

## China's 'Non-War Military Operations Program': MOOTW by Another Name?

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On 13 June 2022 [Xinhua](#) reported that Xi Jinping, in his role as Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), approved an order to issue the 'Military Non-War Military Action Plan (for Trial Implementation)' for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Although light on detail, the report [noted](#) that the 'action plan' contained 6 chapters and 59 articles focused on:

- Effectively preventing and resolving risks and challenges;
- Responding to and handling emergencies;
- Protecting the safety of people's lives and property;
- Safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests;
- Safeguarding world peace and regional stability;
- Innovating the use of military forces, and standardizing the organization and implementation of non-war military operations of the army.

According to [Xinhua](#) the Plan was 'of great significance to the effective performance of the military's missions and tasks in the new era'. More prosaically the [Global Times](#) noted that the Plan would 'standardize, and provide the legal basis for Chinese troops to carry out, missions like disaster relief, humanitarian aid, escort, and peacekeeping, and safeguard China's national sovereignty, security and development interests'.

This has caused a [flurry](#) of [speculation](#) by foreign media and commentators that the 'action plan' is evidence that Beijing is preparing the ground for a Putin-like 'special military operation' – such as a maritime blockade or worse - against Taiwan. Some, like ASPI's Michael Shoebridge, [maintained](#) the 'move from Xi Jinping to license the Chinese military to conduct special military operations involves the PLA using force outside what other nations consider war'. The implications of this line of thinking are that China is copying a Russian playbook for so-called 'gray zone' activities; China's new Plan is preparing the ground for further coercive measures against Taiwan; and it provides a legal basis for PLA operations overseas.

In this edition of the *Looking Glass* we explore the validity of such claims. We find that the first (i.e. that China is copying the Russian playbook) fails to acknowledge both that the PLA has had a focus on 'Military Operations Other Than War' (MOOTW) since the 2000s, and how such functions are integrated into the PLA's core mission. With respect to the second (i.e. that the new directive carries implications for Taiwan) we suggest that the new 'Military Non-War Military Action Plan' will likely have limited applications for Chinese coercion of Taiwan. This is due to the fact China's coercive activities in this context fall within the PLA's broader conception of its deterrence activities.



Finally, the new ‘action plan’ does not provide a legal basis for PLA activities overseas as guidelines from the CMC do not constitute law. Rather they are ‘military strategic guidelines’ (*junshi zhanlue fangzhen*, 军事战略方针) [analogous](#) to, for instance, US military strategic doctrine. As such they [are](#) ‘grounded in both a capabilities-based and contingency-based approach that sets the azimuth for the development of operational and institutional capacities to provide for the national defense of China’. Additionally, the PLA has now been operating overseas for [decades](#) undertaking a variety of ‘non-war’ missions. This includes [anti-piracy](#) patrols in the Middle East, [humanitarian](#) assistance, and [evacuations](#) of Chinese nationals from conflict situations.

### Crossing the River by Feeling for the Stones: The PLA and MOOTW

The PLA’s strategic doctrine and operational principles have undergone a number of significant phases of development since the end of the Cold War. It is in the context of this development that we must place the PLA’s gradual assimilation of and adaptation to MOOTW. Briefly, the PLA’s strategic doctrine and operational principles have progressed through four major phases since 1993 summarized in Table 1 below. As indicated below the core continuity in the PLA’s strategic doctrine has been the concept of ‘active defense’. This concept, as China’s [2019](#) Defence White Paper states ‘keeps to the stance that “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked”’ and ‘places emphasis on both containing and winning wars, and underscores the unity of strategic defense and offense at operational and tactical levels’. The concept, as M. Taylor Fravel [notes](#), ‘provides guidance for how to conduct operations when facing a superior enemy, numerically or technologically, and thus when on the strategic defensive. The main challenge under these conditions is how to preserve one’s forces and then how to gradually gain the initiative. Thus, active defense offers a vision for how to overcome weakness’.

