



China's Strategic Hinterland: Enhancing New-Quality Combat Capabilities in Sichuan

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During an inspection tour in Sichuan in July 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping designated Sichuan Province as a “national strategic hinterland” [国家战略腹地], emphasizing its unique and significant role in China’s overall development.¹ Designating Sichuan as the only national strategic hinterland in China indicates that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, headed by Xi Jinping, has positioned Sichuan as a core region for stimulating economic growth and safeguarding national security. While the primary task is to leverage resource distribution for balancing regional development, Sichuan also undertook the strategic mission to build a strong economic foundation for China’s national security system.² Xi Jinping emphasized that Sichuan should promote technological innovation, secure supply chains, and provide backup capacity for essential industries. This directive reflects Xi Jinping’s intent to transit China’s economy towards greater self-sufficiency to “ensure the national economy operates normally under extreme circumstance,” addressing his longstanding concern of national strategic security.³

The CCP Central Committee formalized the strategic concept of “building the national strategic hinterland” at the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2023, establishing a priority to maintain a national strategic rear area to support China’s economic and security systems.⁴ In January 2024, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) approved the *Long-Term Plan of Sichuan Province’s Territorial Space (2021-2035)*, which explicitly identified Sichuan Province as “the strategic hinterland of China’s development and an important region for the implementation of national strategies.”⁵ On July 18, 2024, the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CCP Central Committee further reinforced this direction in its *Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform and Promoting Modernization with Chinese Characteristics*, reiterating that China should focus on “building the national strategic hinterland and backing up key industries.”⁶

The development of Sichuan as the national strategic hinterland has significant military implications for China. Since its designation as the strategic hinterland, Sichuan has worked on

enhancing strategic capabilities in emerging domains [新兴领域战略能力] to gain advantages in economic growth, national security, and military competition. Following Xi Jinping's directive to integrate new-quality productive forces [新质生产力] with new-quality combat capabilities [新质战斗力], the Sichuan Provincial Government has prioritized scientific and technological innovation and established conversion mechanisms to strengthen military-civil fusion.⁷ As home to numerous state-owned defense industries and scientific research institutions, the Sichuan Provincial Government has invested 2.15 billion yuan (\$296 million) to accelerate mechanization, informatization, and intelligitization to spur both economic growth and military readiness.⁸ Starting in 2024, Sichuan has implemented 167 industrial projects in science and technology and 130 infrastructure projects, including a multi-dimensional transportation network to ensure logistics support in both peacetime and wartime.⁹ Sichuan's established defense industry and military-civil fusion mechanism, combined with national and provincial financial and policy support, strengthen China's defense capabilities and enhance its capacity for global power projection.

Sichuan's Designation as the Strategic Hinterland

Generally, a "hinterland" refers to inland areas distant from China's east coast. Within this context, a "national strategic hinterland" is a designated core geographic area, vital for military and economic power, that serves as a central point for strategic development in peacetime and provides crucial strategic support for frontline operations during wartime.

Although related to the military geographic idea of a "strategic rear area," these two concepts differ in their purpose, timeframe, geographic reach, and particularly the key message they convey. A strategic hinterland is a core area with important natural resources, industry, and population centers, which is typically located in a relatively safe inland region protected by natural geographical barriers. As a national strategic concept, it emphasizes macroscopic planning and focuses on long-term strategic significance and national core interests. A strategic rear area, on the other hand, refers to rear bases that support front-line operations during wartime. It usually includes military facilities, logistics centers, and strategic resource reserves. With a clear military orientation, it emphasizes military strategic needs and can be relocated based on the situation.

The concepts of strategic hinterland and strategic rear area are often complementary, as both are crucial components of the national defense system. During a 2023 conference in Sichuan, Xi Jinping instructed the Sichuan provincial party committee and the provincial government to "accurately identify [Sichuan's] strategic position within the national development landscape," noting that "the concept of a strategic rear area remains significant in the new era."¹⁰ The strategic hinterland concept gained prominence as China pursued greater independence in its economic growth and national security.

