Decisive Decade: PRC Global Strategy and the PLA as a Pacing Challenge - 2023 PLA Conference

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The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College held its annual conference on the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) February 22-24, 2023, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. This year’s conference was entitled “Decisive Decade: PRC Global Strategy and the PLA as a Pacing Challenge.” The event featured presentations on PRC global and regional strategy, and the PLA’s enabling role, by experts from a wide range of agencies and institutions including: the National Ground Intelligence Center, National Defense University, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Indiana University Bloomington, the Office of Naval Intelligence, Florida International University, the China Aerospace Studies Institute, and many others.

This conference intended to better define the notion of the PLA as a pacing challenge as evidenced by PRC strategies and activities in various regions, and to build a much stronger appreciation of how PLA operations in these locations matter to each other and the whole of the PRC’s broader national strategy. The event also occurred six months after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan and the PLA’s large-scale response to her visit, leading to a spirited discussion on Chinese military deterrence and potential justifications for a cross-Strait conflict.

The panel members that participated in the 2023 “Carlisle Conference on the PLA,” coming from several think tanks, the State Department, media, academia, and Department of Defense, introduced a broad range of expertise to discuss and debate the PRC’s regional strategies. Key takeaways from the conference’s panels and papers include:

- The PRC has accelerated its military reforms, enabling it to extend the PLA’s reach. The “Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis” that occurred after House Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan gave the PRC a prime opportunity to demonstrate many of its newest and most powerful capabilities. Such crises could lead to the PRC using it as a pretext for military action.

- The US must continue strengthening its relationships with Northeast Asian allies in the face of growing Chinese military strength, while also improving intelligence sharing, joint operations, and nuclear deterrence capacity in the region.

- The PRC continues to increase commercial, political, and security engagement in Latin America which lays the groundwork for contesting US security influence and access in the region.

- The PRC’s investment in Africa as its “second continent” using a heavy-handed pursuit of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, in addition to increasing its military presence, is fueling Chinese economic growth, and outpacing the US’s influence in the region.

- The PRC is growing increasingly confident in its economic and military power relative to that of India’s, while also remaining determined to prevent India’s threat to its own security.

- Europe remains critical to the PRC’s growth despite the West souring on the PRC’s support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and problematic BRI projects. Although NATO looks at China as a hybrid threat in Europe, the PRC continues to push its influence in the region to maintain access to the economic benefits.

- Despite the growing reliance the PRC and Russia have on each other for economic and security issues, competition between the two in Central and East Asia introduces friction into the burgeoning relationship.