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China's "World-Class Military" Ambitions: Origins and Implications

At the Nineteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017, Chinese leader Xi Jinping outlined the party's goal to "complete national defense and military modernization by 2035" and to transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a "world-class military by the middle of the century."¹ After this report, the term "world-class military" has been featured prominently in military-related publications in China.

Literally, the phrase "世界 [shijie] 一流 [yiliu] 军队 [jundui]" translates as "worldwide first-class military." The key characters are "一流," which is typically rendered as top-tier, first-rate, or first-class. Essentially, it means to belong to the elite group of a category. It does not mean being the single best; it means only to be among the best.

As with many terms in official Chinese discourse, however, the phrase has never been clearly defined. Authoritative Chinese government and PLA documents lack a clear and accepted definition of the term, leaving many to wonder what a "world-class military" really means. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, for example, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper described it as capturing an ambition "to dominate Asia as the preeminent global military power" by 2049.² Does it reflect a desire to become a peer competitor with the United States? What global ambitions does it contain? Does it portend the transformation of the PLA into a global power that can project armed force almost anywhere around the globe?

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Based on a review of available Chinese language sources, my argument is that the phrase “world-class military” should be viewed as a general, high-level, and overarching concept for the development of the PLA. That is, it outlines the goals of PLA modernization and a set of benchmarks for assessing the PLA’s progress toward achieving this objective over the next thirty years. The goal of building a world-class military defines what it means to “achieve the goal of a strong army,” an objective that Xi introduced in early 2013 as part of his “China dream.”³

Nevertheless, the notion of building a world-class military does not reflect a global military strategy or illuminate China’s global ambitions. It does not identify the ends for which a world-class or even modernizing PLA would be used, nor does it indicate the manner in which such forces would be used. It also is not a geographic concept, insofar as it does not describe a global posture or role for the PLA except in the most general sense. It does not reflect a desire to be the preeminent global military power. Instead, a review of China’s current military strategy of “winning informatized local wars” best answers these questions.

Origins of Building a World-Class Military

Xi Jinping first used the phrase “world-class military” in a series of speeches before military audiences in early 2016. At this time, the PLA had just launched far-reaching and unprecedented organizational reforms⁴ and was finalizing its five-year development outline (规划纲要) for China’s armed forces that would be part of the government’s Thirteenth Five-Plan. The five-year development outline provides a template for military modernization—what official PLA sources often describe as “national defense and army building” (国防与军队建设), defined as “a general designation of all activities to build armed forces, maintain and improve the system of military power, and increase combat power.”⁶

Within this context of PLA modernization, Xi Jinping first used the phrase “building a world-class military.” It was introduced as part of a formulation (提法) that describes the high-level goals for PLA modernization: “achieving the goal of a strong army, building a world-class military” (实现强军目标, 建设世界一流军队).⁵ Thus, Xi’s first use of the term indicates that “world-class military” should be viewed as a force development concept—part of Xi’s goal to transform the PLA into a strong army. The simplest interpretation is that China would achieve a strong army when its armed forces had become world-class. The goal of a strong army provided the rationale and

Xi’s first use of the term indicates a force development concept.

motivation for the far-reaching military reforms announced at the end of 2015 that China began implementing in early 2016.

