

The United States-China Strategic Competition and Roots of Chinese “Harmonious Mission” Military Public Diplomacy Strategy

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Abstract

Traditionally viewed as an unconventional foreign policy tool, hard power has recently evolved into a multifaceted mechanism that employs military strength to mediate interactions between military and civilian entities. While national governments frequently leverage hard power to shape foreign public perceptions, academic discourse often underemphasizes the military's role in advancing public diplomacy. Armed forces globally contribute to public diplomacy initiatives through humanitarian relief, infrastructure development, and international military education and training programs. This article analyzes these practices within the framework of soft power and public diplomacy in a previously unexplored manner, from the perspective of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China through the lenses of the hospital ship “Peace Ark,” in comparison with the United States Navy's hospital ships “Mercy” and “Comfort,” and highlights the influence of military power on diplomatic engagement.

Keywords: Mercy, Peace Ark, hospital ship, engagement strategy, peaceful rise

Research Article | Received: 29 January 2025, Last Revision: 27 October 2025, Accepted: 17 November 2025

Introduction

In 2001, China purchased a Russian-made Ukrainian Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier named Varyag. It was merely a floating platform with no engines or technical equipment. By 2012, the purchased aircraft carrier had been transformed into an advanced aircraft carrier named Liaoning and had become part of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China (Yang and Xie 2022: 21). Moreover, a second Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier was constructed and commissioned using reverse engineering methodology seven years after the first one, the Shandong (MacHaffie 2020: 8). A third one, named Fujian (Upadhyaya 2024: 2), is entirely domestically built, larger and more modern than the others, and is planned to be commissioned by 2026. These developments, significantly initiated at the beginning of the 21st century, are considered the first steps in expanding the military power competition between the United States (US) and China, which initially emerged in a regional context, to a global level over time.

While scholars and military experts have extensively analyzed strategic military competition between the US and China, less attention has been devoted to the dimension of military public diplomacy within this rivalry. This article provides an in-depth analysis of a relatively underexplored area, examining how strategic competition between China and the US manifests within the emerging framework of military public diplomacy, with a particular focus on China's "Harmonious Missions". Launched in 2010, these missions serve as strategic instruments of military diplomacy, projecting a benign international image through humanitarian medical assistance. By 2024, the Harmonious Missions had been deployed nine times, covering countries across Asia, Africa, Oceania, North and South America, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Historically, US policy toward China, particularly during the Obama administration, was characterized by a strategy of "conengagement," combining elements of containment and engagement. This dual approach aimed simultaneously to restrict China's influence while promoting constructive cooperation (Larus and Hargis 2017: 7). However, China's consistent economic growth and accelerating military expansion have increasingly pressured the US to reassess this policy. A critical turning point occurred during the first Trump administration, which explicitly labeled China a "strategic competitor" in the 2017 National Security Strategy (2017: 45), marking a notable shift in US foreign policy.

China's burgeoning military capabilities, exemplified by its space and missile technology advancements, have further intensified the strategic rivalry. China's anti-satellite missile test in 2007 underscored its entry into a select group of space-capable military powers, reshaping global defense doctrines and highlighting vulnerabilities in satellite-dependent military operations. China's subsequent anti-satellite tests and its successful manned space missions further underline its expanding strategic aspirations (The Guardian 2007; Gady 2015). By showcasing the capability to target and destroy orbiting satellites with precision, China signaled its entry into an exclusive group of space-capable military powers alongside the US and Russia. The implications of the test were far-reaching and profound, particularly in terms of the militarization of outer space. The event challenged the prevailing assumption that space would remain a sanctuary free from active military conflict. It highlighted the strategic vulnerability of satellites, which serve as indispensable assets for modern military operations, including communications, navigation, surveillance, and missile guidance. Besides, China is the third country after the US and Russia to send manned spacecraft into space. China's accomplishment as the third nation to successfully launch a manned spacecraft underscores its expanding technological capabilities and strategic aspirations, which are integral to the broader context of US-China competition. This achievement reflects China's ability to rival established space powers such as the US and Russia. It positions itself as a prominent actor in the geopolitical contest for leadership in space exploration and technological innovation. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China increased its defense budget from \$278 to \$296 billion in 2023, reflecting a 6.0 percent rise compared to 2022 (Tian, Da Silva, and Scarazzato

