Learning From the US in the Middle East For War In The Pacific

As Beijing studies U.S. wars in the Middle East to prepare for a potential conflict with Taiwan, Washington remains distracted by secondary conflicts.

On May 7, Chinese state-run media Global Times reported that a cease-fire had been reached between the United States and Yemen's Houthi movement, a development expected to restore maritime security and ensure the free flow of international shipping. This is crucial to Beijing's interests, particularly as the ongoing U.S. tariff war continues to reduce China's export volumes.

Although U.S. President Donald Trump said the Houthis had approached his administration to end hostilities, Global Times credited Oman as the key peace broker, downplaying Trump's role and denying the United States any credit for the breakthrough.

The article went on to emphasize that Houthi leaders had issued defiant statements clarifying that their operations against Israel would continue, framing their campaign as support for Gaza. This narrative, portraying the United States as neither victorious nor effective, appears designed to prevent Washington from claiming a diplomatic or strategic win.

At the same time, the Chinese regime's detailed coverage of the development underscores how closely Beijing is observing U.S. military actions in the Middle East, not only to track outcomes but to extract operational and strategic lessons for training the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and preparing it for future asymmetric warfare.

According to recent reports, China is treating U.S. military operations in the Middle East, particularly its ongoing naval campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen, as a live simulation for a future war over Taiwan. The PLA is closely studying how the U.S. Navy responds to asymmetric threats such as drones, shore-launched missiles, and complex strike patterns, all of which mirror tactics Taiwan might use in a defensive war.

The PLA, which lacks real combat experience, has long relied on observing U.S. operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Yemen as case studies to refine its doctrine, force structure, and training. Beijing has turned the Red Sea into a strategic proving ground, empowering proxy forces with satellite intelligence, drone components, and dual-use technology to harass Western vessels while sparing Chinese ships.

This model of leveraging proxies, denying responsibility, and exploiting the constraints of a rules-based order reflects a broader PLA learning system rooted in structured observation and internal experimentation, a method that the RAND Corporation describes as a substitute for battlefield experience.

China's military reforms under Chinese leader Xi Jinping prioritize readiness for informatized local wars, with Taiwan as the central scenario. The PLA's theater commands are now configured for high operational readiness across multiple strategic directions, and the Red Sea may preview how China intends to operate in the Indo-Pacific.

While China has used the Red Sea conflict to study U.S. tactics and strengthen its own position, analysts at the U.S. Army War College argue that the United States has not made a corresponding strategic shift toward China. Although the National Defense Strategy identified the Chinese regime as the pacing threat three years ago, that focus has yet to be fully reflected in U.S. force structure, budgeting, or deployment decisions. Resources and attention remain divided across multiple theaters, especially Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Washington's continued focus on Ukraine and the Persian Gulf undercuts its ability to prepare for a potential near-peer conflict with the PLA. Instead of maintaining global military primacy across three or more theaters, the War College proposes that the Department of Defense concentrate on preparing for one major war, specifically in the Indo-Pacific, against the Chinese regime.

Meanwhile, the United States could rely on partners and allies to manage lower-tier regional contingencies elsewhere. In some respects, this is already happening, as Trump pushes European nations to take greater responsibility for Ukraine's defense. However, U.S. strategic focus has not significantly narrowed toward preparing for a near-peer conflict with China.

One factor supporting the War College's recommendation is that, in Europe and the Middle East, the United States can delegate some of its security responsibilities to NATO and regional powers. However, in the Asia-Pacific, there is no corresponding coalition capable of balancing against China without direct U.S. involvement.

Therefore, the War College recommends prioritizing U.S. naval and air forces in the Pacific and shifting force structure and basing accordingly, including redeploying carriers away from the Atlantic and Middle East. This, once again, aligns with steps that Trump is already taking, such as upgrading and reoutfitting the airbase and port at Guam and making greater use of U.S. overseas territories in the Pacific defense strategy.

As Trump requests a record $1 trillion defense budget, the War College highlights the ongoing mismatch between strategy and resource allocation under the previous administration. For example, the United States has allocated a total of nearly $183 billion in various forms of aid to Ukraine since the Russian invasion in 2022. That figure averages out to roughly $60 billion per year—more than the annual defense budget of any U.S. ally except the UK.

At the same time, the United States was also committing money, resources, and strategic attention to Iran and the Persian Gulf. The resulting drawdown on munitions stockpiles has left the United States in a questionable position if a war with the Chinese regime were to break out tomorrow.

Deterring and defeating the Chinese regime does not necessarily require increased defense spending. Still, it does require a reallocation of existing resources away from theatres deemed secondary to the core mission in the Indo-Pacific. This includes delegating security operations in the Middle East and Europe to regional allies.

