



Testimony

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# Is China Prepared for War?

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Indications and Warning of a Potential Chinese Conflict  
with the United States

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*Is China Prepared for War? Indications and Warning of a Potential Conflict  
with the United States*

Testimony of Timothy R. Heath<sup>1</sup>  
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Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

June 13, 2024

**A**mid worsening U.S.-China tensions and an unrelenting Chinese military buildup, fears have grown that Beijing may be preparing for war. In this testimony, I will address the topic of whether China is prepared for a conflict with the United States. I will begin by distinguishing between the concepts of *military preparedness* and *national war preparation*. There is ample evidence that China’s military is enhancing its preparedness, but little evidence that the national leadership intends to fight a war anytime soon. A principal obstacle to China initiating war lies in politics—in particular, the lack of a constituency for war and the unprepared condition of the bureaucracy. The most important indicators of a potential conflict would consist of efforts to overcome these obstacles. Although difficult to achieve, once a Chinese leader has set the political conditions for conflict, the risk of war could rise dramatically. The timing of a preplanned attack or even the escalation of a crisis to a major war under such conditions would likely be very difficult to predict.

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## Military Preparedness Versus National War Preparation

Experts have for decades predicted an imminent U.S.-China war. In 2005, international relations theorist John Mearsheimer predicted a rising China would fight the United States.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 2010s, many books and articles foretold a U.S.-China conflict.<sup>4</sup> The predictions failed to materialize, but this has not dampened a thriving industry of similar prognostications; recent reports claim, for example, that China has moved to “wartime footing.”<sup>5</sup> And the claim that U.S.-China war is right around the corner has become routine.<sup>6</sup> Some observers have even specified the year in which they believe war might occur, such as 2025 or 2027.<sup>7</sup>

Why have such predictions gained such traction? Analysts often cite evidence of Chinese war preparations, but these claims merit closer scrutiny. In evaluating the evidence, it is essential to distinguish between military preparedness and national war preparation. By *military preparedness*, I mean the breadth of activity undertaken by a state to ensure its military can carry out any and all missions assigned to it. This includes investments in and development of new weapons and equipment, recruitment and training of personnel, and planning and preparation for contingencies. Military preparedness is a normal activity undertaken regardless of whether a country’s leadership believes a war is likely or not. For example, the U.S. military has prepared to fight a major war against potential adversaries for decades, even though it last fought a great power in World War II. Similarly, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has focused its military preparations on a war with Taiwan since at least the early 1990s, even though the two sides last fought each other in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> Absent other key indicators, military preparedness alone is not a reliable indicator or warning of imminent military action.

More reliable indicators that a country is anticipating conflict can be observed when the entire society prepares for war. There are two ways in which societies may prepare for war. The more demanding form, *national defense mobilization*, consists of state-directed activity to transition part or all of the country from a peacetime to war footing through such measures as conscription and the large-scale transfer of resources from civilian to military use. It can greatly expand the war-making capacity of a state, but it is also enormously costly and disruptive and, therefore, rarely undertaken outside a conflict. The less demanding form, which I call *national war preparation*, consists of changes to policy and procedures in nonmilitary domains to facilitate the execution of combat operations. It is less costly and disruptive than mobilization but

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<sup>3</sup> John Mearsheimer, “The Rise of China Will Not be Peaceful at All,” *The Australian*, November 18, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> One such example is Michael Pillsbury, “China and the United States Are Preparing for War,” *Foreign Policy*, November 13, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Seth G. Jones, “Beijing Is on a Wartime Footing,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 1, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Chang, “China Is Preparing for War, America Is Not,” Institute of World Politics, November 29, 2022; John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, “Xi Jinping Says He is Preparing China for War,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> “U.S. Four-Star General Warns of War with China in 2025,” Reuters, January 28, 2023; Joe Saballa, “China ‘on Track’ for Potential Taiwan Invasion by 2027: US Admiral,” *Defense Post*, March 22, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, 2023.

