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China Maritime Report No. 37: Re-Engaging With the World: China's Military Diplomacy in 2023

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Summary

China's military diplomacy plays a crucial role in advancing the nation's foreign policy objectives and safeguarding its strategic interests. This report highlights a diverse array of activities within military diplomacy, including senior-level meetings, joint military exercises, naval port calls, UN peacekeeping operations, and academic exchanges. Our findings reveal a significant—but incomplete—recovery in China's military diplomacy activities in 2023, following a period of reduced contacts with foreign militaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Southeast Asia and Russia remain primary partners for China, with emerging strategic importance also seen in Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. Overall, China's military diplomacy underscores its efforts to diversify partnerships and assert its global influence, emphasizing regional stability and international cooperation in pursuit of its diplomatic goals.

Introduction

During their San Francisco meeting in November 2023, Chinese and U.S. statesmen agreed to resume high-level military-to-military communications, paving the way for the first talks between their top defense officials in over a year.¹ While China almost froze its military diplomacy with the United States in 2023, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was busy enhancing its cooperation with other foreign militaries. According to the PLA, “military diplomacy is an important component of a country's foreign affairs, and it can even be considered the ‘ballast stone’ (压舱石) of a nation's diplomacy.”² Thus, tracking the PLA's diplomatic activities can help us better understand trends in China's overall diplomatic goals and interests.

This report reviews China's military diplomacy activities in 2023, including senior-level visits and meetings, joint exercises, naval port calls, humanitarian activities, and academic exchanges. Key findings are listed below:

- The PLA was actively involved in military diplomacy in 2023, with 66 defense exchanges, 24 joint military exercises, and 27 naval port calls. Additionally, PLA academies facilitated multiple international events to foster military cooperation and exchanges among cadets.
- China's military diplomacy resulted in engagements with 41 partner countries during the period under review. Among these, Southeast Asian countries emerged as the most frequent contacts for senior-level meetings, followed by African states and Russia. Notably, China conducted naval port calls in 27 different countries in 2023, showcasing a diverse range of partners.
- In 2023, senior-level meetings saw significant shifts in personnel and patterns. Despite changes in leadership, diplomatic engagements remained active, with a total of 61 bilateral meetings and 5 multilateral ones. However, compared to previous years, the diversity of participating officers decreased notably, potentially attributed to the shift to virtual platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ Phil Stewart and Doina Chiacu, “US, China top military officials speak for first time in over a year,” Reuters, 21 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-china-top-military-officials-spoke-thursday-pentagon-statement-2023-12-21/>.

² 何雷 [He Lei], 新时代中国军事外交的生动实践和重要成果 [“Vivid Practice and Important Achievements of China's Military Diplomacy in the New Era”], 中国网 [China Net], 17 June 2022, http://news.china.com.cn/2022-06/17/content_78273730.htm.

- China participated in 24 joint military exercises in 2023, a big increase compared to 2020-2022 levels but still significantly lower than 2019 (41 total). The Navy witnessed a resurgence in exercise participation compared to the preceding year, with a significant increase to 10 exercises, surpassing the Army in exercise involvement. Joint exercises with Southeast Asian countries notably increased, reflecting a renewed focus on the region.
- Chinese naval port calls saw substantial progress in 2023, with a total of 27 visits to various regions, including Southeast Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. This marked a return to pre-pandemic levels. Southeast Asia emerged as the most frequented region by the PLA Navy (PLAN), underscoring the region's strategic value to China's foreign policy. The diverse activities conducted during these port calls ranged from joint military exercises to humanitarian missions and medical assistance, highlighting China's multifaceted approach to international engagement.

This report is divided into seven sections. First, we start by providing an overview of the PLA's military diplomacy, including its forms and objectives. In particular, we will briefly analyze how military diplomacy contributes to the advancement of China's broad diplomatic goals and national interests. Sections two through six present trends in the PLA's military diplomacy in 2023, by category: senior-level meetings, military exercises, naval port calls, United Nations peacekeeping, and academic exchanges.³ The report concludes with a summary of main findings.

PLA Military Diplomacy: An Overview

Within the Chinese context, military diplomacy entails a broad spectrum of engagements and plays a pivotal role in shaping the nation's foreign relations. The current official definition is reflected in the 2011 edition of *PLA Military Terminology*, which describes military diplomacy as the

external relationships pertaining to military and related affairs between countries and groups of countries, including military personnel exchange, military negotiations, arms control negotiations, military aid, military intelligence cooperation, military technology cooperation, international peacekeeping, military alliance activities, etc. Military diplomacy is an important component of a country's foreign relations.⁴

By conducting this variety of military diplomatic activities, China seeks to advance key national interests, including protecting sovereignty, shaping a favorable security environment, and improving defense capabilities.

First, at the top of the list, are China's longstanding concerns over territorial sovereignty, such as the Taiwan question and disputes in the South China Sea. Senior-level meetings, strategic dialogues, and

³ The information concerning the PLA's military diplomacy during 2023 is based on about 250 articles published in the PRC's Ministry of National Defense (MND) English-language websites (<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>) and 25 articles in MND's Chinese-language website (<http://www.mod.gov.cn/>). Of note, 23 of the 25 Chinese-language articles were identical to the English-language articles. Historical data comes from the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database* version 4.00 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 31 March 2023). A compilation of PLA reporting on its military diplomacy in 2023 is available in Kenneth W. Allen, "PLA Military Diplomacy During 2023," Personal Website of Andrew S. Erickson, 15 April 2024, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2024/04/pla-military-diplomacy-during-2023/>.

