

ALL THAT XI WANTS: CHINA ATTEMPTS TO ACE BASES OVERSEAS

LEAH DREYFUSS AND MARA KARLIN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the near to medium term, China will likely continue to forgo formal military alliances and full-fledged bases, and instead seek to develop partnerships that allow it access to its expanding interests. This can be seen in partnerships established under the Belt and Road Initiative, which some Chinese officials view as a framework for greater military cooperation. These infrastructure projects are quicker to build, easier to operationalize than proper military bases, considerably less expensive to establish and maintain, and nonetheless effectively Chinese-owned.

Sustaining Chinese growth and development through energy imports, as well as protecting Chinese investments and citizens abroad, will continue to be key motivations for the establishment of these new facilities. At the same time, China's growing military power and its expanded global posture may increase the prospect of conflict and requires serious and regular assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States have taken remarkably different approaches to military bases overseas. In its post-World War II superpower glow, and throughout the Cold War when Washington faced a Soviet rival trying to build a network against it, the United States developed an immense and robust architecture of military bases to project power. It fostered security and economic growth that benefited U.S. national security interests — and often other states as well.

In contrast, Beijing is developing its international network of bases in order to maintain stability so as to foster its own economic growth and interests and to protect its citizens abroad. So far, however, the model it has chosen does not meaningfully benefit other countries. It does not have the political opportunity that would allow it to do so, nor does it face the same existential threat that the United States did. Simply put, China is not yet building up a global network of bases to massively project power abroad and to challenge — or even attack — the United States. Nonetheless, it is building out its global footprint to protect its growing interests in a uniquely Chinese way — one that can still threaten U.S. national security interests.

China's initial forays into military basing abroad reflect its strategic priorities: continued economic growth and development, and a global stability that fosters such growth. China's approach to foreign bases has thus been gradual and cautious, so as not to provoke or alarm other major powers, namely the United States. Debates within Chinese academic and military circles regarding China's need for overseas bases date back at least 20 years, yet — setting aside the question of artificial islands in the South China Sea — China possesses only one established foreign base to date.

The debate in U.S. and Western academic and military circles has focused heavily on whether China's plans for foreign bases, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and military modernization amount to a long-term strategy to encircle China's competitors. To be sure, such an outcome is not out of the question. Should China find its flexibility severely hampered or find itself threatened in circumstances that require it to retaliate and put its foreign bases to such use, it will almost

surely do so. China's strategic priorities and actions thus far do not suggest that it intends to "spring a trap" on an unsuspecting world, but that world would do well to monitor its actions closely lest it tumble into a dangerous complacency.

OVERSEAS BASING: THE U.S. APPROACH

The U.S. military's global posture, an intricate system of forces, footprint, and agreements, took hold about a century after the country's founding. Competitors and adversaries throughout the broader Western Hemisphere triggered fears — about the security of the American homeland as well as U.S. interests and persons overseas — and U.S. military posture grew accordingly.¹ And much of that early posture, particularly in Latin America, was mercantilist in emphasis and direction.

By the early 20th century, the military was increasingly operating around the world. While there were fits and starts over the next few decades, World War II prompted the most fundamental reevaluation of the military's posture. Within a few years of its cessation, the U.S. military had bases or access to bases in 15 different countries around the world.² Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. military extended its bases to numerous sites across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Some of this posture, such as in the Persian Gulf, focused on securing access to oil and ensuring the openness of key waterways; in other regions, such as Europe and East Asia, this posture aimed to foster stability. The end of the Cold War marked a decrease in U.S. overseas posture and somewhat of a return to garrison. However, the post-9/11 era has seen a number of enhancements across the Middle East and, more recently, an increase in Asia and Africa, as well as a slow return to Europe.

Today, the U.S. military's substantial global posture has grown to include hundreds of bases in nearly 100 different countries. It helps reassure allies and partners and deter adversaries and frenemies. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy underscores: "Our force posture, alliance and partnership architecture, and Department modernization will provide the capabilities and agility required to prevail in conflict and preserve peace through strength."³ Moreover, this

posture is operationally crucial to the American way of war, which seeks to fight "away" games far from the U.S. homeland.⁴ In key regions such as Asia and Europe, this approach to warfare is growing trickier even as a global posture remains important. Countries like China and Russia have invested in capabilities designed to target U.S. military advantages, such as its ability to knit together a sophisticated system of stealth capabilities, precision guided munitions, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁵ Thanks to their focused attention, the military "now faces far graver challenges in projecting power and operating effectively in the Western Pacific and Eastern Europe," as the bipartisan congressionally-appointed National Defense Strategy Commission declared in 2018.⁶

