



China's Military Objectives and Operational Experience in the Middle East

Grant Rumley,
Meisel-Goldberger Fellow,
Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Distinguished commissioners and staff, thank you for the invitation to present my testimony on this important topic. It is an honor to testify alongside the experts on these panels today. My name is Grant Rumley and I am the Meisel-Goldberger Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where I focus on military and security issues in our Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East.

Today my testimony will focus on China's military and security presence in the region. I have structured this testimony to answer the commissioners' questions directly.

What are China's military interests and/or objectives in the Middle East? How important are these compared to its interests in other regions of the world? Please be sure to address the importance of securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in your answer.

Broadly speaking, China has five core interests in the Middle East. The first is in securing its access to the region's energy resources. China is careful to not over-rely on any single source or form of energy to meet its domestic needs, but the Middle East is nevertheless a key source for its energy supply. In 2022, China produced 5.1 million barrels of petroleum and other liquid products per day while importing 10.2 million barrels per day.¹ Middle Eastern countries represented a significant portion of these imports, making up 56% of China's crude oil and condensate imports, 29% of its petroleum product imports, and 15% of its natural gas imports.²

¹ "China Country Analysis Brief," *U.S. Energy Information Agency*, November 2023. <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN>

² Ibid.

The second interest is in advancing China's non-energy trade and investment. China is the top trading partner for nearly every country in the Middle East, and since 2005 has poured over \$250 billion in investment and construction projects into the region.³ The Middle East has also been a leading recipient of investment under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): in 2023 the region was second only to Africa globally.⁴ And, of course, the region is a transit point for a majority of China's exports to Africa and Europe.⁵

Considering these economic ties to the region, China's third interest is in securing the sea lanes of communication and free flow of commerce in and out of the region. While it has not joined U.S.-led military efforts to counter efforts by Yemen's Houthi rebels to close the Red Sea to maritime traffic, Beijing has reportedly engaged in diplomatic efforts to protect its own shipping in those waterways.

Beyond the economic, China's fourth interest in the region lies in what the West would consider counterterrorism, but for Beijing equates to both protecting its assets in the region against threats from violent nonstate actors and ensuring that groups in the region do not threaten China's internal domestic stability. China has looked to the region for approval of—and even at times cooperation in—its persecution of Uyghur Muslims.

Finally, China's fifth interest in the region is in utilizing it as a platform to advance its image as a global power. China has long viewed the region as an important proving ground for global powers and has trumpeted its diplomatic achievements—such as the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement—as an example of its global standing.

Like many great powers preceding it, China has gradually developed a military and security presence to protect its interests abroad. In recent years, Chinese leaders have directed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to increase its forward presence in order to project power, protect commercial interests, and improve the image of the state. Chinese President Hu Jintao first directed the PLA to begin focusing on “new historic missions” in 2004, urging the military to begin preparing to protect Chinese interests beyond its borders.⁶ The 2010 Defense White Paper directed the PLA to safeguard China's “maritime rights and interests.”⁷ Likewise, the 2015 paper on China's military strategy called for the development of a modern maritime force that could “protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests.”⁸ China's 2019 Defense White Paper took this concept a step further, declaring that “to address deficiencies in overseas operations and support,” the PLA “builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military

³ “China Global Investment Tracker,” *American Enterprise Institute (AEI)*, accessed March 2024.

<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>

⁴ Wang, Christoph Nedopil, “China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023,” *Green Finance & Development Center*, February 5, 2024. <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/>

⁵ “Chinese Money is Behind Some of the Arab World's Biggest Projects,” *The Economist*, April 20, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/04/20/chinese-money-is-behind-some-of-the-arab-worlds-biggest-projects>

⁶ Hartnett, Daniel M., “The ‘New Historic Missions’: Reflections on Hu Jintao's Military Legacy,” in “Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era,” ed. Roy Kamphausen et al., *U.S. Army War College Press*, 2014.

⁷ “China's National Defense in 2010,” *Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China*, March 2011. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284525.htm

⁸ “China's Military Strategy,” *Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China*, May 2015. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm

tasks.”⁹

Given the importance of the Middle East to China’s economy, it is perhaps only natural that Beijing would increasingly deploy its security apparatus to the region to protect these interests. Today, China’s military and security presence in the region comprises three main efforts:

