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# Foreign Military Educations as PLA Soft Power

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Abstract: This article argues Chinese foreign military education programs, modeled on similar US efforts, promote a positive international image of China while simultaneously advancing military-to-military relations. To ensure American soft power remains strong, US policymakers should prioritize international military education as a method of supporting long-term partnerships even in constrained fiscal environments.

On a midsummer evening at the People's Liberation Army National Defense University (PLA NDU) in Beijing, Chinese and foreign military officers in full dress uniform, accompanied by their spouses in traditional garb, assemble. Aided by crisply dressed PLA singers, everyone belts out a rendition of the Beijing 2008 Olympics anthem, "You and Me" (我和你), under a long red banner emblazoned with Chinese characters that translate as "Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of Victory in the Global Struggle against Fascism and College of Defense Studies 2015 Graduation." As the banner indicates, the event marks the graduation of 136 senior foreign military officers from 82 countries from the College of Defense Studies (CDS), while simultaneously commemorating the 70th anniversary of China and its allies' victory in the "War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression" in 1945.[1]

The 70th anniversary of the end of World War II was enthusiastically celebrated globally and in China. Nevertheless, the significance of linking China's struggle against Japanese imperialism with a graduation ceremony for officers primarily from African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries was undoubtedly not lost on the event's organizers who understood many College of Defense Studies graduates are from countries with histories of Western colonialism. Similarly, the period from 1839 to 1949 is embedded in Chinese historical memory as a "century of humiliation" (百年国耻), when the European powers, Russia, and Japan imposed a series of unequal treaties, which coerced territorial, economic, and juridical concessions

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to thank Aaron Yang for recommending several valuable source materials used in this article.

1 All references to the 2015 CDS graduation ceremony are from *Russia-Dragon News*, a Russian newspaper published in Chinese, which partners with Chinese state media outlets including China Central Television (CCTV). See "136 high-level foreign officers from 82 countries graduate from Chinese National Defense University," [82国136名外国高级军官从中国国防大学毕业], *Russia-Dragon News* [俄罗斯龙报] (St. Petersburg), July 22, 2015, http://www.dragonnewsru.com/news/ch_news/20150722/17192.html.

that reduced China to semicolonial status.[2] In domestic media, the ruling Communist Party portrays itself as executing a post-1949 revival of Chinese civilization from this nadir. Comparable historical grievances provide a basis for camaraderie between China and other countries with postcolonial legacies.

The function of the CDS memorial-cum-graduation ceremony testifies to the multiple purposes of the PLA's foreign military education programs. As in other war colleges, students examine and analyze key issues in the contemporary security environment while learning about the host nation's domestic and international politics, military, culture, and history, as well as general aspects of strategic studies.[3] The educational exchanges also strengthen military-to-military relations by building person-to-person relationships with foreign officers. Finally, the public diplomacy aspect seeks to improve international perceptions of China by winning the hearts and minds of foreign officers, a key segment of governing elites in many countries particularly in the developing world.[4]

Educating foreign military officers at PLA military academies such as the CDS constitute just one line of effort in the Chinese party-state and PLA's conduct of public diplomacy and military-to-military relations. Nonetheless, an examination of the College of Defense Studies, the PLA's flagship academy for educating foreign officers, elucidates several key developments, particularly with regard to the role that military diplomacy plays in China's overall foreign policy efforts:

- The PLA is assuming a growing, although still secondary, role in the conduct of Chinese public diplomacy and foreign policy.
- China is using public diplomacy to compensate for its limited soft power and to cultivate international influence.
- China is safeguarding its expanding global interests through diversified foreign policy strategies that utilize all instruments of national power, not merely economic leverage.
- A growing number of African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries are starting to see China as a viable security partner.

## Military Diplomacy as an Instrument of Statecraft

The current trend of the PLA toward a more active military diplomacy occurs in the broader context of expanding Chinese involvement in nearly all facets of international affairs. History will remember the early twenty-first century as the moment China became a truly global actor. Since the 1990s, Beijing has become far more active in international organizations, massively expanded its overseas economic footprint, and intensified bilateral relationships from South Korea to

2 Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.00526.x.

3 For a course of study outline see "Courses," College of Defense Studies, NDU, PLA, China, http://www.cdsndu.org/html_en/to_columnContent_orderNo=2402&superOrderNo=2400.html (accessed April 19, 2016).

4 David Shambaugh, "China's Soft Power Push: The Search for Respect," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (July/August 2015): 104.

