



China Global Security Tracker

No. 6, July - December 2019

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Highlights

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- Dormant Chinese hacking group resumes attacks: reports

Focus topic: China's rhetoric meets reality - Beijing caught out by the Iran crisis

The killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike on January 3rd drew strong reactions from Beijing, which condemned the attack as an "abuse of military force" by the United States. However, China held back from supporting Tehran in any more active way. The PRC leadership's response shows the pressures it faces, torn between supporting Iran and placating the United States. It wants to keep Iran onside as a source of oil, and a willing partner in the expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while limiting Iran's own nuclear program. Yet China also needs US goodwill to end the damaging trade dispute. Despite Beijing's rhetoric, the US-Iran crisis serves as a reminder of the limitations of China's narrative and geopolitical ambitions. Beijing faced a choice between supporting its ally by getting more involved in an already tense region or preserving stability by staying out of the fray. It chose the status quo.

The state of China-Iran relations: Increasingly close ties

China's footprint in the Middle East has expanded rapidly in recent years. China has taken advantage of the United States' gradual withdrawal from the region to step up its involvement, though it previously had very limited ties there and preferred to avoid the many regional conflicts and complicated internal politics. Given China's goal of becoming a global power by 2049, Beijing's interests in the region lie in a stable Middle East. China needs regional stability to expand its Belt and Road Initiative and protect its existing investments, access the region's energy and other resources, and deal with terrorist threats. The Middle East is becoming increasingly important to Beijing's geopolitical ambitions.

Iran serves as a perfect example of China's expanding regional engagement. Tehran has increasingly turned to Beijing for support in its long-running conflict with the US. China remains Iran's largest trading partner, and it has made BRI-linked investments there, mostly in the transport and energy sectors. China has also been vocal in its support for the Iran nuclear deal, vowing to uphold it even after the United States withdrew from the pact. China's oil imports from Iran have fallen sharply as a result of US sanctions.

However, the two countries maintain close political and military ties. In 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made five visits to Beijing, and President Xi Jinping held a bilateral meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in June 2019 on the sidelines of the Bishkek Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

(SCO) summit. China is also among the top three arms suppliers to Iran, according to SIPRI data, exporting weapons worth about USD 270 million to Iran between 2008 and 2018. The first trilateral naval exercise between China, Russia and Iran was held in the Gulf of Oman in December 2019.

As a result of this close relationship, Beijing has been vocal in its support for Tehran when it comes to its relationship with the United States and the future of the Iran nuclear deal. Just three days before the killing of Qassem Soleimani, for example, and just days after the conclusion of the trilateral naval drill with Russia, Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif was in Beijing to meet with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. During the meeting, Wang Yi adopted an unusually blunt tone, criticizing the US for unilaterally withdrawing from the nuclear deal, shirking its international obligations and exerting maximum pressure on Iran. Wang said US conduct was "the root cause of the current tension over the Iranian nuclear issue."

China's response to the crisis: Strong condemnation of US actions

China's strong reaction to the United States' killing of Qassem Soleimani was unsurprising, given its close ties with Tehran and its interest in regional stability. An initially pro-forma position became sterner over the following days. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs first reacted by condemning the use of force in international relations, urging the US to show restraint and respect Iraq's sovereignty. Wang used stronger language in a phone call with Zarif, saying that the US "military adventurism" violated basic norms of international relations and would aggravate regional tensions. Wang vowed that China would play a constructive role in maintaining peace and security in the Middle East. Beijing has also emphasized its intention to coordinate with Russia to continue to uphold the Iran nuclear deal.

Official Chinese media questioned the US justification for the attack, dismissing the possibility of self-defense given no attack from Iran was imminent. Xinhua's commentary focused extensively on the November 2020 US presidential election as the most likely underlying reason why the Trump Administration decided to take out Soleimani. Reports argued that Soleimani's death would give President Trump a foreign policy victory that he sorely needs for the upcoming election. China's official media also refrained from any open criticism of Iran's response after Tehran launched missiles against bases housing US troops. Instead, some articles praised Iran's restraint. State-owned media was also quick to reassure the Chinese public the PLA has the capacity to deter and divert similar drone attacks.

Social media users mostly kept to the official line, criticizing the US for unilateral action and praising the PRC government's ability to protect Chinese citizens. Although calling for a negotiated resolution to the conflict, many posts struck a militaristic tone by ascribing Iran's vulnerability to such an attack to its lack of nuclear weapons – a problem that China does not have.

Despite its forceful rhetoric, Beijing did not take any concrete action to support Iran. It neither offered to mediate nor tried to raise the issue in the UN Security Council – both things that China did do in support of Pakistan after India's elimination of Kashmir and Jammu's special status, for example.

Rhetoric meets reality: Unwillingness to take on responsibilities in the Middle East

China's growing involvement in the Middle East over the last few years has led to predictions that the Trump Administration's withdrawal from some US commitments there could provide an opening for China. There

have been suggestions that China could fill the power vacuum and might eventually replace the US as the region's major political and economic player, and also with regard to security matters.

