

How Britain and the US can counter China's growing military

By [Lukas Filler](#)

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Xi Jinping, center, general secretary of the Communist Party of China talks to sailors onboard the Haikou navy destroyer

When Xi Jinping first took power in 2012 he promised to combine “the building of a prosperous country with that of a strong military” in order to “rejuvenate” China.

Ten years later, and having consolidated his own personal power, his country's armed forces look in rude health.

His [unprecedented re-appointment as Supreme Leader last month](#) included top jobs for loyalists, leaving few people in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to moderate or impede his approach.

Mr Xi could now rule for life.

[China podcast promotion](#)

But he has already been remarkably successful at making the [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA) into one of the world's largest and most technologically advanced militaries. According to the most recent (2021) China Military Power Report from the US Department of Defence, the PLA navy is now the world's largest, with about 355 vessels (including about 56 submarines) that are increasingly equipped with state of the art offensive and defensive capabilities.

[0810 China under Xi - largest navy](#)

[China under Xi - Global defence spending](#)

The air force and navy's inventory of 2,800 operational, manned platforms – increasingly with 5th generation technologies - mean that it now possesses the world's third largest inventory of aircraft.

The CCP's Rocket Force, meanwhile, has developed and fielded [hundreds of advanced, long-range missiles](#) – some capable of hypersonic speeds, designed to strike ships at sea, and/or carrying multiple conventional or nuclear warheads.

The PLA is also developing weapons that can launch attacks in outer space.

Territorial disputes

Troops are also now trained at a higher quality and train together as well as with the coast guard, police, militia, and state-owned as well as private enterprises.

Many of these military developments are especially useful for China's territorial disputes.

[China under Xi - China nuclear stockpile](#)

In 2015, General Secretary Xi made a rare televised promise to Barack Obama that [he would not further militarise](#) disputed South China Sea features many miles off China's coast.

But since then he has deployed some of the PLA's most sophisticated aircraft and ships, [missiles](#), radars, electronic warfare and other offensive equipment to those reefs, atolls, and artificial islands.

It has also deployed its coast guard and “maritime militia” of supposed Chinese fishing boats.

The informal navy helped seize Scarborough Shoals in 2012 and other features where there are now permanent PRC military bases.

[China under Xi - militarised islands](#)

They have also been accused of sinking Vietnamese fishing boats near the Paracel Islands, another set of disputed outcrops built up and militarised with at least 20 PRC outposts, as well as regular harassment of Japanese fishing fleets.

The coercion does not stop with disputed territorial waters.

In 2017, China successfully established its first and only [foreign military base in Djibouti](#).

Since then and under Mr Xi's direction, the PRC has or is pursuing increased use of military or dual-use facilities in countries such as Greece, UAE, Cambodia, Tanzania, Kiribati, Pakistan, Solomon Islands, and Equatorial Guinea.

The West's Pacific allies

When it comes to countering China, the West has the advantage of a network of allies in the Pacific that can act as a "force multiplier".

While these mutually beneficial relationships substantially help overcome "the tyranny of distance", Britain and the US have varying degrees of permission to operate from like-minded Indo-Pacific nations.

[China under Xi - FOBS orbit](#)

Investing in technology makes having a robust, proximate military presence less essential in the event of conflict but remains a poor substitute for the "skin in the game" commitment of physical military presence in the region.

A more permanent presence also provides opportunities for militaries to improve their ability to operate together – another force multiplier.

Similarly, increased sharing of intelligence is an efficient use of limited resources and doing so with regional partners helps them more effectively look out for their interests as well.

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A common position from many Indo-Pacific nations is that they do not want to choose between China's economic opportunities and US security assurances.

A country's economic and security interests are interconnected battlegrounds in [what China calls "political warfare"](#).

Every delay by the West provides China more leverageable political and military opportunities to rewrite international laws to better favour its interests.

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