2024: 2). China's military expenditure, measured in dollar terms, amounts to approximately \$609 billion, representing 67 percent of the US' actual defense spending, which stands at \$916 billion in 2024 shown in Table 1. China's expanding military power is regarded by the US as a critical strategic threat, prompting initiatives aimed at decoupling, establishing new security partnerships, and intensified demands for elevated defense budgets (Robertson 2024).

Table 1. Chinese and US Military Spendings in 2024 (Robertson 2024)

	China Military Expenditure (billions)	US Military Expenditure (billions)	Assumed PPP exchange rate (RMB per USD)	Chinese expenditure in USD billions (Laspeyres)	US expenditure in RMB billions (Paasche)
Personnel	¥622	\$238	1.90	\$327	¥452
Operations	¥695	\$459	3.64	\$191	¥1,671
Equipment	¥779	\$219	8.54	\$91	¥1,872
Total	<u>¥2,096</u>	<u>\$916</u>		<u>\$609</u>	<u>¥3,995</u>
Ratio China/US				0.67	0.52

This increase in China's defense budget underscores the escalating US-China competition, particularly in military modernization and strategic power projection. While the US is more stable in defense expenditure, China's significant budget growth reflects its determination to contest US dominance in critical regions and sectors, intensifying the global rivalry between the two nations. These latest developments indicate the expanding scope and complexity of strategic competition. Furthermore, China's strategy of civil-military fusion gives it a competitive edge in mobilizing industrial resources for military purposes. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) benefits from direct integration with state-owned enterprises and private tech companies, allowing for rapid scaling in shipbuilding, drone manufacturing, and missile production (US Department of Defense 2024: 27). The US, while possessing a more innovative and high-tech defense industry, faces bureaucratic, legal, and industrial constraints that hinder the speed of wartime mobilization. China's centralized political structure enables more agile conversion of civilian infrastructure and resources for military use, especially in a prolonged regional conflict (Gewirts 2019).

Within this context, this study evaluates whether a structured and strategically oriented military can function effectively as a soft-power asset, enhancing national prestige through international humanitarian efforts. By examining China's Harmonious Missions, the research aims to illuminate the broader implications of military public diplomacy in the ongoing strategic competition between China and the United States.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of the Harmonious Missions

After it acceded to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and integration into the global financial network, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has endeavored to strengthen its influence in the international political system (Yıldız 2023: 55). In this context, it has produced mottos that will be accepted by both the domestic public and the international community. “Peaceful rise”, one of the first discourses, was brought up at the Boao Forum by Zheng Bijian, Vice Chairman of the Central Party School, in 2003 (Zhiyue 2004: 1). Then, with the approval of the concept by former President Hu Jintao, “peaceful rise” started to be used as the official foreign policy discourse of the state. However, the term “peaceful rise” was later replaced by the “peaceful development” concept due to concerns that this discourse was too strong and could lead to misunderstandings among the international community (Keyuan 2012: 78). In addition, the Chinese leadership has recognized that the idea of peaceful rise or peaceful development might not be as effective in managing China's international relations. To improve its global image, a fresh, transformative concept is required. This view aligns with the then President Deng Xiaoping-era “not seeking to lead” (*budangtou*) idea of the PRC's place and role as a passive participant in the international system. However, this idea started to change with the next president, Jiang Zemin. It evolved into the motto of “gear with the world” (*yu shijie jiegui*) and “developing China as a comprehensive power” (*fazhan zonghe guoli*), both of which emphasized the objective of China to be a strong player in the global environment. (Zheng and Tok 2007: 2). Keeping that in mind, Chinese leadership introduced the notion of “harmonious world” to initiate China's rise in the international system.

