

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: China's Military Ambitions, HC 1174

Tuesday 23 February 2021

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-36

Witnesses

[I](#): Meia Nouwens, Senior Fellow for Chinese Defence Policy and Military Modernisation, IISS, Charles Parton, Senior Associate Fellow, RUSI, and Dr Alessio Patalano, Department of War Studies, Kings College London.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Meia Nouwens, Charles Parton, and Dr Alessio Patalano.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on Tuesday 23 February 2021. The purpose of this session is to gather evidence on China's military ambitions and capabilities before the Committee launches a wider inquiry into the Indo-Pacific region, including the role of the UK, later in the year. I am pleased to welcome three witnesses today: Meia Nouwens, senior fellow for Chinese defence policy and military modernisation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies; Dr Alessio Patalano, from the department of war studies at King's College London; and Charlie Parton, senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. Thank you very much indeed for your time this afternoon. I turn to John Spellar to open the questioning.

Q1 John Spellar: In your view, does China view the international order and rules-based system as one that it wants to replace or displace, or does it seek to expand its influence within, or indeed to infiltrate, the system?

Chair: Charlie Parton, would you like to go first?

Charles Parton: In the past, China has benefited greatly from the international system, particularly the World Trade Organisation, but other elements too. Unlike Russia, it does not want to mess it around too much. For the present, I think China sees that the system was set up very much to favour what it terms the west—what I would call the like-minded democracies—so for the future it wants to modify the system and make sure that it better accommodates China's interests. China has put a lot of effort into, for instance, ensuring that, within the UN, it gets the votes that it wants, through a combination of economic carrot and stick. All countries in the UN have one vote, so the more that are on China's side, one way or another, the better. China seeks a much bigger say in important international organisations, such as the International Telecommunication Union, for instance, or indeed a better say on the Human Rights Council, so that its definitions are more accommodated and it is less open to attack. China is also very keen on the promotion of things like the G20. That is combined with a very powerful external propaganda machine—this is not so much soft power as, one might say, firm power—to convince the world that its rise is inevitable and irresistible. It is trying to bring those international organisations more into line with that ambition, and with some success.

John Spellar: Do either of the other two have a view on that?

Dr Patalano: I would probably add that the way in which China looks at the international order and rules-based system really draws upon the primary objective set by the Chinese Communist party of achieving a great regeneration of the Chinese nation by 2049, which means that its interest, if you want, in the international order is subordinate to China achieving that goal. The goal depends on three fundamental pillars: economy



prosperity, leading to political stability, and in turn, to territorial integrity. That means, first and foremost, ensuring that all the missing parts of China, from Taiwan to the claims in the South and East China seas, to mention the most notable ones, are all returned home by that date. In this respect, we need to understand that the Chinese form of revisionism in regard to the international order and the rules-based system is very much about serving domestic objectives. In that regard, it is difficult to provide a clear-cut answer. Is China looking to replace the existing order with something else? Not necessarily. But is it actually aiming to change the existing order? Yes, and it reserves the right to specifically identify where and how, based on those domestic objectives.

Meia Nouwens: I agree. I would add to what my fellow panellists said that China sees this fully within its right, as a large power, commensurate with its size and political and economic strength, to do so. I would say that China's relationship with the current international order is threefold: areas where it has clearly benefited and does not seek any change; areas where it seeks to add to the international order, not necessarily to change or break it—I think of parallel institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; and areas where clearly it sees that how the current international order was created and what it is at the moment does not serve China's national interest, for which I would look at, very much as Alessio said, areas of international law that currently affect how China goes about its territorial integrity goals.

Q2 **John Spellar:** What would you say that China sees as the major obstacles to achieving these objectives?

Chair: Charlie, would you like to kick off again?

Charles Parton: Before answering that question, I just put in the, as it were, almost concentric circles of China's interests. Building on what Alessio said, China wants to be a superpower by the middle of the next century, that is for sure, but if you look within its borders, China is pretty much a colonial power. Think about what it does in Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, Inner Mongolia, and possibly even Hong Kong. Its first objective, which has some military connotations, is to control that area. Then, if you look at a broader question of security, it is to control all the seas within the first island chain, for which control of Taiwan—I am sure we will come to that—is also essential.

China has this concept of tianxia, which is not so much ruling the nearby periphery countries but at least having them accept China's authority. So I think the next concentric circle looking outwards is its periphery and north-east Asia.

Finally, there is the strategic aim of ensuring that the US no longer has sway in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the western Pacific. With that background, to get back to your question, the main and obvious problem for China in putting that strategy into effect in those various areas is the United States and what role it will play in both periphery

countries and also the South China sea and the wider Pacific. So, as a simple answer: the United States.

Chair: Alessio?

Dr Patalano: I could not agree more. In fact, I was about to say that if we slightly tweak the question and divide it into risks, challenges and threats, domestic stability is a challenge. We should not forget that the People's Armed Police is the largest domestic law enforcement organisation on the planet. No. 2, risks, climate change and the consequences of global challenges will affect China both in terms of weather patterns and their consequences. This is part of what creates domestic instability, so it matters to the Chinese to address it.

No. 3, if we can be specific about threats and place them in the realm of military and strategic threats, it is the United States and the United States' system of alliances. This is the single most important challenge to achieving the objective of maintaining territorial integrity while rejecting a sense of stability and security within China's periphery, which today certainly encompasses the East China sea, through the Taiwan straits, down the South China sea and well into the eastern and western Indian ocean.

Chair: Meia?

Meia Nouwens: I would add domestic sentiment and instability not just in China but also in the international arena. In 2020, there was a rumoured internal report in China that noted that China was facing a wave of hostility in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic that could tip relations towards the US when we possibly see a confrontation between the US and China. According to the report, China is increasingly being seen as a national security and economic threat. The report then said that anti-China sentiment was at the highest level it had been since 1989—the Tiananmen Square massacre. It is not just the US or just the US's allies but the global perception of what China is that might pose a problem or a threat to it achieving its global ambitions.

Q3 **Sarah Atherton:** Good afternoon, all. Meia, can I direct this question to you? President Xi has declared the People's Liberation Army's objective to become world-class by the end of 2049, in line with the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic and has spelt out the priority towards global reach, but to what extent does China have global reach?

Meia Nouwens: At the moment, there is a global Chinese presence but not necessarily a global reach for sustained operations at far global reaches for the PLA. We see defence engagement in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and, of course, the Indo-Pacific, but it is really important that we remember that that 2049 goal is a very long way away, even for the PLA and the Chinese leadership, and what we really should be focusing on in the moment, and what the PLA will be focusing on, is the 2035 modernisation goal of the People's Liberation Army.



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Of course, that does not mean that we do not feel China's military presence increasingly further away from its shores. Notably, I would point to the joint exercises with the Russian navy in the Baltic and live-fire drills by the PLA navy in the Mediterranean—so even in Europe we are feeling the presence of the Chinese military. Chinese defence exports, of course, have grown in the past and are being seen on battlefields outside the Indo-Pacific arena. The presence is increasingly international, but the focus for the PLA and its modernisation goals is very much geographically linked to the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific region.

Q4 Sarah Atherton: Thanks Meia. Charles, the one belt, one road initiative—it didn't take us long to get there—is estimated to involve between 60 and 115 countries, looking at Chinese reach in foreign policy, investment partnership, co-operation and global response. What part do you think the military plays in the one belt, one road initiative?

Charles Parton: You will forgive me for being an iconoclast, but the belt and road initiative doesn't exist. It is a slogan. It is part of the external propaganda myth that the rise of China is inevitable and irresistible. What does exist—it is a very serious question—is Chinese globalisation. I hate to use the phrase "belt and road", because it is part of the propaganda, and I don't believe in going along with that.

As Meia has already said, as Chinese economic heft increases around the world, inevitably, the PLA, which at the moment does not have much experience at all of operating outside its own narrow waters will, rather like the Royal Navy, follow the flag. As China's interests grow globally, it is to be expected that it will have to reinforce, defend and protect those interests with a greater overseas deployment, if it can afford it in the long term, which is another interesting question.

We are seeing the beginnings of that, but it is very much the beginnings in terms of a naval base in Djibouti and more port calls, etc. In one sense, China's globalisation, as it invests considerably in ports around the world—it has a big programme of investment throughout Africa, Piraeus and other places—will give it an opportunity to use those ports for ships visits and possibly more. It would be quite difficult for some countries to resist those calls, which will come in the future. It is early days.

Dr Patalano: If I may, I would like to offer a possible framework to give an understanding of the answer to your question. I would say that the Chinese military apparatus is globally postured, but regionally focused operationally. It is globally postured in the sense that, as Meia was pointing out, it has started to expand its range of operations, particularly at the lighter end, if we talk about HADR, NEOs, or security on the ground, if we look at peacekeeping activities for their counterparts in Asia.

However, as we start moving towards the higher end of the kinetic warfare spectrum, the capacity to project power is firmly within 400 to 500 nautical miles from the Chinese coast both towards the East China sea and South China sea, and that includes the straits of Taiwan. Past that, I think there is a considerable lack of capacity to sustain high-intensity warfare

operations. I can come back to this point later when we talk about the aircraft carrier project—if we get to that point.

The first thing to say is that it is globally postured, and they are starting to design all the moving parts to have a slightly more globally oriented footprint, but predominantly, in terms of the full spectrum of military operations, it is regionally focused. By that I mean certainly east of Singapore and south of the Ryukyu islands, with some degree of projection capacity in the Indian ocean, notably in so far as, for example, submarine-based strategic deterrence is concerned.

