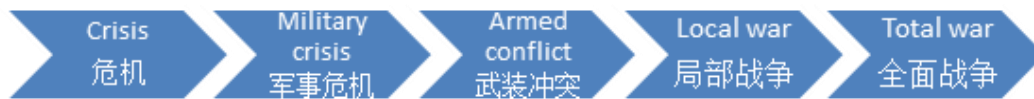


Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control

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Abstract

This study examines how people in China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) think about and discuss escalation control in their public writings. It draws on over two dozen PLA writings, most issued since 2008, to explore the current state of PLA thinking on how crisis and conflict erupt, escalate, and end. We focused on PLA views of conventional (non-nuclear) conflict.

We found that controlling the outbreak and escalation of crisis is an area of focus for the PLA. We also found that there are divergences from U.S. thinking that are worthy of attention. Chief among these is that some Chinese military activities in a crisis could be perceived as—and therefore become—escalatory even if they are not intended as such. Finally, we found that PLA views on these issues are evolving, and that there are still many critical unknowns in our understanding of PLA views on escalation control.

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Executive Summary

Background

The way that different countries approach the concept of escalation of a crisis or conflict is an enduring issue of interest for those who follow military affairs, and has critical implications for the way that strategists and decision-makers in one country perceive the actions and intentions of those in another.

The purpose of this study is to update our understanding of how people in China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) write about escalation control. This report draws on over two dozen PLA writings, most issued since 2008, to explore the current state of PLA thinking on the topic. We focused on PLA views of conventional conflict, i.e., escalation dynamics short of nuclear war.

Key findings

State of Chinese thinking on escalation control

Escalation control is an area of focus for the PLA. The PLA has produced copious writings on the topic since 2008, and stresses the importance for China's future peace and stability of understanding and implementing escalation control.

- Controlling crisis and conflict is an essential mission for the PLA, handed down by higher authorities.
- PLA writings tend *not* to use the term "escalation control." Rather, they use the phrases "war control," "crisis management," "crisis control," "war situation control," and "war termination."

Recent PLA writings on conflict escalation show some areas of evolution from earlier periods. Issues on which we saw change from the past include:

- an ever-growing focus on crisis management as an essential element of conflict control, and

- an increasing awareness within certain parts of the PLA that conflict may occur as the result of accidental or inadvertent escalation.

PLA views on the progression of crisis and conflict

Chinese writings identify a continuum of conflict. We found that PLA writings fairly consistently describe a series of stages in the progression of crisis and conflict. These stages may be placed on a continuum:

crisis → military crisis → armed conflict → local war → total war

- PLA writings say that preventing and controlling conflict involves thinking about *all* of these stages.
- PLA writings associate different objectives for control, and different military activities, with each stage on the continuum.
- PLA writings do not specify the thresholds that divide pre-war states of conflict from a state of war.

The most potentially dangerous state on the continuum of conflict is a middle state in which military activities are taking place and the objectives for control are nebulous.

- In the middle of the continuum of conflict are stages (sometimes called military crisis and/or armed conflict) in which militaries are involved but war has not yet broken out.
- Some PLA writings identify these stages as constituting a state of “quasi-war,” and state that they have characteristics of both peace and war.
- Military operations in the state of “quasi-war” appear to have dual objectives: (1) to resolve the crisis and prevent the onset of war; and (2) to prepare to win a war should one break out.
- According to PLA writings, military activities in this stage may resemble combat operations, even if the countries involved do not consider themselves to be at war.
- PLA writings do not provide any clear indications of how an outside observer would discern the intentions of these military operations.
- We therefore assess that there is a high likelihood of misperception and misunderstanding in the state of “quasi-war.”

PLA writings highlight a few key principles that they say should guide military actions in a crisis or conflict. These include the following:

- **Focus on strategic objectives.** PLA writings say that strategic and political objectives must always be prioritized over military objectives in planning, prosecuting, and controlling a war.
 - These writings argue that military success should be measured primarily in terms of the extent to which it has helped secure political objectives.
- **Seize the initiative.** PLA writings assert that a military should strive to “seize the initiative” in the early stages of a conflict. This appears to mean attacking quickly and decisively.
- **Preserve stability and flexibility.** PLA emphasis on “seizing the initiative” is tempered by a concern to maintain stability. PLA writings assert that it is critical to preserve strategic and political stability and operational flexibility, in order to respond to an adversary’s actions without unnecessarily escalating the conflict.

Areas of concern

PLA writings promote a number of crisis and conflict control actions that could appear escalatory. We did not see any discussions of how these activities might be perceived by other countries.

- Many PLA texts write about the need to “turn crisis into opportunity,” i.e., to seek advantage while resolving a crisis.
- Some PLA writings advocate using kinetic strikes as a form of pre-war deterrence.
- Some PLA texts argue that it may be necessary to conduct pre-emptive strikes early in a conflict in order to “seize the initiative.”
- Some PLA writings argue that cyber and space warfare represent less escalatory methods of warfare than traditional combat activities.

In combination, the PLA notion that there can be a stage of armed conflict short of war, together with a doctrine that advocates going on the offensive early in a war, has serious escalatory implications.

- Several texts argue that in a state of pre-war “armed conflict,” countries may take limited military action in order to “clarify the situation” or persuade the other side to de-escalate.

- Because of the PLA's well-known emphasis on seizing the initiative in war, one can envision a situation where the PLA takes what it intends to be a limited military action in a state of pre-war but an adversary assumes that it is the beginning of a large-scale attack.

Many PLA writings on controlling conflict only address wars of choice.

- PLA writings consistently state that a country should delay the beginning of a war until it is prepared to “seize the initiative” and win the war.
- This admonition relies on an assumption that a country can choose whether to enter a war. These writings do not discuss how a country should fight a war that it was not prepared to enter.

Critical unknowns

We cannot state with confidence how these Chinese views on escalation have been internalized or operationalized.

- Distinguishing between short-term debates and long-term changes in PLA thinking can be challenging.
- We do not know whether the principles that we identified in PLA writings have been fully incorporated into PLA operational doctrine.

It is not clear whether these PLA authors think that accidental or inadvertent escalation could result from the PLA's own actions.

- On one hand, we see recognition in authoritative PLA works that, in theory, conflict or even war may result from an accidental crisis if it is not controlled.
- There is also some general discussion of inadvertent escalation—i.e., the possibility that a deliberate action not intended to be escalatory is perceived as such by the opponent.
- On the other hand, the PLA writings that we examined make no effort to draw links between the operational principles they advocate and the potential that these could lead to escalation.
- Hence, it is unclear whether PLA writers think that China's actions in a crisis or conflict could be the source of accidental or inadvertent escalation.

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Glossary

AMS	Academy of Military Science
CFISS	China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies
GSD	General Staff Department
MR	Military Region
MSG	Military Strategic Guidelines
NDU	National Defense University
PRC	People's Republic of China
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SMS	<i>Science of Military Strategy</i>

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and purpose

The way that different countries approach the concept of escalation of a crisis or conflict is an enduring issue of interest for those who follow military affairs, and has critical implications for the way that strategists in one country perceive the actions and intentions of those in another.

Understanding how other countries think about the dynamics of conflict and escalation is particularly relevant with regard to the People's Republic of China (PRC), where strategic and military thinking are currently undergoing rapid evolution and adjustment. A number of trends combine to suggest that we may expect Chinese thinking on escalation control to be changing. These include the following:

- Chinese national interests have expanded and, with them, the possibility that China's interests could conflict with (or be perceived to conflict with) those of other countries.
- Chinese writings increasingly acknowledge the likelihood that conflict may erupt from a crisis that has spiraled out of control, rather than from an intent to start a war—thus raising questions about how to prevent and control such a crisis.
- As the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) continues its rapid modernization, its planners need to consider the implications of new technologies and capabilities for escalation control.

Our current understanding of PLA thinking is based on analyses written in the mid-2000s, which drew on PLA open-source writings and behavior from the late 1990s and early 2000s to explore Chinese thinking on escalation control in a crisis or conflict.¹ The authors of these analyses observed that Chinese thinking on the topic

¹ Lonnie D. Henley, "War Control: Chinese Concepts of Escalation Management," in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), pp. 81-103; Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006);

at the time was “undertheorized and still under development,” was quite “general,” and “provide[d] limited insights into actual PLA behavior during conflict.”² One noted further that the topic was relatively new for the PLA at the time, asserting that “PLA military academics [had] only begun formal, methodical consideration of the issue since 1999.” All the authors opined hopefully that we might expect to see further exploration and development of these concepts in the future.³

This hope has been borne out. Since the mid-2000s, there has been an outpouring of publicly available Chinese scholarly and policy work on the management of crises and the control of conflict and war.⁴ PRC scholars have also engaged in international outreach and exchange on the topic of crisis management, for example in an ongoing research program between the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (CFISS).⁵

This study draws on over two dozen of these recent PLA open-source writings to explore the current state of PLA thinking on escalation control.

Study approach

To understand evolving views of escalation and escalation control in China, we examined a range of Chinese writings, primarily by PLA authors, that we assessed to credibly reflect mainstream PLA thinking on the subject. Our goal was not to provide a comprehensive summary of *all* PLA writings on escalation, but to highlight those themes and perceptions that appeared to be most prominent and most relevant to understanding PLA views.

We found that although few PLA writings explicitly take the topics of “escalation” (*shengji*; 升级) and “escalation control” as their main focus, there is an abundance of writings on subjects such as crisis, conflict, and war. These include discussions of

Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

² Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 49, 51. Henley similarly notes that open-source PLA studies on war control in the late 1990s and early 2000s were sparse (Henley, “War Control,” p. 82).

³ Henley, “War Control,” pp. 94-95; Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p. 51.

⁴ One of the first English-language articles to examine this new generation of PRC and PLA writings on crisis management in some depth was issued in early 2016; see Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China,” *Naval War College Review* 69, 1 (Winter 2016), pp. 29-72.

⁵ For one example of a publication that came out of this exchange program, see Swaine and Zhang, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises*. See also Johnston, “The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice,” p. 33.

how to “manage” or “control” the evolution of tensions and conflicts and how to terminate a war. Thus, we focused our analysis on PLA writings about crisis and conflict control, which provided useful insights into Chinese thinking on escalation.

Sources used

Approach to PLA texts

In order to accurately represent official PRC and PLA thinking on these issues, we selected primary-source texts based on our assessment of their credibility. By *credibility* we mean those texts likely to either reflect official PRC views on escalation or influence official PRC and PLA policies on escalation (or both). While such texts do not always represent official PLA views, their authors may be assumed to credibly represent at least one line of thinking that has some traction within the PLA.

Key factors in assessing the credibility of PLA texts include: (1) the institutional affiliation of the author, which provides insights into the author’s background, experiences, and duties—and thus the degree of access to and insight on the topic that he or she is likely to have; (2) the publisher of a book or journal; and (3) whether a text has been reviewed by a higher authority. At the very least, a reviewed work can be assumed to concord with the views of the reviewing institution. Writings that are the outcome of an official research plan—i.e., tied to a specific research topic handed down by higher levels of government—have presumably gone through this review process and can be considered reasonably credible.

Documents used

In total, we drew from nearly two dozen Chinese texts for this study. They included the following:

- **Official PRC documents:** These represent the stated collective view of the Chinese government. For this study, we referred to China’s biennial defense white papers, including the 2015 edition entitled *China’s Military Strategy*.
- **PLA reference and doctrinal materials:** PLA military reference materials and doctrinal writings provide authoritative statements and descriptions of military issues. Two works were especially useful for defining key terms related to the concept of escalation and for outlining the most recent thinking on crisis and warfare.
 - *The Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition* (*Zhongguo junshi baike quanshu [di er ban]*); 中国军事百科全书 (第二版), the official encyclopedia of

the Chinese military, hereafter referred to as the *PLA Encyclopedia*.⁶ We primarily referenced the volume entitled “Military Strategy,” which contained most of the discussion on controlling and ending crisis and conflict.

- The 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy (Zhuanlüe Xue; 战略学)*, published by the Military Strategy Research Department of the Academy of Military Science (AMS), China’s premier military research organization. This volume is an expansive examination of myriad issues that constitute “military strategy” in Chinese military science, based on AMS’s assessment of changes to the nature of modern warfare and changes in China’s national security circumstances. This is the third edition of this book published by AMS; previous iterations were issued in 2001 and in 1987. The 2001 edition was also published in an English-language version in 2005; we occasionally refer to that edition in this study.
- **PLA-published textbooks, books, and journals:** These books and journals are published by PLA-affiliated presses and authored by individuals or editorial committees affiliated with PLA institutions. The authors include active-duty PLA officers in operational command positions, PLA academics, and others. In many cases the articles or books are the result of government-sponsored research projects.

This study also draws on insights gleaned from previous CNA studies on Chinese views on and practices of crisis and conflict management.

Finally, to provide context and comparison, this study draws on the secondary English-language analyses of PRC views of escalation previously mentioned.

Assumptions and caveats

Readers should keep in mind several caveats:

First, **the writings we examined cover a relatively limited period of time.** Our research showed that Chinese thinking on some key issues related to escalation has changed since the early 2000s, and presumably will continue to do so. As a result, distinguishing between short-term debates and long-term changes in PLA thinking can be challenging.

⁶ The 2nd edition of the *PLA Encyclopedia* comprises over 80 volumes published during 2006 and 2007. Each volume is topical in nature, and drafted by a different responsible organization. The overseeing committee for the entire encyclopedia set was headed by the then-chief of the PLA General Staff, General Liang Guanglie.

Second, **very few of the writings we examined address specific scenarios, or call out the PLA by name.** Rather, these texts tend to approach the topic of escalation control as a set of general principles that *all* militaries ought to follow when facing a hypothetical crisis or conflict. Much of this information is abstract and theoretical. In order to extrapolate lessons for the PLA, therefore, we need to assume that the PLA applies the same logic to itself.

Third, **we are uncertain how deeply the views described in some of these texts have been internalized and operationalized.** Even if we assume that the views on escalation control expressed in Chinese open-source materials represent consensus, mainstream thinking, we do not know whether that thinking has been fully incorporated into PLA operational doctrine.

Fourth, **our analysis focused on writings that presumably reflect thinking within the PLA, not necessarily the broader Chinese government.** These writings should be taken as *one* source of information about Chinese thinking on escalation, but not the whole picture.

Fifth, **there are several important dimensions of escalation that the texts we examined did not address.** This does not necessarily mean that the PLA is not concerned with these issues; it simply means that they were not central topics in the materials that we looked at. These topics include:

- Under what circumstances China might escalate to the use of nuclear weapons
- Under what circumstances, and in what ways, China might choose to escalate during a war
- How China might respond to deliberate escalation by an adversary.

Finally, **we do not attempt to compare the principles highlighted in these texts with China's actual behavior in crisis situations.** China's historical behavior in a crisis may tell us a great deal about its views of escalation control, but that is outside the scope of this study.

Organization of the study

After this introductory chapter, the study is divided into six additional chapters:

- Chapter 2, "Contextualizing Chinese writings on escalation control," provides background for understanding Chinese concerns about controlling crisis and war.

- Chapter 3, “The continuum of conflict,” examines how PLA authors describe the evolution of crisis and conflict. This chapter derives stages of crisis and conflict from PLA writings, places them along a continuum of increasing intensity, and highlights key features of this continuum.
- Chapter 4, “Principles of pre-kinetic crisis control,” examines PLA writings on controlling crises or conflicts that fall short of kinetic strikes.
- Chapter 5, “Principles of kinetic conflict control,” examines PLA writings on controlling kinetic conflict and war.
- Chapter 6, “Principles for terminating a crisis or conflict,” provides a broad overview of PLA writings on when and how to end a conflict situation.
- Chapter 7, “Implications,” summarizes the implications of our findings, as well as lingering questions in our understanding of PLA views on escalation.

Chapter 2: Contextualizing Chinese writings on escalation control

This chapter provides context for recent Chinese writings on controlling crisis and conflict. First, it provides an overview of the Chinese concept of “war control,” which Western analysts have identified as the PLA’s nearest conceptual equivalent to escalation control. Second, it describes the evolution of crisis and conflict control as a key mission for the PLA. Third, it identifies some basic assumptions in PLA writings about the nature of modern warfare and about the types of conflict that China is likely to face in the future. Understanding these assumptions helps us understand what sorts of conflicts China’s leaders might be seeking to control, and what their objectives might be in controlling escalation in different situations.

We found that controlling escalation of crisis and conflict is an area of focus for PLA authors. These authors appear to take for granted that any modern state should seek to prevent the uncontrolled escalation of conflict. We found, in addition, that PLA authors for the most part assume that in an era of modern, informatized warfare, crisis and conflict *can* be controlled—so long as certain principles are followed. We examine those principles in detail in subsequent chapters of this study.

War control: A critical concept

PLA views about controlling crisis and conflict are most closely captured in the concept of war control (*zhanzheng kongzhi*; 战争控制). The 2007 *PLA Encyclopedia* defines “war control” as “a set of monitoring and limiting actions aimed at war, undertaken by the people who guide strategy. It includes the conscientious application of greater constraints and limitations on war, encompassing war’s initiation, development, scale, intensity, and consequences.”⁷ The issue is clearly one of concern to the Chinese strategic community; for example, an entire chapter in the 2001 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* was devoted to war control.

⁷*Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition (Zhongguo junshi baike quanshu [di er ban])*; 中国军事百科全书 [第二版], edited by Scientific Research Department of the PLA National Defense University, “Military Strategy” Volume (*Junshi zhanlüe*; 军事战略) (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2007), p. 206.

Notably, “war control” is not equivalent to de-escalation. As we discuss later in this study, the goal of “controlling” war and crisis in PLA writings is essentially to manage the unfolding of events so that the speed and intensity of the situation do not exceed one’s ability to shape the outcome in a way that furthers one’s own interests. This almost always includes deliberately limiting the scope of certain military actions in order to avoid unintended consequences. In many cases, controlling a situation may entail de-escalating it, but that is not always the case.

Controlling what? – Different types of escalation

We characterize escalation as falling into three categories:

- **Deliberate escalation:** Measures taken by a state or other actor that are willful, intentional, and intended to cause a qualitative change in a crisis or conflict. This includes escalatory measures that state decision-makers know will be perceived by an adversary as crossing an escalatory threshold.
- **Inadvertent escalation:** Measures taken by a state or other actor that are willful and intentional, but that cross an adversary threshold that is unknown or underappreciated by the state initiating the escalatory behavior. Escalatory behavior that is intentionally escalatory, but has unforeseen, unintended, or undesired second-order effects can also be characterized as inadvertent.
- **Accidental escalation:** Escalation that results from actions or events which are wholly unintended. This category includes escalation that results from mechanical failures or mistakes in the execution of military operations. One example of accidental escalation would be an increase in tension that results from a strike on a target that was misidentified, a strike that results from orders being disobeyed or misunderstood, or a strike that unintentionally hits the wrong target due to equipment failure.⁸

Recent PLA writings discuss “war control” in a manner consistent with the Western analyses presented in the mid-2000s: it is a holistic term that encompasses all activities related to crisis and conflict control across a range of domains and over an extended period of time. For example, while the *PLA Encyclopedia* definition focuses on actions taken during wartime, it also implies the inclusion of pre-war periods in which the escalation of tensions could cross a threshold into the “occurrence” or “initiation” of war. The 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* defines “war control” as encompassing “arms control, crisis control, and control of armed conflict.”⁹ A 2014

⁸ Derived from Forest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 20-28; and Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, Hudson Institute Series on National Security and International Order (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), pp. 284-286.

