interest it most. Chinese firms operating abroad tend to take employees with them, even in labor-intensive industries. An estimated 847,000 Chinese nationals worked for PRC-based companies outside China in 2012.<sup>41</sup> The total number of Chinese expatriates is far larger. One report suggests over one million Chinese nationals currently live in Africa alone, up from perhaps 100,000 at the end of the 1990s.<sup>42</sup> This increase is in addition to the conservatively estimated 35,000,000 *haiwai huaren* (overseas Chinese) living throughout Asia and the Americas, who typically hold citizenship in the states where they reside but maintain varying levels of political and economic involvement with their ancestral country.<sup>43</sup>

From a diplomatic perspective, this diaspora offers Beijing a mixed blessing. The greater the size of any population, the greater the frequency with which members will fall into various forms of embarrassment, whether innocently, accidentally, or through genuine misdeeds. In situations where public opinion in any of the countries concerned might matter, Beijing may find many people hold the Chinese state and Chinese corporations responsible for such incidents, whatever their cause. Beijing has publically accepted responsibility to protect Chinese citizens living abroad from the assorted risks associated with living in other countries, and this may not always be easy or convenient for China.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, the existence of the Chinese diaspora broadens Beijing’s options for influencing external disputes. At a minimum, it provides the PRC’s leadership with a pretext for involving its country in any region where substantial numbers of Chinese people reside. Not

38 Allison Stanger and Mark Eric Williams, “Private Military Corporations: Benefits and Costs of Outsourcing Security,” *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 2, no. 1, (Fall/Winter 2006): 14-15.

39 Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “Enter China’s Security Firms,” *The Diplomat*, February 21, 2012.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Xan Rice, “China’s Economic Invasion of Africa,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2011.

43 The figure of 35,000,000 comes from the Chinese embassy in the United States and is based on data from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, see *CASS Report: Number of Overseas Chinese Up to 35 MLN* (Washington, DC: Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America), <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/qwqz/t297510.htm>. Chinese media sources report a figure of 50,000,000, see “Reforms Urged to Attract Overseas Chinese,” *Xinhua*, March 11, 2012, reprinted by *China.org.cn*, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC\\_CPPCC\\_2012/2012-03/11/content\\_24865428.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2012/2012-03/11/content_24865428.htm).

44 “New Situation, New Challenges and New Missions,” in *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2013), [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content\\_4442756.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content_4442756.htm).

only may the PRC act to protect Chinese expatriates against imminent danger, former PLA officer Yue Gang suggests Beijing may legitimately use military force to deter such threats before they materialize, presumably through preemptive action.<sup>45</sup> There may be circumstances in which the PRC can call on at least a fraction of the diaspora for various forms of action. Mao-era radicals repeatedly attempted to mobilise the *haiwai huaren* against the Indonesian regime, and putatively civilian Chinese activists continue to play a central role in the PRC's territorial disputes, which suggests meaningful numbers of Chinese citizens are currently prepared to take risks for what they perceive as patriotic causes, with or without formal state support.<sup>46</sup> When large numbers of Chinese overseas workers find themselves under threat, one may reasonably speculate PRC security forces will be able to organize them to help provide for their own protection, if only through unarmed vigilance.

## Conclusion

In summary, the PRC presents itself as a nation with global interests. Its combination of traditional and non-traditional power projection assets will frequently allow it to act upon those interests. Although this improvisational approach to expeditionary warfare cannot be as reliable as one sustained by robust air and naval forces, it compels the rest of us to take Beijing's position seriously. Thus, China can, and quite possibly will, use its non-traditional assets to persuade, prop up – and pressure – weaker political actors in areas such as Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East in much the same way as it has historically influenced the smaller states of East and Southeast Asia. When terrorists, criminals, insurgents, and violent protesters threaten its interests, it will be increasingly capable of resisting them, and also of claiming a role in shaping any international response. Moreover, as the PRC develops its armed forces, one may reasonably expect it to use them to consolidate whatever influence it gains with its current mix of capabilities.

Happily for all concerned, China's interests and those of other powerful nations such as the United States will often be the same. This is one of the reasons the PRC is relatively free to exploit non-traditional approaches to power projection, and it is also a reason American leaders may feel relatively safe in permitting their Chinese counterparts to do so. Nevertheless, Americans in particular should be aware reducing their own presence in areas of interest to Beijing, will increase their reliance on the same indirect and implied means of projecting influence the PRC must depend on. Those who hope to use such methods to affect the outcome of a dispute will often find it necessary to take positions which they may be reluctant to back up.

This possibility in itself is worrisome, since a world in which two powers who occasionally find themselves at odds must both base a measurable proportion of their diplomacy on bluster is not necessarily a safer one. Moreover, America's strategy in East Asia is, to quote US Pacific Command (PACOM) commander Samuel J. Locklear III, one

45 Yue Gang, "PLA Must Protect China's Overseas Interests," *China.org.cn*, April 24, 2013, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-04/24/content\\_28642897.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-04/24/content_28642897.htm).

46 Thomas M. Kane, *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 123, citing C.Y. Chang, "Overseas Chinese in China's Policy," *China Quarterly*, No. 82 (June 1980): 302.

of “strengthen[ing] alliances and partnerships, maintain[ing] an assured presence in the region, and effectively communicat[ing] our intent and resolve.”<sup>47</sup> To achieve these objectives, America not only needs to be able to use force when necessary, it needs for others to perceive it has this ability. For those who wish to take their enemies by surprise, the fact indirect means are often subtle can make them particularly useful; but for those who wish to maintain a reputation for strength and reliability, it is more likely to limit their utility.

This article has argued the PRC’s reliance on indirect means has allowed outside observers to underrate China’s capabilities, and those who hope to communicate resolve must strive to avoid being underrated. Consequently, US planners need to remain conscious that America’s prestige in East Asia is likely to be partially dependent on America’s perceived presence in regions where East Asian powers themselves are active, and that for the PRC in particular, this area is expanding. Samir Tata persuasively argued for the US to “counterbalance” Beijing, it must maintain robust capabilities in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.<sup>48</sup> As the PRC’s interests and activities become increasingly global, one will be able to make a similar case for maintaining US capabilities in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Even when US leaders determine it is in America’s interest to support China – and this may often be the case – they may find it useful to have the means to do so actively.

For senior policymakers, this may seem like a familiar and impossible dilemma. No nation has the resources to be as strong as it might like everywhere it might like. Strategy consists largely of choosing priorities, and admitting that one’s choices can never be ideal. Nevertheless, PACOM commanders do well to co-ordinate their plans with other regional commands. Since the global politics of US-Asian relations are complex, and important events may take place in areas where relatively few American personnel are present, lower-level commanders and civilians representing the US government (whether formally or not) throughout the world should understand they may play a role in achieving America’s policy objectives in the Pacific region. They may be the ones to assess situations in areas where the PRC is becoming involved, and the relationships they have formed with their local counterparts may often be what permits America to respond. Although the overall decision to reallocate a greater proportion of American assets to the Pacific region may well be the wisest one, this article suggests US civilian authorities and military commanders should be aware of the compromises they are making, and should craft their policies at lower levels to engage China as effectively outside East Asia as possible.

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47 US Pacific Command Strategy, <http://www.pacom.mil/AboutUSPACOM/USPACOMStrategy.aspx>.

48 Samir Tata, “Recalibrating American Grand Strategy: Softening US Policies Toward Iran In Order to Contain China,” *Parameters* 42, no. 4/43, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2013): 49.

