# CHINESE SECURITY COOPERATION ACTIVITIES:

## Trends and Implications for US Policy

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# Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present another issue of the Wright Flyer Papers. Through this series, Air Command and Staff College presents a sampling of exemplary research produced by our resident and distance-learning students. This series has long showcased the kind of visionary thinking that drove the aspirations and activities of the earliest aviation pioneers. This year's selection of essays admirably extends that tradition. As the series title indicates, these papers aim to present cutting-edge, actionable knowledge—research that addresses some of the most complex security and defense challenges facing us today.

Recently, the Wright Flyer Papers transitioned to an exclusively electronic publication format. It is our hope that our migration from print editions to an electronic-only format will foster even greater intellectual debate among Airmen and fellow members of the profession of arms as the series reaches a growing global audience. By publishing these papers via the Air University Press website, ACSC hopes not only to reach more readers, but also to support Air Force–wide efforts to conserve resources.

Thank you for supporting the Wright Flyer Papers and our efforts to disseminate outstanding ACSC student research for the benefit of our Air Force and war fighters everywhere. We trust that what follows will stimulate thinking, invite debate, and further encourage today's air, space, and cyber war fighters in their continuing search for innovative and improved ways to defend our nation and way of life.

LEE G. GENTILE
Colonel, USAF
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## Abstract

Like most governments, the People's Republic of China engages in security cooperation activities on a global scale. These activities range in scope from military exercises to technology and information exchanges. This work seeks to examine the PRC's goals and objectives of these trends and activities and to ascertain the implications to the United States.

## Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC), much like the United States, globally engages in security cooperation activities. PRC activities range from those traditionally associated with security cooperation (exercises, arms sales, PME exchanges, and so forth) to exporting and supporting information-state surveillance technology. This research paper seeks to answer these broad questions: What are specific trends of Chinese security cooperation activities (ways and means)? How do China's security cooperation activities serve its national and military strategic objectives and goals? What are the international security implications of Chinese security cooperation activities for the United States? The research for this paper found that PRC security cooperation activities are aimed at two major lines of effort. The first is making the world safe for autocracy while the second is shaping the perception of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) abroad.

This paper assumes that the PRC engages in security cooperation activities to further its national security interests. In other words, these activities are rooted in serving the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) goals—both domestically and in international security. The CCP, in its 2019 report, explicitly lists the goals of safeguarding the PRC's sovereignty, security, and development interests; strengthening the military; and redefining the global community. A 2020 RAND analysis of the PRC's grand strategy lists several more goals: maintaining political and social stability, rebalancing diplomacy and economics, and rejuvenating national defense. Assuming the CCP (and therefore the PLA) follows Sun Tzu's platitude to win without fighting, it follows that security cooperation activities seek to fit this goal.[1]

The CCP takes a much more expansive view of security, particularly from the information standpoint, than does the United States. Warfare is taught and viewed through the lens of Sun Tzu, Confucianism, and the theory of three warfares (public opinion, psychological, and legal) rather than through Western philosophies, such as Clausewitz.[2] For this reason, it is important not to view the PRC's security cooperation activities through a Western lens. This paper will also take a more expansive view of what constitutes security assistance and cooperation; specifically, it will include the Chinese export of information monitoring technology, such as automated censorship and facial recognition technology, as an integral part of their security cooperation enterprise.

According to the PRC's 2019 National Defense White Paper, the CCP "actively develops constructive relationships with foreign militaries" through exchanges in over 150 countries. The white paper specifically highlights cooperation with the Russian Federation and areas where the United States and

China have historically cooperated, such as humanitarian assistance and counterpiracy. According to research from the National Defense University, the PRC demonstrated significant increases in military diplomacy actions from 2012, the year Xi Jinping became Secretary-General, onward.[3] The report classifies military exercises, port visits, and senior-level military leader visits as a diplomatic military interaction.