⁹ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*. (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), p. 213.

article in *China Military Science* (*Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*; 军事科学) by the then-current Jinan Military Region (MR) deputy commander, Lieutenant General Liu Shenyang, includes in the remit of “war control” “the process of war planning and preparation” and “effectively controlling crises” as well as the conduct and conclusion of war itself.¹⁰

Some Chinese texts define “war control” even more broadly, as encompassing activities across multiple domains—economic, diplomatic, political, cultural—aimed at putting a country in an advantageous position to achieve national objectives. The 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, for example, includes in its section on “effective control” a discussion of the need to “energetically grasp military struggle while coordinating with political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic means under unified national deployment.”¹¹

Similarities between Chinese and U.S. thinking on escalation control

Broadly speaking, many features of Chinese concepts of war control appear similar to those of U.S. concepts. (We discuss areas of similarity at various points in the study.) This is not surprising, because Chinese theories on the topics of escalation, conflict control, and related concepts—like many topics in international relations—start from Western theories. With regard to escalation, we can see this deliberate mirroring in the admonition of analysts from the AMS’s War Theory and Strategy Research Department in 2005 that China needs to absorb the “reasonable points” of Western war control scholarship, and, from this analytical base, try to build a “system of war control theory with Chinese characteristics” (*you zhongguo tese de zhanzheng kongzhi lilun tixi*; 有中国特色的战争控制理论体系).¹²

¹⁰ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War: A Study from the Perspective of Military Thought” (*Lun kongzhi zhan—zhuyao cong junshi sixiang jiaodu yanjiu*; 论控制战—主要从军事思想角度的研究). *China Military Science* (*Zhongguo junshi kexue*; 中国军事科学) 2014, 2: p. 3. See also an article by the Shenyang MR deputy commander, LTG Wang Xixin, who similarly writes that “the scope of controlling war includes pre-war crisis control, operational control during the war, and stability control after the war.” Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War” (*Zai lun kongzhi zhan*; 再论控制战), *China Military Science* (*Zhongguo junshi kexue*; 中国军事科学) 2014, 4: p. 60.

¹¹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* (*Zhanlue Xue*; 战略学) (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), p. 112.

¹² Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War* (*Zhanzheng zhanlüe lun*; 战争战略论) (Beijing: PLA Press, 2005), p. 584.

Escalation control is a mission for the PLA

In our research we found that Chinese leaders view crisis and conflict control as an essential mission for the People's Liberation Army. This concern starts from a strategic assessment by China's past and present leadership that uncontrolled crisis or conflict poses a severe risk to the PRC's ability to achieve its long-term national objectives.¹³ China's perceived dependence on a stable external environment has led its leaders to emphasize that understanding how to prevent and control crisis and conflict is a matter of national security. Over time, understanding and implementing crisis and conflict control has become part of the PLA's strategic mandate.

In 2004, China's then president, Hu Jintao, announced an updated set of missions for the PLA in the form of the "Historic Missions of the Armed Forces in the New Period of the New Century," usually shortened to the "New Historic Missions." Among other things, Hu called on the PLA to "safeguard the important strategic opportunity period for national development," in part through "improving [the PLA's] abilities to respond to crises, safeguard peace, contain war, and win a war."¹⁵ Hu thus brought together the PLA's ability to manage the full spectrum of conflict, from peacetime to crisis to escalation to full-on warfare, as part of a single coherent endeavor. While the concern with crisis and conflict control was by no means new at the time, the Historic Missions helped to solidify it even more explicitly as a part of the PLA's tasking.

"Restraining crises and winning wars has become our military's strategic objective in the new period of the new century."¹⁴

—Three officers at the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy

Overall, the PLA's view that escalation control is an important issue for a modern military is captured in a 2010 article by three PLA authors at the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy, who stress that "in normal situations, restraining crises is of chief importance, winning wars is emphasized when there is no alternative after a

¹³ Starting with Deng Xiaoping, China's leaders have argued that China's economic development relies on the continued existence of a peaceful, stable external environment—and that it is the responsibility of Chinese leaders to ensure that this stability is not inadvertently compromised.

¹⁴ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, "On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare" (*Lun xinxihua zhanzheng de zhanju kongzhi yishu*; 论信息化战争的战局控制艺术), *China Military Science (Zhongguo junshi kexue; 中国军事科学)* 2010, 2: p. 25.

¹⁵ Hu Jintao, "Understand the New Historic Missions of our Military in the New Period of the New Century" (*Renqing xinshiji xinjiedian wojun lishi shiming*; 认清新世纪新阶段我军历史使命), National Defense Education website of Jiangxi province, Dec. 24, 2004, accessed Jun. 28, 2008, at <http://gfjy.jiangxi.gov.cn/yil.asp?idid=11349.htm>.

failure to contain a crisis, [but] *even then fighting should still strive to contain wartime escalation.*"¹⁶ (Emphasis added.)

War control as one element of China's Military Strategic Guidelines

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy (SMS)* suggests that China's concern to control conflict escalation as a military task goes back at least as far as the 1993 Military Strategic Guidelines (MSG). The MSG are the highest level of national guidance and direction to the armed forces of China, and have been issued only four times since 1949. According to the *SMS*, the 1993 MSG "clarified that containing war was an important element of the strategic guidance, emphasizing that '*containing war through strategic deterrence or delaying the outbreak of war, or preventing the escalation of war*, avoids or lessens the destructiveness of war.'" ¹⁷ In 2004, simultaneous with the New Historic Missions, Hu Jintao's administration adjusted the 1993 Military Strategic Guidelines such that, according to the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, "on the foundation of past emphasis on winning wars, [the adjusted version] *further strengthened the thinking of containing wars*, and proposed in its strategic guidance to contain crises, control the war situation, win wars, and safeguard peace."¹⁸ (Emphasis added.)

A growing emphasis on crisis control

Recent Chinese writings show a dual concern with improving the PLA's ability to win a war, and improving its ability to avoid war altogether by containing and controlling crises before they can escalate. Our research suggests that there may have been a heightened emphasis on crisis control as a critical component of conflict management since around 2004. For example, China's 2004 defense white paper was the first to include the need to "deal with crisis" as one component of "speeding up military combat preparations," saying that the PLA must "improve the [armed forces'] abilities to respond to crises and handle various sudden incidents."¹⁹ By the 2006 edition, the PLA was charged with "ensur[ing] that it can effectively respond to crises, maintain peace, deter and win wars under complex circumstances," as part of its broad mandate to "uphold national security and unity, and ensure the interests of

¹⁶ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, "On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare," p. 25.

¹⁷ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 142. See also Peng Guangqian, "The Development and History of Our Country's Strategic Guidelines of Active Defense Since the Founding of the Nation," in Peng Guangqian, ed., *Researching Questions of Chinese Military Strategy (Zhongguo junshi zhanlue wenti yanjiu; 中国军事战略问题研究)*, Jan. 2006, pp. 86-104.

¹⁸ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 142.

¹⁹ PRC State Council Information Office, *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing: Dec. 27, 2004).

national development.”²⁰ The 2015 defense white paper notes that “the armed forces will work to *effectively control major crises, properly handle possible chain reactions* [i.e., resulting from a crisis], and firmly safeguard the country's territorial sovereignty, integrity and security.”²¹ (Emphasis added.)

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* makes this connection even more explicit when it admonishes that “not only should [strategic guidance] be established on containing the menace of an actual war, *even more so it should be based upon foreseeing crises, dealing with crises, and responding to crises* ... strive to control the occurrence of crises and conflicts, and strive to *use all means to contain or delay the outbreak of war.*”²³ (Emphasis added.)

A likely reason for this evolution is that Chinese decision-makers appear increasingly to believe that uncontrolled crisis poses a critical threat to China’s stability and development, one that could in some cases escalate into conflict or war. PLA texts argue that this is a more likely cause of “serious disturbances” to national security than a foreign government’s deliberate decision to go to war.²⁴

“The frequency with which war breaks out is on the downward trend. However, the frequency with which crises break out is on an upward trend. ... Once a crisis is not suitably handled, it can create serious disturbances and destruction to the overall situation of a country’s development and security, so that it can even influence the historical process of a nation’s rise. Therefore, make containing and controlling crises an important part of military strategy.”²²

—2013 *Science of Military Strategy*

This growing concern to contain and manage crises is also mentioned in a 2011 article by scholar Zhang Tuosheng of CFISS, who wrote:

The Chinese government and China’s strategic studies circles gave security crisis management greater importance at the turn of the [21st] century. At this time, a sort of consensus began to emerge in the face of a string of military security crises between China and foreign countries and

²⁰ PRC State Council Information Office, *China’s National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: Dec. 29, 2006).

²¹ PRC State Council Information Office, *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing: May 2015), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

²² Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114. Emphasis added.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 149. See also Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 1, who characterizes this as a “transformation from singularly seeking to win wars to seeking to contain crisis, control the war situation, and win wars.”

²⁴ For example, “Being on guard against crisis escalating into local conflicts and wars is always our most important task.” Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 146. See also *ibid.*, pp. 144, 149; and Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 5.

on the international scene. Under the new situation, *different types of security crises could replace the threat of direct warfare as the main security challenge facing China*; improving crisis management mechanisms and enhancing crisis management capabilities has become a most pressing task for China.²⁵ (Emphasis added.)

PLA assumptions about the character of modern warfare

Chinese views on how to control crisis and conflict necessarily rest on their assumptions about the character of modern warfare and about the types of conflicts that China is likely to face. (For example, as noted above, the growing emphasis on crisis control derives from assumptions about the increasingly frequent outbreak of crisis as a threat to national security.) In this section, we summarize PLA views on these issues as expressed in open-source writings.

PLA writings assert that modern conflicts are in theory controllable

The PLA writings we examined assume that most wars today are limited, high-tech conflicts that by nature should be controllable. They also argue that modern high-tech wars can be extremely destructive if *not* controlled—thus increasing the onus on countries to ensure that they are capable of controlling such conflicts.

“The limited nature of a local war’s political objectives, the advanced precision capabilities of informatized weapons, and the high rate of consumption and huge destructiveness of modern wars determines that military confrontation activities, especially war actions, be limited and controllable.”²⁶

—2013 *Science of Military Strategy*

From total to local war

The starting point for current Chinese thinking on war control is an assumption that any conflict China might face is likely to be limited in its scope and scale. This thinking derives from two important assessments that Deng Xiaoping made in 1985: first, that the historical era of “total warfare” (*quanmian zhanzheng*; 全面战争) had ended and the wars of the future could be characterized as “local wars” (*jubu*

²⁵ Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China’s Behaviors in International Military Security Crises” (*Zhongguo guoji junshi anquan weiji xingwei yanjiu*; 中国国际军事安全危机行为研究), *World Economics and Politics* (*Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*; 世界经济与政治) 2011, 4: p. 119.

²⁶ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 11.

zhanzheng; 局部战争); and second, that China would be unlikely to enter into a large-scale land war with another country in the future. This reorientation shifted China's military from preparing for a "total war" to focusing on preparation for a more limited conflict, or "local war."²⁷

What are "total war" and "local war"? The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* differentiates the two as follows:

- The "total wars" of the past aimed at total annihilation of the adversary's fighting capacity and the takeover of the adversary's economy and territory, and hence warfighting involved "large-scale warfare" and "mass destruction," "attacking cities and invading territory," and an "either you die or I do" attitude.²⁸
- By contrast, a "local war" is "a kind of limited war" that "by nature is the controlled use of military force to achieve a limited strategic goal."²⁹ In other words, both the ends sought and the means used to achieve them are more controlled and limited than in total warfare.

Every Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping has assessed that the global situation supports Deng's assertion that "peace and development are the trend of the times."³⁰ Perhaps because there is little concern with the possibility of total war, the PLA writings that we examined for this study all examine crisis and conflict control only up to, and including, local war; they do not address total war. The documents that we examined also did not directly address nuclear war (which presumably is a form of total war). That said, in the future China's leaders could, in theory, make a new strategic assessment—which could consequently alter the focus of Chinese writings on war control.

For now, though, the assumption appears to be that any conflicts China would face are likely to be limited in both means and ends.

²⁷ Yao Yunzhu, "The Evolution of Military Doctrine of the Chinese PLA from 1985 to 1995," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 1 (Winter 1995): pp. 69-73.

²⁸ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁰ See David M. Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security: "The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999,"* CNA Report, D0014464.A1/Final (Alexandria, VA: CNA, Dec. 2000); Xi Jinping, "China's Commitment to Peaceful Development, Speech to the Korber Foundation, March 28, 2014," in Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 292.

A newer twist: informatized warfare

PLA writings assert that the technological character of modern warfare contributes to the inherent controllability of “local war.” The PLA characterizes modern conflicts that rely heavily on information technology and information-based capabilities to carry out combat operations as “informatized wars” (*xinxihua zhanzheng*; 信息化战争), and asserts that these technological capabilities provide modern militaries with a greater ability to control how such operations are carried out. For example, the 2013 edition of the

Characteristics of local wars under informatized conditions:

- Are constrained by political factors³¹
- Have limited objectives, forces, duration, and operational space³²
- Can occur suddenly
- Have high expenditure rates of costly high-tech weapons and equipment
- Involve large amounts of information technology based capabilities.

—2007 PLA Encyclopedia³³

Science of Military Strategy states that in informatized local wars, “the means of control have become more numerous, the methods of control have become more flexible, the comprehensiveness of control has become stronger, and the overall benefits of control have become more notable ... [E]very sort of constraining element on war has developed further.”³⁴

Three authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy elaborate that

- improvements in advanced reconnaissance capabilities have made the battlefield more transparent and combat more controllable;
- the use of informatized command and control shortens preparation and implementation of control measures, enabling more timely control of war situations; and
- the spread of long-range precision strike capabilities and non-lethal attack systems, such as cyber, have made the scale and intensity of a war more controllable.³⁵

³¹ See also Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 111.

³² See also *ibid.*

³³ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 44.

³⁴ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 111, 122.

³⁵ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 25.

LTG Wang Xixin, deputy commander of Shenyang MR, argues even more explicitly that

The development and application of information technology, especially [that] developed around precision engagement, ... improves the ability in controlling war, and this ability is getting stronger with higher levels of information technology improvement. This has to do with three aspects: first, the increased transparency of the battlefield avoids unauthorized warfare starting and uncontrolled abuse of methods during wartime due to misjudgment. Second, the enhancement of precision strike weapons greatly reduces non-target collateral damage. Third, the wide use of soft kill methods has reduced wartime violence.³⁶

These texts suggest that informatized warfare allows for greater control of the battlefield (i.e., improved command and control). By this logic, an informatized military should be better able to control *deliberate* escalation and its consequences.

That said, in the view of PLA authors, *uncontrolled* informatized conflict has the potential to be extremely destructive. The authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy note, for example, that the “uncertainty of war seems to be on a trend of increase in informatized warfare,” because more forces are involved and the battlefield is more complex.³⁷ The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* asserts that the rapid operational tempo of modern high-tech wars could increase the scale of destruction and increase the risk that wartime military operations could rapidly exceed political objectives.³⁸

Henley, in his 2006 analysis, expressed his concern that Chinese authors’ certainty that informatized warfare can be controlled could lead them to “think this makes the world safe for war once more, or perhaps safe for the first time,” and thus be more likely to engage in escalatory behavior.³⁹ The texts we examined *do acknowledge the risk* that informatized warfare could accelerate more quickly than prior sorts of warfare, and therefore assert that improving one’s ability to control the course of informatized wars is an urgent task. But they do not say that this risk ought to make a country less likely to engage in informatized warfare. **A critical question, therefore, is whether the PLA, as it perceives its capabilities in informatized warfare to be improving, will become more confident in its ability to control crisis and conflict—and thus potentially more likely to become involved in it.**

³⁶ Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 59.

³⁷ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” pp. 24-25.

³⁸ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 111.

³⁹ Henley, “War Control,” p. 94.

PLA assessments of the conflicts it is most likely to face

Finally, PLA writings provide insights into current PLA assumptions about the most likely and most dangerous forms of conflict for which it must prepare. The 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy (SMS)* identifies four types of future conflicts that its authors assess China might face.⁴⁰ These are described in the following paragraphs.

“Large-scale, high-intensity defensive wars” are characterized by the *Science of Military Strategy* as a form of “high-end local informatized war.” This sort of war would be caused by “hegemonic countries inciting war with the goal of delaying or interrupting our country’s rise.” The text says that the “factors leading to [this sort of] war” could be “a crisis getting out of control and progressively escalating (*zhubu shengji*, 逐步升级),” or “a pre-planned scheme which then arises suddenly. The probability of this kind of conflict breaking out is low, but its degree of danger is high.” (Emphasis added.) The text does not elaborate on whether this sort of crisis escalation would be deliberate, inadvertent, or accidental.

“A comparatively larger-scale, higher-intensity anti-secession conflict” is described in the *SMS* as a more specific sort of “high-end local war under informatized conditions” caused by a Taiwan independence movement that “with the support of international anti-China powers, crosses the ‘red line’ established in the [2005] Anti-Secession Law.”⁴¹ According to the *SMS*, this situation would “compel [China] to use armed force to strike ‘Taiwan Independence’ forces in order to protect national unity.” This is described as a “political-military war (*zhengzhi junshi zhang*, 政治军事仗),” and requires that China “take ... precautions against the interference of foreign enemies.” The *SMS* adds, “The degree of danger of this kind of operation and the probability of its outbreak is on average higher, and preparing for this fight has been the goal of our army for a long time.”

“Medium- and small-scale, medium-to-low-end self-defense counterattack operations” would be “medium-end local wars under informatized conditions directed against peripheral opponents’ provocations.” Such wars could be caused by:

- “islands being invaded, intensifying maritime boundary disputes, and large-scale plundering of maritime oil and gas resources, which would trigger armed clashes and local wars in the direction of the maritime domain”;

⁴⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 99.

⁴¹ China’s stated “red line” would be Taiwan’s declared secession from China.

- “land boundary dispute problems that trigger border counterattack operations”; or
- “the outbreak of chaos due to a neighboring country’s political situation being unstable, which triggers operational actions to close and control the borders.”

According to the SMS, “the degree of danger and probability of this kind of operation breaking out is middling, but is trending upwards.”

“Small-scale, low-intensity counterterrorism, internal stability, and rights-protection operational actions” are, according to the SMS, “relatively lower grade warfare (military) actions, and are closely related to military operations other than war that involve confrontations.” Such conflict could be caused by (1) “anti-terrorism suppression operational activities” against “the ‘three evil forces’ instigating terror, riots, and rebellion”; or (2) “defensive military rights protection abroad” (*fangwei de jingwai junshi weiquan*, 防卫的境外军事维权), meaning operations to counter “serious threats—especially violence and peril—to external national interests, strategic passageways, and the security of expatriates.”

Implications for PLA views of escalation

This list provides some useful insights into PLA views on conflict and escalation.

First, it shows that **the PLA is preparing to respond to a range of contingencies across the spectrum of conflict**. The list of possible crises and conflicts presented in the *Science of Military Strategy* implies that the PLA must be able to respond to situations ranging from counter-piracy and protection of overseas Chinese citizens, to full-scale conventional warfare against the United States or Taiwan. The *Science of Military Strategy* argues that warfare is far more likely to erupt on a small scale, and in domains such as maritime, cyber, and space, than to erupt in the form of large-scale warfare. However, the list does not rule out the possibility of full-on war and argues that the PLA must be ready for that contingency.

This is relevant for understanding PLA thinking on escalation, because each type of contingency could carry different objectives and challenges for control. For example, in some situations, the goal would be to de-escalate the situation; in others it could be to maintain the status quo; and in still others it would be to win in a conflict. The challenges for controlling escalation in an accidental crisis would presumably also be different from the challenges in controlling a war.

As we discuss later in the study, a critical question is whether China’s measures to control conflict in such a wide range of situations would be perceived by opponents in way that the military or civilian leadership intends.

Second, this list highlights some areas of possible evolution in PLA thinking on crisis escalation. Specifically, we see that **the PLA publicly discusses the possibility of:**

- Full-scale warfare erupting from the escalation of a crisis (without stating whether this would be as a result of deliberate or inadvertent escalation)
- Boundary and jurisdictional disputes escalating into higher levels of conflict, particularly in the maritime domain
- The need to manage the possibility that crises may escalate horizontally through interference by foreign entities.

Previously analyzed Chinese writing on escalation did not appear to address the risks of inadvertent escalation or the accidental outbreak of conflict.⁴² However, the *Science of Military Strategy* excerpt discussed above acknowledges the possibility of a smaller-scale crisis escalating to something more serious, presumably against the better judgment of at least some of the parties involved.⁴³ Hence this list collectively appears to represent some evolution in PLA thinking on crisis and conflict since the mid-2000s.

⁴² Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 49, 57-58, 79.

