

Beyond War and Peace: The PLA's Non-War Military Activities • Concept

Description

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.

In 2021, researchers [revealed](#) hundreds of [new missile silos](#) in the deserts of western China. The People's Republic of China (PRC) also tested a new [hypersonic glide missile](#) that encircled the globe and struck a test target. These actions underscore that China is the US military's [pacing challenge](#). But the focus on Beijing's technological innovation and military expansion is incomplete without appreciating the political motivations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its expectations for the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

To that end, the United States must better understand how the PLA organizes itself and acts in support of the CCP's political strategy. Thanks to the Air University's [China Aerospace Studies Institute](#) and [Project Everest](#), Western audiences can access a full translation of the [Science of Military Strategy](#) (2013), which experts regard as an authoritative PLA text that underpins its strategy and operational doctrine development. Understanding how a potential challenger is organizing itself, in its own words, is priceless.

Within the *Science of Military Strategy*, one concept stands out despite its clumsy descriptor: Non-War Military Activities (NWMA). In fact, there is [an entire chapter](#) devoted to strategic guidance for peacetime operations across all domains to fulfill the CCP's political objectives. NWMA stands apart from the more familiar [Three Warfares](#) (public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and lawfare) and [Unrestricted Warfare](#), which receive minimal or no consideration within the *Science of Military Strategy* text. NWMA is central for the PLA's military competition to assert [effective control](#) well before conflict by applying the concept in peacetime.

It may be stating the obvious that all militaries operate outside of war. But analyzing NWMA helps analysts understand *how* Beijing intends the PLA to establish a [favorable strategic posture](#) in peacetime. As the Defense Department's [2020](#) and [2021](#) China Military Power Reports indicate, NWMA is [an important strategic means](#) for the PLA to serve the national interest, safeguard China's development, expand the PRC's global interests, and gain valuable operational experience. The United States and its allies must understand the PLA's conceptions of NWMA in

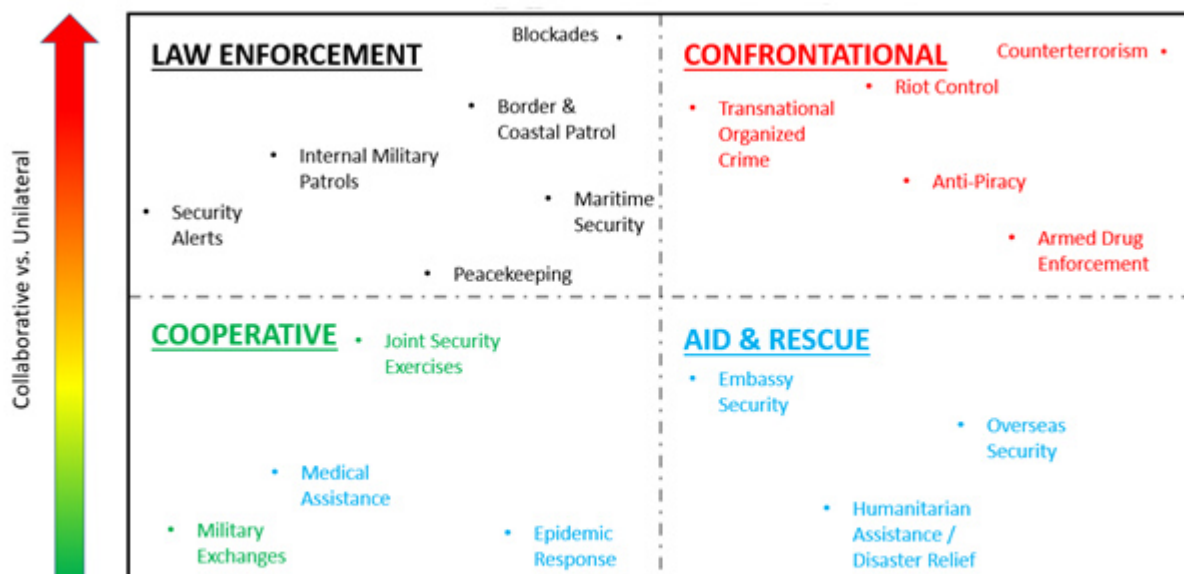
[gray-zone operations](#) and its intent to [win through the gray zone](#) in military competition.

Unpacking NWMA

The *Science of Military Strategy* authors identify Non-War Military Activities as one of the PLA's three [basic modes of military strength](#), alongside warfighting and deterrence. They note that the NWMA concept is part of the PLA's [modernization](#) effort and central for responding to the expanded responsibilities brought on by the PRC's economic growth and global expansion. NWMA plays [an irreplaceable role](#) in an increasingly globalized system.

