

Selective Engagements—Chinese Naval Diplomacy and U.S.-China Competition

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Recommended Citation

Wuthnow, Joel and Baughman, Margaret () "Selective Engagements—Chinese Naval Diplomacy and U.S.-China Competition," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 76: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss1/6>

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SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENTS

Chinese Naval Diplomacy and U.S.-China Competition

Joel Wuthnow and Margaret Baughman

From its origins as a coastal-defense force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy (PLAN) has emerged as a blue-water navy capable of projecting power throughout the Asian littoral and into distant regions.¹ A focus of the PLAN's overseas deployments has been on foreign engagement, including senior-leader exchanges, port visits, and exercises with foreign partners. It is no surprise that the navy—with its mission to protect China's interests in the “far seas” and its ability to deploy forces far afield for extended periods—has become the PLA service most involved in what commonly is referred to as *military diplomacy*. These engagements can be useful both for strategic and for operational reasons. Strategically, they help China to shape the security environment and finesse relations with key partners, while operationally China gains experience through interactions with foreign navies and performs intelligence-collecting activities.²

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This article aims to understand better the scope and drivers of China's naval diplomacy. Using a recently updated U.S. National Defense University (NDU) database on Chinese military diplomacy and a new data set on Chinese strategic partnerships, we describe key patterns between 2000 and 2019 and explain why the PLAN has prioritized some partners over others.³ Descriptively, we found an increase in senior-leader exchanges, port visits, and exercises through 2017, followed by a *decline* in all three categories between 2017 and 2019 that we attribute to PLA reforms and the opening of the PLAN's base in Djibouti (which

Naval War College Review, Winter 2023, Vol. 76, No. 1

reduced the need for port visits). This decline appears to have continued during the pandemic, but engagements likely will rebound from pandemic lows in the coming years. We also observed naval diplomacy in every major maritime region, but there is variation among activities. For instance, senior naval leaders prefer to visit Europe, while PLAN ships are more likely to stop in the Middle East and Southeast Asia in conjunction with antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Through a multivariate regression analysis, we found that the PLAN prefers engaging with other major navies. Partnering with the United States, Russia, and the leading European navies serves multiple goals: shaping China's relations with other major powers, learning from advanced counterparts, and collecting intelligence. Other factors seem to be less relevant. The PLAN has not prioritized engagements with U.S. allies, which might be expected if the goal is to dilute those relationships, nor does it prefer to work consistently with Chinese "strategic partners" or "comprehensive strategic partners," referring to countries where China has growing economic stakes. Pure geographic convenience—referring to a country's distance from China and its status as a frequent replenishment site—mattered only for port calls; it was not useful in explaining the two other types of engagements: senior-leader visits and exercise partners.

Ultimately, the PLAN is following a foreign-engagement strategy that determines how and where it deploys its scarce resources to achieve larger interests, and we should anticipate adjustments in this strategy as China enters a period of heightened strategic competition with the United States. The ramifications of competition will include China forging stronger naval relations with major powers other than the United States, including Russia; an increase in U.S. attempts to deny China new overseas naval facilities; and the use of exercises and other instruments by both countries to shape regional perceptions. This article develops these arguments in four main sections. First, we chart the progress of Chinese naval diplomacy between 2000 and 2019 in aggregate terms and across three categories. Second, we survey the Chinese and Western literature to identify the dominant explanations for the rise and variation in PLAN diplomacy. Third, we conduct a multivariate regression analysis on three types of PLAN diplomacy between 2010 and 2019—a date range intended to highlight recent patterns. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings from our analysis and discusses how U.S.-China strategic competition is likely to influence China's naval engagements in the years ahead.

PLA NAVAL DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY, 2000–19

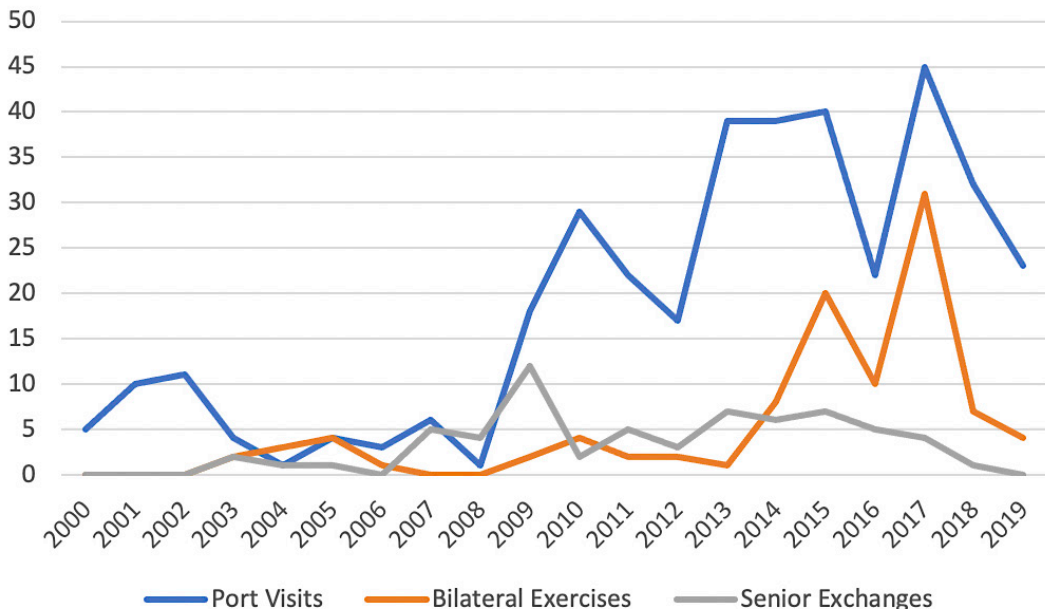
Chinese sources define *military diplomacy* (军事外交) as encompassing a range of activities, including senior-leader engagements, arms sales, bilateral and

multilateral exercises, nontraditional security operations, intelligence collection, and personnel exchanges.⁴ The navy participates in several of these categories.⁵ Its most frequent activities include exchanges among senior naval officials; port visits (some of which focus primarily on rest and replenishment, while others include professional dialogues, naval parades, or public events); and exercises with foreign partners, including bilateral drills and participation in multilateral exercises such as the U.S.-sponsored Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2014 and 2016.⁶ Over a twenty-year period, the data reveal both a rise and decline in frequency, as well as more discrete patterns within each type.

Overall Frequency

Figure 1 documents the total number of PLAN senior-level exchanges, port visits, and bilateral exercises between 2000 and 2019. The data suggest that events in all three categories began a steady rise around 2005 that lasted roughly a decade. A key date is 2004, when former Chinese president Hu Jintao articulated “new historic missions” for the PLA, which included important maritime missions such as defense of critical sea-lanes and protection of overseas interests.⁷ To address these new missions, the PLAN would need to be able to operate farther from home and form stronger relations with foreign navies. A second key date is December 2008, when the PLAN initiated antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden as part of that expanded set of missions, sparking an increase in port calls and exercises.⁸

FIGURE 1
PLAN DIPLOMACY, 2000–19



Source: Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “NDU PLA Military Diplomacy Database.”