Traditional military presence and security cooperation. China has rarely deployed its troops beyond the Indo-Pacific in recent years, but when it has deployed them, it has been to the Middle East. In response to the wave of piracy in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in 2007-2008, China began deploying its Naval Escort Task Force (NETF) in December 2008. As described by Chinese military officials in 2010, the mission was “mainly charged with safeguarding the security of Chinese ships and personnel passing through the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters.”¹⁰ This deployment is ongoing, and today represents China’s longest continuous deployment beyond its borders.¹¹ Since its inception it has kept largely the same configuration of two surface combatants and a refueling ship, though at times has augmented this presence with unconventional forces (in 2014, for instance, the NETF was accompanied by a Song-class diesel-electric submarine).¹²

Sustaining the NETF operationally led China to pursue an agreement with Djibouti for the establishment of its first overseas base in 2017. This base, just miles away from the U.S. base at Camp Lemonnier, became the primary support node for supporting the NETF as well as other Chinese military operations in the region, whether that is joint training exercises with regional partners, the 2014 escort of a ship carrying Syrian chemical weapons, or the 2015 evacuation of Chinese civilians from Yemen.¹³ Upon its establishment, the DoD noted the facility included “barracks, an underground facility, a tarmac and eight hangars for helicopter and UAV operations,” but that it notably lacked “a dedicated naval berthing space, requiring PLA ships to dock at the commercial port [in Doraleh].”¹⁴ Since its founding, the base’s capabilities have been gradually expanded. The base originally included a contingent of PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC). In 2020, the U.S. noted a PLANMC special operations forces (SOF) unit had joined the base.¹⁵ The base’s pier has likewise been expanded and in 2022 supported its first resupply of a PLAN supply ship.¹⁶ According to the U.S., the pier is now likely

⁹ “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” *Information Office of the State Council, The People’s Republic of China*, July 24, 2019. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

¹⁰ “China’s National Defense in 2010.”

¹¹ “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2021. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

¹² Herzinger, Blake and Ben Lefkowitz, “China’s Growing Naval Influence in the Middle East,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 17, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-growing-naval-influence-middle-east>

¹³ Shah, Khushbu and Jason Hanna, “Chinese Ship Arrives to Help in Removal of Syrian Chemical Weapons Materials,” *CNN*, January 8, 2014. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/01/08/world/asia/china-syria-chemical/index.html>; Rajagopalan, Megha and Ben Blanchard, “China Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen in Unprecedented Move,” *Reuters*, April 3, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBNOMU09M/>

¹⁴ “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2018. <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>

¹⁵ “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2023. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

“able to accommodate the PLA Navy’s aircraft carriers, other large combatants, and submarines.”¹⁷

The base and NETF represent the core of China’s traditional military footprint in the region. It should be noted this is still modest in comparison to the U.S. footprint in the region. China’s presence centers around several narrow objectives: protect Chinese shipping interests, project Chinese military might (typically via port calls and joint exercises), and be prepared to support Chinese commercial entities in any crisis scenario. Chinese officials likely see this current footprint as sufficient to meet these objectives.

Investments in critical infrastructure. One way China’s security presence manifests itself is in investments in large, critical infrastructure projects. These can typically include but are not limited to ports, industrial parks, and airports. This is a uniquely Chinese security footprint, as these investments reflect a blending of civilian enterprises with government access and control. Chinese regulations require Chinese companies abroad to be prepared to service the Chinese military. For instance, the 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law gives broad powers to the military over commercial assets, mandating that “all citizens and organizations are obligated to accept the requisition of civilian resources.”¹⁸ The 2016 National Defense Transportation Law further improved the PLA’s legal ability to commandeer civilian entities in times of crisis—in the words of one analyst the law “placed obligations on Chinese transportation enterprises located abroad or engaged in international shipping” and “required them to provide logistical support for PLA forces operating overseas.”¹⁹

One former Biden administration official has noted that China’s investment in ports “are made cautiously and with an eye toward their future potential for military access.”²⁰ According to some analysts, Chinese firms now own or operate over a hundred ports around the world, and the PLAN has made port calls at over a third of these ports.²¹ Of course, the type of servicing to the PLA a Chinese owned or operated foreign port could provide is theoretically limited by host nation considerations and the capabilities of the port in question. Still, that these regulations provide the legal framework for Chinese commercial entities to support Chinese military operations presents a different dilemma for measuring China’s overseas power projection.

In the Middle East, this phenomenon is most often observed in Chinese investments in ports and industrial zones. Chinese firms have signed operating agreements at ports in Israel, Egypt, the UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, and Algeria.²² China has invested in industrial parks in Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.²³ China frames these investments as taking place on the “Maritime Silk Road” between Beijing and Europe, further solidifying connectivity and control for

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mulvenon, James, “2010 National People’s Congress Highlights: Defense Budgets and the New National Defense Mobilization Law,” *The Hoover Institution*, 2010. <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM32JM.pdf>

¹⁹ Kennedy, Conor M., “China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection,” *U.S. Naval War College*, 2019. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1148864.pdf>

²⁰ Doshi, Rush, “The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order,” *Oxford University Press*, 2021. 207.