Sichuan Province was a critical rear area during the Anti-Japanese War and Chinese Civil War, and it was one of the core regions of Third Front Construction during the Cold War. In the

new century, it has built a robust defense industry system and numerous scientific research institutes. Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan, is the PLA's Western Theater Command (WTC) headquarters, as well as the headquarters for the Western Theater Army and Western Theater Air Force. Sichuan's importance as the strategic hinterland is indeed a reasonable choice based on many considerations. It integrates the advantages of geographic location, resources, population, and industries to form a unique strategic value for national security and high-quality development.

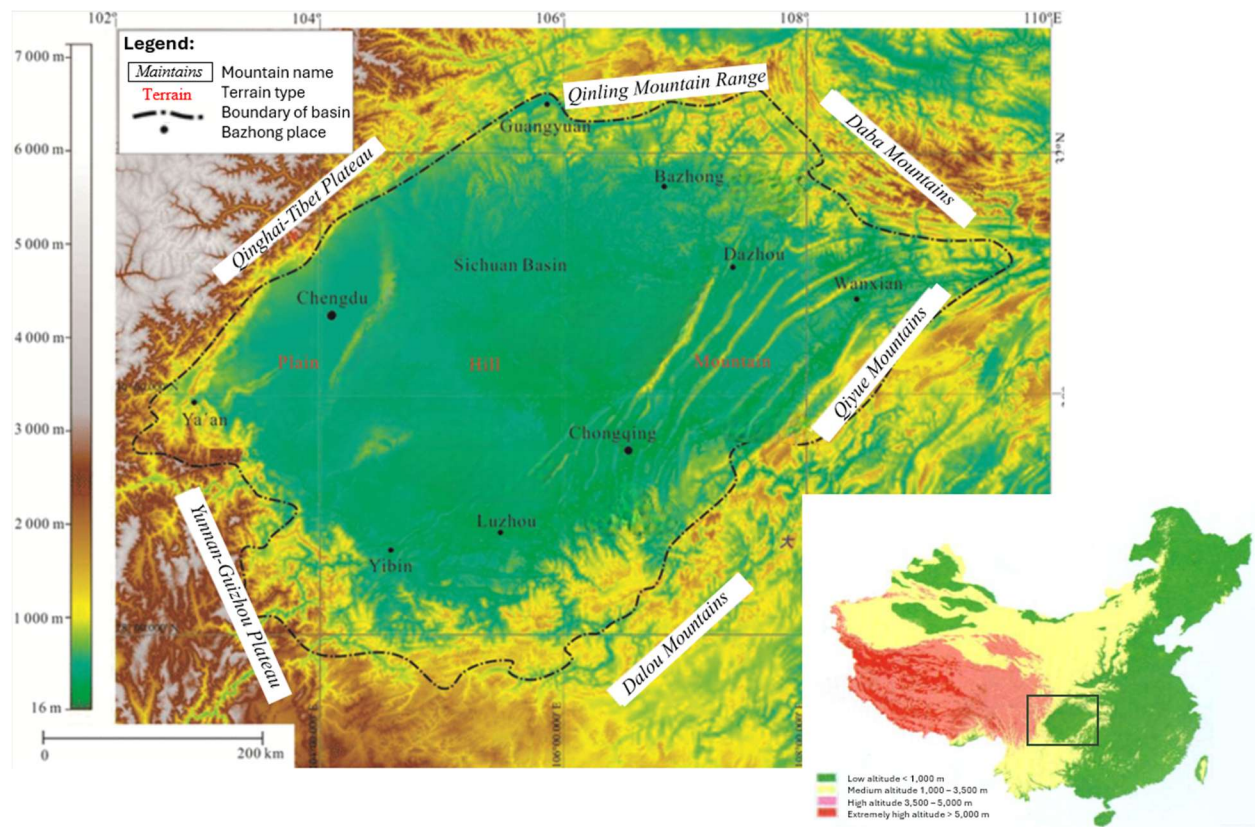


Figure 1: Sichuan's Geographical Location and Sichuan Basin's Surrounding Terrain¹¹

The Sichuan basin is located on the eastern edge of China's southwestern inland, and it is surrounded by towering mountain ranges and plateaus. As illustrated in Figure 1, the basin is bounded by the Qinling Mountain Range to the north, the Daba Mountains to the northeast, the Qiyue Mountains to the east, the Dalou Mountains to the southeast, Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau to the southwest, and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to the west.¹² This mountainous enclosure provides some natural defensive advantages against various military threats, including air strikes, missile attacks, electromagnetic warfare, electronic surveillance, and, in some extreme circumstances, large-scale ground invasion, creating favorable conditions for defensive operations while hindering enemy offensive maneuvers.¹³