However, all three types of PLAN activity declined after 2017. The opening of the PLA's inaugural overseas base in Djibouti in August 2017 can help explain some of the decline. One purpose of that facility is to provide a secure location for replenishment, rest, and repairs, meaning that the PLAN is no longer as dependent on other ports.⁹ Indeed, there were sixty-six “rest/replenishment” port visits globally between 2009 and 2016 (8.3 per year) but only thirteen between 2017 and 2019 (4.3 per year).¹⁰ Fewer visits along the Indian Ocean route to the Gulf of Aden also produced fewer exercises, which the escort task forces often conduct on their return voyages. The drop-off in the number of senior-leader exchanges might be attributed to leaders' preoccupation with PLA reforms that began at the end of 2015.

An uptick in U.S.-China competition also reduced the prospects for naval engagements between these two countries. An implication of the Trump administration's national-security strategy—which highlighted the necessity of preparing for great-power competition with China—was a decrease in many kinds of military engagements. Port visits ceased after 2017, the two sides no longer conducted operational-level exercises focused on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, and meetings among senior officials (especially service chiefs) became less prominent.¹¹ The concern that such engagements would unduly legitimize the PLAN was implicit in U.S. policy; the PLAN had become increasingly aggressive in regional disputes, and the United States did not want to offer China an opportunity to learn useful lessons from a more advanced navy.

The global pandemic reinforced this declining trend beyond 2019. Most in-person meetings involving senior leaders were canceled, and there was also a decline in PLAN exercises with foreign countries, although the PLAN held a few minor exercises with close partners such as Russia and Pakistan, and anti-piracy escort task forces continued (and Beijing claimed that no sailors had been infected with COVID-19).¹² The navy was also less active in delivering personal protective equipment and other medical supplies during the height of the pandemic than was the PLA Air Force, which used the opportunity to highlight its long-range transports.¹³ Some activities can be expected to resume or expand as the pandemic winds down, the PLA completes its reforms, new oceangoing PLAN vessels—such as the Type 075 amphibious ship—come online, and intensifying competition with the United States places greater demands on the PLAN to compete in regional and global contests for influence.¹⁴

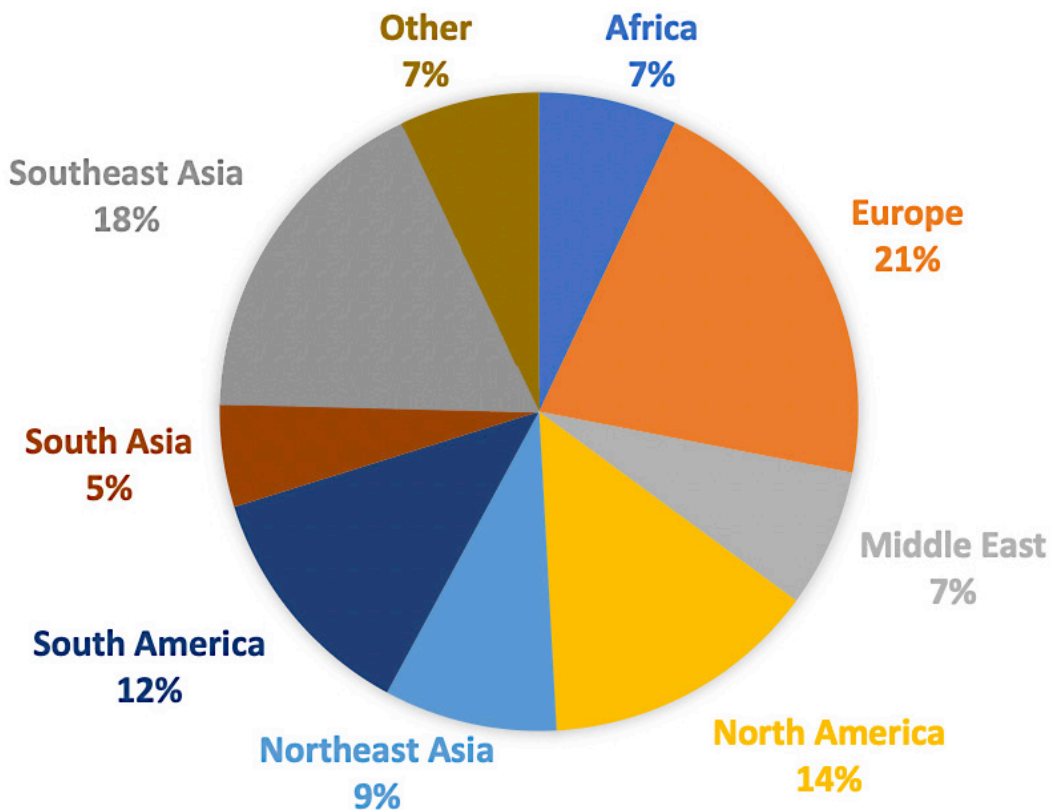
Discrete Patterns

The data also reveal several patterns within each of the three categories of senior-leader engagements, port visits, and exercises with foreign partners. Among senior-leader engagements, there was an increasing tendency for meetings to be held in China, with fewer reciprocal visits. The NDU database listed sixty-five observed bilateral naval engagements from 2000 to 2019, most of which involved

either the PLAN commander or political commissar. This comprised twenty-five foreign trips and forty meetings hosted in China. Yet the balance of outbound and inbound visits changed significantly over time. From 2000 to 2010, sixteen meetings were abroad and eleven were hosted, while in the following decade only nine meetings were abroad and twenty-nine were hosted. Explanations for these trends include President Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign (which discouraged lengthy overseas trips) and the preoccupation of senior leaders with PLA reform.¹⁵

Over twenty years, Chinese naval leaders met most often with counterparts from Europe and North America (35 percent) as well as Asia (35 percent, which includes South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, Central Asia, and Russia) (see figure 2). This is consistent with PLA senior engagements writ large, with Chinese officers meeting most often with counterparts from advanced Western countries and Asia.¹⁶ At the country level, PLAN leaders met most often with officers from the United States (seven times), Chile (five), South Africa (four), Bangladesh (three), Indonesia (three), Singapore (three), and South Korea (three).

FIGURE 2
SENIOR-LEADER ENGAGEMENTS (HOSTED AND ABROAD) BY REGION, 2000–19



Source: Allen, Saunders, and Chen, "NDU PLA Military Diplomacy Database."