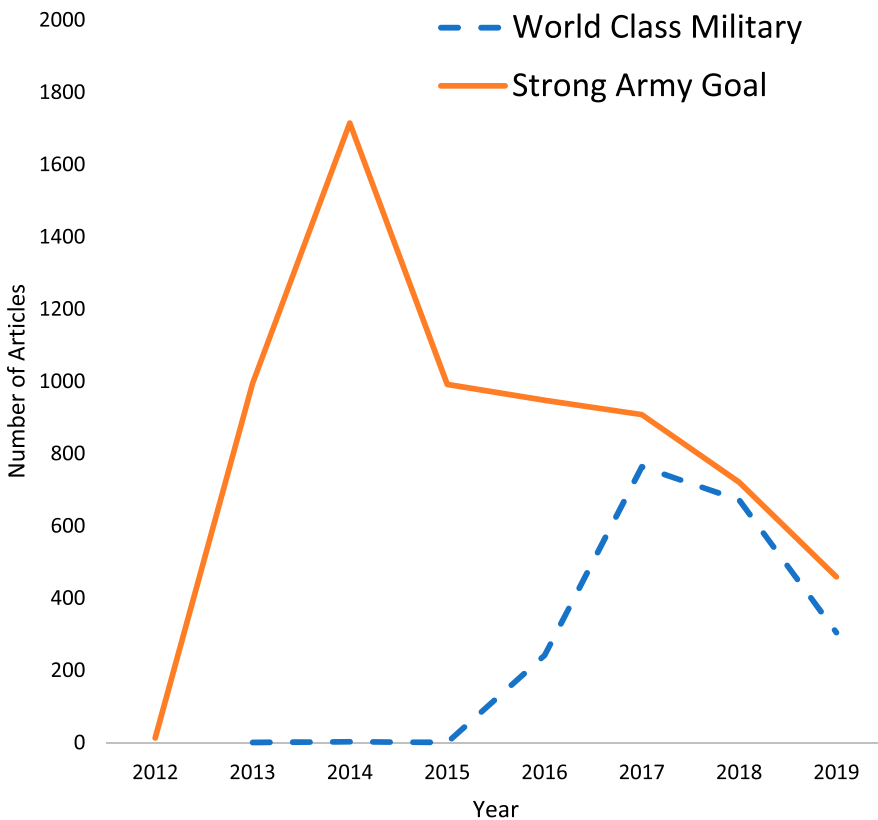
This link between a strong army and a world-class military appeared in other speeches Xi delivered before the Nineteenth Party Congress. In a July 2017 speech on the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the PLA, for example, Xi repeated similar language from 2016. As he told the assembled troops, "We must thoroughly implement the party's thought on strengthening the army, unswervingly follow the road of strengthening the army with Chinese characteristics, strive to achieve the party's goal of a strong army under the new situation, and build our heroic people's army into a world-class military."⁷ By describing what a strong army should be, the idea of building a world-class military was again used as a force development concept, not a strategic concept that might illuminate the PLA's future employment, posture, or goals.

After the initial use of the term "world-class military" in 2016, it peaked in 2017 and then began to decline. To put use of the term in context, [Figure 1](#) shows the number of times "strong army goal" and "world-class military" have appeared in articles published in the *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报), the PLA's official newspaper. The frequency of "strong army goal" peaked in the paper in 2013 and 2014, after Xi began to use the term. The frequency of the term "world-class military" has never exceeded that of "strong army goal," again suggesting that building a world-class military explains how the goal of a strong army would be realized. The decline in frequency of the term since 2018 may be due to the appearance of a new slogan for the PLA's force development—"Xi Jinping's Thought on Strengthening the Army" (习近平强军思想)—that has been used more frequently since 2017.

When the Nineteenth Party Congress was convened in October 2017, Xi linked the idea of building a world-class military with a timetable for PLA modernization. Almost twenty years earlier, back in 1997, the Chinese leader Jiang Zemin identified three steps for PLA modernization. The first step was for the PLA to create a foundation for its modernization by 2010. Then, by 2020, it would complete mechanization and "make great progress toward informatization," indicating the two main components of PLA modernization (as discussed in more detail below, informatization refers to the application of information technologies to all aspects of warfighting). The third and final step was to "achieve national defense and military modernization by the middle of the 21st century."⁸

Xi modified Jiang's original timetable in two ways. First, the goal for the middle of the twenty-first century is now more specific: to create a world-class military. Second, Xi added an interim stage by which to assess the PLA's progress, which was to "strive to basically complete national defense and military modernization by 2035."⁹

Figure I: Use of the Terms “Strong Army Goal” and “World-Class Military” in the Liberation Army Daily, 2012–19



Unfortunately, little has been published in authoritative sources on the meaning of the 2035 benchmark. One interpretation is that Xi accelerated Jiang’s timetable for PLA modernization by fifteen years.¹⁰ US defense secretary

Mark Esper suggests that it indicates that China “intends to complete its military modernization” by 2035.¹¹ Another view is that Xi clarified how to realize Jiang’s mid-century modernization goal. The inclusion of “basically” in the context of 2035 suggests additional work would be required before modernization would be “fully” complete in 2049. In other words, Xi defined completing PLA modernization as becoming a “world-class military” while also adding an interim

Little has been published in authoritative sources on the meaning of the 2035 benchmark.