Brazil.[5] To be clear, China is not yet a peer competitor to the United States; however, due to China's economic heft and latent power, many countries perceive it as an emerging pole that, along with Russia, can reduce or offset American preeminence.

As China's international influence and interests have increased, its foreign relations have become more extensive and complex. Correspondingly, the number of governmental actors involved in foreign policy has proliferated. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs remains the primary conduit for diplomatic relations, but other ministries, provincial governments, state-owned enterprises, intelligence agencies, and the People's Liberation Army all now also factor in foreign relations.[6] The diffusion of foreign policy implementation has been overlaid by President Xi Jinping's recent centralization of foreign policy decision-making power. In a February 2016 *Council on Foreign Relations* report, Robert D. Blackwill and Kurt M. Campbell note Xi exercises greater control over foreign policy than any leader since Deng Xiaoping, and has demonstrated a "willingness to use every instrument of statecraft," including military resources, in pursuit of foreign policy objectives.[7] While China's primary sources of foreign policy leverage remain economic, security factors have grown as a secondary lever of influence, particularly in Asia and Africa.[8]

In January 2015, Xi called for China to "place a greater emphasis on military diplomacy as part of its overall foreign policy strategy."[9] The May 2015 white paper on *Chinese Military Strategy* also sketched out an expansive role for military diplomacy, stating the People's Liberation Army will "develop all-round military-to-military relations" by broadening military exchanges with Russia, promoting a "new model of military relationship with the US armed forces," deepening military relations with Europe, and preserving "traditional friendly military ties with their African, Latin American, and Southern Pacific counterparts."[10]

Military diplomacy supports developing the Chinese military into an effective joint force by providing opportunities to improve operational readiness. Because the PLA has not conducted major combat operations since 1979, bilateral and multilateral exercises help compensate for a lack of experience and thus contribute to operational preparedness.[11] Joint exercises also provide opportunities to learn from more advanced

5 For an overview of China's post-Cold War foreign policy see Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

6 David L. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61–72.

7 Robert D. Blackwill and Kurt M. Campbell, *Xi Jinping on the Global Stage: Chinese Foreign Policy under a Powerful but Exposed Leader*, Council Special Report No. 74 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, February 2016), 3–7, 16.

8 See Mathieu Duchâtel, Richard Gowan, and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, *Into Africa: China's Global Security Shift*, Policy Brief 179 (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2016); and Niklas Swanström, "The Security Dimension of the China-Central Asia Relationship: China's Military Engagement with Central Asian Countries" (testimony, hearing on Looking West: China and Central Asia, Before the United States Congressional Commission on U.S.-China Economic and Security Review, March 18, 2015).

9 Shannon Tiezzi, "3 Goals of China's Military Diplomacy," *Diplomat*, January 30, 2015.

10 Chinese Ministry of National Defense, "China's Military Strategy," US Naval Institute News, May 26, 2015, https://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy#MSC.

11 Eric Hagt, "The Rise of PLA Diplomacy," in *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies of Stanford University Press, 2015), 227–28.

forces such as the Russian and American militaries. Chinese forces have also gained useful operational experience staging new types of missions while participating in multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities and military operations other than war.[12] Most notably, since late 2008, the PLA Navy has participated in antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in coordination with North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Japanese, and other naval forces.[13]

Relations with Sub-Saharan Africa exemplify China's increasing willingness to assume security roles where its interests are concerned. Since the Maoist period, China has supplied African countries with affordable Soviet-designed land equipment and small arms; however, Chinese arms manufacturers have only recently begun selling African buyers more advanced, indigenously developed technologies. In 2015, for example, Nigeria purchased the CH-3 unmanned aerial vehicle for operations against Boko Haram.[14] While China has long been a major African arms supplier, it just recently started making significant troop contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations, deploying combat troops in a peacekeeping capacity for the first time to South Sudan in 2012.[15] In early 2016, China established its first overseas military facility in Djibouti to facilitate logistical support for peacekeeping missions in Africa and antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.[16]

Unsurprisingly, major peacekeeping contributions have occurred where China has significant economic interests. As of mid-2016, more than one thousand Chinese peacekeepers were in South Sudan, where the state-run China National Petroleum Corporation operates extensive energy projects.[17] Increased security involvement in Africa has not come without risks; for example, two Chinese peacekeepers were killed in July when violence erupted in South Sudan.[18] Nonetheless, China looks to continue security involvement in Africa for the foreseeable future.

