



FUTURES FORUM

Global Multi-Domain Operations Competitors in 2035: China's Transformation

by Mr. Kevin B. Gorski

China's sense of time beats to an altogether different rhythm from America's.

—Henry Kissinger

Introduction

In the future competitive continuum, the United States will face challenges from many nations into and beyond 2035. Of greatest concern is the need not only to recognize but also to envision the future adversarial potential of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ongoing significant national and military modernization efforts.

Under the current Chinese President, Xi Jinping, the PRC is implementing the great rejuvenation using Xi's slogan of *fixing zhi lu*¹ (which roughly means "the road to renewal"). Included are national pride and the goal of demonstrating a "world class" military by December 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC.

Background

Chinese history is witness to centuries of strife and discord. The Qing dynasty is known for its initial prosperity and tumultuous final years, lasting from the mid-17th century until it was overthrown in 1912 after the Xinhai Revolution. The Republic of China, established in 1912, lasted until 1949 when Mao Zedong founded the PRC. Since Mao, the PRC embarked on a path to establish China as a global power in the 21st century, and the Chinese leaders and strategists are engaged in the "Hundred-Year Marathon,"² from 1949 to 2049. This strategy is a modernization effort across all aspects of the Chinese society, economy, and military that is

intended to replace the United States and other world powers as the globally dominant nation by 2035.

PRC Leaders' Strategies over the Last 70 years

- ◆ **Mao Zedong (1949 to 1976)**—Created the "People's War" guiding principle for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which focused on three strategies: imminent war, major war, and nuclear war.
- ◆ **Deng Xiaoping (1978 to 1989)**—Focused on "peace and development," including a PLA prepared to conduct "local war under modern conditions" of speed, mobility, and lethality.
- ◆ **Jiang Zemin (1989 to 2002)**—Assessed modern warfare after the first Gulf War and called for a "revolution in military affairs" based on the realization China was "ill-prepared" to address a Taiwan scenario.
- ◆ **Hu Jintao (2002 to 2012)**—Updated the Chinese military strategic guidance to "local war under modern, high-tech conditions," emphasizing joint cooperation and a move toward technology and the integration of "system-of-systems operations" referenced in the PLA Academy of Military Science document published in 2010.
- ◆ **Xi Jinping (2012 to present)**—In 2015, placed the PLA on a defining modernization effort across all branches of military operations, directing the PLA to win "informatized³ local wars" and emphasizing "informational" (electromagnetic, space, cyberspace, and cognitive) and maritime domains, later including the air domain.⁴ Subsequently, China's State Council Information Office published *China's Military Strategy*, driving the great national rejuvenation and the need for a strong military.

National Rejuvenation

PRC President Xi and Chinese Communist Party leaders are executing "national rejuvenation," targeting Chinese social stability, economic prosperity, and technology gains

that will ensure China dominates global affairs. The strategies direct the PLA to modernize, expand from regional concerns to a global response capable force, and dominate information, cyberspace, and space by 2049:

- ◆ **Military-Civil Fusion:** The result of the Military-Civil Fusion development strategy is a completely self-reliant defense industry.
- ◆ **One Belt, One Road:** The One Belt, One Road strategy, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, employs foreign and economic policies to expand global transportation and trade links to improve China's economy and access to essential resources and technology.
- ◆ **Polar Silk Road:** Over the past decade, Chinese presence in the Arctic has steadily increased, centered on research and exploitation. There have been disputes in the "near-Arctic State," enforced by icebreaker vessels, the presence of trained military personnel, and the deployment of an extended integrated air defense capability.
- ◆ **Global Affairs:** PRC foreign policy will expand bilateral and multilateral military exercises and achieve an overseas presence that allows for enhanced relations with nations and their militaries.
- ◆ **Non-War Military Activities:** The period from 2021 to 2035 will emphasize humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maintaining internal security, and maritime rights in the South and East China Seas. Additionally, PRC official writings describe aspects of Non-War Military Activities that advocate global PLA expansion—or a means to implement multi-domain operations, emphasizing recent advances in antiaccess and area denial capabilities.

Conclusion

By 2049, the outcome of the national rejuvenation is a modern self-reliant defense industry, a world-class and globally responsive military force, and a national strategy capable of exerting dominance across multiple domains. In order to achieve this global goal, the current Chinese scientists' ideas and concepts will need to complete a transition



China's People's Liberation Army flag raising parade in Kunming, China, December 29, 2007.

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as early as 2035 to 2040 of a modern military that is heavily reliant on advanced technology while still boosting significantly high numbers of available manpower. Ultimately, the future military will include the integration of advanced computing and artificial intelligence with robotics, advanced weapons, and biotechnological human enhancement, as well as the inclusion of new lunar materials to enhance armor, energy, and communication networks. ✨

Epigraph

Henry Kissinger, "Face To Face With China," *Newsweek*, April 15, 2001, <https://www.newsweek.com/face-face-china-150011>.

Endnotes

1. Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015).
2. Ibid. The Hundred-Year Marathon is a term coined by author Michael Pillsbury to describe China's strategy to supplant the United States as the world's dominant power. It is also the title of one of his books.
3. "Informatized" is the correct translation. It describes a process that involves acquiring, transmitting, processing, and using information to conduct joint military warfare.
4. Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 4–5, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR A394-1.html.