²¹ Kardon, Isaac B., “Statement for the Record Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing: ‘China’s Military Diplomacy and Overseas Security Activities’,” *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, January 26, 2023. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/Isaac_Kardon_Statement_for_the_Record.pdf

²² Sly, Liz, “China Has Acquired a Global Network of Strategically Vital Ports,” *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/china-ports-trade-military-navy/>

²³ Fulton, Jonathan, “China’s Gulf Investments Reveal Regional Strategy,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, July 29, 2019. <https://agsiw.org/chinas-gulf-investments-reveal-regional-strategy/>

Chinese commerce. At the opening of the 2018 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) summit in Beijing, China's foreign minister Wang Yi described a vision of a network of "industrial park-port interconnection" across the region.²⁴

Arms transfers. Like many countries, China has utilized arms sales and transfers to advance its defense industrial base, gain leverage in relationships, and boost its military's image. For decades, China was a minor player in the global arms market given its reliance on arms imports. Yet China's decades-long defense modernization effort has gradually reached a point where its indigenously produced platforms are becoming competitive on the global market. In 2019, the U.S. noted China was the world's fastest-growing global arms exporter.²⁵ Today China markets and sells a wide variety of platforms, including fighter jets, advanced missiles, and naval vessels. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China was the fourth largest global arms exporter from 2019-2023, behind the U.S., France, and Russia.²⁶

Like many arms exporters, China has found the Middle East to be an appealing market for arms sales. Historically, the Middle East provided a boost to Chinese defense industry: in the 1980s, sales of fighter jets to Iraq and Iran rocketed Beijing to briefly becoming the fourth largest global arms exporter at the end of the Cold War.²⁷ Though that was short-lived, in recent years China has made slow but steady progress breaking back into the market through a shrewd marketing strategy. The appeal for Beijing is two-fold: the region is consistently home to some of the top arms importers in the world, many of whom have security partnerships with the U.S. that China can attempt to undermine. China has wisely offered platforms the U.S. has not generally offered, such as armed UAVs, on terms and conditions the U.S. typically does not match. As the U.S. has noted, "many Chinese systems are offered with enticements such as gifts, donations, and flexible payment options."²⁸

Today, China has made inroads selling to several countries in the region. The top purchasers of Chinese weaponry between 2011 and 2021 were Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran, according to SIPRI.²⁹ Chinese platforms are generally of a lesser quality, but that has not stopped customers from purchasing. The CH-4 UAVs purchased by Iraq were largely sidelined due to crashing or maintenance issues during the country's fight against the Islamic State, while similar Chinese UAVs kept crashing for Algeria and the UAVs purchased by Jordan were eventually resold.³⁰ Yet Chinese UAVs continue to be sold across the region, including to Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, the latter of

²⁴ "Wang Yi: China and Arab States Should Jointly Forge the Cooperation Layout Featuring 'Industrial Park-Port Interconnection, Two-Wheel and Two-Wing Approach'," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, July 10, 2018.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2903_663806/2905_663810/201807/t20180712_536469.html

²⁵ "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2019. https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf

²⁶ Wezeman, Pieter D., Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2024. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2023>

²⁷ Rumley, Grant, "China's Security Presence in the Middle East: Redlines and Guidelines for the United States," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states>

²⁸ "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019."

²⁹ Rumley, "China's Security Presence in the Middle East."

³⁰ Ibid.

which is due to take possession of the Wing Loong-10 UAVs this year.³¹ At the World Defense Expo hosted by Saudi Arabia in February, China sent over 70 defense companies (second only to Saudi firms) to market their platforms and flew an exhibition of the J-10 fighter jets, the first time they've demonstrated the J-10s at an expo abroad.³² Regional customers understand the trade-offs with Chinese platforms, but still consider them for a number of reasons, including gaining access to Chinese technology, securing a typically lower price point, fostering a security relationship with China, expressing dissatisfaction with its other arms suppliers, and/or operating weaponry without end-use restrictions.

