

“The PRC’s ‘Defense Diplomacy’ Strategy: Addressing the Asia-Pacific Multilateral Organizations”

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First, thank you to General Wang and to the organizers of this important conference, particularly Andrew Yang, an old friend for whom I continue to have the greatest respect for his experience and expertise as a strategist, for inviting me to play a small role in deliberations which I hope will play a significant part in the relationship between Washington D.C. and Taipei. I believe that relationship is crucial to the continued security of Taiwan.

Second, I must complain to those same folks who I just commended, since they have asked me to speak about a topic so complex and important that I have had trouble defining it, obviously a step necessary before attempting to explain it.

“The PRC’s ‘Defense Diplomacy’ Strategy: Addressing the Asia-Pacific Multilateral Organizations” contains a range of terms and ideas that demand definition.

I will immediately acknowledge the very fine analysis and discussion of this topic by Dr. Phil Saunders and Jiunwei Shyy

in their chapter, “China’s Military Diplomacy,” in *China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations*, edited by Scott McDonald and Michael Burgoyne. I will not hesitate to quote from this chapter!

First, how should I define the PRC’s “defense diplomacy”? Wikipedia identifies this as a post-Cold War phrase of British origin, meaning “the pursuit of foreign policy objectives through the peaceful employment of defense resources and capabilities.” In the United States, the Department of Defense (DOD) explains “defense diplomacy” by referring to “the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs’ Office of State-Defense Integration” as “a link between” the Department of Defense and the Department of State (DOS). Specifically, it notes that “nearly 100 military advisors from DOD are assigned to 25 DOS bureaus and offices” to provide “military expertise and advice.”

At the same time, DOS assigns “about the same number of foreign policy advisors” to senior military commanders and staffs around the world. A perhaps more prosaic use of the phrase, based on my 22 years on the faculty of the U.S. National Defense University (NDU), specifically the National War College (NWC), is based on the reason that College was founded, in 1946. Generals George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower were dissatisfied with the performance of the U.S.’s delegations to the many international conferences in which the United States participated during World War II.

They particularly noted that the British delegations, the U.S.’s most frequent interlocutor at these conferences, were almost invariably well-prepared and rehearsed for these meetings, with both military and civilian delegation members thoroughly familiar with each other and options for the agenda items to be discussed. The U.S. delegations were not so prepared, primarily because of differences in education, training, and experiences between the military and civilian members of the U.S. delegations. Another important weakness in among the members of the U.S. delegations often rested on historic Army-Navy rivalry in those pre-DOD, pre-Goldwater Nicholls days.

Marshall and Eisenhower took their dissatisfaction and proposed solution to Secretary of the Navy (and first Secretary of Defense) James V. Forrestal, who agreed that the United States needed to improve its preparations and performance as a member of the post-war world, dominated, it was hoped, by the United Nations and other international organizations. Hence, the decision to establish a “national war college” with a student body composed of both mid- and senior-grade military officers and their State Department counterparts. This combination still lies at the heart of the National War College student body, but now includes students and faculty members from across the U.S. government.

These definitions are not mutually exclusive and I suggest that China’s conception of “defense diplomacy” should be

defined by a combination of the above. Saunders and Shyy attribute to Beijing's use of PLA missions "supporting overall national foreign policy, protecting national sovereignty, advancing national interests, and shaping the international security environment."¹ A further definition was offered by Xi Jinping in January 2015, when he addressed the All-Military Diplomatic Work Conference; Xi noted several goals for "Chinese military diplomacy," including supporting national foreign policy, protecting national security, and promoting military construction (e.g., force building).²

Least well-defined, based on my limited experience with the PLA's professional military education organization, is the National Defense University in Beijing, where the military element, both students and syllabi, overwhelmingly dominate the curricula.

[Although I have to note that my very esteemed and unfortunately late mentor and friend, and predecessor at the National War College, Paul Godwin, who many of you knew,

¹ Saunders and Shyy, Ch. 13, 209. The authors draw on a data base created by Saunders at the U.S. NDU, which contains tables of data on the following categories of PLA diplomatic activities, including: diplomatic interactions, senior level visits, military exercises, port calls, educational and functional exchanges, and peacekeeping and counter-piracy operations (212-221).