The intellectual underpinnings of China's “harmonious world” notion, which later evolved into the foundation of the Harmonious Missions initiative, were articulated by Hu Jintao during his address at the 60th anniversary summit of the United Nations in 2005. This concept was subsequently reinforced in the report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2007, emphasizing that “the people of all countries should join hands and strive to build a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity” (Xinhua 2007). In line with a broader ideological transformation, the 2006 edition of China's National Defense White Paper introduced the concept of a “harmonious world” for the first time (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2006: 1). This document also marked the initial articulation of China's involvement in international disaster relief efforts as an element of its national defense strategy, positioning such actions as part of its commitment to fulfilling international obligations (China's National Defense White Paper 2006: 6). A comparative assessment of subsequent white papers—particularly those released in 2010, 2013, 2015, and 2019—illustrates a growing emphasis on multilateral security cooperation and military diplomacy, with the 2019 report representing the most pronounced expression of this evolving trend (Wei and Loh 2025: 7). In parallel, some Chinese scholars have contended that the conceptual pairing of a “harmonious world” with the operationalization of “harmonious missions” constitutes an early stage in China's broader effort to articulate a comprehensive strategic vision for reshaping the future international order (Hao 2009: 54).

The concept of “Harmonious Mission” concept is central to China’s “new” strategic domestic and international relations approach. Introduced by President Hu Jintao in 2005 under the broader framework of a “harmonious world,” this doctrine signified a pivotal shift in China’s foreign policy, emphasizing peaceful development as its core tenet. This new strategy is announced to aspire to achieve the ambitious objectives of enduring global peace and shared prosperity among all nations. (Zhou 2014: 75-76) Central to this vision is China’s commitment to fostering international cooperation and prioritizing peaceful development within its foreign policy framework. However, the Harmonious Missions concept reached its zenith under the Xi Jinping administration, as part of China’s new military diplomacy strategy (Joel and Fravel 2023: 1163), which primarily focuses on fostering cordial relations with neighboring countries, cultivating strategic partnerships with global powers, and strengthening cooperative ties with developing states. The realization of this ambitious mission relies heavily on sustained efforts by the global community to support peace and development on a worldwide scale (Sambath 2011: 4-6), requiring the collective utilization of both soft and hard power tools. Thus, the concept of “military public diplomacy”, an essential dimension of China’s soft power, was introduced as an innovative, tailor-made application for enhancing China’s Harmonious Missions concept, thereby contributing to realizing the “harmonious world” strategy.

Among academic circles, hard power, as an unconventional mechanism of foreign policy, has recently gained prominence as a multifaceted instrument that employs military capabilities to shape diplomatic interactions between military and civilian stakeholders (Smith 2000: 52; Nye 2004: 5). While national governments frequently rely on hard power to sway foreign public opinion, scholarly discourse tends to undervalue the role of military tools in the evolution of public diplomacy. Nearly all armed forces engage in public diplomacy initiatives, utilizing fundamental mechanisms such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Public diplomacy focuses on shaping the ideas, decisions, and preferences of policymakers in other countries (Nye 2004: 105). It can be broadly defined as the strategic effort to influence public opinion within target communities and among decision-makers alongside traditional diplomatic channels through the engagement of individuals, groups, and organizations to advance the initiating country’s national interests. In essence, a government should oversee public diplomacy to ensure that its activities operate as an extension of soft power, enhancing its influence on the global stage. (Karadağ 2017: 73). From this perspective, military forces, characterized by their hierarchical and complex structures, serve as a primary agency in public diplomacy (Wallin 2015: 3).