This leads to the point about the bases. Based on this distinction, we need to class two different types of basing opportunities. One is the Djibouti model, which is not just a military outpost; it is a military-commercial outpost, and the Chinese are investing economically as much as militarily into it. That is a comprehensive base. The Chinese base in Djibouti is very different from any other foreign country's base in that space, because within the same compound there is the potential for land, air and maritime operations, and training facilities. No other base in Djibouti of any other foreign power includes within the same compound the same capacity. It is a fully sustaining base and also has a commercial element to it; it is linked through railways directly into Ethiopia, which is part of the commercial output.

A different story is possible. Chinese Communists have made investments, which of course can be part of that broader canvas of light missions, whether it is defence engagement, the occasional port visit or indeed the need to drop anchors for NEOs or some degree of HADR. It is a completely different story having the necessary network of bases for comprehensive military missions overseas. That is not there, and Djibouti is the only thing we can look at in that sense. As a result, I would argue that there are very different categories at the moment in terms of military logistical support for that complete spectrum of mission necessary if you want to be a global force and not just a globally postured one.

Meia Nouwens: I just want to echo the point that when we think about dual-use basing, we really need to think about what we're looking at here as signals that that might be the case. We have heard a number of bases being mentioned as potential follow-ons to the Djibouti base that we haven't actually seen be developed to the same extent yet. Ream naval base in Cambodia is one example, and Gwadar in Pakistan is another example, but we have to see.

I completely agree with Alessio that, for that operational capability and global reach, the PLA is going to need naval facilities abroad for supply, logistics and maintenance, and that is fair. But I maintain that, with the strategic focus for the PLA in the next few years—being in its first island chain and second island chain neighbourhood—we are a way away from that being prioritised at the moment.

In terms of securing the belt and road initiative, or whatever you want to call it—Chinese overseas investment—the PLA have not played a massive



role here. We have seen the Chinese Government rely on local security forces, such as in Pakistan, which it wasn't all that pleased with in terms of protecting Chinese companies and employees.

Secondly, we have seen an uptick in the number of Chinese private security companies taking over the security role for Chinese overseas investments. Roughly 20 companies out of the thousands that are operational within China offer a global security service. These are meant to be consultants but are usually, just like European or western equivalents, former military personnel who are retired and playing a role. This is both on land and at sea. I think that is a useful mechanism for the Chinese Government to avoid a militarisation and securitisation of the belt and road initiative in terms of narratives, while still ensuring some sort of security.

- Q5 **Chair:** Can I just step back before we look at China's friends? The one belt, one road initiative came up at the Munich security conference, and the head of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, made it very clear that he saw China as a geostrategic threat. That is because many of these countries are now ensnared in China's influence, and that will challenge the west and our rules-based order. Charlie, would you agree that this is the biggest and most dangerous destabilising factor that we are going to confront over the next decade?

Charles Parton: It is certainly a very big destabilising factor. In terms of NATO itself and the degree of Chinese influence and interference in NATO member countries, there is the use of Chinese equipment—not just military equipment, which is highly likely, because it is cheap and effective, but also telecommunications equipment. The debate that we have had over Huawei will be, I suspect, writ much larger in a NATO context. So, yes, I think it is an extremely difficult political challenge, as much as anything else, as to the degree to which NATO can keep its systems pure and keep its members working off the same song sheet. China makes a strength of its divide and rule tactics, and its powerful economic position is helping it do that. I think that the head of NATO is correct.

Chair: Let's pursue divide and rule a bit further and look at some of China's so-called friends. Emma, over to you.

- Q6 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Can I direct my first question to you, Meia? Who are China's allies, and how strong are those alliances?

Meia Nouwens: That is a great question. China does not recognise alliances as something that it does. It has a formal alliance with the DPRK, but that is about it. Other than that, it has strategic partnerships of co-operation or all-weather friendships with countries that it views as important partners in pursuing its interests. Here, of course, I am thinking of Russia and Pakistan, but these all carry different strategic significance to China, I would say.



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In south-east Asia, China has close ties to Cambodia and Laos, in particular, with the former particularly having strong links to Beijing. This, again, is an effort to strengthen China's political ties with countries on its immediate border and those in south-east Asia more generally.

China views alliances as an inherently American phenomenon and activity. It views alliances with scepticism and with distrust to some extent. As such, it also seeks to find fissures within existing alliance structures—particularly US alliance structures—that it can seek to widen and exploit to its interest. That is not just alliances, but also regional groupings. We have seen the 17 + 1 grouping in Europe; that, of course, has not really eventuated to China's benefit with the sub-groupings that they are in also showing fractures and moving away from that very positive Chinese rhetoric. Similarly, as I just said, there is ASEAN. Groupings are a potential threat to China if it is not included in them, and are something that it seeks to weaken.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thank you for that. Charles, you have your hand up.

Charles Parton: It is worth having a quick word about Russia and China's relations with Russia. First of all, I think it is very much a marriage of convenience, not one of love. It is probably a little bit shakier than some might suppose, but in the military sphere it is important. At the moment, China still has technology and equipment to buy from Russia. That is decreasing as China's own technology is increasingly superior to Russia's.

The other aspect in the military where Russia is of use to China is that the Russian military forces have got experience. They know how to manage joint ops to get all arms of the services working together. China has not fought since the Vietnam war, when it got a bloody nose. No matter how good its hardware is, it does not quite yet know how to combine it in joint operations, so it can learn a lot—it hopes—from Russia in that area.

Q7 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thank you. I'm not sure who is best placed to answer this, but in terms of China's overseas bases, where are they?

Chair: Alessio, do you want to have a go at that?

Dr Patalano: Yes. I think I will fall back on the point we were discussing earlier on. From the military perspective, the only base that one can speak of is the overseas logistics support base, as the Chinese call it, in Djibouti, which, as I say, from a military perspective, is a comprehensive base. It covers land, maritime and air operations. It is also used as a testing ground for potentially new combat capabilities. We know, for example, that laser-guided tests have been conducted there, with foreign militaries being impeded in their activities. So it is understood to be a place not only where the Chinese army prepares and seeks to develop the capacity to support further deployments, if necessary, in multilateral or national conditions, on the African continent, but also, apparently, for extended maritime operations in the western and eastern Indian ocean.

It must be noted that the pier in the naval base has been extended, and part of the seabed has been dredged so as to accommodate the docking of



larger warships. So, at the moment, pretty much anything that is in the PLA inventory can be docked inside the naval side of the Djibouti base. Again, I should point out that this is not like anybody else's ability to dock in Djibouti, which is the international space; it's a place inside the Chinese compound and, as a result of that, not accessible to anybody else outwardly. So, in that sense, it's a pretty comprehensive and all-encompassing, all-types-of-weather overseas base. I cannot really indicate any other facility of that kind anywhere else.

Q8 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Is there anywhere else you think they may expand to in the future in terms of bases?

Dr Patalano: Could I quickly go back to a point that Meia was raising? I believe that there certainly was the intention and there was potential for Pakistan, and there was potential for an outpost in Sri Lanka. I have to say, at the moment, there seems to be a certain intention to consolidate the capacity to project power within what we call the first island chain—those 400 nautical miles from the Chinese coast. All other activities in terms of development of dual-use-type bases are still on the table, but I would say they are on pause at the moment, so I wouldn't necessarily indicate anything more than the broader media coverage of the usual suspects. Again, I would be hesitant to class them as potential base developments, because other than with Sri Lanka, there is very limited agreement with local authorities to lease out significant portions of local ports in order to develop these further.

Meia Nouwens: I agree with Alessio. I would just like to move away from the issue of naval bases and talk about other types of facility that the PLA has at its disposal. Here I would like to point to a small facility that the People's Armed Police also use in Tajikistan—just over the border, close to the border—for counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency-type operations and intelligence, but this is still quite limited and very small.

This also goes back to that point about Russia and the sensitivity in the relationship between Russia and China. That relationship, as Charlie said, is not an alliance at all; it is often described as a marriage of convenience. There is, of course, contention between the two countries as to China's role in central Asia and Russia's role in central Asia; and where China might overstep its boundaries in terms of providing a security role, rather than just a social, economic and development role, is where we might see a tension between Russia and China in the future.

I would also like to say, in terms of the relationship between Russia and China when it comes to training and exercises and learning, that it is one that I think is sometimes overestimated. The Russians have a suspicion of the Chinese. When we see the Chinese participate in Vostok, that is often at a distance, so we are seeing Chinese participation by observation and very limited participation, and not at all the deep type of military integration between the Russian and Chinese militaries that is sometimes assumed. So there are limits to that friendship that we need to keep in mind.



Dr Patalano: Very quickly, I have two things on this question of alliances. I would like to propose a framework, building on Meia's point on Russia, with which I agree wholeheartedly. From a tactical and operational point of view, the China-Russia military relationship is quite important. There is one example that I studied in the project: a June 2016 instance in which there was a clear sense that a Russian naval task group was working in co-ordination and co-operation with their Chinese counterparts in the East China sea. You could see that there was certainly tactical level co-ordination and operational level co-operation in achieving the specific objective that the Chinese had set for themselves.

That said, does that mean that a strategic partnership like Russia becomes a force multiplier in terms of military effectiveness? No. When they do the big joint exercises, this is not a NATO-style joint exercise where they work together. It is either a Russian military headquarters with Chinese officers embedded into it or the other way round. So there is a clear distinction and separation, which in a way tells you a lot about the limits of considering Russia and China as two fully functioning allies in the way we would think about alliances from the NATO perspective.