## Military Sales

Like most other world powers, China engages in arms exports. The United States engages in the practice for several reasons, including improving soft military power with friendly nations, reducing per-unit costs for the United States, keeping production lines open longer, achieving interoperability, or pure economic benefit for US industry.[4] China remains the fifth largest global arms exporter, with a 5.2 percent market share in 2020. Interestingly, as China assumes a more assertive role and seeks to modernize its military, its arms exports have decreased 7.8 percent between 2011 and 2020.[5] This is largely in line with the PRC's "independent foreign policy of peace;" however, a closer inspection belies some important information.[6] China's largest arms export market is Pakistan, which has ongoing tensions with India, a regional competitor of China.[7] This can be seen as an attempt to balance a regional peer with advanced weaponry, such as the JF-17 fighter aircraft. Other large importers over the past decade include Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Indonesia—countries within South and Southeast Asia.[8]

Often these arms sales are made at "friendship prices," in direct exchange for commodities such as oil or food.[9] This may be seen as an attempt to gain soft influence, particularly with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, to offset criticism for China's territorial disputes with fellow ASEAN members, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Many of these states have complicated relationships with democracy and have been excluded from importing arms from Western providers. While China does not universally support illiberal regimes abroad (such as Vietnam), it shows a clear trend of authoritarian states seeking to improve international legitimacy through acquiring Chinese military equipment. Conversely, having stronger authoritarian states in the United Nations reduces the international criticism of CCP management of internal affairs.

The PRC's export of digital authoritarianism is more concerning than its conventional arms exports. The CCP views internal stability as its highest priority security threat, as do many other authoritarian states.[10] Domestically, the CCP has embraced automated internet censorship through AI, the great

firewall, and smart city (i.e., widespread integrated surveillance) technology. Internationally, it has begun to export the same technology to illiberal states, mostly in conjunction with the Belt and Road Initiative. Malaysia and Singapore have already purchased similar technology to what the CCP employs in Xinyang. Other countries which have enlisted China's help in monitoring its citizens include Venezuela and the UAE among 16 others.[11] While this clearly falls into the information segment of the three warfares, especially for the target countries, it provides China with a more important asset; by exporting this technology, it normalizes the behavior of authoritarian regimes, further fragmenting the international community and reducing the influence of the liberal democratic values, not only within the borders of China but in other countries as well—creating multiple precedents around the globe to support its own domestic actions.

## Military Exercises

The PLA also engages with other militaries (partners or otherwise) through a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises. Between 2012 and 2016, the PLA's participation in military exercises increased tenfold, indicating that under Xi Jinping's leadership, the PLA was likely directed to significantly expand PLA diplomacy. The dataset used in this section indicated that the bilateral and multilateral exercises in which China participated. It additionally classifies the nature of the exercise into five categories: combat, combat support, competition, military operations other than war (MOOTW—still a doctrinal term in the PLA), and antiterrorism.[12]

These exercises span the entire spectrum of conflict; for example, there have been 25 exercises with the United States between 2003 and 2016 that focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, while half of the 38 exercises with Russia were concentrated on combat operations. Russia, the United States, and Pakistan are China's top three partners in terms of volume of exercises (Figure 1). Russian and Pakistani participation is unsurprising if viewed as balancing activities against the West and India. Thailand and Indonesia tied for fourth, and India was fifth.[13] The United States and India's second and fifth-place positions are a bit surprising but can be explained as mechanism to reduce tensions or establish contacts across the border.