In Asia specifically, the U.S. military has sought to increase its posture since the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance declared: "*We will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*"⁷ Since then, the U.S. military has expanded its forces, footprint, and agreements across the region. As then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter explained, the rebalance aimed to shift U.S. military posture so it was "more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable," while sending the most sophisticated military capabilities there and updating operational concepts relevant for that theater.⁸ Although its progress has been plodding, some illustrative examples over the last seven years include: basing 2,500 Marines in Darwin, Australia; rotating littoral combat ships and P-8s out of Singapore; adding new capabilities to Guam; realigning forces and enhancing capabilities across Japan; increasing pre-positioned equipment in Korea; increasing access to bases in the Philippines; inaugurating a new set of exercises with India; an aircraft carrier strike group visiting Sri Lanka and Vietnam for the first time in decades; and deepening collaboration with the Pacific Islands, among others.⁹ And of course, the most controversial aspect of U.S. partnership in Asia — U.S. military cooperation with Taiwan — continues to grow. In line with these steps, the June 2019 Defense Department strategy toward Asia redoubled the focus by bluntly declaring it "is the single most consequential region for America's future."¹⁰

OVERSEAS BASING: THE CHINESE APPROACH

China, on the other hand, has deliberately avoided an expansionist presence abroad since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power. In keeping with its military strategy of “active defense”¹¹ and concerns about major war on or near its territory, China has historically focused its military planning around homeland defense, with a prioritization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and land capabilities — a legacy, of course, of China fighting many wars on its territory over the last 200 years.



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Only in recent decades has China turned its focus to broadening capabilities across its services. Current reorganization and modernization efforts — aimed at what China calls “informationized warfare”¹² — have placed great emphasis on maritime forces, with major investments and initiatives directed at People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the Marine Corps (PLANMC) therein.¹³ Notably, the latest Chinese defense white paper makes this explicit, underscoring for the first time the importance of “far seas protection,” thereby describing a strategic rationale for China’s investment in a blue-water navy.¹⁴ The reorganization of China’s military into five “theater commands,” similar to the U.S. combatant commands,¹⁵ reveals its prioritization of a joint force capable of power projection and organized command and control over a distinct and growing set of security challenges. While to date this has continued focus on China’s near-periphery, it does expand coverage toward the Arabian Sea and the Middle East, the largest source of China’s crude oil imports.¹⁶

Combined with the strategically defensive, operationally offensive concept of “active defense,” the principle of non-interference — one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that characterizes Chinese foreign policy — has historically restricted

China in any pursuit of overseas bases.¹⁷ Chinese military leaders and scholars have often highlighted China’s lack of overseas bases as indicative of its respect for other states’ sovereignty as well as its peaceful — not revanchist or imperialist — ambitions.¹⁸ Official Chinese white papers from the 1990s through 2000 affirmed China’s policy not to “station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country” nor to “seek military expansion.”¹⁹

Yet as Chinese interests overseas have expanded, the discourse around non-interference and overseas bases in Chinese academic and military circles has changed. The past two decades have witnessed a gradual transition, with more voices calling for a reinterpretation of the non-interference principle to China’s current circumstances.²⁰ With significant investments, citizen populations, and energy imports abroad, China began to recognize in the late 2000s and earlier this decade the need to reimagine overseas bases and consider options that would allow adequate access to protect its growing interests.²¹ One scholar noted the need to distinguish “safeguarding China’s rights and interests” from “intervention,”²² while another emphasized broadening the PLA’s mandate to maintain the peace from a domestic to a global level.²³ A colonel of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) argued publicly that overseas bases were required to “safeguard [China’s] commercial interests and world peace” if China was to “effectively shoulder its international responsibilities and develop a good image.”²⁴ Even the general public in China began to express support for expanding Chinese presence overseas: A 2009 Huanqiu Shibao poll reported nearly 90% of respondents answered “yes” when asked whether China should establish overseas military bases.²⁵

China’s initial experiments with overseas basing seemed to tell a different story, however: less about “shouldering international responsibilities” and “developing a good image,” and more about expanding China’s domain. In recent years, the country took hold through an aggressive island-building campaign in the South China Sea, despite outcries from regional neighbors and the United States. Though China repudiated accusations of its intent to militarize the islands, it never renounced its rightful claim to the territories and the economic resources they held. Extensive research and satellite imagery show that China has, in fact, militarized the

islands, demonstrating its creative, operationally effective approach in gray-zone activity and a creative approach to overseas basing.²⁶