What range of military activities does the People's Liberation Army (PLA) undertake in the Middle East? Please include the following in your answer:

a. PLA Navy's "counter-piracy" task force in the Gulf of Aden

As discussed above, the NETF stemmed from a realization in Beijing that China's overseas economic interests were subject to the volatility of the region. The spate of piracy in the Red Sea in the late 2000s also affected China: several Chinese merchant vessels were either hijacked or attacked by Somali pirates in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.³³ When the Libyan civil war erupted in 2011 China was forced to conduct a massive evacuation of over 30,000 of its citizens in the country and in the immediate aftermath Chinese officials were primarily focused on tallying up all the millions lost in investment in the country.³⁴ Establishing and deploying a presence to mitigate these security concerns became a crucial imperative for Beijing. As Xi Jinping said at the start of his third term as president: "security is the bedrock of development, while stability is a prerequisite for prosperity."³⁵

In 2022, Chinese state media claimed that since the NETF began, the PLAN has deployed more than a hundred ships and 30,000 service members in escorting over 7,000 commercial ships.³⁶ As piracy attacks gradually decreased in the years following its initial 2008 deployment, so too did the NETF's escort missions. As of 2020, the NETF had escorted just forty-nine ships according to the U.S.³⁷ Yet from the success of the NETF came the establishment of the PLA logistics base in Djibouti, and from

³¹ Parakala, Askshara, "WDS 2024: AVIC WL-10B to be Delivered to Royal Saudi Air Force," *Janes*, February 9, 2024. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/wds-2024-avic-wl-10b-to-be-delivered-to-royal-saudi-air-force>

³² Meyer, Henry and Christine Burke, "China Grabs Spotlight with Major Presence at Saudi Weapons Show," *Bloomberg*, February 7, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-07/china-grabs-spotlight-with-major-presence-at-saudi-weapons-show?embedded-checkout=true>

³³ "China to Send Warships to Gulf of Aden," *France 24*, December 21, 2008.

<https://www.france24.com/en/20081221-china-send-warships-gulf-aden->; Rice, Xan, "Somali Pirates Capture Chinese Ship and 25 Crew in Indian Ocean," *The Guardian*, Oct 19, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/19/somali-pirates-hijack-chinese-ship>

³⁴ Collins, Gabe and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya," *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 11, 2011. <https://jamestown.org/program/implications-of-chinas-military-evacuation-of-citizens-from-libya/>; Jingjing, Huang, "China Counting Financial Losses in Libya," *The Global Times*, March 4, 2011. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/629817.shtml>

³⁵ Law, Elizabeth, "Security is the Foundation for China's Development: President Xi," *The Straits Times*, March 13, 2023. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/security-is-the-foundation-for-china-s-development-president-xi>

³⁶ "Chinese Naval Escort Task Forces Conduct Mission Handover at Gulf of Aden," *PLA Daily*, June 13, 2022. http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2022-06/13/content_10162772.htm

³⁷ "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2020. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

there the PLAN has supported other traditional military options in the region, including the 2013 escort of a ship removing chemical weapons from Syria, the 2015 evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen's Port of Aden, and the 2023 evacuation of Chinese nationals from Sudan to Saudi Arabia.³⁸ The PLAN's 46th iteration of the NETF departed China in February 2024 for the region and follows a routine formula: two surface combatants and a supply ship depart China while the previous NETF finishes its deployment to the region, thus providing a near continuous presence in the region.³⁹

b. Chinese participation in peacekeeping operations

China views peacekeeping operations as a useful way to improve its image, gain military experience, and in some cases, protect its overseas economic interests. China has participated in UN PKOs since 1990, and Chinese officials claim they have sent over 50,000 peacekeepers to 20 countries (notably suffering losses of 25 Chinese peacekeepers) in the years since.⁴⁰ China also offers training to foreign peacekeepers at its academies.⁴¹ In 2015, Xi Jinping offered 8,000 Chinese soldiers as potential available peacekeepers in his General Assembly address, yet as of November 2023 China had only 2,267 peacekeepers deployed on service with the UN.⁴² The majority of China's peacekeepers are deployed to Africa, specifically in countries with sizable Chinese investments.⁴³ In the Middle East, 409 Chinese peacekeepers are currently deployed to south Lebanon in support of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), while 5 peacekeepers are deployed to Jerusalem as part of the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).⁴⁴

c. Naval and other military exercises with regional partners

Naval diplomacy is a relatively new phenomenon for China. The PLAN only first demonstrated its capability as a blue water navy in a 2002 circumnavigation of the globe, and in 2004 was still unable or unwilling to provide maritime support to Indonesia following the tsunami.⁴⁵ The PLAN made only eleven foreign port calls from 2003 to the establishment of the NETF in 2008. In 2015 alone, the PLAN

³⁸ Shah and Hanna, "Chinese Ship Arrives to Help in Removal of Syrian Chemical Weapons Materials.," "Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden," *BBC*, April 3, 2015.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32173811>; Xuanzun, Liu and Guo Yuandan, "PLA Navy's Routine Escort Operations Not Related to Regional Situation: Spokesperson," *The Global Times*, February 29, 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1307939.shtml>

³⁹ Xuanzun and Yuandan, "PLA Navy's Routine Escort Operations Not Related to Regional Situation: Spokesperson."