also results in a smaller expansion of war-making capacity. Chinese sources make such a distinction between two types of conflict preparation. According to the PLA dictionary, “war mobilization” [争动员战] occurs when a country, in anticipation of conflict, directs part or all of society to move from a peacetime to wartime footing. By contrast, “war preparation” [战争准备] occurs when a country enacts policies in the political, economic, industrial, and other domains to facilitate combat operations. Measures for war preparation can be undertaken in peacetime, as well as both prior to and during conflict.<sup>9</sup> For example, Russia, which has fought numerous conflicts since it invaded Georgia in 2008, carried out war preparations in peacetime beginning around 2010, and it intensified preparations prior to and during its seizure of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Key measures included Putin’s consolidation of power, a relentless propaganda campaign directed against Ukraine and NATO, tightened media censorship, stockpiling, economic security measures, and military deployments.<sup>10</sup> However, Russia first attempted a defense mobilization in 2022 when its initial assault stalled, a process that proved so contentious that Moscow suspended it.<sup>11</sup> Although national war preparation is less disruptive and costly than mobilization, it still is premised on an expectation of conflict. Thus, it is inherently more political and potentially controversial in a way that military preparedness is not. Most states carry out military preparedness, but only countries that anticipate war are likely to endure the stress of attempting national war preparation. In contrast to military preparedness, national war preparation is a more reliable indicator and warning that a country may be planning to get involved in a conflict.

A great deal of the evidence cited for the claim that China is preparing for war is more accurately characterized as evidence of military preparedness. For example, reports have cited China’s large defense budgets or annual increases in military spending. Analysts have also drawn attention to China’s vast network of missiles and weapons to deter foreign interventions.<sup>12</sup> Reports have also cited China’s vast inventories of short-range ballistic missiles and many medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles.<sup>13</sup> China’s military preparedness may be worrying, but it does not in itself signal any expectation of imminent conflict.

Speeches by Xi Jinping that exhort the military to ensure combat readiness, while alarming when read out of context, must be understood as another part of military preparedness.<sup>14</sup> This is true even though Xi has himself, confusingly, sometimes used the term “war preparation work”

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<sup>9</sup> *Military Dictionary* [军语], PLA Press, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Kalev Stoicescu, Mykola Nazarov, Keir Giles, and Matthew D. Johnson, *How Russia Went to War: The Kremlin’s Preparations for Its Aggression Against Ukraine*, International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Katharina Krebs, Chris Liakos, and Lianne Kolirin, “Russia Suspends ‘Partial Mobilization’ of Citizens for Ukraine War,” CNN, November 1, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Katsuji Nakazawa, “Analysis: Xi Puts Economy on War Footing with Taiwan in Mind,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 10, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Grant Newsham, “China’s Military Buildup Enough to Win a War with US,” *Asia Times*, November 30, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Verna Yu, “Xi Jinping Tells China’s Army to Focus on Preparation for War,” *The Guardian*, November 9, 2022.

[备战打仗工作].<sup>15</sup> In every case, Xi or other top military leaders have used such language when addressing military units or in standard speeches, such as Party Congress reports, that contain sections on the military. The officials have defined such phrases in terms of military training, planning, and organizational change—in other words, standard military preparedness activity.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, although Chinese military modernization developments may well pose a threat to the U.S. military, they do not signal that China is carrying out (or has already initiated) national war preparations. This point was underscored when senior U.S. officials clarified that intelligence reports regarding PLA modernization goals for 2027 did not imply any intent to actually start a war.<sup>17</sup>

## Little Evidence of National War Preparation

To determine whether China actually expects war, it is far more important to observe what the leadership is saying and doing in the nonmilitary policy domains. There is no evidence that China is carrying out any type of mobilization for war and little evidence of national war preparation. Although a comprehensive review of the state of preparations in all nonmilitary policy domains lies beyond the scope of this testimony, I will highlight a few key areas: politics, economy, defense industry, defense mobilization, and medical care.