The Sichuan basin spans approximately 260,000 square kilometers, encompassing two major plains centered on Chengdu (Sichuan's capital) and Chongqing (a direct-administered

municipality (DAM) with strong economic and cultural connections to Sichuan).¹⁴ The total population living in the Sichuan basin exceeds 100 million, offering a stable foundation for labor and agriculture. Sichuan possesses abundant energy resources, particularly hydropower, coal, and natural gas, contributing one-third of China's total electricity generation and 73 percent of its water resources.¹⁵ Furthermore, Sichuan contains 132 mineral varieties, accounting for 70 percent of China's total mineral production. Notably, the region holds 82 percent of the global titanium reserves, a metal whose alloys are vital to the chemical industry, military applications, and aerospace technologies.¹⁶

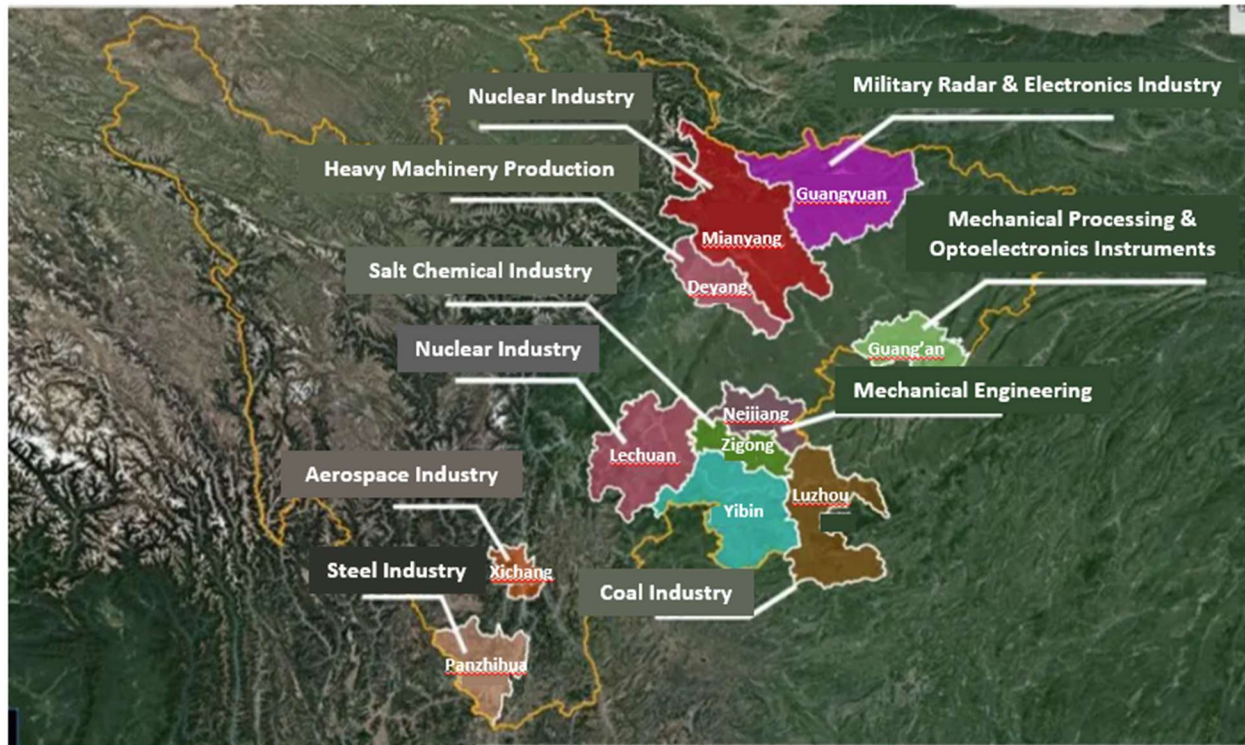


Figure 2: Distribution of Key Heavy and Light Industry Clusters in Sichuan

Sichuan has established a military-civil fusion mechanism to leverage its strengths in science, technology, and industry to provide material and technical support for China's national defense. As one of the few provinces in China that has developed both light and heavy industries, Sichuan's key industrial sectors include electronic information, equipment manufacturing, food and textiles, energy and chemical industry, advanced materials, and medicine.¹⁷ Sichuan has prioritized funding and policy support for military-civil industrial bases and high-tech zones in areas like aviation, aerospace, nuclear technology, and optoelectronic information, forming several industrial clusters and complete industrial chains, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁸ With such a robust industrial system comprising both traditional and emerging fields, the designation of strategic hinterland empowers Sichuan to further extend its influence across China's western region and strengthen the security and resilience of China's industrial chain.

Historical Foundations

Designating Sichuan as the strategic hinterland in 2024 was not the first time that the CCP aimed to build a strong rear area to integrate national defense and economic resources. The Third Front Construction [三线建设] program, initiated by Mao Zedong in the 1960s, was a war preparedness effort undertaken in response to the geopolitical and military challenges of the Cold War.

In the early years of the Chinese Communist regime, the PRC faced an increasingly complex and severe regional and international environment. As threats such as worsening Sino-Soviet relations, the Sino-Indian war, the Vietnam war, and disruptive Kuomintang coastline operations became progressively prominent, CCP leaders reassessed the potential risks of nuclear and large-scale conventional war. Consequently, they decided to designate China's western provinces as a rear base that combined industry, agriculture, and national defense capabilities. Concerns about a potential invasion by the U.S. or the Soviet Union compelled the PRC government to secretly relocate “thousands of industrial and military factories from coastal cities to mountainous hinterland areas to guard against possible air attacks.”¹⁹