⁴ 全军军事管理委员会 [All-Military Military Affairs Management Committee], ed., 中国人民解放军军语 [*PLA Military Terminology*] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2011), p. 1063.

functional exchanges often serve as platforms for conveying diplomatic messages.⁵ For example, in the press releases after senior-level meetings, some foreign defense officials issue statements confirming their support for the “One China Principle,” which Beijing takes as a form of international solidarity for its claims to sovereignty over Taiwan. Additionally, demonstrating advanced weapons during senior visits, joint drills, and naval port calls are considered part of the PLA’s approach to strategic deterrence against potential challengers.⁶

Second, China’s growing interests abroad require the construction of a favorable security environment to expand overseas investments and ensure the safety of its citizens and assets around the world. By engaging in international peacekeeping, joint military exercises, and aid delivery, China aims to ensure regional stability against terrorism and armed conflict, develop mutual trust with partners, and establish a positive international reputation. For example, the PLAN regularly sends its *Peace Ark* hospital ship to developing nations, such as the Pacific Island states, helping Beijing build closer diplomatic relations with local governments for other strategic purposes.⁷

Third, military diplomacy provides intelligence collection opportunities. Through exchanges and cooperation, nearly all military diplomatic activities allow China to gather information from foreign militaries on their capabilities and intentions. Examples like multilateral competitions and joint exercises are rare chances for the PLA to benchmark its capabilities against foreign counterparts.⁸

The strategic purposes of military diplomacy are best summarized by the MND’s spokesperson Wu Qian at the ministry’s year-end press conference, where he listed five achievements of military diplomacy in 2023: 1) “served the overall political and diplomatic objectives of China”; 2) “resolutely safeguarded national sovereignty, security and development interests”; 3) “expanded foreign-related military operations”; 4) “made innovative efforts in multilateral diplomacy”; and 5) “contributed to building a community with a shared future for mankind.”⁹

The next sections will delve into each major type of military diplomatic activities and demonstrate how they contribute to China’s overall foreign policy goals.

Senior-Level Meetings

Senior-level meetings are channels to engage with top foreign military or civilian defense leaders either bilaterally or multilaterally. These exchanges contribute to China’s broader diplomatic efforts to improve communications and foster favorable relationships with other nations.

⁵ Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, “Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications,” (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS)), *China Strategic Perspectives* 11, July 2017,

<https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-11.pdf>, p.10.

⁶ 肖天亮 [Xiao Tianliang], ed., *战略学* (2020 版) [*Science of Military Strategy* (2020 edition)], (Beijing: National Defense University Press, August 2020), p. 136.

⁷ Loro Horta, “China’s Peace Ark: Building Bridges with Pacific Island Nations,” RSIS, 23 October 2023, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/chinas-peace-ark-building-bridges-with-pacific-island-nations/>.

⁸ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016,” p. 11.

⁹ 李伟超 [Li Weichao], 中国国防部定期记者招待会 12 月 28 日新闻发布会 [“Regular Press Conference of China’s Ministry of National Defense on December 28”], 中国国防部 [PRC Ministry of National Defense], 8 January 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16279128.html.

Senior-level defense meetings are usually attended by China's defense ministers or a Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), supplemented by other CMC members and the Deputy Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department who is responsible for military diplomacy.¹⁰ The year 2023, however, witnessed a rather unusual situation for China's defense leaders. It marked the beginning of the Chinese president Xi Jinping's third term and entailed major personnel changes. With the retirement of Wei Fenghe, Li Shangfu became the new Minister of National Defense starting from March.¹¹ However, Li disappeared from the public after the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum held in Beijing on 29 August 2023 and was removed from his post in October without any official explanation. During Li's seven months in the ministry, he led 40 meetings with his foreign counterparts, including four multilateral ones. After two months of vacancy, Admiral Dong Jun, former commander of the PLAN, was appointed as Li's replacement in late December.¹²

CMC leaders held meetings with foreign counterparts in 2023. Zhang Youxia, the number one CMC Vice Chairman, participated in 14 bilateral meetings, and He Weidong, the number two CMC Vice Chairman, chaired seven different bilateral meetings.¹³ Both played an active role in the 10th Xiangshan Forum hosted in Beijing in October when Li was absent.¹⁴ General Liu Zhenli, the Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department, held two virtual meetings, one with Russia's First Deputy Defense Minister and one with the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Charles Q. Brown.¹⁵

In 2023, there was a significant lack of diversity in China's defense officers who participated in senior-level meetings compared with 2022. In 2022, a total of 14 different defense officers, including commanders from the PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force as well as CMC members other than Vice Chairmen, participated in senior-level meetings with their foreign counterparts. In 2023, there were just six. See Table 1 below. While the shift to online meetings during the COVID period—making it more convenient for various officers to engage in military diplomacy—may explain this difference, the gap is still obvious compared to 2018 before COVID cut off in-person exchanges.

¹⁰ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016," p. 12.

¹¹ Wei's last diplomatic meeting before his retirement was with the Turkmenistani defense minister in January 2023. Wang Xinjuan, ed., "Chinese defense minister meets with Turkmen counterpart," PRC Minister of National Defense, 6 January 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4930109.html.

¹² Lin Yunshi and Han Wei, "Ousted Defense Minister Li Shangfu Removed from Top Military Body," Caixin Global, 27 February 2024, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2024-02-27/ousted-defense-minister-li-shangfu-removed-from-top-military-body-102169175.html>.

¹³ Allen, "PLA Military Diplomacy During 2023."

¹⁴ Lin Congyi, ed., "CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia meets with guests attending 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum," *China Military Online*, 1 November 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16263732.html; Huang Panyue, ed., "CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong meets with guests attending 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum," *China Military Online*, 1 November 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16263744.html.

¹⁵ Li Weichao, ed., "Chief of staff of Chinese military holds video talks with Russian counterpart," *China Military Online*, 9 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16230169.html; Li Weichao, ed., "China's senior military official holds video meeting with US counterpart," *China Military Online*, 22 December 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16275519.html.

Table 1. Number of Chinese Defense Personnel Engaged in Senior-Level Meetings, 2018-2023¹⁶

Year	# of personnel
2018	14
2019	8
2020	5
2021	7
2022	14
2023	6

In terms of the total number of senior-level meetings, China’s military diplomacy only recovered around 60 percent from the pre-COVID level. In 2023, China participated in a total of 66 defense exchanges, of which 61 were bilateral and 5 were multilateral. Though the numbers almost doubled for total and bilateral engagement compared to the 2020-2022 period, Beijing was much more active in organizing meetings for senior officials before the pandemic.

Table 2. Senior-Level Meetings by Type, 2018-2023¹⁷

Activity Type	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Grand Total
BL - Abroad	23	28	6	9	7	4	77
BL - Hosted	39	42	2	0	6	15	104
BL - Margins	32	30	3	4	2	40	111
BL - Virtual	0	0	18	13	16	2	49
ML - Abroad	4	4	1	2	3	3	17
ML - Hosted	5	1	0	0	2	2	10
ML - Virtual	0	0	2	5	8	0	15
Grand Total	103	105	32	33	44	66	383

*BL = bilateral, ML = multilateral

¹⁶ Data for 2018-2022 comes from the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database* version 4.00; 2023 data was gathered by the authors.