As an emerging academic framework, military public diplomacy encompasses a broad spectrum of actions, ranging from basic humanitarian aid to more complex operations. Notable examples include the US Armed Forces’ involvement in disaster relief, such as their response to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, where the US Naval Ship (USNS) *Mercy*, the largest hospital ship in US Navy, provided critical assistance (Sukma 2006: 221), as well as their contributions following the nuclear disaster near the Fukushima Daiichi reactor in Japan (Holt, Campbell, and Nikitin 2012: 12). The aid relief efforts after the tsunami and earthquake received significant coverage in the Indonesian and Japanese media and led to a

notable increase in favorable views of the US in 2005, two years after a Pew Research Center Survey (Wike 2012). Following this example, the PLA constructed a massive hospital ship named “Peace Ark”¹ (*Daishan Dao*-和平方舟). They deployed it annually under the name of “Harmonious Mission” to provide health services in different parts of the world, covering 53 countries.²

China’s Hospital Ship Initiative as a Tool for Military Public Diplomacy

Surveys conducted in the context of Indonesia indicate that US military-led relief efforts significantly enhanced public support for American engagement in the region. Furthermore, US aid efforts initiated a vigorous public discourse on whether the military’s involvement in disaster relief elevates its status to that of a public diplomacy agency within the broader framework of foreign policy (Wike 2012). Following the US aid activities closely, the PLA Navy’s hospital ship, Peace Ark, has conducted visits to multiple countries within these regions since 2010, providing humanitarian aid and medical assistance as part of its “Harmonious Mission” initiative (Benson 2013) under the concept of military public diplomacy. These examples and their positive impact on public opinion can be argued to reflect some primary practical tools that can be created and utilized to incorporate public diplomacy efforts into military operations.

Under international humanitarian law, as Article 22 of the 1949 Geneva Convention II outlines, a hospital ship is subject to strict legal definitions and requirements. To qualify, “a vessel must serve exclusively for the care, treatment, and transportation of the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked.” The owning state must formally make its designation as a hospital ship and communicate to all conflicting parties before deployment. The vessel must also display distinct markings, such as a white hull with red crosses or crescents, and fly a flag that signifies its hospital status. Furthermore, it must remain neutral by refraining from any hostile actions or activities that could compromise its humanitarian purpose, with weapons only permitted for defensive use. If these conditions are upheld, hospital ships are granted protection from attacks during armed conflicts. However, failure to comply with these criteria may result in losing their protected status under international law (International Humanitarian Law Databases 2017).

Due to the complex nature of the construct, not all naval vessels offering medical services at sea qualify as “hospital ships” under the definition established by international law. Currently, only the US, China, and Russia operate seagoing hospital ships that are internationally recognized and protected. In fact, apart from these countries, some other countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Indonesia, also have smaller vessels, such as amphibious ships or auxiliaries, that can be considered hospital ships. These vessels are not classified as hospital ships and therefore do not benefit from the specific protections afforded to hospital ships under international conventions. Additionally,

1 Due to the Chinese military’s institutional opacity, existing English-language research lacks verifiable sources or official documentation regarding the conceptual development of the Peace Ark hospital ship.

2 The data on the number of countries visited by the Peace Ark was derived from Table 2, compiled by the author.

they lack the capacity to accommodate large numbers of patients. Primarily designed for military operations, these ships are nonetheless versatile and cost-efficient assets capable of performing various international functions (Child 2020). Except for the old-fashioned hospital ships of the Russian Navy, the US has two giant military hospital ships, Mercy (T-AH-19) and Comfort (T-AH-20). Mercy has been operating mainly in Asia and the Pacific region and, in recent years, in Latin America and the Caribbean. These vessels were initially constructed as San Clemente Class supertankers but have been extensively redesigned and adapted to their current form (Bailey 2008: 353). The USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) and USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) are outfitted with 12 fully equipped operating rooms and a 1,000-bed hospital facility. They feature advanced medical infrastructure, including digital radiology, a medical laboratory, a pharmacy, an optometry lab, a computerized tomography (CT) scan, and oxygen production plants. Both ships are equipped with helicopter decks capable of accommodating large military helicopters and include side ports for receiving patients directly at sea (US Navy 2020).