## PLA Public Diplomacy

China has historically been a source of "good enough" weapons and military assistance for many middle- and low-income countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. As a result, many of China's military-to-military relationships hitherto have been based primarily on transactional drivers such as security aid in the form of arms, matériel, and arms sales, as well as ensuring the security of Chinese investments and nationals overseas.[19]

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12 Roy Kamphausen, "China's Military Operations Other Than War: The Military Legacy of Hu Jintao," (paper presented at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute conference, Stockholm, April 18–19, 2013, 2).

13 Kenneth Allen, "The Top Trends in China's Military Diplomacy," Jamestown Foundation, May 1, 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43866&no_cache=1#.VxECZPnR-Uk.

14 "Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Military Balance: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2016* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016), 425.

15 Before this, China had mostly deployed medics and engineers. See Duchâtel, Gowan, and Rapnouil, *Into Africa*, 6.

16 Katrina Manson, "China Military to Set Up First Overseas Base in Horn of Africa," *Financial Times*, March 31, 2016.

17 Karen Allen, "What China Hopes to Achieve with First Peacekeeping Mission," BBC News, December 2, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34976580.

18 Okech Francis and William Davidson, "China Peacekeepers Killed in South Sudan as Civil War Looms," *BloombergTechnology*, July 11, 2016.

19 Duchâtel, Gowan, and Rapnouil, *Into Africa*, 2; and Hagt, "The Rise of PLA Diplomacy," 233.

Nevertheless, Beijing increasingly recognizes that robust military-to-military relationships rest on more than transactional considerations.

Consequently, the PLA is working to develop relationships with foreign military forces based on "personal and institutional affiliations."[20] As a part of this effort, China's international military education programs aim to cultivate influence among foreign military officers, many of whom will rise to leadership positions in their respective countries. This investment demonstrates recognition that international power is not based solely on economic and military strength but also on the ability to influence other nations through soft power assets such as cultural attraction and interpersonal relationships.

The People's Liberation Army has recently attached greater importance to public diplomacy and seeks to promote a positive image of Chinese military power as a force for stability that contributes to international security.[21] In doing so, PLA public diplomacy confronts many of the same challenges complicating China's overall public diplomacy efforts. Since the early 1990s, Beijing has assiduously sought to counteract what Chinese sources term the "China threat theory" (中国威胁论)—the widespread post-Cold War perception that the rise of China challenges the US-led international order and imperils the stability of the Asia-Pacific region.[22] Beijing has responded by promulgating a "peaceful rise" (和平崛起) counternarrative wherein a strong China is portrayed as a contributor to international peace and stability.[23]

Another obstacle for Chinese public diplomacy is overcoming an inward-facing culture and authoritarian, Leninist political system to appeal to a global audience. Naturally, the need to control dissent and limit individual expression stifles some key sources of soft power, namely individual innovation and cultural expression.[24] Leading China experts such as David Shambaugh observe that China's growing military and economic hard powers have not translated into international cultural and political influence, or soft power.[25] Thus, in order to compensate for China's limited organic soft power, Beijing places greater emphases on official public diplomacy efforts, including PLA-led public diplomacy.

## Foreign Military Education in China

The PLA operates nearly 70 military academies in China; approximately half offer training to foreign military personnel.[26] Although little interest has been demonstrated in emulating the normative aspects of US programs, China's military educators have been eager to appropriate best practices and other key elements of US programs—for example, Chinese international military education programs at the university-level

20 Hagt, "The Rise of PLA Diplomacy," 233.

21 Heidi Holz and Kenneth Allen, "Military Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics: The People's Liberation Army Experience with Military Relations" in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute [SSI], US Army War College [USAWC], 2010), 430–33; and Shannon Tiezzi, "3 Goals."

22 Shannon Tiezzi, "Beijing's 'China Threat' Theory," *Diplomat*, June 3, 2014; and Tiezzi, "3 Goals."

23 "Peaceful Rise," *Economist*, June 24, 2004.

