



BRICS leaders (from left to right) Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Dilma Rousseff, Xi Jinping, and Jacob Zuma holding hands in unity 15 November 2014 at the G20 summit in Brisbane, Australia. The BRICS acronym stands for the five major emerging national economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. (Photo by Roberto Stuckert Filho, Agência Brasil)

Chinese Soft Power

Creating Anti-Access Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

Maj. Robert F. Gold, U.S. Army

In 1949, scores of Chinese Nationalist troops and civilian refugees under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan to escape the onslaught of Chinese communist forces in mainland China. Major combat in the bloody Chinese Civil War ended; however,

the lack of an armistice or a peace treaty meant that the conflict remains politically undecided. Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to annex Taiwan and bring the Chinese Nationalists under control of the CCP. The passing of time has not waned Chinese



A Chinese propaganda poster from 1958 that translates to "We Must Liberate Taiwan." (Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

interest in this endeavor. This threat to Taiwan has proved to be an enduring geopolitical issue for the region.

Taiwan sits approximately 180 kilometers off the east coast of China, separated by what is called the Taiwan Strait. The island nation is also bordered by the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Philippine Sea. These waters play an important role in the global economy. About 80 percent of global trade by volume moves by sea, with about one-third of that traffic moving through the South China Sea alone.¹ This amount of trade in the South China Sea was estimated to be US\$3.37 trillion in 2016.² In addition to interstate trade, the region is also rich with natural resources such as hydrocarbons that fuel the region's economies. Taiwan sits strategically along both trade routes and energy resources. This puts it in competition with China, which looks to secure the trade and resources necessary to secure hegemonic status in the region, if not globally.

The amount of trade that transits Asian waters and the region's resources are not only of interest to China, but the region is also of great interest to the United States for economic and security reasons. The United States depends heavily on trade across Asia. For instance, goods and services trade with the other twenty member states of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 2018 totaled US\$3.2 trillion.³ To keep the flow of goods and services, the United States is interested in the overall security of the region. However, the U.S. presence in the region is viewed as disruptive by the Chinese government and conflicts with its interests.

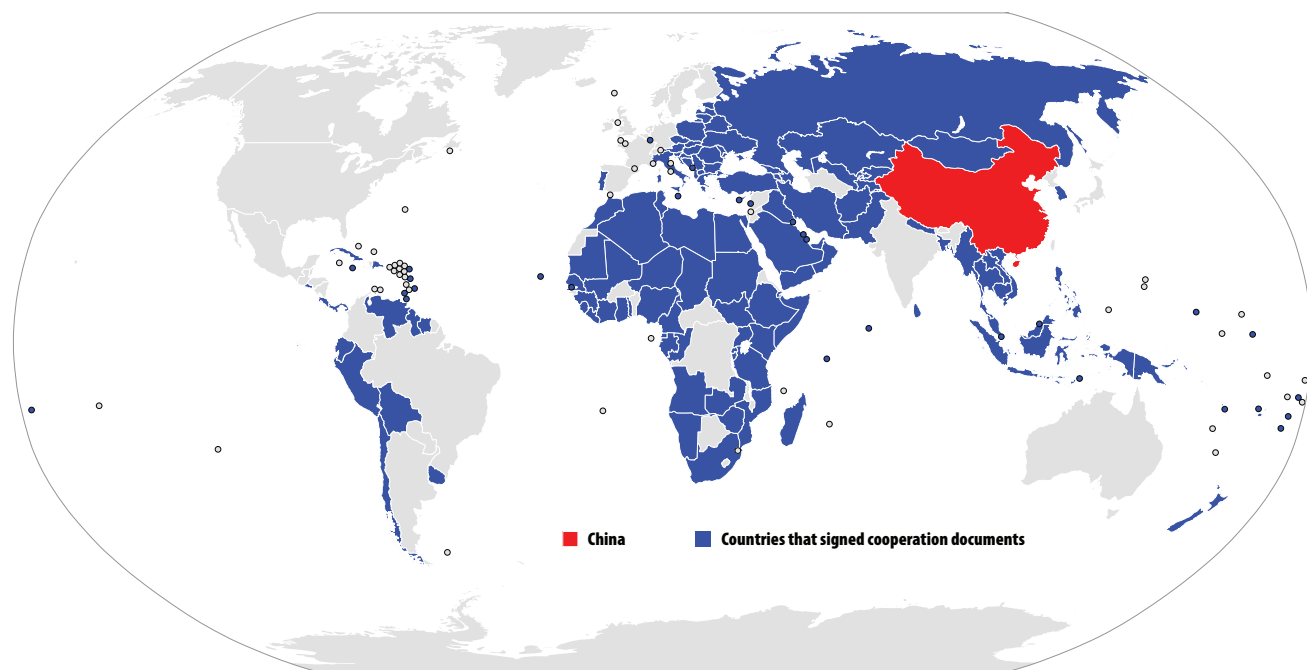
There has been much discussion in the past few years about Chinese anti-access/area denial capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. These discussions tend to center around the growing Chinese military capabilities. Buoyed by economic growth, China has spent years reforming its military and investing in various military technologies. Maps of the Indo-Pacific region typically show red fans indicating the weapon engagement zones for Chinese antiship and anti-aircraft missiles. However, despite the threat these weapons may pose, military power is only one component of China's national power used to deny the United States access to the region, especially if it sought to defend strategically important Taiwan.