The Third Front Construction's primary strategic objective was national defense. Mao Zedong's “Two Fists and One Bottom” theory [两个拳头一个屁股理论] provided the framework of his economic development guidance. In this theory, agriculture and the defense industry were the “two fists” enabling the nation to attack and project power, while basic industry served as the foundational “bottom” for a nation's stability. Attaching great importance to the defense industry, Mao Zedong made national defense a priority, a decision rooted in his persistent concern about China's counteractions in the event of war.²⁰ The PRC government implemented Third Front Construction across 13 provinces and autonomous regions from 1964 to 1980, during which it invested over 200 billion yuan (\$27.5 billion) and mobilized tens of millions of people.²¹ This massive investment of capital and human resources established an extensive network of inland industrial and military bases. As depicted in Figure 3, it spurred the creation of large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects in sectors such as metallurgy, machinery, chemicals, and military. Furthermore, it led to the founding of scientific research institutions and military facilities that contributed to the PLA's modernization in the 1990s, laying a solid foundation for Sichuan to become a core area for military technology innovation and application.

The execution of Third Front Construction strengthened the PRC's industrial foundation. During the Third Front Construction period, the PRC government invested approximately 30 billion yuan (\$4.1 billion) in national defense and built over 800 institutions in western China focused on national defense science and technology.²² Notably, the majority of research and development (R&D) and testing bases for China's atomic bomb, hydrogen bomb, satellite, nuclear submarine, jet fighter, and long-range missile programs were located in Third Front regions. Sichuan Province, for example, not only developed research and production bases for both conventional and nuclear weapons, but also concentrated on building a cutting-edge

aerospace industry to support the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Shaanxi Province and its own Xichang Satellite Launch Center.²³ The Third Front Construction's emphasis on basic industries also spurred the development of railroad networks, coal and steel production, and large-scale manufacturing factories. By the late 1970s, China's western region had achieved its goal of establishing a national strategic rear area with a comprehensive national defense industrial system.²⁴

Sichuan's Current Efforts

Sichuan has built a robust foundation of industrial systems and technological innovation. Assigning the national strategic hinterland title to Sichuan underscores China's recognition of its modern economic achievements and signals an expectation that these achievements will contribute to the PLA's modernization. Beyond its role as a vital hub for promoting inland opening-up and economic growth, Sichuan's strategic positioning also provides crucial stability against external disturbances. This designation aligns with the CCP's policy guidance and carries strategic significance.