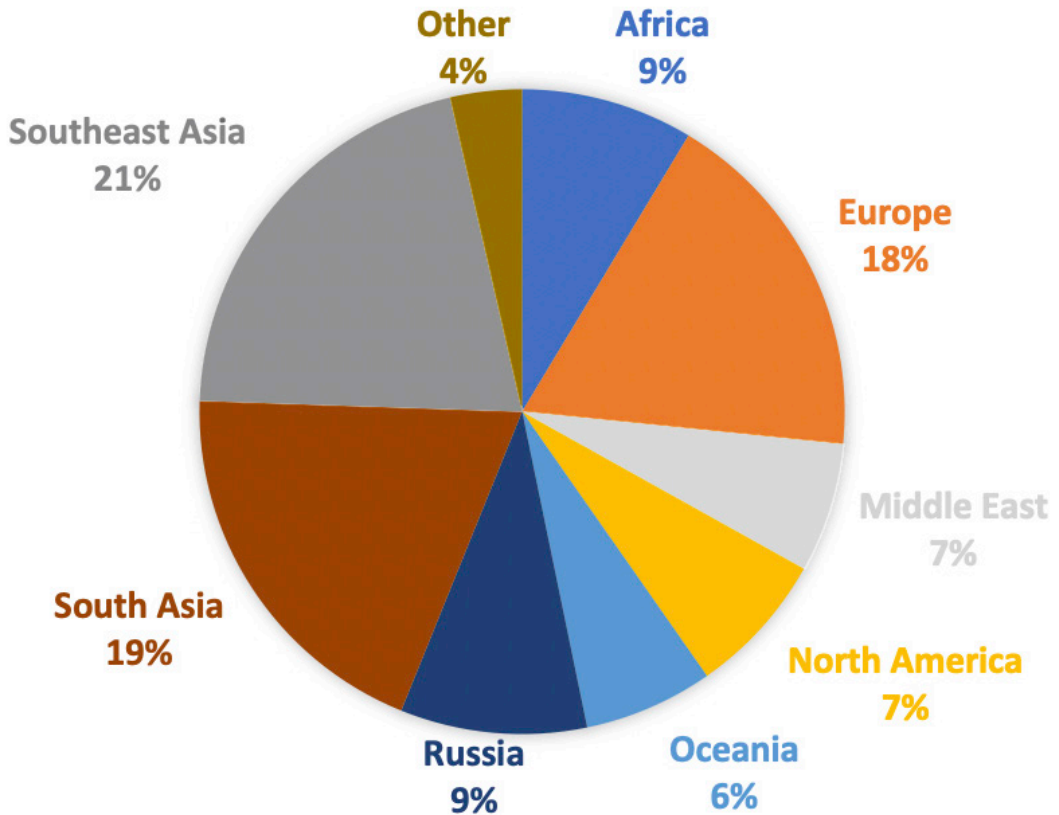
They also engaged counterparts through video teleconferences (e.g., several between former PLAN commander Admiral Wu Shengli and former U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert) and in multilateral dialogues.¹⁷

Given its overseas reach and responsibilities, the PLAN is the Chinese service most engaged in foreign exercises. According to a report by NDU authors, 42.9 percent of all exercises from 2003 through 2018 involved the navy; next was the army, at 41.5 percent, while the air force accounted for the remainder, at 15.6 percent (the rocket force did not participate in any overseas exercises).¹⁸ Most PLAN exercises focused on military operations other than war, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and search and rescue, although there have been combat-oriented exercises with close military partners, especially Russia and Pakistan.¹⁹ A large majority (73 percent) of naval exercises between 2000 and 2019 were bilateral, but there has been a trend toward multilateral exercises—in 2018 and 2019, more than half of PLAN exercises were with multiple countries.

Although the PLAN rarely exercises with partners in the Western Hemisphere, there is significant variation across other continents and regions (see figure 3). The most frequent location, Southeast Asia, involved only slightly more than one-fifth of bilateral and multilateral PLAN exercises, with a similar number carried out in South Asia and Europe. This pattern follows the route that PLAN ships take to and from the Gulf of Aden; some escort task force ships continue into the Mediterranean for exercises with Russian and European navies after they conclude their escort duties.²⁰ Suggesting a preference for advanced navies and close regional partners, China's most frequent exercise partners between 2000 and 2019 included Pakistan (seventeen), Russia (thirteen), France (ten), the United States (nine), Thailand (eight), and Australia (eight).

Port visits are a uniquely naval type of military diplomacy. NDU data distinguish between two variants: replenishment visits, which typically last between three and five days and do not feature foreign engagements, and “friendly visits” of two to four days, which include meetings with local officials, public tours of PLAN vessels, and other events, such as sports competitions.²¹ We examine both because even the former category can serve diplomatic purposes by demonstrating Chinese commitments and naval power. Their geographic distribution is similar to that of exercise partners, but port calls in the Middle East (25 percent) are far more common than exercises in that region (7 percent) (see figure 4). This suggests that, while Chinese naval ships often visit ports in the Middle East for practical reasons, naval exercises usually are focused elsewhere. Top destinations for port visits between 2000 and 2019 include Oman (twenty-seven), Djibouti (twenty-seven), Pakistan (twelve), Sri Lanka (twelve), Yemen (eleven), Singapore (eleven), and Australia (ten).

FIGURE 3
PLAN EXERCISES BY REGION, 2000–19



Source: Allen, Saunders, and Chen, "NDU PLA Military Diplomacy Database."

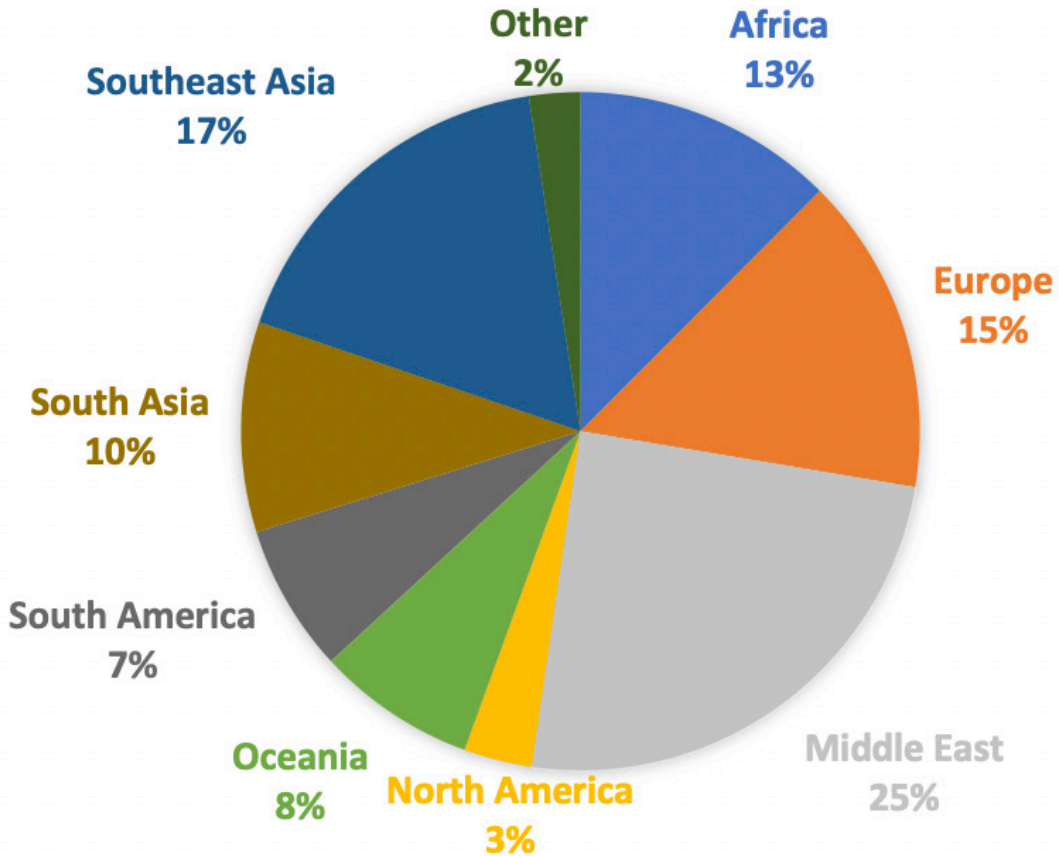
RANGE OF EXPLANATIONS

Geographic diversity within the practice of all types of naval diplomacy raises the question of how the PLAN prioritizes partner engagements. The literature on Chinese military diplomacy tends to divide the explanations into strategic and operational goals. We discuss the range of motives in this section and use this distinction to inform our statistical analysis in the next section.