⁴³ We see a more explicit identification of the possibility of accidental escalation in a 2012 article by a civilian researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary Relations. This author argues that intensified military procurement and activities among Asian nations, including “sea and air reconnaissance, patrols, and confrontation,” could lead to an “accidental discharge” that might “escalate into a conflict or limited warfare.” Zhang Wenzhong, “How Can the U.S., China, and Neighboring East Asian Countries Positively Interact?” (*Zhong mei lin zai dongya ruhe liangsheng hudong?*; 中美邻在东亚如何良生互动?) *Contemporary International Relations* (*Xiandai guoji guanxi*; 现代国际关系) 2012: 10.

Chapter 3: The continuum of conflict

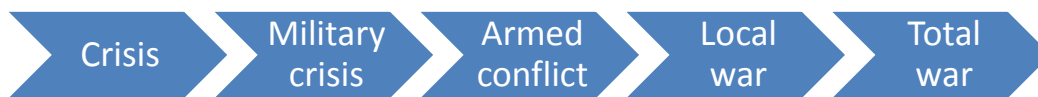
In this chapter we examine more closely how PLA authors describe the emergence and evolution of conflict. We look at how PLA texts characterize the dynamics of escalation, what they say the objectives should be for controlling conflict at different stages, and what basic features they attribute to each stage of crisis and conflict.

We found that **PLA texts fairly consistently break down the progress of crisis and conflict into distinct stages with increasing levels of intensity and use of military force.** Based on PLA writings, we can arrange these stages on a “continuum of conflict.”⁴⁴ In the first part of this chapter, we summarize these stages and discuss key features of the overall continuum of conflict. We then provide more details on each stage as characterized in PLA texts.

The continuum of conflict

Across a range of PLA writings, we found consistent descriptions of sequential stages of crisis and conflict. From these, we can derive a “continuum of conflict” that progresses from peace to war.⁴⁵

Based on our analysis, the Chinese continuum of conflict looks like this:



According to PLA writings, each of these stages has distinct characteristics—regarding, for instance, the use of military assets, the intensity of interaction, and the

⁴⁴ We do not use the term “escalation ladder” here because to do so would, in our view, inaccurately “map” Chinese terms to U.S. concepts, despite some obvious similarities. Herman Kahn, the seminal U.S. theorist of escalation, defined an “escalation ladder” as “a progression of steps in what amounts to ... an ascending order of intensity through which a given crisis may progress.” Kahn, *On Escalation*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ This does not mean that action would necessarily proceed smoothly from one stage to the next; each stage just represents an increase in intensity and risk from the prior stage.

objectives for control. We summarize these characteristics in Table 1, below, for reference. We then identify critical features of the overall continuum of conflict, and highlight aspects that have troubling implications for escalation. Later in this chapter we discuss each individual stage in greater detail.

Table 1. Summary: PLA definitions and characteristics of different stages on the continuum of conflict

Stage of conflict	PLA definition	Key characteristics
Crisis 危机	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manifestation of conflicts of interests • Constitutes a serious threat to national security and social stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likelihood of crisis eruption is predictable, but timing is not • Takes place in diplomatic, economic, or other non-military domains • Can escalate to military crisis
Military crisis 军事危机	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A risky state of affairs that could lead to armed conflict or war • Has the effect of changing or damaging the state of balance of military affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves military forces • Is a "transitional state" between peace and war • May emerge if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a shift has occurred in the military balance of two or more countries – the interests of rival countries have suddenly diverged – attempts to resolve a crisis in other domains have failed – there is a perceived threat to a country's "core interests" • Can quickly escalate to armed conflict
Armed conflict 武装冲突	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A small-scale, low-intensity fight between opposing armed forces • Does not constitute a state of war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves armed fighting • Is a "transitional state" between peace and war • Can escalate into war
War 战争	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of armed forces to carry out a large-scale intense battle for political and/or economic objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Local, "limited" war – Total, "all-out" war

Key features of the continuum of conflict

As a whole, this continuum has several key features:

- PLA texts imply that, in principle, the objectives for controlling crisis and conflict should differ depending on which stage you are in.
- The thresholds that separate a state of pre-war conflict from a state of war are unclear in the writings we examined.
- The middle stages of the continuum—which, according to PLA writings, involve military activities but do not constitute a state of war—are rife with the possibility of misunderstanding and escalation.
- Some of the military actions that Chinese writings associate with pre-war stages could be interpreted as escalation to war by other countries.

In principle, the objectives for controlling crisis and conflict vary across the continuum of conflict

According to the texts we examined, a military should have different goals at different stages on the continuum of conflict. Early on, the main goal for controlling the situation is to limit the damage created by a crisis or conflict and prevent it from escalating to war. Once war has broken out, the major objective is to win the war at the lowest cost to one's interests.

Table 2, on the next page, summarizes PLA writings on the objective of control at each stage of conflict. With the exception of “military crisis control,” these objectives for control are all found in the official *PLA Encyclopedia*. (We discuss each stage in greater detail later in this chapter.)

Table 2. Summary: Objectives for control on the continuum of conflict

Stage of conflict	Controlling mechanism	Objective of control
Crisis	<i>Crisis control</i>	Prevent crisis from developing into a military conflict. ^a
Military crisis	<i>Military crisis control</i>	“Control and guide [the military crisis’] development in a favorable direction.” ^b
Armed conflict	<i>Armed conflict control</i>	Avoid expansion and escalation into war. ^a
War	<i>War situation control</i>	“Seize the initiative in order to guide war to a victory, as well as to seize the initiative as quickly as possible during situations in which you are at a disadvantage.” ^a

Sources:

^a. *PLA Encyclopedia*, pp. 11, 21, 206-08.

^b. Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises” (*Lun junshi weiji de guankong*; 论军事危机的管控), *China Military Science (Zhongguo junshi kexue*; 中国军事科学) 2013, 4: p. 65.

Notably, the objective for control in each stage is not necessarily to immediately *de-escalate* the situation; rather, it is to prevent its escalation to a much more intense form of conflict. **This implies that not all control measures the PLA takes in such a situation would be obviously de-escalatory.** Indeed, as we discuss later in this chapter, some measures that PLA texts advocate taking in order to prevent escalation to war could be viewed by outside observers as escalatory. Moreover, there is an admonition in at least some texts that one goal of crisis control should be to “guide the crisis’s development in a favorable direction.” In other words, “controlling” a crisis can mean steering it, not just stopping it.

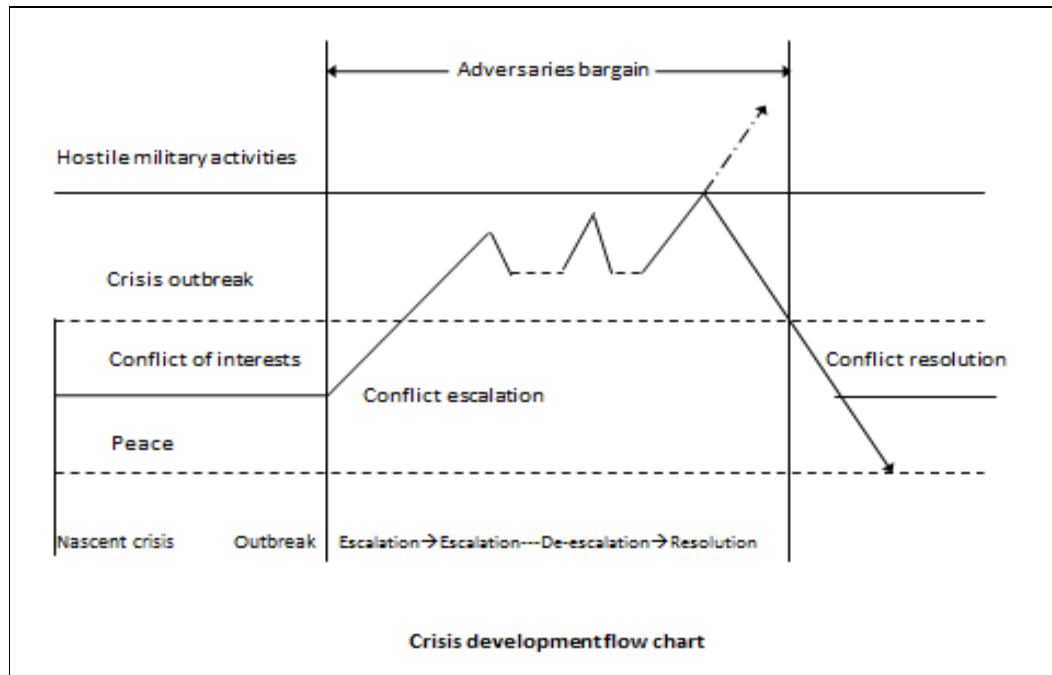
Even so, in theory, the Chinese should approach any pre-war state of crisis with the goal of preventing its escalation into war.

Thresholds separating crisis from war are unclear

The PLA writings we examined provide limited insight into what could cause a situation to transition from a state of pre-war crisis or conflict to a state of war. Many of the Chinese texts we examined acknowledge that specific actions may trigger a “jump” from one level of tension or conflict to the next, but they do not specify what such actions might be. For example, an NDU teaching text provides a diagram of the notional process of crisis development. (See Figure 1, next page.) In this rendering, there is a dividing line near the top of the diagram for the inception

of “hostile military activities” (*diduixing junshi xingdong*; 敌对性军事行动). Such activities appear to represent the escalation of a crisis into war or some other form of serious conflict, but the nature of such “hostile” activities (contrasted with military activities that are “non-hostile,” i.e., intended to be normal or deterrent) is unclear.⁴⁶

Figure 1. “Crisis Development Flow Chart”: from a Chinese NDU teaching text



Source:

⁴⁵ Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis* (*Guoji weiji guanli lilun yu anlie jixi*; 国际危机管理理论于案例解析) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2011), p. 10.

The lack of information about when a crisis is deemed to have crossed a threshold into a state of war presents challenges for outside observers. As we noted previously and discuss further in the next section, Chinese writings associate each stage of conflict with certain sorts of military activities and objectives. Hence, in order to understand whether Chinese actions represent a deliberate escalation, we would need to know how the PLA determines where on the continuum of conflict China is at a given time.

⁴⁶ Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis* (*Guoji weiji guanli lilun yu anlie jixi*; 国际危机管理理论于案例解析) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2011), p. 10.

PLA writers have a concept of “quasi-war” that blurs the line between non-war and war activities and objectives

Many PLA texts assert that the middle stages of the continuum of conflict constitute a “special state” that lies between peace and war.⁴⁷ In these stages, militaries have become involved in a crisis or conflict but are not yet at war. According to this characterization, we may thus divide the continuum of country-to-country interactions into three broader categories: peacetime; a “middle state” between peace and war; and war. **The middle state is notable because, in many PLA writings, the precise nature and objective of military activities during this state are ambiguous, and potentially could be misinterpreted as acts of war.**

In several of the texts we examined, these middle stages of the continuum of conflict are characterized as a state of “quasi-war” (*zhun zhanzheng*; 准战争).⁴⁸ Liu Xiaoli, a PLA senior colonel who works in NDU’s Campaign Teaching & Research Department, explains in his book *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises: Research on Military Operations Other than War* that quasi-war is a form of “military operations that are implemented outside of a state of war.”⁴⁹ He elaborates that quasi-war entails “confrontational operations that use armed force as the primary method; although [the two sides] have not yet declared that the form of the struggle is in a state of war, the operations still have the violent nature of war.”⁵⁰ Two scholars from the NDU Crisis Management Center, Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, equate “quasi-war” with armed conflict, and note that quasi-war “is often accompanied by combat activities of some intensity. Decisions are made at the

⁴⁷ For example, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204; Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises: Research on Military Operations Other than War (Jundui yingdui zhongda tufa shijian he weiji feizhanzheng junshi xingdong yanjiu*; 军队应对重大突发事件和危机非战争军事行动研究) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2009), p. 7; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises” (*Lun junshi weiji de guankong*; 论军事危机的管控), *China Military Science (Zhongguo junshi kexue*; 中国军事科学) 2013, 4: p. 64; Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 63.

⁴⁸ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 7; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64. A 2012 article from the *Journal of Sichuan Ordnance*, a civilian journal, also suggests that there is a state of being “on the verge of war” or “pre-war” (*lin zhan qian*; 临战前), in which the goals for deterrence would be different from those in either peacetime or war. While that text does not use the term “quasi-war,” it corroborates the notion that different stages on the continuum of conflict should have different objectives for control. Li Shiling, Sun Dongping, and Zhou Baolin, “Qualitative Analysis of the Nuclear Deterrent Capability of Ballistic Missile Nuclear Submarines” (*Dandao daodan qianting heweishe nengli de dingxing fenxi*; 弹道导弹潜艇核威慑能力的定性分析), *Journal of Sichuan Ordnance (Sichuan bin'gong xuebao*; 四川兵工学报) 33, 3 (Mar. 2012): p. 29.

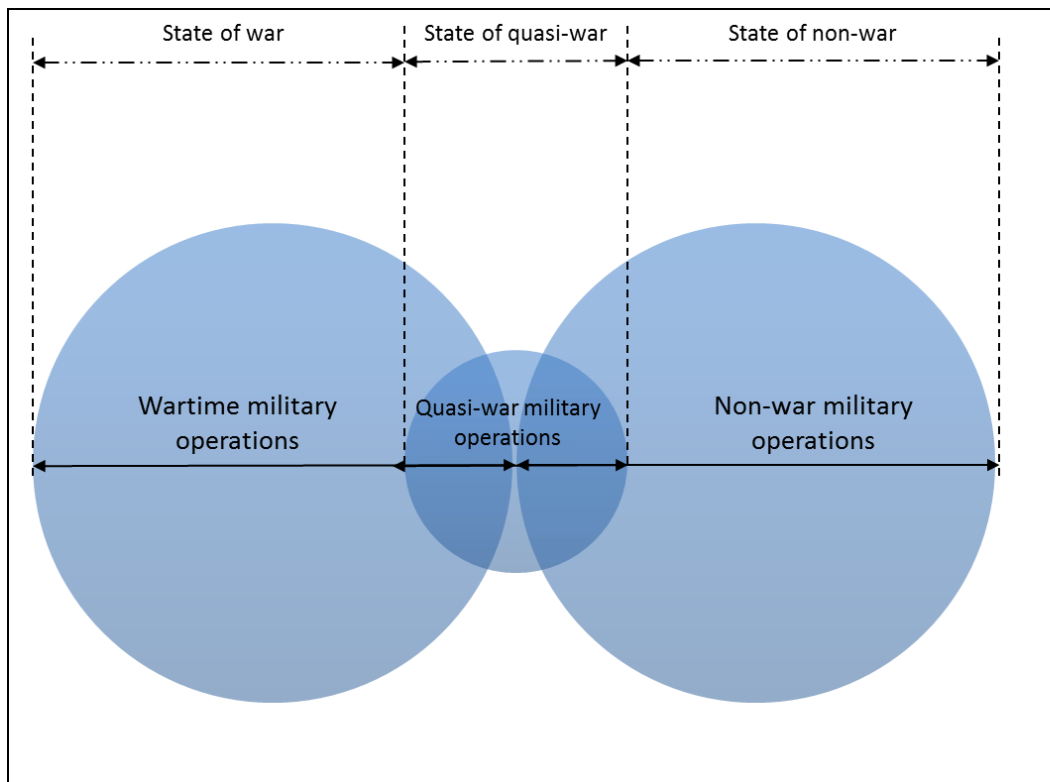
⁴⁹ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

highest level. It is a game of national will. This is also a last juncture before a crisis is turned into a war.”⁵¹ In other words, the state of “quasi-war” involves direct military confrontation between opposing sides, yet it is not considered a state of war.

The three states are depicted graphically in Liu Xiaoli’s book, in the diagram copied in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2. States of war, quasi-war, and non-war: from a PLA text



Source:

^a Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises: Research on Military Operations Other than War*, p. 8.

There are two important distinctions to be drawn for each state: (1) the types of military operations; and (2) the objectives of military operations. Liu provides a useful table that lays out both, which we reproduce below in Table 3.

⁵¹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64.

Table 3. Chart differentiating wartime military operations, quasi-war military operations, and non-war military operations: from a PLA text

Mission	Wartime military operations		Quasi-war military operations	Non-war military operations
Differences				
State	State of war		State of quasi-war	State of non-war
Situation to which the operations are responding (yingdui mubiao; 应对目标)	Total war	Limited war	Major crisis or armed conflict	Major crisis incident
Goal	Overturn [the opponent's] political regime, destroy [the opponent's] armed forces, occupy territory		Resolve inter-state conflicts of interest, to create the conditions for a political solution	Protect national security interests and social stability
Scale/scope of force	War implemented with complete mobilization and full strength	War implemented by mobilizing armed forces in a localized area	Mobilizing some of the armed forces to carry out small-scale, low-intensity operations	Using armed forces to conduct mainly non-violent military operations

Source:

^a Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 8.

According to the texts we examined, military operations that take place in a state of quasi-war may closely resemble combat activities. Zhao and Zhao state, for instance, that the state of “quasi-war” may involve direct confrontation and “combat activities of some intensity” between military forces.⁵² In Table 3, Liu argues that quasi-war military operations prioritize “small-scale, low-intensity employment” of armed force (rather than the full-scale employment that would characterize a state of war), and contrasts them with “non-war” military operations that prioritize “non-violent” methods of armed force. However, Liu adds in the accompanying text, even non-war military operations may occasionally include unspecified “low-intensity violent methods,” and “may even extend into quasi-war military operations, for example implementing military deterrence operations for the sake of containing war.”⁵³ Figure 2 showed how he similarly depicts an overlap, in the state of quasi-war, between combat operations and non-war military operations. Accordingly, in a state of quasi-war the line between combat and peacetime military activities is blurred.

⁵² Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64.

⁵³ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 7.

Similarly, the objectives for control in a state of quasi-war appear to be ambiguous. In principle, these distinctions should be clear-cut. Liu states in his table and the accompanying text that the objectives for quasi-war are different from those in a war. For example, he notes in Table 3 that the “goal” for a war is to defeat the enemy, politically and militarily. In a “quasi-war,” on the other hand, the goal is to “create the conditions for a political solution” to an ongoing problem, through deterring or intimidating the enemy by the use of armed force.⁵⁴ Earlier in this chapter we also noted that, in theory, the objective for control in pre-war situations should be to prevent escalation to war; only after some unspecified threshold into a state of war has been crossed should a country’s objective switch to winning the war.

However, a closer look at these texts suggests that during the stages in the middle of the continuum of conflict, a military should have *two* goals: it should simultaneously seek to *prevent the escalation to war* while also *preparing the battlefield for a war should one break out*. For example, LTG Wang Xixin, deputy commander of the Shenyang Military Region, writes in a 2014 article:

Conflict control during crisis times ... *is aimed at avoiding wars*. ... Once a crisis occurs, the first thing is to respond quickly to *show the principle stance [of avoiding wars]* and strive for strategic initiative, expanding diplomatic efforts, public opinion and propaganda in order to convey specific and clear information and advice to the other side, and to increase mutual understanding and enhance trust. At the same time, *actively carry out internal preparations for addressing a contingency, including adjusting military deployments and military deterrence, and complete dual preparations for negotiating a resolution and for dealing with a random contingency.*⁵⁵ (Emphasis added.)

Liu Xiaoli, similarly, notes that non-war military operations (which apparently include the category of quasi-war operations) often “support” combat operations because they can “assist in competing for time, familiarizing oneself with the environment, *increasing one’s own strength, and raising the military struggle, so that [one] can effectively safeguard the outcome of the wartime military operations.*”⁵⁶ (Emphasis added.)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 63.

⁵⁶ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 4. A search of earlier PLA writings suggests that the concept of a period of preparation prior to the outbreak of full-scale warfare is not particularly new. For example, writings from the early 2000s on “pre-war mobilization” (*linzhan dongyuan*; 临战动员) discuss the measures that a military may take to prepare for imminent conflict or to counter an enemy surprise attack. According to these writings, pre-war mobilization often begins once a likely opponent and the likely

In sum, these PLA writings suggest that in the middle stages of crisis or conflict, a military may have multiple objectives for control and multiple means for meeting those objectives:

- In the early stages, China would be unambiguously trying to avoid an outbreak of war.
- In the middle state of “quasi-war,” the PLA would be simultaneously trying to (a) deter or prevent war, and (b) prepare the battlefield in case crisis management fails and war becomes inevitable.
- In a war, the goal would be unambiguously to win.