⁴⁰ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on May 30, 2023," *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America*, May 30, 2023. http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202305/t20230530_11086032.htm

⁴¹ Zhou, Bo, "How China can Improve UN Peacekeeping," *Foreign Affairs*, November 15, 2017. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-15/how-china-can-improve-un-peacekeeping?check_logged_in=1

⁴² Note: Chinese officials claim they've made good on Xi's pledge by establishing a stand-by force of 8,000 PLA troops ready to contribute to PKOs. "China's Xi Says to Commit 8,000 Troops for UN Peacekeeping Force," *CNBC*, September 28, 2015. <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/28/chinas-xi-says-to-commit-8000-troops-for-un-peacekeeping-force.html>; "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, November 30, 2023. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

⁴³ Dyrenforth, Thomas, "Beijing's Blue Helmets: What to Make of China's Role in UN Peacekeeping in Africa," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, August 19, 2021. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/beijings-blue-helmets-what-to-make-of-chinas-role-in-un-peacekeeping-in-africa/>

⁴⁴ "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*.

⁴⁵ Erickson, Andrew S. and Justin D. Mikolay, "Welcome China to the Fight Against Pirates," *USNI Proceedings*, March 2009. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2009/march/welcome-china-fight-against-pirates>

conducted forty port calls.⁴⁶ The establishment of the NETF and its base in Djibouti has likewise expanded China's operating environment and provided a foundation for further military operations in the region, including naval exercises. The PLAN has conducted joint naval exercises in the region with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Russia, and Pakistan.⁴⁷ Some of these exercises are more symbolic than practical, such as the recent joint exercise with Iran and Russia that featured tactical maneuvering drills and a hostage rescue scenario.⁴⁸ Others, like the 2019 three-week joint counter-piracy exercise with Saudi Arabia, are more sophisticated and have led to reciprocal exercises in China.⁴⁹ Some have expanded beyond the maritime domain, such as the first-ever joint China-UAE air exercise in Xinjiang in August 2023.⁵⁰ All are designed to showcase the capabilities of the Chinese military, build up PLA experience, and improve China's image as a security partner.

Why and where might China seek to establish military bases or logistics facilities in the Middle East? Is there a high likelihood that China will seek to establish one in the region in the future?

It is clear that China is looking to protect its overseas assets, occasionally with a conventional military force. Sometimes this protection can take the form of an economic investment in a third-party country's infrastructure, however. At times the line between these two methods of overseas protection is blurred due to the nature of China's civil-military fusion. The revelation in 2021 that the U.S. had discovered a secret Chinese facility under construction at the al Khalifa port in Abu Dhabi, just miles from U.S. forces at al Dhafra Air Base, demonstrates the dilemma of China's dual-purpose overseas infrastructure.⁵¹

In 2020, the DoD annual report to Congress was the first to confirm publicly that China was seeking another overseas base, noting Beijing was "seeking to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances."⁵² It also listed several locations China had "likely considered" for future overseas military facilities—the only Middle Eastern country listed was the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁵³ In October 2023, however, *Bloomberg* noted Chinese officials had reached out to Oman about potentially establishing a Chinese military facility, and that Omani officials had been "amenable" to China's overtures.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ McCaslin, Ian Burns, Andrew S. Erickson, "The Impact of Xi-Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy," *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, National Defense University Press, 2019. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>

⁴⁷ Rumley, "China's Security Presence in the Middle East."

⁴⁸ Mahadzir, Dzirhan, "Russia, China and Iran Finish Drills in Gulf of Oman," *USNI News*, March 14, 2024. <https://news.usni.org/2024/03/14/russia-china-and-iran-finish-drills-in-gulf-of-oman>

⁴⁹ "China, Saudi Arabia Launch Joint Naval Exercise—Media," *Reuters*, November 19, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-saudi-military-idUSL3N28010M/>; "Saudi, Chinese Navies Launch Military Drill in Zhanjiang," *Arab News*, October 10, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2388781/saudi-arabia>

⁵⁰ Lau, Jack, "China, UAE Set for Joint Air Force Training in Military First, as Beijing Forges Closer Middle East Ties," *South China Morning Post*, July 31, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3229485/china-uae-set-joint-air-force-training-military-first-beijing-forges-closer-middle-east-ties>

⁵¹ Lubold, Gordon and Warren P. Strobel, "Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations with UAE," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>

⁵² "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020."