¹⁷ Data for 2018-2022 comes from Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database* version 4.00; 2023 data was gathered by the authors.

However, if we look at the number of individual partner countries with which Chinese defense officers held meetings, China seemed to maintain a level of diversity similar to the pre-pandemic period. In 2023, Beijing reached out to 41 different countries for military communications, doubling the annual numbers from 2020-2022 with a robust recovery.

Table 3. Number of Different Countries Holding Senior-Level Meetings with China, 2018-2023¹⁸

Year	# of Countries
2018	44
2019	53
2020	18
2021	19
2022	21
2023	41

A closer look at the geographic distribution of China’s partner countries for senior-level meetings reveals several significant trends. First, the Southeast Asian countries remained China’s most frequent contacts for senior-level meetings, a reflection of the geographical proximity and strategic importance of the region for Beijing. Second, Africa became China’s emerging partner region for defense communications, with visits of defense ministers from 15 African countries in 2023, mostly during the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum held in Beijing in August. This was nearly twice as many as the pre-pandemic period and almost matched the number of top military officer visits from Southeast Asian countries in 2023. See Table 4 below. Third, Russia outnumbered all other countries in the frequency of senior-level meetings, conducting seven conversations with Chinese defense leaders last year—a development consistent with growing ties between Beijing and Moscow in recent years. Pakistan, another close partner, made the most visits to China with four senior-level meetings hosted in Beijing in 2023. See Table 5 below.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Table 4. Geographic Distribution of Countries Holding Senior-Level Meetings with China, 2018-2023¹⁹

<i>Geographic Region</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Grand Total
Southeast Asia	27	25	15	8	13	16	104
South Asia	13	12	5	5	2	6	43
Africa	8	8	0	0	6	15	37
Europe	9	9	1	6	2	5	32
Russia	9	5	2	5	2	7	30
Northeast Asia	5	10	4	4	3	2	28
Central Asia	7	6	0	1	3	6	23
North America	5	5	4	1	4	1	20
Global	5	3	1	2	4	3	18
South America	6	7	0	1	1	1	16
Oceania	7	8	0	0	1	0	16
Middle East	2	7	0	0	3	4	16

* “Global” refers to multinational meetings

Table 5. China’s Partner Countries for Senior-Level Meetings with More Than One Occasion in 2023²⁰

<i>Partner Country</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Russia	9	5	2	4	2	7	29
Pakistan	7	8	2	3	2	4	26
Vietnam	3	3	2	2	2	3	15
Cambodia	3	4	1	0	3	3	14
Belarus	3	1	1	0	0	3	8
Thailand	4	2	1	0	2	2	11
Singapore	6	5	1	2	2	2	18
Laos	2	2	1	0	1	2	8
Kazakhstan	2	2	0	0	1	2	7
Iran	1	2	0	0	1	2	6

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

By reviewing the official readouts, four themes emerged from China's bilateral meetings with senior foreign defense leaders. First, Chinese officials consistently expressed the importance of deepening bilateral and strategic relations with various countries. They emphasized mutual trust, respect, and support for each other's core interests. For instance, China and Laos reaffirmed their traditional friendship and strategic cooperation, aiming to elevate their comprehensive strategic partnership to new heights.²¹ Similarly, China and Pakistan reiterated their all-weather strategic partnership and commitment to supporting each other's core interests.²² Second, there was a strong emphasis on strengthening military cooperation and training exchanges between China and other countries. For example, China and Cambodia agreed to deepen military exchanges and cooperation, including joint exercises and personnel training.²³ Third, Chinese officials underscored the importance of regional stability and security. They proposed collaboration in areas such as border security and counter-terrorism, and maintaining peace and stability in the region. For instance, China and Mongolia pledged to strengthen strategic communication and policy coordination to promote regional security and stability.²⁴ With Singapore, He Weidong called for coordination to maintain peace in the South China Sea.²⁵ Fourth, China received support from several partners for its stance on contentious issues, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. For example, defense ministers from Laos, Papua Guinea, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitments to follow the "One China" policy during bilateral meetings.²⁶

Overall, in 2023, China's senior-level defense meetings saw significant shifts in personnel and patterns. The year began with Li Shangfu assuming the role of Minister of National Defense before disappearing from public view and being replaced by Admiral Dong Jun. Despite these changes, diplomatic engagements remained active, with a total of 61 bilateral meetings and 5 multilateral ones. However, compared to previous years, the diversity of participating officers decreased notably, potentially attributed to the shift to virtual platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the total number of meetings increased from 2020-2022 levels, it only reached about 60 percent of pre-pandemic figures. Nevertheless, China maintained a diverse range of partners, notably focusing on Southeast Asia, Africa, and Russia, highlighting strategic priorities in these regions and the growing ties between Beijing and Moscow.

²¹ Wang Xinjuan, ed., "CMC vice chairman Zhang Youxia meets with Lao, Mongolian guests," *China Military Online*, 28 October 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16262919.html.

²² Li Jiayao, ed., "CMC Vice Chairman meets with Pakistani Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee," *China Military Online*, 20 June 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16232555.html.

²³ Huang Panyue, ed., "Senior Chinese, Cambodian military officials meet in Beijing," Xinhuanet, 11 February 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16200862.html.

²⁴ Wang, "CMC vice chairman Zhang Youxia meets with Lao, Mongolian guests."

²⁵ Huang Panyue, ed., "CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong meets with guests attending 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum," *China Military Online*, 1 November 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16263744.html.

²⁶ Ibid; Lin Congyi, ed., "CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia meets with guests attending 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum," *China Military Online*, 1 November 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16263732.html; "Cambodian PM meets with senior Chinese military official," *Xinhua*, 5 December 2023, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2023-12/05/content_116858219.htm; Chen Zhuo, ed., "Senior Chinese military officer meets with Pakistani Army Chief," *China Military Online*, 26 April 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/CMCDEPARTMENTS/News_213079/16220268.html.