China has spent years using diplomacy, information operations, and economic investment to shape the global environment and influence its neighbors. However, despite its global outlook, China still looks across the Taiwan Strait and wishes to complete its long-term aim of annexing Taiwan. Chinese diplomatic, informational, and economic efforts are setting the stage to allow China to seize Taiwan in the future by isolating it. Additionally, these nonmilitary means of national power are working to separate the United States from its regional allies and to deny prompt access to potential crisis spots. For the U.S. military, overcoming Chinese antiship and anti-aircraft missiles is only one problem in gaining access to the region. Potentially, the U.S. military may someday face a reality where access to Indo-Pacific seaports and airports is not only hampered by long-range missiles but also through Chinese political maneuvering and foreign investment. This reality will require the U.S. military, especially the Army, to be prepared to conduct an array of amphibious operations across the region's littoral areas. This will be vital to protecting U.S. interests and allies within the region.

Chinese Diplomacy in the Strategic Environment

Politically, China is very engaged globally because of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a trip to Kazakhstan in 2013 and is a global development strategy that spans dozens of countries.⁴ The purpose of this strategy for China is to create new trade corridors and opportunities across the globe through land and maritime routes. Additionally, increased economic interaction with other countries allows China to increase its cultural interactions with them as well. China hopes to complete this initiative

in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which it is a founding member. The SCO is an inter-governmental organization that was originally founded to play a role in the regional security of Central Asia. However, its role has expanded to increase political and economic ties between member states. Original members of the alliance included China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, but it has now grown to include India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. Several states hold observer status in the SCO and the organization is in dialogue with Turkey, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nepal. Political engagement by China



(Figure by Owennson via Wikimedia Commons)

Belt and Road Initiative Participants as of 27 April 2019

by 2049 to coincide with the one hundredth anniversary of the CCP coming into power in China. To achieve this goal, China remains politically engaged through several forms. Part of the Chinese strategy is to remain a participant in international organizations to showcase its ability to be a regional and global leader. Through these international forums, China engages in diplomatic campaigns to further its interests and delegitimize the claims of others through “lawfare,” or legal engagement.

Chinese land-based trade corridors across Asia and Europe greatly benefit from the country’s membership

through its participation in the SCO has allowed China to secure its land routes for the BRI.

The SCO is only one example of Chinese participation in intergovernmental institutions. China also actively plays a part in the United Nations (UN) by holding a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and participating in UN-affiliated organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the International Criminal Court. Additionally, China also regularly deploys troops as part of UN’s peacekeeping operations. Active membership in international institutions

and the global community writ large allows China to further its diplomatic engagements and show itself as a leader on important international issues. Additionally, this allows China to shape the strategic and operational environments in the Indo-Pacific by attempting to sway U.S. allies into the Chinese sphere of influence and limit American opportunities for engagement in the region.