Strategic Goals

U.S., Chinese, and third-country analysts frequently argue that Chinese military diplomacy supports Beijing's larger strategic agenda. RAND Corporation scholar Timothy Heath argues that PLAN hospital ship visits to Grenada in the 1990s were a reward for that country's shift in diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.²² A scholar from the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies (SIIS) describes PLA activities in Africa as effective in reducing anti-China sentiment and helping to "supplement [China's] political and economic relations."²³ The 2020 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, a key teaching volume written by

FIGURE 4
PLAN PORT VISITS BY REGION, 2000–19



Source: Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “NDU PLA Military Diplomacy Database.”

senior PLA academics and used in China’s professional military education system, argues that port visits and naval exercises should be “closely aligned with our important national diplomacy activities, complementing each other, and better supporting our national diplomacy.”²⁴

Some sources focus specifically on how military diplomacy supports China’s relations with other major countries. Since 2002, discussions of military exchanges in China’s biennial defense white papers have led with descriptions of bilateral engagements with Russia and the United States, suggesting that these are two of the PLA’s priority relationships; those documents have provided much less discussion of other engagements.²⁵ U.S. analysts Kenneth Allen, Phillip Saunders, and John Chen suggest that China’s combat exercises with Russia, including naval drills, help to shape the security environment by signaling close defense cooperation between the two states.²⁶ Heath describes PLAN diplomacy with the United States as a way for Beijing to stabilize relations with Washington, but also as a card that China can play to express dissatisfaction with U.S. policy by canceling events.²⁷ Indian analyst

Prashant Kumar Singh contrasts China's aims in Russia, which focus on building a quasi alliance, with its goal of "avoiding confrontation" with the United States.²⁸

Other sources highlight China's goals regarding smaller countries. A specific argument often found in the U.S. literature addresses China's "strategic partnerships" (战略伙伴), a label that Beijing applies to its priority political and economic relationships. More than one hundred countries, mostly in the developing world, now have this label.²⁹ Allen, Saunders, and Chen found a correlation between China's "strategic partners" and military engagements between 2003 and 2016.³⁰ The U.S. Defense Department's 2021 report on China's military power also asserts that strategic partnerships exert major influence on PLA diplomacy.³¹

Military diplomacy is especially useful in cultivating ties with key maritime partners. Heath writes that naval interactions reinforce positive relationships and serve as a "barometer" of the health of China's relations with littoral countries.³² Chinese scholars affiliated with SIIS write that military diplomacy in North Africa underscores China's "strategic partnerships" in the region—including those involved in China's Belt and Road Initiative—and suggest a connection between military deployments and China's "commercial interests."³³ They also describe the Gulf of Aden as "one of the most important waterways and bottlenecks for Chinese trade," which helps to explain why Beijing is intent on fostering ties with Djibouti and why the Chinese ultimately established a base there.³⁴

Japanese scholar Matsuda Yasuhiro formulates a broader framework that describes different types of strategic objectives. These objectives include "strategic placement," referring to securing access for China in key locations such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (all of which are relevant to PLAN access and presence in the Indian Ocean); "coopting" both neighboring countries and major powers, such as France and Great Britain, thus creating a more favorable international environment for China's development; and "restraining" other countries, such as India and Japan, from aligning too closely with the United States.³⁵ A corollary, implicit in his framework, would be attempts to improve leverage over countries seen as critical for U.S. access or to weaken relations among the United States and its allies. Potential examples of this corollary could be the high proportion of PLAN engagements with Thailand and Singapore.

Operational Goals

The literature also highlights a range of operational goals driving China's military diplomacy. One such goal is intelligence collection. High-level visits, exercises, and other interactions can be useful in gathering intelligence on foreign militaries and supporting the work done by China's network of defense attachés. Matsuda writes that PLA engagements especially can be useful in deriving information on foreign military strategy, science and technology, and military modernization.³⁶ Allen, Saunders, and Chen suggest that some degree of intelligence collection is

likely in virtually any military engagement.³⁷ Citing Chinese sources, Heath notes that naval diplomacy is seen as a way for the PLAN to monitor foreign navies and governments.³⁸

A closely related operational goal is to learn new skills. U.S. political scientists Tyler Jost and Austin Strange argue that a major revision of China's military strategy in 1993 provided an impetus for the PLA to reach out to foreign militaries to improve China's military modernization and its ability to conduct high-end operations. This factor helps account for the growth of China's senior-level engagements in the 1990s, such as the 1998 visit by General Zhang Wannian to the United States, where he observed RED FLAG exercises, toured a *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier, and observed advanced fighters.³⁹ Other scholars assess that the PLA has been able to acquire useful combat-related skills from participation in high-end exercises with Russia such as the AVIADARTS competition and the PEACE MISSION series.⁴⁰ This desire to acquire new skills may help to account for the relatively high proportion of PLAN senior engagements and exercises with European navies.

PLA activities beyond Asia also help to improve expeditionary capabilities. Gaining such experience has been a goal of China's United Nations peacekeeping deployments in the Middle East and Africa, which require the army to manage operations on foreign soil.⁴¹ Antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden similarly have provided far-seas experience to a younger generation of naval officers and have required the PLAN to be able to sustain forces far from home, while providing valuable leadership experience for commanding officers.⁴² More than a decade's worth of those patrols has been useful not only in increasing operational efficiency but in helping prepare the PLAN for other missions in the far seas, such as sea-lane protection. Antipiracy patrols thus support a strategic aim of increasing the PLAN's ability to protect overseas interests.

Some assessments by non-Chinese scholars generally conclude that military diplomatic events simultaneously serve goals at both the strategic and operational levels. Two reports by U.S. scholars, for example, argue that bilateral and multilateral exercises and port visits associated with antipiracy patrols concurrently benefit Chinese foreign policy, shape the international security environment, facilitate intelligence collection, and allow the PLAN to learn new skills. Senior-leader meetings also serve each of these goals (except learning skills).⁴³ Contributions from other scholars—such as Heath, Singh, and Matsuda—also reference drivers at both levels.

While these goals all appear relevant, only a few recent studies have tried to untangle those drivers that might be *most* influential in China's decision-making calculus over time and across specific event categories. One exemplar is Jost and Strange's 2018 work. Their analysis, after controlling for a range of other

explanations, found that high-level exchanges were associated most often with advanced militaries and major Chinese arms markets.⁴⁴ That finding, though, was limited to meetings through 2010. Another study is that of U.S. Department of Defense analyst Jonah Victor in 2021. He conducted a multivariate regression on PLA activities in Africa and found that both arms markets and level of diplomatic partnership can help explain PLA engagement on that continent between 2008 and 2018.⁴⁵ The availability of the NDU data set used here provides scholars with more opportunities to assess PLA diplomacy rigorously; the remainder of this article uses that NDU source to assess those factors that best can explain Chinese naval diplomacy between 2010 and 2019.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

This section identifies factors that are the strongest predictors of PLAN diplomatic engagements with other partners. The dependent variables include senior-level visits, port visits, and military exercises. For each of these categories, we track the annual number of PLAN engagements for each partner country. We use multivariate linear regression to estimate the relative predictive power of several potential explanations: U.S. alliance/partnership status, Chinese strategic partnership status, host-nation naval strength, and geographic convenience. The following discussion explains our selection of variables and presents the findings from our quantitative analysis.