Beijing itself has stoked this narrative through its rhetoric about China's goal of becoming a global power and a global defender of multilateralism, free trade, peace and stability in the face of an increasingly destabilizing United States.

However, China's response to the killing of Soleimani reveals the limits of Beijing's rhetoric and ambitions. In dire need of US goodwill in order to conclude trade negotiations for a phase 1 deal to cool their trade war, China limited itself to verbal condemnations of US actions.

The incident serves as a reminder that despite Beijing's grandstanding and rhetoric about its ambitions to be a global power, China is currently neither willing nor able to take on the US's responsibilities nor to actively contribute to maintaining the region's security. It wants a stable Middle East where it can continue to trade and invest without shouldering the responsibility of securing it itself. Instead, it prefers a free ride on the United States' security guarantees.

Beijing's unwillingness to step up to the plate may be particularly evident in the Middle East, due to the region's many complex and politically charged disputes, with which it has little to no experience. However, the tension between China's rhetoric and the reality of its actions exists worldwide.

Domestic developments

Foreign and security policy

- **China publishes a new defense white paper.** On July 24th, China issued its first defense white paper in four years, titled China's National Defense in the New Era. The white paper does not outline any major changes to PRC defense policies or strategy, but it takes a markedly more aggressive line on the United States and Taiwan. The political message it sends to both the domestic and the international audience is clear – a strong reminder that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the army of the Communist Party, that ideology is key, and that China is a responsible power unlike the US.
- **China hits back after NATO calls it a security challenge.** NATO leaders, meeting in London on December 4th to mark the alliance's 70th anniversary, chose to describe China as a security challenge for the first time. China was quick to respond, criticizing the characterization as unfair and claiming that although some NATO members had been against labeling Beijing an adversary, the US had forced them to agree to the position. This is in line with Beijing's narrative that the US is the destabilizing force in the international arena – not China – and that Washington has bullied Europe into taking a more adversarial stance.
- **China rejects nuclear policy change.** In mid-October, Fu Cong, the director of the Arms Control Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that China would not change its nuclear policy by moving to a launch on warning posture. He said it would be incompatible with China's long-standing commitment not to use nuclear weapons first. Fu called on all other nuclear powers, especially the US and Russia, to abandon their launch on warning policies.

Force development and capabilities

- **China to reform military ranks promotion system.** On December 8th, the Central Military Commission (CMC) issued a "Notice on Adjusting the Policy Concerning the Promotion of Military Ranks of Officers" at and above the corps level. The new policy aims at clarifying promotion procedures; the ultimate goal is a better correlation between grades and ranks. Under the current system, every PLA officer is assigned both a grade and a rank. Unlike in other militaries, officers move up the ranks based on their grade, not their rank, making an officer's grade more important than his rank. Each grade can also have multiple assigned ranks, so mismatches sometimes occur. For example, a corps commander with the rank of colonel would have seniority over a division leader with the rank of major general, as grades take precedence. This reform has been a long time coming and is thought likely to be a first step towards merging ranks and grades. In mid-December President Xi Jinping promoted 170 senior officers to align their ranks and place in the military hierarchy.
- **PLA unveils new equipment and capabilities at National Day parade.** On October 1st, the PRC celebrated the 70th anniversary of its foundation with a military parade on the streets of Beijing. The PLA

used this opportunity to showcase some of its new equipment and capabilities, which were all domestically made and already in active service, according to Major General Tan Min, Executive Deputy Director of the Military Parade Joint Command Office. The new capabilities included the new Z-20 utility helicopter, the Type 15 lightweight tank, China's latest bomber, the H-6N, with refueling capability, the new WZ-8 high-altitude, high-speed reconnaissance drone and GJ-11 stealth attack drone, as well as a number of new missiles, e.g., the reportedly hypersonic DF-17 conventional ballistic missile; the DF-41 intercontinental strategic nuclear missiles; and the JL-2 nuclear-capable submarine-launched ballistic missile.

