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China's Military Diplomacy

by Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha

Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs
Institute for National Strategic Studies
National Defense University

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Cover image: Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan meets with Vietnamese Minister of Defense Ngo Xuan Lich in Beijing, January 13, 2017 (Liu Fang/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

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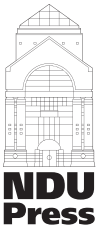

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Executive Summary

- Chinese military diplomacy serves both strategic and operational goals. The main strategic goals are supporting Chinese foreign policy and shaping the strategic environment; operational goals include supporting People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization and collecting intelligence on foreign militaries.

- Military diplomacy is a tool for building foreign relations and an indicator of the quality of China's bilateral relationships. When relations are strained, military-diplomatic engagements decrease or stop; when relations are good, engagements tend to increase.

- Military activities are limited by partner willingness and capability, Chinese domestic constraints, and Chinese Communist Party control over the PLA. PLA engagements with foreign militaries often emphasize form over substance and do not necessarily build much trust or interoperability with military partners.

- The total number of PLA senior-level visits, exercises, and port calls grew significantly from 2002–08, stayed relatively constant from 2009–19, and dropped dramatically in the COVID-19 years of 2020–22 before gradually beginning to rise again starting in 2023. Senior-level visits are the most common form of activity, but military exercises and port calls make up an increasing share of PLA foreign military engagements.

- Asia is the highest priority region for Chinese military diplomacy, with Europe in second place and Africa a distant third. Southeast Asia has emerged as a battleground for U.S.-China competition in military diplomacy.

- Russia, Pakistan, and the United States are the PLA's top three partners, but the volume of U.S.-China engagements has declined significantly from its peak in 2015, while engagements with Russia and Pakistan have continued apace.

- Initially suspicious of multilateral forums, the PLA now participates in six annual multilateral security dialogues and hosts several other meetings in China. These forums provide a platform for Chinese messaging and an opportunity for regular bilateral meetings with Chinese partners.

- As China's diplomatic weight has grown, more countries are willing to send their senior officials to China without reciprocal visits. This highlights the increasing willingness of other countries to engage on Chinese terms. China has also followed U.S. practice and initiated new "2+2" foreign ministry/defense ministry dialogues with South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

- Multilateral exercises sponsored by organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) make up a modest but increasing proportion of PLA exercises. The PLA has also increased exercises with Southeast Asian militaries in recent years, including with countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines that have territorial disputes with China.

- Military exercises play a symbolic role in demonstrating friendly political relations. Most PLA exercises involve nontraditional security issues such as humanitarian assistance and antiterrorism, but exercises with Russia, Pakistan, and the SCO are more focused on combat-relevant skills. China and Russia also started to conduct operationally focused joint air and naval patrols in 2019.

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a significantly negative impact on PLA military diplomacy. Port calls stopped entirely from March 2020 to November 2022, and senior-level meetings were mostly conducted by video teleconference or phone call, with little travel by senior PLA leaders. Military engagements decreased by 75 percent, but the PLA became more active in delivering COVID-19 medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and medical expertise to countries in South and Southeast Asia. Activity began to recover in 2023, but has not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels.

- Purges of senior PLA leaders have become an obstacle to the PLA's ability to maintain consistent relations with foreign counterparts.

- The volume of PLA engagements does not necessarily equate to influence. U.S. allies and partners, especially in Southeast Asia, use military diplomacy as a means of managing their broader relationships with China and sometimes engage with the PLA to balance more substantive security cooperation with the United States. Close U.S. allies such as South Korea and Australia have seen a decrease in engagements with the PLA as U.S.-China security tensions have deepened.

- U.S. policy should focus on limiting the PLA's ability to use military diplomacy to improve its operational capabilities or to build strategic relationships that give it access to ports and bases. The United States should not dissuade U.S. allies and partners from engaging the PLA as part of their China policy but should insist that friendly militaries not teach the PLA tactics, techniques, and procedures they have learned from the United States and be cautious when engaging the PLA in exercises.

Introduction

The international profile of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has grown significantly over the last 20 years, with a notable increase in the frequency and complexity of its activities with partners abroad. As the Chinese military participates in multilateral meetings and engages foreign militaries around the world, it is strengthening diplomatic relations, building the soft power of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and learning how to deploy and support military forces overseas for longer periods. The PLA's engagement of foreign militaries, including key U.S. allies and partners, is an increasingly important arena of U.S.-China strategic competition at the global and regional levels.

This paper uses a National Defense University (NDU) database that tracks Chinese military-diplomatic engagements to analyze and assess the PLA's senior-level meetings, port calls, and military exercises with foreign militaries.[1] It builds on previous research by validating and refining earlier versions of the NDU database, adding 9 additional years of data (2002, 2017–24), and conducting additional analysis of PLA interactions with specific partners and in multilateral contexts.[2] This paper conducts trend analysis based on the updated database, emphasizing developments in Chinese military diplomacy since 2017, with a special look at changes in PLA military engagements during COVID-19.

The PLA has historically been an insular institution with only limited contact with foreign militaries, especially after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960 and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). China's opening and reform (starting in 1978) created new opportunities for contacts with other countries, and the PLA was able to gradually expand its interactions with foreign military counterparts. However, an organizational culture that emphasized secrecy and the importance of avoiding embarrassment, for example, by revealing the limits of PLA capabilities, meant that most interactions consisted of high-level visits or staged demonstrations. The PLA's limited power projection capabilities also restricted its ability to exercise with foreign counterparts or to undertake overseas deployments or port calls. Many of these constraints no longer apply, and today's PLA is an active practitioner of military diplomacy.

The PLA defines military diplomacy as "external relationships pertaining to military and related affairs between countries and groups of countries, including military personnel exchange, military negotiations, arms control negotiations, military aid, military intelligence cooperation, military technology cooperation, international peacekeeping, military alliance activities, etc."[3] Chinese military writings describe military diplomacy as a component of China's broader diplomatic efforts and stress that military diplomacy "must always take the overall diplomatic goals of the country as its goal and always grasp the right direction."[4]

Chinese military writings over the last decade highlight the growing importance of military diplomacy. Stated objectives are derived from broader PLA missions and include supporting overall national foreign policy, protecting national sovereignty, advancing national interests, and shaping the international security environment.[5] Xi Jinping cited several specific goals for Chinese military diplomacy in a January 2015 speech to the All-Army Diplomatic Work Conference [全军外事工作会议], including supporting overall national foreign policy, protecting national security, and promoting military construction (the PLA's term for military force-building). Xi also highlighted the importance of protecting China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.[6] Military academics reiterate these goals; a lecturer at the PLA Nanjing Political College notes that a major role of Chinese military diplomacy is to "support overall national foreign policy and the new-era military strategic direction," and other scholars highlight "shaping the international security environment and promoting military modernization" as additional objectives.[7] In addition to these acknowledged objectives, the PLA uses military diplomacy to gather intelligence and to learn from other militaries.

Much of the PLA's current military-diplomatic activity is focused on protecting and advancing specific Chinese strategic interests and managing areas of concern.[8] Chinese foreign policy emphasizes managing strategic relations with great powers, such as the United States and Russia, and engaging countries on China's periphery; Chinese military diplomacy emphasizes interactions with the United States, Russia, and countries in the Indo-Pacific region.[9] China is increasingly dependent on oil and natural gas imported from the Middle East and Africa; the PLA Navy (PLAN)'s counterpiracy presence in the Gulf of Aden and logistics base in Djibouti facilitate strategic ties in the Middle East and Africa, help guarantee China's energy security, and provide operational experience relevant to protecting China's sea lines of communication. Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy contribution is the Belt and Road Initiative; PLA interactions with militaries in Europe, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia reinforce this effort.[10]

Military diplomacy is a means of developing bilateral relationships, not an end in itself. Because military diplomacy serves China's overall foreign policy, trends in military-to-military relations can indicate the relative priority China places on countries and regions. The PLA's military-diplomatic engagements also serve as an indicator of the overall health of relationships between China and other countries. When bilateral relations are good, military-diplomatic engagements tend to increase; when relations are bad, engagements decrease or stop. Military diplomacy is a two-way street: both China and its partners must agree on what activities to conduct and can leverage engagements as foreign policy tools. A willingness of both

sides to increase the frequency and substance of military-diplomatic engagements indicates an improving relationship; cancelations or refusals to engage are signs of trouble.

For analytic purposes, Chinese military diplomacy objectives can be divided into strategic and operational categories. Strategic objectives include supporting overall PRC diplomacy by engaging key countries and providing public goods and shaping the security environment by displaying or deploying PLA capabilities. These efforts can help set political conditions for access to overseas bases, which can expand the PLA's strategic reach. Operational goals include collecting intelligence on foreign militaries and potential operating areas and improving PLA capabilities by learning new skills and tactics, techniques, and procedures from advanced militaries and those with combat experience. Table 1 summarizes how different types of military diplomacy activities advance different Chinese objectives.

Table 1. Chinese Diplomatic Activities and Objectives

	Strategic Goals		Operational Goals	
Activity	**Support PRC Diplomacy**	**Shape Security Environment**	**Collect Intelligence**	**Improve PLA Capabilities**
Senior-Level Visits				
Hosted	X	X	X	
Abroad	X	X	X	
Dialogues				
Bilateral	X	X	X	
Multilateral	X	X	X	
Military Exercises				
Bilateral	X	X	X	X
Multilateral	X	X	X	X
Naval Port Calls				
Escort Task Force (ETF)	X	X	X	X
Non-ETF	X	X	X	
Functional Exchanges	X		X	X
Nontraditional Security Operations				
HA/DR	X	X	X	X
Peacekeeping	X	X	X	X

Methodology

This study employs an open-source National Defense University database that tracks PLA diplomatic interactions with foreign militaries from 2002 to 2024. The database emphasizes activities where sufficient open-source information is available to discern trends and assess PRC motivations through revealed preference methodology.[11] This dataset includes complete information on all high-level visits, military exercises, and port calls during this period. Other activities such as functional exchanges, dialogues, and military educational exchanges are also part of Chinese military diplomacy, but this data is spottier and therefore not incorporated in our quantitative analysis.

Version 5.00 of the NDU database has updated data for all three categories of senior-level visits, military exercises, and naval port calls, which were all extensively cross-checked with other sources to validate the data. Because corrections and additions were made to the underlying data, numbers for a given year or type of activity may not match previous publications. Version 5.0 has been expanded to cover 2002–2024, adding 9 years of new data (2002 and 2017–2024). For new and updated entries, references to the original primary sources were added to make the database more comprehensive and to facilitate other kinds of analysis. Revisions were made for entries in "PRC Relationship Category" to ensure that strategic partnership and alliance names are accurate and reflect upgrades in China's strategic partnerships over time.[12] Version 5.0 of the NDU database is available for download at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/4222744/chinese-military-diplomacy/.

For senior-level visits, many duplicate entries in the database were deleted. Entries for the Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman (a position concurrently held by the civilian Chinese Communist Party [CCP]'s General Secretary for most of the period) were removed to focus solely on the diplomatic activities of uniformed military officers; the position weight values assigned to meetings by officers of different grades were also rescaled. The dataset does *not* include meetings that only involve Chinese civilian leaders such as President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi or that are led by civilian leaders.[13]

For military exercises, a few changes have been made. First, there is now only one entry associated with each multilateral exercise—usually the host country or the sponsoring organization. For cases in which multilateral exercises are held in China, the partner country is the most important country participating in the exercise or the country designated by the organization to take the lead in organizing the exercise. Consequently, there are fewer entries for multilateral exercises in the updated database. Large-scale multilateral exercises are now categorized based on the specific

activities the PLA participates in, rather than the range of activities in the overall exercise. An "antipiracy" category has been added to the military exercise type. The dataset now incorporates narrower definitions of combat and combat support exercises that are focused on actions against traditional military opponents. Finally, a more expansive definition of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) that includes survival training and basic military skills (for example, basic naval maneuvers) was added. Military exercise entries were recoded to match the new categories and definitions. For naval port calls, efforts were made to make this part of the dataset more comprehensive, with additional port calls added in the years between 2003 and 2008.