Military Exercises

Joint military exercises serve as prominent avenues for military diplomacy.²⁷ Through such engagements, China aims to bolster mutual trust, deepen cooperation, and showcase its military prowess on the international stage.²⁸ They also allow China to signal its military and political intentions, as evidenced by joint naval exercises with Russia and Iran in 2022.²⁹ Moreover, these exercises facilitate skill enhancement and serve as platforms for benchmarking PLA capabilities and gathering intelligence on foreign counterparts.³⁰ They allow the PLAN to train in the “far seas” (远海) as part of its naval strategy.

In 2023, China participated in 24 joint military exercises, a significant increase from the COVID period. Yet this number is still below the 2018 and 2019 levels, indicating more room for recovery. See Table 6 below.

Table 6. Number of China’s Military Exercises with Foreign Militaries, 2018-2023³¹

Year	Military Exercises
2018	39
2019	41
2020	9
2021	14
2022	10
2023	24

In 2023, the dataset indicates a mixed pattern of military exercise participation across different branches of the armed forces. Notably, the Navy witnessed a resurgence in exercise participation compared to the preceding year, with a notable increase from 4 to 10 exercises, showcasing a revitalized focus on maritime operations and security. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Navy surpassed the Army in exercise involvement, underscoring China’s commitment to building a blue-water navy.

²⁷ China Power Team. “How is China Bolstering its Military Diplomatic Relations?” *China Power*, 27 October 2017, Updated 26 August 2020, Accessed 3 April 2024. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/>

²⁸ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016,” p. 13.

²⁹ Leng Shumei, “China, Russia, Iran complete joint drill amid ‘restrictions on sea routes from some major powers,’” *Global Times*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246566.shtml>

³⁰ Kristen Gunness, “China’s Overseas Military Diplomacy and Implications for U.S. Interests,” RAND Corporation, 26 January 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CTA2571-1.html>

³¹ Data for 2018-2022 comes from Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database* version 4.00; 2023 data was gathered by the authors.

Table 7. Participation in Joint Military Exercises by Service, 2018-2023³²

<i>MilEx Service</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Navy	13	12	1	6	4	10
Army	16	22	5	7	2	7
Air Force	3	4	2	1	3	4
Joint	4	1	0	0	1	2
Coast Guard	0	0	1	0	0	1

Regarding the geographic distribution of China's partners, there was a notable increase in joint military exercises conducted in Southeast Asia, with a total of 14 exercises compared to only 2 in the previous year, suggesting a renewed focus on the region. This increase could be attributed to several factors, including heightened regional tensions in the South China Sea and efforts to strengthen alliances and partnerships in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics. Engagement with Russia remained consistent, with 5 exercises conducted in 2023, reflecting uninterrupted military cooperation despite Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine. Conversely, joint military exercises with certain regions such as South Asia experienced a decline compared to pre-COVID years, due to geopolitical tensions between China and India, leaving Pakistan as the only partner since 2020.

Table 8. Geographic Distribution of China's Partners for Joint Military Exercises, 2018-2023³³

<i>Geographic Region</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Southeast Asia	9	13	3	5	2	14
Russia	2	6	3	5	5	5
South Asia	6	7	2	3	1	2
Middle East	1	4	0	0	1	3
Europe	5	1	0	1	1	0
Africa	6	2	0	0	0	0
Oceania	4	2	0	0	0	0
Central Asia	2	4	0	0	0	0
Northeast Asia	2	1	0	0	0	1
North America	1	1	1	0	0	0
South America	1	0	0	0	0	0

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

A closer look at China's military exercises with partners from various regions reveals notable differences in the thematic focus of these engagements. Exercises conducted with Southeast Asian and South Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Pakistan, predominantly centered on maritime security, counterterrorism, and disaster relief efforts, aligning with shared regional concerns. In contrast, exercises with Russia and Central Asian nations, like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, prioritized joint defense, strategic deterrence, and border security, reflecting China's emphasis on bolstering defense capabilities along its periphery and fostering regional stability. Additionally, military engagements with the Middle East, exemplified by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, often concentrated on naval operations, counterterrorism, and special forces training, indicating China's expanding interests in the region's security dynamics.³⁴ These diverse thematic emphases underscore China's multifaceted approach to military diplomacy, tailored to the strategic priorities and security concerns of its regional partners.

Furthermore, the joint exercises often included live drills and simulated scenarios, emphasizing practical cooperation and mutual support in addressing shared security challenges. Skills such as search and rescue, maritime interception, disaster management, and counterterrorism tactics were frequently practiced, reflecting a concerted effort to improve operational readiness and response capabilities. The specific activities conducted during these exercises highlighted a focus on joint maritime drills, aerial photography, search and rescue operations, and various combat scenarios. For example, exercises like the Sea Guardians-3 Joint Maritime Exercise with Pakistan and the Russia-China Strategic Air Patrols involved coordinated maritime patrols, aerial maneuvers, and communication training to enhance interoperability and coordination between participating forces.³⁵ Additionally, exercises such as the Cobra Gold-2023 in Thailand and the Laos-China Friendship Shield-2023 emphasized humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, showcasing a commitment to regional stability and crisis response capabilities.³⁶

The purposes of these exercises, as highlighted in the official readouts, were to strengthen military cooperation, enhance mutual trust, and address common security threats. Many exercises, like the Shaheen-X Joint Training Exercise with Pakistan and the Falcon Strike-2023 Joint Air Force Exercise with Thailand, aimed to deepen military-to-military relationships, exchange expertise, and promote interoperability.³⁷ Moreover, exercises such as the Northern/Interaction-2023 Exercise with Russia underscored the importance of safeguarding strategic maritime passages and deterring potential threats, reflecting a shared interest in regional security and stability against the "Western

³⁴ Allen, "PLA Military Diplomacy During 2023."

³⁵ Li Wei, ed., "China, Pakistan to hold "Sea Guardians-3" joint maritime exercise: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, 26 October 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16262265.html; Li Weichao, ed., "China, Russia complete tasks of second phase of 6th joint strategic air patrol," *China Military Online*, 7 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16229514.html.

³⁶ Lin Congyi, ed., "China participates in Cobra Gold 2023 HADR exercise in Thailand: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, 23 February 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16203770.html; Li Jiayao, ed., "Mixed-group training launched in China-Laos Friendship Shield-2023 joint exercise," *China Military Online*, 18 May 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16225177.html.