24 Shambaugh, "China's Soft Power Push," 99.

25 Ibid.

26 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, 301.

were modeled on the US National Defense University International Fellows Program after several high-level PLA officers visited the US National Defense University during the early 1980s.[27] This application fits a larger pattern of selective borrowing from US military education programs. The People's Liberation Army's brief, but fruitful engagement (1999–2002) with the Asia Pacific Center for Strategic Studies (APCSS), a Department of Defense-funded regional center intended to build "capacities and communities of interest by educating, connecting, and empowering security practitioners to advance Asia-Pacific security" in support of US Pacific Command (USPACOM) education and outreach efforts, offers another case in point.[28]

As part of its mission, the Asia Pacific Center for Strategic Studies regularly hosts educational seminars and workshops for security practitioners from throughout the Asia-Pacific region. People's Liberation Army officers began attending ACPSS seminars in 1999 and PLA NDU faculty regularly participated in these programs through 2002, which roughly parallels the timeframe that the PLA NDU implemented, developed, and revised its own International Symposium Course.[29] This sustained effort to apply lessons from ACPSS fora to PLA courses for foreign officers exemplifies a proclivity to selectively borrow and adapt US models and practices to suit the Chinese military's purposes.

The efficacy of China's foreign military education programs matters because education is an important yet underexamined aspect of the PLA's international engagement strategy. According to Shambaugh, courses for "officials, diplomats and military officers from developing countries . . . do teach students tangible skills, but they also try to win hearts and minds along the way."[30] Such programs help China cultivate influence among foreign military elites and foster amicable military-to-military relations particularly with states in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.

As a tool of diplomacy, military education is likely most effective with countries outside of East Asia, particularly with authoritarian states in the developing world, who share China's suspicion of what are often perceived as Western-imposed values, such as human rights and democratization, that infringe on national sovereignty.[31] By contrast, sources of tension, such as unresolved territorial disputes with nearby East and Southeast Asian countries, negatively impact China's security

27 Paul H. B. Godwin, "The Cradle of Generals: Strategists, Commanders, and the PLA-National Defense University," in *The "People" in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2008), 322.

28 Frank Miller, "The People's Liberation Army Lessons Learned from Recent Pacific Command Operations and Contingencies," in *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: SSI, USAWC, 2011), 217–18; and "Mission and Vision", Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, http://apcss.org/about-2/mission/ (accessed September 23, 2016).

29 Miller, "Lessons Learned," 217–18.

30 Shambaugh, "China's Soft Power Push," 104.

31 Cynthia Watson, "China's use of the Military Instrument in Latin America: Not Yet the Biggest Stick," *Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 106–7.

relations with Asian neighbors and are not easily overcome.[32] Finally, several countries that send officers to study in China, such as Venezuela, generally have poor relations with the United States and therefore either do not attend American professional military education institutions or are not invited to participate in US-funded courses.[33]

## College of Defense Studies

The College of Defense Studies, the primary institution for graduate-level international military education in China, is a component of the PLA NDU offering short-term and extended courses for foreign officers. The CDS has trained foreign military personnel under different monikers since the early 1960s.[34] Estimates on the total number of students educated vary but universally number in the thousands. Composed primarily of commissioned foreign military officers ranging from lieutenant (O-2) to brigadier general (O-7), the student body also includes civilian defense officials. The year-long Defense and Strategic Studies course is taught in English and French to colonels (O-6) and brigadier generals (O-7).[35] In 2012, the PLA designated CDS as its pilot program for granting war college master's degrees to foreign military officers and had awarded 61 such degrees by September 2014.[36]

According to a 2010 Xinhua News Agency article, more than 4,000 foreign officers from 150 countries had received some form of training at the College of Defense Studies.[37] Due to this international orientation, the college is relatively transparent compared to other Chinese military academies. In contrast to other Chinese military academies and the PLA NDU, which largely do not have publicly-accessible websites, the College of Defense Studies has hosted a public website since 2012 that shares information in Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.[38] The multilingual website demonstrates that international outreach is a core function of the college as stated in its mission to undertake "unswerving efforts to promote friendly relations and pragmatic cooperation between countries and armed forces."[39]

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32 For example, despite strong economic relations, China's defense relations with Malaysia have been circumscribed because of Kuala Lumpur's suspicion of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea region. See Ngeow Chow Bing, "Comprehensive Strategic Partners but Prosaic Military Ties: The Development of Malaysia-China Defence Relations 1991–2015," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no. 2 (August 2015): 269–304. Nonetheless, recent indicators suggest China's influence in Southeast Asia is increasing relative to the United States. In November 2016, Malaysia signed its first significant defense agreement with China, which included the purchase of four littoral combat ships. See Sue-Lin Wong, "China and Malaysia Sign Deals on Navy Vessels," Reuters, November 1, 2016. Furthermore, under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines, a longtime US ally, has bolstered economic ties with China and indicated greater willingness to compromise on maritime territorial disputes.