Variables

Our first explanatory variable is whether a country has an alliance with the United States. We divide this into five categories: NATO allies, major non-NATO allies, countries with bilateral defense treaties, the United States itself, and non-allies (which serves as our baseline). These are treated as factor, rather than ordinal, variables.⁴⁶ The base model assesses U.S. alliance status alone, comparing countries in the four nonbaseline categories to the baseline. This variable is a proxy for the extent to which PLAN engagements are intended to weaken U.S. alliances—a hypothesis that would be confirmed if U.S. allies are *more* likely to be PLAN diplomatic partners than nonallies. In contrast, engaging with nonallies would suggest that the PLAN prioritizes countries that are not tied to the United States already, either to influence nonaligned countries or to strengthen relations with countries already friendly to China (such as Pakistan or Russia).

The second variable is the identification of Chinese strategic partnerships. These are harder to classify than U.S. alliances, because over the last two decades China has expanded its partnership categories significantly, using a range of descriptors to qualify or “upgrade” relationships.⁴⁷ Data on strategic partnerships typically have focused on partner status in a specific year and usually omit the complete explanatory label, which often incorporates descriptive or qualifying

terms. One of the authors developed an original, comprehensive data set that tracks annual changes in full partnership labels for each country by collecting every press release from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website and from Chinese embassies abroad. This collection technique allowed us to control for not only a partner country's relationship with China as of 2020 but also its relationship status at the time of each event.

By 2019, Beijing had used thirty-six different labels to describe its relations with 123 countries. Creating a thirty-six-level interval variable to measure relationship strength would require creating a defined ranking of each relationship and assuming that the distance between each category is the same.⁴⁸ Without sufficient data to create such a ranking, we aggregated China's thirty-six strategic partnership labels into four categories: no defined relationship, partnership, strategic partnership, and comprehensive strategic partnership. These categories were treated as interval variables ranked from one to four. Our hypothesis is that the PLAN is more likely to conduct engagements with countries on the higher end of the scale to strengthen ties with countries with which Beijing has identified priority economic or political interests.

The third explanatory variable covers engagements with other advanced naval powers. We defined naval powers as countries with a fleet of more than one hundred vessels. We acknowledge that this is an imperfect proxy, because there are some countries with small but highly capable navies (e.g., Singapore), but using it removes the burden of ranking and scoring countries on the basis of vessel type. By making naval strength a binary variable (developed vs. not developed), we avoid the issue of ranking among top powers that would be incumbent on a categorical variable. Our hypothesis is that the PLAN prefers to engage with developed navies to learn lessons and to gather intelligence, as well as to influence key strategic actors that may or may not be allied with the United States.

The final explanatory variable is simple geographic convenience. We divided this variable into two categories—distance from China and convenience for replenishment. Distance was measured in thousands of kilometers from Beijing to the capital of each partner.⁴⁹ Our hypothesis is that the PLAN is more likely to partner with countries closer to China, given fewer time and financial resources required. We also incorporated a binary variable to address countries that the PLAN frequently visits for replenishment/overhaul purposes, many of which are located on the route that the antipiracy task forces travel to the Gulf of Aden. This binary variable used NDU data on the PLAN's replenishment/overhaul patterns. We hypothesize that those countries used for replenishment or overhaul visits should be associated with more-frequent port calls but not with senior-leader engagements (since naval leaders typically travel via plane).

Findings

Our regression analysis consists of three successively detailed models: a base model that highlights U.S. alliance status, a second that adds controls for distance and convenience, and a full model that also incorporates Chinese strategic partnership status and naval power. We tested and compared each of the models for each category of naval engagements.

Senior-Level Visits. The base model suggests that China prefers to conduct senior-level visits with the most advanced countries—the United States and its NATO allies. This finding can be explained by both the importance of China's overall strategic interests in those countries (including shaping their preferences through military diplomacy) and its narrower operational goals of learning from those states.⁵⁰ Beijing did *not* prefer to carry out senior visits with U.S. bilateral allies or major non-NATO allies, suggesting that this is not a way that China tries to weaken those U.S. relationships. In fact, the baseline variable (no U.S. alliances) was correlated more strongly with visit frequency than were either U.S. bilateral allies or major non-NATO allies. As seen in table 1, those findings persisted as variables for geographic convenience were added in the second model, suggesting that PLAN leaders are willing to travel widely to meet with interlocutors from priority countries.

With the addition of the China strategic-partnership and naval-power variables, however, the model was less effective in explaining PLAN behavior relative to senior-level visits. In the full model—incorporating all three variables of U.S. alliance status, distance and convenience, and Chinese strategic partnership—the strongest associated variable was having no U.S. alliance. There was, however, a statistically significant relationship with naval-power status, which indicates that PLAN leaders have an interest in meeting with naval peers regardless of their affiliation as a U.S. ally (including Russia). This data point suggests that PLAN leaders concentrate on a handful of significant countries. Interestingly, PLAN leaders did not meet more frequently with interlocutors from states with more-elaborate diplomatic labels; a “comprehensive strategic partner” may be a place where China sees long-term economic interests, but it is not necessarily a country where naval diplomacy is focused. China's comprehensive strategic partners are rarely naval powers—the correlation between comprehensive strategic partnerships and naval power status is low (corr = .21). This low value confirms our understanding that this significant partnership-status label may indicate economic, rather than military, interests for China.

Port Calls. Our models for port calls confirm a broader range of hypotheses than those for senior-level visits. We found that adding more predictor variables increases the complexity of the models, but also increases the descriptive power of the model.⁵¹ Thus, the best description of the data, which accounts

TABLE 1
SENIOR-LEVEL VISITS: MODEL COMPARISON

Dependent Variable: Senior-Level Visits			
	(1)	(2)	(3)
U.S. (self)	0.791*** (0.296)	0.937*** (0.295)	0.470 (0.425)
U.S. bilateral defense treaty	-0.027 (0.568)	-0.002 (0.292)	-0.347 (0.612)
U.S. major non-NATO ally	0.306 (0.291)	0.262 (0.296)	0.169 (0.295)
NATO	0.640*** (0.291)	0.557** (0.296)	0.480 (0.304)
Convenient (binary)	—	0.336 (0.224)	0.235 (0.233)
Distance to Beijing (1,000 km)	—	-0.00001 (0.00003)	-0.00000 (0.00003)
Relationship strength (1-4)	—	—	-0.010 (0.094)
Naval power (binary)	—	—	0.487* (0.253)
Baseline (no U.S. alliance)	1.027*** (0.129)	1.013*** (0.236)	0.894*** (0.300)
Observations	68	68	68
R^2	0.155	0.187	0.237
Adjusted R^2	0.101	0.107	0.133
Residual std. error	0.783 (df = 63)	0.780 (df = 61)	0.769 (df = 59)

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

for approximately 28 percent of the variation among data points (adjusted $R^2 = .277$), is the third model, which includes all three variables of U.S. alliance status, distance and convenience, and Chinese strategic partnership, as seen in table 2.