Chinese military sources indicate that the development of hospital ships by the PLAN originated in the late Maoist era, prompted by a 1974 naval conflict between the PRC and Vietnam over the strategically significant Paracel Islands in the South China Sea (Mackenzie 2011: 2). In 2009, during the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PLA Navy, China unveiled the hospital ship Peace Ark. The Peace Ark hospital ship, constructed by the Chinese Defense Industry, regarded as a source of national pride and naval modernization, embarked on its inaugural voyage in 2010 (Zhuo 2023) as an institutional ocean-going hospital ship. (Panyue 2023) This vessel was introduced to enhance military diplomacy, facilitate medical exchanges, and promote cultural communication between China and various nations worldwide. (Ghosal Singh 2016: 30) The ship is presently unrivalled with at least 300 hospital beds and eight surgical suites, enabling it to conduct approximately 40 significant surgical operations daily. (Li 2020: 34) The Peace Ark has comprehensive diagnostic and examination facilities, including an X-ray suite, an ultrasound room, and a CT scanner. It also houses a clinical specimen examination room and a specialized gynecological examination room, which is invaluable during humanitarian missions. The ship facilitates patient boarding through a helicopter, boat, and hangar basket system (Mizokami 2014).

The Peace Ark is crucial in promoting China's military public diplomacy efforts with its diverse capabilities and specialized functions. By integrating advanced medical services with humanitarian initiatives, the vessel enhances China's international reputation, cultivates goodwill and reinforces diplomatic relations. Its delivery of medical care during disaster relief efforts, peacekeeping operations, and multinational exercises demonstrates a commitment to supporting global health and humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the ship's participation in international missions highlights the use of soft power, presenting China as a responsible and collaborative participant in the global community.

China's military public diplomacy constitutes a significant aspect of its broader foreign policy framework, designed to cultivate a favorable global reputation, strengthen strategic alliances, and foster trust among other nations. By engaging in humanitarian missions,

conducting military-to-military exchanges, and participating in international peacekeeping initiatives, China endeavors to convey an image of responsibility, collaboration, and a commitment to peaceful objectives. An essential element of this strategy involves utilizing military assets, such as the Peace Ark, to deliver humanitarian aid during natural disasters and public health emergencies. These initiatives highlight China's ability to support global security and well-being while aligning with its objective of positioning itself as a leader in addressing transnational issues. China further emphasizes its dedication to fostering mutual respect and understanding through joint military exercises, naval diplomacy, and cultural exchanges, mitigating apprehensions regarding its expanding military capabilities. This approach places significant emphasis on "soft power," defined as the capacity to influence others through appeal and persuasion rather than force (Nye 2004: 256), enabling China to pursue its national interests while advocating for a harmonious global order.

Nevertheless, some critics argue that these efforts are strategically driven to enhance China's geopolitical influence and counterbalance competing powers. China's military public diplomacy represents a deliberate blend of altruistic initiatives and strategic objectives, exemplified by the Harmonious Missions of the PLAN. It includes deploying hospital ships such as the Peace Ark, significantly enhancing its international stature and fostering enduring global partnerships.

China's primary motivation behind implementing public diplomacy policies is its desire to reshape international perceptions of its global rise. Faced with persistent narratives that portray China as a revisionist or aggressive power, the Chinese leadership seeks to project a more peaceful, cooperative, and altruistic image. China's public diplomacy also fulfills domestic and international legitimacy functions. At home, these missions instill national pride by showcasing the capabilities and modernization of the PLAN. On the global stage, they enhance China's credibility as a responsible and active contributor to international security and development, especially in global health diplomacy. The Peace Ark's involvement in epidemic response, disaster assistance, and medical exchanges positions China as a cooperative player in addressing transnational challenges. These efforts are also partly driven by strategic competition with the US. Observing the success of US humanitarian military initiatives, such as USNS Mercy and Comfort missions, China has adapted similar mechanisms to promote its own narrative and leadership model (Diehl and Major 2015: 5). Thus, the Harmonious Missions can be viewed not only as tools of goodwill but also as strategic instruments to advance China's long-term geopolitical objectives and to challenge US influence through soft power projection (Ghosal Singh 2016: 30)

Additionally, the PLAN hospital ship, Peace Ark, has participated in notable international exercises beyond the Harmonious Missions, particularly the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in 2014 and 2016. Peace Ark's engagement in these multinational exercises alongside the US Navy's hospital ship USNS Mercy offered unique opportunities for medical exchanges, cooperation, and trust-building between the two navies (Li 2016: 3) While these RIMPAC deployments were not formally categorized under the Harmonious

Missions framework, they nonetheless complement China's broader military public diplomacy objectives by demonstrating its willingness to engage constructively with international partners, including strategic rivals (Allen, Saunders, and Chen 2017: 25).