Short of formal basing, China took steps over the last decade to increase its ability to conduct out-of-area operations. China faced real hiccups in evacuating its citizens from thorny conflicts, like Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2004, and most spectacularly Libya in 2011, a massive effort that overwhelmingly relied on charter ships and aircraft. This capability has improved in a few short years, as demonstrated by the military's ability to lead the evacuation of citizens from Yemen, albeit on a much smaller scale.²⁷ It has actively participated in the Gulf of Aden counter-piracy coalition, increasing the military's familiarity with and experience in operations outside of the region, and may join the burgeoning Strait of Hormuz effort as well.²⁸

The 2013 unveiling of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) only accelerated the transition to accepting overseas bases as a necessity. China's 2015 Military Strategy white paper confirmed that "the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue."²⁹ Still, it stopped short of suggesting a complete reversal of its overseas basing policy. The subsequent two years confirmed the transition, with the opening of China's first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017. Two years into its operations, China shows no signs of regret in its policy reversal. In fact, the Ministry of Defense's 2019 white paper on "China's National Defense in the New Era" cemented its commitment to its overseas interests and basing requirements, as well as its transformation from a regional to a global power:

The PLA actively promotes international security and military cooperation and refines relevant mechanisms for protecting China's overseas interests. To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks. The PLA conducts vessel protection operations, maintains the security of strategic SLOCs, and carries out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations.³⁰

This white paper highlights China's overseas interests more than previous versions—including an entire subsection on it—and perhaps inadvertently, refers to Djibouti specifically as a base in the official English translation.³¹

CHINA'S BASES: RUMORED AND REAL

After years of speculation and repeated Chinese denials, the PLA Djibouti Support Base opened in August 2017. Since its opening, China has continued to refer to it as a logistics facility, intended solely to support peacekeeping, counter-piracy, and humanitarian missions around the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Aden.³² Despite these claims, satellite imagery and unofficial reports indicate the base has military infrastructure that would render it more than a mere logistics facility.³³ Its location next to a strategic oil chokepoint, the Bab al Mandab Strait, and in close proximity to the only U.S. base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, suggest the potential to "kill two birds with one stone" by ensuring the free flow of energy exports while gathering intelligence on U.S. forces.³⁴ Equally as critical is the role the Djibouti base plays in protecting China's economic expansion into Africa, in terms of both human and financial capital.³⁵ China has invested \$34.7 billion in projects across the continent, which is now host to over 260,000 Chinese citizens.³⁶ China's base in Djibouti is thus "a concrete manifestation of China's new naval strategy of near seas defense, far seas protection," as experts have written.³⁷

These developments have spurred speculation about the PLA's plans and intentions for future overseas bases. In July 2017, Sri Lanka handed China a controlling stake in the Hambantota Port, plus a 99-year lease on the port and 15,000 acres of the surrounding land, in exchange for \$1.1 billion in debt relief from BRI-related loans.³⁸ China's official news agency marked the occasion on Twitter: "Another milestone along path of #BeltandRoad."³⁹ Though the agreement technically bars military use of the port by foreign countries, it provides an exception should the Sri Lankan government grant permission. China has repeatedly claimed its interests in Hambantota are exclusively commercial, but, according to experts: "The economic rationale for Hambantota is weak."⁴⁰

The most developed of the Chinese precursor bases is in Pakistan. Its name — the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — is an incomplete description at best. Over the last five years or so, a Chinese state-owned enterprise has operated the Gwadar port and China has invested in a robust transportation system to facilitate access. Paired with deepening and widening military cooperation between China and Pakistan, including on building fighter jets and sharing sensitive satellite navigation systems, this access could pay serious dividends like refueling rights and landing access for China's military.⁴¹ Given the strategic corridor exemplified by Gwadar and the subsequent roadway system — which facilitate access to India, Iran, and Afghanistan — China's actions in that key area may reveal more crass aims.

Rumored potential “bases” in Haifa, Israel and Ream, Cambodia reflect similar priorities to those exemplified by Djibouti and Hambantota: protecting the human and financial investments of BRI projects and ensuring the maintenance of SLOCs and free-flowing energy transports. By 2022, a Chinese state-owned enterprise will operate a portion of the Haifa port near an Israeli naval base that often serves as a port of call for the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet.⁴² In addition to serving as a potential foothold from which to protect investments, Haifa could serve as a perch for intelligence collection on the U.S. and Israeli militaries and espionage on the high-technology sector of the Israeli economy.⁴³