On March 7, 2024, Xi Jinping attended the plenary meeting of the PLA and the People's Armed Police (PAP) Force delegations during the second session of the 14th National People's Congress and emphasized the essential role of new-quality productive forces in the development and application of new-quality combat capabilities. With an overarching goal of military modernization, Xi Jinping advocated for the efficient integration and mutual enhancement between these two critical concepts.²⁵ He pointed out the intrinsic link between economic growth and military modernization in his speech:

The national economic and social system provides an inseparable support for China to achieve the military goals and tasks outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan. It is crucial to strengthen civil-military collaboration by leveraging local strengths, capabilities and resources to improve the quality and effectiveness of the PLA's modernization. We must take advantage of China's burgeoning productivity forces to accelerate and develop new-quality combat capabilities by innovating methods to build and employ combat capabilities and improving mechanisms to respond [to] and transform advanced technologies.²⁶

Thanks to China's integrated national strategic system, its growing productivity—particularly in the science and technology domains—provides the fundamental guidance to enhance new-quality combat capability growth, build a modern military power system, and enable China to build a strong military. In the context of modern warfare, particularly informationized conflicts characterized by artificial intelligence, scientific and technological innovation is paramount. Innovation not only dictates the effectiveness of new-quality productive forces but also, when applied to military domains and coupled with their mutual conversion, dictates the PLA's ability to secure strategic advantages in military competitions.²⁷

Technological advancements are driving the evolution of combat methodologies. Xi Jinping has prioritized technological breakthroughs in maritime, aerospace, cyberspace, and

artificial intelligence, stressing the rapid integration of these technologies into military capabilities. Provincial military districts [省军区], acting as crucial links between military and civilian sectors, must capitalize on the rapid expansion of new-quality productive forces to accelerate the transition of local technological innovations into new-quality combat capabilities.²⁸ Simultaneously, local Party committees and governments should actively promote military-civil fusion, ensuring that economic growth driven by new-quality productive forces directly empowers the military's combat capabilities.²⁹

While many central and western provinces in China possess established industrial systems with one or more pillar industries, Sichuan is exceptional for its complete spectrum of all 41 industrial divisionsⁱ and 31 manufacturing sub-divisions categorized by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS).³⁰ This comprehensive industrial base, along with its six key advantageous, five strategic emerging, and five national-level advanced manufacturing clusters, led to Sichuan having the highest GDP in China's central and western regions by December 2024, granting it national influence (See Figure 3). Sichuan's strong foundation of 368 research institutes, 137 universities, and 205 national-level innovation platforms empowers the province to leverage its scientific technological resources for the effective development and transformation of new-quality productive forces.³¹ China's designation of Sichuan as the strategic hinterland signifies the CCP's trust on the province to bear the responsibility and capability to secure industrial and supply chains and to support key national assets.

ⁱ According to a 2019 report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS), China is the only country in the world that has all industrial sections [门类], including 41 industrial divisions [大类], 207 groups [中类], and 666 classes [小类] listed in the Union Nation's *International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC)*. However, China's 41 industrial divisions and 31 manufacturing divisions are based on the *National Economic Industry Classification (NEIC)* developed by the NBS. The information is not consistent with the latest ISIC Rev.4 published in 2008, in which there are 21 sections, 88 divisions, 238 groups, and 419 classes.

| Six Key Advantageous Industries | Five Strategic Emerging Industries | Five National-level Advanced Manufacturing Clusters |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic Information • Equipment Manufacturing • Food And Textiles, Energy And Chemical Industry • Advanced Materials • Medicine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artificial Intelligence • Biotechnology • Satellite Network • New Energy And Intelligent Connected Vehicles • Unmanned Aerial Systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chengdu Software and Information Service Cluster • Chengdu-Deyang High-end Energy Equipment Cluster • Chengdu-Chongqing Electronic Information Advanced Manufacturing Cluster • Chengdu-Chongqing Biomedicine Cluster • Chengdu-Deyang-Mianyang-Ziliang Aerospace Cluster |

Figure 3: Sichuan’s Economic and Industrial Significance to Defense Modernization

Responding to the CCP’s designation, the Sichuan Provincial Government announced at the fifth plenary session of the 12th Sichuan Provincial Committee the implementation of a series of scientific research projects. These initiatives aim to strategically allocate economic resources and cultivate stronger technological innovation capabilities within the province.³² Sichuan has utilized its established industrial bases and robust scientific research infrastructure to achieve breakthroughs in critical technologies. These technological innovations are then used to drive the transformation of Sichuan’s key industries and the development of its new-quality productive forces.