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Jamrisko, Michelle and Jennifer Jacobs, "Biden Briefed on Chinese Effort to Put Military Base in Oman," *Bloomberg*, November 7, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-07/biden-briefed-on-chinese-effort-to-put-military-base-in-oman?embedded-checkout=true>

More broadly, it is likely China will try to solidify another node in the region for protecting its interests given the region's importance to China's economy and Xi's prioritization of protecting overseas interests. In 2013, the PLA's Science of Military Strategy paper called for building "strategic strong-points that rely on mainland, radiate out into the periphery, and go into the two oceans [i.e. Pacific and Indian Oceans], providing support for military operations or serving as a forward base for the deployment of military forces overseas, as well as exerting political and military influence in relevant regions."⁵⁵ Whether that takes the form of a declared military base, ala Djibouti, or a dual-use facility will depend on China's aims and the third-party country's receptivity.

Assess Chinese naval operations in the Middle East amid the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel:

a. Is the PLA providing protection to Chinese commercial ships that are vulnerable to attacks from the Houthi rebels?

The primary mission of the PLAN ships in the region is to protect Chinese commercial shipping. PLAN ships started escorting select Chinese commercial vessels in January, according to one Chinese maritime tracker, and as of March had escorted at least five commercial vessels.⁵⁶ As the Pentagon spokesperson noted in November 2023, PLAN ships had not responded to nearby distress calls from non-Chinese ships.⁵⁷ Beijing has navigated the turbulence caused by the Houthis' attacks using non-military means as well. China has repeatedly sent messages to Iran for the Houthis to restrain from threatening its commercial vessels. Chinese commercial ships have been broadcasting their nationality and announcing their presence as they enter the vicinity of potential Houthi attacks.⁵⁸ China also notably refused to join the U.S. and UK condemnation of the Houthi attacks at the UN in January, and one report in March noted China and Russia had reached an understanding with the Yemeni group to avoid being targeted in exchange for potential political support.⁵⁹ The cumulative effect has been the relative safety of Chinese commercial shipping. Indeed, apart from the seemingly errant targeting of a Chinese vessel in March, Chinese commercial vessels have not been purposely targeted by the Houthis since November 2023.⁶⁰

b. Is the PLA adjusting its own operations in the area in response to the conflict?

Chinese leaders likely assess that the current PLA posture in the region—to include the NETF—is sufficient to match the current risks to Chinese interests. Chinese media reported that PLA officials pledged to continue "standard operations" during the current Red Sea crisis.⁶¹ Beijing may consider

⁵⁵ Doshi, "The Long Game." Page 206.

⁵⁶ Babb, Carla, "Where is China in the Red Sea Crisis?," *Voice of America News*, March 1, 2024.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/where-is-china-in-the-red-sea-crisis-/7510435.html>

⁵⁷ "Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an Off-Camera, On-the-Record Press Briefing," *U.S. Department of Defense*, November 27, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3598749/pentagon-press-secretary-brig-gen-pat-ryder-holds-an-off-camera-on-the-record-p/>

⁵⁸ Longley, Alex, "Ships Advertise Chinese Links to Avoid Houthi Attack in Red Sea," *Bloomberg*, January 11, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-11/ships-advertise-chinese-links-to-avoid-houthi-attack-in-red-sea?embedded-checkout=true>

⁵⁹ Dagher, Sam and Mohammed Hatem, "Yemen's Houthis Tell China, Russia Their Ships Won't be Targeted," *Bloomberg News*, March 21, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-21/china-russia-reach-agreement-with-yemen-s-houthis-on-red-sea-ships?embedded-checkout=true>

⁶⁰ Raydan, Noam, Farzin Nadimi, "Tracking Maritime Attacks in the Middle East Since 2019," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 12, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019>

⁶¹ Dang, Yuanyue, "China PLA Stationed Up to 6 Warships in Middle East Over Past Week Amid Rising Tensions from Israel-Gaza War: Reports," *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 2023.

augmenting its presence in the region, of course, if Chinese commercial entities were directly attacked or had become collateral damage in a regional escalation. China could also decide to change the operating principles of its military presence if the UN Security Council issued a resolution calling for a halt in the Houthi attacks. In such a scenario, it is likely China would want to be seen as contributing to a UNSC effort, whether or not that contribution was meaningful militarily. Barring these scenarios, it is likely China will seek to maintain the status quo.

c. Is the PLA providing any military assistance to either side?