³⁷ Huang Panyue, ed., "China, Pakistan kick off Shaheen (Eagle)-X joint air exercise," *China Military Online*, 29 August 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16248628.html; Huang Panyue, ed., "China-Thailand joint air exercise Falcon Strike - 2023 kicks off in Thailand," *China Military Online*, 10 July 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16236106.html.

aggressors.”³⁸ In addition, given that the PLA’s last war was fought in the 1970s, joint exercises with a military that has modern war experience can complement its training system.

In sum, the themes and partners of China’s joint military exercises reflect its foreign policy objectives of fostering regional cooperation, strengthening military ties with strategic partners, and asserting its presence in key geopolitical regions. The diverse range of exercises, involving both bilateral and multilateral collaborations, underscores China’s growing influence in shaping regional security architectures and its commitment to promoting peace and stability through military diplomacy and cooperative security initiatives.

Naval Port Calls

Chinese naval port calls involve either visits by PLAN vessels to foreign ports or the hosting of foreign naval ships within China. These engagements, highlighted by Chinese sources, emphasize benefits such as joint training and fostering friendly relations. Typically, these visits have occurred either concurrently with training missions or as independent endeavors in military diplomacy.³⁹ According to China’s Ministry of National Defense, as of December 2023, the PLAN had dispatched more than 150 ships and over 35,000 troops in 45 anti-piracy escort task forces (ETF) to the Gulf of Aden and adjacent waters since 2008.⁴⁰ In addition to the ETFs, other PLAN vessels serve specific operational or diplomatic purposes, such as bilateral drills, trainings, or humanitarian assistance.

In 2023, the PLAN conducted a total of 27 naval port calls, adding four more trips than 2019 and making substantial progress compared to only a few visits per year during the pandemic. Southeast Asia remained the most frequently visited region by the PLAN, with 10 port calls, followed by Africa with 6 port calls, Oceania with 5 port calls, and the Middle East with 4 port calls. See Table 9 below. In addition, the PLAN reached out to 27 different countries for these port calls, nearly matched with the 29 partner countries in 2018 and showing a robust recovery for its activities. See Table 10 below.

³⁸ Li Weichao, ed., “China-Russia Northern/Interaction-2023 exercise concludes,” *China Military Online*, 24 July 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16239326.html.

³⁹ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “Chinese Military Diplomacy 2003-2016,” p. 14.

⁴⁰ Li, “Regular Press Conference of China’s Ministry of National Defense on December 28.”

Table 9. Geographic Distribution of China’s Naval Port Calls, 2018-2023⁴¹

<i>Geographic Region</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Grand Total
Southeast Asia	2	8	1	0	1	10	22
Africa	8	4	0	0	0	6	18
Oceania	4	3	0	0	0	5	12
Middle East	4	5	1	0	0	4	14
South Asia	1	0	1	0	1	1	4
Russia	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
South America	7	0	0	0	0	0	7
Europe	6	2	0	0	0	0	8
Grand Total	32	23	3	0	2	27	87

Table 10. Number of Partner Countries the Chinese Navy Visited for Port Calls⁴²

<i>Year</i>	<i># of Countries</i>
2018	29
2019	21
2020	3
2021	0
2022	2
2023	27

Compared to previous years, Southeast Asia accounted for a larger share of the PLAN’s port calls in 2023, underscoring the region’s strategic value to China’s foreign policy. A closer look at the data reveals that the training vessel *Qi Jiguang* accounted for most of the visits in Southeast Asia and has consistently visited this region along with Fiji since its commissioning in 2017. See Table 11 below. Meanwhile, ports in Africa and Middle East have received mainly Chinese ETFs, and Oceanian Island nations are frequent destinations for the PLAN hospital ship *Peace Ark*. However, port calls in

⁴¹ Data for 2018-2022 comes from Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, *Chinese Military Diplomacy Database* version 4.00; 2023 data was gathered by the authors.

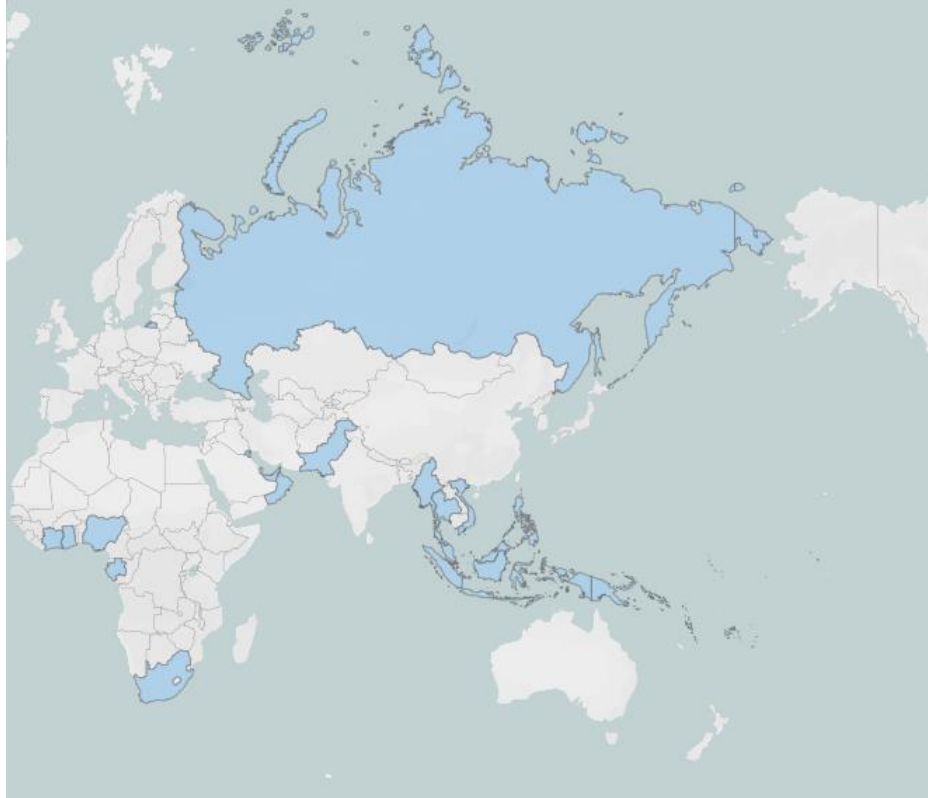
⁴² Ibid.