As with senior-level visits, we did not find that the PLAN consistently prioritizes port visits with U.S. allies. NATO allies and major non-NATO allies were not statistically significant predictors in any of the models. The third model was an exception; it showed that bilateral alliances (the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand) were significant at the $p < .001$ level, lending credence to the view that the PLAN seeks to influence some U.S. allies within the Indo-Pacific region

TABLE 2
PORT CALLS: MODEL COMPARISON

Dependent Variable: Port Calls			
	(1)	(2)	(3)
U.S. (self)	1.774*** (0.194)	1.963*** (0.191)	1.866*** (0.218)
U.S. bilateral defense treaty	-0.226 (0.147)	-0.312** (0.152)	-0.428*** (0.153)
U.S. major non-NATO ally	0.024 (0.093)	0.020 (0.090)	-0.055 (0.091)
NATO	0.081 (0.093)	0.016 (0.092)	-0.093 (0.096)
Convenient (binary)	—	0.254*** (0.071)	0.187** (0.073)
Distance to Beijing (1,000 km)	—	-0.00003*** (0.00001)	-0.00003*** (0.00001)
Relationship strength (1–4)	—	—	0.066** (0.028)
Naval power (binary)	—	—	0.184** (0.190)
Baseline (no U.S. alliance)	1.226*** (0.041)	1.404*** (0.090)	0.201*** (0.111)
Observations	344	344	344
R ²	0.206	0.267	0.294
Adjusted R ²	0.197	0.254	0.277
Residual std. error	0.600 (df = 339)	0.578 (df = 337)	0.569 (df = 335)

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

(other than Japan and Australia). Overall, however, we found that the strongest predictor in this category was countries not allied with the United States.

By contrast, other kinds of relationships appear to matter more to the PLAN. At the top of the list is the United States. Before 2019, the United States hosted on average 3.066 port calls from PLAN ships annually, higher than the average visit rate for any of its allies or for nonallies. This variable was highly significant in all three models, suggesting that the PLAN uses port visits both to influence and to gather intelligence on the U.S. Navy. The PLAN's preference to conduct port calls with naval powers suggests similar goals of exerting influence and gathering intelligence in those countries.

Unlike senior-level visits, countries with higher-level partnerships with China have higher port-call rates. For each categorical increase in partnership strength (to partnership, strategic partnership, or comprehensive strategic partnership), there is an estimated 0.066 point increase in port-call frequency (significant at the 0.05 level), where a “point increase” is a one-exercise increase in the count of total predicted port calls (the dependent variable). This means that a country with a comprehensive strategic partnership label has an annual port-call rate approximately 0.198 points higher than a comparable country with no partnership status with the PRC (or 0.198 more total port calls annually). This finding confirms our hypothesis that the PLAN uses port calls to support China’s public diplomacy within existing strategic partnerships rather than using them to target countries on the lower end of the partnership spectrum to lay the groundwork for future partnership upgrades.

Our control variables of geographic distance and convenience are both statistically significant, suggesting that practical considerations factor into port-call preferences. Countries that hosted replenish/overhaul port calls represent a predicted 0.187 point increase in their annual port-call frequency (statistically significant at the 0.05 level). Countries farther from China see a decrease in annual port-call frequency; for each one thousand kilometers away from Beijing, we see a small but statistically significant decrease in port-call rates. Countries with the fewest port calls, on average, are those that are far from China and also away from established routes to and from the Gulf of Aden.⁵² In practice, these partners tend to be in regions such as Latin America, East Asia, or the west coast of Africa.

Bilateral Exercises. PLAN naval exercise patterns are explained best by the model that includes all three variables. Running an ANOVA to compare models indicates that increasing predictors successively improves the descriptive power of the model. (An ANOVA tests whether a more complex model describes the data significantly better than a simple model and investigates whether added variables better explain trends.) This three-variable model, shown in table 3, describes approximately 18.5 percent of the variation in the data (adjusted $R^2 = .185$).

As with the other categories, the model demonstrated a strong preference for bilateral exercises with the U.S. Navy. This may indicate both an agenda to use military interactions to manage relations with Washington and a desire to learn operational lessons and gather intelligence on the world’s premier navy. For similar reasons, the PLAN generally also preferred to conduct exercises with major naval powers—particularly with a key nonally, Russia—regardless of their U.S. alliance affiliation or distance from China. Indeed, naval powers are more likely to engage in exercises with China, with a 0.475 point increase in annual exercise frequency compared with nonnaval powers. Notably, there was no statistically

TABLE 3
MILITARY EXERCISES: MODEL COMPARISON

Dependent Variable: Annual Naval Exercises			
	(1)	(2)	(3)
U.S. (self)	1.316*** (0.293)	1.586*** (0.308)	1.190*** (0.407)
U.S. bilateral defense treaty	-0.299 (0.293)	-0.293 (0.307)	-0.176 (0.314)
U.S. major non-NATO ally	0.168 (0.179)	-0.026 (0.184)	-0.125 (0.187)
NATO	0.633*** (0.180)	0.455** (0.195)	0.294 (0.203)
Convenient (binary)	—	0.475*** (0.158)	0.277 (0.169)
Distance to Beijing (1,000 km)	—	-0.00003 (0.00003)	-0.00001 (0.00003)
Relationship strength (1-4)	—	—	0.053 (0.081)
Naval power (binary)	—	—	0.475*** (0.180)
Baseline (no U.S. alliance)	1.299*** (0.101)	1.395*** (0.212)	0.963*** (0.321)
Observations	212	212	212
R^2	0.134	0.182	0.216
Adjusted R^2	0.117	0.158	0.185
Residual std. error	0.991 (df = 207)	0.968 (df = 205)	0.952 (df = 203)

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

significant correlation between exercises and countries in higher partnership categories. This suggests that exercises, unlike port visits, are not a prime way that Beijing reinforces ties with existing partners.

Over the last twenty years, carrying out foreign engagements has been an important mission for the PLAN. Despite the recent decline (owing in part to the pandemic), the navy continues to conduct a robust program of diplomatic activities—notably, senior-leader exchanges, port visits, and exercises—across the globe. This article has described some of the key patterns in each category and reached conclusions about the factors influencing the PLAN's selection of

partners in each of the three categories of senior-leader exchanges, port visits, and naval exercises. Our analysis suggests that both strategic and operational goals are at work, although there is variation in how these two sets of explanations can be applied across different engagement categories.

The most consistent explanation is the most straightforward: China's navy prefers to engage with other major navies. Partnering with the U.S. Navy, the Russian navy, or the major European navies allows Beijing to shape the choices of countries that matter most to China's interests (whether to develop leverage with the United States or signal closer ties with Russia), learn operational lessons from key naval powers, and collect intelligence on other major countries. Engaging with these major navies also suggests another motive, which simply is to demonstrate China's status as a top-tier navy in its own right—a message that both fuels national pride and helps shape the security environment.⁵³ With finite resources, Beijing needs to choose relationships to prioritize, and the data suggest that the emphasis has been placed on countries that satisfy the broadest range of important interests.