step. Consistent with this view, a manual from the CMC's Political Department describes Xi's timetable as "a grand blueprint for comprehensively advancing national defense and military modernization."¹²

A final, and perhaps simpler, explanation is that the 2035 and mid-century milestones for PLA modernization complement the CCP's national development goals for the People's Republic. At the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi also introduced a two-phase plan for China's overall development. According to the work report, "socialist modernization" would be "basically realized" by the end of 2035. By mid-century, China would become "a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful."¹³ Identifying 2035 as a milestone in China's national development by definition carried implications for the level of military modernization that would need to be achieved at that time. As one Chinese commentator notes, the PLA's modernization should be "closely aligned with the strategic arrangement for national modernization."¹⁴ Thus, the 2035 milestone was likely added to be consistent with the overall national development plan.

Reflecting the broader context of national development, the work report Xi delivered at the party congress used "world-class" to describe the goals for transforming other parts of the state and society besides the military. These goals include fostering "world-class advanced manufacturing clusters," cultivating "world-class scientists and technologists," turning "Chinese enterprises into world-class, globally competitive firms," and working "to build Chinese universities into world-class universities and develop world-class disciplines."¹⁵

In June 2019, the publication of a defense white paper provided an opportunity for the PLA to offer a more detailed definition of the term. However, the document only used "world-class" twice, and without any further clarification.¹⁶ The first use repeated verbatim the language from the 2017 work report, while the second use identified it as part of Xi Jinping's thought on strengthening the army, again a reference to force development. The white paper did not, however, offer a definition or detailed description of the term, much less outline a goal of global preeminence.

Fleshing Out the Details: "World-Class" Commentaries

Commentaries on the term "world-class" have appeared in party and military publications. These include *China Military Science* (中国军事科学), the journal of the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS); the "military forum" section (军事论坛) of the *Liberation Army Daily*; and *Seeking Truth* (求是), a party journal. These commentaries are less authoritative than leadership speeches or

government statements and documents, as the authors are usually writing in their personal capacity (based on their qualifications) and not representing their organizations. Nevertheless, these commentaries provide support for the argument that building a world-class military is a force development concept. They attempt to develop benchmarks for assessing progress in the PLA's modernization by identifying what constitutes "world-class." However, the commentaries do not describe what a global goal or posture might be for a world-class PLA or how it would be used.

These commentaries describe world-class militaries in several ways. One concerns the overall capabilities of world-class militaries. Simply put, they are as capable as the best militaries in the world. One professor from the PLA's

China appears to hope that by 2049, PLA capabilities will be on par with the world's elite.

National Defense University (NDU) describes world-class as "having the ability and strength to compete on par with the world-class militaries" and "having the powerful strength and deterrent force to match [抗衡] the militaries of world powers [世界强国]."¹⁷ A professor from AMS describes world-class militaries as being able to "compete with world-class rivals [对手]."¹⁸ This article also observes that world-class militaries are "those

who have the military ability to compete with the world's strongest players."¹⁹ Thus, China hopes that by 2049, the capabilities of the PLA will be on par with the world's elite armed forces including, and perhaps especially, those of the United States.

These commentaries also describe the organizational characteristics that make a military world-class. Most of the commentators agree with Cao Yimin, chief of staff of the ground forces in the Western Theater Command, who describes world-class militaries as possessing world-class operational theories, personnel, weapons and equipment, law-based management, combat power, and innovation abilities.²⁰ Likewise, a scholar from AMS writes that "a so-called world-class military means having world-class military theories, military systems, weapons and equipment, personnel, and training levels."²¹

A number of the commentaries highlight the need for clear benchmarks or standards to measure the PLA's progress toward becoming world-class. These benchmarks also offer insight into how the PLA qualifies as world-class.²² AMS scholar Xiao Tiefeng offers a lengthy description that distinguishes between benchmarks for operations and for army building. Regarding operations, he writes, "World-class militaries should have advanced military thinking and strategy and tactics, efficient and sensitive command and control, real-time or near-real-time intelligence surveillance capability, combined and integrated

firepower strike capability, actual combat training, trans-regional and trans-continental force delivery capability, and comprehensive, efficient and seamless link support level.”²³

