

Beijing's Long Game: Gray Zone Tactics in the Pacific

Description

During the progress of hostilities, guerillas gradually develop into orthodox forces that operate in conjunction with other units of the regular army. There can be no doubt that the ultimate result of this will be victory.

On Guerilla Warfare, by Mao Zedong

The [expulsion of former Chinese defense ministers](#) Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on June 27, 2024, is the latest development in a [months-long series](#) of personnel purges in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). As President Xi Jinping continuously reforms the PLA to make it a [world-class military](#) capable of achieving the People's Republic of China's (PRC) national security objectives, these purges illustrate an underlying tension that stems from competing priorities. Because the PLA is the [armed wing](#) of the CCP, Xi Jinping must make tradeoffs in balancing regime loyalty and military competence when selecting PLA officers for senior positions. As a result of this and similar compromises, the PLA remains [unprepared](#) for direct confrontation with near-peer adversaries. To address this gap, China will continue leveraging irregular warfare activities to incrementally accomplish its strategic objectives while buying time to achieve the level of conventional force development it desires. This article will evaluate how China's use of irregular warfare sets the stage for its conventional force development, given the context of the competing requirements for senior PLA officer promotion, the PLA's guiding principles, and the role of the new defense minister, Dong Jun.

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Loyalty and Experience within the CMC

By necessity, Xi Jinping's selection of senior officials balances political loyalty with operational and command experience. While he favors aggressive and competent commanders capable of realizing his ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, these leaders must remain politically loyal to Xi's rule. His selections for the [Central Military Commission \(CMC\) in 2022](#) attest to this. In order of rank, they are Zhang Youxia, He Weidong, Li Shangfu (who has since been removed), Liu Zhenli, Miao Hua, and Zhang Shengmin. Xi's appointment of senior leaders to the CMC indicates an attempt to balance loyalty and experience because many of his selections break precedent. Examples include Zhang Youxia and

Liu Zhenli, both [promoted](#) despite Zhang being past retirement age and Liu being the youngest in his rank group. These exceptions to policy were made because both Zhang and Liu have [combat experience](#) from the [Sino-Vietnamese border wars](#), a rare and valuable quality given that the PLA is largely untested and inexperienced in combat. In other [unconventional moves](#), [He Weidong](#) was permitted to skip key career milestones before assuming his position on the CMC. At the same time, Miao Hua transitioned from a long Army career to become the Navy's political commissar. Indeed, selection to senior leadership positions has also been based on personal connections and previous experience with Xi. [He Weidong and Miao Hua](#) worked with Xi back when he was a provincial official in Fujian, and both Zhangs hail from the same region as Xi, claiming membership in his infamous [Shaanxi Gang](#).

Chinese Strategic Concepts

To put Xi's priorities and the PLA's irregular military operations into context, it is vital to understand the guiding principles that inform the PLA's military philosophy. Since its founding, the PRC has adhered to a warfighting philosophy of [Active Defense](#). Under this principle, conflict is believed to exist on a spectrum ranging from peace to kinetic war. As a result, the PLA assumes a proactive force posture, constantly assessing potential threats and carrying out activities below the threshold of kinetic war that could create a better geopolitical position for the PRC. Through Active Defense, the PLA would theoretically be able to accomplish its objectives while controlling escalation on the conflict continuum.

In tandem with Active Defense is the concept of [People's War](#), incorporating lessons from the past century and a half and forming the backbone of the PLA's tactics and strategies. From its inception by Mao during the Chinese Civil War to the present day, the idea of People's War has gone through several revisions, but the crux remains the same. Warfighting proficiency must be pursued through all possible means at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The United States understands this in the modern context as being able to field a proficient joint force capable of combined arms and multi-domain operations.

However, due to having to include party loyalty as a prerequisite for promotion, the PLA suffers from an acute [Big Army Mentality](#) that prevents the realization of an effective joint force. Consider the service component composition of the 2022 CMC. Four of these officials are PLA Army officers, a Navy officer, and a Rocket Force officer, with no Air Force representation in the CMC. Because of the pervasive attitude in the PLA that favors the dominance of land forces, the PLA has [struggled](#) to integrate its different services, preventing it from executing seamless multi-domain operations in both war and peacetime. [Wargames](#) conducted by Chinese military leaders have shown that the PLA is not yet ready to face near-peer adversaries in conventional warfare. PLA publications and training orders

frequently acknowledge these shortcomings, using phrases like the [“Five Incapables”](#) and [“Two Incompatibles”](#) and [“Three Whethers”](#) to describe issues of inflexibility, poor training performance, and a general lack of readiness.