Harmonious Missions of Peace Ark within PLAN

Since 2010, the PLAN has carried out Harmonious Missions to enhance China's international image, demonstrate its blue-water naval capabilities, and deliver humanitarian assistance by deploying the hospital ship Peace Ark. These missions, strategically designed to foster diplomatic and military ties, have been conducted nine times by 2024. They have involved port visits and medical outreach across a broad geographic spectrum—including Asia, Africa, Oceania, South and North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean—reflecting China's efforts to position itself as a cooperative and responsible global actor in addressing transnational challenges.

Aligned with the “Harmonious World” concept introduced by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2005, the 2006 China National Defense White Paper emphasized that the People's Liberation Army, particularly the PLAN, could actively engage in international disaster relief efforts (The Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2006; Mackenzie 2011: 19). The concept of a Harmonious World advocates for multilateralism, mutually beneficial collaboration—particularly in the realm of economic cooperation—and the principle of inclusivity. Hospital ships' humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) missions align seamlessly with this framework. Thus, a mission akin to that of the USNS Mercy and Comfort—hospital ships modeled after those of the United States Armed Forces—was initiated to position China as a significant and peace-oriented participant in the international system.

As previously noted, the primary rationale for the Peace Ark's deployment in HA/DR missions was inspired by the US Navy's use of the USNS Mercy hospital ship during the 2004 tsunami and earthquake relief efforts in Indonesia. This operation provided a significant opportunity to enhance trust in the US military, specifically, and in the US more broadly, among the nations of the region (Kissane 2005: 4). China contributed only a limited number of medical teams to the relief effort and did not deploy any of its naval assets. Consequently, Beijing faced criticism for its delayed and inadequate response (Chacho 2013: 402). Analysts have highlighted the political successes of the USNS Mercy during Operation Unified Assistance as significant influences on the evolution of China's maritime forces (Bradford 2013: 28). After missing the opportunity to assist countries in the region, particularly Indonesia, during a natural disaster, Beijing capitalized on a new opportunity with the deployment of the Peace Ark hospital ship (Heinegg 2023: 486).

In June 2009, the PLAN, at the invitation of the US Navy, dispatched a four-member medical team to observe operations aboard the USNS Comfort. At the time, the Comfort was engaged in Operation Continuing Promise off the coast of Colombia (Harold 2013: 125). Peace Ark's first mission was a 40-day exercise in the South China Sea. In its inaugural mission in 2009, the ship departed from Shanghai and traveled to the South China Sea, where the onboard medical team delivered free healthcare services and treatment to more than 8,700 residents of remote islands in the region (People's Daily Overseas New Media 2019).

In 2010, China undertook a groundbreaking public diplomacy initiative by deploying the Peace Ark hospital ship on a mission to five African and Asian countries: Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, Seychelles, and Bangladesh. Known as Harmonious Mission-2010, this represented the PLAN’s first international medical public diplomacy operation (Dooley 2012: 71). Such missions are a form of military public diplomacy aimed at enhancing a nation’s global image by offering medical assistance to those in need. During this endeavor, the Peace Ark visited underdeveloped countries, providing critical medical care to vulnerable populations while fostering greater awareness and understanding of China among local communities. According to Chinese official news media sources, 336,548 patients have been treated in all missions since 2010, and 2,950 surgeries have been performed during these port visits. (China Daily 2019; Tang, Han, and Liu et al 2021: 1; Xinhua 2023; 2025). Treatment details, such as the number of visited ports, outpatients, and surgeries performed, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. People’s Liberation Army Navy Harmonious Missions Details³