These simultaneous goals may not be remarkable—we could reasonably expect any country in a state of military crisis to have similar ones—but they do suggest that the line between crisis control and war may be fuzzier than it appears at first glance. Notably, there is no discussion in the PLA texts we examined of whether it might be difficult to simultaneously meet the dual goals of the “quasi-war” state. They do not mention the possibility that these objectives could compete with one another, require prioritization, or create unintended consequences. For example, what if preparing the battlefield is perceived by the other side to be escalatory and thus undermines the objective of “enhancing trust”? The texts we examined did not explore this possibility.

Most importantly, **although military activities in the state of quasi-war may in theory be aimed at resolving a crisis and preventing escalation to war, they may simultaneously resemble the activities of a country that already considers itself to be at war.** There is no discussion in these texts of how a country undertaking such actions would signal to the opponent that they are *not* intended as acts of war.

Military actions that the Chinese intend as crisis control may appear escalatory to others

Relatedly, several of the texts we examined describe military activities aimed at crisis management during peacetime and “quasi-war” that are kinetic and could be viewed as escalatory. For example, Liu Xiaoli describes a crisis situation in which a Chinese military vessel may fire warning shots and even direct “damaging shots” at a foreign vessel as a form of crisis deterrence.⁵⁷ If the PLA’s military activities during the state

battlefield have been identified. Wu Zhiyong, *Teaching Materials on Wartime Mobilization Studies (Zuozhan dongyuan xue jiaocheng; 作战动员学教程)* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2001), p. 51; Chinese War Mobilization Encyclopedia Editorial Committee, eds., *Chinese War Mobilization Encyclopedia (Zhongguo zhanzheng dongyuan baike quanshu; 中国战争动员百科全书)* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2003), pp. 13-14.

⁵⁷ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 205.

of “quasi-war” resemble combat activities, they may be perceived as such by another country even if their actual intention is to *prevent* escalation to war.

Based on these texts, it appears that **in a conflict, it could be difficult for outside observers to determine whether Chinese warfighters think they are in a state of crisis or a state of war.** Our analysis of these texts suggests that there is a reasonable likelihood that—if the Chinese follow these theories in practice—the PLA could undertake crisis management activities that are *intended* to prevent escalation to war, but whose *content* appears, from the perspective of outside observers, to be escalatory. Almost none of the PLA texts we surveyed mentioned the possibility that Chinese signals at this stage could be misconstrued.

Detailed discussion: Stages on the continuum of conflict

PLA writings are fairly consistent in the terms they use to describe different states of crisis and conflict. In the following sections, we delve more deeply into the definition, characteristics, and means and objectives of control that PLA texts attribute to each of these stages.

Crisis

(*weiji*; 危机)

Definition and characteristics

A “crisis” is generally defined in PLA writings as a situation in which the interests of two sides clash and a resolution is difficult to find. The writings that we examined highlighted the following fundamental aspects of a crisis.

PLA writings say that a crisis is dangerous and potentially escalatory. As defined in PLA reference works, a crisis (1) presents a security threat that must be managed; and (2) is an unstable situation that can easily escalate into further hostilities or even war. The *PLA Encyclopedia* says that a crisis is a “bilateral or multilateral tense conflict of interest that could lead to the outbreak of a war” through “crisis escalation” (*weiji shengji*; 危机升级).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 205. See also Shou Xiaosong,

PLA writings say that a crisis erupts suddenly.⁵⁹ They also assert, however, that the eruption of a crisis is rather predictable. As Liu Xiaoli of the NDU Campaign Teaching and Research Department puts it, “there are clues that can be observed” of an impending crisis outbreak.⁶⁰

PLA writings say that crises are “controllable” (*kekongxing*; 可控性).⁶¹ Liu Xiaoli asserts there are “laws that can be followed” to control and mitigate the crisis.⁶² The *PLA Encyclopedia* states that “if you understand clearly the laws of crisis evolution and grasp the principles of crisis control, you can effectively control the course of a crisis and then head off a disaster.”⁶³

Crisis control: Definition and objectives

(*weiji kongzhi*; 危机控制)

Official PLA definitions of crisis control emphasize limiting the scope of damage and preventing the crisis from escalating into military crisis, armed conflict, or war.

For example, according to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, “crisis control” refers to

the various methods—monitoring and limiting actions—utilized by a country or political entity to *prevent a crisis from developing into a military conflict*. It includes the elimination of the negative factors

ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114; Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management (Junshi guanli xue; 军事管理学)* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2009), p. 317; Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, 2011, p. 6; Ding Bangquan, ed., *International Crisis Management (Guoji weiji guanli; 国际危机管理)* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2004), p. 5; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 63; Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 583.

⁵⁹ Ding Bangquan, ed., *International Crisis Management*, pp. 29-33; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114; Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, pp. 25-26.

⁶⁰ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* See also Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, pp. 318-320. Zhang Tuosheng provides several examples of historical crises that he views as “[fully] controlled, or controlled to a certain extent”: the 1995 incidents at Mischief Reef involving China, the Philippines, and the United States; the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crises; the “embassy bombing incident” in 1999; the 2001 “China-US aircraft collision incident”; and the “Diaoyu Island vessel collision incident” between China and Japan in 2010. Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China’s Behaviors in International Military Security Crises,” p. 114.

⁶² Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 25.

⁶³ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 205.

that could lead to crises and stopping crises at their roots. It also includes *limiting the damage* to the smallest possible area after a crisis has already occurred, *ending the crisis in the shortest time with most limited consequences*, and *preventing the crisis from turning toward conflict or war*.⁶⁴ (Emphasis added.)

Some of the texts we examined provide additional detail on what actions might constitute crisis control. These include:

Limiting the domains of the crisis. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* warns against allowing crises in other domains to escalate into the military domain: “Strive to avoid economic and societal crises from escalating into political crises. ... Strive to avoid non-military crises from becoming military crises. ... Strive to control political, diplomatic, and economic contradictions from spreading to strategic conflict.”⁶⁵

Limiting the geographic scope of the crisis. Zhao and Zhao of the NDU Crisis Management Center say that “the geographic scope of a crisis must be contained ... to keep it from spilling over into other directions and areas.”⁶⁶

Limiting the number of parties involved in the crisis. Zhao and Zhao argue that in order to “keep [a crisis’s] range from expanding ... [you must] contain a crisis to the countries directly involved. Keep external forces from intervening so that it will not become multilateral or international in nature.”⁶⁷

Military crisis

(*junshi weiji*; 军事危机)

Definition and characteristics

PLA writings describe a military crisis as different from other sorts of crisis in that it (1) involves military forces; and (2) is even more prone to escalate into armed conflict or war than other types of crisis.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 113.

⁶⁶ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69.

⁶⁷ Ibid. See also Johnston, “The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China,” p. 34.

For example, the *PLA Encyclopedia* defines military crisis as a “risky state of affairs between countries or political groups” that “could instigate war or military conflict.”⁶⁸

A number of PLA writings describe “military crisis” as a “transitional state” between peace and war.⁶⁹ The *Encyclopedia*, for example, writes that military crisis “is the special time period between peace and war. Although not yet an all-out resort to force, it brims with the threat of war, is on the fringe of war, and at any time has the potential to turn into war.”⁷⁰

Conditions that may catalyze a military crisis

PLA writings suggest that a military crisis may be especially likely under the following circumstances: (a) a major shift has occurred in the military balance of two or more countries; (b) the interests or concerns of rivals have diverged suddenly; (c) attempts to resolve the issue in other domains have failed; and/or (d) there is a perceived threat to one or more countries’ “core interests.”

A 2005 article by the AMS War Theory and Strategy Research Department points to “two conditions” that are particularly likely to lead to a military crisis:

One is a qualitative change in the contradictions that exist between two rivals, which causes a terrific increase in the possibility of hostile military actions between the two sides, or causes the emergence of a serious reversal in the existing situation of military stability between the two sides; the second is a serious loss of balance in the relative military power [of the two sides], which causes a loss of the normal relationship between the two rivals, or creates a serious challenge to

⁶⁸ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204. Similarly, an author affiliated with the PLA General Staff Department (GSD) wrote in a 2012 article that a military crisis is “a particular sudden incident or state of emergency that has the possibility to lead to war or military conflict between nations or political groups in which one or both sides feel threatened.” Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries” (*Zhongwai junshi weiji guanli yanjiu de lishi huiqu*; 中外军事危机管理研究的历史回顾), *Military History (Junshi lishi: 军事历史)* 2012, 3: p. 17.

⁶⁹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 62; *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114; Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 17. Also see Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, 2011, p. 10, which references “crisis” (rather than “military crisis”) in the same way.

⁷⁰ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

the existing structure of some form of relationship between the countries.⁷¹

The *PLA Encyclopedia* similarly notes that “a military crisis is regarded as the emergence of a change or the destruction of a military balance, and is the result of intensified contradictions between countries or political groups.”⁷²

According to Zhao and Zhao of the NDU Crisis Management Center, a military crisis may develop when political, diplomatic, or economic options for resolving an issue have failed—and thus already represents an escalation of a crisis that has originated in other domains.⁷⁴

Several PLA texts assert that crises that revolve around perceived threats to “core national interests” appear to be especially likely to involve military force.⁷⁵ Zhao and Zhao write that the outbreak of a military crisis usually rests on the fact that “the core interest (*hexin liyi*; 核心利益) or major interest (*zhongda liyi*; 重大利益) of a relevant party is threatened.”⁷⁶ The *Science of Military Strategy* notes that “the military is the main force for protecting national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity”—from which we may infer that conflicts revolving around these core interests are likely to involve the PLA if they cannot be otherwise resolved.⁷⁷

What are China’s “core interests”?

China’s leadership has explicitly articulated China’s “core interests” as:

- Safeguarding China’s political system and national security
- Protecting China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity
- Maintaining China’s sustained and stable economic and social development.⁷³

⁷¹ Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 583.

⁷² *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

⁷³ Li Jing and Wu Qingcai, “The First China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue Touches on Major Issues Except Going to the Moon,” *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, Jul. 29, 2009.

⁷⁴ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 65.

⁷⁵ See also the *PLA Encyclopedia*, which says that one “basic principle of war control” is to “make national interests the jumping off point and final destination of war control. Usually, only when the nation’s fundamental interests, long term interests and overall interests are severely threatened and measures other than war will not work is it necessary to resort to force.” *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

⁷⁶ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69.

⁷⁷ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 112.

Dynamics of a crisis or military crisis

Several PLA writings assert that the evolution of crisis or military crisis follows four phases (*jieduan*; 阶段).⁷⁸ We thus surmise that this is a standard terminology for understanding crisis dynamics. The four phases are:

- Crisis initiation
- Crisis escalation
- Crisis de-escalation
- Crisis termination.

Crisis initiation (*weiji kaishi*; 危机开始) or *eruption* (*baofa*; 危机爆发)⁷⁹

According to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, this period “indicates an increase in tensions between military opponents.”⁸⁰ Crisis initiation is interactive: each side must respond in an escalatory manner to the other’s actions in order for the conflict of interest to turn into a crisis.⁸¹

A 2011 training text from China’s National Defense University, edited by Xu Hui, provides a list of possible causes of crisis outbreak. (See Table 4, next page.) Of note, the causes (a) arise across both non-military and military domains, and (b) appear to be in order of escalation, although Xu does not say so explicitly.

⁷⁸ For example, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204; Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 583; Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, pp. 10-14.

⁷⁹ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204; Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, pp. 10-14.

⁸⁰ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

⁸¹ Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 10.

Table 4. Examples of actions that can trigger a crisis: from an NDU teaching text

Domain of action	Example of actions
Verbal political action	Protest, intimidation, censure, demands and other verbally threatening actions
Political action	Subversion, diplomatic sanctions, severing diplomatic relations, violation of treaties or agreements
Economic action	Economic embargo, economic sanctions, nationalization of property, suspension of economic aid
Change in the external environment	Changes in certain weapons systems and attack capabilities, changes in global or regional arrangements, changes in the legitimacy of international organization(s)
Change in domestic politics	Media provocation, a new government comes to power, government falls from power, government change, conspiring on sabotage operations (<i>yinmou pohuai xingdong</i> ; 阴谋破坏行动), terrorism, assassination, demonstrations, strikes, arresting politically sensitive persons, assassinating politically sensitive persons, implementing martial law or military control, armed rebellion or mutiny, revolt or uprising
Nonviolent military action	Demonstration of force, combat exercises, military mobilization, troop movements, military units shift into an attack posture
Indirect (<i>jianjie</i> ; 间接) violent action	Another country initiates armed rebellion, violent actions are directed against an ally or friendly country or affiliate
Violent action	Border conflicts, crossing a border with limited military strength, intrusion into territorial airspace, bombardment and sinking of warships, naval and air sudden incidents, major targets being bombed, large-scale military attack, war

Source:

^a. Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, pp. 10-11.

Crisis escalation (weiji shengji; 危机升级)

The *PLA Encyclopedia* says that when a crisis escalates, “the possibility of the outbreak of conflict has increased, and is usually accompanied by military actions” such as “military preparations, mobilization, and troop movements and deployments.”⁸²

In another table, Xu Hui asserts that certain specific responses to a crisis initiation are especially likely to escalate the situation. (See Table 5.)

⁸² *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

Table 5. Responses to crisis that could lead to crisis escalation: from an NDU teaching text

Domain/type of action	Example of actions
No response	N/A
Verbal response	Protest, threat, censure, putting forth demands
Political response	Form an alliance, diplomatic sanctions, reduction of the status of diplomatic relations, tearing up treaties or commitments
Economic response	Economic embargo, dumping, economic sanctions, nationalization of property, cutting off economic aid
Nonviolent military response	Demonstration of force, combat exercises, military mobilization, troop movements, military units shift into an attack posture, threatening punishment by military force
Violent military response	Border conflicts, limited military strength crossing a border, intrusion into territorial airspace, bombardment and sinking of warships, naval and air sudden incidents, major targets being bombed, large-scale military attack, war

Source:

^a. Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 12.

Notably, many of the responses that Xu Hui says could lead to escalation are identical to the actions that may have initiated a crisis in the first place. Moreover, many of these actions are similar to those advocated as escalation *control* measures in other PLA writings. For example, economic embargos and the various actions listed under “nonviolent military response,” and even some of those categorized as “violent military response,” are discussed in other texts as forms of deterrence, but most of those texts do not note the escalatory potential of these actions. (See the section on deterrence in this report for further discussion of this issue.)

Shenyang MR deputy commander Wang Xixin provides a somewhat similar list of escalatory measures in a crisis. He notes that military actions that may take place as part of “controlled warfare” include deterrence (which roughly corresponds to “nonviolent military actions” in Xu Hui’s table); then “military intervention,” which Wang characterizes as “an escalation of military deterrence” that involves “directly having military power stationed in the region of conflict” through actions such as “seizing a disputed territory and sending troops or establishing military bases”; and finally military strike, which “is the most direct military manifestation of controlled warfare” aimed at “using war to end war” by “prompting [opponents] to return to the negotiating table and return to the peace track.”⁸³

⁸³ Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 64.

Crisis de-escalation (weiji jiangji; 危机降级)

According to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, crisis de-escalation “indicates that the tension of a conflict is decreasing, and that military posture is returning to normal.”⁸⁴ Xu Hui explains that this takes place “when one side in a crisis expresses that it could accept the conditions put forward by the opponent, or the two sides through bargaining reach an agreement to compromise (*tuoxie*; 妥协).”⁸⁵ Xu provides the example of the 1994 nuclear crisis between North Korea and the United States, when “the two sides in the crisis equally recognized that the crisis’s gradual escalation could lead to unbearable risks” and therefore sought negotiations.⁸⁶

Crisis termination (weiji jieshu; 危机结束)

According to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, the crisis termination phase “symbolizes that the tension has ended, although the post-crisis situation may not be the same as the pre-crisis one.”⁸⁷

PLA thinking on specific considerations for when and how to end a crisis is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Military crisis control: Definition and objectives

(junshi weiji kongzhi; 军事危机控制)

The 2007 *PLA Encyclopedia* does not have a separate entry for “military crisis control.” However, it describes the objective of both *non*-military crisis control and armed conflict (i.e., the stages before and after military crisis) as being to minimize the crisis’s negative effects and to prevent escalation to war. If the principles of military crisis control follow this pattern, they should similarly aim at preventing a military crisis from escalating to war.

However, some unofficial definitions of military crisis control assert that gaining advantage should also be an important consideration for military crisis management. Specifically, several PLA texts and teaching materials describe the objective of military crisis control as *maximizing one’s national interests* and *maintaining initiative* over the other side. For example, the 2009 *Science of Military Management*, edited by then AMS deputy commandant LTG Liu Jixian, defines

⁸⁴ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

⁸⁵ Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 204.

“military crisis management” (*junshi weiji guanli*; 军事危机管理) as the “various measures undertaken by a state to *safeguard its interests* from possible or already occurring military crisis.”⁸⁸ Zhao and Zhao of the NDU Crisis Management Center argue even more strongly that controlling a military crisis can also mean turning the situation to one’s advantage:

*Military crisis control and management is based on protecting the fundamental interest of a nation. Its objective is to strive to ensure initiative in crisis management. Domestic and international resources are mobilized to minimize the occurrence, development and escalation of unfavorable crises. ... In addition, effort will be made to turn this crisis into an opportunity to further expand national interests.*⁸⁹ (Emphasis added.)

If Chinese strategists follow these recommendations, then in a crisis they could undertake undefined measures to protect or expand China’s national interests that, in others’ eyes, would seem escalatory. The stated goal in the Zhao and Zhao quote is only to avoid the escalation of “unfavorable crises,” not all crises. This has potentially troubling implications for observers seeking to de-escalate a crisis with China. In Chapter 4, we examine PLA views on seeking opportunity in crisis, and the potential implications for escalation control, in greater detail.

Armed conflict

(*wuzhuang chongtu*; 武装冲突)

Definition

“Armed conflict” resides on the continuum of conflict in the nebulous middle category between peace and war. It involves direct military confrontations, but these are not viewed as constituting acts of war.

The *PLA Encyclopedia* defines “armed conflict control” as “a low-intensity military confrontation between armed forces.”⁹⁰ Zhao and Zhao describe armed conflict as a

⁸⁸ Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, p. 320.

⁸⁹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69; see also p. 65.

⁹⁰ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

“high-intensity military crisis” that “is a *last juncture* before a crisis is turned into a war.”⁹¹ (Emphasis added.)

Armed conflict control: Definition and objectives

(*wuzhuang chongtu kongzhi*; 武装冲突控制)

According to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, armed conflict control is “the actions seeking to monitor or limit a low-intensity military confrontation. *The goal is to avoid the expansion and escalation of an armed conflict into war.*”⁹² (Emphasis added) The *PLA Encyclopedia* states further that the most important elements of armed conflict control are to control the conflict’s **objectives, targets of attack, “means and methods,” duration, and geographic scope.**⁹³

Notably, while “armed conflict” is described as a pre-war state, these objectives for control are the same as those described for controlling a local war. (See Chapter 5.)

War

(*zhanzheng*; 战争)

Definition and characteristics

The 2007 *PLA Encyclopedia* defines “war” as “armed struggle carried out between countries, political groups, or ethnic groups for the sake of certain political,

⁹¹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64.