² Ibid.

spent several weeks as a visiting professor at China’s NDU in 1987, when China’s NDU was being established--a very different time in U.S.-PRC relations.]

More important is the use of “military resources and capabilities” to achieve Beijing’s national objectives. Examples abound, both in the PRC’s government organization and in case studies around the world.

The most obvious military support of the PRC’s foreign policies and interaction with its diplomats are the military attaches now stationed at over 130 of its embassies and UN peacekeeping forces around the world. These officers support their diplomatic colleagues by advising them, collecting intelligence, and advocacy of PRC policies with host nation counterparts. They act as the primary conduit between the PLA and host nation militaries.

A second area of PLA support for PRC foreign policy is the inter-departmental structure, especially in Beijing, but also throughout the civilian governmental structure in China’s provinces, counties, and municipalities. This element may range from military-civilian interaction on the Central Military Committee to a small town mayor being asked to support a local PLA unit or maritime militia. These cooperative efforts may be more present in areas bordering China’s coast, but also would be likely in any province, county, or municipality on any of China’s borders subject to disputes or other security concerns. Hence, the military presence in Xinjiang is a major

element both in “civil” governance and concerns about cross-border Islamic movements from Central Asia.

Qinghai and Sichuan border Xizang (Tibet), an area of unrest and potential civil conflict. And Xizang itself, of course borders India, which poses the most serious land border challenge to China. Yunnan and Guangxi both border Southeast Asian nations, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, which are of varying degrees of concern to Beijing. In the north, Liaoning and Jilin face North Korea’s border of uncertainty, while the northern tier of provinces, Heilongjiang, Nei Mongol, Gansu, and Xinjiang border Mongolia and Russia. These latter two do not currently confront China in other than a friendly if cautious manner, but provide interesting histories of less than friendly relations with their neighbor to the south.

A third area of Beijing employing its military to support diplomatic aims is simple intelligence gathering, through both human and technical means. The increasingly large and sophisticated space architecture and sub-surface oceanic sensor networks are two examples of military-operated systems that directly support China’s diplomatic initiatives and goals.

A fourth, dangerous area where the PLA influences or even frames PRC foreign policy consists of the maritime disputes which Beijing prioritizes. There may be no clearer demonstration of the mutually supporting efforts of China’s civilian government and military forces. Taiwan holds a special status among Beijing’s priorities, both for the civilian

government—by which I mean the communist party as well as office factotums—and for the PLA. The forces of China’s military most concerned with day-to-day operations in support of maritime disputes are of course the navy, but also the coast guard and the maritime militia. These forces are both centrally controlled to the maximum extent possible by the CMC, but the maritime militia in particular also relies on local governmental support for personnel and resources. What may be different about this civilian-military interaction is that the PLAN often seems to take the lead, but with civilian officials following. This does not mean the military initiates international actions, but that the leadership in Beijing consciously uses PLAN, coast guard, and/or maritime militia to as the primary instrument of statecraft, with the diplomatic and other instruments following.

The most important of these disputes obviously is that centering on Taiwan, on the existence of the Republic of China. We all know Beijing’s refusal to agree to any meaningful degree of independence for any sovereign state of any name on Taiwan and its associated islands. Beijing has long conducted what might be called a “soft” campaign against Taiwan and its people, using the economic, diplomatic, and political instruments of statecraft to isolate Taipei, a campaign that is intensifying.

However, Beijing’s refusal not only to refuse to use military force against the people it rather ironically claims are

“Chinese,” in the same sense as the citizens of the mainland, but its actual use of military pressure against Taiwan is the clearest possible example of the CCP regime employing the PLA in support of national diplomatic aims.

A similar employment of the military instrument of statecraft is frequently employed by Beijing to support its offshore diplomatic positions in the East and South China Seas. These maritime arenas provide a clear example of civilian-military mutual support, as the PLAN, coast guard, and the nominally civilian maritime militia are all used to demonstrate China’s hardline diplomatic positions. In fact, this employment goes beyond demonstration or diplomatic niceties, as the Chinese maritime units often employ violent means against other claimants, particularly in the South China Sea. China has not merely used its maritime forces to deter but also to attack and to posture state-of-the-art military forces on the island bases it has constructed in that sea.