- **First domestically made aircraft carrier commissioned.** China's second aircraft carrier, and the first one to be domestically made, was delivered to the PLA Navy and commissioned on December 17th in Sanya, Hainan province, at a ceremony attended by President Xi. The carrier, named Shandong, had undergone sea trials since May 2018 and it will be based in Sanya, with a mission to cover the South China Sea. Commissioning the Shandong has elevated China into the handful of countries that operate more than one aircraft carrier and demonstrates the rapid advances of China's carrier program. The Shandong can carry 36 J-15 fighter jets, whereas China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, can carry only 24.
- **China's main shipbuilding conglomerates merged.** The China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) and the China Shipbuilding Industry Company (CSIC), the two main state-owned shipbuilding conglomerates, were merged again on November 26th, after 20 years as two separate companies. The long-awaited merger has created a new shipbuilding giant named China State Shipbuilding Corporation, which is now the world's largest shipbuilder by sales with about 20 percent of the global market.
- **China continues to export some of its domestically made platforms:**
 - **Thailand receives Chinese armored vehicles, signs contract to acquire amphibious ship.** Thailand signed an agreement with the state-owned shipbuilder CSIC (now merged into CSSC) on September 9th for a Type 071E amphibious transport dock. This is the first time that China will export an amphibious ship. In December, Thailand also received its first batch of China-made VN-1 wheeled armored vehicles. Thailand is a regional ally of the US, but it also maintains close ties with the PRC, and its military operates various China-made platforms.
 - **Bangladesh receives two Chinese frigates.** On December 18th, the Bangladeshi Navy took delivery of two Type 053H3 frigates purchased in 2018. Bangladesh is one of the main recipients of Chinese weapons.
 - **China receives second regimental set of Russia's S-400 air defense system.** Russia began delivery to China of the second set of its S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile system in late July. China was the first foreign customer of the S-400 Triumf. It received the first regimental set in early 2018 under a USD 3 billion contract signed in 2014.
 - **Serbia signs deal to purchase Chinese drones.** In a first for Europe, Serbia signed a deal in September for the purchase of nine Wing Loong drones, officially known as Chengdu Pterodactyl-1 drones, which will be delivered in 2020. This is believed to be the largest export of Chinese military equipment to Europe in recent decades, and it marks the increasingly close ties between Beijing and Belgrade.