Politically, Xi Jinping has made no statement suggesting the entire nation must prepare for war or otherwise suggesting war is likely or at all desirable. On the contrary, Xi has consistently affirmed that Beijing adheres to the pursuit of the “China Dream” of national revitalization through a peaceful development strategy.<sup>18</sup> To be clear, Xi has made numerous criticisms of the United States and has stated on several occasions that Taiwan unification must occur and that use of force cannot be ruled out. Yet his statements about Taiwan largely resemble those of his predecessors.<sup>19</sup> For example, when Xi makes pledges to ensure Taiwan’s unification, he has done so in sections of long speeches that outline national priorities and imperatives, such as the 19th or 20th Party Congress reports. In such reports, mention of Taiwan usually appears near the end of the report, in a section typically reserved for the issue. The overwhelming focus of those speeches is on socioeconomic issues, such as jobs, corruption, and inequality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Xi Stresses Breaking New Ground for War Preparedness in PLA Eastern Theater Command Inspection,” Xinhua, July 6, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> “Deepen the Work of Preparing for War in the New Era and Fight the Tough Battle to Achieve the Centenary Goal of the Founding of the Army” [“深入推进新时代备战打仗工作 打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战”], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], February 9, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Joe Saballa, “China to Develop Ability to Seize Taiwan by 2027: US Intel,” *Defense Post*, September 21, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Wang Yi, “All People of Chinese Descent Should Jointly Oppose ‘Taiwan Independence’ and Support Peaceful Reunification,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China website, March 7, 2024; “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” Xinhua, November 3, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy R. Heath, “Is China Planning to Attack Taiwan? A Careful Consideration of Available Evidence Says No,” *War on the Rocks*, December 14, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy R. Heath, “Xi’s Cautious Inching Towards the China Dream,” *Lawfare*, August 7, 2023.

What about China's economy and defense industry? Countries that are serious about waging war tend to significantly increase their defense spending to maximize the odds of victory. In World War II, mobilized Allied and Axis powers increased defense spending to between 50 and 70 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). In more recent wars, states have ramped up spending, though to a lesser degree. U.S. defense spending surged to around 6 percent of GDP in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example.<sup>21</sup> Russia has ratcheted defense spending to between 6 and 9 percent of GDP in its war in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, China's defense spending remains relatively modest at under 2 percent of GDP, although the actual amount spent is probably slightly underreported.<sup>23</sup> Although China has pursued a "military-civil fusion" strategy, its purpose seems as much to be about supporting the country's economic development strategy as it is about improving military capability.<sup>24</sup> Some have cited evidence of stockpiling to suggest war preparations. But this may be explained more simply by Chinese concerns over a more unstable and unpredictable global economy, given the disruptions from the Russia-Ukraine war and other crises. It is a concern shared by many countries. For example, China may have amassed about 300-400 million barrels of oil, while the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve has accumulated 364 million barrels.<sup>25</sup>

China has carried out reforms to streamline defense mobilization procedures and clarify roles and responsibilities. However, the system continues to face shortfalls.<sup>26</sup> As an example, the People's Armed Forces Department (PAFD) has experienced a resurgence in activity. The PAFD is responsible for overseeing the recruitment, organizing, and management of militia forces and also plays a key role in the mobilization of militia. However, improvements to the PAFD do little to address the more fundamental problems with China's defense mobilization system, such as a lack of standardized data management, understaffed and misaligned bureaucracies, inconsistent authorities, and unresolved compensation policies.<sup>27</sup>

China's medical infrastructure has made little progress in national war preparations as well. Chinese hospitals appear, at most, to be prepared for earthquakes but otherwise have little

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<sup>21</sup> Lee Hudson Teslik, "Iraq, Afghanistan, and the U.S. Economy," Council on Foreign Relations, March 11, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Howard J. Shatz and Clint Reach, *The Cost of the Ukraine War for Russia*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2421-1, 2023, [www.rand.org/t/RRA2421-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA2421-1).

<sup>23</sup> Megan McKernan, Stephanie Young, Timothy R. Heath, Dara Massicot, Mark Stalczynski, Ivana Ke, Raphael S. Cohen, John P. Godges, Heidi Peters, and Lauren Skrabala, *Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution in Comparative Organizations: Vol. 1, Case Studies of China and Russia*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2195-1, 2024, [www.rand.org/t/RRA2195-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA2195-1); Nan Tian and Fei Su, *A New Estimate of China's Military Expenditure*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Elsa B. Kania and Lorand Laskai, "Myths and Realities of China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy," Center for a New American Security, January 28, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Chen Aizhu and Florence Tan, "Exclusive: China's CNOOC Stockpiles Russian Oil at New Reserve Base," Reuters, April 15, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Yu-Ping Chang, "National Defense Mobilization: Towards a Clear Division of Labor Between the PLA and Civilian Bureaucracies," *China Brief*, Vol. 24, No. 6, March 15, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Liu Ruiqiang [刘瑞强], "Achievements, Problems and Prospects of National Defense Mobilization Law Since Its Implementation" ["《国防动员法》实施以来的成就、问题与展望"], *Journal of Beijing Institute of Technology* [北京理工大学报告], Vol. 24, No. 1, 2022.