This military employment should not be dismissed with a catchy phrase such as the “weaponization of diplomacy,” but labeled for what it is: the use of military force to secure national objectives.

[Note Taipei’s apparent agreement with Beijing’s maritime claims in the East and South China Sea....]

As stated by China’s ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai this past August, “The PLA has made irreplaceable and indelible contribution [to] maintain [ing] the international

order.” That, of course, means the international order as defined and approved by Beijing.

Some additional points. First, the government in Beijing employs all the instruments of statecraft in pursuit of its foreign—and domestic—goals. These include economic programs and objectives; social management; political management campaigns; diplomatic missions, communications, negotiation, and programs; and of course military deterrence, presence, pressure, cyber operations, and if necessary near-combat and combat operations (by “near-combat” I am referring to the so-called “gray zone” tactics we have seen, particularly in the East and South China Seas, as well of course, against Taiwan).

That China makes extensive use of a broad sweep of these instruments is neither good nor bad, neither commendable nor evil, but simply indicative of a nation focused relatively narrowly on specific international issues and goals. In Beijing’s case, these are not just post-1949 issues but long-held Chinese concerns.

Beijing officially has described its foreign policy thusly:

"[China] unswervingly pursues an independent foreign policy of peace. The fundamental goals of this policy are to preserve China's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, create a favorable international environment for China's reform and opening up and modernization of construction, and to maintain world peace and propel common

development." To include "an active role in multilateral organizations."³

This claim is not spurious. The title of this paper includes the term "multilateral organizations," which is really interesting when considering Chinese views and approaches to such organizations, historically and currently. Beijing's attitude toward the international community and multilateral organizations certainly has changed radically since Mao Zedong wrote that

"the central task and the highest form of revolution is to seize power through armed struggle and to solve problems through war. This is a revolutionary principle of Marxism-Leninism, and it is universally applicable both in China and in the rest of the world."⁴

This attitude changed dramatically under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and his successors. By 2010, an article entitled "China Defines Its New Role in International Organizations" appeared in *People's Daily*, which recognized the importance

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 November 2003, at: <http://www.china-un.org/eng/gyzg/wjzc/t40387.htm>, accessed 02 October 2019.

⁴ *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: 1962), 529, at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ACFB04.pdf>, accessed 02 October 2019.

and value to China of such organizations.⁵

There are many thousands of international organizations, but the United Nations remains the world’s most universal and important. Since it displaced the ROC in the United Nations (UN) in 1971, the PRC has played an increasingly active role in UN committees and peacekeeping forces. I’ll mention here that it is a UN treaty, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that is the platform for the dangerous maritime disputes mentioned above, in the East and South China Seas, as well as the attendant arguments about freedom of navigation and the parameters of the zones delineated by the UNCLOS, which are Territorial Waters, Contiguous Zone, Exclusive Economic Zone, and the Continental Shelf.

International economic organizations are of near-equal stature to the UN in importance, both to China and to other members. The World Bank (WB), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asia Development Bank (ADB) are fully engaged by Beijing in its drive to continue maintaining China’s flourishing economy. Additionally, of course, Beijing has launched two additional, potentially very important international organizations that have

⁵ Li Dongyan, “China Defines Its New Role in International Organizations, *People’s Daily* (08 November 2010), at: <http://iccs.aichi-u.ac.jp/archives/report/038/5099f0477e37a.pdf> , accessed 02 October 2019.

nominally economic missions and goals, but which both carry enormous potential strategic weight, some of it military. In fact, the BRI and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) represent China's effective drive to modify or at least moderate the post-World War II international economic structure created by the United States and its allies.

The defense element in Beijing's participation in these organizations is most apparent in the BRI program. This feature follows the maritime emphasis in the 2015 Defense White Paper, which noted for the first time the PLAN's responsibility for "far seas protection," which expands the navy's mandate from the regional to the global arena. It also offers an after-the-fact justification for the blue water navy China is building.