Europe and South America have not resumed post-pandemic, likely due to geopolitical factors. The figure below maps the geographic distribution of PLAN port calls in 2023.

Table 11. China's Naval Port Calls By Type and Geographic Region, 2018-2023⁴³

<i>Geographic Region</i>	<i>Type</i>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Africa	ETF	8	4	0	0	0	6
Europe	ETF	6	2	0	0	0	0
Middle East	ETF	3	4	1	0	0	4
	Hospital Ship	1	0	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	1	0	0	0	0
Oceania	ETF	1	1	0	0	0	0
	Hospital Ship	3	0	0	0	0	4
	Training ship	0	2	0	0	0	1
Russia	ETF	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	1
South America	Hospital Ship	7	0	0	0	0	0
South Asia	ETF	1	0	1	0	0	1
	Other	0	0	0	0	1	0
Southeast Asia	ETF	1	3	1	0	0	3
	Hospital Ship	1	0	0	0	1	1
	Training ship	0	5	0	0	0	6

⁴³ Ibid.



Map of PLAN Port Calls in 2023

The activities conducted by the PLAN during their port calls vary significantly depending on the type of vessels involved. ETFs, for example, account for the bulk of the PLAN's friendly visits abroad and have engaged in a variety of activities. The PLAN deployed four ETFs throughout 2023, including the 42nd ETF, which returned in February.⁴⁴ The 43rd ETF, comprising vessels such as the guided-missile destroyer *Nanning* and the comprehensive supply ship *Weishanhu*, engaged in joint military exercises in South Africa, participated in multinational maritime exercises in the Arabian Sea, and undertook humanitarian missions, including evacuating Chinese and foreign nationals from Sudan.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the 44th ETF, consisting of vessels like the guided missile destroyer *Zibo*, focused on anti-terrorism and anti-piracy training along its route and conducted joint maritime exercises with navies in the Middle East.⁴⁶ Additionally, the 45th ETF, represented by ships such as

⁴⁴ Li Jiayao, "43rd Chinese naval escort taskforce officially starts escort mission," *China Military Online*, 22 February 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2023-02/07/content_4932120.htm.

⁴⁵ Li Jiayao, "43rd Chinese naval escort taskforce sets sail for Gulf of Aden," *China Military Online*, 11 January 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/OverseasOperations/4930453.html; Sana Jamal, correspondent, "Pakistan Navy hosts 50 countries for multinational exercise Aman 2023: Navies of the US, China, Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait taking part," *World Asia*, 12 February 2023, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-navy-hosts-50-countries-for-multinational-exercise-aman-2023-1.93803073>; Chen Zhuo, ed., "Chinese military completes mission of evacuating Chinese personnel from Sudan: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, 29 April 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16221045.html.

⁴⁶ Li Weichao, ed., "44th Chinese naval escort taskforce wraps up visit to UAE," *China Military Online*, 6 November 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16265210.html; Li Weichao, ed., "44th Chinese naval escort taskforce concludes visit to Kuwait," *China Military Online*, 24 October 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16261491.html; Huang Panyue, ed., "44th Chinese naval escort taskforce wraps up Qatar visit," *China Military Online*, 30 October 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16263183.html.

the destroyer *Urumqi*, escorted Chinese fishing boats, demonstrating its commitment to maritime security and protection of Chinese interests.⁴⁷ These activities underscore the multifaceted roles of ETFs, encompassing military cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and maritime security operations, in line with China's strategic objectives and international engagement efforts.

On the other hand, the training vessel *Qi Jiguang*, assigned to the Dalian Naval Academy, emphasizes cadet training and diplomatic outreach during its voyages. By visiting multiple countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji, the *Qi Jiguang* fostered international cooperation and mutual trust. These visits not only provided hands-on training opportunities for Chinese naval cadets but also facilitated cultural exchanges and strengthened practical maritime cooperation with host countries. Through joint exercises with naval vessels from partner nations, the *Qi Jiguang* contributed to “serving and building a maritime community with a shared future” while enhancing its own operational adaptability and capability.⁴⁸

In contrast, the PLAN's *Peace Ark* hospital ship focuses on providing medical services and conducting training tasks during its overseas missions. During visits to countries like Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste, the *Peace Ark* provided outpatient medical services, surgical procedures, and emergency treatment to thousands of people. It also offered training in sea and air rescue. Furthermore, the hospital ship participated in anti-terrorism and anti-piracy drills, underscoring its role in ensuring maritime security and stability. Despite being unarmed, the *Peace Ark* demonstrated its effectiveness in combat scenarios, highlighting the importance of its mission in safeguarding global health and maritime interests.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lin Congyi, ed., “45th Chinese naval escort taskforce escorts ten fishing boats,” *China Military Online*, 25 October 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16261858.html.

⁴⁸ Li Weichao, ed., “Chinese naval training ship Qi Jiguang wraps up goodwill visit to Vietnam,” *China Military Online*, May 26, 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16226739.html. Li Weichao, ed., “Chinese naval training ship Qi Jiguang arrives in Thailand for goodwill visit,” *China Military Online*, 30 May 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16227442.html. Li Weichao, ed., “Chinese naval training ship Qi Jiguang arrives in Brunei for goodwill visit,” *Xinhuanet*, 5 June 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16228975.html. Huang Panyue, ed., “Chinese naval training ship heading to Philippines after wrapping up friendly visit to Brunei,” *Xinhuanet*, 9 June 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16230113.html. Huang Panyue, ed., “Naval training ship Qi Jiguang to host open day activities in the Philippines,” *China Military Online*, 14 June 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16231164.html. Xu Yi, ed., “Chinese naval training ship Qi Jiguang arrives in the Philippines for goodwill visit,” *China Military Online*, 15 June 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16231493.html. Chen Zhuo, ed., “Chinese navy vessel returns from overseas voyage,” *Xinhuanet*, 24 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16232961.html. Lin Congyi, ed., “Naval ship Qi Jiguang to visit Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji,” *China Military Online*, 4 September 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16250009.html. Huang Panyue, ed., “Chinese naval ship Qi Jiguang concludes goodwill visit to Indonesia,” *China Military Online*, 21 September 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16253531.html. Li Weichao, ed., “Chinese naval ship Qi Jiguang concludes goodwill visit to Fiji,” *China Military Online*, 10 October 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16257319.html. Li Jiayao, ed., “Chinese naval ship Qi Jiguang returns from ocean-going training mission,” *China Military Online*, October 24, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16261422.html.