Since 2001, the U.S. and Chinese militaries have been shaped by a distinct set of direct and indirect experiences. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq invasion in 2003, the U.S. military focused its energies and resources on combating terror ism and performing counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even in 2023, U.S. emphasis on major power competition contends with other national security priorities, including current crises and continued deployments around the globe. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), on the other hand, has largely focused its military modernization and restructuring to prepare for a regional conflict that would likely involve U.S. military intervention. Despite having no combat experience since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the PLA has conducted an in-depth study of all aspects of the U.S. military's technological and operational capabilities—including its organization, command and control, logistics, joint operations, and concepts of operation—since the 1990s.

The dichotomy presented by the experiences of both militaries raises several questions about how they are preparing for the possibility of a major power conflict. Since the early 1990s, the U.S. military has gained significant direct combat experience but has done so against technologically inferior, non-peer adversaries. In contrast, the PLA has no direct combat experience. Even though its concepts of operation are designed to fight a major power, these concepts are largely derived from indirect observations and lessons from U.S. operations since 1991. The ways that each military gains and processes experience and incorporates it into training will heavily affect readiness for and performance in a future war.

We examine both the extent to which the experience gained by the U.S. and Chinese militaries since 2001 has shaped the way these militaries train and the potential effects these experiences and recent training trends will have on the readiness of both nations for major power conflict. The report focuses on two primary research questions:

(1) How has the military experience gained by both the U.S. military and the PLA since 2001 shaped the way both militaries train?
(2) What effect do these experiences and training trends have on readiness for major power conflict?

Approach

Our research approach consisted of three components. The first was an examination of historical examples that provided insights into how military organizations have adapted training to meet emerging security requirements

and why some countries adapted successfully "Preparing for Great Power Conflict". How Experience Shapes U.S. and Chinese Military Training while others failed. We considered specific types of experience in the historical examples and focused on a broad variety of factors that might have helped or hindered adaptation. Defining and categorizing experience revealed that militaries either internally develop operational models that drive experiential learning and training or import models from other militaries. These operational models help build connections between experience and the political, economic, and social factors that play a critical role in how militaries adapt. For the second component of our research, we took findings from historical examples to develop a logic model that we used to evaluate how experiential and institutional factors are likely to shape U.S. military and PLA training. Finally, we applied this logic model to a limited number of current U.S. military and PLA case studies to assess how experience is shaping U.S. and Chinese military training today.

Key Findings

Seven major takeaways emerged from our research:

• The PLA gains experience through a structured process involving observation of wars and study of military science through a Marxist-Leninist lens, concept development, experimentation, demonstration, and implementation and training across the force.

• The U.S. military has a mostly indigenous experiential model based on direct combat, but indirect experimentation figures more prominently as the global threat picture changes and near-peer adversaries seek to undermine the global security position of the United States.

• The nature of both militaries' experiences since 2001 raises questions about their preparations for major power conflict and, specifically, whether the training component of those preparations will be sufficient for operational success.

• China has an advantage in the focus it applies to concepts and capabilities needed to deter, delay, or defeat a U.S. force entering China's neighbourhood—stressing the home field advantage. The United States has been forced to reckon with the idea that China might have the means to make such U.S. intervention prohibitively costly, putting U.S. forces in a reactive mode to develop concepts and capabilities to change that equation.

• The U.S. military has advantages in adaptive and innovative capacity based on direct experience and a head start in operational concepts stressing networked precision strikes against key systemic nodes. Ultimately, one of the most significant and enduring advantages enjoyed by the U.S. military has been the quality of its training and the ability to update that training to meet changing conditions and threats.

• Time is an advantage for the United States when it comes to conceptual and functional change in preparing for major power conflict. The PLA's focus on

preparing to fight the United States appears nearly singular in some respects but involves massive revisions of the PLA's command culture. These revisions must occur in an environment already fraught with changing priorities on other fronts.

Summary

Training and exercise approaches, tools, and infrastructure needed for PLA joint operations are improving but still nascent compared with those of the U.S. military. U.S. direct experience since 2001 provides the basis for a training system that the PLA cannot entirely emulate in the absence of similar experiential pressures.

Recommendations

Two major recommendations:

• Further comparative study on U.S. and Chinese experimentation, training, and exercises related to major war concepts and capabilities would benefit U.S. planners and strategists in campaign development. A comprehensive database that quantifies the number, scope, and scale of these activities, along with qualitative assessments of the capabilities and vulnerabilities in evidence, would inform net assessments and scenario-specific games and analyses.

• U.S. policymakers and senior war-fighters should likewise seek additional insight on how China's leadership assesses PLA readiness for major power conflict from the intelligence community and federally funded research and development centres. Understanding how senior Chinese Communist Party decision-makers evaluate PLA experience as a factor in decisions to employ military force is a key component in designing U.S. deterrence approaches.