⁹² *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

⁹³ Specifically, the *Encyclopedia* says: “In an armed conflict, it is prohibited to use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons of mass destruction, and it is especially prohibited to be the first to use weapons of mass destruction; it is prohibited to choose inhumane combat tools that deviate from the political objectives of the armed conflict; it is prohibited to use the operational methods of indiscriminately attacking people, areas and material objects; it is prohibited to use operational methods that deliberately manipulate natural processes and alter the earth or outer space (such as the lithosphere, ground water and outer space) and destroy the ecological balance.” *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

economic, or other goals.”⁹⁴ According to Liu Xiaoli, the objective of all war operations is to “strip the other side of its ability to resist.”⁹⁵

In Chapter 2 we briefly described the characteristics of “total war” and “local war.” As noted there, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* differentiates the two types of war by their *targets*, their *scope*, and their *objective*. To remind, the *SMS* differentiates them as follows:

- The “total wars” of the past aimed at total annihilation of the adversary’s fighting capacity and the takeover of the adversary’s economy and territory, and hence warfighting involved “large-scale warfare” and “mass destruction,” “attacking cities and invading territory,” and an “either you die or I do” attitude.⁹⁶
- By contrast, a “local war” is “a kind of limited war” that “by nature is the controlled use of military force to achieve a limited strategic goal.”⁹⁷ In other words, both the ends sought and the means used to achieve them are more controlled and limited than in total warfare.

The actual conduct of the war is referred to as the “war situation” (*zhanju*; 战局), which the *PLA Encyclopedia* describes as

A state of war between two adversaries within a certain time and period, consisting of a series of engagements in the overall situation of the war or in a certain war zone. Also indicates a series of campaigns and military operations undertaken in a certain time and within a certain space to achieve strategic goals according to a unified strategic plan.⁹⁸

War situation control: Definition and objectives

(*zhanju kongzhi*; 战局控制)

Once a conflict has escalated to war, measures taken to control its direction are called “war situation control.”

⁹⁴ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 11.

⁹⁵ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 122.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁹⁸ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 193.

War situation control involves simultaneously controlling and dominating all elements of the war's prosecution. The *PLA Encyclopedia* defines “war situation control” as “the active monitoring, controlling and limiting actions directed at a war’s situation,” from the beginning to the end of the war.⁹⁹ A group of authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy define the term as “the use of various, mostly military, means to control and dominate” the war situation, and say that it involves “the moderated use of armed force.”¹⁰⁰ The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states that war situation control—similar to armed conflict control—implies “being able to control the objectives, means, scale, phases, duration, and scope of a war.”¹⁰¹ The *PLA Encyclopedia* adds that war situation control includes control of “tangible land, sea, air and space battlefields” and of “intangible electromagnetic and cyber battlefields.”¹⁰²

The objective of war situation control is to seize the initiative and win the war. In contrast to earlier stages of conflict, where the objective of control is often to prevent escalation, the goal of war situation control, according to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, is to “seize the initiative in order to guide war to a victory, as well as to seize the initiative as quickly as possible during disadvantageous situations.”¹⁰³ Three authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy say that the objective of war situation control is to “dominate the enemy”; the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* adds that war situation control aims to “achieve a beneficial conclusion to a war for a relatively low cost.”¹⁰⁴

The emphasis on a “relatively low cost” points to the fact that even when seeking to win a war, there is a desire to limit damage to both sides as much as possible. LTG Liu Shenyang, deputy commander of the Jinan Military Region, writes that when practicing war situation control, “we should prevent the unrestricted escalation of armed conflict or local war by guiding combat back on track to seek a political solution.”¹⁰⁵ If war is unavoidable, “we should strive to achieve the political objectives [of a conflict] using a relatively low intensity and rather small scale war activities.”¹⁰⁶ The principles of war termination are discussed further in Chapter 6 of this study.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁰⁰ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” pp. 24, 25.

¹⁰¹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115.

¹⁰² *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 207.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 28; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Looking ahead

In the next two chapters, we discuss some of the key principles that PLA writings identify for controlling crisis, conflict, and war.

We have opted to divide our analysis of Chinese approaches to war control into those that focus on control before fighting has broken out (i.e., what we call pre-kinetic situations), and those that focus on controlling a situation where fighting has broken out (i.e., kinetic conflict).¹⁰⁷ Broadly speaking, this puts what the Chinese label “crisis” and “military crisis” into the pre-kinetic stages, and “armed conflict” and “war” into kinetic stages.

In Chapter 4, we examine Chinese writings on control in the pre-kinetic stages; in Chapter 5, we examine those on controlling kinetic conflict. In Chapter 6, we provide a broad overview of principles presented in Chinese writings for conflict termination.

¹⁰⁷ A reviewer of this study has pointed out that the terms “pre-kinetic” and “kinetic” to denote stages of crisis and conflict are, at best, inexact, as they do not precisely capture the critical distinction between non-lethal and lethal use of force. For example, a water cannon is technically kinetic but non-lethal, whereas a high-energy laser can be lethal but could be considered non-kinetic. We appreciate this distinction. Given the common use within the U.S. strategic community of the terms “pre-kinetic” and “kinetic” to describe states of conflict, however, we have opted to retain these terms in this report.

Chapter 4: Principles of pre-kinetic crisis control

In this chapter we identify guidelines that are presented in PLA writings for controlling pre-kinetic states of tension and crisis, with a focus on situations where military assets are in some way involved (i.e., a military crisis).

PLA writings portray prior planning as a key component of crisis response

Chinese writings assert that crises can be anticipated and planned for. Several of the PLA texts we examined assert that because military crises are often the result of “long-simmering tensions,” it is often possible to predict that a crisis will emerge out of a particular situation.¹⁰⁸

In this view, a country’s ability to respond quickly and decisively to a crisis depends largely on having planned for it. Many PLA texts argue that military strategists need to observe a situation very carefully in order to accurately forecast the likelihood and nature of a crisis, and to plan an appropriate response.¹⁰⁹ In the 2009 *Science of Military Management*, for example, author Liu Jixuan writes that planners need to

¹⁰⁸ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64. Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114, states that “the appearance of crises is sudden, but the roots of crises are long term contradictions” that can be foreseen and mitigated. See also Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 25; Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, pp. 318-320.

¹⁰⁹ For example, the *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206, says, “Scientifically calculate the circumstances of a crisis, accurately determine the possibilities and nature of an outbreak of a conflict, always be on alert, and provide against possible trouble.” See also Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 65, who says that it is important to “provide scientific warning of possible crisis” and “establish early warning critical indicators.” This is similar to the basic approach to crisis that Henley described in 2006: “[According to Chinese writings,] effective crisis management depends a great deal on whether the crisis has been foreseen and analyzed in advance, as well as the effectiveness of crisis management leadership structures. Anticipating crises, thinking through the causes and possible responses before they occur, and having appropriate resources at the ready are the key to gaining control and maintaining the initiative.” Henley, “War Control,” pp. 83-84.

“strengthen [their] crisis mentality and firmly establish an outlook of ‘preparedness averts peril.’”¹¹⁰

Preparation: The cornerstone of China’s emergency planning

The emphasis on “preparedness” is embodied in China’s extensive emergency management system. Beginning in the early 2000s, China’s civilian government began an ambitious effort to formulate a nationwide system of emergency planning and response. This effort culminated in 2006 in the creation of a system of emergency plans that in total comprises hundreds of plans for use at multiple levels of government, from local jurisdictions all the way up to the central government in Beijing.

Prior research has shown that these plans, which are linked to China’s national defense mobilization system, are formulated with the expectation that having the plans in place will enable Chinese authorities to quickly mobilize the appropriate authorities and assets for emergencies ranging from natural disasters, to social disturbances, to foreign military incursions into Chinese-claimed territory.¹¹¹ Chinese emergency plans emphasize the importance of preventing incidents and otherwise heading off potential crises before they occur. Many emergency plans have a section on the importance of keeping abreast of local developments. They dictate that even during periods of relative calm, local and provincial governments are expected to actively monitor events within their jurisdiction. Once they get word of a possible emergency or crisis, the local governments are expected to collect and evaluate all available information about the impending incident, and assess the degree of harm the incident may cause, in order to determine who should respond to it and how.¹¹²

From the standpoint of escalation control, these practices are important for two reasons. First, since PRC emergency plans lay out clear thresholds for classifying the severity of an incident (according to, for example, the number of casualties or the amount of economic loss), they may help outside observers ascertain which level of the Chinese government and/or military could be called upon to handle a specific crisis. Second, **these practices raise questions about how the Chinese would respond to a situation that they have *not* planned for.**

¹¹⁰ Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, p. 330.

¹¹¹ Catherine Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China,” in Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, eds., *The People’s Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), pp. 85-105; “People’s Republic of China National Defense Mobilization Law” (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guofang dongyuanfa*; 中华人民共和国国防动员法), Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China website, Feb. 26, 2010, accessed Feb. 21, 2012, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/policy/2010-02/27/content_4127067.htm.

¹¹² Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China.”

PLA texts assert that accurate, timely information collection is critical for crisis control

Once a crisis has broken out, say many of the texts we examine, planners must immediately arm themselves with excellent information about its precise nature. This information will, in turn, allow authorities to determine which emergency measures should be activated and who should carry them out.¹¹⁴

“Determination of its nature is a critical step in controlling and managing a military crisis.”¹¹³

—PRC NDU analysts

According to PLA writings, essential information includes: (1) the nature of the crisis; (2) the severity of the crisis; and (3) the opponent’s intentions. We discuss these further in the following sub-sections.

Understand the nature and severity of the situation

As noted in the previous section, prior CNA research has shown that one of the first things Chinese emergency managers are supposed to do in a crisis is determine its character and severity.¹¹⁵ This principle is echoed in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, which says that one should “uphold in managing classification, carry out policies according to the situation. Differentiate the characteristics and degree of crises.”¹¹⁶

The following are specific types of information that Chinese planners might look for in order to determine how to respond to a crisis:

¹¹³ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67.

¹¹⁴ The link between information gathering and rapid response is drawn by Lin Yi of the GSD, who notes: “Before a crisis breaks out, [decision-makers should] keenly observe the ‘omens’ of a crisis. As soon as a crisis is generating, immediately take steps and launch crisis response organizations in a timely fashion.” Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 17. Another author similarly promotes “active early warning, rapid response” to a crisis. Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, p. 328.

¹¹⁵ Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China.”

¹¹⁶ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 114.

- The “type” of crisis—in particular, whether it is related to natural disasters, “accidents” (e.g., environmental or industrial accidents), public health, or social stability
- Whether the crisis was accidental or deliberate
- The severity of the crisis, as measured with regard to variables such as economic loss, human casualties, environmental damage, and other factors
- Other factors, including whether foreigners were involved.¹¹⁷

Depending on how these questions are answered, different parts and levels of China’s emergency management and defense mobilization systems may be called upon to respond.

Understand your opponent’s intentions

PLA writings also stress the importance of understanding the other side’s intentions in order to determine how to control a crisis. According to these texts, there are two types of military crisis that should be relatively easy to control *if* intentions are properly understood: (1) military crisis that arises from an accident rather than from deliberate, strategic actions; and (2) military crisis that neither side intends to be the first step toward war.¹¹⁹

Several of the post-2008 texts we examined acknowledge the possibility that a crisis may emerge accidentally. Lin Yi of the PLA’s General Staff Department (GSD) notes, for instance, that “military crises are often accidental, and the time for managing them is urgent as their transformation [i.e. escalating to a more intense form of crisis] is unpredictable.”¹²⁰

An article by a researcher at the civilian China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations notes that the close proximity of many countries’ military

“In determining the nature of a crisis, we should focus on careful logical reasoning and capture details to grasp the true intent of our opponent. We should avoid being subjectively judgmental to treat an isolated incident as a premeditated plan.”¹¹⁸

—PRC NDU analysts

¹¹⁷ Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China”; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67.

¹¹⁸ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹²⁰ Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 17.

vessels and personnel in the Asia-Pacific can lead to accidental encounters that are not intended to foment a crisis.¹²¹

Zhao and Zhao of NDU refer to such incidents as “quasi-crises,” a type of “sporadically induced military crisis” in which “there is no intent by either party to manufacture a crisis.”¹²² They argue further that **an accidental crisis should be fairly easy to control**. In this view, since neither side intends to escalate the situation, they should be able to resolve the situation through clear communication of their intentions. Hence, Zhao and Zhao assert that accidental crises tend to be “low-intensity” and “will not lead to serious military confrontation between the two parties. The level of military confrontation is relatively low, and there is very little effect on relations between states.”¹²³

By contrast, they argue, higher-intensity military crises are usually “actively manufactured” by one side in order to achieve certain political or military objectives. For example, a military may create a crisis for the sake of either deterring the other side or using the crisis as “an excuse to go to war.”¹²⁴ Thus, assert Zhao and Zhao,

Whether military crisis is controllable hinges on political decisions. If a crisis is not directed toward war, various parties involved in a crisis can still find a point of balance through bargaining. A compromise can be reached to control and manage the crisis.¹²⁵

It is not clear from our research whether this represents a mainstream view. As we noted in Chapter 2, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* acknowledges the possibility that serious conflict may erupt from the mishandling of a crisis. Other PLA writings note that if bilateral relations are already tense, and if the other side’s intentions are not immediately apparent, it can be easy to assume the worst—and thus unintentionally escalate a situation. Therefore, they say, clear communication of intentions is essential in order to avoid accidental escalation.¹²⁶ However, at least some texts also imply that even accidental crises are potentially very risky if not dealt with quickly.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Zhang Wenzhong, “How Can the U.S., China, and Neighboring East Asian Countries Positively Interact?” p. 10.

¹²² Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹²⁶ For example, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 205.

¹²⁷ Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 17.

When in doubt, seek better information on the opponent's intentions

If one assumes that war can erupt from unintentional crisis, the stakes become very high for determining whether one is indeed facing such a crisis. Several PLA texts therefore advocate taking actions to determine the opponent's intentions if they are not obvious.¹²⁸ For example, in an NDU training text, Xu Hui says that each side “will try their best to collect wide-ranging information, [and] analyze the important signals that the opponent is sending out.”¹²⁹ This may include information about the other's “intentions, capabilities, and determination ... the opponent's orientation toward using armed force or diplomatic methods, [its] relative military superiority,” and the likelihood that the opponent will seek “compromise or concession” versus having an “attitude of obstinate persistence.”¹³⁰

Some exploratory actions could involve military activities. Of note, Zhao and Zhao argue that these exploratory activities could include “limited military action to clarify the situation by finding the bottom line of the opponent.”¹³¹ In other words, in a crisis a country may engage in limited military action even if it is trying to avoid an actual war.

It is unclear whether Zhao and Zhao would view such military action as escalatory, since they do not raise the question themselves. Only a handful of the texts that we examined acknowledge that such activities could have a negative effect on the overall outcome.

PLA writings say that it is critical to respond to crisis proactively, rapidly, and decisively

PLA texts assert that crisis decision-making is inherently different from peacetime decision-making. Several PLA texts note that crises by nature take place on a compressed time scale, with the implication that “decision processes must be shortened and response speed must be improved so that we will not be helpless or

¹²⁸ For example, Xu Hui says that “in the initial period of a crisis breakout, [if] both sides' mutual actions appear to go beyond the conditions of ‘low level tensions’ of normal relations, each side in the crisis will tend to choose certain exploratory actions, in order to further clarify the opponent's intentions, capabilities, and determination.” Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 11.

¹²⁹ Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 12.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 70.

react inappropriately in crisis handling.”¹³² Lin Yi of the GSD adds that in a crisis, “decision methods must change from peacetime’s ‘democratic decision making’ to crisis’s ‘authoritative decision making.’”¹³³

Multiple PLA writings argue, consequently, that **crisis decision-makers must be proactive and rapid in their response to a crisis situation.**¹³⁴ Their ability to do so in turn relies on the anticipation and planning discussed earlier. Several of the texts we examined argue that if parties to a crisis act “passively” (*beidong*; 被动) when it first arises—that is, if they do not work assiduously and quickly to recognize and control the situation—the situation is more likely to escalate.¹³⁵

“The best strategy [for handling a military crisis] is to anticipate ahead of time, be proactive and gain control over the entire process. The worst strategy is to be late in anticipation, be passive and react in phases.”¹³⁶

—LTG Liu Shenyang, Deputy Commander of Jinan MR

These writings also associate rapid response with the need to “seize the initiative,” which in Chinese strategic writings is a crucial element of positioning oneself to the advantage in crisis or war.¹³⁷ (This topic is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 of this study.)

Combined with an emphasis on limited military action to clarify the situation, this desire to respond rapidly and proactively carries some worrying implications. While the PLA writings we examined suggest that “exploratory” military actions should be aimed at preventing escalation to war, one can envision a situation where the PLA takes what it intends to be a limited military action in a state of pre-war, but an adversary assumes that it is the beginning of a large-scale attack.

¹³² Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 6; Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, pp. 12-13.

¹³³ Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 18.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*; Liu Jixuan, ed., *Science of Military Management*, p. 328.

¹³⁵ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 113; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 64.

¹³⁶ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4.

¹³⁷ For example, Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 65.

Some PLA writings depict crisis as an opportunity for gain

PLA writings advocate avoiding crisis if possible, but many of them also view some crises as potential opportunities to be taken advantage of if they do arise. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, for example, states:

A crisis has risks, but is also an opportunity to resolve contradictions and problems. ... When there is no incident, do not cause trouble, [but] when an incident arises do not be afraid. Strive to turn bad incidents into good incidents. Make use of a crisis situation to capture an opportunity and *carry out strategic actions that would normally be hard to resolve*. Make the situation beneficial to one's own development.¹³⁸ (Emphasis added.)

The relationship between crisis and opportunity is not just a vague linguistic formulation. Many PLA writings are specific about the types of gain they have in mind. These texts provide concrete examples of past situations to argue that correct handling of a crisis may provide decision-makers with an opportunity to “solve problems that are hard to deal with under normal circumstances”—either domestic or international.¹³⁹ For example, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* argues that, when Mao Zedong invaded Tibet to prevent its independence in 1959, he was able at the same time to “move the Tibetan reform plan originally scheduled for 1963 earlier, thereby eliminating the Tibetan serfdom system.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, leaders may use a crisis situation as an opportunity to further other political or economic goals that have previously seemed out of reach or especially costly.

A critical question is whether this formulation might lead some PRC or PLA leaders to advocate fomenting a crisis, based on the assumption that they could control the situation, in order to attain other goals. One text we looked at, by Zhao and Zhao of the NDU Crisis Management Center, argues that leaders should

¹³⁸ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 16, 115. See also a 2012 article by Lin Yi of the GSD, which says that in the event of a crisis, one should “grasp opportunities within the crisis, seize fleeting beneficial opportunities, quickly create beneficial conditions, generate opportunities, change danger into opportunity, transform the crisis into a benefit for oneself; as the circumstances allow, use the crisis to release contradictions, use crises to respond to crises, use small crises to avoid big crises, use crises to avoid wars, and other such strategies.” Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 18.

¹³⁹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 70.

¹⁴⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115.

sometimes “take some active actions to plan, guide and shape a crisis in order to realize a specific strategic objective.” Alarmingly, they say that this includes:

Take the initiative to challenge a larger opponent just like David vs. Goliath. Proactively provoke a conflict to ... turn the unfavorable situation around. ... Take the initiative to provoke a small conflict ... in order to prevent the onset of a larger crisis in future.¹⁴¹

We were unable to determine how widespread this sentiment is. Zhao and Zhao may be more extreme examples, but the basic sentiment that crisis presents opportunity appears to be mainstream thinking. Notably, these authors do *not* indicate how they think such actions would be interpreted by others.

“While military crisis brings on pressure and threat, it also provides an opportunity to attain more interest. In some sense, the risk associated with a military crisis is proportional to the opportunity it offers. Large risk is accompanied with great opportunity. If a crisis is controlled and managed well, it can produce a profound positive effect. Not only can tension between countries be relieved, a strategic interactive mode with the opponent can also be shaped. We can also take advantage of the situation to secure more of our interests, to establish a new strategic balance, and to maintain peace for a longer period of time.”¹⁴²

—PRC NDU analysts

PLA writings state a preference for using non-military approaches to resolve a crisis

As noted in Chapter 3, the use of military force in a crisis already represents an escalation. Several PLA writings therefore argue that, if possible, a crisis should be resolved through non-military approaches. Indeed, according to Zhang Tuosheng of CFISS, the preference for non-military approaches to conflict resolution has characterized China’s approach to crisis management since the beginning of the 21st century. Zhang asserts that since the early 2000s, “China has begun to use non-military measures, such as diplomacy ... more frequently to send warning signals.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 70.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China’s Behaviors in International Military Security Crises,” p. 118. Zhao and Zhao also note the importance of “peaceful measures” such as “consultation and negotiation.” Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69.