Security diplomacy

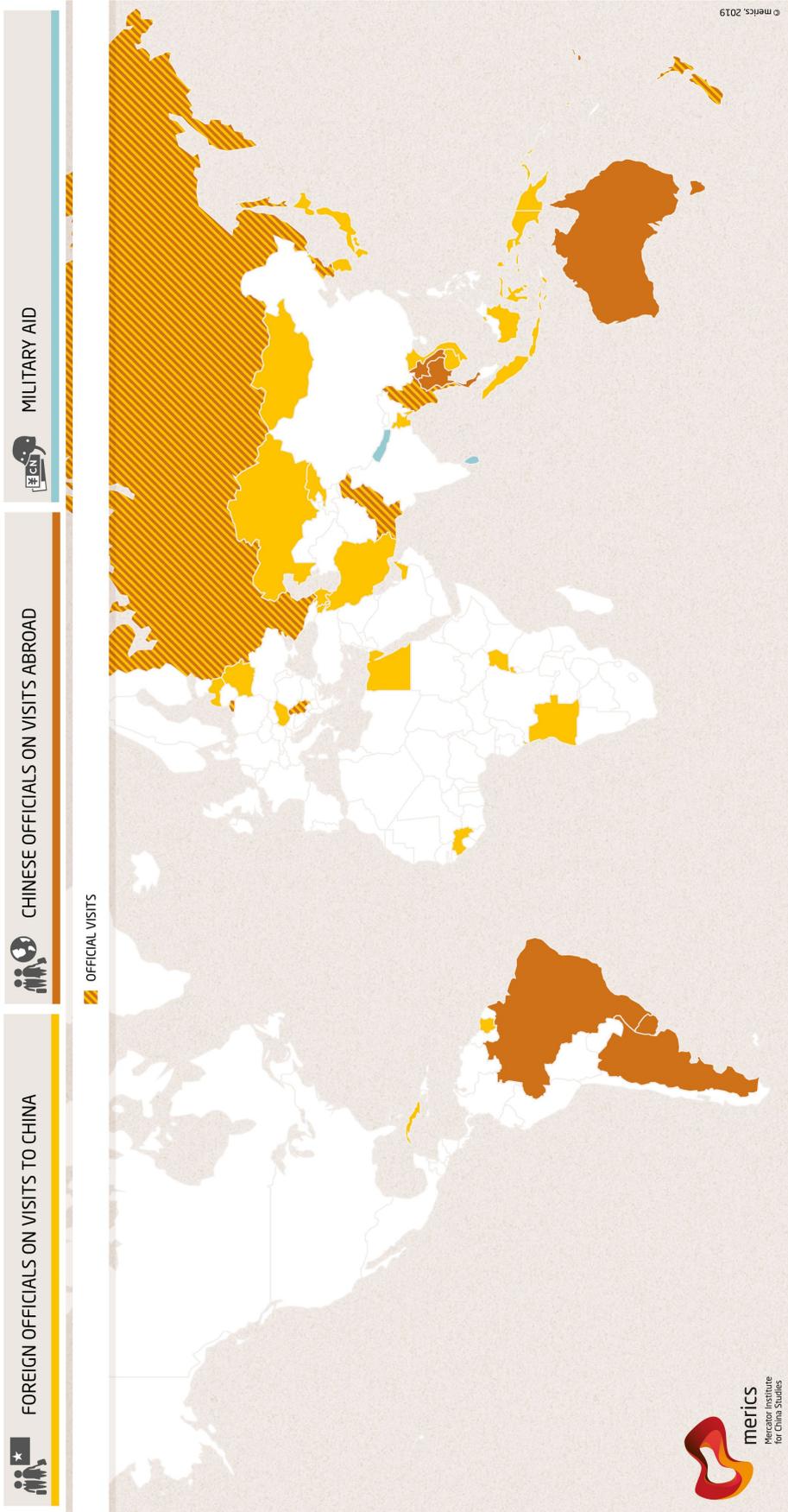
Defense diplomacy

High-level meetings

- **Members of Central Military Commission meet high-ranking foreign defense officials.** CMC members met with officials from over 40 countries between July and December, mostly from BRI countries especially those in Asia. Defense minister and CMC member Wei Fenghe took the majority of these bilateral meetings, which were meant to strengthen bilateral relations and emphasize the PLA's international role.
- **Defense minister Wei clashes with US Defense Secretary.** Wei attended the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Bangkok in November. There, he clashed with US Defense Secretary Mark Esper who called the PRC's claims in the South China Sea unlawful and unreasonable and criticized China behavior in the region. Wei in turn demanded the US "stop flexing its muscles" and held Washington responsible for provoking tensions.
- **Defense minister tough on US, Taiwan at Xiangshan Forum.** Defense minister Wei also used the 9th Xiangshan Forum in Beijing in October to emphasize the PRC's long-held position on Taiwan; he warned other countries not to interfere and said the PRC would achieve reunification. Wei also took a veiled swipe at the US for "instigating color revolutions" in other countries – a reference to Beijing's narrative that US interference is behind the Hong Kong protests.
- **First China-Africa Peace and Security Forum held in Beijing.** The defense ministry event held in July brought together high-ranking military officials from China and 50 African nations and African Union (AU) officials. Security cooperation has become an increasingly important element of China-Africa relations; President Xi pledged USD 100 million in military assistance to the AU in 2015. Although the 2019 edition was the official launch of this forum, China had previously hosted a similarly named China-Africa Defense and Security Forum in June 2018.