Sichuan has pioneered mechanisms to accelerate the fusion of military and civilian sectors and has actively leveraged commercial innovation to advance military applications, particularly in key areas such as artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, quantum computing, space technology, and hypersonic weapons. The Sichuan Provincial Government has demonstrated its commitment through significant financial investment, allocating over 10 billion yuan (\$1.38 billion) to a provincial military-civil fusion industrial development fund.

Furthermore, Sichuan has taken a leading role in establishing China’s first military-civil high-tech industrial alliance, alongside the first high-tech equipment and advanced material industrial alliance.³³ Markedly, Sichuan’s investment in core military-industrial capabilities accounts for approximately one-sixth of China’s total expenditure, ranking highest in China. Capitalizing on its strong military-industrial base, Sichuan has facilitated a smooth transition from military industrial resource advantages to broader economic and social development benefits.³⁴ As military-industrial enterprises have diversified into developing and manufacturing

civilian products, Sichuan has achieved significant industrial scale in high-tech fields such as electronic information, biochemistry, and optomechanical integration.

Under the military-civil fusion national strategy, the involvement of private enterprises in supporting military industries is a growing trend. Chengdu Engine Co., Ltd., a subsidiary of Aero Engine Corporation of China, was the first state-owned aerospace manufacturer to accept private enterprises as suppliers for parts and services. The shift was further solidified by the *Notice on Promoting and Supporting Innovation-Related Reform Measures*, issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2017, which officially approved “the identification and access standards for civilian enterprises [to] support core military products.”³⁵ This policy has encouraged an increasing number of private enterprises in Sichuan to participate in the design and manufacturing of military-industrial products by providing technologies, raw materials, parts, and subsystems. For instance, Sichuan Space Transportation [凌空天行科技公司], initially known for its technological breakthroughs for its supersonic passenger aircraft, is now a key supplier of engine performance testing for the PLA’s supersonic combat aircraft.³⁶

Beyond the contributions of military industrial alliances to areas including Beidou communications, commercial drones, and aircraft engines, Sichuan has initiated a series of collaborative innovation programs, which includes establishing engineering technology research centers, key laboratories, and engineering laboratories through partnerships linking military enterprises with universities and private companies. The Sichuan provincial government has also collaborated with military research institutes to jointly establish ten military-civil fusion industrial bases and 150 military-civil fusion technology transformation and upgrading projects.³⁷ The Sichuan Provincial National Defense Science and Technology Industry Office (NDSTIO) has launched various platforms for resource sharing and technology transfer to promote cutting-edge technological innovation and military technology industrialization. In 2024, a total of 4,910 scientific and technological achievements were recognized by the Sichuan Provincial Government, with the volume of technology transfer contracts reaching 260.7 billion yuan (\$36.05 billion).³⁸

A 2025 report indicates that China’s military-industrial system is now primarily driven by its top ten military industrial groupsⁱⁱ, with private civilian enterprises playing increasingly vital

ⁱⁱ China’s Top Ten Military Industrial Groups are funded and directly managed by the State Council. They undertake the research, development, and production tasks of major national defense construction projects. They are China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) [中国核工业集团有限公司 (中核集团)], China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) [中国航天科技集团有限公司 (航天科技)], China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation (CASIC) [中国航天科工集团有限公司 (中国航天科工)], Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) [中国航空工业集团有限公司 (航空工业)], Aerospace Engine Corporation of China (AECC) [中国航空发动机集团有限公司 (中国航发)], China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) [中国船舶集团有限公司 (中国船舶)], China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) [中国兵器工业集团有限公司 (中国兵器)], China South Industries Group Corporation (CSGC) [中国兵器装备集团有限公司 (兵装集团/南方工业)], China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC) [中国电子科技集团有限公司 (中国电科)], and China Electronics Corporation (CEC) [中国电子信息产业集团有限公司 (中国电子)].