The CCP also uses its diplomatic platform to delegitimize competitors in the Indo-Pacific as it furthers its own interests. China does this through lawfare. China claims several small islands and reefs in the Pacific, using the language of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), placing it at odds with countries such as Japan and the Philippines. The UNCLOS establishes international law to govern the use of the world's oceans and its resources.⁵ The UNCLOS grants states ability to claim sovereign rights of an exclusive economic zone that extends two hundred nautical miles from the shore, to include use of the seabed.⁶ Additionally, states can claim territorial seas that may not exceed twelve nautical miles from the shore line.⁷ However, according to the UNCLOS, areas that have no ability to sustain human habitation have no economic zone.⁸

China makes the claim that, historically, the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands in Japanese), a small uninhabited area near important shipping lanes in the South China Sea, belong to the country. This area offers potential oil and natural gas fields as well as abundant fishing areas.⁹ Additionally, China is at odds with the Philippines over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. These areas, like the Diaoyu Islands, are potential sources of natural resources to fuel the Chinese economy. China has used its claims to these areas as justification to occupy and build up the areas with several man-made islands. Attempting to use the language of the UNCLOS, China claims its territorial waters extend twelve miles from the shores of these artificial islands.

This claim by the Chinese government has been disputed in international court. A ruling by an international tribunal at The Hague in 2016 sided with the Philippines

and determined that the Chinese government cannot claim territorial waters of areas that are primarily submerged and are within the exclusive economic zones of other states.¹⁰ However, despite this ruling, the Chinese continue to challenge freedom of navigation operations by the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea.

China also uses lawfare to improve its strategic positioning by enforcing contract law. As part of the BRI, China, through state-owned enterprises, has invested



(Figure courtesy of Jackopoid, Wikimedia Commons)

Disputed Senkaku Island Chain in the East China Sea

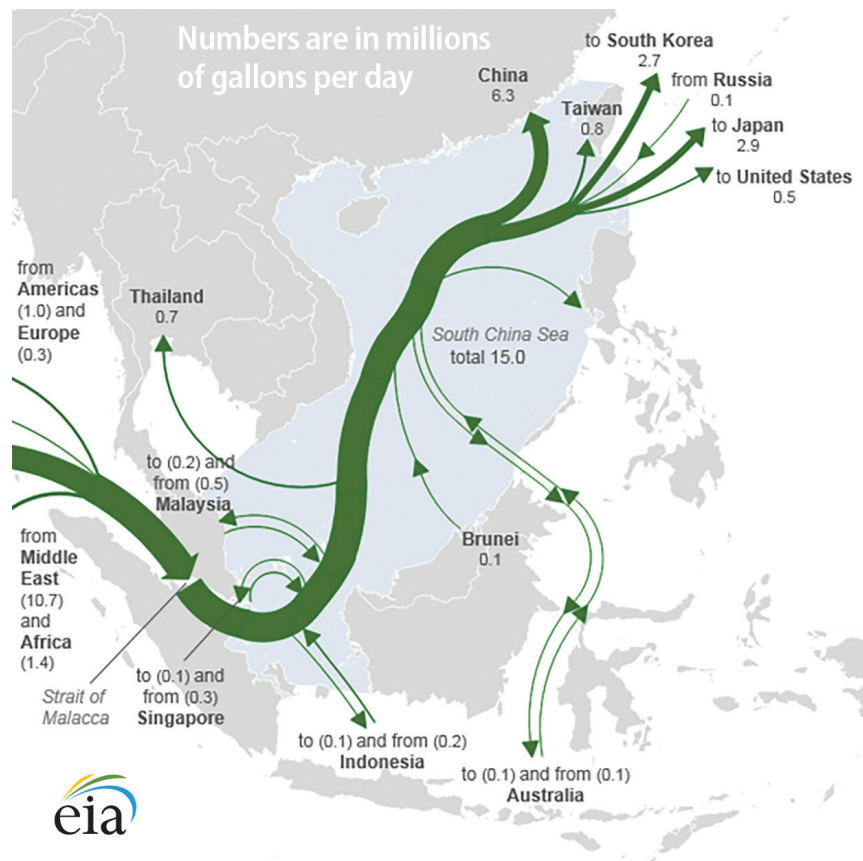
in infrastructure or partnered with other nations on infrastructure projects. These projects include seaports, airports, and energy infrastructure. Chinese loans to poorer states in the Indo-Pacific have the potential for setting up a debt-trap if the state defaults on its loan. Sri Lanka had such an experience with the construction of the port at Hambantota, which was contracted to the China Harbor Engineering Company.¹¹ However, the port did not generate enough revenue to allow Sri Lanka to pay off the Chinese loans that paid for the port's construction. This was because the Sri Lankan Port