**Table 1: Phases in the development of PLA strategic guidelines and operational principles**

	Doctrine							
Concept	CCP strategic guidelines	People’s War (defending the Motherland, 1956); Resist in the North, Open in the South (1960); Lure the Enemy in Deep (1964)	People’s War under modern conditions (1977)	Local wars under modern conditions (1985)	Local wars under modern hi-tech conditions (1993)	Local wars under informatized conditions (2005)	Informatized local wars (2015)	Actively adapt to the new landscape of strategic competition and modern warfare (2019)
Key strategic concept	Imminent war, major war, nuclear war	Active defense (Lure the Enemy in Deep)	Active defense (anti-invasion)	Active defense	Active defense	Active defense	Active defense in the new situation	Active defense in the new era
Key doctrinal concepts	Positional defence, mobile offense	Positional defence	Seize the initiative, mass forces for decisive early battle	“three attacks and three defenses”; Non-contact warfare	Informatization; “systems-of-systems” operations	Informationized conventional operational strength; target-centric warfare	“RMA with Chinese characteristics”; Intelligentized and informationized warfare	

**Table 1:** Adapted from Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020) <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf>; *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2019), [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html); M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949*, (Princeton University Press 2019); and Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Guinness, Cortez A. Cooper III, Mark Cozad, *People’s Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA394-1.html#:~:text=Three%20interlinked%20operational%20concepts%20likely%20underpin%20doctrine%20and,%283%29%20target-centric%20warfare%20defeats%20the%20adversary%27s%20operational%20system](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA394-1.html#:~:text=Three%20interlinked%20operational%20concepts%20likely%20underpin%20doctrine%20and,%283%29%20target-centric%20warfare%20defeats%20the%20adversary%27s%20operational%20system).

Since the early 1990s a focus on combating threats to China’s security from a position of weakness has informed successive doctrinal and operational principles that emphasize the need for the PLA adapt to the ‘revolution in military affairs’ and the prevailing international conditions of the relative absence of



'major' wars. Thus, from 1993's 'strategic military guidance' onward the primary direction of PLA strategy has been to prepare to engage in 'local wars' (generally conceived to be limited conflicts on China's periphery/and or immediate strategic environment) under conditions of what has [variously](#) been described in successive policy documents as 'informatized' and/or 'intelligentized' warfare. The emergence of thinking about PLA capabilities with respect to MOOTW falls into this gradual evolution of Chinese military doctrine. As we suggest below, the story has been one of an iterative and at times quite hesitant integration of the concept of MOOTW into China's declaratory defence policy and practice.

Like other militaries around the [globe](#), by the early 2000s the PLA had internally recognised that (as China's [2006](#) Defence White Paper put it), 'growing interconnections between domestic and international factors and interconnected traditional and non-traditional factors have made maintaining national security a more challenging task'. As such the PLA had to improve its capabilities to [accomplish](#) 'diversified military tasks'. These included responding to crises, maintaining peace, and deterring and winning wars under complex circumstances. China's [2008](#) Defence White Paper developed this further to explicitly identify MOOTW for the first time – defined as 'the tasks of counter-terrorism, stability maintenance, emergency rescue and international peacekeeping' – as 'an important form of applying national military forces'.

Notably China's view was highly consistent with how the US military had defined MOOTW a decade before. The U.S. Army Field Manual of [September 1997](#), for example, [defined](#) MOOTW as encompassing 'the use of military capabilities across the range of military operations short of war' applied 'to complement any combination of the other instruments of national power' to address counterinsurgency, domestic emergencies, humanitarian assistance and peace operations.

The first practical application of the Chinese concept came in 2008 when the PLA Navy (PLAN) took part in multi-national anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. These activities – conducted until 2015 – assisted the PLAN in [developing](#) real-world experience in out-of-area operations, logistics, joint exercises and port visits. More broadly, China's anti-piracy operations were a first step toward the PLA developing the capability to undertake 'diversified military tasks' identified by the 2006 and 2008 Defence White Papers. The subsequent [2010](#) Defence White Paper continued to emphasize China's increased investment in MOOTW including not only anti-piracy missions but also 'earthquake rescue and disaster relief operations', 'flood control and emergency rescue operations', and 'international rescue operations'. Significantly, MOOTW were not only explicitly [identified](#) as one of three priority areas (the others were PLA professionalization and 'pushing forward the Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics') that accounted for increased Chinese defence expenditure, but they were also described as 'in line' with the requirements of an 'offshore defense strategy'. This was done so the PLAN could develop 'capabilities in conducting operations in distant waters and in countering non-traditional security threats'.

