



# Can Beijing Maintain its Peaceful Rise?

Mark David Tischler

Headlines caution regularly that China is preparing for war against the West, and paint the largest Communist country as a rising belligerent force, threatening world peace. Sino-American tensions are rising as cooperation turns into competition, and a growing list of incidents and miscommunications threaten Indo-Pacific stability. The People's Liberation Army remains a major threat to American interests in the age of great power competition. Nevertheless, critical examination of China's grand strategy, geopolitical interests, and economic needs reveals that war is an unfavorable outcome for Beijing, and might threaten China's relatively peaceful rise. Thus while neither party is interested in war, the risk of a Sino-American war remains, and the geopolitical reality might force them into a regional or global conflict. Therefore, Washington must be ready for conflict should it materialize. At the same time, there lies a grave danger in a deterministic view that portrays conflict as inevitable, as it overshadows Beijing's interests, which are not meant to lead to war, but might lead there if misunderstood.

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In recent years, headlines have cautioned regularly that [China is preparing for war against the West](#). Combined with pictures of grandiose military parades and remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping telling [troops to prepare for combat](#), these articles paint the largest Communist country as a rising belligerent force, threatening world peace. Some go even further and predict that [armed conflict between China and the United States is inevitable](#). However, these claims generally lack nuance and ignore the complexity that lies behind China's grand strategy and the policy that stands in line with the evolution of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

This argument is unpopular because it is risky. If war breaks out, those who contended Beijing is not interested in war will be heavily criticized—and rightfully so. Conversely, the claim that China is preparing for war is a convenient position, as no one will be challenged for maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, critical examination of China's grand strategy, geopolitical interests, and economic needs reveals that war is an unfavorable outcome for Beijing. At the same time, Sino-American tensions are rising as cooperation turns into competition, and a growing list of incidents and miscommunications threaten Indo-Pacific stability. Therefore, there lies a grave danger in a deterministic view that portrays conflict as inevitable, as it overshadows Beijing's interests, which are not meant to lead to war, but might lead there if misunderstood.

### **Beijing Cannot Afford a War**

With the [PLA's budget rising consistently](#), many in the West perceive China as a growing military threat. [Combined with Xi Jinping's militaristic rhetoric](#), it might seem unreasonable from a Western perspective to claim that China is not interested in war. Yet there are numerous reasons why Beijing is not interested in armed conflict in the near future.

First and foremost, China is unlikely to win a war against any formidable adversary. Despite

the PLA's rapid technological advancement, [likely due to extensive industrial campaigns](#), the PLA is still going through [extensive reorganization efforts](#), which were jumpstarted in 2016. While the reforms were meant to address the structural and doctrinal challenges the PLA faces, most of the issues raised at the time are still relevant, such as the lack of combat experience since 1979 and limited capacity to operate outside the first island chain. China's economy and industry are dependent on crucial imports, such as oil and food products, which China's adversaries can easily obstruct by placing strategic bottlenecks along [critical sea lines of communications \(SLOCs\)](#). As of now, it is unlikely that the PLA Navy (PLAN) or PLA Airforce (PLAAF) can properly secure Chinese interests in the Strait of Malacca and the Tsushima Strait during times of war.

While the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are part of Beijing's plan to allow China access through other, land-based routes, they are unlikely to provide a tangible alternative to the SLOCs in the near future. The CPEC highways from Gwadar to western China are not easy or safe to travel. China's industrial centers, where the oil is sorely needed, are located mainly across China's southern and eastern shores, far away from Central Asia. Transports will have to navigate through the rising elevations of the Central Asian mountain chains, rising over ten thousand feet above sea level.

Beyond the geographic challenges, these roads are far from safe. Across the southern end of CPEC, the [Balochi insurgency](#) targets Chinese and Pakistani interests and infrastructure. Going north into the Afghan-Pakistani border regions and central Asia, the [Taliban, Islamic State, and other militant groups](#) are an ongoing destabilizing factor in the region. Even after the transports have reached China, they must pass through the relatively unstable Xinjiang region, which according to Beijing faces a constant [threat of unrest and extremism](#).