PLA strategists developed NWMA from the US doctrine of ["military operations other than war"](#) (MOOTW) that emerged in the 1990s, and some translations still prefer ["MOOTW"](#) instead of NWMA. When then-CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao announced in 2004 that the PLA would undertake ["New Historic Missions"](#), MOOTW provided an initial foundation later expanded upon in Beijing's [2006 national defense white paper](#). The PLA [further developed](#) the NWMA concept to campaign through limited military aggression in support of Beijing's political objectives.

In their analysis of NWMA, the *Science of Military Strategy* authors distill Non-War Military Activities into four major categories: ["confrontational"](#) (also translated as ["opposed"](#)); ["law enforcement"](#); ["aid and rescue"](#); and ["cooperative"](#). Each category includes additional missions that the PLA undertakes. For ease of comparison, the below figure depicts Non-War Military Activities based on (1) their intensity and potential or implied use of force and (2) whether the action is predominately cooperative or more unilateral in nature.



Four Major Categories of Non-War Military Activities (figure generated by author)

The confrontational and law enforcement activities illustrate some risk acceptance among PLA thinkers on taking military action for political or economic gain outside of a declared conflict. These concepts are evident through PLA engagements in the South China Sea, patrols along the Mekong River, and antipiracy patrols off the Horn of Africa. These activities illustrate a conceptual relationship between Non-War Military Activities and [“active defense,”](#) which is widely regarded as the [core of CCP military strategic thought](#), and present tangible examples of the PLA conducting [“defense through decisive engagements.”](#) Confrontational and law enforcement activities reflect how NWMA fits into active defense through limited operational offensives intended to secure political goals without leading to strategic escalation. Unfortunately for PLA planners, the potential remains for miscalculation or for specific actions to backfire amid [international scrutiny](#).

Toward the bottom, cooperative and aid and rescue functions more closely align with concepts like [defense support of civil authorities](#) or military diplomacy and defense cooperation. While the *Science of Military Strategy* writers emphasized that Non-War Military Activities provide operational experience, these activities depict how the PLA imagines using soft power to strengthen bilateral relations and gain control over potential crises in [“important peripheral regions.”](#) This rendering encourages the PLA to pursue unilateral or partnered military exercises that strive to [command the strategic heights](#) in peacetime.

Viewing NWMA through the lens of its differing intensity levels shows how the PLA can tailor its use of force for greatest effect. In this way, NWMA allows for specific actions before war to provide strategic effects on their own. [“Competition with a military dimension”](#) ceases to be a linear progression to the [previously designated “phase three”](#) that shapes traditional Western conceptions of war planning. This perspective offers greater nuance to asymmetric uses of military force in [low-intensity conflict](#) or the below-threshold aspects of the [competition continuum](#) in US doctrine, and shows that the entire PLA force can contribute when called upon.

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* makes clear that the scope of Non-War Military Activities is expansive. NWMA applies across the PLA and exceeds the scope of most Western doctrine on the military’s role in internal affairs and the coercive application of force outside of declared war. Disparate missions such as counterterrorism, riot control, armed drug enforcement, internal military patrols, and epidemic response show that NWMA could include the use of lethal force or none at all, either inside or outside of Chinese territory. These diverse responsibilities are consistent with the historical role of the PLA as the CCP’s party army.

At the same time, the NWMA concept demonstrates that PLA deployments may serve ulterior motives. [Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief](#) missions may aim to expand Beijing's global influence, and [UN peacekeeping missions](#) provide operational experience and a forum to test warfighting concepts. The *Science of Military Strategy* [touts the ability](#) of NWMA to "reflect the essentials of China's traditional military security concepts."

NWMA also reveals blurred lines between Non-War *Military* Activities and the actors who conduct them, especially in the maritime domain. In 2018, Beijing [subordinated the China Coast Guard](#) to the Central Military Commission, but not as part of the PRC's armed forces. Then, in 2021, the Coast Guard enforced China's [interpretation of jurisdictional waters](#). Understanding NWMA allows for drawing a connection between Beijing's maritime security and coastal patrol activities with its use of lawfare, demonstrating a concerted attempt to normalize CCP political assertions as stated fact.