33 Watson, "China's Military Instrument," 106.

34 "Courses," College of Defense Studies.

35 Ibid.

36 "National Defense University of PLA Awards Master Degree to Foreign Senior Officers," China Military Online, September 9, 2014, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-09/09/content_6129447.htm.

37 国防大学防务学院首次揭秘：已培训4千多名外国军官 [College of Defense Studies' top secret: 4,000 foreign military officers trained already], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], September 5, 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/school/2010-09/05/c_12519388.htm.

38 Zhao Shengnan, "College of Defense Studies Launches Website," *China Daily*, September 14, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-09/14/content_15759701.htm.

39 "Function and Mission," College of Defense Studies, NDU, PLA, China, http://www.cdsndu.org/html_en/to_xygk_orderNo=2251&superOrderNo=2250.html (accessed April 21, 2016).

On the one-year anniversary of the College of Defense Studies website launch, an article was published in the official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army, the *PLA Daily* (解放军报), praising the "international influence of the College of Defense Studies' website."[40] This recognition is notable because the PLA Daily serves as a mouthpiece for top-level military and civilian Communist Party leaders, advancing policy prerogatives and promoting the official party line. The article describes the website as "an online bridge of Chinese-foreign military friendship" and quotes a Brazilian Air Force colonel and alumnus: "Congratulations to CDS on the opening of the website, this is great news, this is a great platform to keep up with my alma mater and to understand China's military buildup, hope the site does better and better!"[41]

Like other Chinese colleges and universities in the business of educating foreigners, CDS leverages China's illustrious civilizational legacy by exposing students to Chinese history and culture—for example, CDS has organized trips for students and their families to the Great Wall and visits to a Beijing Shaolin kung fu school as well as held classes in calligraphy, dumpling making, and Chinese character paper-cutting for students' spouses and children.[42]

Although CDS students are exposed to historical attractions and Chinese culture, they are not integrated with their Chinese counterparts at the PLA National Defense University. Foreign students are taught at a separate satellite campus in northern Beijing, which according to alumni from Southeast Asia limits opportunities to interface and build relationships with PLA colleagues.[43] These alumni also expressed disappointment that instructors limit opportunities for discussion and rarely depart from official positions.[44] Steep language barriers are likely responsible for segregation of Chinese and foreign officers at the PLA NDU. Most foreign officers lack the language skills necessary to undertake graduate-level coursework in Mandarin, but speak French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, or other foreign languages. As a result, the College of Defense Studies offers courses in English, French, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese, which reflects this linguistic mix.[45] Conversely, many Chinese officers would also likely be unable to undertake graduate studies in English or another foreign language.[46] Putting aside the PLA's motives for holding separate courses, segregating foreign and Chinese officers at the university attenuates efforts to build stronger person-to-person relationships between PLA and foreign officers.

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40 国防大学防务学院网站的国际影响力 [International influence of the College of Defense Studies website], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], September 20, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2013-09/20/c_125416490.htm.

41 Ibid.

42 "Visit to Beijing Shaolin Kung Fu School," Cultural Life, College of Defense Studies, NDU, PLA, China, June 1, 2015, http://www.cdsndu.org/html_en/to_articleContent_article.id=40288a854cd222b5014dbda32f8103bd.html; and "Pictures," College of Defense Studies, NDU, PLA, China, http://www.cdsndu.org/html_en/to_picture_language=English&pageSize=9.html (accessed June 23, 2016).

43 Bing, "Strategic Partners," 286; and Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 297, doi:10.1080/14799855.2012.723928.

44 Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy."

45 "Courses," College of Defense Studies.

46 Van Oudenaren developed this perception based upon his experience teaching adult English classes in China (2008–9).

## "Understanding" China

Coursework at the College of Defense Studies includes general literature on international security studies. Nonetheless, the curriculum adopts a primarily Sinocentric perspective designed to instill understanding and respect for China. The college introduces students to classical Chinese philosophy and strategic culture through classics such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (孙子兵法).[47] A China Studies (中国研究) course provides a comprehensive introduction to the contemporary Chinese political system and China's economy, military, diplomacy, and culture.[48] The course comprises 18 seminar sessions taught by prominent guest lecturers including retired senior leaders such as former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and former Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Vice Chairman Qi Xuchun. A 2014 *PLA Daily* article entitled "The China Dream through the Eyes of Foreign Officers at CDS" notes the China Studies course strives to promulgate the concept of China's peaceful development (和平发展) while explaining the China Dream (中国梦) to foreign officers. A Pakistani brigadier general explained China's peaceful development path is a strategic choice benefiting not only neighboring countries, but also the whole world. Realizing the "China Dream" will bring about a more "fortunate world."[49]