Turning to army building, Xiao offers an even longer list of benchmarks. He writes that a world-class military should “possess advanced leadership and management concepts and intensive and efficient military institutions and organizations; have world-class modern equipment ... have a perfected system of military regulations and rules; possess abundant and high-quality military human resources and high comprehensive quality of military and civilian personnel; realize the deep military-civil fusion ... have a good international image and a high degree of internationalization.”²⁴

Implicit—and often explicit—in these discussions of benchmarks is China’s own assessment that the PLA currently falls short of what might constitute a world-class military. Many commentaries note that the PLA’s level of modernization lags behind the country’s economic accomplishments and that significant reforms are still needed for the PLA to become world-class. They also note that the goal of becoming world-class underscores the imperative of implementing the wide-ranging 2016 reforms.²⁵ As one group of AMS scholars writes, “Compared with the world’s first-class militaries, our army is still in the historical stage of the composite development of mechanization and informatization, and many ‘shortcomings’ [短板] for development exist.”²⁶ Indeed, one noteworthy aspect of China’s 2019 defense white paper was several references to the PLA’s deficiencies when compared with other armed forces. For example, the white paper states that the PLA “has yet to complete the task of mechanization, and is in urgent need of improving its informationizationThe PLA still lags far behind the world’s leading militaries.”²⁷

As a world-class military, the US armed forces loom large in Chinese discussions of what it means to be world-class. However, these commentaries do not dwell excessively on the United States. Some of them mention the US pivot or the rebalance to Asia as part of the security challenges China faces that a world-class, or at least more modernized, PLA would be better able to address.²⁸ Others describe the United States as a world-class military, often along with Russia and sometimes France and the United Kingdom. The implication of becoming world-class is clear: China would be in a position to match, balance, and thus deter, the United States and others.

These commentaries do not discuss the geographic characteristics or requirements of a world-class military. That is, the commentaries do not describe a world-class military as a global military that can project power around the world in the way that the United States military can today. Certainly, some degree of power projection is implied by using the United States, Russia, France and others as examples of world-class militaries. All of these armed forces can

The “world-class” concept does not illuminate global ambitions or how China envisions using force.

project and sustain at least some combat power beyond their home regions of the world. Nevertheless, these commentaries contain little discussion of where the Chinese military would be employed beyond East Asia or what kind of global posture would be required in order to be world-class. Thus, the concept does not illuminate the PLA’s global ambitions or force posture.

However, two exceptions exist. The first is references to China’s overseas interests, though these commentaries do not define them in detail or link them to specific military forces.²⁹ Instead, they draw on the now-familiar discussion of overseas interests that have appeared in Chinese military sources since the focus on “non-war military operations” in the late 2000s.³⁰ The second is international security cooperation, as these commentaries note how world-class militaries are able to participate in international security cooperation and “make contributions” to the international community.³¹

Winning Informatized Local Wars

As a force development concept, the notion of building a world-class military does not illuminate broader questions relating to how and where a more capable PLA will be used. A review of China’s national military strategy, contained in what the PLA calls “military strategic guidelines” (军事战略方针), can help to illuminate these questions. These guidelines provide answers to four questions: 1) who China will fight (the “strategic opponent”), 2) where China will fight (the “primary strategic direction”), 3) the characteristics of the wars China will fight (the “basis of preparations for military struggle”), and 4) how China will fight these wars (“basic guiding thought for operations”).³²

The PLA’s current military strategy, named “winning informatized local wars” (打赢信息化局部战争), was adopted in July 2014. It is the second adjustment to the 1993 strategy put in place after the 1990–91 Gulf War, in which the PLA highlighted the role of high technology in warfare and the shift to joint operations among the services as the basis of the PLA’s approach to warfighting. In the current strategy, informatization refers to the collection, processing, and utilization of information in all aspects of warfighting in order to seamlessly link individual platforms in real time from across the services to gain leverage and advantage on the battlefield. Informatization enables networked operations, which are seen as the core of modern warfare.

The 2014 strategy of winning informatized local wars contains important elements of continuity with China's previous strategies since the end of the Cold War. First, it remains premised on how to prevail in local wars on China's periphery. Local wars refer to disputes involving Chinese claims to sovereignty, especially Taiwan but also territory along the disputed border with India as well as offshore islands and claims to maritime rights in the East and South China Seas.