Beyond the external threats, China also faces domestic security challenges. In recent years, domestic security expenditure has risen significantly, to the point that it might have eclipsed the PLA budget. In 2019, the budget of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the state organ in charge of domestic security and intelligence, was \$1.661 billion. The 2019 budget for the People's Armed Police (PAP), a paramilitary force conducting border security and domestic counterterrorism operations, was \$28.5 billion. In addition, these budgetary investments do not include sums allocated directly from the regional and provincial governments, such as the governments of the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. These are in addition to the PLA 2019 budget of \$143.8 billion. It is difficult to identify the exact composition of China's domestic security and military investment, due to overlap in responsibilities and extra-military investment, such as the Ministry of State Security (MSS), Beijing's foreign intelligence service. However, it is clear that China invests considerable funds in domestic security. The Communist Party struggles to maintain its dominance over its 1.4 billion citizens at a time of globalization, migration, and new media. These challenges were further bolstered following a series of high-profile attacks by Uyghur militants and mass protests in Tibet, which peaked with a [terrorist attack injured in Yunnan](#) that left 31 dead and 141 injured. Beijing's efforts to maintain domestic stability, in the form of [mass incarceration in Xinjiang](#) and the establishment of a [nationwide surveillance network](#), prove to be extremely costly.

War is also unfavorable to Beijing from a diplomatic angle. China's diplomacy and propaganda rely heavily on the "peaceful rise" and "community of common destiny" narratives. These narratives often aim to portray China as an alternative to Western powers, which are perceived as aggressors by many in the global south. Pursuing an overtly aggressive foreign policy can seriously

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challenge the narrative Beijing has propounded for decades. Therefore, China has been very careful to balance its displays of military power with defensive rhetoric, emphasizing that its military development is used for protective means only. For example, what is often called in the West anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy or tactics is referred to by Chinese sources as "counter-intervention" efforts.

### Why Beijing Prepares for War

If military conflict is such an undesirable outcome for Beijing, why does China invest so much capital in the PLA? The first and simplest answer is that while Beijing cannot afford a war, it also cannot afford being perceived as weak. China must maintain its sovereignty against political adversaries, such as the US, Japan, or India, and geographic threats, such as the chokepoints on China's SLOCs. To be able to do so, Beijing knows that it must possess military capabilities that will allow it to deter its opponents from threatening its sovereignty.

Beyond the geopolitical calculation, there is also an ideological drive for a military buildup. A strong military plays a crucial role in the Party's national rejuvenation policy; in the words of Chinese Communist leadership: "Enriching the country enables strengthening the military; strengthening the military enables enriching the country." This is as much a domestic issue as it is one of national security. The Communist Party's mandate derives from Beijing's capability to maintain China's rise. Therefore, appearing weak to its domestic audience can quickly become a threat in itself.

Finally, Beijing hopes to out-bid Washington and its allies in the South and East China Seas. China knows that with multiple conflicts and limited resources, the US must be selective in the extent of resources and troops it can afford to send against possible Chinese aggression. Therefore, Beijing hopes that if the PLA is powerful enough to overcome the forces the US can afford to send to the Chinese periphery, Washington will be unable to respond to gradual Chinese aggression. In turn, this has led China to publicly boast and showcase its rising military capabilities.

All these factors have combined to encourage the propensity of proclaiming that a war with China is just a matter of time. However, this kind of paranoia is dangerous as it can prove to be a self-fulfilling prophesy. Rising tensions can in themselves be a reason for escalation, and the narrative of inevitable war can push a trigger-happy officer or policymaker to start a war nobody truly wanted. On the other hand, confidence in the ability to prevent conflict in itself can maintain peace. For example, the US measured yet determined [response to the 1995 Strait Crisis](#) likely played a major role in preventing the escalation of the crisis into a full-blown war. Decision makers in both Washington and Beijing must be confident of their ability to prevent a war, but paranoia can rob them of the sound calculations at a time when level-headedness will matter the most.

It is also worth examining what kind of war the PLA prepares for. Not all wars are created equal, and as of now China finds itself in a very uncomfortable point on the asymmetric warfare scale. The Chinese Navy's heavy investment in diesel submarines, alongside the PLA's investment in anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, suggests that Beijing is preparing for a [defensive naval war](#). However, while China knows it cannot win a total war against the US and its allies, it also cannot afford a limited war. Even if the PLAN can keep the US Navy at bay and maintain control of the South China Sea, it

simply does not have the resources to protect crucial SLOCs in the Indian Ocean.

This conundrum may explain [China's buildup of amphibious assault capabilities](#). While analysts often claim that this is part of Beijing's preparation to invade Taiwan, it is unlikely that such operations will be limited to Taiwan alone. Even if Beijing can deliver a swift strike and take Taiwan before the US navy can intervene, this will not be enough to win the war that may continue. Therefore, it remains extremely unlikely that China will risk its current success on the off chance that Washington will decide to not intervene in this scenario.