Buzz surrounding Ream indicates China might acquire exclusive rights to part of a Cambodian naval installation, allowing China to use the base for 30 years in exchange for building two new piers. Though the nearby airport is supposedly for commercial use, the sparsely populated surrounding areas and two-mile runway able to host long-range bombers or military transports hint otherwise.⁴⁴ Along with outposts in the South China Sea, a facility in Cambodia would set up a triangular perimeter around Southeast Asia (including Vietnam and the South China Sea). This would further enable China to manipulate — and potentially intimidate — neighboring countries with which it has extensive economic relationships, and which it views as part of its rightful sphere of influence.⁴⁵

Speculation about other possible facilities reinforce China's emphasis on “near seas defense, far seas protection” and traditional concerns about protecting

mainland territory.⁴⁶ Doing so may mitigate its vulnerability to potential strangulation attempts in key waterways like the Strait of Malacca. The past decade has witnessed the development and militarization of China's artificial islands in the South China Sea, extending China's defensive periphery and bolstering China's claims to natural resources.⁴⁷ In 2018, the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu vehemently denied that it had any intention of allowing China to establish a foothold, let alone a military base, on its territory.⁴⁸ Such a base would have further extended China's eastern defensive periphery, potentially complicating the movements of U.S. naval forces in a Pacific conflict. Australia, one of America's closest allies in the region, has expressed outright opposition to Chinese efforts to militarize the region, with then-Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull stating: “We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific island countries and neighbors of ours.”⁴⁹ Reports this year indicate an “initial presence” in Tajikistan “may be the precursor to a base, evidently motivated by concerns of border security and counterterrorism,” in addition to BRI investments across Central Asia.⁵⁰ Though China and Tajikistan officially deny the presence of any Chinese military bases or talks to establish such bases, the situation on the ground and Tajikistan's strategic location on the BRI map suggest otherwise.⁵¹

(PLA)NS FOR THE FUTURE

In keeping with its policies of non-interference and non-alignment, China will likely continue to forgo formal military alliances and full-fledged bases in the traditional U.S. sense, and instead seek to develop partnerships that allow it access to protect its expanding interests. Partnerships will take root in economic relations, enabling China to establish a soft foothold in less-developed countries eager for investment and gradually build the leverage to assert a stronger presence. Though Chinese officials frequently deny any neo-colonialist ambitions attributed to the BRI, certain statements reveal the accusations have some truth: China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe recently told a group of foreign military leaders that “the BRI would provide a ‘framework’ for greater military cooperation.”⁵²

This alternative to the U.S. basing approach is uniquely Chinese, and in a way, capitalizes on lessons learned from the U.S. experience. China's light-touch facilities and leasing agreements are quicker to build, easier to operationalize than proper military bases, drastically less expensive to establish and maintain, and are nonetheless effectively Chinese-owned. Should one of China's host countries consider renegeing on an agreement, China has deftly put in place the financial leverage to enforce compliance with Chinese wishes. With the success this approach has produced for China thus far, it is not surprising that Xi has instructed the PLA to "steadily advance overseas base construction," and Foreign Minister Wang Yi has more openly expressed China's willingness "to try to carry out the construction of infrastructure facilities and logistic capacity in the regions where China's interest is involved."⁵³ Nevertheless, as tiffs over BRI projects in Malaysia have demonstrated — Malaysia's prime minister has been willing to cancel some projects despite the country's desperate desire for investment — this compliance may not be as total as the Chinese would like.⁵⁴

Looking forward, the priorities driving site selection for potential Chinese bases will remain constant in the near-term. Sustaining Chinese growth and development through energy imports and protecting Chinese investments and citizens abroad will continue to be the true reasons behind new facilities, despite claims of more internationally-palatable justifications such as humanitarian missions, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism. According to the Chinese Naval Research Institute, the PLA Navy chief's internal strategic think tank, sites for future consideration include Sittwe (Myanmar), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), and the Seychelles.⁵⁵ With military diplomacy activities surging under Xi in the past decade, it is possible the Chinese approach to overseas basing may become a cost-efficient model for other countries seeking to protect their expanding interests.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, observers should focus on a few considerations to assess China's overseas military basing trajectory. It may choose to prop up sympathetic regimes through investment. It could face a threat from extra-territorial terrorists and respond by expanding its presence. Its desire for access to distant and difficult locales like the Arctic may grow. The resource-

ascendant navy may take advantage of its growth to push into new arenas. Potential U.S. efforts to limit the efficacy of Chinese anti-access/area-denial capabilities may make out-of-area operations more appealing. And, as its basing infrastructure grows, it may suffer the self-licking ice cream cone fate, insofar as forward-deployed bases are vulnerable and hence require other bases to support them.

POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS

Traditionally, the most worrisome flashpoint for the United States and China has focused on Taiwan; however, the list has grown in recent years to include the South China Sea and the East China Sea. These three scenarios pose varied challenges based on their geography, topography, and distance. Moreover, there exists ample concern over how and under what circumstances a conflict might erupt, in what ways the parties might respond, and where the rungs on their respective escalation ladders lay.⁵⁷



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Yet even this expansive list may no longer be exhaustive as China's military presence burgeons outside of Asia. Personnel and capabilities at its base in Djibouti could intentionally or accidentally engage U.S. military personnel or assets at Camp Lemmonier, or lead to constrained U.S. access and activity across the Horn of Africa.⁵⁸ Increasing cooperation between Israel and China, and Chinese investment in key dual-use institutions like the Haifa port — which U.S. Navy ships frequently visit — could lead to Chinese interference in U.S. military posture or operations in the Middle East.⁵⁹ The increasing Chinese military presence in Tajikistan could be used to hinder (at best) U.S. military personnel or facilities in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Worryingly for U.S. military planners, this enhanced Chinese posture will make monitoring U.S. military movements cheaper, easier, and more effective. Operationally, that means

China will increasingly be able to surveil U.S. assets; track U.S. ships, aircraft, and personnel; and, should it desire, interfere with all of these movements. Simply put, as the Chinese military gradually expands its global posture and hence its global reach, the number and nature of potential flashpoints increases.

LOOKING FORWARD

China's evolving global military posture is nascent, yet requires serious study. Regular assessments are critical to understanding the strategic and operational implications, particularly in regions or vis-à-vis partners where the United States has been the primary external actor. The Defense Department's annual China Military Power Report is vital for the national security community to understand the changes presented by an increasingly capable, active, and present Chinese military. It would benefit, however, from a retrospective exploration of when, where, and how the U.S. national security apparatus has accurately and inaccurately assessed Chinese progress and intentions.⁶¹

Many of the steps that the U.S. military can take to enhance, deepen, and buttress the efficacy of its posture in Asia are well-trodden ground. These include:

- establishing more access agreements;
- increasing bilateral and multilateral military exercises with allies and partners in the region (and including extra-regional allies as well);
- continuing the focus on new and informal security frameworks when and where possible, like facilitating military cooperation among various combinations of Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia;
- deepening investments in, exercising, and testing new operational concepts to make the posture more distributed, capable, and resilient; and
- doubling down on key U.S. military advantages like undersea capabilities.

Many of these efforts could be catapulted were Congress to establish an "Indo-Pacific Stability Initiative" focused on directing 1% of the defense budget on this key region, as Mark Montgomery and

Eric Sayers suggest.⁶² Across Asia, the U.S. military benefits because allies and partners are largely enthusiastic about collaborating with it. While many may not wish to be publicly forced into a choice that could perturb China, they are nevertheless concerned about China's growing military power and the prospects of conflict.⁶³

To be sure, China's approach to date merits serious monitoring, but it does not yet merit hysteria. Yes, China is expanding its military presence abroad in tandem with its broadening economic interests, but — as its leadership reminds observers *ad infinitum* — it is also on its own path of "peaceful" development. With an unofficial pact between the Chinese people and the CCP that promises continued economic growth in exchange for one-party rule, forecasts of decelerating economic growth increasingly require China to look abroad for opportunities, both for its people and its capital.⁶⁴ Xi has recognized this, and has therefore thrown the full power of his weight in the CCP behind proliferating the BRI — his pet project — which not only provides growth opportunities, but also the soft power benefit of positively predisposing other less-developed countries toward China.

With such projects, however, comes the need to protect both human and financial investments, as well as China's international image. Building up traditional U.S.-style bases would be a huge expense, time consuming, and a hassle to maintain — not to mention potentially at odds with the principle of non-interference; however, figuring out more agile arrangements that afford China the access and ability to protect its newly gained interests is not. In a way, China is leapfrogging the U.S. in its basing strategy, cutting straight to dual-use and public-private setups that may be more economically and logistically efficient than America's global network of military bases. Nonetheless, as China continues to grow in influence and power, its approach will be tested by the cold realities of geopolitics. Though Beijing seems intent on avoiding the challenges faced by the U.S. global network of bases, it may find itself facing similar — or even more difficult — challenges in the 21st century.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Leah Dreyfuss is associate director of the Security and Strategy team in the Brookings Foreign Policy program. She is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where she studied international economics and strategic studies.

Mara Karlin is a nonresident senior fellow with the Brookings Foreign Policy program and Director of Strategic Studies at SAIS. She worked for five secretaries of defense and is the author of *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (2018).

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