capacity to cope with mass casualties.<sup>28</sup> A survey of academic reports in 2018 observed that China lags its counterparts in the study of emergency medical systems for mass casualty incidents.<sup>29</sup> Chinese military medical journals have also judged the existing system of medical evacuation and treatment of war-related injuries deeply inadequate.<sup>30</sup> China's medical system has seen some improvements during Xi's tenure, but it continues to suffer serious deficiencies, including ineffective regulation and inconsistent training and education of providers.<sup>31</sup> China's mishandling of the exit from the COVID-19 pandemic underscored weaknesses in the system.<sup>32</sup>

China may have made little effort to put the country on a war footing, but Beijing has clearly sought to bolster the country's security. This activity has contributed to the perception that China is stepping up war preparations. However, Chinese leaders have fairly consistently highlighted domestic dangers as the principal reason for such preparations. When Xi described the threats to national security at the 20th Party Congress, he began by listing issues of "social governance," likely referring to popular discontent over corruption, inequality, and local malfeasance. He then mentioned "ethnic separatists, religious extremists, and violent terrorists," as well as organized crime and natural disasters, before moving on to discuss other perils, including pressure from the United States.<sup>33</sup> The strong emphasis on domestic dangers should not be surprising. International polls similarly show that domestic issues, such as crime, unemployment, and corruption, are top concerns in many developing countries, including China.<sup>34</sup> The security preparations observed in industry, defense mobilization, the PAFD, the medical system, and elsewhere are consistent with a country worried first and foremost about a deteriorating domestic situation and are less consistent with those undertaken by a leadership contemplating major war.

## Politics: The Key to National War Preparation

What would it take to move China politically to a war footing? A big obstacle to China's initiation of a war against Taiwan lies in politics. In particular, Chinese leaders lack a public

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<sup>28</sup> Jin-Hong Chen, Jun Yang, Yu Yang, and Jing-Chen Zheng, "Mass Casualty Incident Primary Triage Methods in China," *Chinese Medical Journal*, Vol. 128, No. 19, October 5, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Wenya Yu, Yiping Lu, Chaoqun Hu, Xu Liu, Haiping Chen, Chen Xue, and Lulu Zhang, "Research of an Emergency Medical System for Mass Casualty Incidents in Shanghai, China: A System Dynamics Model," *Patient Prefer Adherence*, Vol. 12, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Yang Pei, Yue Song, and Min Yu, "A New Approach to Organization and Implementation of Military Medical Treatment in Response to Military Reform and Modern Warfare in the Chinese Army," *Military Medicine*, Vol. 182, No. 11–12, November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Bouey, "China's Health System Reform and Global Health Strategy in the Context of COVID-19: Addendum," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, RAND Corporation, CT-A321-2, 2020, [www.rand.org/t/CTA321-2](http://www.rand.org/t/CTA321-2).

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Bouey, "Lost Opportunities to Contain COVID-19 in China," *RAND Blog*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/01/lost-opportunities-to-contain-covid-19-in-china.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," October 25, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Pew Research Center, "Crime and Corruption Top Problems in Emerging and Developing Countries," November 6, 2014.



constituency for war and the state bureaucracy is not ready for war. The most important indicators of a potential war involving China will likely stem from activity related to overcoming these obstacles. However, Chinese leaders would face serious risks if they attempt to do so.

The lack of public demand for major war is important, given the expected hardships that war with the United States could entail, including mass casualties and a severe economic disruption, to say nothing of potential nuclear annihilation.<sup>35</sup> Scholarly surveys have found that the Chinese public has expressed little support for armed conflict to compel Taiwan's unification and still less if such a war might involve the United States.<sup>36</sup> Nor is there any evidence of a faction of Chinese elites who eagerly seek war with the United States.