There is little public evidence that China is providing overt military assistance to Israel or Hamas. Arms trade between Israel and China is minimal. Chinese small arms have shown up in Hamas weapons caches and Chinese components have, of course, turned up in weapons systems throughout the region, but these are more likely a result of illicit small arms trade and sanctions evasion techniques by nonstate actors than a concerted effort by Beijing to sell conventional military weaponry.⁶²

Is the PLA “learning any lessons” from the ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel?

One of the lessons Chinese military planners could take from Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel is how complacency and a distracted leadership can increase a country’s susceptibility to attack. Israel had a de facto arrangement in place with Hamas, whereby it facilitated economic incentives to the Gaza-based leadership in exchange for calm. That Hamas violated this arrangement at a time of seeming mutual benefit, and that it conducted its attack as effectively as it did, may cause China to consider the implications for its own geopolitical contests. Another lesson could be in the U.S. response to the attack against Israel. The U.S. repositioned two carrier strike groups, dramatically accelerated the delivery of military aid, and sent a wave of senior officials—including the president—to Israel in order to reinforce a message of deterrence to Israel’s adversaries. Chinese officials could attribute this response to the close relationship between the U.S. and Israel, or they could posit—correctly or incorrectly—that this is how the U.S. would likely respond to Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Does China’s leadership perceive the United States’ shift away from the Middle East and toward the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to establish itself as an alternative security partner in the region? Are there any indications that China may be reconsidering its approach given the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel?

It is possible to look at the repeated directives from Chinese leadership for the PLA to become a more global force, coupled with the rapid build-up and modernization of the PLA, and conclude that Chinese military power projection may start reaching areas like the Middle East soon. This discounts, however, the premium Chinese leaders place on their own regional issues. The bulk of Chinese military might remains decidedly focused on the Indo-Pacific, where China has maritime disputes with almost all of its neighbors, an ongoing land border dispute with India, and the constant desire to dial up pressure on Taiwan.

The reality for China in the Middle East is that it greatly benefits from the U.S. security architecture. This architecture promotes freedom of navigation, stability, and the integration of like-minded state actors. It is in China’s interest for this security architecture to remain in place. Further, it is arguably

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3238536/6-chinese-warships-present-middle-east-over-past-week>

⁶² Biesecker, Michael, “Hamas Fights with a Patchwork of Weapons Built by Iran, China, Russia and North Korea,” *The Associated Press*, January 15, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-guns-weapons-missiles-smuggling-adae9dae4c48059d2a3c8e5d565daa30>

in China's interest for the U.S. to commit even more resources to maintaining this security architecture, as doing so not only helps preserve the free flow of commerce in a region crucial to China's economy, but also potentially siphons away U.S. military capabilities from the Indo-Pacific. So long as this architecture remains in place and China can continue to augment its presence through a combination of modest military deployments and investments in critical infrastructure, Chinese leaders are likely to remain satisfied with the level of security protection for their economic interests in the region.

The war between Hamas and Israel and subsequent regional escalation has given Middle Eastern countries another example of what a security partnership with China offers and exposed the limits of China's role as a security provider. Chinese officials were quick to condemn Israel and champion the Arab countries' talking points, but were largely unable to make any meaningful progress on de-escalating regional tensions. Further, China's military actions demonstrated yet again that its security presence in the region is designed to protect China's economic interests first and foremost. With the exception of a tenuous relationship with North Korea and its "no limits" partnership with Russia, China strictly follows a 'no allies' policy set forth in the Cold War.⁶³ Beijing is unlikely to change this policy for the conflict-prone Middle East. China is, therefore, highly unlikely to offer countries in the region the type of military support the U.S. has in the past. Beijing will, of course, continue to offer these countries access to select weaponry, investment in critical infrastructure (so long as this infrastructure serves China's interests), and potentially political support on select issues. But, the recent and ongoing regional escalation has hopefully revealed to countries in the region that a security partnership with China offers little by way of security or partnership.

Please describe China's professional military education and training programs with Middle Eastern partners.

The exact numbers of foreign participants in China's professional military education (PME) programs is difficult to ascertain publicly. China's 2019 Defense White Paper offers the most detail publicly, noting that "more than 10,000 foreign military personnel from over 130 countries have studied in Chinese military universities and colleges."⁶⁴ Beyond that, however, information on exact attendance by participant country and year is scarce. By comparison, according to the U.S. State Department, the U.S. trained approximately 10,000 foreign military personnel in 2021 alone.⁶⁵

The general consensus remains that PME opportunities in the U.S. or Russia are still more valuable than in China. PME offerings in China are limited by language restrictions, typically separate foreign students from Chinese students, and avoid issues sensitive to Beijing. According to the U.S., Chinese schools "rarely teach students about the root causes of security problems."⁶⁶ Still, China is looking to incentivize attendance through higher stipends and "greater exposure to Chinese technological and

⁶³ Keith, Ronald C., "The Origins and Strategic Implications of China's 'Independent Foreign Policy'," *International Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1985-1986. Pages 95-128.