As a result of these weaknesses, and despite the PLA’s [many modernization initiatives](#) in recent years, the PLA still favors asymmetrical approaches and remains hesitant to embrace large-scale combat operations fully. This is best explained by the [Chinese military concept of shi \(势\)](#), rendered in English as a “strategic configuration of power.” Under this framework, one’s military assets are arrayed to create an advantageous situation and physical power is applied at that particular moment to achieve victory. Returning to Active Defense and People’s War, shi (势), when applied, would craft an unassailable position for the PLA and enable it to maximize its resources if conflict escalates to kinetic war. The PLA employs irregular tactics to create favorable geopolitical and battlefield conditions to achieve this objective, maximizing China’s strengths and neutralizing enemy advantages before conflict begins.

Irregular Warfare Activities

As military reforms continue, China will likely employ unconventional methods to achieve immediate security objectives. Recognizing its forces are not yet [war-ready](#), China keeps tensions below the threshold for war through gray zone activities. The PLA uses [warfighting, military deterrence, and military operations other than war](#) to build capabilities and gather information, aiming to discourage adversaries or decisively defeat them if conflict arises. These activities are expected to intensify once military reforms and modernization are complete.

This strategy is already on display in the South China Sea. There, China [optimizes anti-access and area-denial capabilities](#) to prevent any significant and sustained challenge to Beijing’s territorial claims, all while remaining under the [threshold for kinetic conflict](#). Components of this strategy consist of technological development, legal warfare, and expansion of China’s presence through manufactured islands.

Technological development in key areas of the maritime domain is intended to [negate the West’s advantages of firepower and experience](#) to ensure Beijing’s dominance over other Southeast Asian states in the South China Sea. Legal warfare [limits](#) the range of potential responses to China’s actions by its adversaries yet still achieves PRC interests. [Expanding China’s presence](#) in the adjacent seas through conventional troop deployment and unconventional state entities ensures the persistence of Chinese influence. It enables China to continue its regional operations without escalating to war. All these activities require significant planning and expertise to function as intended and synchronize with other PLA activities, thus necessitating leadership with joint experience and

knowledge.

The PRC bolsters its sea claims through conventional and unconventional means. Troop deployments and exercises, as well as the [construction of artificial islands](#) and [commercial sea vessels](#), ensure a continuous Chinese presence that is hard for other maritime states to displace. These artificial islands provide strategic bases for [sustainment and defense](#), which are crucial for sectoral control in naval warfare. Coupled with advances in military technology, this enables China to project its reach beyond the [First Island Chain](#), effectively limiting the entry of other navies into the area.

The China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Maritime Militia are key in these irregular activities. Their vast number of assets and plausible deniability, under the guise of internal security, offer significant advantages. [CCG](#) and [Maritime Militia](#) vessels often target other ships with non-lethal means, preventing competing states from establishing a sustained maritime presence in the South China Sea while minimizing the risk of military escalation. The PRC frequently [obstructs](#) and [evades attempts](#) to enforce international law about maritime practices. This enables China to act with impunity in the South China Sea and provides the PRC the time and space to consolidate its claims within the [Nine Dash Line](#). Again, these gray zone activities require considerable expertise and experience to avoid escalating tensions beyond China's readiness.

The New Defense Minister

Further evidence that the PLA will continue to execute gray zone activities can be found in the appointment of the new Minister of Defense. On December 29, 2023, China announced the appointment of the PLA Navy (PLAN) commander [Dong Jun](#) as its new defense minister. Dong Jun previously served as the deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet, responsible for Taiwan Strait maritime issues and disputed islands in the East China Sea. After that, Dong was deputy commander of the Southern Theater Command, which oversees operations in the contested South China Sea. His operational experience in these strategically vital theater commands handling China's most salient national security interests already makes him a desired candidate for promotion by conventional force standards alone. Dong Jun also has extensive experience conducting gray zone activities because such operations are largely carried out by the PLA Navy and conducted in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands' areas of responsibility.

Also of note is the fact that Dong Jun is [not sanctioned by the United States](#), unlike his predecessor, which suggests that he will be able to serve China effectively in [military diplomacy](#). Dong's [recent engagements](#) with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin illustrate the role he is stepping into. These are the first of such meetings in over two years and reflect attempts to ease tensions between the two countries. Thus, Dong Jun's promotion [facilitates diplomatic engagement](#) and enables China the

[time and space](#) to develop conventional military capabilities and bring China's military power to the immediate forefront. Military diplomacy reduces threat perceptions, preventing escalation along the continuum of conflict and enabling China to continue its activities in repositioning and improving the PLA.

Conclusion

Since the PLA is not ready for a direct confrontation, China will continue to bide its time and leverage gray zone activities to achieve its interests while preparing the PLA to be able to counterbalance any potential near-peer adversary. To this end, we should expect to see increased use of irregular warfare, coercion, and pressure in the maritime domain from the China Coast Guard and Maritime Militia, especially given the elevation of Admiral Dong Jun to the position of defense minister. With these developments, the PLA will step closer to towards its goal of being able to execute unified multi-domain operations. The United States and its partners must also prepare for the future challenges to come.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III meets with Chinese Minister of Defense Adm. Dong Jun in Singapore, May 31, 2024. [Photo](#) by Chad J. McNeeley, DOD.

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Date Created

2024/07/25