Q9 Chair: Before we turn to the South China sea, I just want to pursue the Russia-China piece very quickly. Vostok 2018 was a massive exercise involving the army, air force and navy—huge, from that perspective. Are we doing ourselves a disservice, with an absence, perhaps, of a workable strategy with Russia and China? It is almost nudging Russia towards China. Go back the last 500 years, to the grand embassy, I think it was, of Peter the Great, and the bond that you had between Moscow, Saint Petersburg and so forth, wanting to look to the west. Yet we are perhaps shunting them towards the east and towards China. Would you concur that perhaps there is some work to be done to keep Russia closer to us, because in the longevity of time Russia and China as an alliance is going to be more problematic than just China on its own?

Charles Parton: I would not profess to be an expert on Russia, and how it is at the moment that you get closer to a Russia that is behaving very much against our interests is beyond my ken. I do not think that we should overestimate the attraction between Russia and China on a cultural level, a historical level and a people-to-people level. Where do Russians look to come and put their money, their education and their children, or whatever? London and Europe—not Beijing, for sure.

It is very much a marriage of convenience, and marriages of convenience can fall apart rather more quickly, but I would not profess to be an expert on Russia. From China's point of view, of course it wants to exploit Russia, for very obvious reasons, like technology and equipment, like not having tension on such a long land border, like the question of potentially opening up the Arctic and so on. There are many reasons, but they are based on very practical considerations, rather than, I think, any sympathy of ideology or view—other than anti-America, anti-liberal democracies.

Chair: Okay. Let's turn to the South China sea.



Q10 Derek Twigg: I suppose the South and East China seas could be a particular flashpoint, and are an area of already considerable concern, given China's claims with the nine-dash line and its arguments over a number of land points—small tiny features—and, of course, its exclusive economic zone. I wonder whether you could talk us through that in terms of where and how the situation might escalate within that area.

Dr Patalano: I am happy to give that a stab first. I would say that the best way, from my perspective, to characterise the difference between the East and the South China seas is that both have an element that speaks to Chinese concerns about territorial integrity, with the outstanding maritime claims, both in terms of sovereignty features and boundary delimitation, which are two related but very different types of question. Then there is a strategic component: how these two maritime basins speak to Chinese strategic concerns, first and foremost in relation to the United States' presence in the western Pacific, and then in south-east Asia.

Therefore, I will focus my brief comments looking at those two theatres by emphasising the territorial aspect in the East China sea and the strategic dimension in the South China sea. Then we can have a broader conversation about that with the others, as well.

As far as the East China sea is concerned, the main outstanding bone of contention is around the islands occupied by Japan under the name Senkaku and claimed in China under the name Diaoyu. There, the situation is one in which, even though it has not been particularly well reported in the media, there has been a consistent degrading landscape of how that tension has evolved.

In particular, I would say that Chinese strategy has developed over three steps. Starting in 2012, there has been an attempt to establish a presence through law enforcement, in particular, as an asset within the waters of those contested islands.

Phase two started to challenge Japanese control of the islands. There is a sense that we might be starting to inch towards a phase three stage, literally overtaking control, which at the moment is centred on the notion of exercising law enforcement rights. That might see further deterioration and, indeed, create the risk of conflict.

How far we are from there, the next six to eight months will tell us pretty much what the trends are. Certainly, the Chinese in the past two years, notwithstanding the covid time, have become consistently pressing in that regard, really giving an indication that they are moving towards openly challenging Japanese control of the islands. The Japanese made very clear last August that it is a serious problem for them and, for the first time, they provided clear red lines to the Chinese, insofar as how the behaviour of Chinese forces in that space would be considered.

The passing of the new law for the Chinese coastguard presents a bit of problem because the law is argued in a way that is sufficiently ambiguous to authorise, in all spaces under Chinese jurisdiction, Chinese coastguard



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vessels to fire upon foreign vessels intruding into that space. The context is such that you have a potential for actual exchange of fire happening in a relatively small space.

The South China sea, as you alluded, presents another interesting feature about how the occupation of these islands is related to military outposts of the Chinese outbuild. Many countries in South East Asia have done some form of reclamation but the Chinese have outmatched and outclassed everybody else by a certain factor.

Just to give an idea, the longer landing airstrips in the outposts in the South China sea and the Spratlys are roughly the size of Heathrow airport's main landing strip. So, we are talking about a considerable space there. Those are of particular importance because, de facto, regardless of the state of the law, which according to the 2016 award of the International Court of Arbitration declared the Chinese claims illegal, it allows the Chinese to project military power far from their coastal shores based down in Hainan, and well into the South China sea, to cover roughly 80% of that space. From a strategic point of view, you can certainly see that months ahead a degree of tension continuing to unfold. Because, from an operational point of view, we are looking at a situation that sees the United States definitely receding from where they were before.

What could be trigger points? Definitely, additional deployments on the artificial military outposts in the South China sea of capabilities that would signal an intention of the Chinese to further consolidate their military and strategic position in that basin. I will stop there.

Charles Parton: I agree with Alessio in all aspects. I think we are going to see a continuation of these so-called salami-slicing tactics, measures which, on the whole, are not big enough in themselves to be called out, but gradually move the boundaries and make it more difficult for America, or like-minded democracies, to react. I think the use of militia and coastguard and large fishing fleets around certain fishing areas—particularly the Senkakus, but elsewhere—is very difficult to counteract, and is going to increase. I think we are going to see a lot more weaponry stationed on those bases that Alessio described. An interesting question would be whether they develop a fortification on any feature in the Scarborough Shoal, because that is something that in the past was a red line for the Americans. Is it now? I can see more pushing there.

We are just seeing an increasing aggressive stance, increasing nationalism, propaganda about it, that I think makes the risk of an incident—a collision between ships, or like 2001 where two aircraft collided—more likely and, because of that nationalism, a little bit more difficult, perhaps, to de-escalate as China feels more confident and able to throw its weight around.

Q11 Derek Twigg: If the United States decided it wanted to send a part of a fleet or a carrier fleet into what it considers international waters, which the Chinese don't, how would you think China would react to that?



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Charles Parton: At the moment I think America is powerful enough to do it and China is not willing to stop it. How long that will continue is difficult to say, but certainly for the next few years; but I think increasingly we shall see aggressive feints and moves and threats towards those forces and I am no military person but at what stage do you conclude that dummy manoeuvres, as I think happened recently on one of the American carriers, are merely dummy and practice, or might they be for real? At what stage do you feel you have to defend yourself? I think for the conceivable future we shall see and should see sailings through the South China sea, just as the law of the sea allows, but I also think we are going to see more tension around them and therefore a greater risk of an incident.

Meia Nouwens: I think Alessio has already covered this quite extensively, so not much to add, but two points: we have talked, obviously, a lot about surface vessels and the presence of aircraft by the US and others, but there is another important element here, and that is of course the development of submersibles and unmanned underwater vehicles that present an added challenge, and will do so in the future. We know that China is developing these capabilities, particularly in the UUV capabilities. Where this goes, under UNCLOS—how UNCLOS applies to an incident that involves one of these capabilities—will be an added challenge that we see in terms of how we deal with grey zone tactics, as well.

Secondly, I think what is really important here, as Alessio already mentioned, is just the uptick in tempo of exercises and potential aggressions. We are talking about the East China sea and the South China sea, but of course in the middle is Taiwan. Just counting the number of air incursions the PLA air force and the PLA naval aviation have made in various formations, including various different types of aircraft special mission as well as combat aircraft: just this year alone we have seen 44 incursions, including more complex incursions, as well as multiple incursions per day both day and night. So just the vast uptick in the types and the numbers of these exercises and normal drills—regular drills, as Beijing calls them—really increases the risk of miscalculation, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and that is something we should be careful of.

Dr Patalano: I will be very quick, because we talked briefly about this question of risk coincidence. First of all, let me clarify three points. One: the South China sea and the East China sea are super busy, and any foreign ship will be shadowed and tailed—period. That is the experience of the British, the experience of the French, the experience of pretty much everybody; so the idea that the South China sea is going to be riskier kind of misallocates the picture. The picture has been quite tense and intense since at the very least 2016, if not earlier.

The experience of all British ships on a couple of projects that I run is that on deployments in the Indo-Pacific they were never alone. The Chinese were nice enough to keep them company all the time. Already the Chinese military machinery has a sufficient number of assets to allocate to tail



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pretty much anybody who is in either the South China sea or the East China sea, particularly in spots that are considered core to China, whether it is the Scarborough Shoal, the 70 miles off the coast of Shanghai or in other parts of the South China sea or the straits of Taiwan. That is point No. 1: the risk is already there.

No. 2: I would caution that there is a sense of professionalism. We have seen in the media the coverage of the mishaps and near misses, but we do not always hear of the shadowing and tailing that takes place and leads to that. There is a basic layer of professionalism, certainly in foreign assets deployed in the region that should not be discounted. Of course, this raises the question: "But what about the Chinese?" We have something more specific later in the questions, so I will leave the bulk of that until later.

I would say that a force that went from a coastal force to a globally postured navy in less time than I could gain my PhD, roughly—there are some corners that you have to cut. Training will catch up, and captains are getting better, because they spend a lot of time at sea. But you do not always encounter the same level of professionalism. Thankfully, western and European navies, particularly the Royal Navy, have a level of professionalism that allows a guarantee in that sense.

The third point is that I really want to reinforce what Meia and Charlie were saying: we are going to see a considerable sense of trying to push anybody, either through challenges of excessive maritime claims in the EEZs or against future areas that the Chinese claim as islands and therefore inside the 12 nautical miles. This is going to happen. That is certainly the indication that Xi Jinping has given throughout his speeches, and it is certainly the indication of the trends in China's military transformation. I think the smart move is to take these three assumptions, keep them close to our chest and start operating on this basis, rather than saying, "Is this really happening?" No, it has already happened. Let us assume it is there, and let us take it from there.