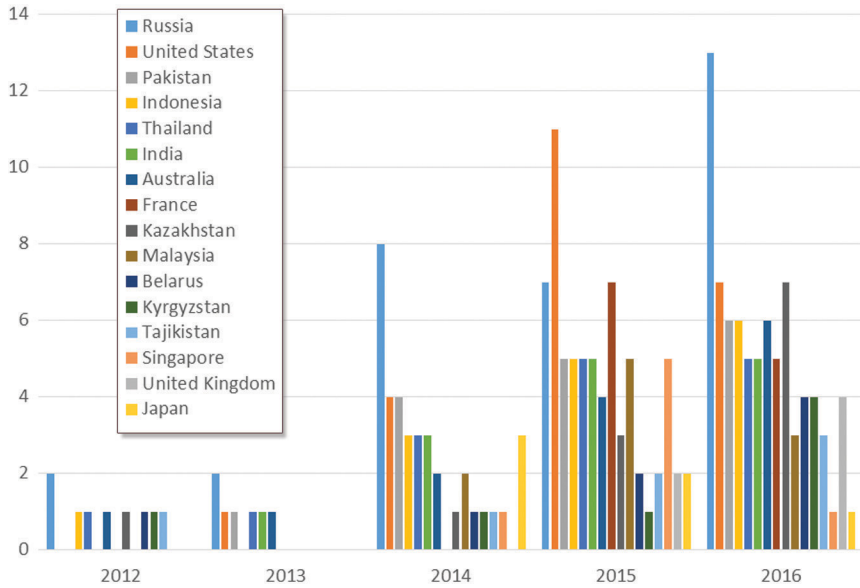


**Figure 1. PRC International Exercises by Year and Partner**

This is a part of an interesting trend that can be seen when those data are compared with democracy ratings as evaluated by *The Economist*. *The Economist* classifies the government of each country based on indicators of liberal democratic success into four classifications: full democracies, flawed democracies (for reference, *The Economist* classifies the United States as a flawed democracy), hybrid regimes, and authoritarian governments (Figure 2).[14] China has yet to participate in combat exercises with any nation categorized as a full democracy.[15] Of the full democracies participating in combat support exercises, the only countries not located within the Pacific AOR were the UK and Denmark, who respectively participated in naval communications and fleet maneuvers in 2015 and naval navigation and formation maneuvers in 2016. The remainder of the full democracies participating in combat support exercises were in the Pacific AOR—New Zealand, Australia, and Japan. All were one-time events and did not repeat annually or otherwise.[16]

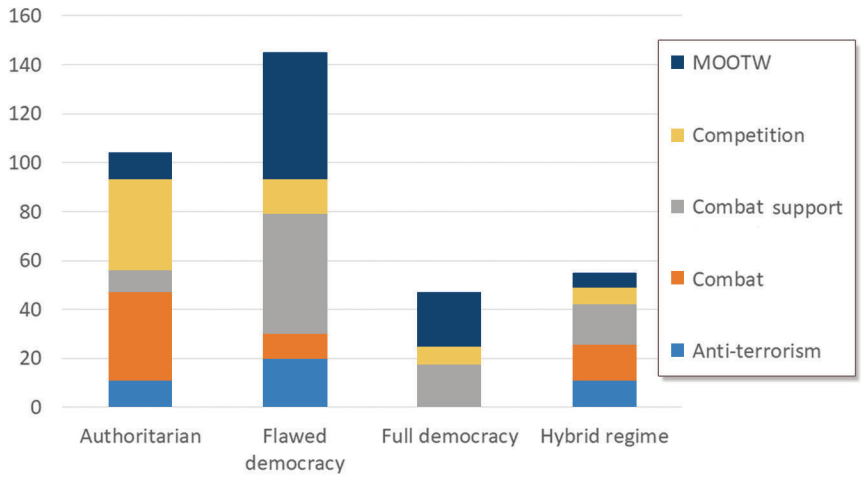


**Figure 2. Number of International Chinese Exercises by Partner Regime Type: 2003–2016**

China did participate in combat exercises with three flawed democracies: Romania (a NATO member), Indonesia, and Thailand. Thailand presents an interesting data point as being the only "flawed democracy" participating in recurring combat military exercises with China. As one of the United States' bilateral defense treaty partners, this could be interpreted in several ways.[17] First, China could be trying to displace (or provide an alternative to) the United States as a security partner. The United States has traditionally been the military partner of choice for the Southeast Asian kingdom but significantly reduced security cooperation actives after the 2013 military coup.[18] China is poised to be a more reliable partner without aspirations of influencing domestic Thai politics. Second, China could be using Thailand as a vector for increased influence in ASEAN. ASEAN's dependency on consensus for action only requires a single dissenting voice in the organization to prevent unified criticism of China. Lastly, as Thailand has recently procured several US weapon systems, such as the F-16, these exercises could be an opportunity to collect intelligence on US capabilities. The last case is the least likely, given the PRC's likely sophisticated collections already in place within the US defense industry.[19]