The bureaucracy is responsible for carrying out the myriad tasks related to national war preparation, but it is not currently postured to do so. Party cadres have been thoroughly socialized to prioritize peaceful development policies. Their promotion criteria, rules, regulations, indoctrination material, and political work all prioritize such measures as GDP growth, governance, and management of social stability, not war preparation. Their work remains guided by the ideology largely set by Deng Xiaoping and refined by subsequent generations of leaders. This ideology upholds a "peaceful development" strategy that is fundamentally anchored on the assessment that China faces a relatively benign security environment. China has not fundamentally changed its assessment, set in 1985, that the country faces a low risk of general war, although it has made many modifications to the identification of specific threats.<sup>37</sup> The 2019 defense white paper, for example, states that "forces for peace predominate over elements of war" and describes the Asia-Pacific region as "generally stable."<sup>38</sup>

Without a constituency for war and with a bureaucracy focused on development-oriented policies, Chinese leaders face powerful disincentives and major hurdles to escalating any crisis to conflict.<sup>39</sup> Although Xi has concentrated power, China retains a more institutionalized form of authoritarian rule than other autocracies. These features make it harder for Chinese leaders to start a conflict than might be the case in a personalistic regime such as Putin's Russia.<sup>40</sup> The difference in political systems helps explain, in part, the contrasting records of belligerence. Russia under Putin has fought wars almost continually since 2008, while China has not fought a war since 1979.

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<sup>35</sup> David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable*, RAND Corporation, RR-1140-A, 2016, [www.rand.org/t/RR1140](http://www.rand.org/t/RR1140).

<sup>36</sup> Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, "Assessing Public Support for (Non)Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 33, No. 145, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, RAND Corporation, RR-A394-1, 2020, [www.rand.org/t/RRA394-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA394-1).

<sup>38</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, July 24, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "Could Beijing Risk a Diversionary War Against Taiwan?" *Lawfare*, January 13, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, May 2012.

Although commentators routinely warn that China and the United States could blunder their way into war, the danger is easily overstated.<sup>41</sup> Historically speaking, getting great powers to fight each other when they are disinclined to do so has proven extremely difficult.<sup>42</sup> In the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union faced numerous crises and even proxy wars but never directly fought each other. Similarly, China and the United States have experienced their own crises, including the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the downing of a U.S. military aircraft by the Chinese military in 2001. Yet none of these incidents have led to war. Tensions have intensified in the last few years between Washington and Beijing, but both sides continue to state their disinclination to fight a war with each other.<sup>43</sup>

Increasing China's willingness to risk war requires at least several steps. A first step would be the articulation by a top leader that China no longer faced a benign security environment and that the risk of war had grown to dangerous levels. To cope with the new situation, the leadership would revamp the country's priorities and goals. Instead of economic development, national preparations for war and the realization of more basic security goals, such as the securing of lost territory or the defeat of U.S.-backed threats to CCP rule, would become top priorities.<sup>44</sup> Alarmed elites and members of the public might question the leadership's shift toward a more belligerent politics. Extensive purges and repression would be required to suppress any such challenges. Consolidating his grip on power around a belligerent policy agenda would enable the Chinese leader to carry out national war preparations. Relevant measures could include extensive propaganda that depicted the United States and/or Taiwan as a threat to China's safety and that glorified the notion of individual sacrifice in service to China. A flurry of meetings and indoctrination efforts would orient the bureaucracy to prioritize national war preparation over peacetime development goals. Diplomatic preparations are also important. Starting around 1976, Chinese leaders and media declared Vietnam in hostile terms, issued bitter denunciations, and diplomatically maneuvered to isolate Vietnam before launching an attack in 1979.<sup>45</sup> China would likely undertake similar efforts to mobilize international pressure against the United States and/or Taiwan. For war with the United States, politically mobilizing the populace would likely be necessary to extract war taxes, conscript labor, mobilize militia, or otherwise reallocate resources from civilian to military needs.

Making such changes would be politically difficult and risky. Xi may personally be more powerful than rival elites, but the Chinese state's grip on society is far weaker than was the case

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<sup>41</sup> Graham Allison, "How America and China Could Stumble to War," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, April 12, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Michael P. Colaresi, Karen Rasler, and William R. Thompson, *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space and Conflict Escalation*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> "Biden: China's Xi Knows We Are Not Seeking Conflict," Reuters, October 26, 2022; Cao Desheng, "Xi: Conflicts, Confrontations Serve Nobody's Interests," *China Daily*, March 18, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Tristan Finazzo, *The Return of Great Power War: Scenarios of Systemic Conflict Between the United States and China*, RAND Corporation, RR-A830-1, 2022, [www.rand.org/t/RRA830-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA830-1).