So, what is the purpose of such amphibious buildup? First, it is likely part of the attempt to outbid the US in the Indo-Pacific arms race. But it might also be part of a greater active defense strategy in case of a war. Beijing cannot and will not take Taiwan and just pray that Washington will stay back. In case of such an escalation, the PLAN will have to move forward and target key strategic positions in the Indo-Pacific, such as Guam and even Okinawa. Simultaneously, the Chinese hope that by the time such a war erupts, they will possess cyber and anti-satellite (ATAS) capabilities to disable [vital American infrastructure](#). If successful, Chinese leadership is likely right to assume that the US will comprehend that any endeavor to subdue the PLA, while possible, will be long and costly—to the point of discouraging Washington from following through with a counter-offensive. Nevertheless, Beijing must be aware that the same strategy failed in the last Pacific war where the Imperial Japanese Navy attempted to subdue Washington with a surprise attack in 1941.

### **Still, the PLA Remains a Threat**

All that being said, the PLA remains a major threat to American interests in the age of great power competition. Faulty decision making based on wrong calculations and human error can be extremely dangerous, especially when driven by paranoia and overly belligerent rhetoric.

Nevertheless, caution and preparedness are equally important. Washington must show it is prepared for war against the PLA, and develop the appropriate countermeasures against Beijing's arsenal.

Although China is unlikely to be a direct military threat to the US and its allies, its rise and growing military capabilities do pose security implications. While a war with China is unlikely in the near future, Chinese arms stand to end up in the hands of more likely enemies. Beijing already provides [drones to Middle East countries](#) and has [shown willingness to circumvent US sanctions](#). Moreover, China has gradually become [a major player](#) in global arms trade. Due to the rapidly evolving capabilities of the PLA arsenal, especially against American military systems, other US adversaries will presumably be increasingly interested in purchasing Chinese arms. So, while a direct conflict with China remains unlikely, American troops might find themselves fighting against Chinese systems in North Korea, Iran, or Venezuela. Thus, challenging the alarmist, and even at times jingoist, reactions to China does not need to completely disregard the threats posed by Beijing.

From Beijing's perspective, while war is an unfavorable outcome, China might not be able to maintain its relatively peaceful rise. The Chinese economy margin of profit grows increasingly thin, making slight threats to their trade ever so dangerous. Additionally, Beijing's rising investments around the world, especially in some of the globe's most volatile regions, such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Libya, and sub-Saharan Africa, might force Beijing to intervene in conflicts that until recently were of little interest to it. These investments are not just diplomatic, but in many ways an essential aspect of Beijing's economic policy, with [growing trade relations with South Asia and Africa](#). However, with many of these regions suffering from instability, China might find itself clashing with domestic or foreign forces with competing interests. Such concerns have

already driven China to establish a [military port in Djibouti](#), meant to provide security to Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, there is a constant risk of an escalation out of the gray zone. While Beijing does not desire an overt war with the US, China works steadily to undermine American interests and capabilities. Beijing's gray zone activity involves a diverse set of tools, ranging from the [Chinese maritime militia](#), [disinformation](#), and [influence](#) campaigns, to cyber warfare. Of course, the US does not sit idly by; Washington utilizes its own set of gray zone weapons against China, including [diplomatic pressure](#), [political coercion](#), and [cyber warfare](#).

The danger lies within the murkiness of the red lines around the gray zone. In the past, governments could have drawn clear and relatively fixed lines in the sand. But now, there is a constant risk that a government will cross a red line before it was made clear whether the taken action constitutes a *casus belli* or not. This is due to the rapidly evolving nature of gray zone activities. For example, if China shoots down or permanently disables a vital American communication satellite, does that constitute a declaration of war? If not, how many downed satellites will Washington tolerate before it strikes back? The higher tensions get, the blurrier red lines become.

Tensions are further heightened by the growing politicization of these issues inside the US. While economic competition between Beijing and Washington has been developing for years, under the Trump administration it became one of the main talking points of the White House. While a tough stance toward China remains a bipartisan issue, the Trump campaign attempted to portray the [Democrats as submissive to Beijing](#), going as far as saying calling Joe Biden "[Beijing Biden](#)." This economic, diplomatic, and political climate leads to steadily growing tensions between China and the US, as political leaders on both sides of the Pacific attempt to display supremacy over each other. Following the 2020 presidential elections,

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Secretary of State Anthony Blinken *said* in his confirmation hearings that “Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China. I disagree very much with the way that he went about it in a number of areas, but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that’s actually helpful to our foreign policy.”

Therefore, the risk of a Sino-American war remains. Even though neither party is interested in war, the geopolitical reality might force them both into a regional or global conflict. After

all, in 1940, neither the US nor the Empire of Japan was interested in fighting each other. Hopefully similar circumstances will not lead the two powers to war, but Washington must be ready for such conflict if the need should arise. Nevertheless, analysts should be careful not to fan the flames of war and sow paranoia and fear among decision makers. Many wars have started without either side desiring conflict, and this war will be one that neither side can truly win.

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