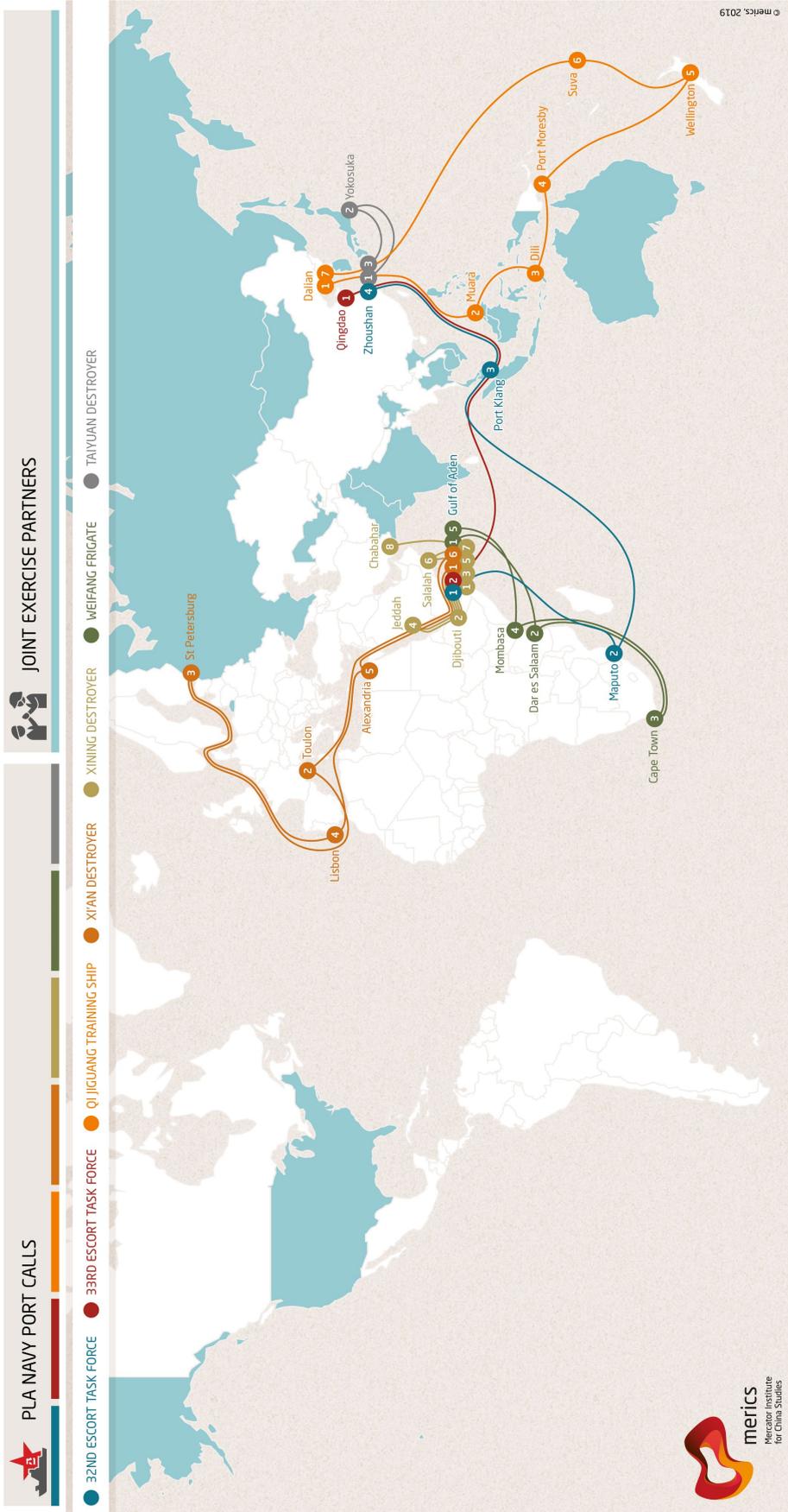
Military aid and training

- **Nepal, Sri Lanka receive Chinese military aid.** The PRC donated military equipment to Nepal and Sri Lanka in the second half of 2019 in a bid to increase its regional influence and boost its own military industry. Sri Lanka received a PLA Navy Type 053H2G frigate, which had been in service since 1994. President Xi visited Nepal in October and pledged CNY 150 million in unspecified military assistance over the next three years. Colombo is a regular receiver of Chinese military aid.
- **China trains Sri Lankan navy personnel, Kuwait National Guard.** China sent a 7-man team from the People's Armed Police (PAP) to Kuwait for a month in September to train members of Kuwait's National Guard. Courses taught included special operations, marksmanship and martial arts. Additionally, the PLA Navy (PLAN) also held a two-month training course for over 110 Sri Lankan Navy personnel in Shanghai, presumably to train them to operate the donated frigate.



Port calls and joint exercises

- **PLA continues to participate in joint exercises with foreign militaries.** Between July and December, the PLA participated in about 24 joint exercises and drills with foreign militaries, mostly focused on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy. Notably, in September China sent more than 1,600 troops from the PLA Western Theater Command to Russia to participate in the Russian military's multi-national Tsentr-2019 exercise along with India, Pakistan and four central Asian nations. The "Combined Aid-2019" joint medical exercise with the German military, held near Munich in July, also marked the first time that the PLA has deployed military personnel and armored medical vehicles to Europe. These exercises are supposed to contribute to turning the PLA into a military that can "fight and win wars" by 2049, by providing it with operational experience and insights into how other militaries operate.
- **China, Russia ramp up military cooperation with first joint air patrol in Asia-Pacific.** China and Russia carried out their first joint patrol in the region on July 23rd. Two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and two Chinese H-6 bombers were backed up by Russian A-50 and Chinese KJ-2000 early warning planes. The patrol drew warning shots from South Korea and strong protests from Japan, both of whom accused China and Russia of violating their airspace.
- **PLAN on tour.** Vessels of the PLA Navy, many belonging to the PLAN's 32nd and 33rd escort task forces to the Gulf of Aden, visited strategically important countries in Europe, Africa and Asia in the second half of 2019. They went to Russia, France, Mozambique, Kenya, Malaysia and, most notably, to Japan for the first time in 10 years. The PLAN training ship Qi Jiguang also conducted its second ocean-going mission, a two-month voyage to Brunei, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Fiji in the same period. PLAN port calls have become an important element of the PLA's diplomatic outreach.
- **China denies US Navy requests to visit Hong Kong, Qingdao.** Against the background of growing tensions between Washington and Beijing and anti-government protests in Hong Kong, China repeatedly denied the US Navy's requests for port visits to Qingdao and Hong Kong.



Leadership in regional security frameworks

- **Li attends heads of government meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.** China's Premier Li Keqiang attended the heads of government meeting of the SCO, in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, on November 2nd. He called on the eight member states (China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and recent additions India and Pakistan) to intensify cooperation on security, connectivity and innovation. Li emphasized the synergies between the BRI and SCO members' development strategies.
- **UN Secretary-General praises UN-SCO cooperation.** UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres applauded the partnership between the UN and SCO in matters of counter-terrorism and praised the SCO as a leading player in regional diplomacy. He was speaking at an event on UN-SCO cooperation for peace, security and stability held on November 19th at UN headquarters in New York.

Conflict prevention and resolution

- **China hosts talks on Afghan peace process.** Beijing hosted delegations from the US, Russia and Pakistan on July 11-12th for a new round of talks on the conflict in Afghanistan. The four countries later put out a statement urging the Taliban to agree to a cease-fire and enter into direct negotiations with the Afghan government. The quartet met again in Moscow on October 24-25th. China also hosted a Taliban delegation on September 22nd, shortly after the Trump Administration suspended talks with the group. Beijing has since put forward a proposal – welcomed by the US – to organize and host a fresh meeting between the Afghan government and the Taliban, effectively replacing the US-led process that has broken down. Stability in Afghanistan has long been among Beijing's regional priorities because of concerns about links to militants in the largely Muslim border province of Xinjiang and the impact of instability on trade and the BRI.