GSD-affiliated author Lin Yi notes, further, that even in a military crisis—that is, one that has already escalated to use of military assets—both sides should strive to resolve the situation through “diplomatic methods including heads of state diplomacy, government diplomacy, diplomacy between the people, information channels, ultimatums,” and negotiation, as well as “economic methods” and “media methods.”¹⁴⁴ Zhao and Zhao add that “in special circumstances, appropriate use of military force can produce a decisive effect. Nonetheless, generally speaking in the majority of crises military means [should] play a supporting role.”¹⁴⁵

Several texts also address forms of “coercive” (*qiangzhixing*; 强制性) crisis control, including embargoes, sanctions, and blockades.¹⁴⁶ **Notably, a handful of texts warn that such measures may carry the risk of escalation:** as the *PLA Encyclopedia* puts it, they can could easily “intensify a contradiction and bring about crisis escalation.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, even these non-violent forms of coercive diplomacy “should be cautiously used” in order to “avoid initiating a chain reaction or forcing our opponent into a corner.”¹⁴⁸

PLA texts state that a country should not hesitate to deter through military force if there is no other way to control a crisis

Despite this stated preference for non-military solutions to crisis control, PLA writings also argue that some crises can *only* be controlled through military actions that deter and intimidate the opponent.¹⁴⁹ We refer to such actions here as military deterrence (*junshi weishe*; 军事威慑). The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, for

¹⁴⁴ Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69.

¹⁴⁶ For example, Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, pp. 205-206.

¹⁴⁷ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 205. This wording is essentially identical to that in Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English language edition)*, 2005, p. 206.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 69.

¹⁴⁹ Henley made a similar point, saying that in Chinese views, “good crisis management does not preclude the use of military force. In fact, ostentatious force deployments may be a key part of” Chinese perception management in a crisis. Henley, “War Control,” p. 83.

example, states that “military deterrence is regarded as an important means for containing war (*e'zhi zhanzheng*; 遏制战争) and safeguarding peace.”¹⁵⁰

Translating 威慑 as “deterrence”

Previous analyses have pointed out that Chinese concepts of deterrence (*weishe*; 威) include a strong element of compellence and coercion as well, in that the goals of Chinese deterrence may include intimidating the opponent through economic, diplomatic, or military coercion in a way that “directly affect[s] an opponent’s interests in order to compel him to submit to Beijing’s will.”¹⁵¹ The 2001 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* highlights the dual nature of the concept when it defines “strategic deterrence” as “a military strategy [in which one] displays or threatens to use force in order to *compel* (*poshi*; 迫使) the adversary to yield.”¹⁵² (Emphasis added.) This creates a dilemma for someone seeking to translate 威慑 in a way that captures the nuances of the term. For the sake of readability, in this study we have opted to translate it simply as “deterrence,” but we urge readers to also keep in mind the more coercive aspect of the term.

According to PLA authors, effective military deterrence demonstrates both the capability and the will to use violence—thus potentially raising the cost of the crisis to the opponent and making it more likely that the opponent will seek compromise and/or de-escalation. Hence, as the author of the *Science of Military Strategy* writes, “Compared to verbal threats, military forces more believably reveal the embodiment of the threat.”¹⁵³

If the Chinese follow their own logic in these texts, **the need to demonstrate credible deterrence may act as a justification for both enhancing and using their combat capabilities.** The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* notes, for example, that “[deterrent] violence must be based upon the foundation of relevant actual strength,

¹⁵⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 134.

¹⁵¹ Mark A. Stokes, “The Chinese Joint Aerospace Campaign: Strategy, Doctrine, and Force Modernization,” in James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein, eds., *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2005), pp. 226-227. See also Roger Cliff et al., *Shaking the Heavens and Splitting the Earth: Chinese Air Force Employment Concepts in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 43; and M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, “China’s Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure,” *International Security* 35, 2 (2011): 71.

¹⁵² Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2001, p. 230

¹⁵³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 135.

or it will be very hard to make an opponent believe you.”¹⁵⁴ The author goes on to explain that for military deterrence to be credible, it must be based on

real war capability. The composition of deterrent forces and of combat forces have no real differences Only by rapidly raising the real war capability to win local wars under informatized conditions will we be able to have a fully capable foundation for carrying out strategic deterrence.¹⁵⁵

Chinese authors suggest that a country may demonstrate credible deterrence through activities such as

- displays of force (e.g., exercises);¹⁵⁶
- mobilization of troops and deployment of combat units;¹⁵⁷
- reconnaissance or surveillance activities or patrols;
- “initiating exchanges of foreign military personnel”;¹⁵⁸
- military alliances;¹⁵⁹ and
- “limited operational actions,”¹⁶⁰ which might include “military blockade” and “military attack.”¹⁶¹

Many of these activities are non-violent and fairly routine. For example, several works from the mid-2000s by PLA writers concerning aerospace activities advocated the use

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 135, 147.

¹⁵⁶ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67; Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China's Behaviors in International Military Security Crises,” p. 117; Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 211. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* says that “key military deterrence activities include: nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence, space deterrence, cyberspace deterrence, and integrated conventional-nuclear submarine deterrence (*hechang yiti weishi*, 核常一体威慑).” Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 100, 138-139.

¹⁵⁷ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67; Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China's Behaviors in International Military Security Crises,” p. 117.

¹⁵⁸ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67.

¹⁶⁰ Zhang Tuosheng, “A Study of China's Behaviors in International Military Security Crises,” p. 117.

¹⁶¹ Lin Yi, “Historical Review of Studies of Military Crisis Management in China and Foreign Countries,” p. 18.

of relatively low intensity deterrence activities, such as publicizing air and space force buildup; carrying out visible and realistic testing, training, and exercises; and testing weapons as a way of signaling credible capability and will.¹⁶²

Other recommended deterrent actions, however, are more threatening. These could include mobilization, deployment, and intrusive reconnaissance or surveillance activities and patrols.¹⁶³ The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* says that it is important to “not be afraid to (*ganyu*; 敢于) use military deterrence methods, particularly in space, network and other new domains of struggle, to smash the enemy’s warfighting command systems.”¹⁶⁴ **Any of these could be perceived by an opponent as escalatory if initiated during a crisis—even if the PLA does not intend them to be perceived as such.**

Most notably, **some PLA authors advocate using kinetic actions to control a crisis.** “Military attack,” included in the list above, by definition involves kinetic strikes. This recommendation appears in other texts as well. For example, Liu Xiaoli describes a hypothetical situation in which a foreign vessel has entered China’s exclusive economic zone and resists inspection by Chinese maritime surveillance vessel. Under such circumstances, writes Liu,

our surface vessels can decisively fire warning shots and other such warning and enforcement measures to force the vessel to accept inspection. If the vessel still resists after warning shots have been fired, China can, according to the situation, fire damaging shots at the vessel and make it aware of the dangerousness of disobeying orders so it will abandon its resistance.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, according to these writings, **combat may itself serve as a form of deterrence.** Following the logic discussed in Chapter 3 of this study, there are points on the continuum of conflict where a military may simultaneously seek to limit the situation’s escalation and to prepare to win should the situation escalate anyway. These dual objectives are summarized in a commentary on deterrence by Zhao and Zhao at the NDU Crisis Management Center. They explain that in a crisis situation,

¹⁶² Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Study of Integrated Aerospace Operations (Kongtian yiti zuozhan xue; 空天一体作战学)* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2006), pp. 133, 289-290; Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Aerospace Battlefield and China’s Air Force (Hangtian zhanchang yu zhongguo kongjun; 航天战场与中国空军)* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2004), pp. 148, 151; Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Operations (Kongtian yiti zuozhan yanjiu; 空天一体作战研究)* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2006), pp. 127-129.

¹⁶³ Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Study of Integrated Aerospace Operations*, pp. 289-290; Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Aerospace Battlefield and China’s Air Force*, pp. 148-149; Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Operations*, pp. 126, 130-132.

¹⁶⁴ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 129.

¹⁶⁵ Liu Xiaoli, *Military Response to Significant Sudden Incidents and Crises*, p. 205.

“the objective of military deterrence is to *contain the crisis or to limit its escalation*. But in the event that deterrence fails ... actual combat may take place to further deter the enemy. *A small battle may be waged to stop a large war*, or to keep a confrontation from escalating any further.”¹⁶⁶ (Emphasis added.) **The authors thus advocate escalating a situation with the end goal of de-escalating it.**

Deterrence continues during warfare

Many PLA writings note that it is also important to deter an opponent from escalating a conflict while that conflict is ongoing. For example, the *PLA Encyclopedia* calls upon the PLA to “emphasize the use of military deterrence to control the war situation.”¹⁶⁷ Some note that psychological warfare against the enemy’s civilian population during a war can help provide effective deterrence.¹⁶⁸

Do PLA writings acknowledge that deterrence can lead to escalation?

A small number of the texts we examined acknowledge that the use of military deterrence carries some risk of uncontrolled escalation. For example, writing in a monthly journal of the AMS, Xu Xin and Cheng Xiaodong of the NDU state that “military action possesses a dual nature,” such that using it “too lightly or excessively will invariably ... stand in the way of bringing the crisis under control.” They add that in a crisis situation, troop deployment should be scaled appropriately and troops should be kept at a distance from one another “to avoid any direct contact” in order to prevent “conflicts [that arise] by accident.”¹⁶⁹

The question of whether PLA authors recognize the escalatory potential of deterrent activities was also a concern for earlier analysts. For example, Henley noted in 2006:

Large troop movements, mobilization of strategic nuclear forces, and other apparently threatening actions are likely in any serious crisis,

¹⁶⁶ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 208. See also Liu Shenyang, who writes that “normal deterrence” (*changtaihua weishe*; 常态化威慑) is an effective means and “primary action” for preventing escalation during a conflict. Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 6.

¹⁶⁸ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 129, 208; Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 28.

¹⁶⁹ Xu Xin and Cheng Xiaodong, “Research on the Issue of Military Crisis Control Actions and Methods” (*Junshi weiji kongzhi xingdong yu fangfa wenti yanjiu*; 军事危机控制行动与方法问题研究), *National Defense (Guofang)* (国防), 2007, 9: 27-30.

whether or not Beijing intends to attack. ... Significantly, such movements are among the few visible indicators American and Taiwan intelligence can use for warning of attack, but the war control literature suggests they may provide little insight into China's real intentions.¹⁷⁰

The fact that there is some implicit and explicit discussion on this issue in more recent PLA texts appears to reflect a degree of evolution. Still, the issue was not raised very robustly or at length in the writings we examined, and should remain a point of concern.

PLA writings emphasize the importance of communication for crisis management

Many of the PLA writings we examined highlighted the critical role of communication and signaling between the various parties to a crisis. They assert that successful communication is critical for ensuring that each side's messages are received in the manner in which they are intended. Such signaling may be aimed at *reassuring* an opponent of benign intentions, or at *detering* the opponent. In both cases, PLA texts say, clarity is important in order to avoid misinterpretation that could lead to inadvertent escalation.¹⁷¹

With regard to reassurance, PLA texts say that good communication can clarify each side's intentions in undertaking routine military activities so that they are not misinterpreted. Hence, the 2007 *PLA Encyclopedia* asserts that crisis control measures should include confidence building measures such as:

Publicizing diplomatic policies, military strategies and defense capabilities based on voluntary and non-threatening national security interests, [and] ... selectively informing the relevant countries of major military activities, military build-ups or reductions, putting units on alert and making adjustments to deployments.¹⁷²

With regard to *deterrence*, on the other hand, the message one seeks to convey is that one has the capability and resolve to continue or escalate a conflict. For example, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states: "The main components of the content of information are the target objective, the possible measures to be undertaken, and the

¹⁷⁰ Henley, "War Control," p. 93.

¹⁷¹ For example, Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, "On Control and Management of Military Crises," p. 66.

¹⁷² *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, "Military Strategy," p. 205.

resolution to fulfill the threat Among these, the resolution to fulfill the threat is the core part of information about deterrence.”¹⁷³

That said, Zhao and Zhao of NDU note that effective crisis management also requires a degree of opacity. This article argues that it is essential in a crisis to

delicately conceal the relation between our intent and the information we try to communicate. In order to maintain effective communication, information must be kept transparent to some extent. However, *we should not reveal everything just for the sake of avoiding misreading*. Therefore, both strategy and art need to be emphasized in information communication. Its release method, channel, timing and degree should be delicately designed in advance.¹⁷⁴ (Emphasis added.)

This raises obvious questions about how much trust each side in a crisis can and should place in the overt signals being delivered by the other.

¹⁷³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 136-137.

¹⁷⁴ Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” p. 66.

Chapter 5: Principles of kinetic conflict control

In this chapter, we examine PLA writings on controlling escalation after a crisis has entered a kinetic phase. On the “continuum of conflict” described in Chapter 3, kinetic conflict characterizes the stages of armed conflict and war. PLA writings discuss several principles related to controlling kinetic conflict. Of note, they also highlight many of the same principles as were used for controlling pre-kinetic conflict (e.g., prepare fully, practice deterrence, and so on). In this regard, we may think of the principles of *kinetic* conflict control as a more specialized sub-set of overall principles for crisis and conflict control.

PLA writings assert that it is critical to limit a war’s objectives

PLA writings on local informatized war emphasize that a key aspect of controlling that type of war is limiting its objectives. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* characterizes local warfare as, by definition, having “limited political objectives, limited military objectives, and limited economic objectives,” so that the principal goal is not to “threaten an opponent’s existence or completely deprive him of his military capabilities, but instead is mainly [to] seek to compel an opponent to compromise.”¹⁷⁵

Several PLA texts stress two critical points about limiting the objectives of war:

- **They say that war planners must place national interests above all else.** The *PLA Encyclopedia*, for example, asserts that “ensuring national interests” must be the “prerequisite” for determining a war’s objectives.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 124. See also Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 25.

¹⁷⁶ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 207. The *Encyclopedia* also asserts that once a war has begun, all combat questions such “to fight or not to fight, to advance or to retreat, and to seize or to abandon [territory] must all regard national interests as the ultimate requirement.” *Ibid.*, p. 208. See also Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 6.

- **They stress that political objectives must be prioritized over military objectives in planning, prosecuting, and controlling a war.** As three authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy put it, “War is the continuation of politics, and controlling the war situation is fundamentally in order to serve politics; its starting point and ending point all should be subordinated to and serve political requirements.”¹⁷⁷

In principle, these points seem obvious: presumably any modern nation waging a war is doing so out of national interest. Why, then, do PLA texts spend a considerable amount of time on this issue? We surmise that the underlying concern in these writings is that military leaders could confuse military victory with strategic victory. These writings would thus be aimed at ensuring that, in a war, military leaders know how political leaders view the situation and understand unambiguously what national interests are at stake.

This in turn puts three burdens on war planners. First, **they must understand the hierarchy of national interests and be aware of the political objectives in the current fight.** Because political objectives are driven by national interests, say PLA texts, they should remain fairly consistent even if the military fight is going well. Hence the *PLA Encyclopedia* admonishes against “expanding or contracting fixed objectives as one pleases.”¹⁷⁸ In a similar vein, the *Science of Military Strategy* states that a country at war must “prevent the mindless expansion of political goals that bring about the escalation of a war.”¹⁷⁹ Again, this puts a high burden of proof on military planners to ensure that their plans are well coordinated with the broader political objectives and national interests of the central government.

Second, military success should be measured against the extent to which it has helped secure the political objectives of the fight. LTG Liu Shenyang, deputy commander of the Jinan Military Region, explains that when a country’s government and military consider going to war, they not only must determine whether a war is “militarily advantageous,” but also should avoid pursuing a military victory that isn’t “within the permitted frame of political objectives.”¹⁸⁰ He asserts: “If the use of military means exceeds the war’s objectives, it could lead to a setback; military objectives are not the equivalent of political objectives Excessive military actions

¹⁷⁷ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 26. See also Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115, which admonishes readers on the necessity of establishing goals for a war that “follow and serve political goals.”

¹⁷⁸ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 207.

¹⁷⁹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 115.

¹⁸⁰ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 5.

could result in political disadvantages and international isolation.”¹⁸¹ Throughout the course of a war, argue Zhang Yu et al. of the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy, decision-makers must thus carefully assess progress on both the political and military fronts, and

should coordinate changes in military objectives and political factors during the course of a war. ... [They] should use politics as a ruler to measure military goals, ... and when discovering that achieving military goals and political objectives are not mutually fitted, then they should promptly revise or adjust the control goals.¹⁸²

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* asserts that there is significant risk in becoming overly focused on the immediate objectives of the war, rather than the broader political concerns: “Insisting on 100 percent achievement of the war’s [military] objectives could get [one] bogged down in the difficult circumstances of continuous employment of armed force, and a situation that is difficult to control.”¹⁸³ The implication is that it may be desirable to cease operations before achieving all of one’s original objectives.

Finally, say PLA writings, **planners must align war objectives with military capabilities**. According to the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, these include both “actual military capabilities,” and “your own side’s war potential and the likelihood of transforming it into actual war strength.” This is important for setting realistic goals for the military fight.¹⁸⁴ One implication is that limited war capabilities would presumably mean very limited war objectives. **This raises the question of whether, if China had improved military capabilities, its leaders would feel capable of controlling more complex war objectives.**

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 2-3, 4. Zhang Yu et al. similarly point out that in a limited war, “the warring sides’ war situation control can’t only consider the success or failure of military battles, but must also tightly revolve around the requirements of national strategic interests, nimbly and moderately using armed force.” Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 25.

¹⁸² Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 26. See also Zhao Ziyu and Zhao Jingfang, “On Control and Management of Military Crises,” pp. 67-68.

¹⁸³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

PLA writings say that conflict control entails controlling the objectives, targets, methods, geographic scope, and duration of a war

PLA writings identify five ways of controlling a war situation: controlling the objectives, the targets, the methods, the geographic scope, and the duration of a war.¹⁸⁵ This is an area where Chinese thinking appears to be rather similar to U.S. thinking. We have already discussed PLA writing on controlling the objectives of a conflict, and we will discuss duration (i.e., when to terminate a conflict) in Chapter 6. Here, we focus on the other three methods of control.

Limit the targets

Several writings assert that in a war, the PLA should concentrate on critical military targets and avoid civilian targets.¹⁸⁶ These stated norms are similar to those of the United States and most of the international community.

These texts say that controlling targets requires not attacking civilians or critical infrastructure, such as nuclear power plants and reservoirs.¹⁸⁷ Instead, according to PLA writings, the focus should be on the “main operational targets” that provide a direct military benefit to the opponent for the current conflict.¹⁸⁸ For example, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states that a military seeking to control the war situation should

mainly strike those targets useful for conducting the war or providing strategic support, such as military and political headquarters, military command and control centers, high-tech weapons bases, and important supply facilities.¹⁸⁹

PLA writings advocate using precision strikes as a form of war situation control. The writings we examined suggest using precision strikes to hit critical enemy targets, rather than indiscriminate attacks. These are apparently viewed as allowing the military in question to either prevent or control escalation of the conflict. For

¹⁸⁵ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-208; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 123; Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, p. 207.

¹⁸⁷ For example, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

¹⁸⁹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 123.

example, some PLA analysts in the mid-2000s advocated using precision first-strike attacks in the air, space, and information domains in order to deter or intimidate opponents.¹⁹⁰ These authors argued that precision strikes would keep the attacks more “limited.” More recently, LTG Liu Shenyang, deputy commander of Jinan MR, noted the importance of controlling the scale of a war through the use of “precision combat actions to strike and break the vital points of an enemy’s combat system.”¹⁹¹

LTG Liu expands upon this concept when he calls for what he refers to as “target-centric warfare” (*mubiao zhongxin zhan*; 目标中心战). According to Liu, target-centric warfare refers to the process of focusing decision-making, combat operations, and war stages on striking “vital points and key nodes” of the enemy’s combat system. Rather than seeking to annihilate all of the enemy’s forces or occupy all of its territory, target-centric warfare stresses controlling a war situation by destroying the enemy’s ability to wage war.¹⁹² The 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* uses an example from the Kosovo war to show what these “vital points and key nodes” might be:

NATO undertook a policy of using an air campaign to gradually escalate, first striking key points of the Yugoslavian military’s air defense system, headquarters, and operational targets which supported the Yugoslavian military and special police units; then striking command, control and communications systems as well as petroleum facilities, roads and bridges; finally striking field units, electrical systems, industrial systems; [and] matching powerful psychological warfare attacks, and through these means it continued escalating deterrence and a degree of real war, compelling Yugoslavia to accept NATO’s conditions for stopping the war.¹⁹³

This example can reasonably be taken as a description of controlled escalation in warfare.