Second, within the context of local wars, the primary strategic direction in the 2014 strategy, or where the PLA believes conflict will most likely occur, remains the southeast. Thus, the primary operational target remains Taiwan, along with the United States to the degree it becomes involved in Taiwan's defense. Likewise, the southwest border with India and the southern border toward the South China Sea remain secondary strategic directions or priorities in China's military strategy.

Third, joint operations, which the PLA now describes as "integrated joint operations" (一体化联合作战), remain the main form of operations for China's armed forces to be able to conduct. Such operations are premised on the notion of networked warfare that target an opponent's entire operational system, not just its forces, and are viewed as key to victory in informatized war. The operational guiding thought in the current strategy is "information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, [and] joint operations to gain victory" (信息主导、精打要害、联合制胜).³³

Informatization is no longer just a condition of warfare, but its dominant feature.

Fourth, the strategic guidance continues to stress crisis prevention, crisis management, and, if war occurs, escalation control. A focus on crisis management has been a feature of Chinese military strategy since 1993. Thus, the current strategy emphasizes "effectively controlling major crises" and "properly handling possible chain reactions" under the broader strategic guidance to "emphasize farsighted planning and management, shape favorable situations, comprehensively manage crises, and resolutely deter wars and win wars."³⁴

Nevertheless, the 2014 strategy contains several important differences from previous ones. First, the basis of preparations of military struggle—what kind of wars the PLA should be prepared to fight—was adjusted to highlight the centrality of informatization in warfare. In contrast to the 2004 strategy, the current strategy for prevailing in informatized local wars indicates that informatization is no longer just a condition of warfare, but its dominant feature or characterization.

The second, and perhaps the most important, change in the 2014 strategy is the emphasis on the maritime domain. Specifically, the new strategy calls for "highlighting maritime military struggle and preparations for maritime military

struggle.”³⁵ This strategy marks the first time that any domain of warfare has been singled out in a Chinese military strategy and at the strategic level. Maritime military struggle refers not only to naval conflict but also to the importance of the maritime domain in many of the local wars the PLA may need to fight, such as maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas and especially Taiwan. Thus, from a warfighting perspective, the maritime component remains focused on regional challenges around China’s maritime periphery. As the 2015 defense white paper notes, “It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests.”³⁶

China’s military strategy will continue to emphasize East Asia, especially Taiwan.

The emphasis on the maritime domain also provides the naval pillar of China’s aspirations to become a maritime power, as first codified at the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012. Toward this end, the service strategy for the PLAN was altered from focusing only on the “near seas,” or defense of Chinese sovereignty interests in East Asia in the waters adjacent to the mainland, to gradually combine “near-seas defense” (近海防御) with “far-seas protection” (远海护卫), or a focus on China’s interests beyond these areas.³⁷ This far-seas component of China’s military strategy, however, appears to remain under

development, as the phrase has only appeared nineteen times in the *Liberation Army Daily* between 2015 and 2019.

Third, and relatedly, the primary strategic direction was expanded to include parts of the Western Pacific, as it would relate to a conflict over Taiwan. One retired Chinese general described the primary strategic direction as the “Taiwan Strait-Western Pacific” direction.³⁸ This description perhaps reflects what other Chinese military sources have described as “forward defense” (前沿防卫), which seeks to push the frontline of combat in local wars away from China’s national borders.³⁹

The Global Implications of China’s Military Strategy

This description of China’s current military strategy contains several implications for considering the potential global role of the PLA today under the overall goal of building the PLA into a world-class force. First, in terms of force employment and warfighting, the PLA remains geographically focused primarily on East Asia (defined broadly to include the eastern half of the Western Pacific). The reason is that China remains involved in long-standing disputes over its sovereignty, which are the kind of issues in international politics that most easily escalate

into armed conflict.⁴⁰ Toward this end, the first two strategic tasks for the PLA listed in the 2015 white paper on China's military strategy are to "effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air, and sea" and "resolutely defend the unification of the motherland."⁴¹ Of course, these tasks refer to territorial and maritime disputes as well as Taiwan. Actions and operations beyond the region, including "protecting the security of overseas interests" and participation in international security cooperation, rank fourth and sixth on this list, respectively. They are not unimportant, but they are also not the primary focus in the PLA's current military strategy.