Chinese partnership-category labels were less useful in explaining PLAN behavior. Although prior studies and the U.S. Department of Defense's annual China reports suggest that strategic-partnership labels influence where the PLA conducts military diplomacy, we found that partnership level only helps to account for port calls, not other types of engagements. This finding is logical, because port calls are the most public oriented of the three categories; ships are visible symbols of Chinese presence, and their crews sometimes engage with foreign populations. Thus, port calls serve as an affordable way for Beijing to improve its reputation in places where China has growing economic interests.⁵⁴ But the navy does not favor the same countries in high-level exchanges or combined exercises as it does with frequent port calls. The data indicate a preference to conduct senior-leader and combined-exercise activities with advanced navies—with whom the PLAN also can seize other strategic benefits and operational lessons, as discussed above.

The analysis also indicates that naval diplomacy is not a primary tool in China's strategy for weakening relations among the United States and its treaty allies. Indeed, we consistently found that China prefers engagements with countries not allied with the United States. The only evidence to the contrary was a preference for port calls with a few U.S. allies in Asia, a fact that partly can be explained by geographic convenience. This finding implies that Beijing calculates that in the competition for regional influence, military diplomacy may be more effective with states that do not have mutual-defense commitments from the United States already—and that other tools of national power, especially economic leverage, are more useful than symbolic activities in driving wedges between Washington and its most important partners.

In the years ahead, Chinese naval diplomacy increasingly will take place in the context of U.S.-China strategic competition. This context will have three possible implications. First, while the PLAN has preferred to partner with the United States, a decline in U.S.-China military relations, driven by mutual suspicion, will reduce the opportunities for engagement.⁵⁵ Even now, both sides have curtailed some naval exchanges, including China's decision to recall the visiting PLAN commander from the United States because of U.S. sanctions on the PLA in September 2018 and the U.S. decision not to invite the PLAN to participate in the 2018, 2020, or 2022 RIMPAC exercises.⁵⁶ Bilateral military interactions further deteriorated with China's cancellation of military exchanges (including the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, which has served as a forum for discussion of unsafe air and naval interactions) in response to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan.⁵⁷ Fewer opportunities for operational-level engagements with the U.S. Navy could increase the PLAN's preference to exercise with Russia and European countries. Washington then may be prompted to dissuade NATO allies from engaging with the PLAN altogether or to restrict naval contacts that could put sensitive capabilities at risk.

Second, we likely will see an escalating competition for naval partners between China and the United States. While Beijing largely has confined engagements within its network of developing-world "strategic partners" to port visits, the need to compete with the United States for influence in key maritime nations could lead to an uptick in other types of engagements. Invitations to foreign naval chiefs to visit Beijing could be a way to reinforce relations without needing to conduct lengthy international travel, while the PLAN is also likely to ramp up security cooperation (or arms sales) with select partners, such as Iran.⁵⁸ A more specific part of the competition will focus on questions of access. In particular, competition will encompass U.S. attempts to limit China's ability to construct new overseas naval facilities in places such as Cambodia, the United Arab Emirates, the Solomon Islands, or Tanzania because such bases would allow the PLAN to expand its operational reach.⁵⁹ Thus, both sides are likely to consider how their navies can be used to cement influence in Asia and in nonallied countries farther afield.

Third, both sides are likely to employ naval diplomacy to shape the regional security environment. The U.S. Navy increasingly has conducted combined exercises with allies and partners to underscore U.S. commitments in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere. These range from bilateral drills to multilateral events, such as the revived MALABAR series that features all four members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.⁶⁰ China thus will have greater incentives to pull together its own ensemble to emphasize Chinese naval power and signal its own ability to marshal key relationships in front of a regional audience. Beijing has done this already

through Sino-Russian naval exercises and in an expanding set of “+3” exercises involving China, Russia, and regional powers such as Iran and South Africa.⁶¹ Analysis of updated data and case studies in the years ahead will indicate how PLA diplomacy actions, and naval activities specifically, are evolving to compete better with the United States.

NOTES

1. For key reference volumes on the PLAN, see Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 8 March 2022); Michael A. McDevitt [Rear Adm., USN (Ret.)], *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020); Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, “The Impact of Xi-Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 125–70; and Bernard D. Cole [Capt., USN (Ret.)], *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).
2. Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: National Defense Univ. Press, 2017).
3. A limited version of the database through 2016 can be found at Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “NDU PLA Military Diplomacy Database” (file name: “PLA-diplomacy-database.xlsx”), in *ibid.*, ndupress.ndu.edu/. Updated data are available through 2019. Data for 2020–22 eventually will be available, although they will be less useful, owing to the severe impact of the pandemic. Ending the analysis with 2019 reflects currency through the last “normal” year of engagements.
4. Guo Xinning, 论军事外交和当代中国实践 [On Military Diplomacy and Modern Chinese Practice] (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press, 2011); Zhang Qiliang, 海军外交论 [Theory of Naval Diplomacy] (Beijing: Military Sciences, 2013); Wan Fayang, 中国军事外交理论与实践 [Chinese Military Diplomacy Theory and Practice] (Beijing: Diplomacy Theory and Practice] (Beijing: Current Affairs, 2015); Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, p. 8.
5. While the NDU database tracks the three categories of senior-leader exchanges, port visits, and exercises over time, and is thus the subject of our quantitative analysis, it is worth noting that the PLAN carries out other, more-idiosyncratic engagements as well. These include antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, initiated in December 2008, which occasionally have involved interactions with foreign navies; HA/DR operations, such as a PLAN role in the 2014 search for a missing Malaysian airliner and its contribution to evacuating Chinese and foreign nationals from Yemen the next year; naval representatives posted in many of the PLA's 130 attaché offices; and academic exchanges involving PLAN researchers and students.
6. The United States did not invite the PLAN to the 2018 version of RIMPAC, because of U.S. complaints about Chinese policies in the South China Sea.
7. See Daniel M. Hartnett, “The ‘New Historic Missions’: Reflections on Hu Jintao's Military Legacy,” in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), pp. 31–80.
8. See Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: James-town Foundation, 2015).
9. Peter A. Dutton, Isaac B. Kardon, and Conor M. Kennedy, *Djibouti: China's First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint*, China Maritime Report