Law enforcement cooperation

- **China ratifies two new extradition treaties.** The Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress ratified extradition treaties with Sri Lanka and Vietnam on August 26th.
- **Mixed results for China's extradition requests.** Brazil and Vanuatu both extradited suspects to China over the summer, but Sweden's Supreme Court ruled on July 9th against the extradition of one of the PRC's most sought-after corruption suspects, Qiao Jianjun. The Swedish court considered there was a risk that Qiao would be persecuted for his political activity, in violation of the European Convention.
- **Nepal shelves plans for extradition treaty with China.** Nepal's government decided at the last minute not to sign an extradition treaty with the PRC during President Xi's visit in October. According to some reports, there was apprehension in Nepal about the possibility that such a treaty might be used to stifle Nepal's Tibetan community and to demand their extradition. Nepal signed a pact on mutual legal assistance instead.
- **Interpol rescinds arrest warrant for former Chinese judge.** Interpol took the rare step in August of rescinding an arrest warrant against Xie Weidong, a former PRC judge. Xie sat on the People's Supreme Court until 2000 and now resides in Canada. China had requested the red notice in 2014 when Xie was charged with accepting a bribe. Interpol, however, assessed the prosecution as potentially politically motivated.

Force projection

Military operations other than war

Peacekeeping Operations

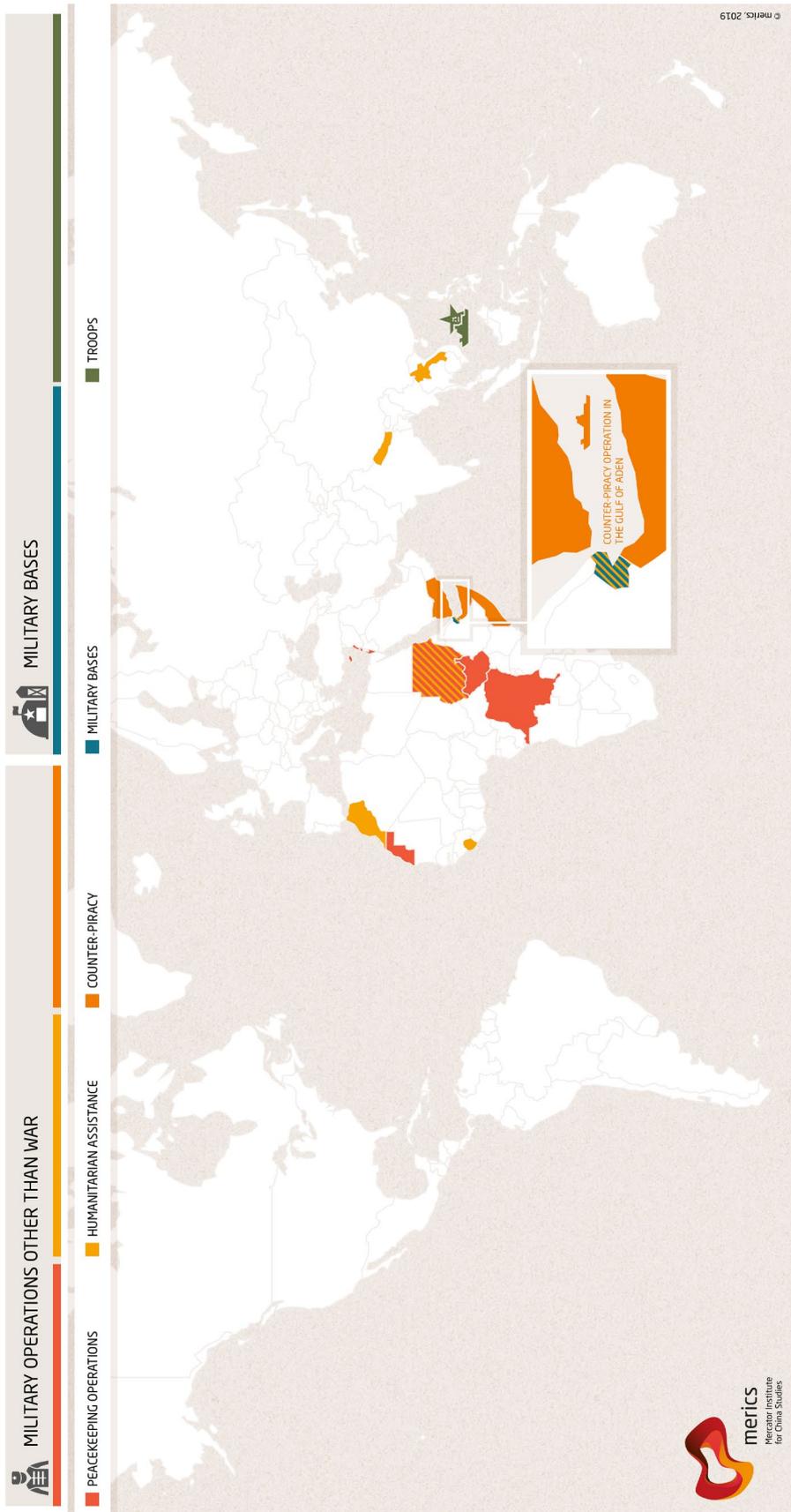
- **China's participation in UN peacekeeping continues.** China continued its participation in eight existing UN peacekeeping operations in the second half of 2019. Total deployments remained broadly stable, at around the 2,500 personnel level, which has been consistent since 2017. China remains the largest contributor of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations from among permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). China's largest single ongoing participation in a UN peacekeeping mission is in South Sudan, where it had 1,058 personnel at the end of October.