Second, so long as China's major sovereignty disputes remain unresolved, especially Taiwan, its military strategy will continue to emphasize East Asia over other regions.⁴² This emphasis on East Asia does not mean the PLA will stop exploring ways to operate in other regions and increase its ability to do so—for example, it established a base in Djibouti in 2017. However, the PLA will likely not expand significantly beyond East Asia until its major sovereignty disputes are resolved, or until it has achieved a level of military dominance in these disputes such that opposing states are deterred and dissuaded from challenging Beijing. In other words, China cannot devote significantly more resources to projecting military power beyond East Asia until it dominates its home region and no longer faces vulnerabilities or challenges along its immediate periphery. After all, Taiwan's unification remains part of the preamble of the PRC's constitution. Military dominance in these sovereignty disputes will be hard to achieve, especially over Taiwan, so long as the United States maintains its pledges to Taiwan's security under the Taiwan Relations Act and forward-deployed presence in East Asia.

Third, the focal point of military competition between the United States and China will also be centered in East Asia, not other regions. The PLA's ongoing modernization since the late 1990s has enabled it to project power farther from its shores than ever before, challenging the sanctuary that US forces previously enjoyed in maritime East Asia. Although distance creates challenges for US force projection into East Asia, China also faces challenges to projecting its forces farther and farther from its shores, especially beyond the range of air defenses and fighter aircraft based on the mainland or reefs in the South China Sea. Thus, military competition between the United States and China will likely create a contested zone in maritime East Asia into which both sides can project power but neither may be able to dominate.⁴³ For example, the renewed focus on China in the 2018 US National Defense Strategy reflects the US commitment to balancing or offsetting China's growing capabilities in the region.

With a continued emphasis on local wars and armed conflicts, China's current military strategy is not premised on expelling or extruding the US military from the

region. Nor is it, as the National Defense Strategy suggests, a strategy “that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term”⁴⁴ if the Indo-Pacific stretches from California to Calcutta (or even, now, Kilimanjaro) and hegemony is defined as dominating the United States within this expansive region. Of course, China would prefer that the United States was not a military power in the region, but the question remains: what price would China be willing to pay to achieve that goal? So far, China is focused on diminishing the ability of the United States to play a decisive role in China’s sovereignty disputes, especially Taiwan, not kicking the United States out of the region.

Fourth, China’s global military presence outside of East Asia will grow in the coming decade, but it is likely to be relatively modest when compared with other major military powers. The United States currently has military bases, operating locations, and access points in roughly forty countries, often with multiple facilities in the same country.⁴⁵ France and Great Britain have overseas military bases in roughly eleven countries, and Russia has nine.⁴⁶ Although much speculation surrounds where China might establish more bases in addition to the facility in Djibouti, they will most likely be along the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, overseas bases will be perhaps the critical factor enabling the PLA to project and sustain combat power beyond East Asia in the long term. After all, the United States has enjoyed command of the commons because it relies on its network of overseas bases and locations to forward-deploy forces around the world.⁴⁷

In peacetime, even if China does not establish more overseas bases, an increasingly global presence of the PLA could actually enable not just competition but also further cooperation between the United States and China. In 2017 and 2018, for example, the two governments worked together to facilitate the removal of fissile nuclear material from Ghana and Nigeria.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in a conflict with the United States, China’s bases beyond East Asia would likely be quite vulnerable if the United States chose to attack them.

World-Class Capabilities or Ambitions?

The idea of transforming the PLA into a world-class military is a force development concept that outlines China’s aspiration to become a leading military power in the world by the middle of the century, on par with other great powers. The idea of being world-class outlines the goals of PLA modernization and a set of benchmarks for assessing the PLA’s progress over the next decades. It explains how the PLA will achieve a core part of Xi Jinping’s “China dream”—the goal of a strong army—as part of China’s national rejuvenation.

At the same time, the concept of a world-class military does not illuminate the PLA’s global ambitions or how it envisions using force. It does not reflect a goal of

becoming the preeminent global military power by 2049. China's current military strategy of winning informatized local wars indicates that, in terms of warfighting, China's armed forces continue to prioritize East Asia because of the unresolved sovereignty disputes, especially Taiwan, and the potential of conflict with the United States in these disputes. Thus, the greatest near- to mid-term challenge for the United States is not the global presence of the PLA, but a PLA with world-class capabilities that becomes the dominant military in East Asia.

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