Finally, the PLA participates in a range of functional exchanges, dialogues, and military education with foreign countries that are not tracked in our dataset. Due to incomplete data, it is difficult to fully capture the number of students that have studied at PLA institutions in China, and the number of PLA students that have been sent overseas. Recent numbers reported by China's 2019 Defense White Paper suggest that over 10,000 military personnel from over 130 countries have studied at Chinese military universities, but this source does not specify in detail how many students came from which countries. These activities are an important part of Chinese military diplomacy but are not examined in depth in this paper.[14]

Trends and Analysis

Figure 1 shows the total volume of military-diplomatic interactions from 2002 to 2024. An examination yields several observations. First, senior-level meetings represent most PLA military-diplomatic engagements. Beginning in 2009, naval port calls and international military exercises start to make up a growing share of total interactions, but senior-level meetings still represent the bulk of Chinese military-to-military interactions. Second, total interactions peak in 2010 and 2015 and start to decline after 2015. This can be attributed to the fact that Xi Jinping's military reforms started in early 2016, and the PLA dedicated more time and resources to internal matters than to outside engagements. Third, China's 5-year political cycle can be observed through this data by comparing engagement levels from 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017 with off-cycle years. Finally, as predicted with the global COVID-19 pandemic, all interactions drop precipitously in 2020 due to restricted travel and closing borders, before resuming in 2023.

Figure 2 breaks out PLA military-diplomatic engagements by geographic region. Asia is the highest priority region for Chinese military diplomacy, with Europe in second place and Africa a distant third.[15] Figure 3 breaks out PLA military-diplomatic interactions in Asia by subregion. Southeast Asia is the top priority for China, despite ongoing territorial disputes with numerous countries in the subregion. South Asia is the second priority, with Pakistan making up a large

Figure 1. Military Diplomatic Interactions, 2022–2024

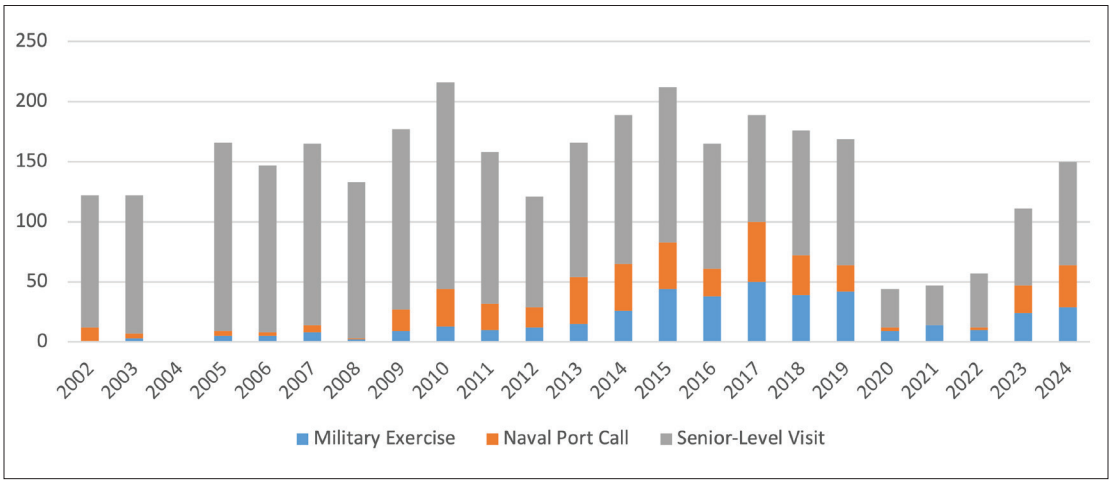


Figure 2. PLA Military Diplomacy by Geographic Region, 2002–2024

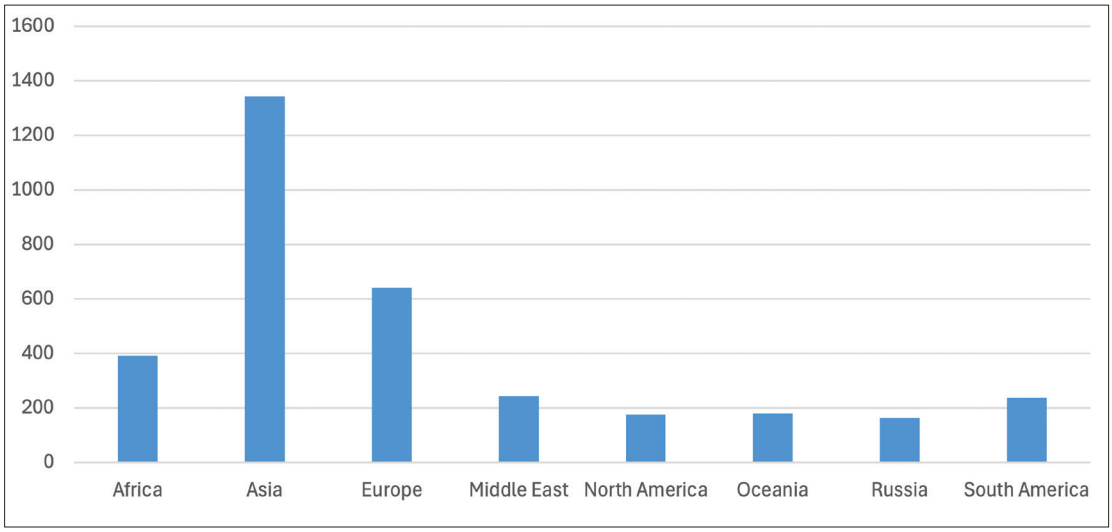
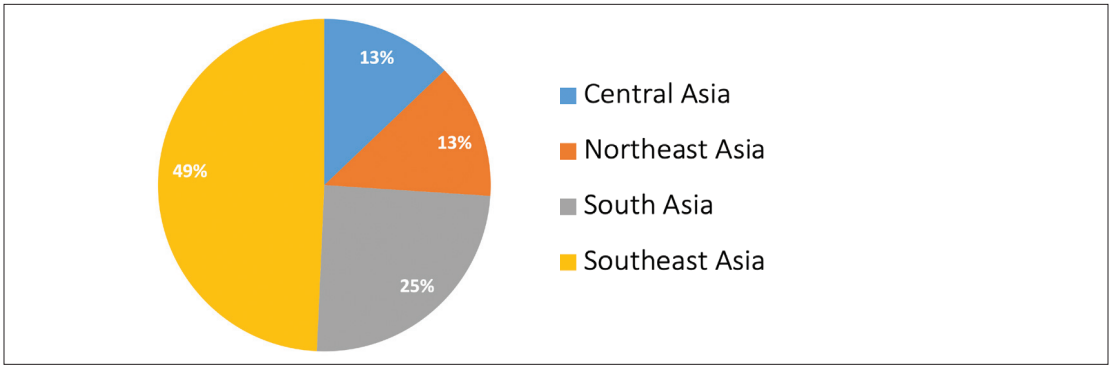


Figure 3. PLA Military Diplomatic Interactions in Asia, 2002–2024



percentage of the interactions. Pakistan depends on China for security assistance to balance India and has a military with extensive combat experience, leading China to see Pakistan as a useful partner. Despite Northeast Asia's strategic importance, the PLA has limited interactions with this subregion due to historical strains in relations with Japan, South Korea's reluctance to engage in military exercises with China, and a cautious approach toward North Korea.

Senior-Level Meetings: Bilateral

Figure 4 focuses on senior-level visits. A 5-year political cycle pattern is evident, with fewer visits during party congress years in 2002, 2012 and 2017. In addition, 2007 stands out as an anomaly and 2022 as a COVID-19-related exception. Years when party congresses are held are characterized by political maneuvering as officials attempt to secure promotions for themselves or their protégés; this produces a reluctance to travel and raises the opportunity costs of meeting with foreign counterparts. In party congress years, the PLA is less willing to send senior leaders abroad, producing an imbalance between visits abroad and visits hosted.

Continuity in political and military leadership during the transition from the 16th to the 17th National Party Congresses (NPC) could explain the anomaly in the 2007 data. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao stayed on in their positions as CCP General Secretary/PRC President and Premier, respectively. Hu Jintao also continued as CMC Chairman and Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou stayed on as CMC Vice Chairmen.[16] Incumbency for top civilian and military leaders allowed PLA senior officials to spend more time, energy, and resources engaging foreign militaries, which explains why senior-level meeting data in 2007 is like nonparty congress years.

Figure 4. Number of Senior-Level Meetings, 2002–2024

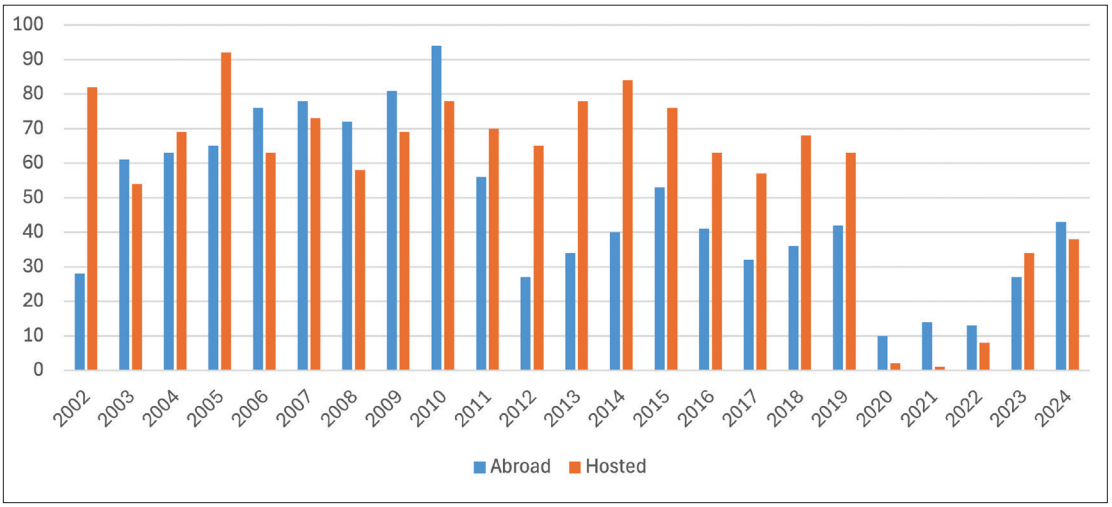


Figure 4 also shows a significant decline in senior visits by top PLA leaders overseas since 2010 due to Chinese austerity and anticorruption campaigns. On December 29, 2010, the State Council Information Office published a white paper on China's anticorruption campaign titled "China's Efforts to Combat Corruption and Build a Clean Government," which emphasized government transparency and supervising authority.[17] Following the white paper, in 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao addressed several anticorruption measures in his speech at a "clean government work" conference, citing specifically the "Three Public Expenses" policy, which required government officials to make public their expenditures from overseas trips and public relations activities.[18] These campaigns, which continued and intensified under Xi Jinping, may have served as a disincentive for PLA leaders who did not want to take on the highly visible political risks of foreign travel.