Authority had struck a deal with the Chinese to withhold container traffic at Hambantota for a time to not undermine container traffic at Sri Lanka's Port of Colombo.¹² Sri Lanka ended up owing the Chinese the equivalent of US\$1.3 billion with no ability to pay back Chinese-backed loans.¹³ China exercised the terms of its contract with Sri Lanka and ordered that a China Merchants Group take over a majority equity holding in the port. Additionally, Sri Lanka was forced to lease fifteen thousand acres of land to the Chinese around the port for a period of ninety-nine years.¹⁴ These actions enabled the Chinese to gain control of a seaport on the Indian Ocean.

The example of Hambantota is only one example of Chinese enforcement of its contracts with other governments. While Chinese loan behavior is not necessarily predatory by nature, China, through its state-owned enterprises, has engaged throughout the Indo-Pacific on many projects with states that are economically underdeveloped. This sets the conditions for China to have at least a minority stake (if not a majority) in infrastructure the United States might need to project forces and build combat power should China threaten Taiwan. These conditions provide the Chinese with political leverage over host nations that it can apply to deny critical locations such as seaports, airfields, and other key facilities for use by U.S. forces. Additionally, the presence of Chinese enterprises and their workers in these locations creates an operational security concern for U.S. forces staging in an area. Finally, control of infrastructure by Chinese companies would potentially limit the amount of contract support the U.S. military might be able to rely upon.

Chinese Influencing Activities

In addition to its diplomatic efforts, China also uses information operations to manipulate the strategic



(Figure courtesy of the U.S. Energy Information Administration)

Major Crude Oil Trade Flows in the South China Sea (2016)

environment to degrade security partnerships with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. China also focuses much of its activities internally as part of a carefully planned information strategy. As an authoritarian regime, the CCP tightly controls the internet and other media forms within China to carefully craft its image to the rest of the world. This has resulted in social engineering of the Chinese people and pushes a nationalist message to make its citizens more patriotic and supportive of Chinese strategic interests. For example, China makes itself appear as a victim regarding the international court ruling on its claims to islands in the South China Sea. Playing the role of victim, China claims that the U.S. Navy's freedom of navigation operations are a direct challenge to Chinese sovereignty. This has caused Chinese citizens to express outrage over social media with some calling for war.¹⁵

As mentioned, China's influencing activities are not limited to its own people. China also uses propaganda and social media to interfere in politics within other countries and promote Chinese cultural values.¹⁶ China has targeted its influencing activities toward Chinese citizens in countries like Australia and New Zealand as well as others in the Indo-Pacific. Through political donorship linked to Beijing and the silencing of foreign critics, China is able to influence domestic debate in foreign countries to reexamine those countries' views on China's policies. Through these proxies, China advocates against the recognition of Taiwan, for the recognition of the Chinese economic development model, and for furthering friendly relations with China. Additionally, China also funds Confucius Institutes across the globe on university and secondary school campuses. These institutes have the goal of sharing Chinese language and culture with students and educators. However, Confucius Institutes teach a nuanced view of Chinese culture that discourages critical discourse on Chinese policies.

These influencing activities serve to isolate Taiwan from the international community and ensure it is more vulnerable to Chinese aims for reunification. In 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, Taiwan lost three diplomatic partners, leaving only seventeen countries around the world to grant diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.¹⁷ Additionally, Taiwan is still refused formal recognition by many international institutions such as the UN. Chinese efforts to influence opinion has also had the

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consequence of swaying some Taiwanese citizens to call for reunification with China.¹⁸ The consequence would create a dynamic and complex operating environment if the United States were to come to the aid of Taiwan in case of a hostile annexation attempt by China.