Student scholarship highlighted on the CDS website also reflects efforts to instill greater sympathy and admiration for China. An early 2013 paper, "Is China a Threat to World?" [sic], written by a Bangladeshi officer claims, for example, "The 'China Threat' theory originated in the early 1990s in America and Japan" and stems from a "lingering Cold War mentality."[50] He further argues those espousing this theory fail to account for China's dependence on the international system, increasing global economic interdependence, internal development needs, and the Confucian tradition of emphasizing harmony.[51]

Remarkably, a few student papers featured on the CDS website are less sanguine that China's rise will be frictionless. A 2013 paper by a Malaysian brigadier general notes American forward military deployments serve as a "strategic insurance policy" for smaller Southeast Asian countries against Chinese assertiveness.[52] Nonetheless, the tone of the paper suggests Southeast Asian states should be wary of American efforts to regain regional primacy, which Beijing might perceive as attempts to encircle China and consequently heighten regional tensions. Student scholarship demonstrates different opinions are tolerated, albeit within the context of the curriculum, which steers scholarship toward viewpoints that are generally sympathetic toward China. This demonstrates a subtle approach to shaping the perspectives of a multinational student body with diverse ideological orientations.

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47 "Academic Trends" College of Defense Studies, NDU, PLA, http://www.cdsndu.org/html_en/to_xshd_.html.

48 All information concerning CDS's China studies course is from 国防大学外国高级军官学员眼中的"中国梦" [The China dream through the eyes of senior foreign officers], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], November 20, 2014, http://www.81.cn/jkhc/2014-11/20/content_6233316.htm.

49 Ibid.

50 Group Captain Fazlul Haque, "Is China a Threat to World," *Defense Forum*, Autumn 2013, 112.

51 Ibid, 113–16.

52 Brigadier General Hj Sanusi Bin Hj Samion, "China-Southeast Asia Relations: The Security Dimensions and the Way Forward," *Defense Forum*, Spring 2013, 41.

Another means used to develop rapport with students from African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries is to emphasize postcolonial grievances, primarily with the West. A senior African officer who attended both a US professional military education program and CDS recalled the latter's curriculum promulgated a narrative of US neoimperialism in Africa.[53] According to this narrative, the West, and in particular the United States, continued to subjugate Africa following the colonial period by controlling means of production and exploiting African labor. This viewpoint dovetails with China's own postcolonial historical narrative that the West and Japan subjected China to a "century of humiliation," which finally ended when the Mao Zedong-led Communist Party threw off the shackles of foreign imperialism.[54]

## Made in the USA: China's Foreign Military Education

Although the narrative delivered to foreign students at PLA military academies differs greatly from American international military education programs, China has adopted and adapted some key elements of US models and practices. Most importantly, Chinese programs such as CDS attract high-level military personnel to build and develop mutually beneficial relationships with foreign partners similar to US Defense Security Cooperation Agency programs, such as the International Military Education and Training program and the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program, for elite military and government leaders.[55]

Multinational programs, particularly those conducted at the US National Defense University, are often underappreciated outside the classroom as demonstrating the value of education, and connecting student learning directly to national security outcomes is difficult. According to scholarship on US national security budgeting, "The initial goals of International Military Education Training were to further regional stability through military-to-military relationships, transfer critical skills to foreign militaries, and train militaries for combined operations with the United States."[56]

After the end of the Cold War, International Military Education and Training evolved beyond training partners for combined operations with the United States to include coursework promoting US ideals such as government accountability, civilian oversight of the military, protection of minority and human rights, and democratic values.[57] This shift recognized the utility of military-to-military education in advancing

53 Interview in spring 2016.

54 Wang, "National Humiliation," 790–91.

55 Funding for International Military Education and Training is administered by the Department of State through traditional bilateral foreign assistance and implemented by the Department of Defense. Funding for Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program is administered by the Department of Defense and international student billets are allocated by the US Combatant Commands. See also Russell S. Thacker and Paul W. Lambert, "Low Cost High Returns: Getting More from International Partnerships," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 74, (4th Quarter): 70; and "History of the International Counterterrorism Fellows Program," National Defense University International Student Management Office, October 12, 2016, http://ismo.ndu.edu/Incoming-Students/The-International-Fellows-Programs/International-Counterterrorism-Fellows-CISA/History-of-the-ICTFP/.