¹⁹⁰ Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Study of Integrated Aerospace Operations*, pp. 289-290; Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Operations*, p. 132; Min Zengfu et al., *The Concept of Air Force Military Thought (Kongjun junshi sixiang gainian; 空军军事思想概念)* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2006), p. 147.

¹⁹¹ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4. See also Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 65, where he writes that “‘pinpoint’ style strikes to the target ... [can] reduce additional destruction and killing, avoid unnecessary damage, and control the scale and intensity of war. At the same time, it has a deterrent effect and achieves the political purpose of war situation control.”

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 7. This author has written an entire article on the topic: Liu Shenyang, “The Theory and Practice of Target-Centric Warfare” (*Mubiao zhongxin zhan de lilun yu shijian; 目标中心战的理论与实践*), *China Military Science (Zhongguo junshi kexue; 中国军事科学)*, Oct. 2013, pp. 83-92.

¹⁹³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 138-139.

Control the methods of warfare

PLA writings state that, if at all possible, you should choose conventional, least-lethal weapons. Some PLA writings discuss the importance of using methods of warfare that limit unnecessary human casualties or suffering. This requires that a military “to the best of its ability” choose conventional weapons rather than weapons of mass destruction (which would represent an escalation beyond local war); avoid “inhumane combat tools that deviate from the political objectives of the armed conflict”; avoid indiscriminate attacks; “respect the laws of war and international treaties”; and “not lightly choose methods or means that could potentially intensify or escalate a war.”¹⁹⁴

Some PLA writings argue that cyber and space attacks are less escalatory methods of warfare than traditional combat operations. Zhang Yu et al. of the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy argue, for example, that cyber and space warfare are less lethal and can help prevent conflict escalation.¹⁹⁵ A similar assertion is found in PLA writings on information and electromagnetic attacks. These writings advocate actions such as conducting electromagnetic “interference, suppression, deception and confusion” attacks against an adversary’s space-, aerial-, land- and sea-based information collection, transmission, and command and control systems.¹⁹⁶

These writings do not address the fact that other countries would likely regard such activities as escalatory. Rather, explains one PLA text, “using this type of ‘soft’ countermeasure incurs smaller cost than using a ‘hard’ kill method ... It will not overly provoke the enemy to cause an all-out conflict or an escalation of war.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” pp. 206, 208; *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 124; Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, p. 207.

¹⁹⁵ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 25.

¹⁹⁶ Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Operations*, p. 132. See also Li Daguang and Wan Shuixian, “The Fundamental Features of Space Control Power Fighting,” *Journal of the Academy of Equipment Command and Technology (Zhuangbei zhihui jishu xueyuan xuebao; 装备指挥技术学院学报)* 14, 6 (Dec. 2003).

¹⁹⁷ Li Daguang and Wan Shuixian, “The Fundamental Features of Space Control Power Fighting.” The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* asserts that using “soft weapons”—again perhaps a reference to cyber operations, psychological operations, and others that minimize immediate human casualties—“better fits China’s peaceful development strategy and the strategic objectives of controlling a war situation.” Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 111.

Control the geographic scope of the war

PLA writings note the importance of not expanding a conflict to a wider geographic area. The *PLA Encyclopedia*, for example, states that when a war breaks out, “efforts should be made in order to limit the geographic scope of the conflict.”¹⁹⁸ Similarly, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states that China “should not seek to cover the entire space of the opponent’s and our national territory, but instead limit [the fighting] to a certain area.”¹⁹⁹

PLA writings emphasize seizing the initiative

PLA writings assert that the single most decisive factor in controlling and winning a war is your side’s ability to seize the initiative. PLA writings stress repeatedly that war preparation must focus on being ready to immediately “seize the war initiative” (*duoqu zhanzheng zhudongquan*; 夺取战争主动权) early in a conflict, and to maintain this initiative throughout.²⁰⁰ Zhang Yu et al. argue that “without battlefield initiative, war situation control would be very difficult to carry out, and war victory would lack [a] reliable guarantee.”²⁰¹

This concern to seize the initiative is consistent with earlier PLA writings. Henley and Morgan et al. both noted the prominence of “seizing the initiative” in the Chinese writings they examined.²⁰² Both also observed that Chinese writings did not appear to acknowledge that seizing the initiative could entail potentially escalatory behavior.²⁰³

In the following sub-sections we discuss several principles related to seizing the initiative in a war situation.

¹⁹⁸ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

¹⁹⁹ *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 124.

²⁰⁰ For example, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206. The *Encyclopedia* also says that the goal of war situation control is to “seize the initiative in order to guide war to a victory, as well as to seize the initiative as quickly as possible during disadvantageous situations.” *Ibid.*, p. 207. See also *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 112, which says that “effectively exerting control is premised upon “gradually seizing the strategic initiative” in a conflict; and Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4.

²⁰¹ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 24.

²⁰² Henley, “War Control,” pp. 90-91; Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 57-58.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

PLA writings say you should not enter a war until you are prepared to win

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* cautions that it is difficult to seize the initiative in war without intensive advance preparation: “The key to modern wars ... is grasping opportunities in war; the more preparation, the more victory.”²⁰⁴ Therefore, it advises against getting involved in a conflict unless one is fully prepared:

Carefully choose the right time to start a war. Resolutely accomplish preparation for war; first be victorious then fight. [PLA General] Su Yu used to repeatedly emphasize that the key to modern wars, especially large-scale joint maritime operations which China is not good at, is to *emphasize operational preparations more than grasping combat opportunities*; the more preparation, the more [likely you are to be] victorious.²⁰⁵ (Emphasis added.)

This includes preparation for escalation: the *PLA Encyclopedia* says, for example, that the PLA should be “amply prepared in case a war escalates. The more fully prepared for the escalation of war, the stronger one’s capabilities to control the war situation, and the smaller the possibility of losing control over the war situation.”²⁰⁶

Undertake pre-war activities to weaken the other side. The *Science of Military Strategy* stresses that pre-war activities are important for preparing to win, especially when fighting a superior opponent.²⁰⁷ The author notes that such activities could include:

- Economic sanctions “to weaken the opponent’s strength”
- “Diplomatic methods to isolate the enemy and cause him to have no way to gain international support, especially weapons and equipment support”
- Psychological warfare to “shake his resolve and divide and demoralize” him
- “Military deterrence methods,” “particularly in the new domains of space and cyber, to smash his warfighting command system.”²⁰⁸

The above list illustrates the types of preparatory activities that might be taken during a state of non-war or quasi-war. As noted in Chapter 3, the fact that some of

²⁰⁴ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 115-116.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 208.

²⁰⁷ *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 129.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

them—particularly the “military deterrence methods”—appear rather aggressive could create problems for outside observers trying to determine whether the PLA thinks it is at war or not. The texts that we reviewed do not address the question of whether these actions could cause the opponent to escalate the situation.

If you are not ready to seize the initiative, delay the opening of the war. PLA texts say that if you are not prepared to win, you should not enter or initiate a war. Hence, for instance, the *Science of Military Strategy* advises, “If [victory] cannot be absolutely seized, do not easily begin an attack, and instead procrastinate.”²⁰⁹ This principle has some critical implications:

- *It implies that one always has a choice about whether to enter a war.* The admonition to not fight until you are ready seems at odds with other PLA writings that acknowledge the possibility of accidental war. It also does not acknowledge the possibility of being invaded by an adversary.
- *It does not specify how one would “procrastinate” against the onset of a war.* What would we expect to see if the PLA were “procrastinating” while readying itself to seize the initiative? In theory, this might include some of the activities undertaken in the “quasi-war” state with the dual purpose of preventing crisis while preparing for war.
- *The PRC and PLA leadership’s confidence in their ability to win a war is presumably a crucial factor in their decisions to enter or exit a conflict.*

PLA writings advocate seizing the initiative early, through rapid, violent, and possibly pre-emptive attack

Once a war has broken out, PLA writings stress, a military should strive to seize the battlefield initiative as quickly as possible or risk losing control of the war. Zhang Yu et al. say, for example, that a military must “focus on establishing favorable conditions in the opening of the war” and “dominate the enemy by seizing the earliest moment of opportunity” and “conquering the enemy in early battles.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115-116.

²¹⁰ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 24. See also Morgan et al., who drew on earlier Chinese writings to note that those texts “specify a series of steps to achieve and maintain initiative, including rapid reaction to incipient crises, quick deployments, strong standing forces, solid contingency planning, rapid mobilization of societal forces, a resolute political stance, rapid generation to wartime postures, and avoiding outside intervention and the internationalization of the situation.” Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p. 57.

Seizing the initiative appears to mean undertaking a rapid and violent attack. The texts we examined say that this mandate to seize the initiative early in a war means attacking quickly and decisively. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* argues:

As soon as preparation is sufficient, and it can truly be grasped, concentrate on a crack, quick and violent attack. In the relatively short opening period, strive to catch the enemy unawares, seize control of the battlefield initiative, completely destroy the enemy's operational system, intimidate the enemy's will to wage war.²¹¹

Seizing the initiative early may include pre-emptive strikes. In a potentially alarming follow-on to this principle, a few writings advocate undertaking pre-emptive strikes early in a conflict. For example, some PLA analysts argue in favor of precision air and space first strikes early in a conflict in order to deter the enemy from continuing the fight.²¹²

Three authors from the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy elaborate on this point when they write that “gaining mastery through counterattacks [i.e., striking only after being attacked] (*houfa zhiren*; 后发制人) ... is not an effective way to seize initiative on the informatized battlefield.”²¹³ We translate their comments at length below, as they are directly germane to this issue.

The initial operations in informatized warfare are decisive; *if we ... fail to capture early moments of opportunity to turn the table on the enemy, we would likely get trapped in a passive, cornered position in which resistance would be difficult and counter-attack opportunities would be scarce.* Therefore, the art of controlling a war situation ... *must accentuate offensive combat operations* at the campaign and battle levels or even the strategic level ... *making the seizure of early moments of opportunities to dominate the enemy the focus of establishing favorable conditions in war opening.*

Generally speaking, in the initial stage of future wars, *there are two kinds of opportunities where our military may ... dominate the enemy by executing offensive operations. The first is, in the process of the enemy assembling and deploying forces ... take advantages of the favorable opportunity of the enemy's incomplete development of*

²¹¹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 116.

²¹² Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Study of Integrated Aerospace Operations*, pp. 289-290; Min Zengfu et al., *The Concept of Air Force Military Thought*, p. 147; Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Operations*, p. 132.

²¹³ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 28. For more on “gaining mastery through counterattack” or “striking after being struck,” see Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, p. 63.

combat capabilities to *conduct necessary advanced attacks to disrupt the enemy's strategic deployment*. The other is, *when signs of enemy invasion are clear, we may organize our regular armed forces to boldly conduct cross-border combat operations, directing the fighting to the enemy side and inflicting heavy strikes on the enemy.*"²¹⁴ (Emphasis added.)

But PLA texts also emphasize the need to maintain stability and preserve flexibility

While the importance of seizing the initiative early in a conflict is a ubiquitous theme in PLA writings, an equally ubiquitous concern—sometimes within the same texts—is *maintaining stability and control over the overall situation*. We have already discussed the emphasis that many PLA writings place on ensuring that military objectives do not supersede strategic and political objectives. Similarly, some PLA texts suggest that, if one side should respond too aggressively in a crisis, the situation could escalate beyond that country's control. These texts emphasize two long-standing principles of PLA warfighting: first, the importance of acting "justly, advantageously, and with restraint" (*youli, youli, youjie*; 有理, 有利, 有节) in order to retain the moral and strategic advantage; and second (and relatedly), the principle of "post-emptive strike," i.e., "striking after the enemy has struck" (*houfa zhiren*; 后发制人).²¹⁵

A 2012 teaching text from AMS, *Teaching Materials on Joint Campaign Command*, provides an example of what this might mean in a military confrontation. This text discusses a number of hypothetical campaigns to be undertaken by the PLA (*wojun*; 我军). Among other things, the text discusses the importance of not overreacting to a "powerful enemy's military intervention" (*qiangdi ganshe*; 强敌干涉) or escalation.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, "On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare," pp. 28-29.

²¹⁵ For a useful overview of the principle of *youli, youli, youjie* and its relationship to seizing the initiative, see Michael D. Swaine, "Understanding the Historical Record," in Swaine and Zhang, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 23-33; and Johnston, "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China," p. 35. The PRC's 2015 defense white paper notes that "adherence to the principles of defense, self-defense, and post-emptive strike" remain an important element of China's "strategic concepts of active defense." *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015. The principle of *houfa zhiren* is complex and hotly debated in PLA texts, which provide varying interpretations of what strategic or operational actions would constitute a "first strike" by the enemy and therefore justify rapid retaliation by the PLA. For example, the article by Zhang Yu et al. discusses at some length the importance of taking offensive operational actions very early in a conflict while continuing to observe the "prerequisite of strategically attacking only after being attacked." Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, "On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare," p. 29.

²¹⁶ Zhang Peigao, ed., *Teaching Materials on Joint Campaign Command (Lianhe zhanyi zhihui jiaocheng*; 联合战役指挥教程) (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2012), pp. 201, 212.

The authors argue that the PLA must “have measures for dealing with” escalation, to include “striving to [have the capacity to] strike after the opponent has struck.”²¹⁷ They go on to explain that, in such a situation, one should seek to “*contain the enemy’s escalation of the military intervention intensity ... to ensure the stability of our strategic overall situation and the smooth conduct of the joint campaign.*”²¹⁸ In addition, say the authors, the PLA should “*adopt flexible response tactics*” to respond to whatever intervention the enemy might undertake.²¹⁹ (Emphasis added.) The authors thus suggest that escalation control is essential for stability, that such control requires that the PLA not be too rigid in its responses to foreign intervention, and that it is important to build and maintain the capacity to absorb a first blow.

This concern with stability and flexibility does not negate the earlier discussion on seizing the initiative. Our point is simply that the principle of seizing the initiative is not solely determinative of PLA actions in a crisis.

The role of information dominance

The literature we assessed noted that it is essential to have “information dominance” (*xinxi quan*; 信息权) in order to seize the initiative in a war.²²⁰ According to the *PLA Encyclopedia*, information dominance is achieved when “friendly forces” are able to “seize and preserve the freedom and initiative to use information” on the battlefield, while “simultaneously depriving an opponent” of that freedom and initiative.²²¹

PLA writings note that acquiring information dominance is crucial to war situation control, but they disagree about its importance relative to other forms of dominance. For example, according to Zhang Yu et al., war situation control in informatized wars depends on seizing information dominance in order to gain “greater freedom of action” and “overturn disadvantageous positions in the battle space.”²²² The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states, by contrast, that seizing information dominance is important primarily as a prerequisite to seizing air and sea dominance.²²³

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 201.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 212.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 216.

²²⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 130. Information dominance is one of “three dominances” identified in *Science of Military Strategy* as necessary for seizing battlefield initiative; the other two are air and naval dominance.

²²¹ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” pp. 212-213.

²²² Zhang Yu, Liu Sihai, and Xia Chengxiao, “On the Art of War Situation Control in Informatized Warfare,” p. 26. See also Lu Weifeng and Dong Yan, “The Art of War Situation Control under Informatized Conditions” (*Xinxihua tiaojian de zhanju kongzhi yishu*; 信息化条件下的战局控制艺术), *PLA Daily (Jiefang junbao*; 解放军报), Jul. 17, 2008, p. 12.

²²³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 130.

Chapter 6: Principles for terminating a crisis or conflict

In this chapter, we provide a broad overview of principles presented in PLA writings for terminating a crisis or conflict.

PLA writings say that it is preferable to end a conflict quickly and to your advantage

PLA writings express a range of opinions about how quickly you should seek to end a crisis or conflict. For the most part, they argue that it is preferable to end a war quickly and in a position of advantage to yourself. However, there seems to be some ambiguity on what to do if you are not in an advantageous position.

PLA writings on terminating a conflict start from two principles:

PLA writings say that, in general, a quick ending to a war is preferable. For example, the *PLA Encyclopedia* cautions against getting involved in prolonged conflicts, stating that “as soon as an armed conflict erupts, all effort should be made to control how it develops in order to end the conflict as soon as possible.”²²⁴

PLA writings stress that in ending a war, as at other points during a conflict, you should seek to “grasp (*bawo*; 把握) the initiative.”²²⁵ The documents we examined stressed the importance of maintaining the upper hand when determining when and how to end a war. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* notes, for example, that a chief objective of war termination is to “compel the adversary to conclude the war

²²⁴ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

²²⁵ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 133.

according to our own proposed conditions, schema, and schedule.”²²⁶ Therefore it recommends “appropriately ending a war” at “a suitable time.”²²⁷

These two admonitions together make the case that a quick end to a conflict is most obviously preferable when China feels itself to be in a position of advantage. LTG Liu of Jinan MR lists three questions that must be answered in order to determine whether one’s nation is in this position: (1) Have your country’s political objectives been achieved? (2) Have you created a “beneficial strategic situation”? and (3) Is your country in an “advantageous position” for safeguarding its national interests and national security?²²⁸ Based on these rather vague assessments, he writes, decision-makers can determine whether to end the war:

- When your conditions are met, you should do all that it can to “force a surrender” (*poxiang*; 迫降) and “press for a stop” (*biting*; 逼停) to the fighting.
- When the war situation is at a standstill, you should push for a “beneficial agreement” to conclude the war.
- When the war situation is unfavorable, China should “work hard to conclude the war situation at the lowest cost.”²²⁹

The stronger the position one occupies, say PLA authors, the better one’s position is for “bargaining” (*taojia huanjia*; 讨价还价) to resolve the crisis.

However, other PLA writings point out that a quick ending to a conflict may not always be to one’s advantage. In some cases, it is less clear that ending the war quickly is the highest priority. For example, the *Science of Military Strategy* argues: “War leaders ... must manage the relationship between quick decisions [to end the war] and prolonging it, in order to grasp the initiative during the process of ending the war. ... For the stronger side, quick decisions are the main option. But for the weaker side, prolonging [a war] is an important choice.”²³⁰ Similarly, the *PLA Encyclopedia* writes that one aspect of “controlling the course of a war” is determining when to end it:

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 132. Liu Shenyang of Jinan MR similarly writes that ideally, war control should allow your side to “force the enemy to conclude a war according to your side’s intent.” Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4.

²²⁷ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, pp. 116, 132. A 2005 volume from the AMS says that you should seek the fastest conclusion to the war that is advantageous to your country’s interests (*jinkuai youli jieshu*; 尽快有利结束). Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 596.

²²⁸ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 5.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 133.

If ending a war is advantageous, then think of a way to end the war as soon as possible; if delaying the [course of] war is advantageous, then by hook or by crook delay the war; or if neither war nor peace (*buzhan buhe*; 不战不和) is advantageous, then maintain a situation of neither war nor peace.²³¹

This does not necessarily mean that the weaker side *should* prolong the war. But it does suggest that, in theory, a losing China might undertake activities that would allow it to regain at least some advantage before agreeing to end a conflict. This raises the question of how China determines whether it is in an advantageous or a disadvantageous situation when at war.