Q12 Chair: I just want to talk about China's strategy in containing or influencing—the nudging behaviour of China. It was described under the Obama regime, or even under Trump, as strategic ambiguity. Do you see a strategy forming, from the collective western perspective, on how to stand up to China?

Charles Parton: I do not like to use the expression "the West", but the like-minded democracies are waking up to the challenge, which is the first step. The second step is to understand China better, and there is a lot more effort going into that. On whether we yet have a strategy, who is to form that—whether it has to be NATO, whether the Five Eyes intelligence alliance is to be broadened into a more strategic alliance, or whether it is through the G10—and what precisely that strategy will be, I am not sure that we are there yet, and we should do.

There are also some things that we should be agreeing on now and acting on. In terms of whether we should be sailing our ships through the South



China sea, absolutely we should, for the main reason that that is what international law allows us. We should support the whole concept of international law and not allow countries such as China to cherry-pick which bits are to be observed and which are not. Once you start showing disrespect for international law, as they did in The Hague tribunal, where do you stop? Is China just able to say, "Well, that's a core interest. Therefore, international law doesn't apply. If we put a nine-dash line around the Earth and the Moon, the Moon becomes ours and you are not to go there."? I think it is a point of very important principle, quite apart from a question of military capability.

Dr Patalano: Very briefly—increasing the risk of a horizontal escalation, in the sense that the Chinese like to keep things between the Chinese and the Americans, or the Chinese and Japanese. They hate when a group of people gang up together—the way they look at it—against them. That means that, when we are talking about freedom of navigation, whether in the East China sea or South China sea, acts of coercion that risk changing the status quo, whether they happen in the territorial waters of the Senkaku islands or around the Spratly islands or, for that matter, in the eastern Mediterranean, are all the same. From the perspective of the rule-based order, of which the maritime order is a core, fundamental pillar, they all matter. There is a political opportunity not only in naming and shaming but in reinforcing the point that there is a degree of unwillingness to accept that this happens in other places, because that would create precedents that inevitably might be taken elsewhere. That is No. 1.

No. 2, as a result of that, is the increase in the co-ordination among different actors. This is an opportunity for the UK as well, particularly given the kind of deployment now being discussed—an opportunity to work with others. Alone, you are more exposed to Chinese naughtiness, if I could put it that way, at sea or in a particular operational environment. Becoming a force of partners and allies from within and outside of the region that have joined together changes things entirely, because it is a much more political, strategic and complicated game for the Chinese to counter and challenge. This is about projecting convening power and the ability to operate as a magnet, bringing others together on a cause that has validity in the South China sea, the eastern Mediterranean, the south Atlantic or anywhere else in the world.

Q13 **Chair:** Meia, going on from the naughtiness that Alessio talks about, this happens again and again. It happened with the denial, let us say, of the outbreak of the pandemic; actions in the South China sea, as we have just discussed; surveillance, using Huawei; the impact on the Uyghur population—yet the west simply reacts. Do you think a recalibration is now taking place because of what has happened in the last, let us say, couple of years that will actually lead to, first, China perhaps being on a much bolder footing, and secondly, putting Taiwan at risk, simply because China will no longer care about befriending the west to keep it in abeyance?

Meia Nouwens: Two things. I think that countries are becoming less naïve about their bilateral relationships with China and the nature of the



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Chinese regime. They are obviously more aware of current domestic developments, for example in Xinjiang, and human rights abuses within China. So yes, countries are absolutely becoming more aware. However, a whole-of-Government effort is required to develop a China strategy that meets the various challenges that China poses—military, economic, political and technological, as you mentioned, to a certain extent. That will be the real difficulty.

It is one thing to be clear-eyed about this. It is another thing entirely to balance, for example, very necessary infrastructure development for developing countries with a political relationship with China. This is not just a story about us in Europe. It is a story about other countries as well, and if there is no alternative to Chinese infrastructure, where do they go for that? If there is no alternative to Chinese cell communications, what option are countries left with?

That requires us not just to think more about ourselves. The China story and the China challenge is very much about our own stories and how we deal with these challenges and collectively think about them, but it is also of course about how we expand our notion of friends and allies around the world. Perhaps this requires the difficult decision to work with countries that we do not share every single value and norm with but which have no option but to work with China. That is one part of your question.

This is purely a military question of capability and of how and when the Chinese military is able and capable to enter into a Taiwan contingency of various scenarios, and ultimately of whether the US will intervene. The Chinese calculus is to play it safe; that the US will intervene in a Taiwan scenario and contingency, and that the PLA will have to be able to face the US, Taiwan, with its porcupine and whole military effort.

As Alessio said, increasingly other countries might enter into a role—friends and allies of the United States and likeminded countries that support Taiwan, that might have an Indo-Pacific strategy. That picture makes it very complicated for the PLA to assess exactly the right time to use force for a Taiwan scenario.

We have seen that the Chinese leadership threaten the use of force if unification is not achieved by other means, preferably peaceful, of course, but that doesn't seem to be working too well. If you look and ask the Taiwanese electorate, economic pressure does not really work. Diplomatic pressure doesn't really seem to work; it only seems to backfire. Military pressure also seems to backfire to a certain extent.

I have to emphasise here that the PLA is not ready for a scenario in which it takes Taiwan by force. It has not yet judged that it is a peer and an equal to the US military, no matter how much it has to date changed the risk calculus of the United States to a certain extent. There is a lot to say on this and I'm happy to continue.

Charles Parton: We have entered the very interesting question of Taiwan. I largely agree with Meia but I am not convinced that, certainly

this decade, if ever, the PLA will be invading Taiwan, even if it could militarily.

There are military reasons for that. It is extremely difficult to take an island across over 100 miles of sea. There are only 13 beaches you can land on. Even when you've got it, then what? It is very easy for resistance. And what are you getting? A place that's going to cause you an immense amount of trouble.

Beyond that, even the question of whether America would come in at some stage and help out, if it could in time, is the question of what would happen on the economic and political front. I think it would be very unlikely that there wouldn't be sanctions against China. Most countries in Europe and North America would break relations and have economic sanctions.

For the foreseeable future, at least, if there are sanctions, that is going to cause the Chinese economy very considerable problems, and unemployment and unrest. That always gets directed at the only power there is, which is the Communist party. I just don't think it is going to take that risk.

What it is doing is building up a threat in order to break the will of the Taiwanese people—to convince them, as I said right at the start, of the inevitable and the irresistible. Part of that is the build-up of the military forces and very considerable PLA air force and naval activity, in order not just to give the impression that they could if they wanted to, but as part of a much broader hybrid warfare involving cyber-attacks and united front work and a whole range of things.

There are many other ways in which they could put pressure on Taiwan short of an invasion. Just blockade Kinmen and Matsu, the two islands next to the mainland, and have them declare that they want for patriotic reasons to go back to the mainland, and so on.

Q14 **Chair:** Alessio, I want to move on to India. Can you give a very quick answer on Taiwan and then we can move forward?

Dr Patalano: Very quickly on the question of Taiwan, I think we have to distinguish between planning for forcing unification and planning for compelling the Taiwanese towards unification. We have blended so far both kinds of set-up. The target is clear under Xi Jinping: 2049, everybody needs to come home. The PLA has been given a clear marching timetable. Will they ever be in a position to do so? That is an open question.

However, the planning in case of forcing, which is half of the conversation that we have had, is based on what I think is a four-tiered strategy: degrading, insulating, overtaking and sealing off the island. Basically, that would start with light, targeted kills to Taiwanese air defences and neuralgic ISR centres; secondly, you would blockade and insulate the island; thirdly, if Taiwan has not capitulated yet, you then go for the invasion; and fourthly, you insulate the island from American intervention long enough for the Taiwanese to capitulate.



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Let us put that aside for a moment, because I do agree with Meia and Charlie that we are not looking at this tomorrow, although we need to take on board that the PLA has been given clear instruction to prepare for that, and the military capabilities development is increasing the risk of the United States intervening if one such situation arises.

Let us focus for a second on the compelling aspect—compelling the Taiwanese to see the inevitable, irreversible trend. From that point of view, Matsu and Quemoy are important, as Charlie mentioned. What is even more important is that in 2020 and 2021 we have seen considerable increases, as Meia mentioned, in PLA air activities, particularly south-west of Taiwan ADIZ, inching towards Pratas island. That island is the most distant, the least defensible and the easiest to take of all Taiwan-controlled islands. In that sense, the political risk that Charlie was talking about of international exposure is much more contained, especially if we are talking in terms of a compelling game—convincing the Taiwanese that there is no real legitimate point in resisting the inevitable. I would suggest that within this decade, a couple of spots that deserve a little bit more attention are the peripheral islands occupied by Taiwan, Pratas island on top of everything else. They are potential hotspots for that military adventurism that is seen as reinforcing the compelling acts to bring Taiwan home.

Chair: Thank you for that. We need to make progress. Stuart Anderson, we turn to you and let's look at India, please.

Q15 Stuart Anderson: Meia, we have talked a lot of Taiwan and other issues. How serious do you think the clashes are that we have witnessed between China and India along the shared border?

Meia Nouwens: In so far as the fatalities that we saw along the border are actually quite rare, those clashes are quite serious, but as clashes occurring along the disputed border, they are not that serious. Transgressions are not rare, and they follow within a more regular pattern that occurs each spring.

I would argue that India and China are not each other's main adversaries. For China, the strategic focus will still be on the US and Taiwan. For India similarly, the strategic focus will be on Pakistan continuously. Also, I would argue that the territory in question is not particularly important or strategic for either country. I would argue that it was a symbolic clash rather than anything more serious. It was certainly not along the lines of how important and strategic a Taiwan scenario would be for China. That being said, both countries have risen up each other's ladders of concern, and that is fuelled by the investment in capabilities aimed at countering each other. That has resulted in a heightened threat perception.