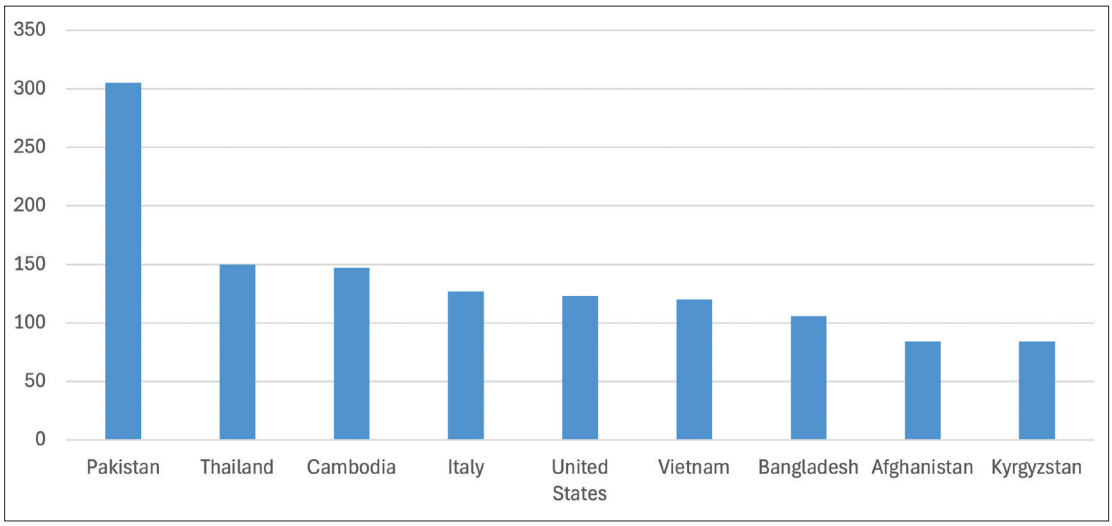
Prior to 2010, PLA senior-level visits abroad and hosting of foreign counterparts were roughly in balance, in accordance with diplomatic protocol that calls for alternating sending and receiving senior officials. However, as China's influence has grown, many foreign countries have become more willing to disregard protocol and send their senior officials to China without reciprocal visits. This highlights China's increasing international strategic weight and the willingness of other countries to engage on Chinese terms.

The PLA interacts with different foreign partners in different ways. Patterns in these interactions suggest differing levels of cooperation, trust, expediency, and effort between the PLA and specific foreign military-diplomatic partners. The PLA appears to place a strong emphasis on senior-level contacts with countries in Asia and Europe; within Asia the PLA prioritizes the subregions of Southeast and South Asia. The data, coupled with PLA participation in an increasing array of multilateral meetings, highlights the growing importance of Southeast Asia as a battleground for U.S.-China competition.[19]

At the same time, countries in Asia that are caught between the United States and China often use military diplomacy as a tool to manage their relations with China. U.S. allies Thailand, South Korea, and Australia and Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia conduct senior-level military visits to China much more often than they host senior PLA officers. Figure 5 weights these visits by the seniority of the delegation leader, so that senior officer visits count more than lower-level visits. The imbalance between senior-level visits sent and those hosted by the PLA indicates which country is departing from reciprocity and trying harder to build the bilateral relationship.[20]

The imbalances can be due to strategic and practical reasons. For example, Pakistan is heavily dependent on China for security and therefore seeks to cultivate the military relationship. The

Figure 5. Largest Imbalances in Senior Visits to China, 2002–2024



United States has historically seen value in military relations with China to reduce misunderstandings and develop crisis management and communications mechanisms. Italy, which seeks to engage China economically, was also one of the first Western European countries to sign onto China's Belt and Road Initiative. Overall trends reveal that Southeast Asian and South Asian nations are trying harder to build bilateral relationships with China.

One new trend involves China's adoption of a U.S. diplomatic innovation for managing alliance relations: bilateral "2+2" meetings between the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and their foreign counterparts. Such meetings are intended to showcase U.S. commitment to its closest allies and to demonstrate that U.S. foreign policy and military policy are closely aligned.[21] The United States currently holds "2+2" cabinet-level dialogues under various labels with Japan, South Korea, India, and the Philippines. China held its first ministerial-level "2+2" dialogue with Indonesia in Beijing in April 2025.[22] This meeting was preceded by a vice-ministerial "2+2" dialogue with South Korea in Seoul in June 2024.[23] A China-Malaysia "2+2" diplomatic and defense dialogue mechanism of an unspecified level was announced in April 2025 "to deepen exchanges and cooperation on national security, defense, and law enforcement."[24] China has held strategic and security dialogues with a range of international partners for decades, but these have mostly been civilian dialogues led by the Chinese foreign ministry or military dialogues conducted at a lower level.[25] The involvement of senior foreign ministry officials and senior PLA officers is meant as a symbol of the partner's strategic importance to China; it remains to be seen

whether this level of representation will be sustained over time or accompanied by a significant increase in security cooperation.[26]

Senior-Level Meetings: Multilateral

As another notable trend, PLA participation is increasing in multilateral meetings (see figure 6). This started with the Shanghai Five and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits in 2000 and 2001, extended to the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, and now includes regular attendance at multilateral meetings organized by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other organizations. The 2022 spike reflects a post-COVID-19 resumption of multilateral dialogues and meetings, including some hosted by the PLA.

After the PLA gained experience participating in multilateral meetings, it began to organize its own meetings, starting with the first China-Latin America Defense Forum in November 2012, extending to the Xiangshan Forum in 2014, and adding a China-Africa Defense and Security Forum in 2018. Table 2 shows the current list of multilateral forums that feature regular PLA participation.

Dr. Joel Wuthnow has identified three main drivers of the PLA's increased involvement in multilateral forums.[27] The first is to solve intergovernmental coordination problems and to influence security cooperation in areas where Beijing has interests at stake. The second is as a platform for Chinese strategic messaging; multilateral forums allow the PLA to reach larger audiences of

Figure 6. PLA Participation in Multilateral Meetings, 2000–2024

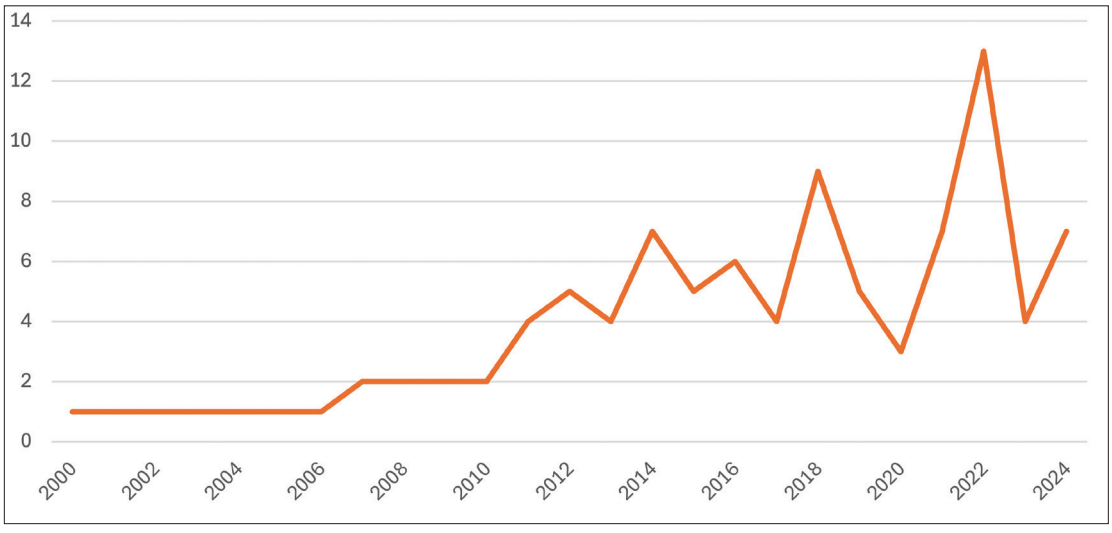


Table 2. Multilateral Forums Featuring PLA Participation

Name	Organizer	Year Initiated	Location	Level	Freq.	U.S. Role?	Number of Countries
Shangri-La Dialogue	IISS	2001	Singapore	Varies	Annual	Yes	42 (2022)
SCO Defense Ministers' Meeting	SCO	2003	Rotates (China, Russia, Central Asia)	Defense Minister	Annual	No	9
Xiangshan Forum	CAMS/ CIISS	2006	Beijing	Defense Minister	Annual	Yes	100+ (2024)
SCO Military Chiefs' Meeting	SCO	2011	Rotates (China, Russia, Central Asia)	JSD Chief of Staff	Annual	No	9
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN	2012	Rotates (Southeast Asia)	Defense Minister	Annual	Yes	18
China–Latin American and Caribbean States Defense Forum	PRC Defense Ministry	2012	Beijing	Defense Minister	Biennial	No	24 (2022)
Moscow Conference on International Security	Russian Defense Ministry	2012	Moscow	Defense Minister	Annual	No	76 (2023)
China-Africa Peace and Security Forum	PRC Defense Ministry	2018	Beijing	Defense Minister	Varies	No	50 (2023)

Key: IISS: International Institute for Strategic Studies; SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; CAMS: China Association for Military Science; CIISS: China Institutes for International Strategic Studies; ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations; JSD: Joint Staff Department.
Source: Data compiled by Joel Wuthnow.

regional and global elites than in bilateral meetings. Such messaging can send signals of reassurance, legitimize Chinese goals and initiatives, and delegitimize adversary policies and messages.

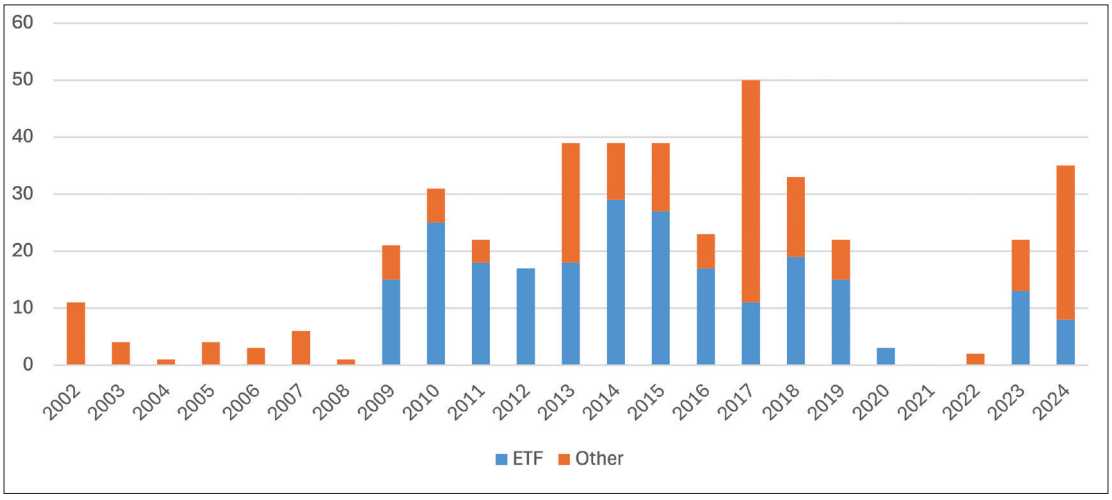
Such messaging is especially effective in forums where the United States and its allies are not represented or where Beijing can control the agenda. The third driver is to use multilateral dialogues to advance Chinese bilateral goals on the margins of the meetings. Regional defense forums allow senior PLA leaders to engage multiple counterparts at a single meeting, rather than traveling for individual bilateral meetings. This motive is reflected in a dramatic increase in PLA bilateral meetings with senior leaders from other militaries on the margins of multilateral meetings; PLA leaders had 30 or more such meetings in the non-COVID-19 years of 2018, 2019, and 2023 and 50 meetings on the margins in 2024.

Naval Port Calls

Figure 7 shows data on naval port calls, including PLAN escort task forces (ETFs) conducting antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and other PLAN ships. ETFs usually consist of two warships and a replenishment ship; they conduct replenishment port calls to support their deployment and friendly visits on the way home after a 4-month operational deployment.[28] Non-ETF port calls can involve regular PLAN warships, hospital ships, and training vessels.