<sup>45</sup> Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021, [www.rand.org/t/RRA444-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA444-4).

in Mao Zedong's day. Mao could command the populace to carry out astonishing acts of national sacrifice in such bloody campaigns as the Great Leap Forward or Cultural Revolution. By contrast, the Chinese state under Xi grapples with persistent discontent over a slowing economy, unemployment, corruption, and inadequate social welfare services. The internal security budget has remained slightly larger than the military budget since 2011, and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) academics concede that popular identification with the CCP has dwindled.<sup>46</sup> Academic surveys suggest that popular support for the CCP is around 50–70 percent and is likely declining further.<sup>47</sup> Elite compliance with Xi's directives can also be overstated. His incessant tirades and criticism of "formalism" and "bureaucratism" hint at the intractable problems of elite noncompliance with many of Beijing's directives. Many elites continue to resist instructions that threaten their privileges and wealth, resulting in persistent political fragmentation and inconsistent policy implementation.<sup>48</sup>

The political peril of attempting a radical redirection of the country's political agenda from a decades-old focus on national development to war can perhaps be grasped by reviewing the last such change of this magnitude. In the 1970s, the leadership attempted to abandon a messianic communist ideology in favor of a pragmatic politics featuring market-friendly changes. That change proved enormously contentious and occurred only after considerable political strife and violence. Even after Deng enshrined the turn toward "reform and opening" in 1978, he struggled with hardliner opponents throughout the 1980s and only prevailed after ousting his rivals in 1992.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Once China's leader had successfully overhauled the country's politics and entrenched a new agenda that regarded war as likely or necessary, national war preparations could proceed quickly. The bureaucracy could carry out national war preparations or even mobilization in the economic, industrial, medical, and other domains. With ample indoctrination and relentless propaganda, a base of public support for war could emerge. Under a more belligerent political posture, the risk of conflict would increase dramatically. Chinese leaders could plan a deliberate attack. Even if they did not plan a war, their expectations of its likelihood and extensive national war preparations would raise the risk of rapid escalation in any crisis. Under such conditions, it would be difficult to determine when and where China might choose to initiate conflict.

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<sup>46</sup> Timothy R. Heath, Weilong Kong, and Alexis Dale-Huang, *U.S.-China Rivalry in a Neomedieval World: Security in an Age of Weakening States*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1887-1, 2023, [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1887-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1887-1).

<sup>47</sup> Erin Baggott Carter, Brett L. Carter, and Stephen Schick, "Do Chinese Citizens Conceal Opposition to the CCP in Surveys? Evidence from Two Experiments," *China Quarterly*, January 10, 2024; Ilaria Mazzocco and Scott Kennedy, "Public Opinion in China: A Liberal Silent Majority?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy R. Heath, *The Autocrat's Predicament: The Political Peril of Economic Upgrade in Single-Party Authoritarian Regimes*, Lexington Books, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Heath, 2023.

In conclusion, China has undertaken military preparedness for many years. The reasons for the military buildup vary, but there is no evidence that China is currently on a war footing or contemplating moving to one imminently.<sup>50</sup> The political disincentives to initiate a war remain compelling. This does not rule out the possibility of sudden China-related shocks, crises, coercion, and intense feuding—all of which are possible and may well increase should U.S.-China tensions worsen. However, so long as China’s leaders believe a path of peaceful development to be viable, the risk of escalation to war in any situation should remain low.

## Policy Recommendations

To improve our understanding of China’s intentions regarding the potential use of force and more accurately identify indications and warning of a potential Chinese intent to risk war with the United States, I close my testimony with some policy recommendations:

- The United States should monitor Chinese senior leader speeches and official documents that assess the prospects for the country’s peaceful development. Evidence of broad pessimism regarding the country’s peaceful development strategy would pose a dangerous warning of a potential shift in the political agenda.
- The United States should focus more analysis on Chinese national war preparations. While analysts have long tracked developments in the country’s military preparedness and mobilization system, less has focused on war preparations in all policy domains.
- The United States should monitor the mood of the public in China and among elites as represented in publicly available media. A surge in fictional depictions of war with the United States in Chinese movies, television shows, and books could reflect both government efforts to cultivate popular support for a more belligerent policy and deepening public support for such a policy.

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<sup>50</sup> Timothy R. Heath, “Why is China Strengthening its Military? It’s Not All About War,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/why-is-china-strengthening-its-military-its-not-all.html>.