Yet as Andrea Ghiselli has [detailed](#), the growing emphasis on MOOTW across much of this period had been driven by civilian leaders and institutions. In contrast, the PLA resisted assuming responsibility for MOOTW 'in areas where they enjoy a significant level of autonomy from the civilians, such as doctrinal and institutional development'. Indeed, on the basis of detailed analysis of authoritative and semi-authoritative writings from PLA institutions from the late 1990s to 2016, Ghiselli [concluded](#) that while China's civilian leaders over the same period 'started to envision a larger role for the PLA to support Chinese diplomacy', the 'military held a rather different point of view' which remained focused on traditional national security challenges much closer to home.

Some of China's foreign policy analysts also [worried](#) about the 'western' origins of the 'non-traditional security' concept central to MOOTW, and questioned whether the West (notably the US) was simply using the concept to 'promote its hegemonic status and once again undermine China's security by cleverly directing the attention of China's leaders away from real, traditional security concerns'. Others were even more bullish. Liu Lin, an analyst from the Department of World Military Research, Academy of Military Sciences, [noted](#) that in an external security environment that was both more complex and interdependent than the past and in which China had greater 'security or development interests' it should 'make more use of actions of a non-war nature to declare to the outside world where China's national interests lie and our determination and will to safeguard national interests'.

Internal wrangling about MOOTW was eventually overcome when China's will and capability to conduct 'operations in distant waters' were tested over its evacuation of Chinese nationals from situations of regime collapse and/or civil war. This occurred first in Libya in March 2011, and later in Yemen during March-April 2015. In the wake of the Arab Spring and the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya China successfully evacuated 35,000 Chinese nationals over a 12 day period. The evacuation was notable for two major reasons: (i) China deployed a [combination](#) of civilian and military assets, including chartered commercial aircraft and ships along with four PLA Air Force (PLAAF) transport aircraft and a PLAN frigate diverted from the anti-piracy deployment in the Gulf Aden; and (ii) the [emergence](#) of new diplomatic mission described as 'overseas citizen protection'. In the case of Yemen in 2015, China utilised its presence in the Gulf of Aden to deploy a frigate to assist in the [evacuation](#) not only of 600 Chinese nationals but also of some 225 foreign nationals from 10 other countries.

China's successful deployment of military assets in this case was seen as [serving](#) both domestic and international objectives by demonstrating to the Chinese public that Beijing had the will and capability to achieve 'overseas citizen protection' while the 'successful high-profile naval operation in a conflict zone demonstrated Beijing's interest in maintaining its great power status and showed its growing global power'. The 2011 Libya and 2015 Yemen evacuations thus appeared to affirm the veracity of the consistent civilian-driven emphasis in the Defence White Papers of 2006, 2008 and 2010 on the necessity for China to develop the capabilities to conduct MOOTW. More significantly these events served to mitigate the PLA's previous resistance to such operations as it was recognised that MOOTW [provided](#) 'justification for increased defense spending in long-range capabilities' that [were](#) 'complementary and consistent with the general modernisation of the PLA'. After Libya, senior PLA figures such as Chang Wanquan (Minister of National Defence 2013-2019) and Zhao Keshi (Director of the Logistic Support Department of the Central Military Commission, 2012-2017) [voiced](#) strong support for all PLA service elements 'to develop the capabilities to carry out global MOOTW in both times of war and peace' and the 'establishment of overseas footholds for the PLA to defend China's burgeoning overseas interests, especially against non-traditional threats'.

At the level of declaratory policy the [2013](#) Defence White Paper revealed the increasing complementarity between MOOTW and China's broader strategic objectives. Not only did the document contain a number of references regarding the importance of MOOTW for China's 'comprehensive security', but it also included a statement that continued efforts of the PLAN to develop 'blue-water capabilities' would enable it to conduct 'mobile operations' to counter 'non-traditional security threats'. Under Xi Jinping's leadership the integration of MOOTW has also been reflected in institutional developments, with the Central Military Commission (CMC) [establishing](#) an 'Overseas Operations Office' to 'push forward the "normalization of military operations abroad"', and the [inauguration](#) of China's first overseas base in Djibouti in 2016.