The NDU database tracks all PLA naval port calls and groups them by function, fleet, and date. The 2002 data point is an anomaly, reflecting the Chinese Navy's first around-the-globe voyage, where the destroyer *Qingdao* and a *Taicang* supply ship visited 10 countries over a 4-month deployment.[29] In late 2008, PLAN started ETF antipiracy deployments to the Gulf of Aden. These deployments generated new requirements for replenishment port calls and new opportunities for port calls along the Indian Ocean rim, which crowded out non-ETF port calls from 2009–12. In 2010, China's hospital ship *Peace Ark* made its first deployment, which started

Figure 7. Outbound Port Calls, 2002–2024



an increase in the number of non-ETF port calls. Another notable deployment was a 2017 mission by a three-ship task group led by the destroyer *Changchun*, which conducted 20 port calls over the course of a 176-day mission.[30]

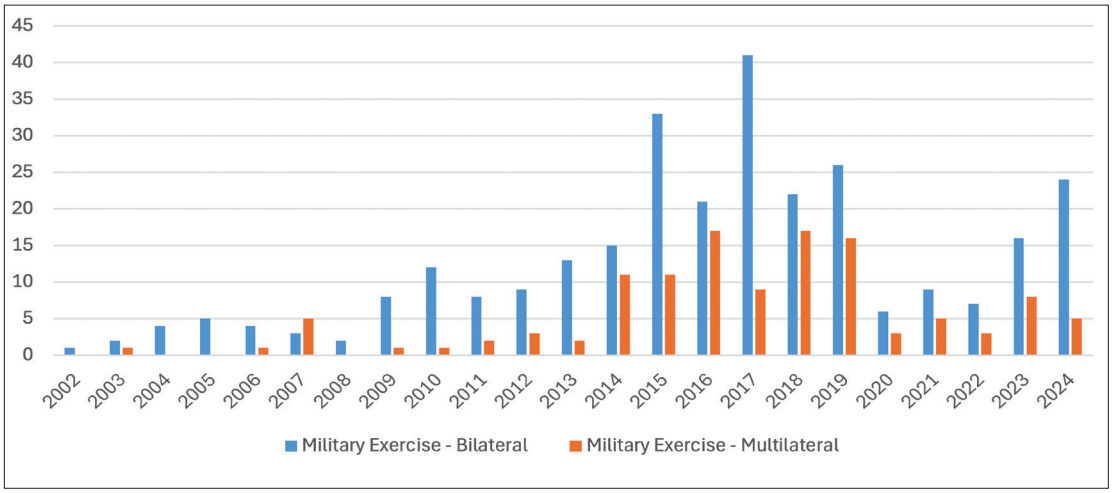
The ports most frequently visited by PLAN ETFs are all in countries along the Indian Ocean rim, including Oman, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Djibouti, where China's first overseas base is located. The opening of the Djibouti logistics base in August 2017 eliminated the need for replenishment port calls elsewhere; PLAN replenishment port calls to the Djibouti base are not tracked in the NDU database because they do not involve engagement with foreign militaries and are not reported by the PLA. From that point on, any ETF port calls are friendly visits for diplomatic reasons after the antipiracy task force completes its deployment. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented PLAN port calls other than replenishment port calls in Djibouti to support ETF antipiracy operations. There was a 31-month hiatus between the last port call, PLAN ETF-33, conducted in Thailand in March 2020 and the *Peace Ark*'s port call in Indonesia in November 2022.[31]

Military Exercises

The PLA seeks to use exercises with foreign militaries to "learn from the advanced technology, operational methods, and management experience of foreign armies, focusing on the fundamental goal of seeking victory for war."[32] This objective is best achieved by combat and combat support exercises with advanced militaries and with militaries with extensive combat experience.[33] However, the PLA is willing to use a strategy of "pragmatic cooperation" that begins with high-level visits, dialogue, and nontraditional security exercises with the goal of eventually developing military relations to include cooperation on military technology and joint exercises and training more directly related to combat skills.[34]

Figure 8 represents total PLA military exercises by type, with bilateral exercises in blue and multilateral exercises in red. Starting in 2010, the PLA increased bilateral military exercises with foreign militaries and subsequently increased participation in multilateral exercises beginning in 2014. This reflects several factors. First, the PLA has grown more confident in the ability of its equipment and personnel to engage in increasingly complex exercises and military competitions with foreign militaries without risk of failure or embarrassment. Second, military exercises provide an opportunity for the PLA to show off its capabilities to the rest of the world and shape the regional security environment.[35] This is particularly true of multilateral exercises, which have larger audiences and are better vehicles for demonstrating PLA capabilities. Third, most PLA exercises focus on MOOTW, antipiracy, or antiterrorism, all activities that help demonstrate the PLA's willingness to shoulder global responsibilities.

Figure 8. PLA International Military Exercises by Type, 2002–2024

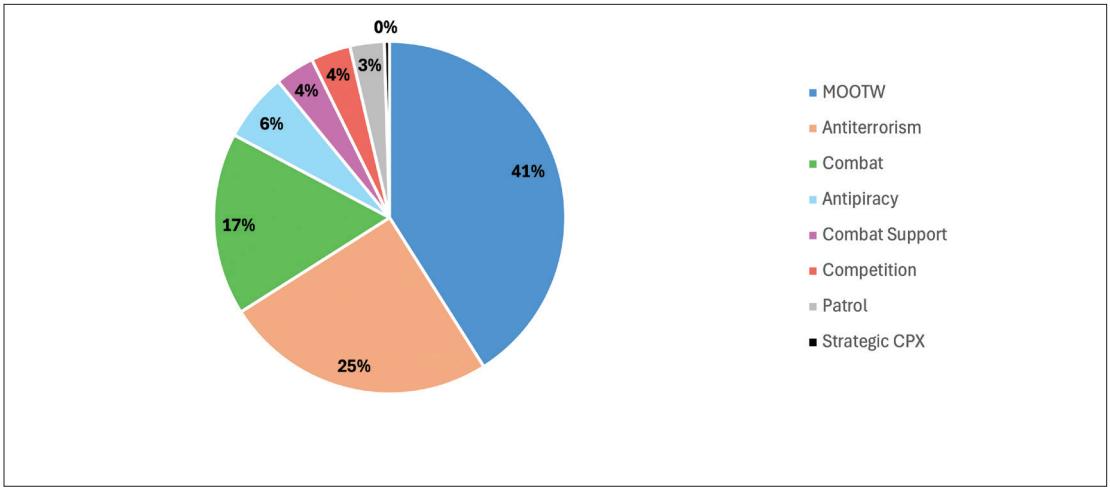


The number of PLA bilateral exercises peaked at 50 in 2017, but the increased numbers mask a shift toward smaller-scale exercises as PLA ground-force units focused attention on the PLA reorganization and the transition into a corps-brigade-battalion structure based on modular composite units optimized for combined arms operations.[36] PLA exercises with foreign militaries declined significantly in 2020–22 due to the impact of COVID-19 and associated quarantines. The PLA made some effort to develop virtual exercises as a substitute; these are not tracked in the NDU database because they do not involve interactions between fielded forces. Post-COVID-19 saw the PLA gradually begin to increase military exercises in 2023 and 2024, though they have not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 9 showcases PLA military exercises broken out by function, comprising the categories of antipiracy, antiterrorism, combat, combat support, military competition, MOOTW, combined patrols, and strategic command post exercises. Relative to our 2017 study, we see a decreased percentage of combat and combat support exercises, while the MOOTW percentage has increased to 41 percent.

A couple of factors could be at play. First, the updated methodology and expanded definitions of MOOTW would have contributed to the increase. Another explanation is that as the PLA begins to conduct military exercises with new partners, there is a greater degree of comfort if the exercises involve less politically sensitive content. MOOTW exercises focus on nontraditional security issues, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuations, and peacekeeping missions, which help project an image of the PLA as a reliable partner and as a military with global responsibilities. If antipiracy and antiterrorism exercises, which also

Figure 9. PLA International Military Exercises by Function, 2002–2024



focus on nonstate threats, are included, more than three quarters of PLA exercises with foreign militaries focus on nontraditional security issues rather than skills directly relevant to combat. Figure 10 shows PLA military exercises by region, revealing a focus on Asia and Europe.

Another phenomenon involves military exercises taking on a new role in signaling positive political relations. Figure 11 displays the number of countries conducting their first military exercise with China in each year. Countries have become more willing to participate in exercises with the PLA, even if they have territorial disputes or suspicions about China's intentions.

Figure 12 shows exercises between the PLA and select Indo-Pacific countries. Countries are listed in order of the date of their first exercise with the PLA. The first China-ASEAN exercise in 2013 stands out as a key date when Southeast Asian countries became willing to engage the PLA in military exercises. Chinese exercises with rival South China Sea claimants such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, and U.S. security allies such as the Philippines and South Korea, are interesting data points that suggest that even countries that have significant security tensions or territorial disputes with China became willing to exercise with the PLA. Most of the exercises had very limited military content, but significant political symbolism.

Multilateral Exercises

Figure 13 shows PLA participation in multilateral exercises sponsored by individual countries or by regional organizations. The PLA began participating in multilateral exercises in 2003, but the volume increased significantly from 2014 on, including participation in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises. Though the military content of PLA participation in RIMPAC

Figure 10. Military Exercises by Region, 2002–2024

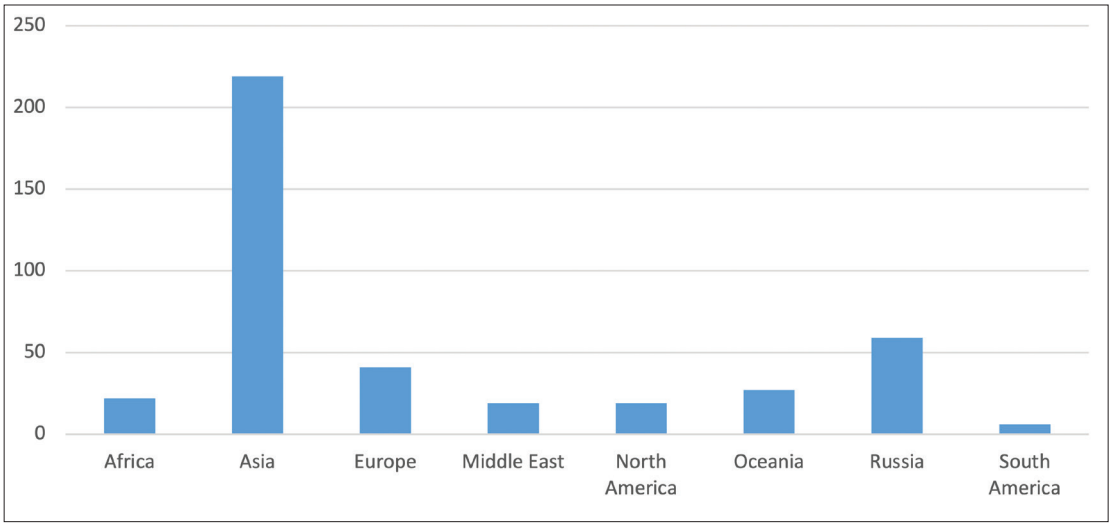
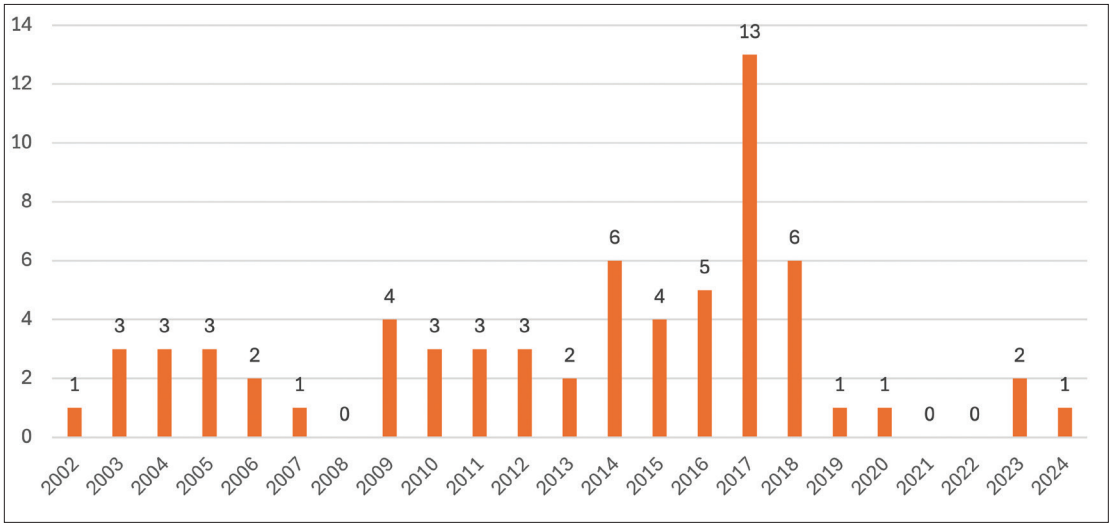