Most importantly for the United States, Chinese influencing activities act as a wedge between the United States and its allies

in the Indo-Pacific. While it undermines U.S. security partnerships, China itself does not necessarily want to become the security partner of choice in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ Instead, China wants to degrade U.S. influence while China seeks its own objectives such as the annexation of Taiwan. The vast distances of the Pacific and geography make the United States reliant on security cooperation with countries throughout the region to secure American interests. The degradation of diplomatic and security relationships with long-term U.S. allies would make it harder for the United States to project power and achieve a basing strategy to balance Chinese power.

Using Economics to Shape the Environment

The growth of the Chinese economy has been remarkable since economic reform became a priority for the Chinese government in the late 1970s. As a communist country, the Chinese economy was centrally planned for decades with Chinese leadership placing emphasis on autarky, or economic self-sufficiency. The Chinese economy was agriculturally based and did not interact much with the global economy. However, through the implementation of policies aimed at economic reform, the Chinese have been able to move to a more market-based economy. But it is important to recognize that the Chinese economy, while a market economy, is still socialist.

A major difference between the Chinese economy and capitalist markets is the level of government participation in the market. The presence of state-owned enterprises within China allow the CCP to maintain a degree of control of the marketplace. State-owned enterprises only make up 3 percent of the businesses that operate in China, but these companies account for 40 percent of the business capital within China.²⁰ This limitation on private control of capital assets by China is different than a capitalist market economy where private control is encouraged over government intervention. However, Chinese control of the market through governmental action allows it to more directly influence the course of its own economy.

The benefit for China in loosening economic restrictions is that it has encouraged individuals and other business enterprises to partake more fully in the global marketplace.²¹ China seeks to capitalize on this through the BRI, as previously mentioned. To support the BRI, China has also stood up the Asian Infrastructure Investment

Bank. This bank is a lending institution that China uses to support its infrastructure investment projects in not just the Indo-Pacific region but also in the rest of Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. It is believed that the Chinese government is involved in the construction or operation of at least forty-two ports in thirty-four countries globally.²² Additionally, in 2015, it was reported that the Civil Aviation Administration of China had fifty-one ongoing projects at airports tied to the BRI.²³

China has also increased its investment in amphibious ships and force structure. The People's Liberation Army Navy maintains five Type-071 Amphibious Transport Docks with three more under construction as of 2018.²⁵ Also, in 2019, it was reported that the People's Liberation Army Navy had plans to construct three Type-075 Landing Helicopter Dock vessels. The CCP has also grown the oddly named People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps from just two brigades to seven brigades.²⁶

“Increased Chinese wealth has allowed it to invest in infrastructure projects that have increased China's sphere of influence and enabled it to posture itself around the globe.”

Chinese economic reform has led to an increase in gross domestic product and net wealth that has allowed nearly one billion Chinese to be lifted out of poverty. However, despite a rise in relative wealth, China is still a large source of inexpensive labor. This has attracted foreign direct investment to China as manufacturers look to take advantage of a cheaper labor force to lower their manufacturing costs and increase their bottom line.

China has benefited greatly from its increasing wealth, which it uses to fund reform of its military and expand its sphere of influence through targeted investment. Chinese military reforms have been ongoing for many years. The purpose of these reforms is to allow the Chinese military to compete more effectively with the United States and Japan. Also, a stronger military allows China to secure its interests abroad through its own force projection.

As part of its reforms, the People's Liberation Army reduced three hundred thousand personnel from its ranks and it condensed its seven military districts to five in recent years.²⁴ This not only allows for more efficient command and control of Chinese forces, but it also frees up a significant portion of the Chinese military budget for procurement. Increased Chinese wealth has allowed the acquisition of newer missiles (e.g., the DF-21 “carrier killer”), fifth-generation aircraft, and ships. China now maintains two aircraft carriers, one of which it purchased from Russia (the *Liaoning*) and another it has built domestically (the *Shandong*). These aircraft carriers signal Chinese intent to extend its influence outside of Chinese territorial waters.