supporting roles.³⁹ Military industry can be categorized into six subsystems: aerospace, aviation, weapons, ships, nuclear industry, and military electronics. Notably, the Chengdu and Chongqing plains form a pivotal military-industrial heartland, boasting substantial industrial bases across all these sectors and serving as a central engine for the PLA's modernization. Within this region, Sichuan is home to China's largest aviation industry cluster. Numerous state-owned innovation platforms, including Aviation Industry Corporation (AVIC) and Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, have directly contributed to the PLA's advanced aircraft and unmanned aerial systems (UAS), with AVIC's expertise in composite materials and digital design reportedly benefiting China's next-generation stealth bomber program.⁴⁰

The strategic importance of Sichuan was highlighted again in the 2025 Spring Festival Symposium of Sichuan Military-Local Leaders. General Wang Haijiang, Commander of the WTC, commended Sichuan Province for its vigorous development of new-quality productive forces and its strong support for the WTC's mission execution and force development.⁴¹ He noted the WTC's recent success in safeguarding border regions and the significant progress made in its combat readiness and military training. Wang Haijing also reiterated his guidance on the mutual support between the WTC and Sichuan's economic and social progress, reaffirming commitment to strengthening the military-government and military-civilian unity.⁴²

Recognizing this crucial link, local party committees and governments are also fulfilling their significant political responsibility of generating new-quality combat capabilities through the cultivation of new-quality productive forces. Since its designation as the strategic hinterland, Sichuan has been building itself as a self-sufficient region capable of meeting China's needs for both economic development and military modernization, primarily through technological advancement. In February 2025, Shi Xiaolin, deputy secretary of the provincial party committee and governor of Sichuan, emphasized the importance of translating technological innovation into tangible achievements during an inspection tour in Chengdu. She advocated that Sichuan should fully utilize its "economic foundation, scientific research institutions, natural resources, and military-civil fusion advantages to actively integrate into the global innovation system and enhance the competitiveness in innovative development."⁴³ Aiming to "build an industrial cluster and strengthen production chains," the Sichuan Provincial Government convened a conference to promote industrial chains in artificial intelligence, aerospace, and new display technologies.⁴⁴ Through these concerted efforts, Sichuan has been cultivating and adjusting its new-quality productive capacity to enhance the overall industrial development of military science and technology.

Outlook

Designating Sichuan as China's strategic hinterland represents an evolution of its military strategy, blending a historically grounded defensive posture with a forward-looking drive for military advancement. This strategic decision underscores China's ambition to build comprehensive national power through a closely integrated political, economic, and military triangle anchored by Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu. As a strategic hinterland, Sichuan fulfills

critical roles across multiple domains. It offers geographical security against external threats, fosters dynamic military-civil fusion through technological innovation, supports the PLA's modernization via its military-industrial complex, and creates a crucial foundation for China to expand its influence on a global scale.

Ultimately, the strategic hinterland policy deepens the PLA's strategic depth and enhances its resilience. Sichuan's role as the strategic hinterland facilitates the development and application of cutting-edge technologies. The strong ties between military and civilian sectors in Sichuan, combined with the province's strong emphasis on emerging fields like AI and aerospace, positions it as a pivotal point for PLA's modernization. The PLA can use civilian innovations for military purposes and improve next-generation weapon systems and advanced combat capabilities. Furthermore, as the headquarters of the PLA's Western Theater Command, Sichuan also supports China's defense posture and power projection in Southeast and South Asia. This strategic transformation demonstrably amplifies China's ability to exert influence both regionally and globally.

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Endnotes

- ¹ “习近平在四川考察时强调,推动新时代治蜀兴川再上新台阶,奋力谱写中国式现代化四川新篇章. 返京途中在陕西汉中考察 [During His Inspection in Sichuan, Xi Jinping Stressed That the Governance and Development of Sichuan in the New Era Should be Taken to A New Level, and Efforts Should be Made to Write A New Chapter Of Sichuan's Chinese-Style Modernization. On the Way Back to Beijing, He Inspected Hanzhong, Shaanxi],” 中国中央电视台 13 新闻频道 [*China Central Television-13 (CCTV-13) News*], July 29, 2023, <https://news.cctv.com/2023/07/29/ARTIjV22foWgF2JzutsRsOor230729.shtml>.
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