Figure 11. Count of China's First-Time Military Exercise Counterparts, 2002–2024

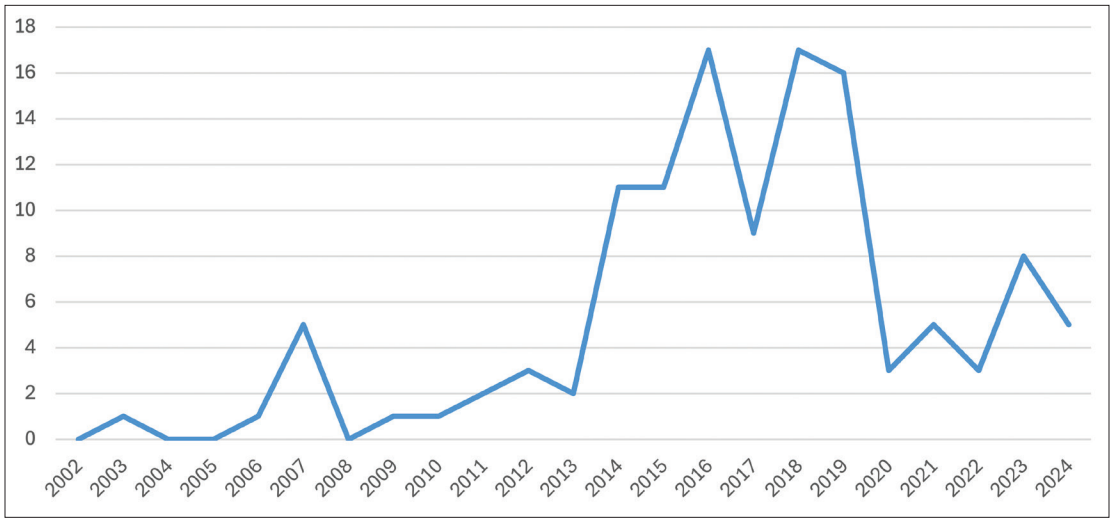


was carefully limited, the invitation served as a signal of the U.S. desire to build trust between China and other countries. (This effort was undercut by the PLAN's decision to send an intelligence ship to collect on the 2014 and 2018 RIMPAC exercises.[37]) The converse is also true: the U.S. decision to disinvite China from RIMPAC in 2018 due to its "continued militarization" of the South China Sea was viewed as a political rebuke.[38]

Figure 12. PLA Exercises With Select Indo-Pacific Countries

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	TOTAL
Pakistan		1	1	1	1	1		1	2	4		1	2	4	5	6	2	5	2	3	1	3	1	47
India		1		1		1	1					1	1	1	3		1	1						12
Australia			1			1			1	1	1		2	3	4	4	3	2						23
Russia				1		1		3				1	5	5	3	4	5	2	5	3	5	6	3	7	59
Thailand				1		1	1		2	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	5	1	1	1	3	3	32
Singapore								1	2				1	1		1		1		2		2	2	13
Indonesia										1	1	1	3		2		1			1		1	1	12
New Zealand												1		1		1	1							4
ASEAN												1	1	1	4		1	3				1		12
Malaysia													1	1	1		1	1						5
South Korea														1										1
Cambodia																1	1	1	1			2	1	7
Vietnam																1	1			1				3
Myanmar																2								2
Laos																	1	2			1	1	2	7
Philippines																			1					1

Figure 13. PLA Multilateral Military Exercises



The PLA has been participating in the SCO Peace Mission exercise series since 2005 and in Pakistan's Aman naval exercise since 2007. The PLA has also participated in multilateral exercises sponsored by ASEAN, the European Union, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, as well as multilateral exercises sponsored by individual countries, including Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Russia, and the United States. Most of these multilateral exercises are focused on MOOTW, antiterrorism,

and antipiracy, which are relatively harmless from a military point of view but allow the PLA to posture itself as contributing to global security cooperation. As the PLA gains more experience and becomes more confident in its capabilities, it is likely to seek to participate in more combat-oriented exercises in the future.

Figure 14 shows multilateral exercises and senior-level meetings organized by the SCO, which China and Russia founded in 2001. China plays a major role in leading and seeking to institutionalize the SCO as a means of projecting its influence into Central Asia without alienating Russia. In recent years, SCO has continued to gain support in Central Asia and South Asia, with India and Pakistan officially becoming full members in 2017 and Iran and Belarus joining in 2023 and 2024, respectively. SCO senior-level engagements include annual meetings of SCO ministers of defense and periodic SCO military chiefs of staff meetings. As of 2024, there have been 22 ministers of defense meetings and 6 military chiefs of staff meetings.

The SCO organizes a range of multilateral military exercises involving SCO member states. The biggest is Peace Mission, which has been held almost annually since 2007 and has become more geared toward antiterrorism efforts in recent years. Peace Mission 2021 was a joint military exercise that involved over 4,000 military participants from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. Although Peace Mission 2021 is branded as an antiterrorism drill, it is classified as a combat military exercise in the NDU database due to combat elements such as forces conducing live-fire drills and using infantry fighting vehicles and assault vehicles against targets. Twelve percent of the PLA's combat exercises are conducted in the SCO context, making it the third largest partner for these types of exercises.

ASEAN is another regional organization that has taken on an increasing role in organizing senior-level military meetings and multilateral exercises. Figure 15 shows China's military diplomacy engagements with ASEAN, which began in 2010. These include the Chinese defense minister's regular participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum's Defense Minister's Meeting Plus and in a separate informal multilateral meeting with ASEAN defense ministers. China-ASEAN military exercises began in 2013 and have mostly focused on nontraditional security issues such as disaster relief and antiterrorism. The PLA's increased engagement with Southeast Asian countries in general and with ASEAN in particular starting around 2013 can be seen as an effort from China to repair bilateral tensions, especially with countries that have territorial and maritime disputes with China.

Figure 14. PLA Activities With Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002–2024

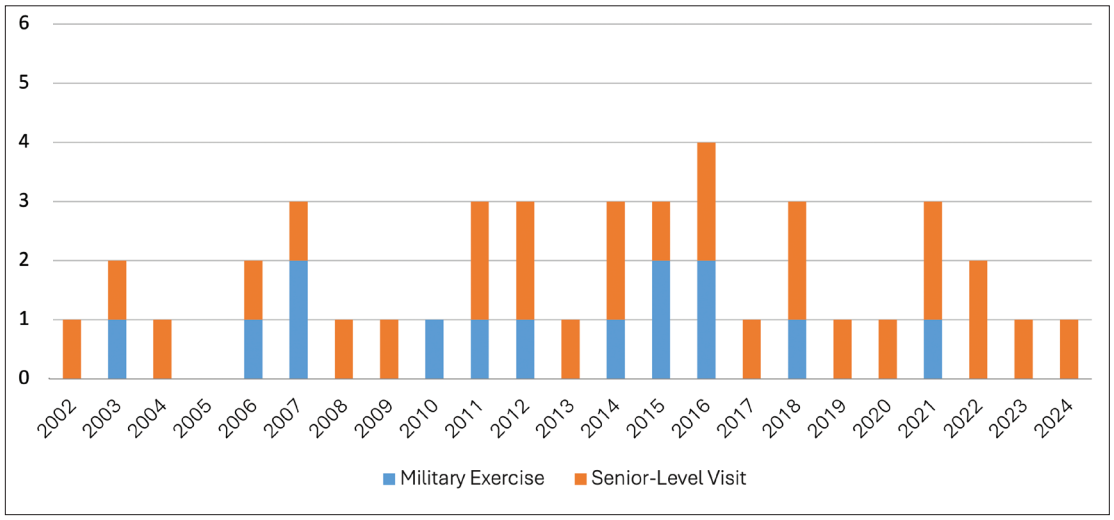
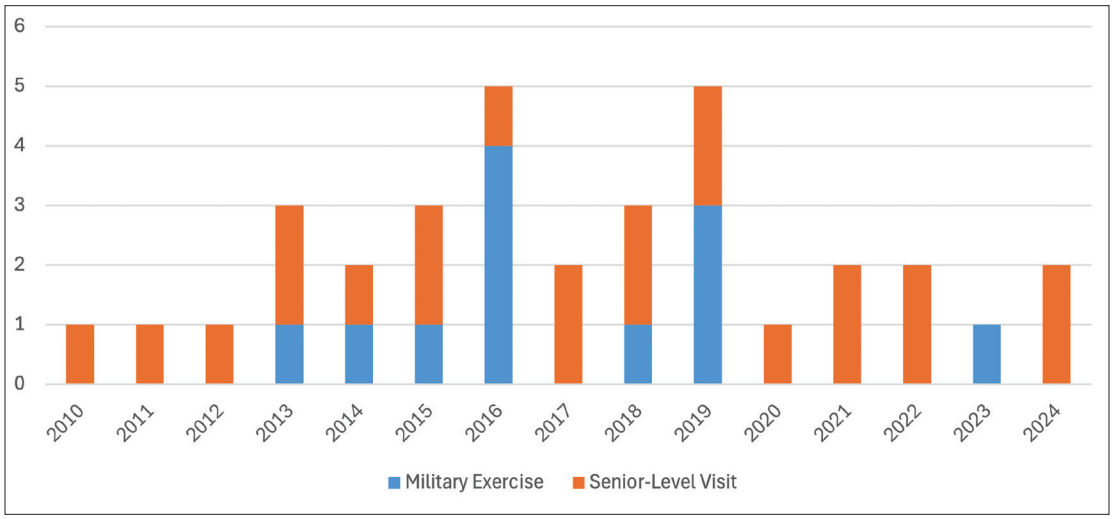


Figure 15. China and ASEAN Military Diplomacy, 2010–2024



Bilateral Engagements and Exercises

As figure 12 demonstrates, China has been participating in bilateral military exercises with a wider range of countries, including most countries in Southeast Asia. This section analyzes a few case studies in greater detail to identify trends within bilateral engagements. The analysis begins with a focus on ASEAN member states, examining PLA engagements with Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines from 2002 to 2024.

China and Singapore signed a formal agreement on defense exchanges and security cooperation in January 2008 following exchanges of port calls and high-level visits.[39] Figure 16 shows that Singapore conducted its first military exercise with China in 2009. Engagement peaked in 2010, and drastically decreased the following years, with no military exercises from 2011 to 2013. This could be related to the confrontation at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi in July, when Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi responded to Singapore's raising of the South China Sea dispute by warning his Singaporean counterpart that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact."[40] Engagement increased again in 2014 and 2015, and then sharply dropped in 2016, possibly as a result of Singapore's support for the arbitral tribunal ruling in July 2016, which found in favor of the Philippines and denied several of China's maritime sovereignty claims.[41] Another reason for this decline could be tensions due to Hong Kong's 2016 seizure of nine armored Singapore Armed Forces vehicles, which were being shipped to Singapore from Taiwan, where the Singapore military had regularly conducted training.[42] The two militaries signed an enhanced defense cooperation agreement in 2019 that established a ministerial-level defense dialogue and agreed to set up a defense secure defense telephone link in 2023.[43]

These ups and downs illustrate how domestic politics and foreign policy tensions are reflected in Singapore's military relationship with China. Singapore officials believe it is important to maintain a relationship with the PLA, partly to keep channels of communication open in the event of a crisis. At the same time, the Singaporean military carefully limits the scope and content of its exchanges and exercises with the PLA.[44] Almost all of Singapore's exercises with China have focused on nontraditional security issues, except for a 2015 exercise that included naval gunnery and air-defense drills.

Figure 17 displays military-diplomatic engagement between Malaysia and China. Despite territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands, Malaysia conducted its first military exercise with the PLA in 2014 and has continued regular exercises, mostly focused on MOOTW and antiterrorism themes. Around the same time, port calls increased as well. Senior-level visits have continued throughout this period, possible because Malaysia has taken a lower key approach to its territorial dispute with China.