Additionally, two divisions from the People's Liberation Army Ground Forces are reported to have been restructured as combined arms mechanized amphibious brigades.²⁷ Like China's aircraft carriers, an increase in amphibious capability allows China to project power abroad and indicates that it wishes to fight in an expeditionary manner like the United States.

Chinese economic reform has allowed it to do several things. Increased Chinese wealth has allowed it to invest in infrastructure projects that have increased China's sphere of influence and enabled it to posture itself around the globe. Chinese infrastructure projects at civilian seaports and airports offer potential locations for the Chinese government to project and build its own combat power in response to Chinese interests around the globe. Additionally, China has used its wealth to leverage other states in pursuit of its political objectives. One result of this is the ever-increasing isolation of the Taiwanese government as fewer states recognize it diplomatically. Rising Chinese affluence has also supported massive military reform spending by the Chinese government. This increased military spending enables the People's Liberation Army to be more competitive with the United States and serves to create a hard power instrument that can coerce Taiwan into reunification.

What This Means for the United States

Despite Chinese efforts to shape the Indo-Pacific region, it is important to note that the Chinese have not

blocked American access to the region; they have only made it more complicated. For years, the United States has postured itself to defend its interests away from the U.S. mainland. This has included forward deployed troops, as well as pre-positioned stocks of equipment. The United States is still very capable of engaging its adversaries across the globe. However, a vulnerability of the U.S. military is its reliance on existing infrastructure to support the logistical requirement of building combat power and fighting abroad.

Over the last two decades, the United States has especially been reliant upon airports and seaports to receive large quantities of personnel and equipment for reception, staging, onward movement, and integration into a theater of operations. Additionally, the U.S. military has grown more reliant on contractor support to meet its operational logistics needs. However, operations in the Indo-Pacific may require a different approach in the future that is less reliant on existent facilities and contract support. The U.S. military should be prepared for a nonpermissive environment where it does not have access to the infrastructure it needs for large combat operations. In this type of environment, the joint force may need to conduct distributed amphibious assault operations, open or construct seaports, construct aircraft landing strips, and conduct joint-logistics-over-the-shore operations to sustain operations. In the future, the United States may have to gain access to a part of the Indo-Pacific by fighting its way ashore to seize or construct the facilities it needs to fight and win.

However, while China builds its amphibious capability, the capability to conduct amphibious operations has been steadily declining in the U.S. military since the end of World War II.²⁸ The U.S. Navy maintains thirty-two amphibious warships, which is short of the fifty amphibious support ships needed by some estimates. Still, of these amphibious warships, only sixteen are capable of supporting operations at any one time.²⁹ Additionally, the U.S. Marine Corps is undergoing review of its force design to move away from large-scale amphibious assaults and sustained land combat. Instead, the Marine Corps is moving toward a force design that would allow it to operate in smaller formations and seize expeditionary advanced bases from where precision fires could be employed against an adversary.

The U.S. Army has an important role to contribute as part of a joint force in the Indo-Pacific region. It has the

combat formations, precision fires, and logistics capabilities to seize terrain and conduct sustained operations. Even though amphibious capability in the Army is deficient, it is a capability that will be necessary to overcome Chinese access challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The Army does maintain a small watercraft fleet that is manned by the Transportation Corps. This allows the operational movement and maneuver of soldiers and equipment in littoral environments. However, this fleet of vessels is too small and is more suited for use in permissive environments. Additionally, the small number of personnel who operate these craft are the only subject-matter experts on amphibious operations in the Army today. There is a significant gap in institutional knowledge to fully integrate Army forces into joint planning to conduct amphibious operations.

The Army has not always been averse to conducting amphibious operations, however. During World War II, the Army took part in fifty-eight of sixty-one amphibious operations.³⁰ The Army also took part in six major assault operations and supported seven other amphibious operations along with the Navy and Marine Corps. Amphibious Army engineer units also proved their worth during the Korean War by enabling UN forces to conduct shore-to-shore maneuvers in the littoral regions of the Korean peninsula. However, after the Korean War, the management of amphibious craft was transferred to the Army Transportation Corps.³¹ By the mid-1960s, the last Army amphibious units were deactivated as the Army focused on fighting large Soviet tank formations in Europe. With these last units went the institutional knowledge to plan and conduct Army-led amphibious operations.