Although not directly connected, China's BRI activities include construction projects that might easily double as military facilities, depending in part on the particulars of the acquisition and operation agreements between Beijing and the host country. Apart from the overt military bases built by China in the South China Sea and at Djibouti, in the Persian Gulf, such facilities as those in Sri Lanka primarily reflect Beijing's worries about securing energy flows and other resources, as well as the sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

The Sri Lankan port and airfield construction projects in Colombo and Hambantoto may be cited as examples of this possibility. Indeed, these projects possess a weak economic

rationale, but provide China with a facility well-suited for protection of its Indian Ocean SLOCs; in the words of China’s Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, “the BRI would provide a ‘framework’ for greater military cooperation.”⁶ The most likely future military “place,” in U.S. parlance, is Ream, in Cambodia, which would in conjunction with its South China Sea bases further extend its potential military perimeter around Southeast Asia.

ASEAN is the proximate multilateral organization for this region, and one in which Beijing continues to expend considerable political and economic efforts. It is not baseless to conclude that China now so economically dominates at least two ASEAN members, Cambodia and Laos, as to hold veto power over ASEAN-wide decisions, especially those dealing with the South China Sea sovereignty disputes.

Another multilateral organization of importance to China is the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO), one that Beijing established, in cooperation with Russia. The SCO is credited with economic development and counter-terrorism missions, but its primary purpose seems from China’s

⁶ Quoted in Leah Dreyfuss and Mara Karlin, “All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas,” September 2019, Brookings Institution, 5, at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_basing_karlin_dreyfuss.pdf, accessed 04 October 2019.

perspective to serve as a platform for police and military considerations.

In conclusion, China has since the onset of its most recent modernization period, approximately 1980, altered its view of multilateral organizations to see them as valuable platforms for furthering its domestic and international goals. This factor became even more obvious in 1992, when China signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and joined other international organizations. These remain primarily economic, but also include political and hence military elements. The PLA is an instrument of statecraft applied by Beijing in its international participation, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

What are we to conclude from this brief discussion? Certainly, Beijing uses military pressure in the conduct of its foreign policy, both as it relates to individual nations and to multilateral organizations. And it is not alone in this practice.

Military deterrence is as much a tool in the U.S. practice of statecraft as it is in China's. Similarly, both the U.S. military and the PLA have developed an extensive program of exercises and naval port visits to support foreign policy goals. With the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, China has now joined the United States, and other nations past and present, in using far-flung bases to ease the distant application of military force and to defend foreign economic interests and safeguard SLOCs. This last mission is particularly applicable as a providing the avenue for China's notable naval expansion

since 2008.

That year is most often noted in the United States as the time of a possibly seminal economic change in the international balance of trade and financial forces, but for those of us who study the Chinese navy, 2008 was when the first distant PLAN deployment occurred, as Beijing dispatched its first task group to the far Western Indian Ocean. This turned out to be the first step in a systemic cycle of deployments that soon outstripped its nominal counter-piracy mission and its 90-day cycle.

Now on its thirty-second iteration, this mission has often included voyages well beyond the Gulf of Aden, to include the Mediterranean, the Black, North, and Baltic Seas. Other deployments have reached as far as Great Britain and Scandinavia, the west coast of Africa, Latin America, and even global circumnavigation. These deployments have outstripped their original counter-piracy tasking to perform classic naval missions of humanitarian relief, non-combatant evacuation of threatened civilians, presence, deterrence, and diplomacy.

These PLAN task groups have not joined the various multilateral organizations that have formed to coordinate counter-piracy operations, but they have continued operating in the international maritime environment, acknowledging and cooperating if not aligning with foreign navies in the same waters.

Beijing has awakened to the value of participating in

multilateral organizations, to include using its military as the instrument for doing so. Saunders and Shyy usefully note that the PLA's international activities can be either strategic or operational in nature; I would add that some activities may be classified as both.

The UN, ASEAN, BRI, maritime operations are examples of multilateral elements of China's use of defense diplomacy. There is nothing altruistic or "Wilsonian" in China's actions, but simply valuing multilateral organizations as useful platforms for forwarding its own international objectives.