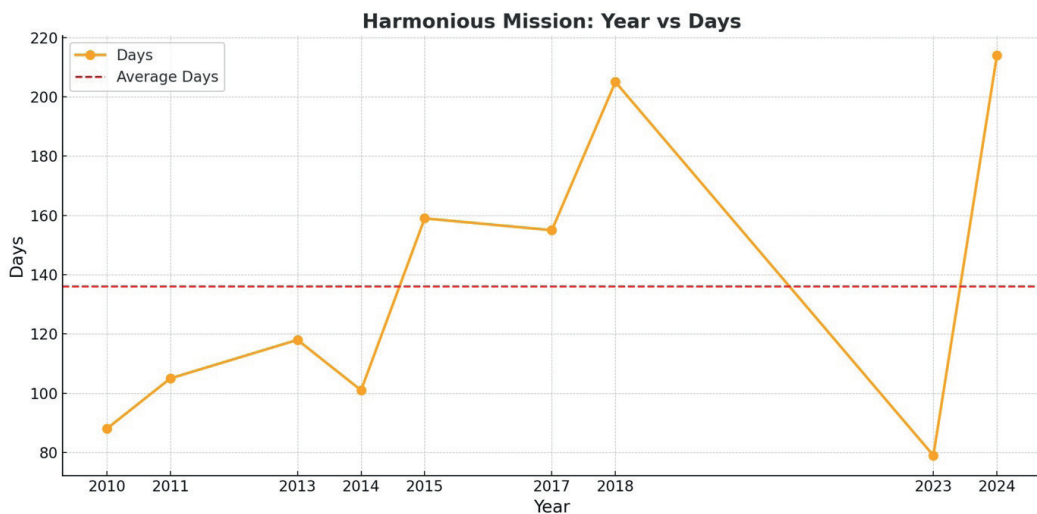
Harmonious Mission	Region	Port Visits in Countries	Duration	Number of Outpatients Treated	Number of Surgeries
2010	Africa and Asia	Djibouti, Seychelles, Kenya, Tanzania, and Bangladesh	88 days	17,345	97
2011	Latin America	Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Costa Rica	105 days	11,446	118
2013	Asia	Maldives, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Cambodia	118 days	30,713	293
2014	Africa and Oceania	Togo, Fiji, Vanuatu, and New Guinea	101 days	22,456	212
2015	Caribbean, North and South America, Africa, Oceania	Australia, French Polynesia, Mexico, Barbados, Grenada, Peru, Tanzania, Vanuatu, US (Hawaii)	159 days	17,838	59
2017	Africa and Asia	Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Gabon, Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, Timor Leste	155 days	61,528	299
2018	Oceania, Caribbean and South America	Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, Togo, Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Grenada, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Antigua and Barbuda	205 days	50,884	288
2023	Oceania and Asia	Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Timor Leste	79 days	41,358	192
2024	Africa and Asia	Seychelles, Tanzania, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, Angola, Gabon, Cameroon, Benin, Mauritania, Sri Lanka and Republic of Congo	214 days	82,890	1,392

3 The data on the number of countries visited by the Peace Ark compiled by the author from the references Dooley 2012; Harold 2013; Yan 2014; Parameswaran 2015; Glen and Solomon 2015, Yang 2019; People’s Daily Overseas New Media 2019; China Daily 2019; Tang, Han, and Liu et al 2021; China Diplomatic Digest 2023; Heinegg 2023; Xinhua 2023; Huaxia 2024; Thome 2025.

Since its inception in 2010, the Harmonious Missions have been conducted nine times as of 2024. These missions involved visits to various countries across Asia, Africa, Oceania, South and North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as outlined in Table 2. The Peace Ark did not undertake voyages in 2012 and 2016, and from 2018 to 2023, these missions were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Thome 2025). Although a brief 79-day tour was conducted in 2023, Harmonious Mission 2024 marked the most extended mission to date, spanning approximately 214 days (Yan 2014; Glen and Solomon 2015: 4; Harmonious Mission 2015; Parameswaran 2015; Yang 2019; Tang, Han, and Liu et al. 2021: 2; China Diplomatic Digest 2023; Huaxia 2024). During the pandemic, China has employed “vaccine diplomacy” as a soft power and public diplomacy tool to support various regions of the world, in place of its traditional Harmonious Missions (Üngör 2023: 63).