One way to restore amphibious capability in the U.S. Army would be to create a multifunctional brigade of engineers and logisticians called the Engineer Amphibious Support Brigade (EASB).³² This brigade would combine some of the Army's watercraft fleet with engineer troops who could help establish the base camps necessary to support the joint force in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, this type of formation would be helpful in the opening or clearing of seaports, or even in the construction of temporary port facilities, if necessary. The EASB would be capable of conducting construction and combat engineering operations to sustain and support large-scale combat.³³ In a nonpermissive environment like the one China is shaping in the Indo-Pacific, the EASB would contribute

to gaining U.S. forces access to the region in the event of a crisis, such as a war between Taiwan and China.

For the Army, forming a new type of organization to improve its ability to conduct amphibious operations is just one step. Training and education would be necessary to better prepare Army personnel to conduct amphibious operations in the world's littoral regions. To accomplish this the Army should coordinate with the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps to conduct amphibious joint training and exercises. This would allow the sharing of lessons learned, build the institutional knowledge for soldiers regarding the planning and conduct of amphibious operations, and streamline integration of the Army into future joint amphibious operations.³⁴ Additionally, the Army could work with the Navy and Marine Corps to invest in new ship-to-shore connectors to allow forces to be better protected in nonpermissive environments.

Conclusion

China has been adept at using its instruments of national power to manipulate the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, especially regarding Taiwan. Chinese diplomatic, informational, and economic efforts have allowed it to increasingly isolate Taiwan from the rest of the international community. Chinese efforts have been aimed at swaying allies away from the United States and preventing U.S. access to key infrastructure in the region. This would hamper a U.S. response to a crisis in the region such as a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. China has also used its increasing wealth to fund military reform and modernization efforts. A more modern and efficient People's Liberation Army allows the Chinese to back up their soft power gains with coercive hard power. It has also better enabled the Chinese to invade and annex Taiwan.

To overcome these challenges, the United States will need to be prepared to conduct amphibious operations and open critical infrastructure needed to sustain operations in the Indo-Pacific region. Being comfortable operating in littoral regions will allow the U.S. military to move and maneuver large numbers of troops and equipment, whether from ship-to-shore, or shore-to-shore. While the United States already has robust amphibious capability compared to most nations, it is also a capability that



“China has a huge array of multimedia tools to carry out ‘Information Operations.’ It leverages online operations, audio visual productions, and of course the traditional media of newspapers and television news channels. It reportedly controls more than three thousand public television channels in the world, over one hundred and fifty pay TV channels, around twenty-five hundred radio stations, about two thousand newspapers and ten thousand magazines, and more than three million internet sites. The biggest and by far the most important asset in this propaganda machinery is the *Global Times*. It is a tabloid that has been appropriated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and now attempts to pass off as a daily newspaper. Earlier it came out only in the Chinese language for internal consumption; in 2009 it started publication in English to cater for ‘international readership.’”

Snippet of article courtesy of “The Global Times: Obnoxious Headquarter of Chinese Information Warfare,” by Col. (Retired) Jaibans Singh, *NewsBharati*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.newsbharati.com/Encyc/2020/9/23/Information-Global-Times-.html>.

Photo: Chinese President Xi Jinping delivers a speech 18 May 2020 during the 73rd World Health Assembly in Beijing. (Photo by Li Xueren, Xinhua News Agency)

has been declining for several years. For the Army, the capability is almost nonexistent.

It will be necessary for the Army to invest resources into growing its ability to conduct amphibious operations. While they are very capable organizations, the Navy and Marine Corps cannot shoulder the burden of operations in the Indo-Pacific alone. The Army brings significant capability to the joint force in the Indo-Pacific, but it must get its forces there first. One step the Army can take is to look at

creating specific organizations, such as the EASB. This would enable the Army to create the basing and infrastructure the joint force needs to sustain combat operations in the region. Additionally, the Army should work with the Navy and Marine Corps to build the institutional knowledge to conduct complex amphibious operations. These actions would allow the Army to better integrate with the joint force to overcome Chinese efforts to deny the United States access to the Indo-Pacific. ■

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