Counter-piracy

- **China continues to participate in counter-piracy operations in Gulf of Aden.** The PLA Navy's 32nd, 33rd and 34th escort task forces continued their counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, including escorting and protecting commercial shipping. China first sent a task force to the region in 2008.

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

- **PLA medical teams deploy abroad.** PRC military medical teams were present in several African and Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, Djibouti, Sierra Leone and Sudan, between July and December. These deployments were mostly regular yearlong missions to work in military hospitals and provide medical assistance to local communities. In Sierra Leone, China's team also contributed to setting up a new Tropical Infectious Diseases Prevention and Control Center.



Force deployments and counter-terrorism

- **Record number of Chinese vessels entered zone around Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2019.** According to the Japan Coast Guard's data, Chinese government vessels entered the contiguous zone around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands 1,097 times in 2019. It is the highest figure since records began in 2008. Data also shows that at least one Chinese government vessel was observed in the zone every day between April 12th and June 14th.
- **China keeps up pressure on Taiwan with military maneuvers.** Beijing continued to conduct military shows of strength, raising tensions in the run-up to Taiwan's January 2020 presidential elections. The PLA conducted three training exercises in waters around Taiwan between July and December. Furthermore, China's first domestically made aircraft carrier – the now-commissioned Shandong – passed through the sensitive Taiwan Strait in November on its way to sea trials in the South China Sea. The US and Canada have also stepped up their presence in the region, regularly sailing through the Taiwan Strait. Although Beijing maintains the maneuvers are routine exercises, China's 2019 Defense White Paper was clear that they are meant to "send a stern warning to the Taiwan independence separatist forces".
- **China and Vietnam in South China Sea standoff.** Coastguard vessels from China and Vietnam engaged in a weeks-long standoff over the summer. On July 3rd, Chinese survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 entered waters near the Vietnamese-controlled Vanguard Bank in the Spratly Islands to conduct a seismic survey escorted by PRC coastguard vessels. The survey ship left the area shortly after but was re-deployed in August. Vietnam responded by sending its own vessels to the area. End of July, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh denounced China's "illegal survey activities" within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone at the 52nd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok. Beijing has responded to this criticism by claiming that it is Vietnam that has unilaterally conducted drilling activities for oil and gas in waters under China's jurisdiction in the South China Sea, which would place Hanoi in serious violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Out-of-area logistics

- **Concerns remain over China's rumored military base in Cambodia.** Despite China and Cambodia's repeated denials that the PLA Navy will be allowed to use a designated section of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, speculation continues to swirl. In July, the Wall Street Journal reported that US officials had seen a draft of the basing agreement.
- **Solomon Islands leases island to China, then declares move unlawful.** On September 22nd, the day after the Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, the state-owned China Sam Group signed a contract with the Solomon Islands' Central Province to lease Tulagi Island. The island has a natural deep-water port and hosted US and Japanese military facilities during WWII, raising concerns that China might use it as a dual-use facility. Objections from the US and Australia

prompted the Solomon Islands' central government to declare that the contract was "unlawful, unenforceable and must be terminated with immediate effect". Officially, this was due to the two parties' failure to get the agreement vetted by the Attorney General before signing, as the provincial government lacked the authority to enter into the contract.

- **Reports suggest existence of Chinese military outpost in Tajikistan.** Despite the lack of official confirmation from Beijing, several media reports and satellite images show the existence of a small military facility in the Gorno-Badakshan province of Tajikistan, about 10 km north of Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan and about 30 km from the China-Tajik border. The location means that the facility is able to oversee the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan, a crucial entry point into China's Xinjiang province that is seen as a potential route for terrorists to enter China.

Cyber and space capabilities

- **Beidou navigation system to be completed in 2020.** After seven additional Beidou satellite launches between July and December, Yang Changfeng, chief designer of the system, announced that the deployment of the core BDS-3 constellation system was complete. Beidou now has the capacity for global service, he said. Two more satellite launches are planned for the first half of 2020 to complete the deployment of all 30 satellites of the BDS-3 constellation. According to official data, the PRC's alternative to the US GPS system will provide positioning accurate to 10 cm for military users, compared to 30 cm on GPS.
- **Dormant Chinese hacking group resumes attacks.** According to a December report by security company Fox-IT, China's government-linked hacking group APT-20 has resumed global activities. Fox-IT's study said the group has carried out a global espionage campaign over the last two years, targeting governments and industries in 10 countries, including the US, the UK, Brazil, France, and Germany.
- **Media report claims China behind hacking of Australian parliament.** According to a Reuters report published on September 16th, Australian intelligence has determined that China's Ministry of State Security was responsible for a cyberattack on its parliament and three of the country's largest political parties before the latest general election in May. Beijing has denied any involvement in the attack.
- **Allegations against Huawei continue to emerge.** Separate reports by the Washington Post in July and the Wall Street Journal in August claimed that Huawei had secretly helped Pyongyang to build and maintain North Korea's commercial wireless network, and that it also helped African governments to spy on political opponents. Czech media also claimed to have discovered Huawei's Czech unit secretly collecting personal data from customers, officials and business partners. These allegations raised further questions about Huawei amid a global debate over whether the company should be allowed to build and operate 5G networks in other countries.