- 6 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2020), pp. 36–37.
10. The PLAN does not announce replenishment visits to its Djibouti base, so these are not tracked in the NDU database.
 11. Joel Wuthnow, “U.S.-China Military Relations in an Era of Strategic Competition” (paper presented to the Univ. of Pennsylvania Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations, Philadelphia, PA, April 2021).
 12. Thanks to Maj. Kevin McGuinness, USA, for these observations. On the continuing escort task forces and claims that the navy was virus-free, see Guo Yuandan, “Zero COVID-19 Cases among PLA Navy Escort Group,” *Global Times*, 8 June 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/. For 2021 exercises, see “Chinese Naval Fleet Heads for Joint Exercise in Pakistan,” *Xinhua*, 11 February 2021, www.xinhuanet.com/, and “Russia and China Hold Joint Naval Drills in Sea of Japan,” *Reuters*, 15 October 2021, www.reuters.com/.
 13. “Chinese PLA Sends Epidemic Prevention Supplies to Militaries of 20 Countries,” *China Military Online*, 5 June 2020, eng.mod.gov.cn/.
 14. For an assessment of China’s expanding navy, see James E. Fannell [Capt., USN (Ret.)], “China’s Global Navy: Today’s Challenge for the United States and the U.S. Navy,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 4 (Autumn 2020), pp. 13–43.
 15. Phillip C. Saunders and Jjunwei Shyy, “China’s Military Diplomacy,” in *China’s Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations*, ed. Scott D. McDonald and Michael C. Burgoyne (Honolulu, HI: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2019), p. 213.
 16. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, p. 49.
 17. Meetings via video teleconference also appeared to increase during the global pandemic.
 18. Saunders and Shyy, “China’s Military Diplomacy,” p. 215.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
 20. Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher P. Carlson, “Sustained Support: The PLAN Evolves Its Expeditionary Logistics Strategy,” *Jane’s Navy International*, 9 March 2016.
 21. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, pp. 34–35.
 22. *Ibid.*; Timothy R. Heath, *Winning Friends and Influencing People: Naval Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*, China Maritime Report 8 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2020).
 23. Shen Zhixiong, “On China’s Military Diplomacy in Africa,” in *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*, ed. Chris Alden et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 101–22, available through the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies at www.sis.org.cn/.
 24. Xiao Tianliang, ed., *战略学 [Science of Military Strategy]* (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press, 2020), p. 322. (Authors’ translation.)
 25. This was on display most recently in China’s 2019 national-defense white paper, “Full Text: China’s National Defense in the New Era,” *Xinhua*, 24 July 2019, www.xinhuanet.com/. An exception was the 2013 white paper, which focused more on nontraditional security and did not document developments with Russia or the United States.
 26. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, p. 10.
 27. Heath, *Winning Friends and Influencing People*, p. 9. This is also a finding of other assessments on China’s military diplomacy with the United States. See, for example, Scott W. Harold, “Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (July 2019), pp. 145–68, and Andrew S. Erickson, “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations: Policy Considerations in a Changing Environment,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (July 2019), pp. 123–44.
 28. Prashant Kumar Singh, “China’s ‘Military Diplomacy’: Investigating PLA’s Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations,” *Strategic Analysis* 35, no. 5 (2011), pp. 793–818.
 29. Georg Strüver, “China’s Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2017), pp. 31–65.
 30. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, pp. 54–57.
 31. U.S. Defense Dept., *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic*

- of China (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021), pp. 14–15.
32. Heath, *Winning Friends and Influencing People*, p. 13.
 33. Hend Elmahly and Degang Sun, “China’s Military Diplomacy towards Arab Countries in Africa’s Peace and Security: The Case of Djibouti,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 11, no. 4 (December 2018), pp. 120–21.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 129. On Djibouti, see Dutton, Kardon, and Kennedy, *Djibouti*.
 35. Matsuda Yasuhiro, “An Essay on China’s Military Diplomacy: Examination of Intentions in Foreign Strategy,” *NIDS Security Reports*, no. 7 (December 2006), pp. 21–37.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 37. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, pp. 10–11.
 38. Heath, *Winning Friends and Influencing People*, p. 8.
 39. Tyler Jost and Austin Strange, “Delegated Diplomacy: Why China Uses the Military for Face-to-Face Exchanges” (working paper, 28 April 2018), pp. 26–27, available at www.tylerjost.com/.
 40. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, p. 11.
 41. Joel Wuthnow, “PLA Operational Lessons from UN Peacekeeping,” in *The PLA beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense Univ. Press, 2021), pp. 235–61.
 42. Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting*; Joel Wuthnow, “The PLA beyond Asia: China’s Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region,” *INSS Strategic Forum*, no. 303 (2020), pp. 7–8. A number of China’s rising naval leaders have served in the Gulf of Aden, although commanding task forces did not appear to be a formal promotion criterion as of 2016. See Jeffrey Becker, “Who’s at the Helm? The Past, Present, and Future Leaders of China’s Navy,” *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2016), pp. 66–90.
 43. Saunders and Shyy, “China’s Military Diplomacy,” p. 211; Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, pp. 11–12.
 44. Allen, Saunders, and Chen also conducted a regression of China’s partnership categories against a measure of military diplomacy drawn from three categories (senior meetings, port visits, and exercises), but this did not control for other factors. Allen, Saunders, and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016*, pp. 54–57.
 45. Jonah Victor, “China’s Security Assistance in Global Competition,” in Wuthnow et al., *The PLA beyond Borders*, pp. 263–93.
 46. While ordinal variables assign numeric rank (i.e., 1, 2, 3) and consequently set distances among different ranks, factor variables treat different categories as equidistant from one another, and without numeric weight (e.g., “red,” “blue”).
 47. For background, see Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, “China’s Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a Changing World,” ESPO Working Paper 8, SSRN, June 2014, papers.ssrn.com/ (the authors are both affiliated with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, one of China’s most influential research institutes); and Strüver, “China’s Partnership Diplomacy.”
 48. Christopher Winship and Robert D. Mare, “Regression Models with Ordinal Variables,” *American Sociological Review* 49, no. 4 (August 1984), pp. 512–25, doi.org/10.2307/2095465.
 49. We acknowledge that this is only a coarse measure, since PLAN visits or engagements may occur in other cities or ports.
 50. It is unclear, however, that variation is driven by alliance status per se. NATO allies are correlated highly with European countries, suggesting that PLA leaders may be visiting for other reasons, including those countries’ economic importance to China or simply the rare opportunity (for a serving PLA officer) to visit that continent.
 51. Running an ANOVA test on the models confirms that the descriptive power gained from adding predictor variables is statistically significant, such that the model with the most predictor variables describes the data best.
 52. Mediterranean countries also fit into the established routes to and from the Gulf of Aden, since some escort task force ships

- continue on from the Gulf of Aden through the Red Sea.
53. Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–81.
54. One example is the use of PLAN hospital ships. For a good early analysis of this trend, see Peter W. Mackenzie, *Red Crosses, Blue Water: Hospital Ships and China's Expanding Naval Presence* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2011).
55. For recent analysis, see Erickson, "U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations"; Wuthnow, "U.S.-China Military Relations"; and Paul Haenle, "Why the U.S. and Chinese Militaries Aren't Talking Much Anymore," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 August 2021, carnegieendowment.org/.
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58. Reuben F. Johnson, "The Dangers Presented by Russian and PRC Weapons Sales to Iran," *Middle East Institute*, 4 August 2020, www.mei.edu/.
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60. "Australia, India, Japan, and U.S. Kick-Off Phase II: MALABAR 2021," *U.S. Navy*, 13 October 2021, www.navy.mil/.
61. For instance, China responded to the 2021 MALABAR Phase II with a combined Sino-Russian naval drill in the Sea of Japan. Guo Yuandan and Liu Xuanzun, "China, Russia Hold Joint Naval Drill in Sea of Japan, Display 'Higher Level of Trust, Capability,'" *Global Times*, 14 October 2021, www.globaltimes.cn/. On exercises with Iran and South Africa, see, respectively, Song Zhongping, "China, Russia, Iran Military Drills in Gulf Enhance Regional Security, against External Interference," *Global Times*, 24 August 2021, www.globaltimes.cn/, and "S. African Navy Hosts Russia, China for Maritime Exercise," *Xinhua*, 26 November 2019, www.xinhuanet.com/.