PLA writings say that if you cannot win, you may consider a compromise in order to end a conflict with the lowest possible cost

A few PLA writings say that it may be necessary and acceptable, in principle, to reach a compromise before your objectives have been met. In both the 2001 and 2013 editions of *Science of Military Strategy*, the authors acknowledge that a country may seek to terminate a conflict at a disadvantage, in order to “end the war within a controllable scope” and prevent further losses.²³²

A compromise on issues of secondary concern is depicted as acceptable; concession on core principles is not. PLA authors make a distinction between “compromises” or “concessions” (*tuoxie*; 妥协 or *rangbu*; 让步) that a country should be willing to consider in order to terminate a crisis or conflict, and “surrender” (*tuirang*; 退让) on matters of principle, which it should not consider.²³³ They do not define in any detail what distinguishes an acceptable compromise from an unacceptable surrender. However, their discussion implies that (1) acceptable compromise involves a degree of sacrifice by *all* parties to a conflict; and (2) acceptable compromise does not require sacrificing one’s fundamental principles. In the 2001 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, for example, the authors argue that

²³¹ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 208. See also Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 63, where he writes: “When to wage a war is certainly important, but when to end a war is sometimes even more important. Too early, and it may be difficult to fully realize one’s goals; too late, and one may be bogged down.”

²³² Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, p. 205; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132.

²³³ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, p. 205; Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 63.

controlling crises implies “the compromise or exchange of interests to a certain extent of both parties.”²³⁴ LTG Wang Xixin of Shenyang MR adds:

The most common way to resolve a crisis is for the two sides *to make modest concessions at the same time*. This so-called concession *must uphold not giving an inch (cunbu bu rang; 寸步不让) on issues of principle, but flexibly deals with issues not relating to principles*. Although the firm insistence on matters of principle may increase the difficulty of managing the crisis, it will not fundamentally affect [the ability to] manage it.²³⁵ (Emphasis added.)

By extension, we may surmise that an unacceptable “surrender” involves disproportionately greater sacrifice for one party, perhaps including a sacrifice of core interests.

PLA writings highlight specific factors to consider when deciding whether and how to end a conflict

The preceding discussion raises the obvious question of how Chinese strategists assess whether the costs of continuing a conflict outweigh the benefits. PLA writings reviewed for this and previous studies highlight several factors that, according to these authors, determine decision-makers’ willingness to conclude a conflict. This list of factors is fairly consistent across a range of PLA texts. However, it is not clear from the writings we examined how they should be measured or prioritized.

We summarize the essential factors below.

1. **National interests at stake for both sides.** PLA authors argue that national interests are critical determinants of a nation’s willingness to escalate or de-escalate in a crisis or conflict, and that the sustainability of a post-crisis settlement depends on the extent to which post-conflict arrangements accommodate the interests of both parties.²³⁶
2. **Progress toward goals.** PLA writings argue that strategists must assess “the extent to which the objectives of a conflict have been achieved” as a “primary

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Wang Xixin, “Further Discussion on Controlling War,” p. 63.

²³⁶ Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 592; see also Johnston, “The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China,” pp. 34-35.

basis” upon which to decide whether to continue or end the war. These objectives may include “political, economic, and military objectives.”²³⁷ As noted in Chapter 5, political objectives are considered paramount.

3. **Cost of continuing the conflict.** Chinese writings provide some information about what sorts of costs appear to resonate within the Chinese system, and how they are measured. Issues of importance include:

- Costs to sovereignty and territorial integrity
- Weakening of CCP legitimacy
- Domestic instability
- Economic costs
- Human casualties
- Environmental damage
- Cost to China’s international reputation.²³⁸

4. **The two sides’ relative combat power.** PLA writings suggest that a nation’s view of its relative combat power—that is, the personnel, equipment, and materiel available to conduct operations—plays a prominent role in a nation’s willingness to conclude a conflict.²³⁹ Moreover, PLA writings stress that *changes* in relative combat power that take place during the course of a conflict or war are important for determining how willing each side will be to seek a rapid end to the conflict. For example, a 2005 book from the Academy of Military Science argues that:

- When the relative gap in power has widened, “the nation occupying the superior position will expect to conclude the conflict on the terms it proposes,” whereas the party in the inferior position may only be able to “adjust its own policy so as to minimize the amount of harm it suffers.”
- On the other hand, if the process of waging war has narrowed the gap in combat power, equitable compromise will be easier.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Ibid., pp. 589-590; Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132.

²³⁸ Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 592; Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China.”

²³⁹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132; Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 594.

²⁴⁰ Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, p. 594.

On the surface this contrast seems logical, but it does not automatically point to the decision that a country would make if it is on the losing end of a highly asymmetric situation. On one hand, the country might seek to regain some advantage in order to avoid having to make extreme concessions. On the other hand, it might seek to terminate the conflict before the gap in combat power widens even further in its disfavor. The texts we examined do not say what a country in this position should do.

5. **“Strategic trends” during a conflict**, which include:
 - Trends on the battlefield²⁴¹
 - “Trends in the international strategic environment,” such as international opinion, and the likelihood that other countries will become involved in the conflict²⁴²
 - Trends in domestic opinion.²⁴³

PLA writings say that countries should seek an equitable compromise that preserves the interests of both sides

Some PLA authors argue that a sustainable crisis resolution (a) should seek to preserve the national interests of *both* sides so far as is possible; and (b) may require China to make some concessions on (unspecified) interests.

PLA writings emphasize national interests as the most important measuring stick for assessing whether and how to compromise in order to terminate a conflict. As discussed in Chapter 3, Chinese authors stress that conflicting national interests are a critical driver of crisis and conflict. Accordingly, the ability to resolve a conflict also rests on how both sides perceive the subsequent risks and rewards to their national interests. As the authors of the 2001 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* put it, “Wars begin in pursuit of interests and end in pursuit of interests. The most urgent issue after the war is also interests.”²⁴⁴ The *PLA Encyclopedia* notes further that “one

²⁴¹ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Academy of Military Science War Theory and Strategy Research Department, *On the Strategy of War*, pp. 588-589.

²⁴⁴ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, p. 386.

should also adjust the military strategy at appropriate times according to whether national interests are being obtained or lost, controlling the tempo and intensity and ending the war at the appropriate time.”²⁴⁵

PLA writings assert that, if possible, settlement of a crisis should try to preserve both sides’ interests. Several texts note that, while preserving one’s own interests is the paramount concern in terminating a crisis, it is also important to understand and, where possible, accommodate the opponent’s major concerns and core interests. The *PLA Encyclopedia*, for example, argues that one should “firmly grasp where interests intersect” and that “not only should one consider one’s own strategic interests, but also should avoid endangering an opponent’s fundamental interests (*jiben liyi*; 基本利益) to the greatest extent possible.”²⁴⁶

One reason this is true, according to PLA writings, is that a settlement that both sides view as “equitable” is more likely to result in the long-term resolution of a crisis or conflict.²⁴⁷ If one side feels that it has been unreasonably treated, tensions may linger that lead to renewed conflict or war.²⁴⁸ (For example, the authors of the 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* attribute the outbreak of World War II, in part, to an inequitable or unreasonable arrangement intended to secure the peace following World War I.²⁴⁹)

PLA writings assert that it may be acceptable to sacrifice some national interests for the sake of ending a crisis or conflict. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, for instance, says:

When facing a complicated war situation, it is necessary that the war leaders set out from the principle of maximization of national interest, in order to be able to end the war within a controllable scope, and *when necessary to dare to sacrifice a portion of national interests*, resolutely make policy decisions, and decisively end the war.²⁵⁰ (Emphasis added.)

²⁴⁵ *Chinese Military Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*, “Military Strategy,” p. 206.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁴⁷ For example, the authors of the 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* note: “If the issue of interests is properly solved, the foundation for postwar peace will be solid ... when interests are properly distributed [i.e. accommodated], there will be fewer contradictions after the war.” Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy (English-language edition)*, 2005, pp. 386-387.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 132.

The purpose of this sacrifice is, presumably, to end the conflict quickly and avoid incurring greater costs.²⁵¹

A critical question, therefore, is: What sorts of national interests can acceptably be sacrificed, and what sorts cannot? We can derive a general list from a few PLA texts. For example, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* presents a hierarchy of interests that should underpin a war's objectives:

Unequivocally limited war objectives lie in ensuring that national core interests and major interests (*zhongda liyi*; 重大利益) do not come to harm, and that national important interests (*zhongyao liyi*; 重要利益) do not suffer major losses; [and they] lie in ensuring that in the short term, national interests are not encroached on, and in the long term do not leave behind hidden security dangers.²⁵²

According to this quote, “core interests” and “major interests” must be protected, presumably even at a high cost. “Important interests,” on the other hand, are portrayed as able to withstand minor losses.

LTG Liu of Jinan MR similarly differentiates between interests when he states that “war control thought emphasizes ... grasping the relationship of core interests, important interests, and basic interests (*yiban liyi*; 一般利益); and separately undertakes different safeguarding means and policies.”²⁵³

A tentative inference we may draw here is that “core interests,” and perhaps “major interests,” are likely to be quite difficult to compromise on; but “important interests” and/or “basic interests” may be dealt with differently in a conflict termination situation. Unfortunately, while China's leaders have been explicit about what presently constitute PRC “core national interests,” we have far less insight into the content of China's “major interests” or “important interests”—and thus little sense of what the Chinese might be willing to sacrifice in order to end a war.

²⁵¹ Xu Hui of China's National Defense University argues that in a period of crisis escalation, in which “the risk of war is pressing,” decision-makers must similarly be willing to concede “non-essential domains” in order to “quickly gain greater domestic and international support.” Xu Hui, ed., *International Crisis Management Theory and Case Study Analysis*, p. 13.

²⁵² Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, p. 124.

²⁵³ Liu Shenyang, “On Controlling War,” p. 4.

Chapter 7: Implications

Chinese writings indicate that some aspects of PLA thinking on escalation control are evolving

The PLA appears to have put significant time and energy into thinking about escalation control since the mid-2000s. Our research identified dozens of PLA writings that examine the character, dynamics, and control of crisis and conflict. Our research also suggested that this is a high-stakes topic for the PLA: writings we surveyed indicate that the PRC leadership views uncontrolled crisis and conflict as presenting grave risks to China's economic and political well-being.

In many areas, **Chinese thinking on escalation appears to have remained consistent since the mid-2000s, if not earlier.** In some (though not all) of these areas, that thinking is also consistent with broader international understandings of escalation control. We surmise that these are likely to be fairly stable elements of PLA thinking. Issues on which post-2008 PLA writings are fairly consistent with those of the past include:

- The notion that crisis and conflict control is an essential mission for the PLA
- A basic definition of “escalation control” as controlling the time, space, objectives, targets, and methods of war
- An emphasis on “seizing the initiative” as a foundation for winning a conflict
- Confidence that “informatized warfare” allows for greater control of the battlefield space and, therefore, the progress of a war.

On two other critical issues, however, **PLA thinking appears to have evolved since 2008.** One appears to be truly new; the other appears to be an acceleration of previous trends.

- Perhaps most notably, post-2008 PLA writings now acknowledge the possibility of accidental conflict caused by a crisis spiraling out of control, or a

misunderstanding of the opponent's intentions—something that appeared alarmingly absent in the past.

- The PLA places increasing focus on crisis management and control as an essential pre-requisite to conflict control.

Some PLA views on crisis and conflict control appear inherently escalatory

We found that there are many areas in which PLA writings on the dynamics of crisis and conflict control differ substantially from the mainstream views of their U.S. counterparts. We identified several areas where PLA views appear, from a U.S. perspective, to be inherently escalatory: the PLA's emphasis on "turning crisis into opportunity"; its views on deterrence; and its emphasis on "seizing the initiative."

Emphasis on "turning crisis into opportunity"

We found ample evidence to suggest that the Chinese preference is, if possible, to avoid the escalation of crisis and conflict. However, the emphasis in several texts on "turning crisis into opportunity" is troubling. It suggests that once a crisis is underway, the PLA could choose to escalate it if doing so is determined to support broader political and/or economic agendas.

We also found that at least a small number of Chinese thinkers may advocate *provoking* a crisis in order to gain political or other forms of advantage. At present we do not know how mainstream this thinking is, and thus cannot assess how likely the PLA would be to undertake such an action.

Views of deterrence

PLA writings on deterrence depict it somewhat differently than their American counterparts. Some of the divergences rest on fundamentally different assumptions about whether certain actions would be perceived as "deterrent" or as unduly aggressive and, hence, escalatory.

- First, the use and movement of military assets intended as deterrence could easily be misinterpreted. According to PLA writings, many of these activities are essentially designed to determine the opponent's intent, capability, and resolve. But such activities could be perceived as escalatory.

- Second, at least some of these forms of deterrence appear to be kinetic. This means that the PLA could escalate to the use of force before others would expect, but without intending to escalate to a war.
- Third, some forms of deterrence appear to involve pre-emptive strikes.
- Finally, PLA writings suggest that use of space, cyber, and other “soft kill” methods should be viewed as less escalatory than traditional combat.

Like Henley, we found that few of the more recent PLA works we examined attempt to gauge how such deterrent activities might be perceived by an opponent. Many PLA writings discuss the general problem of “misperception” and “miscommunication” and the possibility that mistakes could lead to an escalation of crisis, but do not tie this to the specific principles of deterrence that they advocate. If the relative dearth of discussion on this issue reflects a continued lack of PLA attention to the topic, this should be a point of concern.

Emphasis on “seizing the initiative”

There is a broad consensus in PLA writings that “seizing the initiative” is an essential component of winning a war. Many elements of seizing the initiative would compel the PLA to strike early, hard, and fast. Some PLA writings even state explicitly that the need to seize the initiative could require the PLA to act pre-emptively, particularly in the early stages of a conflict.

Most troublingly, in the writings we examined there does not appear to be any acknowledgment that PLA efforts to seize the initiative could be construed by the other side as an act of escalation.

That said, some PLA writings also discuss the importance of maintaining strategic stability, operational flexibility, and the capacity to absorb a first blow. These principles suggest that **the ubiquitous concern with seizing the initiative, while concerning, is not solely determinative of the PLA’s approach during a crisis.**

Unclear dividing lines between crisis and war present challenges for discerning PLA intentions in a crisis

Our analysis showed that **it may be challenging to determine what PLA actions would indicate that China’s leaders consider their country to be in a state of war.** The great ambiguity of the middle state (“quasi-war”) between peace and war could

lead to a misunderstanding of the PLA's objectives for controlling a specific situation, and therefore to a misinterpretation of Chinese military actions.

Most notably, there is not a clear correlation on the Chinese continuum of conflict between military *objectives of control* and *means of control*.

- At some points on the continuum, the PLA's *objective for control* is solely to prevent escalation to war; at others, it is solely to win, or prepare to win, a war; and at still other stages, it appears that the PLA would pursue both objectives simultaneously.
- At some points on the continuum, the *means of control* is combat or combat-like operations; at others, it is non-kinetic.

If the PLA in practice follows the logic of the writings we examined, it is entirely possible that we might see the PLA using kinetic means but with the purpose of preventing war. The PLA's possible use of kinetic means for crisis control means that combat operations are not a clear indicator—particularly in the state of “quasi-war.”

As a result, **in a crisis situation outside observers may not get the clear and unambiguous indicators about where China thinks it is on the “continuum of conflict” that they would need in order to respond with clarity.**

Most alarmingly, the PLA concept that there can be a stage of armed conflict short of war, combined with a doctrine that advocates going on the offensive early in a war, has serious escalatory implications.

- Several texts argue that in a state of pre-war armed conflict, countries may take limited military action in order to clarify the situation or to persuade the other side to de-escalate.
- Almost none of them acknowledge that acts of deterrence could lead to inadvertent escalation.
- Combined with PLA doctrine that calls for “seizing the initiative” through rapid, violent, and possibly pre-emptive attack, these views could cause an adversary to assume that what the PLA intended to be a limited military action is actually the beginning of a large-scale attack.

Our analysis raises questions about how the PLA would handle a conflict for which it is not prepared

Many of the PLA texts we examined rest on the premise that it is possible for an advanced, informatized military to control the entry to and the prosecution of a war. The authors of these writings start from the assumption that if one correctly understands and interprets the factors that lead to and perpetuate a conflict, one can control its course. Hence there is a heavy emphasis in these writings on *predicting* and *pre-managing* crisis, conflict and war. These writings say that if you can just gather enough and the right kind of information, you should be able to sufficiently prepare your diplomatic, economic, and military forces to smoothly handle the outbreak of crisis.

Several of the texts we examined stated that a country should not get involved in a war until it is prepared to win, and otherwise should “delay” the onset of a conflict. This principle implies that *all deliberate wars are wars of choice*—and provides little guidance for a country that finds itself involved in a situation that it did not choose and where it is not prepared to “seize the initiative.”

Together, these principles raise obvious questions about how the PLA would react to a crisis or conflict situation that its leaders do not feel prepared for. Chinese writings do not provide any information on whether, in such a situation, the PLA would be more likely to

- fight more aggressively, in hopes of regaining the initiative, or
- seek to de-escalate quickly, in order to minimize losses and/or to prepare to rejoin the fight.

From the texts we examined, we could not glean any insights on whether PLA writers consider the possibility that China might face a deliberately-initiated war it did not expect.

We need a clearer understanding of how the PLA measures and prioritizes interests and costs in order to understand when it might choose to de-escalate

Our analysis has shown that, if PLA planners follow their own guidance, they have a fairly discrete set of issues that they should consider when determining how to control a given crisis or conflict. These include:

- The national interests at stake
- The material and intangible costs of continuing a crisis or conflict
- The likelihood that China will attain its goals if it continues on its current course, as determined by factors including: its success thus far, trends in “relative combat power,” battlefield trends, international support, and domestic opinion.

While PLA writings are fairly explicit about what factors Chinese planners should consider, they are not explicit about how those factors should be measured and prioritized. Absent that knowledge, it would be difficult for outside observers to determine how the Chinese would assess their prospects for attaining their objectives in a given crisis or conflict—and thus to determine whether it would be possible to persuade Chinese decision-makers to de-escalate the situation before they have attained their goals.

There are two areas in which we particularly wished for greater clarity on Chinese priorities: the hierarchy of national interests, and the measurement and prioritization of the costs of continuing a conflict.

Hierarchy of national interests

Chinese writings are explicit about the fact that there is a hierarchy of national interests, ranging from “core interests” (at the top), to “major interests,” to “important interests,” and, sometimes, to “basic” or non-essential interests. Some writings assert that it may be acceptable to “compromise” certain types of interests, but not others, in order to de-escalate a conflict. Therefore, understanding the content of each of these categories can help us understand what issues PRC leaders might consider compromising on in order to ratchet down a crisis or war.

According to PLA writings, perceived disputes over “core interests” are the most likely to cause an outbreak of crisis with China, the most likely to escalate to the use of military force, and the most difficult to resolve. China’s “core interests” are well articulated, and thus outside observers should be able to predict with some accuracy what sorts of conflicts of interest are most likely to lead to military crisis.

“Major interests” also appear to be fairly intractable, but there is less clarity on what these interests are. Finally, some PLA texts state or imply that merely “important interests,” and certainly “basic interests,” may be open to compromise, if doing so can end a conflict with low cost. Again, these texts did not provide any detail on what important or basic interests might be.

Measurement and prioritization of costs

Past CNA work has identified a fairly consistent list of factors that Chinese strategists are likely to consider when determining the costs of continuing a conflict:

- Costs to sovereignty and territorial integrity
- Weakening of CCP legitimacy
- Domestic instability
- Economic costs
- Human casualties
- Environmental damage
- Cost to China’s international reputation.

However, we know very little about how these costs are measured, or how they would be prioritized if tradeoffs were necessary—particularly with regard to “intangible” costs such as domestic stability or international reputation.

In order to understand whether Chinese planners think a conflict is becoming unbearably costly, we would need to know more about how they weigh these factors.

Conclusion

This study focused on just a portion of the ever-growing body of PLA literature on crisis, conflict, and war. Our research showed that Chinese thinking on escalation control is maturing, but that there are still many areas that either are undertheorized or diverge significantly from conventional wisdom in the West. Many of the issues on which we lack clarity are those that would be critical in a conflict, including the thresholds between crisis and war, PLA approaches to ensuring that the two sides in a conflict do not misinterpret one another's intentions, and how the PLA might assess the costs and benefits of terminating a conflict before it has attained its original goals.

Therefore, we still have much to learn about Chinese views on escalation if we are to predict with any certainty how the Chinese would behave in a crisis or conflict setting, and how Chinese decision-makers might perceive and respond to other countries' actions. In this study we have attempted to provide a foundation for answering these questions, with the hope that it will spur much more extensive investigation into the PLA's ever-evolving theories and practices of crisis management.

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