Global security architecture

Influence in the UN

- **China, Russia propose easing sanctions on North Korea.** China's ambassador to the UN, Zhang Jun, argued on December 11th that it was "imperative" that the UN Security Council (UNSC) lift some sanctions on North Korea to encourage talks between Washington and Pyongyang. He also praised North Korea's compliance with the relevant resolutions and its positive steps on denuclearization. Days later, on December 16th, China and Russia put forward a draft Security Council resolution to this effect. The draft, however, it was not put to a vote due to opposition from the US and others.
- **Reference to China's BRI dropped from UNSC resolution.** The UN Security Council unanimously agreed on September 17th to extend the UN's mission to Afghanistan, known as UNAMA, after overcoming a threatened Chinese veto. Resolutions mandating the mission since 2016 had contained a reference to the BRI as a welcome effort, but this year's resolution did not mention the project. China's ambassador to the UN complained that "to our regret a few countries refused to keep the text of consensus previously agreed." Beijing finally voted in favor of the resolution, as the US and other council members maintained their opposition to continued references to the BRI.
- **UNSC meets on Kashmir at China's request.** The UNSC held its first meeting on Kashmir since 1971, in the wake of India's decision to strip Jammu and Kashmir of their special status. Pakistan had been asking for the UNSC to discuss the issue since Delhi's announcement. The meeting finally materialized once China threw its support behind its all-weather ally's request. The UNSC failed to reach agreement on even a press statement, calling instead for bilateral discussions to continue between Delhi and Islamabad. The incident revealed the divisions among UNSC member states on the issue.
- **China, Russia continue to demonstrate support for Bashar Al-Assad's government in Syria.** In September, Beijing and Moscow vetoed a draft UNSC resolution demanding a truce in northwest Syria because it did not include an exemption for military operations against UN-blacklisted groups. The two countries proposed an alternative draft that did contain this exemption but failed to get the minimum nine votes needed; only China and Russia voted in favor, and there were four abstentions.

Non-proliferation

- **China again rejects invitation to join a trilateral arms control treaty.** Beijing several times rejected US invitations to join a new arms control treaty that would also include Russia. China's argument is that its arsenal is only a fraction of the US's or Russia's so they must take steps towards non-proliferation first. After several informal invitations, the Trump Administration issued a formal invitation to China on December 20th to begin talks. Beijing did not publicly respond. Negotiating a new arms control regime that includes all relevant parties, including China, has become increasingly pressing after the collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in August 2019 and as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) nears its 2021 expiry date.

- **China vows to counter potential US deployment of missiles to Asia.** China reacted strongly to US Defense Secretary Esper's indication in August that the US wants to deploy an intermediate-range conventional missile in the Pacific "within months," now that the US has withdrawn from the INF Treaty. Fu Cong, the director of the foreign ministry's Arms Control Department, said China would be "forced to take countermeasures" if the US went ahead, although he did not elaborate on what those may be. Fu warned countries in the region not to allow Washington to deploy weapons on their territory. He also reiterated China's refusal to join talks for a new arms control treaty with the US and Russia.
- **China plans to join Arms Trade Treaty.** Speaking at the UN General Assembly on September 27th, China's foreign minister announced that China has initiated domestic legal procedures to join the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Beijing's decision followed the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the INF Treaty and its announcement that it also plans to leave the ATT. It was a clear attempt to present China as a responsible global power that believes in multilateralism, in contrast with the US under the Trump Administration. A new draft law on arms exports meant to consolidate existing regulations was submitted on December 24th to the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress for deliberation.

Global cyber governance

- **China holds new edition of its state-run World Internet Conference.** At the 2019 conference, held in Wuzhen in October, the PRC continued to trumpet its concept of cyber sovereignty. It blamed the lack of meaningful exchanges on cyberspace issues on the "Cold War mentality" of other countries. This was a clear reference to the US, at a time of growing tensions between Washington and Beijing, especially in the tech sector. Fewer foreign companies attended the 2019 conference. Many big technology names like Google, Apple or Facebook stayed away after attending in previous years.
- **China continues to question applicability of international law to cyberspace.** China's representative to the first meetings of two key UN working groups questioned the applicability of international humanitarian law to cyberspace due to difficulties distinguishing between civilian and military objects in that realm. They were the first meetings of the UN-established "Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security" and the "Open-Ended Working Group". China's representative said Beijing believed further study was needed to determine which international laws are applicable in cyberspace. The UN GGE has a limited membership of 25 countries, but the open-ended working group is open to all countries wishing to participate. The structure makes this group China's preferred forum, as it may be able to secure supportive votes from other authoritarian governments.

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