

HOW FEARFUL IS CHINA'S MILITARY RISE?

Edward Sing Yue Chan

During a meeting with delegates from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Armed Police Force at the Fourteenth National People's Congress in March 2023, Xi Jinping called for the improvement of China's 'integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities' and to 'accelerate the modernisation of the army as a world-class armed force'.¹ His speech was seen as a signal of China's intention to speed up its military transformation. Indeed, in the new government budget announced in March 2023, Beijing revealed a yearly budget of RMB 1.55 trillion (US\$224.8 billion), marking a 7.2 percent increase from the 2022 budget.²

Australia is increasingly concerned about China's military ambitions. The *Defence Strategic Review 2023*, released on 24 April 2023, suggests that 'China's military build-up is now the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War'. Whether or not the statement is true, it warns that China's military rise, 'without transparency or reassurance to the Indo-Pacific region ... threatens the global rules-based order ... that adversely impacts Australia's national interests'.³ According to the Lowy Institute Poll 2022, 75 percent of Australians believe that China is very likely or somewhat likely to become a military threat to Australia in the next twenty years;⁴ 88 percent said they were either very or somewhat concerned about China potentially opening a military base in a Pacific Island country.⁵

The governments of the United States and its allies are certainly responding to China's military rise. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a diplomatic and security network consisting of Australia, the United States, India and Japan, was revived in 2017 to promote 'an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient'.⁶ Since 2015, the US Navy has been patrolling in the South China Sea. By 10 April 2023, the US Navy had conducted forty-four reported freedom of navigation operations in the area. Particularly during the Trump administration, it navigated once every two months between 2018 and 2020 in the South China Sea.⁷ Moreover, in September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced a trilateral security pact, known as AUKUS. On 13 March 2023, the three countries agreed to increase nuclear submarine (SSN) port

visits and training in Australia. More significantly, Australia will purchase at least three *Virginia*-class SSNs from the United States in the 2030s and build its first SSN with technical support from the two countries in the 2040s.⁸

Some media outlets are hyping up the possibility of war with China, suggesting that China will invade Taiwan by 2026 or engage in a war with the United States over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.⁹ However, many China analysts have argued that these claims are exaggerated and ‘devoid of concrete analyses on China’s intention and capability’.¹⁰ So how much should Australia and its allies fear the PLA? Although numerous intelligence and defence reports are available, mostly from Washington, the public needs more context to understand China’s military rise.



The US Navy has been patrolling the South China Sea since 2015

Source: U.S. Pacific Fleet, Flickr

Military transformation under Xi Jinping

Amid China's economic development, it has steadily increased its defence spending and military capability over the past three decades. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's military budget has increased by an average of 13 percent annually, with spending around 5 percent of the government's total budget throughout the last decade.¹¹ The PLA has developed numerous new types of military equipment, including the *J-20* fighters, *Jin*-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), *Shang-II*-class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), aircraft carriers, *DF-41* Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and other matériel researched, designed and built in China.¹²

China's military rise appears to have become more ambitious during the mid-2010s. The country has been in the thrall of the 'strong army dream' 强军梦, an integral part of the goal of national rejuvenation.¹³ Xi Jinping, who chairs the Central Military Commission, also made a few speeches on China's military modernisation. For instance, in 2013, he advocated building armed forces that would 'obey the Party's command, that are able to fight and to win, and that maintain excellent conduct' in order to 'safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests'.¹⁴ In a series of speeches around 2016, he described the goal of PLA modernisation as being to 'achieve the goal of a strong army' and 'build a world-class military'. In 2017, he set out the three milestones for PLA development: basic mechanisation and major progress in 'informatisation' 信息化 by 2020, modernisation of national defence by 2035, and building an all-round world-class military by mid-century.¹⁵ As political rhetoric, the military's three milestones echo the Party's 'Two Centennial Goals';¹⁶ as military objectives, Chinese commentators and scholars describe a world-class military as having world-class operational theories, personnel, training, weapons and equipment, law-based management, combat power and innovation abilities.¹⁷ Some also use these milestones to address the military's shortcoming in mechanisation, informatisation, intellectualisation and operation.¹⁸

The PLA has undergone several significant reforms during this period. In 2015, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) was established to coordinate China's arsenal of land-based ballistic missiles, including nuclear weapons. In 2016, the PLA reorganised its seven theatre commands into five, each designed to counter different security threats: Eastern Theatre Command is responsible for Taiwan, Southern Theatre Command for the South China Sea, Western Theatre Command for the Sino-Indian border, and Northern Theatre Command for North Korea. In 2019, the Central Military Commission adopted a new military strategy for the PLA titled 'Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Era' to address the shift of strategic assessment outlined in the 2019 National Defence White Paper aimed at countering growing threats from the United States and Taiwan.¹⁹ These structural reforms, according to the 2023 Pentagon Report, have strengthened the PLA's joint operations and capabilities.²⁰ However, as Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel have suggested, this 'new' strategy was proposed against the backdrop of Xi's ideological consolidation and indicated little operational or strategic change.²¹ Concepts from previous military doctrines, such as 'near sea active defence', 'informatisation war' and 'integrated joint operations', are still included in the 2019 military doctrine.²² Indeed, after undergoing these military reforms, the PLA still lacks capabilities and combat experiences in amphibious operations, especially in the course of actions against Taiwan.