At the other end of the spectrum of combat operations, the bulk of China's international MOOTW exercises have been with full democracies or flawed democracies. Of the 91 documented activities in this category, only 11 were

with authoritarian regimes (Figure 2). This could simply be because authoritarian regimes are less concerned with using their militaries for noncombat operations or because democratic nations are only willing to engage the PLA in this manner. However, the more likely reason is more nuanced. The 2019 white paper emphasizes the narrative that the PLA exists to help maintain peace; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) exercises with countries with a free press helps perpetuate this narrative.[20] In other words, exercises of this nature shape global perceptions of the PLA consistent with the CCP's narrative of China's intentions. Since authoritarian regimes control the press, there is less need to use MOOTW exercises with those countries to shape perceptions of the PLA in those nations. Furthermore, MOOTW exercises demonstrate to the global community that China is stepping into the role of a responsible major player in the international community, giving it more clout and credibility in multinational organizations like the UN. While the increased robustness of China's international military exercises is curious, the volume still does not compare with the volume of international military exercises the US hosts and participates in. It is unlikely that the CCP is attempting to use military exercises as a tool to displace the United States as a security partner. The more likely answer is shaping a less threatening perception of the PLA.

## PME Exchanges

The PLA has also been utilizing professional military education as a tool to gain influence, particularly with developing nations.[21] According to the State Council Information Office, "since 2012, the PLA has sent over 1,700 military personnel to study in more than 50 countries. Over 20 Chinese military educational institutions have established and maintained intercollegiate exchanges with their counterparts from more than 40 countries. Meanwhile, more than 10,000 foreign military personnel from over 130 countries have studied in Chinese military universities and colleges."[22] While this number is small in comparison to what the United States does, it provides an alternative to nations that may not be ideologically aligned with the West.[23]

The method in which the PLA conducts PME for a foreign student is significantly different from the model used by the United States. For the most part, China isolates foreign students from most of the PLA students.[24] From a practical standpoint, Mandarin is not widely spoken outside of China. Although Chinese languages have the most native speakers globally, none are the lingua-franca of international relations. Instead, classes for foreign students are taught in Russian, French, and English.[25] This may conveniently isolate Chinese students from outside influences while still providing a vector to shape foreign

military officer perceptions of the PLA. However, doing so also eliminates one of the perceived benefits of PME exchanges in the West—the collaboration, dialog, and networking between host nation and foreign students.

## Peacekeeping

The PRC has also been using its military to support UN peacekeeping missions. In 2021, the United Nations reported that China contributed 2,410 personnel to peacekeeping operations in South Sudan, Mali, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cyprus, and the Middle East. China's level of participation in peacekeeping operations has grown slowly over the past decade; the PLA contribution to peacekeeping was about 2,400 in 2017, but only around 1,900 in 2012.[26]

Given the nature of peacekeeping operations, the CCP's logical motivation is an effort to shape perceptions of the PLA and the CCP. It demonstrates that while China may not be concerned with human rights, they are concerned about stability. UN peacekeeping missions provide a visible outlet to demonstrate to the global community that China is growing into a leadership role as a responsible major power. It shows a significant departure from the rhetoric of the Communist Party in the 1970s when UN operations were criticized as Western efforts to interfere in the sovereign rights of foreign countries.[27] Interestingly, it shows the PRC values stability abroad, especially in regions with potential oil reserves.

China has also used peacekeeping operations as opportunities to gain influence. Logically, China's clout in the UN is partially a result of its willingness to participate in United Nations actions, such as peacekeeping. This allows the authoritarian government to shield itself from international criticism by courting and developing sympathetic parties. China's participation in historically liberal (in the international affairs sense of the term) organizations has allowed it to shape those organizations to be more sympathetic to the CCP. Efforts to influence the UN also have a darker side; it vetoed peacekeeping operations in Guatemala in 1997 and Macedonia in 1999 because of their relations with Taiwan. A similar instance happened with Liberia in 2003, which received both UN funding and 500 PLA peacekeepers after derecognizing Taiwan.[28]