Not all PLA Non-War Military Activities are automatically suspect. Embassy security and overseas security missions to protect PRC diplomatic facilities and interests, for example, are sensible missions for any military to conduct in cooperation with host nations and in accordance with international law. But studying NWMA should increase awareness of the second-order consequences of subtle activities that may not register on a Western military planner's day-to-day radar, and of the strategic impact that the PLA intended without escalating to war.

Implications

More than the "Three Warfares" or "Unrestricted Warfare," NWMA represents the PLA's menu of options to pursue CCP political objectives in the [gray zone](#). NWMA allows the PLA to do what Peter Layton described as [steadily changing the status quo](#) through competitive campaigns. Put another way, NWMA enables the PLA to find [ways to victory](#) without fighting and avoid an [unambiguous, head-on challenge](#) preferable for Western military planners.

Examining NWMA alongside the CCP's "Three Warfares" adds depth to Western conceptions of how the PLA complements [CCP influence efforts](#). The NWMA concept illustrates the PLA's supporting role for meeting larger CCP political and economic objectives by shaping facts on the ground and seas. Greater appreciation for NWMA should allow Western strategists to understand how Beijing incorporates PLA activities into a potent strategy for campaigning. To assist in this effort, Western researchers should prioritize the translation of texts dedicated to NWMA and PLA campaigning short of armed conflict.

The NWMA concept illuminates the underlying thought behind the PLA's observable displays of gray-zone coercion and low-intensity conflict. Scrutiny of the individual activities within NWMA shows

relevance in virtually every PLA-related engagement over the past decade and its potential role in future events. From the well-documented [“salami slicing”](#) in the South China Sea through [maritime security](#), [antipiracy](#), and [coastal patrol](#) missions, to PLA [maritime patrols](#) on the Mekong River, [riot control](#)• [demonstrations](#), [border control](#)• [missions inside Bhutan](#), and possibilities of [basing to support overseas security](#) operations, the NWMA concept is manifest in PLA military competition and efforts to control its operational environments well before conflict.

Even inclusion of [blockades](#)• as an NWMA law enforcement activity may serve a greater CCP political end. Barring unforeseen developments, the primary adversary the PLA Navy may enact a blockade against is Taiwan. Since the CCP considers Taiwan a renegade province, Beijing might argue that blockading the island is an internal matter and not an act of war. If the [peaceful reunification](#)• the PRC claims to prefer only implies the absence of war among mutually recognized states, then a blockade or riot control measures show how NWMA offers a potential veneer of international peace while the PLA acts forcibly and ostensibly under Beijing’s domestic laws. Including blockades among Non-War Military Activities gives valuable context to debates about the level of force the PLA considers acceptable outside of declared hostilities.

To Western observers, NWMA may represent an irregular use of the military, but NWMA is not fully synonymous with [irregular warfare](#)• as US [policy](#) and [doctrine](#) define it. Nevertheless, understanding how the PLA envisions [non-war](#)• uses of the military to influence and shape the political landscape is valuable for US and allied planners as they develop new strategies, [creatively adapt existing concepts](#), and leverage [irregular warfare expertise](#) and [operational design](#) for [active campaigning](#) against the challenges posed by opposing militaries. Just as NWMA supports CCP political objectives, irregular warfare could be an essential [military contribution](#) that supports [fully integrated deterrence](#) and advances wider US political interests by working alongside allies and partners to [put out a small ember](#)• rather than react to a raging fire.

Soviet military planners famously struggled to [plan around American doctrine](#), and it is common knowledge that the PLA closely scrutinized [US military successes](#) in the Gulf War. With the pivot to Asia underway, limited understanding of [Chinese thinking](#), cultural barriers, and the scarcity of Mandarin speakers and translated texts may lead to missteps. The China Aerospace Studies Institute solved one of those problems in translating the *Science of Military Strategy*. Their work emphasizes that viewing the military challenge exclusively through the lens of technological innovation is incomplete and risks [missing a contest](#) with greater nuance.

Accounting for NWMA in US strategy and understanding the circumstances in which Beijing might wield its military outside of war allows for more effective strategies and investments to counter the United States’s pacing threat. The *Science of Military Strategy* signals the [PLA’s commitment](#) to

use Non-War Military Activities as a price lesser than war and a mode more flexible than war to obtain greater strategic benefit to manifest the CCP's will. With a full translation of the *Science of Military Strategy* in hand, and hopefully more translated texts related to NWMA yet to come, US and Western strategists should take heed.

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Main Image: Chinese Honor Guard in Column. (Staff Sgt. D. Myles Cullen, US Air Force)

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