In the recent past China's engagement in MOOTW has required limited coordination between PLA service elements. In future, however, this situation will likely change. The PLA now [conceives](#) of four major categories of potential overseas contingencies: border contingencies; 'near seas operations' (i.e. within China's contiguous maritime zone) and contingencies; 'theater plus' contingencies; and 'far seas operations' (i.e. beyond the 'first island chain') and contingencies. Significantly, the PLA could potentially be [required](#) to conduct MOOTW in each of these categories, and do so in a joint manner that hitherto it has not been required to perform. This has contributed in part to the PLA Army's (PLAA) 'below the neck' reforms [initiated](#) in 2017 that 'have focused on modernising and transforming operational and tactical units, which include group armies, divisions, brigades, regiments, and battalions, so that they are structured better to conduct joint operations, especially so that the Army may contribute to joint maritime campaigns beyond China's shores'.

That such contingencies are perceived to be a more frequent feature of future missions for the PLA's various service arms has been underlined by the 2019 Defence White Paper and the December 2020 revision of China's national security law. The former [stressed](#) that 'overseas interests' are now 'a crucial part of China's national interests' and that a core mission of China's armed forces 'is to effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions'. Moreover, it [asserted](#) that the country's 'overseas interests' were 'endangered by immediate threats such as international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy' and that the PLA 'refines relevant mechanisms' for protecting these interests through building 'far seas forces', developing



'overseas logistical facilities', conducting 'vessel protection operations', securing 'strategic SLOCs' and conducting 'overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations'.

The [latter](#) meanwhile *formally* tasked the PLA with defending the country's 'development interests' which are now acknowledged to be increasingly global in geographic scope. China's capacity to meet this ambitious objective are [based](#) on the development of [expeditionary](#) capabilities across the PLA Army (PLAA), PLA Navy (PLAN), and PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC):

- PLAA: 15 Special Operations Brigades and Aviation and Air Assault units, with the former focused on direct action, infiltration, island-landing, and reconnaissance missions, and the latter on airborne insertion, reconnaissance and coordination of air strikes;
- PLAN: *Liaoning* and *Shandong* aircraft carriers; a "modest number" of *Yuzhao*-class ocean-going amphibious platform docks (LPDs) and *Yushen*-class flat deck landing helicopter assault (LHAs) ships; commission of *Renhai*-class guided missile cruisers (CG); and launching of 25 *Luyang*-class guided missile destroyers (DDG);
- PLANMC: the PLAN's land combat arm has expanded from 2 brigades to 10 to meet Xi Jinping's directive for it to become a "multi-functional rapid response" force to protect Chinese personnel and interests overseas.

Despite these developments there are still gaps between the consistent flagging of the importance of MOOTW in China's Defence White Papers since 2006, and the ultimate place of MOOTW in China's overall defence and military strategy. As noted above and in Table 1 China's overall defence strategy is based on posturing the PLA to win 'informatized local wars'. These require China to remain geographically focused on its immediate East Asian neighbourhood where there is the greatest potential for such 'local wars' to take place. This is because of China's outstanding sovereignty disputes – most notably over Taiwan – and intensifying 'strategic competition' with the United States. China's ambitions for the PLA to engage in MOOTW further afield looks set to be constrained by this fact for the foreseeable future. As Taylor Fravel [suggests](#), China 'cannot devote significantly more resources to projecting military power beyond East Asia until it dominates its home region and no longer faces vulnerabilities or challenges along its immediate periphery'.

### **China's 'Non-War Military Operations Program': Toward a 'Use-of Force Spectrum'**

This is not to suggest that MOOTW in the Chinese context has faded in importance, or has been discarded as a concept of limited utility for the security challenges that Beijing confronts. Rather, under Xi Jinping the concept has been partially rebranded and connected much more directly to perceived security challenges in China's immediate environment.