⁴⁹ Zhang Zhicheng, “Regular Press Conference of China's Ministry of National Defense on December 28,” PRC Ministry of National Defense, 28 December 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16279128.html. Chen Zhuo, ed. Chinese naval hospital ship offers medical aid worldwide, *Xinhuanet*, 16 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16231815.html. Huang Panyue, ed., “Hospital ship *Peace Ark*

In summary, Chinese naval port calls serve as essential tools of maritime diplomacy, fostering cooperation, goodwill, and security across various regions. The data indicates a clear pattern of port calls, with Southeast Asia emerging as the most frequented region by the PLAN, followed by Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. The diverse activities conducted during these port calls, ranging from joint military exercises to humanitarian missions and medical assistance, highlight China's multifaceted approach to international engagement. As China continues to enhance its naval capabilities and expand its global presence, naval port calls will remain integral to its efforts to strengthen ties, promote stability, and safeguard its maritime interests worldwide.

United Nations Peacekeeping Operations

The PLA has been actively involved in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) since 1990. By supporting UNPKO, it seeks to demonstrate a commitment to global peace and security.⁵⁰ As of 2023, China contributed the largest number of troops of any country among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and it is the second largest financial contributor to the UN budget for peacekeeping operations. It has participated in 25 UNPKO missions, with over 50,000 peacekeepers deployed. Currently, nearly 2,000 Chinese peacekeepers are deployed across various mission areas, including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Lebanon. These peacekeepers are primarily engaged in engineering, transportation, medical, police, infantry, and helicopter units, highlighting China's diverse contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts.⁵¹

In South Sudan, Chinese peacekeeping efforts have been notable for their multifaceted contributions to stability and community relations. Chinese infantry battalions have conducted extensive foot patrols to assess and secure areas, demonstrating their operational readiness and coordination skills. Additionally, Chinese engineering companies have repaired critical supply lines, ensuring the functionality of local transportation. Chinese peacekeepers have completed construction tasks, including the repair of severely damaged infrastructure. Through active engagement with local communities and humanitarian relief activities, such as condolences and donations, Chinese

conducts anti-terrorism, anti-piracy drills in Pacific," *China Military Online*, 7 July 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16236364.html. Li Jiayao, ed., "China's hospital ship 'Peace Ark' completes 1st visit to Kiribati," *Xinhuanet*, 24 July 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16240091.html. Li Weichao, ed., "Peace Ark hospital ship celebrates 96th anniversary of PLA founding in Tonga," *China Military Online*, 2 August 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16241776.html. Li Jiayao, ed., "Chinese naval hospital ship concludes visit to Tonga," *China Military Online*, 8 August 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16243265.html. Li Weichao, ed., "Chinese naval hospital ship Peace Ark concludes visit to Vanuatu," *China Military Online*, 17 August 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16245696.html. Chen Zhuo, ed., "Hospital Ship Peace Ark engages in cultural exchange with local school in Solomon Islands," *China Military Online*, 23 August 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16247107.html. Huang Panyue, ed., "Hospital ship Peace Ark leaves Solomon Islands for Timor-Leste," *China Military Online*, 28 August 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16248372.html. Lin Congyi, ed., "Chinese naval hospital ship Peace Ark visits Timor-Leste," *China Military Online*, 4 September 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16250002.html.

⁵⁰ "30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Xinhua*, 18 September 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/18/c_139376725.htm.

⁵¹ Zhang Zhicheng, "Regular Press Conference of China's Ministry of National Defense on December 28," PRC Ministry of National Defense, December 28, 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16279128.html.

peacekeepers have strived to establish positive relations and showcase the goodwill and professionalism of the Chinese military on the international stage.⁵²

In Lebanon, Chinese peacekeeping efforts have focused on operations ranging from emergency response to medical support. Chinese engineering companies have participated in exercises aimed at enhancing emergency response capabilities, such as earthquake relief drills and medical rescue exercises. These drills have required Chinese peacekeepers to handle complex scenarios and coordinate with international counterparts under challenging conditions. Moreover, Chinese medical contingents have provided essential healthcare services to both UN personnel and local communities, conducting surgical operations and offering medical support in conflict-affected areas.⁵³

In the DRC, the 26th Chinese Peacekeeping Contingent completed numerous missions, including the construction of a temporary bridge and a Level-II Hospital, enhancing infrastructure and healthcare in the region. For their efforts, they were honored with the UN Peace Medal. The contingent was tasked with maintaining peace and stability in the eastern DRC, conducting engineering surveys, completing projects, and providing medical support to both local communities and MONUSCO members.⁵⁴

Similarly, the 10th Chinese peacekeeping medical contingent to Mali conducted a combat wound treatment drill aimed at addressing the challenges posed by frequent armed conflicts in the region. The drill focused on optimizing the treatment plan to ensure timely and efficient medical care on the battlefield, emphasizing quick transfer and emergency rescue procedures. All 398 peacekeepers were awarded the UN Peace Medal of Honor for their various mission fulfillments, including camp guard and defense, engineering support, and emergency construction.⁵⁵

Academic Exchanges

PLA academies play a role in China's military diplomacy, and in 2023 they engaged cadets in numerous activities to foster international cooperation and exchanges. The PLA National Defense University (NDU) organized a forum in Beijing, welcoming delegates from 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries to discuss future-oriented military education cooperation.⁵⁶ The PLAN concluded the "Deep Sea Warrior" International Sailing Skills Competition, where naval cadets from

⁵² Li Jiayao, ed., "9th Chinese peacekeeping infantry battalion to South Sudan (Juba) completes first long patrol mission," *China Military Online*, 4 January 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2023-01/04/content_4929940.htm; Li Weichao, ed., "Chinese peacekeeping engineering contingent to South Sudan repairs critical supply routes," *China Military Online*, 26 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16233298.html.