56 Gordon Adams and Cindy Williams, *Buying National Security: How America Plans and Pays for Its Global Role and Safety at Home* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 82.

57 Ibid.

American soft power in a post-Cold War era, thereby consolidating the gains of the Cold War based on the fundamental belief that security emanates from proliferation of democratic ideals and norms.

China does not share these goals or ideals. The ruling Communist Party is suspicious, if not hostile, toward organizations and states seeking greater respect for human rights, protection of minorities, or democratic reform. Thus, the PLA has replicated much of the academic framework of the US model of foreign military education graduate programs while jettisoning the values that American programs promote.

## Implications for the United States

China's rise is invariably cited as the most significant geopolitical development of the early twenty-first century. Whether China is actually a near-peer competitor to the United States matters less than the widespread perception that it is. Many observers both inside and outside the PRC perceive China as a standard bearer for an alternative to a Western model of governance and economics. The Communist Party, particularly under Xi, has to some extent encouraged this perception. Due to the gradual discrediting of socialist ideology in Chinese society and increased domestic exposure to Western influences that Beijing views as both pervasive and subversive, the party has stepped up its external propaganda efforts to forge and promote a new Chinese ideology at home and abroad.[58]

Influencing international discourse is a new approach for China, which has previously relied on blocking external influences that the party considers potential threats (e.g., through internet censorship). Public diplomacy, outsized economic investments abroad such as the One Belt, One Road project, and state media have taken on larger roles in Chinese efforts to acquire international influence and shape external discourse because China is not able to draw on the same reservoir of soft power as open societies such as South Korea or the United States. The PLA's cultivation of relationships with foreign officers at programs such as the College of Defense Studies constitutes a targeted component of this larger endeavor.

Outside East Asia, where Sino-US strategic competition is intensifying, China and the United States are not engaged in a bipolar contest for supremacy akin to the US-Soviet contest during the Cold War. By contrast, Chinese and US relations with developing nations beyond East Asia are best envisioned as running on separate tracks, neither complimentary nor adversarial, but rather generally ambivalent toward each other. In peripheral regions, Chinese foreign policy is driven mainly by economic interests and efforts to promote positive diplomatic ties with other nations. By maintaining cordial relations with as many countries as possible, China seeks an improved international image, additional support for positions on international norms and institutions, and diplomatic backing on key issues related to core national security

58 Mareike Ohlberg, "Boosting the Party's Voice: China's Quest for Ideological Dominance," *MERICS China Monitor* 34 (July 21, 2016): 3.

interests such as Taiwan, Tibet, and territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas.[59]

As noted above, Beijing's objectives in promoting alternatives to Western ideology abroad are largely informed by its overriding priority to foster internal and external political contexts that perpetuate and strengthen the Communist Party's domestic grip on power. Nevertheless, the ramifications of China's endeavors in this arena extend far beyond its borders. A major concern is that China, especially if it continues cooperating closely with Russia, is capable of presenting an alternative to the US-led system that attracts and emboldens authoritarian states across the globe. As a result, Chinese involvement in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America presents complex challenges for the United States.

States that do not share US foreign policy prerogatives such as promoting good governance, democracy, free markets, and human rights can now turn to China's more active international diplomacy for support, and increasingly view—rightly or wrongly—China as an exemplar of an alternative model predicated on authoritarianism and state capitalism.[60] Over the long term, the perception that there is such an alternative model could erode US influence abroad and limit the ability of Washington to spread and sustain its preferred international institutions. The United States can counteract this outcome by striving to preserve its comparative advantages.

## Comparative US Advantage

The United States retains a qualitative advantage over China in international military education based on the reputation of the US military and American educational institutions and extensive American experience in building partner capacity. Attending a US war college remains extremely prestigious for foreign military officers, even for those from allied and partner countries that have strained relationships with the United States. Nonetheless, assuming America's advantage in this area is immutable would be imprudent.

As this article demonstrates, China's international military education efforts are substantial, both in terms of resources allocated and number of students educated. Clearly, China has borrowed key elements from US programs, while infusing its own values and messages. If the United States abandoned its efforts in international military education, China would not take long to fill the void. To avoid this eventuality, policymakers should support steps to sustain and enhance the quality of US foreign military education programs.

Due to China's tendency to appropriate and adapt US military institutions to its own purposes, the United States should be more circumspect in future military-to-military relations with China. By no means should the United States sever military-to-military relations with China entirely as cooperation on overlapping counterterrorism,

59 Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 170–71.