Xi's speech at the Two Sessions merely summarises China's continual military development, rather than signifying substantial changes in the timeline of national defence modernisation. The PLA is still gradually addressing its technological and operational limitations. The State Council Institutional Reform Plan 2023 unveiled significant steps to restructure the Ministry of Science and Technology, including the establishment of a Central Commission on Science and Technology 中央科技委员会 to enhance the party's leadership over scientific and technological development.²³

The reform intended to '[push] forward the building of a national innovation system and structural scientific and technological reform, [study] and deliberat[e] major strategies, plans and policies for the country's sci-tech development, and coordinat[e] efforts to resolve major issues of

strategic, guiding and fundamental significance in the sci-tech sector'.²⁴ Although the PLA's structure is not affected by the reform, the goal of the reform, including addressing the limitation of technological self-reliance and promoting integrated research between the civil and the military, falls in line with some of the PLA's objectives in its military modernisation.²⁵ Defence science and technology has been crucial in China's technological innovation,²⁶ so institutional reform in science and technology is relevant to national defence modernisation. Following the State Council reform focused on the sci-tech sector this year, we should see further reforms within the PLA to ground force, logistics and maintenance support, military staff training, and integrated warfare.

Will China wage a war?

The large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in early April (as a response to President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy) suggests that the PLA has become more capable in integrated warfare and deployment of aircraft carriers.²⁷ Nonetheless, military capability building is a gradual process. While the PLA has the budget and resources for research development, personnel training lags behind technological advances. For instance, a report from the US Naval War College suggests that the Chinese navy has 'faced tremendous pressure to keep pace with the rapid expansion and modernisation of the [naval] surface fleet and its growing mission set'.²⁸ According to an article published in a Chinese military magazine last year, the PLA Navy needs at least 200 pilots for its aircraft carriers, but it lacks a fighter trainer specifically designed for carrier-based operations.²⁹ Therefore, although the PLA Navy built its third aircraft carrier last year, construction of the fourth one was stalled.³⁰ More importantly, apart from a border skirmish with Vietnam in 1979 and a minor naval battle at the Johnson South Reef in 1988, also against Vietnam, the PLA has not fought in a war for more than four decades. It still lacks experience in warfare.

Multiple organisations in the United States, including the US Air Force, the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) and the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), have already simulated a few war games of the PLA pursuing military operations against Taiwan but with varying results.³¹ Some suggest that in a war between China and Taiwan, China would likely win. However, we should factor US domestic political consideration into the hype of a war scenario. The outcome of war game simulations needs to be weighed against the fact that they are often intentionally skewed in favour of US forces in order to strive for more resources for national defence.

Whether China has the capability to wage war and whether China will go to war are two different questions. As the US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines told the House Intelligence Committee, 'It is not our assessment that China wants to go to war.'³² The concept of a world-class military, as Taylor Fravel, an expert in Chinese military strategy, argued, does not 'illuminate the PLA's global ambitions or how it envisions using force'. It has limited geopolitical implication of where China would project its military power. Rather, it expresses 'China's aspiration to become a leading military power in the world'.³³ It is essential to distinguish the differences between China's military ambition and policy outcomes.

Launching a war in the Indo-Pacific is complicated. Strategically as well as politically, the PRC would prefer to win Taiwan without fighting.³⁴ It needs to consider the consequences of sanctions and sea lane supply blockages from the West if there is a war across the strait.

Will AUKUS help to deter China's use of force?

There is no doubt that China's military capability is on the rise. The AUKUS security pact has been described as a 'demonstration of unity and ... [a] powerful deterrence signal to the region'.³⁵ To the United States, AUKUS indicates its commitment in maintaining its pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific. To Australia, AUKUS suggests that Australia is more likely to rely on 'the US committing to the "integrated deterrence" approach that the Biden administration set out in its 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy'.³⁶ As Ben Herscovitch

suggests, 'If Australia chooses to deploy its nuclear-powered submarines in support of a US-led effort to defend Taiwan, then AUKUS will have made China's military goals harder to achieve.'³⁷

However, it is important to note that the submarines themselves do not serve as a deterrent. The AU\$368 billion deal is a long-term process, and the first of the new submarines is not expected to be delivered until at least the 2040s. By that time, it is likely that the PLA will have developed sufficient means for countering the AUKUS-class submarines, such as anti-ship missiles, SSNs, ballistic missile nuclear submarines, as well as other anti-submarine capabilities, which China is currently building. In fact, the US Congress Research Service report suggested in 2022 it is likely China will have a new class of SSN by the mid-2020s.³⁸ Furthermore, China's naval development consists of an aspiration to expand its influence globally, beyond the close waters of Taiwan, in which a submarine deal is simply incapable to deter.³⁹



AUKUS submarines themselves do not serve as a deterrent

Source: Royal Navy

In addition, it is dangerous to have naval procurement driving the state's grand strategy. Traditionally, a grand strategy articulates clear security goals for a state to set all aspects of foreign policy, ranging from trade agreements to defence budget.⁴⁰ It is true that AUKUS is beyond a military exchange; it is also an investment in ideas, education, research, and community ties

for Australia.⁴¹ However, rather than establishing distinct security and strategic goals and generating a range of policy alternatives, experts warn that AUKUS, as a singular policy, has now manifested Australia's security decision-making. This could potentially limit Canberra's array of security choices.⁴² In a worse scenario, it might draw Australia into a nuclear war because its continual support of US deterrence against China.⁴³

What, then, is AUKUS for? Since the deal was announced in March 2023, Australian experts have debated its strategic implications.⁴⁴ As the Lowy Institute's Sam Roggeveen submits, there is a bigger question the Albanese government must answer: 'how exactly will these submarines make Australia safer'?⁴⁵ Australia must take China's military rise seriously, but it is not helpful to assume that this will inevitably lead to war. Instead, Canberra should approach this comprehensively and cautiously, and develop a clearer understanding of China's military rise under Xi Jinping as well as its strategic goals and institutional reforms. There also needs to be a wider and more constructive public debate about the best ways to respond to China's rise and to safeguard Australia's security in the broadest sense of the term.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: China's New Era*, edited by
Annie Luman Ren and Ben Hillman, published 2024 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2024.08A