⁵³ Wang Xinjuan, ed., "Chinese peacekeepers to Lebanon participate in Exercise Tiger 2023," *China Military Online*, 16 February 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16201265.html; Chen Zhuo, ed., "Chinese peacekeepers to Lebanon hold earthquake rescue drill," *China Military Online*, 20 February 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16202777.html; Huang Panyue, ed., "Chinese peacekeepers to Lebanon participate in Angel Rescue Exercise," *China Military Online*, 6 May 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16222270.html.

⁵⁴ Li Jiayao, ed., "Chinese peacekeepers to DR Congo awarded UN Peace Medal," *Xinhuanet*, July 26, 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16239764.html.

⁵⁵ Li Jiayao, ed., "10th Chinese peacekeeping medical contingent to Mali conducts combat wound treatment drill," *China Military Online*, 10 January 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2023-01/10/content_4930368.htm. Huang Panyue, ed., "Chinese peacekeepers to Mali awarded UN Peace Medal of Honor," *China Military Online*, 25 June 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16233071.html.

⁵⁶ Li Weichao, ed., "Forum for Chinese, LAC commandants of defense colleges concludes," *China Military Online*, 6 July 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16235372.html.

eight countries participated in exchanges.⁵⁷ The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) hosted the 5th Air Force International Cadets Week in Xi'an, facilitating learning and training activities among cadets from 11 countries.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the PLA Army (PLAA) held the 10th International Army Cadets Week in Nanjing, focusing on capability-building for junior officers, and the first International Special Operations Forum in Guangzhou, promoting exchanges on special warfare tactics.⁵⁹ Additionally, the PLAA Engineering University hosted the 4th International Army Forum on Military Education in Nanjing, aiming to explore the future-oriented cultivation of army officers and enhance international cooperation in military education.⁶⁰ These initiatives were intended to demonstrate the PLA's commitment to global military collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

Conclusion

China's military diplomacy underscores its commitment to safeguarding sovereignty and security concerns, particularly regarding issues like Taiwan and the South China Sea. Senior-level meetings often emphasize support for the "One China Principle," as seen in statements from foreign defense officials confirming their backing for China's sovereignty over Taiwan. To help construct a favorable security environment conducive to its interests and showcase its commitment to regional stability, China also engages in international peacekeeping operations, such as its involvement in UN Peacekeeping Operations in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Additionally, military diplomacy provides opportunities for China to improve its capabilities and gather intelligence on foreign militaries, enhancing its strategic advantage. In particular, joint exercises and drills allow the PLA to benchmark its capabilities against foreign counterparts and learn from their experiences with modern warfare. On the other hand, joint exercises can also serve as a channel to send political signals, as illustrated by the PLA's frequent collaboration with the Russian military to show their deepening ties amid growing tensions with the West.

In 2023, Chinese military diplomacy showed a significant—but incomplete—recovery from the doldrums of the COVID-19 pandemic. Naval diplomacy saw major progress. The PLAN conducted 27 port calls in 2023, compared to just 2 port calls in 2022, 0 in 2021, and 3 in 2020. The 2023 figures exceeded the 23 port calls recorded just prior to the pandemic in 2019. See Table 9 above. However, China only conducted 24 exercises with foreign military in 2023—significantly higher than the numbers recorded 2020-2022 (9, 14, and 10, respectively), but far lower than the pre-pandemic levels. In 2019, for example, China participated in 41 exercises with foreign militaries. See Table 6 above. In terms of total number of senior-level meetings, China's military diplomacy only recovered around 60 percent from the pre-COVID level. See Table 2 above.

China's 2023 engagements in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Russia reflect its strategic priorities and efforts to strengthen ties in key regions. For instance, the high frequency of senior-level meetings with African defense ministers during the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in Beijing highlighted China's focus on strengthening ties with African nations, which are considered key allies to support Beijing's positions in international affairs. Moreover, China's military diplomacy aims to

⁵⁷ Lin Congyi, ed., "'Deep Sea Warrior' International Sailing Skills Competition and Naval International Cadets Week concluded," *China Military Online*, 23 October 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16261123.html.

⁵⁸ Huang Panyue, ed., "5th Air Force International Cadets Week kicks off in Xi'an," *China Military Online*, 24 October 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exchanges/News_209188/16261468.html.

⁵⁹ Li Weichao, ed., "10th International Army Cadets Week to be held in Nanjing: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, 26 October 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16262273.html.

⁶⁰ Wang Xinjuan, ed., "PLA Army Special Operations Academy to hold first Int'l Special Operations Forum," *China Military Online*, 11 November 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16267225.html.

diversify partnerships and build strategic relationships beyond its immediate neighborhood. China's engagement with 41 partner countries across different regions demonstrated its efforts to diversify partnerships for military cooperation. However, it is noteworthy that China did not engage with any countries in Western Europe or the Americas in 2023, except for the one conversation with the United States in the end of the year to break the ice between the two countries.

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Appendix B: Acronyms

Acronym	Term
ADMM	ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting
ADMM+	ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus
ADSOM+	ASEAN Defence Senior Officials Meeting Plus
AMU	Army Medical University
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP / CPC	Chinese Communist Party / Communist Party of China
CCTV	China Central Television
CICA	Captive Insurance Companies Association
CMC	Central Military Commission
COVID	Coronavirus disease
CQB	Close quarter battle
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ERA	Eighth Route Army
ETF	Escort Task Force
EWG	Experts' Working Group
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HMA	Humanitarian Mine Action
IACW	International Army Cadets Week
ICMM	International Committee of Military Medicine
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
JMSDF	Japan Maritime Self Defense Force
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LAC	Latin America and Caribbean
LIMA	Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace
LPA	Lao People's Army
LPAF	Lao People's Armed Forces
MCIS	Moscow Conference on International Security
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MND	Ministry of National Defense
MNEK	Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo
MoE	Ministry of Education
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
NDU	National Defense University
NMU	Naval Medical University
NPC	National People's Congress
OIMC	Office of International Military Cooperation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAA	PLA Army
PLAAF	PLA Air Force
PLAN	PLA Navy
PLARF	PLA Rocket Force
PLASSF	PLA Strategic Support Force
PNS	Pakistani Naval Ship
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
SAM	Surface-to-air missile

SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
TCN	Theater Command Navy
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN.	United Nations
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNPKO	United Nations Peace Keeping Operations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
VBSS	Visit, board, search, and seizure
VCG	Vietnamese Coast Guard
VTC	Video teleconference

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