I think it is really important to remember that first of all there was no invasion, despite as reported very early on, in the Galwan valley clash earlier this summer; there was no large-scale Chinese invasion and holding of Indian territory, which was reported in the Indian news. I would argue that many more resources could have been deployed on the Chinese



side, which actually were not. We saw some reinforcement of border regiments in the area with additional operational reserves, and we saw that the PLA army had mobilised additional conventional combat forces, including tank companies and towed artillery batteries that were deployed in existing Chinese positions along the border. Overall, this could have been a lot bigger, if China had wanted it to be.

We also saw that it received relatively little coverage in Chinese press. We didn't see the stewing up of nationalist sentiment over this as we might have expected, and that is also a signal that Beijing did not want this to escalate as far as it could have potentially. Now of course there is a drive back, after agreements between the two sides, and now, 10 months after the fact, Beijing finally acknowledge that there were fatalities and casualties on the Chinese side, if in the very low numbers, and label these as heroes. Again, I think this was an incident that got out of hand, but was dealt with relatively quickly.

- Q16 **Stuart Anderson:** Based on what you said there, Meia, do you think this action would just continue as symbolic every spring, or every so often, but it is not something that we should be concerned about at this stage?

Meia Nouwens: Again, in terms of threat perceptions rising, it is a concern, obviously. I can't predict the future, but looking at past history and trends, the snow melts in springtime and access to these higher, elevated areas becomes easier and transgressions have occurred on both sides. In that sense, it is likely that we will see it again and that this is not the last time. Whether they will be as deadly as they were this time, I am not sure.

- Q17 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you. Charles, do you want to come in on the end there?

Charles Parton: Very briefly, two points: let's not forget that China has a claim against Arunachal Pradesh, the whole of that province, which, of course, is 'South Tibet' to China. I do not think that is an immediate cause, but it lurks in the background.

The cause that could lead to severe tension between India and China is the question of water and the control of water resources. China recently announced that it would be authorising the building of two mega-dams on the Bramhaputra river at the Great Bend. That is quite a serious issue, particularly if it leads to withdrawing a lot of the water resources on which so much of India's and Bangladesh's agricultural prosperity is based for a large number of people. There could be a lot of tension because of that.

Chair: Thank you, Stuart. Sarah, over to you.

- Q18 **Sarah Atherton:** Meia, China has expanded its international engagement role towards peacekeeping and humanitarian disaster relief. In 2015, we saw the first non-combatant evacuation of Yemen. Why do you think they are doing this? Why have they changed tack slightly?

Meia Nouwens: When it comes to Chinese participation in non-war missions, such as peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance, it serves a

number of purposes. First, from a reputational perspective, as a global power and a participant in the international order, obviously China likes to use this as a way to make good on its promise to provide global security goods, as any other country does in the UN and certainly as a P5 member.

From a military perspective, which I will focus on, non-war missions, such as peacekeeping and counter-piracy offer the PLA learning opportunities. I do not think we should be cynical about this and say that they are only doing this for military learning purposes, but of course it is useful. That is particularly true when missions take place alongside other more experienced military. In terms of peacekeeping, we have seen the role of their missions shift over time from more simple logistics to more complex participation in active combat areas.

We have to remember that, although China says that it is the largest P5 personnel contributor to the UN peacekeeping forces, that is not necessarily true if we look at the bigger picture. In the bigger picture, China is the 10th largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations with roughly 2,545 personnel for the various missions.

From a learning perspective also, only a small percentage of PLA officers are able to participate. It has been calculated that roughly 12% of the PLA active service troops have taken part in peacekeeping missions abroad, so that learning is still quite limited.

Counter-piracy is an area where learning has been formidable. This has been done in an ad hoc co-operation with western navies in the Gulf of Aden since around 2008, when discussions with China began on that. The PLA is learning more not just about how to combat piracy, but about how to raise “the ability to perform missions on seas far away”—that is a quote from a senior PLA official at the National Defence University’s Strategic Studies Institute.

China has gained knowledge on ship-design and capabilities for operation at sea over sustained periods of time, on management of logistics capabilities and on how to operate navies independently in near-combat operations. It has also learned a lot from our navies about communication systems. I find that particularly fascinating—how to communicate between ships and within navies. The PLAN learned from NATO-based comms protocols, nomenclature and codewords during its co-operation in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. I think it is quite a mix of reasons. Yes, Chinese citizens are increasingly living and working abroad, and the PLA will feel a need to be able to protect them, as Charlie said earlier in our discussion.

- Q19 **Sarah Atherton:** The PLA are peacekeeping in Mali for the first time, alongside British troops. In fact, British troops are commanded by a Chinese officer, and if necessary they are going to receive Chinese medical care. Should we be reassured by this or concerned? Perhaps I will direct that to Charlie.



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Charles Parton: I don't think either. As long as our military make sure that they keep their secrets, their sensitive equipment and their communications whole, I don't see any harm in serving under a Chinese commander, and I think it is good for international co-operation. I don't find that in any way concerning, as long as they maintain their secrecy that they need to for the bits that they need to.

Q20 **Sarah Atherton:** Alessio, are you reassured also?

Dr Patalano: If they are professional, why not? The problem is whether they have experience in this type of activity. As Meia was pointing out, there is a relatively smaller number of serving officers within the PLA who have that kind of experience. Having said that, the People's Armed Police has incredible experience in terms of the UN. They also have a specific school for training. Between the PLA and the PAP, the PAP actually have a degree of maturity in conducting themselves in international operations that the PLA perhaps does not have.

On the ability of the Chinese to work with others internationally, it is worth remembering that they have the longest-standing continuous maritime contribution to the international coalition fighting the piracy off the Gulf of Aden. However, they are the only major contributor that never joins any international command structure. In 2015, for example, the Japanese made the jump and joined CTF 151, and they have been in the rotation of the senior officers leading the CTF. In that sense, whether it is because of lack of experience—they don't want to expose themselves too much—there is a certain element of that, but even in a situation where there is an opportunity to grant a greater sense of trust and a welcoming atmosphere in order to work together, the Chinese still remain very reluctant to join a broader international coalition. That is no judgment; it is just a purely factual observation that in the longest-running maritime security contribution that they have done internationally, they have never, ever joined the international interaction.

Chair: Thank you for that. Let's turn now to some of the Chinese main forces. I think we are going to do land, maritime and then air. Stuart, over to you.

Q21 **Stuart Anderson:** Alessio, I am very interested to hear that China has the second-largest military budget in the world. Is it sustainable to keep funding China's military spending? Do you think it will continue?

Dr Patalano: Yes and no, in the sense that, in principle, if their economy continues to perform brilliantly and continues to grow—*[Interruption.]* So far, they have had incredible growth in the areas that I work more closely on: the rocket force, the maritime capabilities in the navy, and the air force and strategic rocket force. I would say that, obviously, what we are looking at is a completely different military apparatus compared with 10 years ago, let alone 20 years ago.

Is this sustainable? The amount of money necessary to sustain the PLAN alone as it exists today is three times the size of the budget today, because costs will continue to increase, in terms of having a full cycle in



the dry docks for every single ship, maintaining personnel at sea, maintaining an increase in salaries and continuous research and development. So, Stuart, is it sustainable? That very much depends on the economic scale in the future for China. If projections are correct, I do not think that it is a long-term sustainable force, but it is certainly a force that, with a degree of stabilisation, can remain at current levels, roughly, certainly for the next 10, 15 or 20 years. As a first shot across the bow, I would say that in the long term it is difficult to foresee whether it is sustainable or not, but for the next 15 to 20 years, depending on the standards of maintenance and the cycle of routine retraining and support logistics for that force, that is definitely the case.

Q22 Stuart Anderson: Thank you very much. Charles, with this increased spending, how is China attempting to improve the effectiveness of its military?

Charles Parton: I would not profess to be an expert on the military. Going back very briefly to the first question, I wrote a paper that came out in January 2020 on why China will not be the superpower of this century. I think that it will not be sustainable, for reasons I could go into. I am happy to send you that paper if you give me your email. It may be that Meia and Alessio are better qualified than I am to talk about the nuts and bolts of Chinese military improvement.

Stuart Anderson: Meia, could you come in on that point, please?

Meia Nouwens: I just want to go back to defence spending, because this is a really important question that requires some nuance. In nominal terms, we have seen China's defence budget grow year on year. However, if we look at the rate of growth, we have seen some change relatively recently. Between 2014 and 2019, the average annual increase of the defence budget was around 7.2%, but between 2019 and 2020, we actually saw a slowdown in that growth rate, to 6.7%. In real terms, the growth rate in China's defence expenditure actually slowed from 5.9% to 5.2% in 2020, from 2019. That indicates that, although, yes, China has formidable finances at its disposal, it actually does have to rationalise, to a certain extent, how much it spends on defence.

The interesting thing, of course, is when we compare that to the cuts that we saw in other areas of central Government spending. There we saw severe cuts to spending on education and foreign affairs; foreign affairs saw an 11.8% cut in this year's budget. That again shows that defence is still being prioritised, and I expect that that will be the case in years to come, considering the threat levels and the modernisation requirements of the forces moving forward.

It is also important to note that the defence economy in China has been and is still relatively insulated to some extent from the impact of the covid pandemic and economic slowdown in the first half of 2020. The Chinese economy picked up again, of course, in the second half of 2020. It is relatively shielded from the impacts of wider economic downturns because it can be further supported by sources of funding from areas such as

capital markets, and to a certain extent arms sales, even though the PLA is the main recipient and client, as well as from special projects. The picture is a little bit more complicated there.