Figure 18 displays China's engagement with Vietnam. Despite tensions over competing claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, Vietnam has maintained relatively consistent senior-level engagement with China over the years, including periodic PLAN port calls. Vietnam is one of the few remaining communist countries, and the two countries maintain close party relations which help support regular senior-level visits between their militaries. The Vietnamese military

Figure 16. China-Singapore Interactions

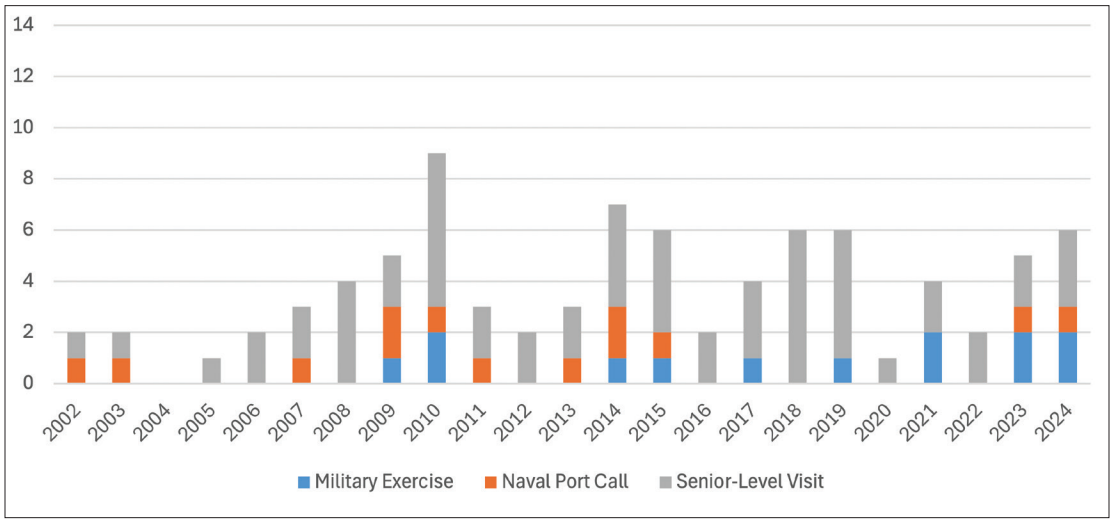


Figure 17. China-Malaysia Interactions

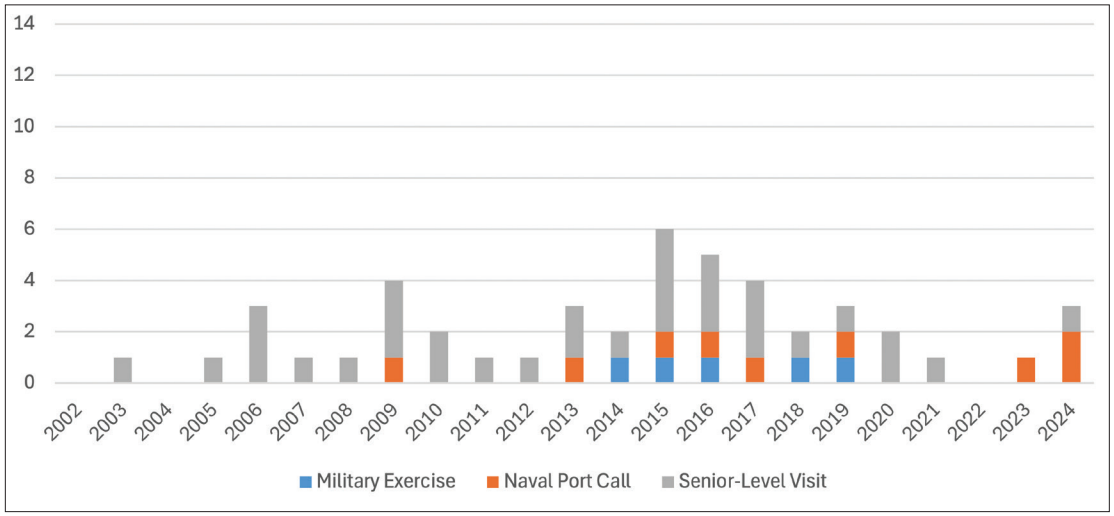
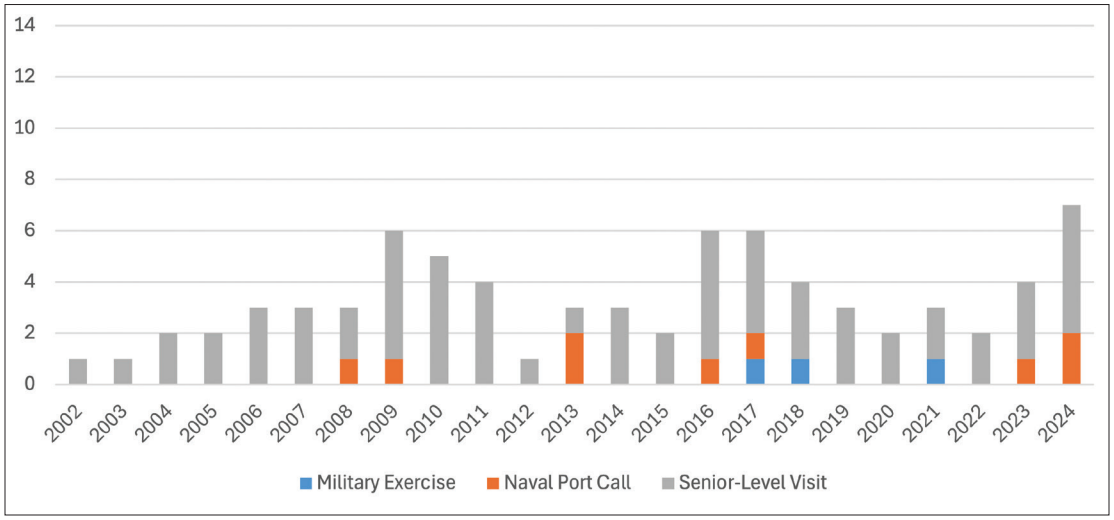


Figure 18. China-Vietnam Interactions



conducted its first military exercise with the PLA in 2017; the three exercises conducted to date have focused on antiterrorism and military medical cooperation. However, like the data from the Philippines, engagement declined noticeably from 2012 to 2015 as the dispute over the Spratly Islands heated up. Engagement declined again beginning in 2018, which follows the overall trend of decreased Chinese military-diplomatic engagements.

Figure 19 displays China's military engagement with the Philippines. This primarily consists of senior-level visits and occasional port calls. As with Vietnam, China's military engagement with the Philippine military fluctuates depending on the political relationship, with reduced activity from 2011–15 as the territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands flared up and the Philippines pursued its case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague from 2013 to 2016.[45] As a result, there were no Chinese military-diplomatic engagements with the Philippines in 2012, 2014, and 2015. Military engagement resumed when Rodrigo Duterte was elected President in 2016 and sought to reorient Philippine foreign policy away from the United States and toward China and Russia. The Philippines conducted its first military exercise with the PLA in 2020, a coast guard search and rescue exercise.[46] Heightened conflict over maritime sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea soon after President Bongbong Marcos took office in June 2022 helps explain why China-Philippine military engagements did not bounce back after the COVID-19 epidemic.

The data from Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines serve as examples of Southeast Asian nations that have started bilateral military exercises with China despite ongoing territorial disputes. Both sides are interested in engaging. China wants to use military diplomacy as a tool to develop bilateral relations and increase its influence within Southeast Asia and over ASEAN. The Malaysian, Vietnamese, and Philippine economies all depend on China as a trading partner and source of investment and their governments hope to use military diplomacy as a means of moderating Chinese military behavior. The limited military content of the exercises highlights their symbolic role as a measure of goodwill between nations regardless of political tensions.

Outside of ASEAN, China is also focused on military diplomacy with other U.S. allies and partners. Two case studies of particular interest are South Korea and Australia. Figure 20 shows China's military engagements with South Korea from 2002 to 2024.

South Korea illustrates how bilateral relations with China affect military diplomacy. Most engagements between South Korea and China consist of senior-level meetings. South Korea and China established diplomatic relations in 1992,[47] and maintained consistent engagement until 2010. The break was due to an incident involving the sinking of the *Cheonan*, a *Pohang*-class corvette from South Korea in March of 2010. An official investigation carried out by a team of

Figure 19. China-Philippines Interactions

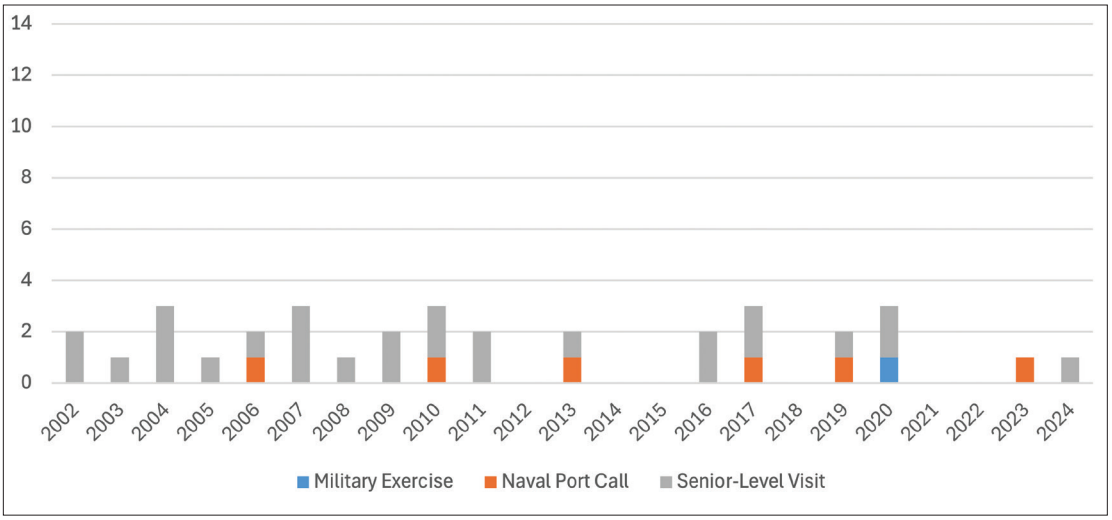
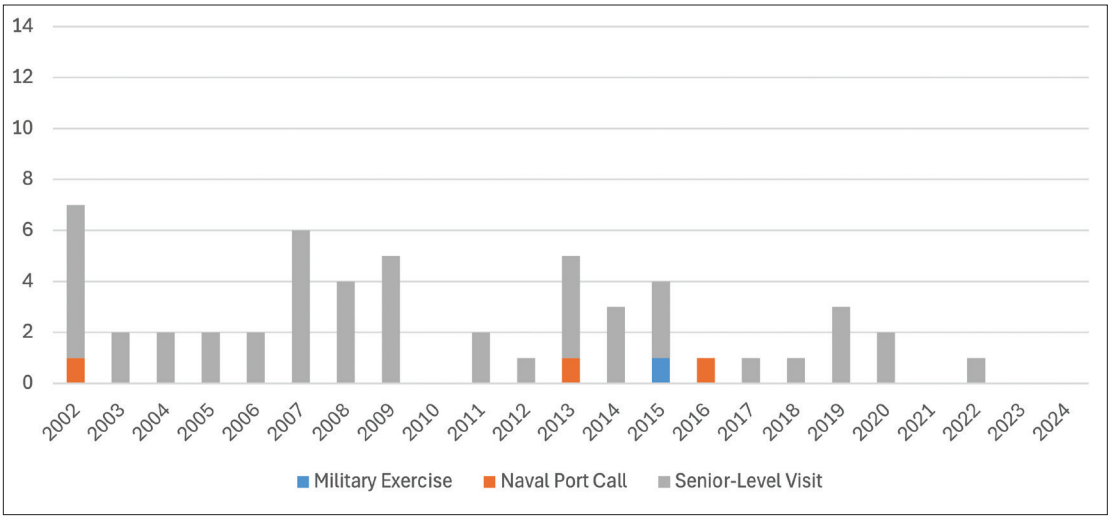


Figure 20. China–South Korea Interactions



international experts concluded that the warship was sunk by a North Korean torpedo, which North Korea denied. China dismissed the evidence of North Korea's involvement as not credible.[48] Later in November 2010, tensions between North and South Korea flared into conflict, resulting in the bombardment of Yeonpyeong, killing four South Koreans and injuring 19 others. Chinese illegal fishing and the murder of a South Korean coast guard member in 2011 and disputes over Socotra Rock (Ieodo) in 2012 further chilled relations between the two countries.