Lastly, the PLA has been using participation as an opportunity to gain operational experience. The PLA views the United States' actions in the Middle East and Afghanistan as opportunities to develop and hone procedures, tactics, logistics, and mobilization processes. Likewise, the PLA's lack of equivalent opportunities would put it at a disadvantage if armed conflict were to break out. Peacekeeping operations, while small in scale, provide opportunities for the PLA to

identify and correct shortfalls in its operational capabilities and procedures, specifically in areas of mobilization and training.[29] Furthermore, the multinational nature of peacekeeping operations allows China to benchmark its capabilities against other militaries, especially when involved with NATO members.[30] By comparing relative capabilities against partners of the United States, China gains a better understanding of how it stacks up against the United States.

## Implications

The current low level of PRC military diplomacy and security cooperation indicates that, at least in the short term, China is not trying to replace the United States as the security partner of choice for much of the world. It is, however, setting itself up to be an alternate security partner for nations that may not welcome the strings attached to US partnership. Chinese arms are still qualitatively inferior to, albeit significantly more affordable than, their Western equivalents. However, the technological gap is shrinking, which is increasing the appeal to other countries. From the same perspective, more countries are engaging in combat military exercises with China. The trend is most worrisome with Russia indicating a convergence of security interests and a desire to offset the influence of the liberal West.

For US policy, this requires a reevaluation of the US security cooperation enterprise. The United States has been able to liberally apply the carrot-and-stick approach with its security cooperation, selectively withholding assistance when other nations engage in undesired behavior, such as the previously mentioned Thai military coup in 2014. With China displacing the United States as the economic partner of choice, security diplomacy and assistance may become the most viable way to maintain influence in some parts of the world. This may demand the US retreat from some of its principle-based decision-making and adopt a more realpolitik mindset. While this may be unpalatable to some in government, the US has already demonstrated willingness to turn a blind eye to authoritarian regimes in other countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, as a balance to Iranian actions in the Middle East. The United States must also be careful with the export of advanced capabilities in areas where China is becoming a more active security player. The Turkish purchase of the Russian S400 missile systems and its implications for the F-35 transfer is an example of this.[31]

Likewise, the PRC's use of security cooperation to shape perceptions serves the goal of increasing Chinese influence. This, combined with China's economic activism, is likely to continue eroding US influence in the international community, specifically in developing nations or countries with a history of authoritarianism. Realistically, the United States is probably unable to reverse

this trend unless China continues to make blunders in its foreign policy. As this is a matter of controlling the international narrative, the United States should continue to highlight China's human rights abuses and coercive behaviors toward developing nations. Conversely, China's willingness to engage with foreign militaries provides opportunities for both the United States and China to find common ground for cooperation, notably combating piracy and HA/DR operations. Building relationships between the two militaries may lead to a greater level of understanding, build contacts, and reduce the probabilities of miscalculation when the militaries of both countries interact in other circumstances.

## Conclusion

China is increasingly utilizing the PLA to engage in what the United States would call security cooperation activities. These activities demonstrate the trend of supporting the CCP by improving the image of the party while reducing international criticism and normalizing autocratic activities abroad. It does this through a variety of mechanisms including military exercises, PME exchanges, and participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, it uses some of these activities to make the world safer for autocracy. By providing an alternative to the United States as a security partner, the PRC has been destigmatizing autocracy. Its military sales, particularly with new information security technology, are allowing other autocratic nations to control their respective populations without having to resort to more violent measures. Foreign military sales to nations like Pakistan directly confront India, which China views are a significant competitor in the region. These trends are likely to continue for the foreseeable future and will force the United States to reconsider some of its foreign policy decisions.

### Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

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29. Singh, 802.

30. Southerland, *The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief*, 3.

31. Rogers, "U.S. Punishes Turkey by Canceling Sale of Jets."

## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| AOR | Area of Responsibility |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| CCP | Chinese Communist Party |
| HA/DR | Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief |
| INSS | Institute for National Strategic Studies |
| MOOTW | Military operations other than war |
| PLA | Peoples Liberation Army |
| PME | Professional Military Education |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |

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