In late 2016 Xi mandated that the military's use of force be framed by what he termed the 'peacetime employment of military force' (和平时期军事力量运用). According to a PLA media [commentary](#) on the concept there were 'three reasons that determine that the use of China's military strength must be expanded to peacetime':

- (i) The 'continuous expansion of China's national interests and accumulation to a certain extent will inevitably be reflected in the transformation of the concept of national security';
- (ii) The 'continuous improvement of the country's comprehensive national strength has also provided a firmer foundation for the use of military power in peacetime'; and
- (iii) The 'surrounding situation is becoming increasingly tense, and it is necessary to manage crisis and stop war through the use of military power in peacetime'.

Under these conditions it was seen as necessary for China to employ what amounts to a [use-of-force spectrum](#), whereby the 'intensity of the use of military force' [could](#) be pegged to 'different levels to meet the needs of the security situation, covering the "peacetime not used-peacetime low intensity use-wartime full use" in order to fully meet the actual needs of safeguarding national security'.

The 'peacetime employment of military force', the PLA media commentary [continued](#), constituted 'bottom-line thinking'. This was because 'its basic idea is to clearly delineate a bottom line in the maintenance of national security, and clearly warn relevant parties that this bottom line must not be crossed'. If China did not base its security on the 'peacetime employment of military force', its national security 'bottom line' would 'only be a "dotted line"' that could be 'broken at any time'. Finally, the

commentary concluded that in China's current 'encircled peripheral security situation' it must 'give full play to the comprehensive effectiveness of the use of military forces' in order to 'take the initiative to break the situation, continuously accumulate strategic advantages, and actively guide the transformation of the national security situation in a direction favorable to our country'. The central thrust of this, as Xi himself [stated](#) in a speech on 23 October 2020 commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 'Chinese People's Volunteer Army' intervention in the Korean War, was that the 'Chinese people know very well that in dealing with the aggressors, they must talk to them in a language they can understand, that is, to stop the war with war, to stop the war with force, and to win peace and respect with victory'.

On the surface it is tempting to frame this as a potentially novel or more belligerent direction for Chinese defence and military strategy under Xi. But such thinking is actually much more consistent with how China's notion of military force, and especially deterrence, has evolved over time. In that context, Xi's identification of 'peacetime employment of military force' suggests a more recent effort to think about how such activities may make a direct contribution to China's 'strategic deterrence' posture. Indeed, the [2020 Science of Military Strategy](#) compendium states that, 'In peacetime, strategic deterrence is mainly the use of national military power, combined with political, economic, diplomatic, technological, cultural and other strategic forces to influence the development of the situation and delay or stop the outbreak of war'.

The 2020 SMS also [notes](#) that three basic conditions must be met for 'strategic deterrence' to be effective: 'strength, determination and information transmission'. And because the costs of 'even a small-scale local war' are 'huge' it is 'in the fundamental interests of the country to make full use of strategic deterrence to deter war, maintain national security and stability, and create a favorable internal and external environment for national development'. However, it goes on to note that when the 'strategic situation is severe and there is danger of war':

...the use of strategic deterrence may delay the outbreak of war and create conditions for the country to make other political choices and prepare for war. When the outbreak of war is imminent, implementing strategic deterrence can either seize the last chance to avoid war, or gain the initiative in war, especially the first battle, and create a favorable military situation for entering a state of war.

This broadly parallels [prevailing](#) US understandings often rendered in the equation that 'deterrence equals capability x resolve x signalling'. And while it is always fraught to make an assessment on the basis of the limited information (and vague language) provided in such announcements, it appears to be consistent with the thinking over the past two decades or more tracked above that conceives of MOOTW as providing China with a means of signaling where its core national interests lie, and how it tries to shape its security environment.

In that way, the story of Chinese non-war military operations is clearly one of continuity rather than change. And if that assessment is accurate, its most important implication for observers of China's military-strategic posture is to avoid the temptation to automatically regard periodic Chinese announcements of this type as a sea-change (and usually a belligerent one) in its strategic posture. Doing so without considering the generally careful and iterative nature of China's security policy evolution can result in more problematic outcomes than drawing flawed conclusions: it lends itself to flawed assumptions about the complex and multifaceted drivers in which China's strategic posture gradually takes shape.

### Further reading

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