Military engagements did not pick up again until 2013, when the Chinese Navy conducted its first port call to South Korea. Engagement remained steady for the next few years, indicating

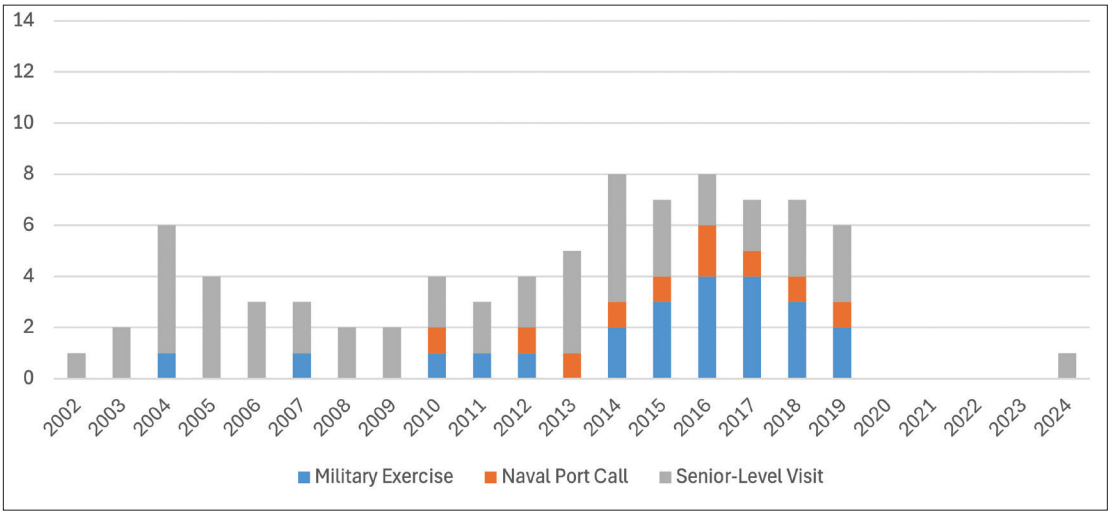
that bilateral relations between China and South Korea had returned to normal, until July 2016 when South Korea allowed the United States to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on its territory. Beijing feared THAAD's powerful radar could penetrate Chinese territory and potentially allow U.S. ballistic missile defenses to track and target Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles. China retaliated by targeting South Korea's entertainment, tourism, and shopping industries; for example, it sanctioned major South Korean retailer Lotte, which had operated 119 stores in China. Lotte eventually shut down all of its stores in China in 2018.[49] Military diplomacy was another means for China to express its displeasure, as military engagements were cut to the minimum. Only in 2019 did activity pick up again.

Finally, our data shows that China has engaged with South Korea more than twice as often as with its neighbor and putative ally, North Korea. The PLA has only interacted with North Korea 25 times in the past two decades, with all the interactions consisting of senior-level meetings. This limited engagement with one of the few remaining communist countries reflects Beijing's unhappiness at North Korea's pursuit and testing of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, and the resulting consequences for regional security and the reinforcement of U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea. As U.S.-China competition has intensified since 2015, China has gradually begun to increase its political and military engagement with North Korea, which may have increased its value to Beijing as a strategic asset against the United States.[50] In March 2018, North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un visited Beijing for his first public international state visit. Since then, Kim has gone to China four times and Xi traveled to Pyongyang once in 2019.[51] These summit visits were matched by five senior-level military visits in 2018 and 2019 before North Korea's COVID-19 lockdown impeded military interactions. North Korea's June 2024 treaty with Russia is likely to produce a return to Cold War dynamics—when Moscow and Beijing competed for influence with Pyongyang—and result in increased military interactions between the PLA and the Korean People's Army.[52]

Figure 21 displays Australian military engagements with China from 2002 to 2024. As part of the U.S. rebalance to Asia, the United States has increased security cooperation with Australia, including rotational deployments of U.S. Marines and the trilateral AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced in September 2021. Australia has balanced its increased security cooperation with Washington with increased military engagement with China, its largest trading partner.

Australia conducted its first military exercise with China, a naval search and rescue exercise, in 2004. However, the volume of military engagement between China and Australia began to pick up in 2012, the year after President Barack Obama formally announced the U.S.

Figure 21. China-Australia Interactions



rebalance to Asia in a speech in Canberra. Around that same time, Sino-Australia diplomatic relations also began to strengthen. In 2013, the two countries agreed to establish a prime-ministerial-level dialogue, which makes Australia one of the few countries to have a dialogue at this level with China.[53] This improved bilateral relationship is mirrored in the increasing numbers of military engagements and exercises from 2014 to 2019.

Australia has sought to use strengthened military relations to ease Chinese concerns about its closer security ties with the United States. Most of the military exercises between the two countries involve MOOTW, with a focus on survival skills, navigation drills, and friendly team-building exercises. Examples include the Pandaroo exercises and the Kakadu exercises. In 2014, Australia hosted the first trilateral Australia-U.S.-China Kowari survival exercise, which illustrates its role as a bridge between the United States and China. Australia's actions illustrate how U.S. allies and partners in the region can use military diplomacy to help manage their economic dependence on China and to offset Chinese concerns about their security cooperation with the United States. This balancing act was reasonably successful until 2020, when a combination of Australian concerns about Chinese efforts to influence its elections, Australian calls for a credible international investigation of the origins of COVID-19, and the AUKUS security pact caused a crisis in bilateral relations. Beijing's response focused heavily on economic measures to discriminate against Australian imports, but the PLA also stopped its diplomatic engagements with the Australian military. PLA engagements with Australia resumed in June 2024 when their defense ministers met on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Their defense minister–level dialogue resumed with a meeting in Beijing in mid-February 2025, but this positive political

signal was immediately undercut by an unprecedented PLAN live-fire exercise in the Tasman Sea off Australia that took place with no advance warning and required civilian commercial aircraft to be diverted.[54]

Pakistan is one of the PLA's closest military partners, reflecting close political relations and more than 50 years of Sino-Pakistani security cooperation. Figure 22 shows a robust pattern of Pakistani military interactions with the PLA. Pakistan's military exercises with the PLA often focus on combat and combat-support, including examples of PLA Air Force fighters conducting simulated attacks to allow Pakistani air defenses to practice against live targets. Some 19 percent of the PLA's combat and combat-support exercises have been conducted with Pakistan, the second most of any partner.[55]

China's Military Diplomacy With Russia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China and Russia have independently sought to expand their global reach and challenge American dominance.[56] Figure 23 shows that Sino-Russian military cooperation has increased significantly since 2013. Arms sales have always been an important factor in the relationship; in the 1990s and early 2000s, the PLA was one of the main purchasers of Russian military equipment, and Russian air-defense systems, fighters, and air-to-air missiles have revolutionized many of China's capabilities.[57] As China has become more capable in building domestic weapons platforms and less dependent on Russian equipment, Sino-Russian military engagement has turned toward other forms of cooperation.

Since 2014, Sino-Russian military exercises have increased in quantity and complexity, and have included more combat and combat support operations. Moreover, 27 percent of the PLA's combat and combat-support exercises have been with the Russian military, the most of any partner. Over the 23 years captured by the NDU dataset, 63 percent of the China-Russia interactions have occurred in the 11 years between 2014–24, showing an acceleration of military interactions. China's second and third most frequent military-diplomatic partners—Pakistan and the United States—have had 58 percent and 48 percent of their military-diplomatic interactions with China occur over that same period, respectively. This likely reflects Russia's increasing isolation from the West since its seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, which makes China a relatively more important partner. Russia has long attempted to balance its desire for arms sales to China to support its defense industries with an effort to hold back on transfers of its most advanced military technologies to China. However, in recent years, Russia has sold the PLA some of its most advanced systems, including Sukhoi Su-35 fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missiles.

Figure 22. China-Pakistan Interactions

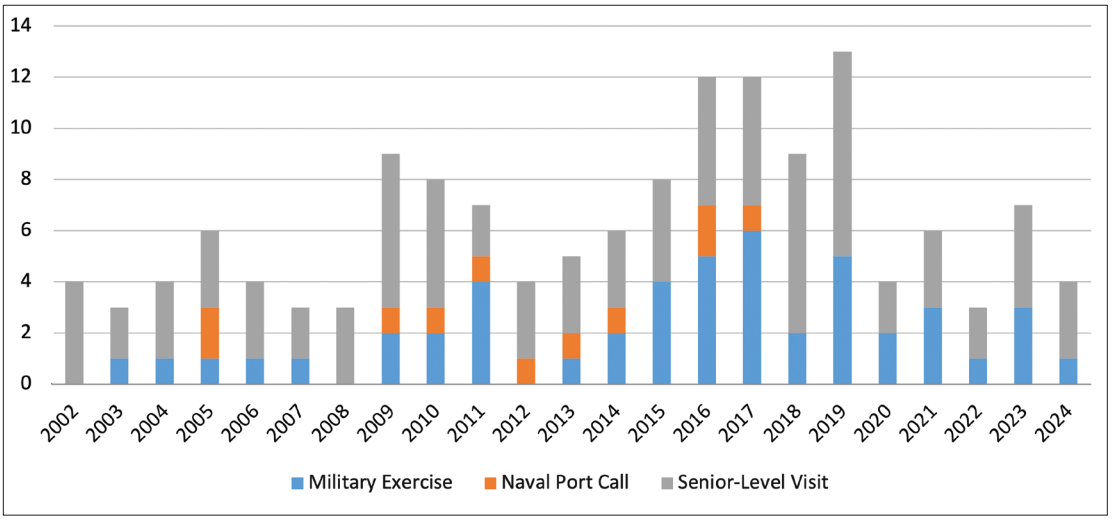
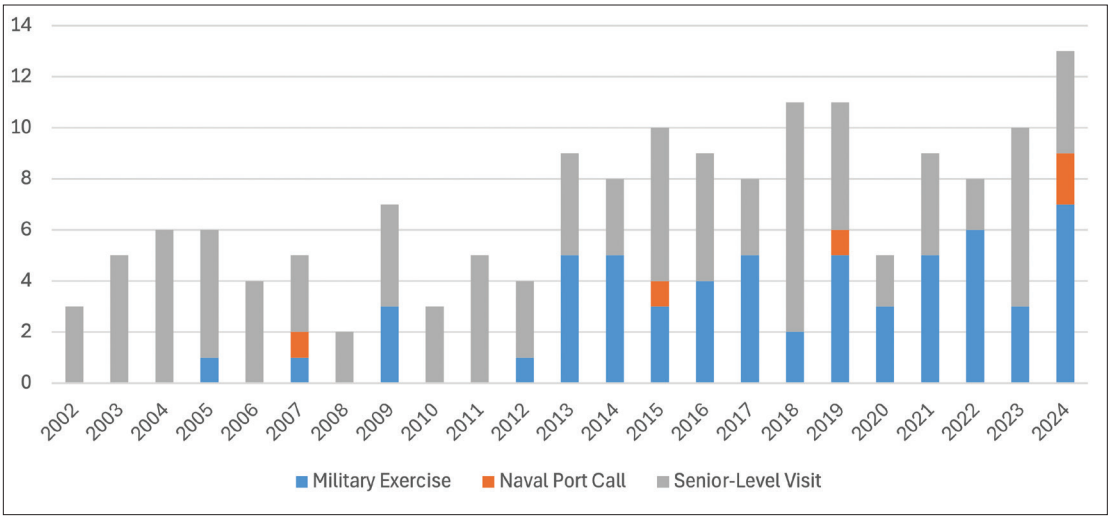


Figure 23. China-Russia Interactions



The PLA sees Russia as a military with both combat experience and advanced technology and seeks to learn from Russia's experience.