Q23 Stuart Anderson: Would you like to expand on how they are improving, or trying to improve, their effectiveness, as I asked Charles earlier?

Meia Nouwens: Sure. In terms of how to improve the effectiveness of the military, there are two things, really. It is not just about procurement. When I asked the PLA a number of years ago what they saw as their main challenge, they said, "Kit is fine. We've got the heavy metal covered and we're relatively comfortable with our production capabilities." But it is the people in the PLA that are really of the greatest concern in here. Training that is less scripted, more realistic, more frequent and integrated jointly—not just between forces but across the theatre commands—will be key for the PLA to achieve a force that is not just combat ready but actually capable of conducting the integrated joint operations that it so seeks to.

Stuart Anderson: Alessio, you wanted to come in on that point.

Dr Patalano: Very briefly, with three points. First of all, the strategic guidelines for the PLA have emphasised joint operation as the top priority, at least for the last half decade, and it is increasingly becoming, with the new version recently released, even more to the point. We have started to get a little bit of a sense of how this is increasing. In 2020 the PLA held the first multi-theatre, multi-service exercise that went from the Gulf of Bohai down to the South China sea and the East China sea. It was an integrated, multi-theatre, multi-week exercise. It was the first iteration, if you like, of a pretty complex and comprehensive formal manifestation of that.

Is this emphasis on joint operation real? Certainly, from the top it is the message that is coming in. Xi Jinping's new year address to the military for the last four times consecutively emphasised readiness and joint operation—the ability to work together—so there is a clear sense that this isn't just about getting the shiny kit. I completely agree with Meia: from my own interaction with the PLA, there is a sense of comfort and they are at their leisure with the kit they are getting. The question is about getting effectiveness and translating material capabilities into the ability to man them to standards that produce a certain level of military effectiveness.

Within this context, a recently published paper in a medical journal on a study of the mental health of nuclear submarine force crews highlighted some interesting data—the methodology used was the standard methodology also used by the US navy and, I believe, by NATO navies—with emphasis on the younger components of the crews of this force. It is interesting because in the last 10 years this force has not particularly grown in size compared with the rest of the PLA, but it has certainly increased operational tempo. One of the key points to take away was that there was certainly a higher level of mental health problems—compared with, for example, US navy standards—with the crews in relation to the increased operational tempo. This means that this is a still: in terms of



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military effectiveness and capacity of personnel, if we could take that little snapshot and widen it out a little bit more, this massive growth in availability of kit will still require time to get a nice balance between the type of people you want and people you want and who can also stay on the job and meet the requirements of what the instructions coming from the top are.

Stuart Anderson: Thank you. Charles?

Charles Parton: This is germane to the questions from earlier. If you look at the reforms to the military that were announced at the end of 2015, there is a greater emphasis on the rocket force and on this new Strategic Support Force and types of warfare that will look at space, cyber, electronics, improved logistics and, as Meia mentioned earlier, things like drones and unmanned submarines. The PLA has got a problem and will need to spend a large amount of money training people in mastering these new technologies and new types of warfare.

It's trying to shed its old, infantry-based and very large numbers, which it also has to take care of. The whole question of military veterans—there are about 56 million of them—is a very sensitive political question and expense as well. At the same time, it's got to do all of that with falling demographics and the need to capture a more technically competent set of young people to man itself. That's a big challenge, I think.

Q24 **Stuart Anderson:** I will come to my final point. You have all touched on it, but I would like to know, Meia: will China achieve its ambition to be a world-class military by 2049?

Meia Nouwens: I wish I had a crystal ball, but I think even for the PLA the 2049 goal is still too far away to come to some sort of conclusion, one way or another. The goal that we should be focusing on is 2035, as I have said before.

With regard to the 2049 goal, one thing that I will mention is China's command and control reforms, and how they impact the ability to have expeditionary forces and a more global reach. As of yet, the reforms that we have seen structurally within China and the PLA and the C2 structure are that there are five theatre commands that are roughly linked to particular contingencies in their neighbourhood and area of expertise, and capabilities are directed towards that. There is no theatre command that looks particularly and solely at global expeditionary forces and global contingencies, so how that structure is developed in the years to come will be a signal, I think, but it is a very low starting point that they don't even have that yet.

The 2035 goal is one that we should be focusing on. I know that there is a 2027 goal that has been thrown around and was mentioned by Xi Jinping in the fifth plenum last year. That is not a military modernisation goal. I think that is important to remember. The idea that that is the new goal for military modernisation stemmed, I think, out of a misunderstanding of the Chinese text, whereby we have Jiākuài jūnshì xiàndàihuà, which is



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“accelerate military modernisation”, but that is something that we, as PLA-watchers, read over and over again all the time—it’s nothing new—and it was in a separate sentence from this 2027 goal, which is army-building.

To reach the 2035 goal of military modernisation to be able to project power confidently and successfully against the adversary of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, the PLA’s main obstacles are not insignificant. I think these reforms started with an acceptance, very openly, in Chinese media about the weaknesses that the PLA have. For example, according to the “Five Incapables”, some PLA commanders—we do not know how many—cannot judge the situation, understand higher authorities’ intentions, make operational decisions, deploy forces or manage unexpected situations. Those are pretty basic things for a military to be able to do, or so I’ve been told.

Of course, there is restructuring happening, there is training happening, exercises are becoming more realistic, there is red and blue teaming taking place, and there is an incentivisation to use live fire drills, to be able to get closer to that realistic combat training scenario. But the bigger picture is: how do you change how people think? How do you change how people operate and work together across domains and across services that have been so heavily siloed for so incredibly long in this system? I think that will be a problem that exercises will only be able to address to a certain extent.

I think there is also a really important question here about PLA loyalty and professionalism. We see an effort to professionalise the PLA force to be combat ready, to operate in a flexible, quick-response way and to be effective, and yet that has a lot to do with C2 and with decision making. And while the PLA is bringing in non-commissioned officers for the first time in its history and integrating them into the force, and while it is trying to test and experiment with relaxing certain areas of decision making, and bringing in those slightly lower down the ranks in the military, there is only so much that they are willing to do until they then start to fear that the PLA no longer becomes the military of the party and instead becomes the military of the state, which of course is one of the reasons that Xi Jinping has consistently—indeed, unceasingly—called for loyalty from the military.

There is lots to say, but I know that we are short on time, so I will stop there.

Stuart Anderson: I will not ask any further questions on that point, because I know we have to move on, Chair.

Chair: If there is time, we can certainly come back to this, but I want to move over to the maritime capability. Kevan Jones, do you want to take that forward?

Q25 Mr Jones: In terms of the point that has just been made about integration, there is the relationship between the PLA and the naval side, particularly their development of carrier-based capability. How capable is



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it and where does it fit into the broader strategy you just talked about? Does it actually integrate? Are they developing a carrier group which could be deployed further than the South China sea, for example?

Dr Patalano: This is closely correlated with the previous question. Let's break it down. There are very interesting naval developments. From my perspective—and I know that this is probably not a very fancy piece of kit to talk about—the Type 091 replenishment at sea and logistical support ship is a very important piece of kit, because it will extend the reach and radius of Chinese capacity to project power well within the broader Western Indian ocean, to the east of the western Pacific theatre.

The first point to make is that they are building all the moving parts to have, if not an oceangoing, then certainly a two-theatre navy that can confidently operate across the spectrum of warfare within these two main theatres—the Indian ocean from the western Indian ocean down to the western Pacific and East China sea. That is point number one. We see it with bits and bobs that are necessary to create the logistical trail necessary for that to happen.

They are also building all the necessary pieces, like frigates, corvettes and in particular destroyers, although the size of them is more like proper cruisers—even larger than American cruisers in that sense. They can support complex formations in task groups, notably a carrier strike group. Also, we know that, for sure, they will have three carriers, so at least the one fully fledged to be always operational for their standard maritime parameters will have a strike group available.

The third thing is that they are also building the hard core for an expeditionary component centred around two types—at the moment, it would seem—of amphibious assault ships, which are quite capable, in terms of what they look like on paper, and we have seen them operating at sea.

Having said that, modern militaries, and in particular modern navies and air forces, are very complex machineries. The fact that you have all the pieces in place does not necessarily translate into having the effectiveness that the total would bring together. In this respect, the Chinese carrier programme has two points that are in development, and time will tell whether it is effective or not. One is the ability to operate, on a sustainable operational tempo, a carrier air wing. In particular, at the moment they are very weak on surveillance, and therefore the carrier, in a sort of out of first island chain scenario, is likely to support broader HADR, NEO or multinational missions in support of Chinese broader interests overseas, predominately in the Indian ocean/western Indian ocean space, together with the amphibious expeditionary dimension. That is one element.

On the second element, can they have a fully operational carrier strike group that is integrated to the point of being an effective military tool? I think it is a little bit too early to say. They have certainly been observing how the United States navy, which in China is considered as the



benchmark, has been doing their business, and all the individual pieces are in place for these carrier strike groups to work together. What we have seen is that, as a group, they seem to be as a task force. They have operated at sea. They have been training at sea over the last two years at least, with increasing complexity and live fire drill exercises. However, in terms of projecting power from the deck through a carrier air wing, the results have been mixed and it certainly does not compare with the effort, for example, that the Royal Navy is putting into moving from initial operational stage to a full operational capability stage with the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier.

So, the straight answer to your question is yes, they are moving. They have all the moving parts for a two-ocean navy and certainly to perform a certain level of activities. For my money, the carrier's use might very well be in support of operation in a Taiwan scenario in the East China sea and the South China sea. Beyond that, it does not have projection capacity, at least from what we have seen so far, because of that lack of a deep integrated nature, which requires both the carrier air wing and the carrier group together to work with effectiveness in mind.