60 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Why the 'China Model' Isn't Going Away," *Atlantic*, March 21, 2013. For debates and discussion on the validity of the China Model, see Bell et. al., "Is there a China Model," *ChinaFile*, October 16, 2015, http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/there-china-model.

counterpiracy, counterterrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief objectives has proven mutually beneficial.[61] Nevertheless, US strategic leaders should look for opportunities to maximize these sorts of synergic opportunities in military-to-military relations while curtailing linkages the PLA is likely to exploit.

Fiscally, Congress and other leaders should avoid the regular temptation to see foreign military education as an easy target during times of austerity and recognize that a relatively small investment provides access to global defense leaders and enables international partners to speak the same language of military strategy. Viewing such programs as expendable negates the long-term value of sustained relationships with key partners and leads to an overreliance on train and equip authorities, which often prioritize flashy new tactical gear and rifle ranges over enduring partnerships.[62] The United States should counter the urge to reduce the number of international officers studying at its war colleges by increasing opportunities for key foreign leaders to build positive and enduring military-to-military relationships.

Although the impact of educating allies and partners is often difficult to measure at the macrolevel due to the multifaceted nature of these programs, the aggregate impact of such programs should not be underestimated or sacrificed for short-term security needs. Graduating officers of the US National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs (CISA) and other similar US programs for international officers, for example, demonstrate how such endeavors shape longer-term strategic partnerships. Success comes in many forms ranging from US war college faculty directly supporting work on national-level strategy and legislation to improving foreign officers' views of the United States, shaping strategic thinking, and building the intellectual capacity of foreign leaders to navigate tough security challenges.[63]

Moreover, many foreign graduates return home to teach at their respective command and staff colleges thereby infusing US joint doctrine into their own national contexts.[64] In South Asia, CISA's Nepali graduates regularly teach and update their irregular warfare doctrine at the Nepal Army Staff College based on the latest curriculum at CISA and in collaboration with their former thesis advisors at the US National Defense University. Because Nepal's Army is a key troop contributor to United Nations peacekeeping missions this has a cascading effect that influences strategic thinking in other militaries that also contribute troops to peacekeeping operations.

When Major General Didier Dacko, a 2010 CISA graduate from Mali, was featured in an article in the *Atlantic* entitled "The New

61 Christopher P. Twomey, "The Military-Security Relationship," in T*angled Titans: The United States and China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 254.

62 Authority to Build the Capacity of Foreign Security Forces, 10 U.S.C. § 2282, (2014).

63 Specific examples include the chiefs of the Colombian Navy and Senegalese Army, three consecutive commanders of Jordanian special forces battalions in Afghanistan, vice chiefs of the Maldives National Defense Force and the Malian Army, presidential advisers in Tunisia and Senegal, and many other strategic leaders.

64 In a postgraduation interview, Admiral Hernando Wills Vélez, who rose to become the Colombian Navy Commander, attributed his success as a military leader to seeing the interconnected nature of twenty-first-century warfare, which he learned while at CISA. He applied these lessons to his country's unique situation by expanding the Colombian Navy's leadership and participation in joint training exercises with other South American countries, as well as the United States.

Terrorist Training Ground," he cited his CISA thesis as the basis for his country's strategic response to the crisis caused by the nexus of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other regional threats.[65] In conversations with military planners at US Africa Command, Dacko was singled out as an "indispensable partner" who could "speak the same language [in discussing strategy]."[66]

The recent increase in coalition operations, such as American troops fighting alongside a Jordanian Special Forces battalion in Operation Enduring Freedom or with Bulgarian Army officers in Iraq, illustrates that US professional military education is critical to building international partnerships at the strategic level. At the present time, America's senior service college system, as well as its other war colleges, remain the benchmark for officers around the world, drawing many future leaders of US partner nations to learn in classrooms alongside their US counterparts. This ideological interoperability in which officers and government officials build on the strategic frameworks, leadership competencies, and joint doctrine taught at US war colleges enhances the effectiveness of joint multinational warfighting by allowing commanders to share a common vocabulary as they cooperate to counteract threats in the twenty-first-century security environment. Abandoning this worthy goal just as competitive alternatives to US international military education are emerging in China that share neither America's values nor goals would be a mistake.

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65 Yochi Dreazen, "The New Terrorist Training Ground," *Atlantic*, October 2013.

66 Discussion with USAFRICOM colonel at US National Defense University in 2014.