⁶⁴ "China's National Defense in the New Era," *Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China*.

⁶⁵ Of these, approximately 2,800 military personnel were from the Middle East and North Africa. "Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest, 2020-2021," *U.S. Department of State*, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/reports/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest-2020-2021/>. Note, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) claims that it trained nearly 25,000 international military students through its own separate programs in 2022. "DSCA Fast Facts: Fiscal Year 2022," *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, 2022. <https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/2023-01/DSCA%20Fast%20Facts%202022%20-%20FINAL%20FOR%20PRINT.pdf>

⁶⁶ "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023," *U.S. Department of Defense*.

scientific innovations.”⁶⁷ To date, the PLA has prioritized attendance from Africa and Latin America.⁶⁸ Were China to seek greater attendance from the Middle East and North Africa, its approach may gain traction in coming years.

The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to the topic of your testimony?

1. Support defense modernization efforts in the region. For a variety of reasons, several countries in the region are looking to develop their own defense industrial bases. In pursuit of these ambitions, countries have sought a combination of foreign investment, diverse suppliers, and external partnerships that include technology transfers, research and development, and co-production agreements. U.S. security cooperation is notoriously inflexible when it comes to the latter. China and Russia, on the other hand, are perceived to be more flexible. Further, some U.S. partners see Washington entering into creative defense agreements with other countries—whether that is the AUKUS arrangement with Australia and the UK or INDUS-X with India—and perceive a general lack of interest in similar agreements in the Middle East.

For the U.S., shedding this inflexibility and sharing technology with regional partners is one way to reinforce the security partnership beyond simply committing military resources on the ground. To date, the U.S. has been wary of such commitments given select countries’ ties to China and the subsequent risk to proprietary U.S. defense information. Yet a defense technology sharing arrangement, if done carefully, could accomplish two objectives at once in both boosting the defense relationship with the partner country while also adding another structural constraint—i.e. the requisite safeguards on U.S. information—on a third-party country’s relationship with Beijing.

2. Coordinate China-related messaging to regional countries with global partners. Regional partners have heard the U.S. talking points regarding China for years. Some are receptive, others are not. Some view the U.S. as a non-objective actor in this domain, given the U.S. competition with China. One way to circumvent this phenomenon is for other global partners, in particular those with experience dealing with China, to convey their own experiences and subsequent warnings to Middle Eastern countries. Some of these countries, like Japan or Singapore, have established relationships in the Middle East and a history of navigating China’s practices. Coordinating their messages to countries in the region could foot-stomp U.S. talking points. Congress should—in the course of its engagement with such U.S. partners—emphasize the importance of imparting these lessons to third-party countries around the world, including in the Middle East.

3. Synchronize efforts between the legislative and executive branches to limit China’s influence in the Middle East. In January, the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party asked the Department of Commerce to investigate the Emirati firm Group 42 Holdings (G42) regarding its reported ties to China.⁶⁹ This followed years of bipartisan concern from the executive and legislative

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Nantulya, Paul, “China’s ‘Military Political Work’ and Professional Military Education in Africa,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, October 30, 2023. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-pla-military-political-work-pme-africa/>

⁶⁹ “Gallagher Calls on USG to Investigate AI Firm, G42, Ties to PRC Military, Intelligence-Linked Companies,” *House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party*, January 9, 2024. <https://selectcommitteeon-theccp.house.gov/media/press-releases/gallagher-calls-usg-investigate-ai-firm-g42-ties-prc-military-intelligence>

branches regarding the firm—which is led by the UAE’s national security advisor—and its relationship with China.⁷⁰ A month later, G42 announced that its investment arm had divested entirely from Chinese companies.⁷¹ The episode is an example of the potential power that unified, clear, and patient messaging can have in addressing China-related concerns with U.S. partners. Congress and the administration should expand efforts to identify specific China-related concerns in the region and coordinate subsequent messaging.

⁷⁰ Mazzetti, Mark and Edward Wong, “Inside U.S. Efforts to Untangle an A.I. Giant’s Ties to China,” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/27/us/politics/ai-us-uae-china-security-g42.html>

⁷¹ “Abu Dhabi AI Group G42 Sells its China Stakes to Appease US,” *Financial Times*, February 9, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/82473ec4-fa7a-43f2-897c-ceb9b10ffd7a>