Charles Parton: I am confused by all this talk about aircraft carriers. Where are they likely to be used? Certainly not against the US. I just don't think a carrier would survive. In any case, we talk about confrontation between China and the US seemingly in a way completely different from how we talked about Russia, where the idea that the two were nuclear powers and could, therefore, never come into conflict was basic to our conversation. Yet we talk about China confronting the US in places and forget that they are both nuclear powers. I don't see the use of a carrier there. I don't see the use of a carrier in the South China sea where China already has bases and, anyway, it is its backyard.

In terms of the rest of the world, what is it projecting those carriers against? It has got other tools for bringing countries into line. If it was fighting against a serious opponent like the US, which I just don't concede, I don't think those carriers would last. I wonder, though I'm no military expert, whether this is not a complete waste of money. It is dated technology—

Q26 **Mr Jones:** To come to your conclusion, is it therefore something they think they've just got to have, to be seen as a great power?

Charles Parton: Quite possibly. I wouldn't rule out the power of interests of the people that build it, or in the PLA in the navy, in having these sorts of things. Again, I'm no military expert, but it seems to me far more about prestige and power than about the reality of how war will be fought in 10, 15 or 20 years.

Q27 **Chair:** Just to explore that further from Kevan's question: isn't that the whole purpose of this? In the spirit of Sun Tzu, you are trying to show that you are too big to take on, that you are able to dominate your area, and you can do that through status, and aircraft carriers are an example of that.



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Charles Parton: But I do not see where that applies. For most countries, China already has tools for trying to put pressure on them, through economic and other ways, and so far they have been relatively successful. The sort of countries that it can't do that with are maybe the big European countries and the United States, and therein, I don't think that adding a carrier or two makes a large amount of difference.

Chair: Let's move forward. We've done the land-based, the army and the navy. Richard Drax, did you want to come in quickly?

Q28 **Richard Drax:** I am sorry I was late. I was attending another virtual meeting before this one. Charles, I am fascinated by your replies so far. British troops under Chinese officers was an interesting one, which you think is okay.

On aircraft carriers, bearing in mind that it seems to me, unless I've got it wrong, that China is expanding—not least to have a foothold on the world's resources, which I suppose ultimately might run out, in the worst-case scenario—what better to have an aircraft carrier with 60 aircraft on it, to protect the troops on the ground, and do all the things that conventional warfare involves, without resorting to a nuclear war?

Charles Parton: But I would argue, "Against what targets?" If your resources are cobalt mines in the Congo, are you going to bomb them? I don't see that that greatly helps.

Richard Drax: Not to bomb them; more to defend them and defend what they have and where they have expanded to, which we can see is right around the world—worryingly so, I would have thought.

Chair: I can see us getting involved. Alessio, I know you're desperate to come in. I do want to cover the third conventional dimension, which is air. Then, of course, there is space and cyber, which we need to get into in the last 15 minutes. If you don't mind, we can progress forward. Sarah is keen to ask her question.

Q29 **Sarah Atherton:** A quick question about the PLA air force. We know that there are over 2,000 combat aircraft—that is not including UAVs—and 395,000 combat personnel within the air force. It appears quite formidable, but as we know quantity does not always equate to quality. What is your assessment of the air force's capabilities, Charles?

Charles Parton: Again, when it comes down to a very specific military question, I would defer to Meia and Alessio.

Dr Patalano: I will leave part of the answer to Meia, because she also covers this aspect quite well, but I will focus on two things in terms of the projection in to rule the maritime theatre, which would be the first island chain and refers to what we have discussed so far. From my perspective, there is a significant increase, in terms of the design, payload and operational and training activity that the Chinese air force has been conducting, certainly in the period of the last five years, and remarkably and starkly over the last two years. We are talking about an organisation that has been operating with more than 318 routine patrols just across the

straits of Taiwan. That does not add the about 900 interceptions that the Japanese air force does, on average. If practice makes you better, it is a hell of a practice these guys are getting.

On top of that, if you look particularly at the design of strategic bombers and the way they are developing, there is a clear ConOps behind it and there are clear objectives behind it. The H-6K, which is the modern strategic bomber that the Chinese have, is a mass-scale production. It is significantly improved from the previous H-6 strategic bomber, and now can also carry conventional long-distance, long-range missiles, which can contribute to and extend the reach and the capacity to project air cover in these broader maritime basins. In terms of ConOps, doctrine, need for integration and practice, the last two years have been a formidable period to observe in terms of improvement. Are they perfect? They aren't, but that extends to all the services, and all services that go through this absolutely staggering increase in less than a generation.

Meia Nouwens: The PLA air force is continuing to improve its equipment inventory and training to shift from what has always been, in the past, more of a domestic defensive focus towards a more power projection and offensive role. We have seen that in the types of aircraft that have come online. It has the technical capabilities to be a peer competitor to, for example, the US air force in China's immediate neighbourhood, but it is likely still limited somewhat by the human element, as Alessio just said, in terms of its capability—in terms of the number of flying hours. As Alessio also said, flying hours seem to be going up in the near region.

It is slightly behind the Russian air force in terms of its platform modernisation, and probably also its pilot and support crew level training, but in terms of the defence industry—I know we will talk about that later—that supports the PLA air force, and the rest of the PLA air force, the weakness there really still is engine production. That is going to be a key area of focus for the PLA. We have seen that the J-20—China's most advanced fighter aircraft—is still using Russian engines. The domestically produced WS-10C is still going through some iterations, working towards a WS-15 version of the aircraft engine. It is still some way away before we will see that integrated into the J-20.

There is, again, a question about how far along they are in terms of their true multi-role capabilities, or their joint operational capabilities. We see that being practised in combat engagements during exercises like Golden Helmet and Red Sword and Blue Sword exercises since about 2011. But overall, again, I think there is a struggle here with regard to PLAAF and the wider PLA being stovepiped and having procedural organisations that are sometimes relatively separate.

Maintenance also still seems to be a question. It is aligned with relatively low tempo peacetime operations in many areas, so it is really unclear still how the air force would be able to adapt this to high-intensity wartime operations. As Alessio said, there is the question of becoming, and having plans to become, more extra-regional in its capabilities. Here we see the introduction of significantly higher numbers of Y-20 transport and tanker



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aircraft to be a strong indication of this, as well as the potential new introduction of long-range stealth bombers such as the H-20, which we think we might see in the early '20s at last.

Chair: We will now turn to another dimension of this: the cyber and the space side. Martin Docherty-Hughes, over to you.

- Q30 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I wonder if I could first direct my question to Meia. Military officials across the world are highlighting the importance of cyber. Some would say that, in China, they are highlighting it as a way of binding, paralysing and inducing chaos in their adversaries. Do you think that China has the capability to do this?

Meia Nouwens: It is quite difficult to say what capabilities the strategic support force actually has and is able to field. For all the reporting that we see on the PLA's reforms and modernisation efforts, progresses and weaknesses, the cyber element is the least reported of all, though we know that it is clearly a focus from doctrinal texts and recruitment efforts that we have seen published. But from open source materials, I am going to be honest and say that this is really difficult to know. China is no keener than other militaries to divulge the details of its cyber capabilities. What we have to go on here is inference that they have invested substantial resources in this area through military-civil fusion, or Jūnmín rónghé, through investment in the strategic support force and how it is set up, and through other Chinese cyber activity that might be leveraged for this or for learning. But it is really difficult to be quite so specific about this.

Dr Patalano: I would not have anything to add to that. As Meia correctly pointed out, there is very little available open source material, in military terms, for how there is a connection. I have a few things to say about the mode related to the civil-military fusion aspects of the conversation, so I will keep them for then.

Charles Parton: There is a parallel here with the automobile industry, in a way. China sees itself as not really competing very well in traditional automobiles and is therefore jumping ahead to the new energy vehicles. In the military sphere, although it is bringing its conventional forces up to date, it is also looking very deeply at jumping ahead of America and others via other forms of warfare. There is a great emphasis on space, cyber and so forth. This gets into other, somewhat controversial grounds too. If you are looking to degrade forces, you don't necessarily have to do it through the military. If you are deeply involved in another country's critical national infrastructure, you may get your way through either threat or the actuality of carrying it out—not necessarily by going to war. That is an area that a lot of people have commented on.

- Q31 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Would you say—you will like this way of thinking—that it is also a far cheaper way of achieving your aims?

Charles Parton: As Alessio and Meia have already indicated, there has been no shortage of money put the PLA's way. But I also think that there is no shortage of money and effort put in through this way as well.

Dr Patalano: On the point about whether it is a cheaper way, I think it would be a mistake to look at it as a cheaper way to achieve an objective.

- Q32 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I should not necessarily say “cheaper”. I meant the lower likelihood of loss of life through armed conflict.

Dr Patalano: I would not necessarily imply that the problem of loss of life is a primary concern. It depends on the context and the particular scenario that you had in mind. For example, as we have talked about already, in a Taiwan-related contingency scenario, an attack on national infrastructure against the United States as a way to distract and delay is certainly something to consider, in the same way as if there is retaliation towards any other state actor for doing something that the Chinese are displeased with. However, I would not say that that is easier to achieve without risking sanctions.

We need to shift the emphasis to the mindset in which, short of a fully fledged open war, the boundaries between offence and defence, and what the frontline is and is not, are very much blurred. You are in the game comprehensively, and as a result you are a target comprehensively. In that sense, cyber-capabilities are part of the bigger picture against which, I suppose, there is a problem of resilience, certainly, on one hand, and a problem of lawfare on the other—the Chinese believe that, until a certain threshold on the use of violence is met, you are not in open war and everything is acceptable.