In the Vostok 2018 exercise in the Russian Far East, the PLA deployed 3,000 troops, senior leaders, and four levels of command and control.[58] In addition, China and Russia have become more willing to hold exercises in sensitive areas and have started to use exercises to signal their strategic cooperation. These include the Joint Sea exercises, which the two countries started in 2012, and which have been held in increasingly sensitive waters over the years such as the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea, and most recently in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. In 2019

China and Russia began joint bomber patrols in Northeast Asia, and joint naval patrols began in 2020. These patrols continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

NDU is currently completing a research project that analyzes the military significance and political signaling value of Sino-Russian exercises.[59] Preliminary findings suggest that exercises have increased in military sophistication and are often conducted in ways that increase the strength of their political signals, including by exercise location, the involvement of advanced weapons systems, and press coverage in English.

Increasing Sino-Russian military cooperation does not mean the two countries are allies or are building mutual trust, but rather that they have a common enemy in the United States and are cooperating in areas of common interest. In the end, China and Russia recognize each other as neighbors and important strategic partners and choose to engage each other militarily to multiply their geopolitical influence. Trends in Sino-Russian military engagements indicate a deepening relationship since 2015 and suggest increased cooperation in the future, especially on efforts to limit U.S. freedom of action and influence.

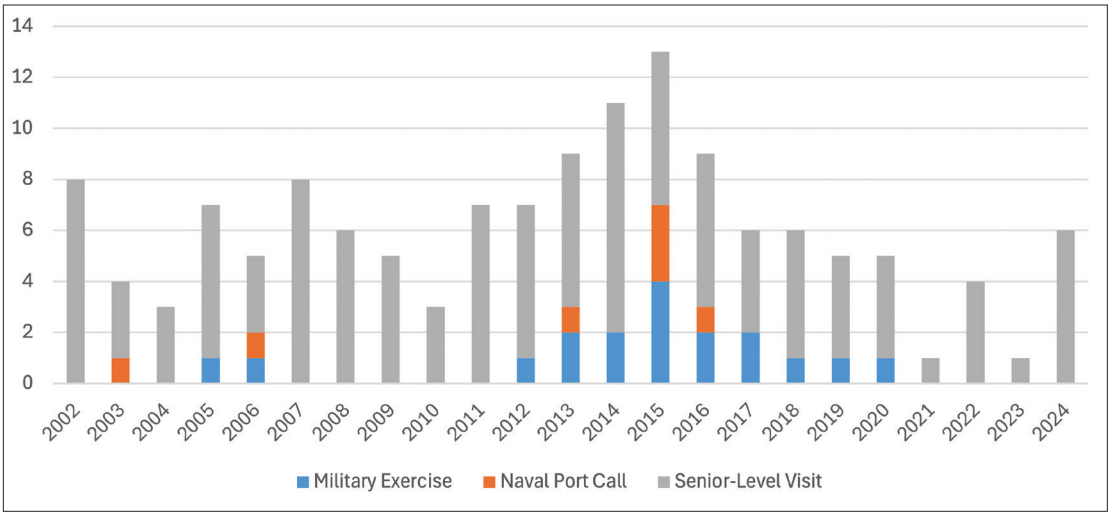
Finally, it is worth briefly examining the pattern of U.S. military engagement with China. The data in figure 24 show U.S. efforts to increase engagement with the PLA from 2011 to 2015, with a focus on negotiating rules of behavior for safe air and maritime encounters. During this period the PLA was under orders from Xi Jinping to improve military-to-military relations with the United States.[60] The data tracks with other academic analysis that shows a souring of U.S.-China relations in 2014 and 2015, and again in 2022 and 2023 when the PLA suspended military-to-military communications for a year following former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 before finally resuming talks again in November of 2023.[61] This reflects an increasing sense of strategic competition in both governments and in both militaries.

Special Challenges: COVID-19 and Corruption

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a dramatic decrease in PLA diplomatic military engagements beginning in March 2020.[62] The PLA conducted just 44 military engagements in 2020, about 26 percent of the 2019 total. As China's domestic and international focus shifted to COVID-19 containment, the PLA's operational capabilities were diverted to domestic medical response and construction projects and to support the provision of medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and medical response missions to demonstrate China's willingness to work with foreign partners to combat COVID-19.

PLA leaders largely stopped traveling and hosting senior-level meetings but continued to hold multilateral and bilateral senior-level meetings virtually through teleconference or phone

Figure 24. China-U.S. Interactions



conversations. For example, in December 2020, the PLA's Academy of Military Science held its 10th Xiangshan Forum in person and by video link. The forum theme was "Trends of Major Power Relations," with a focus on the future of U.S.-China relations.[63] There were only three port calls in 2020 (all during the first 3 months of the year) and none recorded in 2021, indicating the PLA's unwillingness to travel overseas and the reluctance of host countries to receive largely ceremonial port calls from PLAN ships.

PLA military exercises also decreased in frequency following the pandemic. In March 2020, the PLA participated in its first post-outbreak exercise, the annual Golden Dragon exercise with Cambodia, which featured joint Chinese-Cambodian efforts to combat COVID-19. The PLA's subsequent external military engagements reflect this pandemic caution. Recurring exercises with some traditional partners continued throughout 2020 and 2021, notably with countries like Russia and Pakistan, but have not yet returned to their pre-pandemic frequency. This reflects China's strict quarantine regulations as part of its "Zero-COVID" policy, which inhibited international travel. PLA military diplomacy activities begin picking up in 2023, with increases in military exercises, senior-level meetings, and a return to pre-pandemic levels of port calls. All three types of activities increased further in 2024, suggesting that the PLA will eventually return to pre-pandemic levels of military diplomacy activities. The PLA will likely continue prioritizing Southeast Asia and increase its naval diplomacy.

Another special challenge for PLA military diplomacy is widespread corruption and periodic purges of senior military leaders for corruption or suspected political disloyalty.[64] Such purges inhibit efforts by foreign counterparts to build personal relationships and foster trust with

their PLA counterparts and limit the returns from senior-leader engagements. For example, then Chief of the Joint Staff Department General Fang Fenghui accompanied Xi Jinping to a summit with President Trump in April 2017 and met with U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford on August 15, 2017. Fang was abruptly replaced less than 2 weeks later with no explanation and was ultimately convicted of bribery and sentenced to life imprisonment.[65] In June 2024, two former defense ministers, Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe, were purged from the Communist Party amid allegations of corruption.[66] Li was accused of bribery in the procurement of military equipment, and Wei was accused of accepting gifts and leveraging his position to seek benefits for others. These purges underscore Xi Jinping's efforts to consolidate control, ensure loyalty, and eliminate any internal threats to the Party, but they also signify the deep levels of corruption and Xi's distrust of the PLA senior leadership.[67] These embarrassing personnel changes limit the PLA's ability to use high-level visits to achieve its diplomatic objectives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the PLA acquires more resources and capabilities, its military-diplomatic activity has increased in volume and expanded in scope. The PLA seeks to use military diplomacy to support Chinese strategic objectives, including supporting China's overall foreign policy and shaping the security environment. PLA scholars believe that military diplomacy can be leveraged as a foreign policy tool—when it is beneficial to national interests—by cutting off planned military exercises or exchanges, or making military-diplomatic activities a bargaining chip that Beijing can wield. The PLA also hopes to use "pragmatic cooperation" to gradually move from cooperation on nontraditional security issues to military technology transfers and combat-oriented exercises with advanced militaries that will help the PLA improve its ability to fight and win wars.

The PLA's increasing military-diplomatic engagements are a sign that China wants to engage with the world, but they do not necessarily translate into increased influence. Several factors limit the political returns on PLA military diplomacy. First, any military activities will be limited by the willingness and capability of foreign counterparts to engage with the PLA. Second, China's domestic politics constrain the PLA's ability to speak frankly to foreign counterparts or to engage them as equals. The PLA is a party army, not a state army. The Chinese political system and the CCP's desire to exert control over the PLA produce an emphasis on form over substance in external military engagements. Third, the priority placed on the political value of military engagements means that many PLA visits or exercises do not build much trust or interoperability with foreign nations. This is particularly true of China's bilateral military relationships with ASEAN countries and with other nations in the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, as

COVID-19 challenges are overcome, the PLA can be expected to return to the pre-COVID-19 levels of its military-diplomatic activity.

Analysis of both the volume and the type of the PLA's military-diplomatic engagements may be most useful as an indicator of the quality of China's diplomatic relations and security cooperation with a particular country. The PLA is strengthening bilateral relations with some other countries through its efforts to help build their military capacity, especially in MOOTW areas. Other countries, such as Australia, Singapore, and Vietnam, have used military diplomacy as a means of maintaining communications channels with the PLA and balancing their more substantive security cooperation with the United States. Individual case studies of countries and analysis of China's participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises show that most PLA exercises focus heavily on less-sensitive nontraditional security issues; PLA exercises with Russia, Pakistan, and the SCO are an exception to this general rule. Increasingly assertive PLA behavior is also likely to undercut the political effectiveness of its efforts to use military diplomacy to assure countries of its peaceful intentions.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should not seek to dissuade allies and partners from engaging with the PLA as a part of their broader China policy. Instead, U.S. policy should focus on limiting the PLA's ability to use military diplomacy to improve its operational capabilities or to build strategic relationships that give it access to overseas ports and bases. The United States should also insist that allies and partners be careful to not teach the PLA tactics, techniques, and procedures that they have learned from the United States and to be cautious about conducting combat exercises with PLA counterparts.

It is important to recognize that the PLA uses exercises as political symbols of the strength of its bilateral relationships. Many countries in China's periphery are concerned about balancing their economic relations with China and their security relations with the United States and would be reluctant to curtail engagement with the PLA.[68] Washington should allow countries such as Australia and Singapore to use symbolic military engagements with the PLA to balance their substantive security cooperation with the United States. In that vein, the United States should continue to build partner capacity and stress interoperability with allies and partners. These are areas where the United States has a substantial comparative advantage over the PLA and should be emphasized as Washington considers how best to leverage its own military diplomacy as an asset in strategic competition with China.

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[11] *Revealed preference* is an economics methodology that uses observed activity to infer underlying preferences or motivations. It works best with a complete data set of observed behavior.

[12] The original dataset did not list China's alliance with North Korea and treated the U.S.-China aspirational effort to work toward a "new type of major power relationship" as if it had been accomplished. For a good analysis of China's strategic partnerships and another dataset, see Ketian Zhang, "Alliances with Chinese Characteristics? The Contents and Rationale of China's Strategic Partnerships," *International Politics*, June 2, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-025-00701-0.

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[15] The two N/A entries in figure 2 are with the United Nations on peacekeeping issues.

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[20] Each visitor is given a weight based on seniority. CMC Vice Chairmen receive a weight of 10; CMC members and service commanders have a weight of 8; Theater Command/Military Region leaders and deputy directors of general departments or major CMC departments have a weight of 6; and deputy Theater Command/Military Region leaders and assistant directors of general departments have a weight of 5. Foreign officers/officials are given the same weight as their People's Liberation Army (PLA) counterparts. The imbalance is calculated by totaling the weight of all the foreign military leaders who visited China and subtracting the total weight of all the PLA leaders who visited the foreign country. See "Codebook," Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database*, version 5.0.

[21] Like Presidential summits, Cabinet-level meetings force U.S. participants to cooperate on a coordinated State–Defense Department agenda and can also help overcome obstacles to interagency cooperation among U.S. allies. The commitment of two Cabinet-level officials to attend the meetings is intended as a signal of the strength of the alliance.

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[33] Saunders discussion with PLA senior officer, 2015.

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