Going forward, in response to your question about the importance of cyber and space capabilities, it is absolutely important to start looking at these new emerging domains, which are fairly under-regulated from governance in the normative space, and to consider them as possible spaces that lawfare, as it is conceptualised in the Chinese context, is targeted.

- Q33 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Based on what you have said, how could those advances in space aid China’s geopolitical ambitions in the Asia-Pacific?

Dr Patalano: It depends on what particular objectives we are talking about. It depends very much on whether we are talking about the territorial integrity element of it, in which case these capabilities, in a Taiwan-related scenario, are part of compelling or part of that forcing game. If it is against Japan and the Senkaku islands, it may very well be as part of the dialogue to, again, compel someone. It is part of that coercive agenda, which then needs to be relayed to specific objectives, which vary considerably across the Asia-Pacific.

It depends on whether we are talking about the territorial integrity elements, or whether we are talking about military operations to maintain superiority in the broader operational theatre, in which case you are thinking about both how to hit civilian targets of your supposed enemy, such as the United States, or the military targets, which would be the United States military and its partners and allies.



Meia Nouwens: On whether China is prioritising the development of conventional forces or newer domains such as cyber-space, I do not think that we can conclusively say that it is one over the other. These are clearly, as we see from Chinese doctrinal texts, being done in tandem. One reason has to do with the fact that conventional war is likely in the near or medium-term future, and that the PLA is of course building those capabilities to prepare for future scenarios. On the other question, cyber and space are integral to conventional capability. You cannot have conventional capabilities in a modern military without being able to have capabilities in cyber and space. It has to be both at the same time. I think, looking forward to the 14th five-year plan, we will see a greater emphasis on cyber and space moving forward.

In terms of emerging areas of technology, again I do not think it is the case that by 2049 the PLA will move to killer robots, and that that is what a military scenario with the PLA will look like. That is a common misunderstanding, or at least assumption. It is too early to say. It is unrealistic.

In terms of how China advances and how space actually aids its geopolitical ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, I will say a couple of things. As I said, it improves, for conventional capabilities and others, targeting for long-range precision weaponry. Secondly, the BeiDou satellite constellation network actually provides not only the PLA but its maritime militia and the coastguard with maritime information, domain awareness and control. We know that one Chinese private security company has said that it uses the BeiDou network. Pakistan, one of China's military partners, is linked into BeiDou's military space frequency. Similarly, the supplying of satellites and launch capabilities to nascent space powers, not just in the Asia-Pacific, but more broadly, also has a diplomatic and relationship-building element to it, so there is a number of components here.

Q34 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you. Very briefly, Charles, before we move on.

Charles Parton: I thought it was an interesting point that you raised about the forms of warfare that mean fewer casualties, because of China's longstanding one child policy—now abandoned—and the sheer political difficulties of sustaining casualties. We have not seen that because China has not had a vast number of casualties through war, but I think it would be highly politically sensitive and therefore highly desirable politically to be avoided. Therefore that gives a much greater incentive to develop other forms of warfare.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you. Chair, back to you.

Chair: Martin, thank you. Richard Drax, can we quickly get through question 15? The clock is against us.

Q35 **Richard Drax:** Just quickly, what is your assessment of China's current nuclear arsenal and its plans for the future? Does the Chinese Government remain committed to a no first use policy? Dr Alessio.

Dr Patalano: I will be brief and focus on delivery systems. I particularly want to refer to the Type 094 SSBNs, which are the main delivery tools for the stealth strategic components. This is an important programme that the Chinese have been committed to continuously modernise, and certainly now has reached levels that are much more advanced than we were used to. We also know that, in terms of operational deployment and patrols, Chinese SSBNs have been venturing outside the immediate space of the first island chain and into the Indian ocean. In that sense, we are talking about a function that is performed within the economy of the Chinese military that is expanding. It is not just about operating close to the Chinese shore as a defensive shield, but certainly starting to make its own first forays into other basins

Very important for this type of operation to be successful is the charting of seabeds and quality hydrographic surveys. It so happens that the Chinese have been very busy mapping not only the Indian ocean but also the polar regions and other parts of the maritime theatres, where they deploy their forces. That ought to increase the operational viability if and when required to deploy also some unrelated forces.

Why does this matter? It matters because, operationally, it brings Europe closer to the strike range of Chinese ballistic submarines, as well as providing alternative options in case of a face-off with the United States. Does that mean that there has been a change in doctrinal posture? No. There is no change that I can detect. However, it certainly creates the pre-conditions to allow the Chinese to have the options to consider alternatives, even though limited—if we are still talking about *[Inaudible]* the end of the Type 094 class—other than just a second strike on the position.

Richard Drax: Thank you. Meia, anything to add?

Meia Nouwens: Yes, absolutely. China is of course expanding a little bit broader than Alessio's expert naval focus. China has been expanding its ICBM and SLBM arsenals by roughly 50% since 2017. The number of ICBMs have gone from 70 to 100, and SLBM tubes have gone from roughly 48 to 72. We have also seen new intercontinental-range designs, so China is able to again be able to reach further afield with more modern and MIRV-capable systems. What is really interesting—turning to the no first use doctrine and no first use policy—is that I agree with Alessio that there is no observable shift in doctrine that we can see that would suggest that China is moving away from its policy of no first use. That being said, MIRVs are seen as inherently first-use capabilities by some, and, second of all, the dual-capable nature of some of these new systems that have come online, such as the DF-26, somewhat call into question what the real use and purpose of these systems are, if there is still a no first use policy in place.

Richard Drax: Finally, Charles.

Charles Parton: I think if it abandoned its no first use policy, that would be an enormous statement to the world about the whole nature of its



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global ambitions, and I very much doubt it will ever say that openly and have people come to therefore consider it to be an expansionist power, rather than the posture that it likes to put forward at the moment.

Richard Drax: Thank you. Chairman, back to you.

- Q36 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Just one final question, to wrap all this together: on this constant competition that we are now seeing between China and the west, how do we, as we are conducting our integrated review, counter this? How do we offer a counterbalance to what China is doing economically, technologically and militarily, with the dozens of countries that we have spoken about that are getting seemingly ensnared in China's influence? Should we be looking for greater upstream engagement, for example, in befriending and strengthening our bonds with, let's say, the Commonwealth countries across Africa? Charlie.

Charles Parton: Well, I think we have touched on elements of this already. First of all, I think we need to get our house in order and be a much better model for other countries than we have in the past. I think, also, we talked about the need for very considerable increased co-operation in all sorts of fora—with major Europeans, but also all round the world. This is a question of liberal-minded democracies getting together. It is a very serious values war—not a cold war; it is very different from Russia—but it is here to stay, and we need to recognise that and work far more closely together.

Meia Nouwens: I think this, again, isn't just a question about liberal democracies but about expanding our partnerships with other countries that might be looking for alternatives and extending their own relationships with us. So I wouldn't just limit it to liberal democracies. Also, again, as I said at the start, this is a lot about looking internally and seeing where our weaknesses and our strengths are, and being proactive rather than reactive all the time.

There is so much more to say, of course, about the Chinese defence industry and structuring and modernisation processes going forward, but I think having a really clear-eyed and deep understanding of where China is is important. But we also need to, I think, have some sort of understanding of, and need to take some initiative in terms of understanding, what type of role perhaps the UK, through its integrated review, would like to have in the future. It is about what we think are the capabilities that are important in future warfare, not just what China thinks they will be in 2049.

Dr Patalano: Mr Chairman, I will be brief. I think there is a point that we haven't explored. We need to understand what China is, where China is going and what China wants, but we also need to be paying close attention to what our partners and allies, especially in the region, are doing. There are alternative visions, and perhaps the most important is the one that Japan has been proposing for the last half a decade, of a free and open Indo-Pacific, which is a comprehensive plan. It is about capacity building.

It is about an economic alternative to China. I completely agree with your point that we need to present those who are looking at the landscape with alternatives. Japan is a good starting point, in terms of looking at a country that, like the UK, cannot do things by itself, needs to work with others and has come to understand that people want alternative visions, and it has started developing one. So working with our partners, in that sense, is very important.

Within that context, building on Meia's point, my second point would be that, from a defence, military and security perspective, here there is one of the most important opportunities to play to a strength that China does not have. That is working with partners and allies in developing new ways to create military integration between capabilities and interchangeability—how to work with others in a way that the total is better than the sum of the individual components that we bring to the game.

If the UK is operating, as it is with the current deployments, with a US Marine Corp air wing flying from its deck, why not explore options to work through bilateral partners—like Japan, Australia, even South Korea and others—or multilaterally, through frameworks that the UK has, such as the five power defence arrangements, for example? Why not strengthen those to ensure that, as we look at the future, those capabilities are not just valuable per se, or as a national property, but as a magnet to bring other coalitions together and make a fundamental strategic difference to how we think about the future of the security and stability of the broader region?

Chair: Thank you very much to all three of you for your contributions today. This subject is clearly not going to go away. It was, as I mentioned, the focus at the Munich security conference, with the new American President showing resolve to perhaps rejuvenate the western collective effort to take on China. As Charlie pointed out, China is not going away, and we need to conduct ourselves in a way that allows both the west and the east to move forward together, but there are some difficult questions ahead, no doubt. I hope that Britain will be able to start to recognise some of these issues through the integrated review and our leadership in the G7.

On behalf of the Defence Select Committee, thank you very much indeed to Meia Nouwens, Dr Alessio Patalano and Charles Parton for your views, comments and thoughts today. I bring this session to a close