The extended duration of the Peace Ark’s military and diplomatic missions can be attributed to its extensive itinerary involving numerous country visits. This approach is strategically designed to maximize China’s outreach and interpersonal engagement, thereby enhancing the global reach and effectiveness of its military public diplomacy efforts. As illustrated in Table 3, the duration of Harmonious Missions has generally shown a consistent upward trend over time. Notably, Harmonious Mission 2014 experienced a reduction in duration, while Harmonious Mission 2017 maintained a relatively stable trajectory. The significant decrease in the duration of Harmonious Mission 2023 can be interpreted because it was the first mission conducted after the pandemic. This contrasts with Harmonious Mission 2024, which marked the longest mission in terms of duration. The significance of Table 4 lies in its reflection of the Chinese government’s sustained commitment to these missions, as evidenced by the increasing mission durations, which also highlight the government’s high expectations for the outcomes of the Harmonious Missions.

Table 3. Duration Trends of China’s Harmonious Missions (2010–2024)⁴



⁴ The chart presented in Table 3 was developed by the author using data extracted from Table 2.

Peace Ark has also occasionally carried out missions outside of Harmonious Mission. For example, in November 2013, Typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda) struck the Philippines, resulting in over 6,000 deaths and massive devastation. While the international community swiftly mobilized humanitarian assistance, the Chinese government's initial reaction was notably restrained. Beijing first pledged only \$100,000 in aid through the Red Cross Society of China, a figure widely criticized in international media and diplomatic circles for being disproportionately small compared to China's economic capacity and regional ambitions (Oremus 2013). This hesitance was primarily shaped by the tense state of China-Philippines bilateral relations, particularly the maritime disputes in the South China Sea surrounding the Scarborough Shoal. The political sensitivity of directly supporting a government engaged in territorial disputes with Beijing led to an initially cautious and symbolic response. However, faced with mounting international criticism and a growing awareness of the diplomatic cost of inaction, the Chinese government recalibrated its approach. Approximately two weeks after the disaster, Beijing deployed the Peace Ark hospital ship to the region—marking a shift from passive monetary support to visible humanitarian engagement. Although the mission was not officially part of the Harmonious Missions framework, it represented an ad hoc use of military public diplomacy tools to mitigate reputational damage and demonstrate China's regional goodwill. The delayed dispatch of Peace Ark highlighted the interplay between strategic calculations, regional geopolitics, and the emerging role of humanitarian aid in China's soft power strategy. (Oremus 2013; CRS Report 2014: 8).

Reflections on the Harmonious Missions of PLAN

The public perspective in countries visited by the Peace Ark hospital ship is generally positive, as it is often viewed as a symbol of humanitarian assistance and goodwill. Many local populations appreciate the medical aid, training, and supplies provided by the ship, which help address immediate healthcare challenges in underserved regions. Additionally, the ship's visits foster friendly relations between China and the host nations, aligning with the broader goals of public diplomacy (Panyue 2018).

Instances illustrating this phenomenon can be observed in news coverage provided by official Chinese media outlets. A notable example occurred during the Harmonious Mission 2010, when Chinese medical personnel provided life-saving treatment to a pregnant Bangladeshi woman suffering from a severe cardiac condition. Following the successful intervention and the birth of a healthy infant, the woman named her child "Chin", known as "China" in the local language, as a symbolic expression of gratitude toward the Chinese medical team. Following free medical treatment in another country, Fiji, a resident remarked on the high quality of care the Chinese military doctors provided. In appreciation, some island inhabitants offered fruit and written messages of thanks. In contrast, others expressed their gratitude through traditional gestures such as embracing and taking commemorative photographs with the medical personnel. Upon the departure of the medical team by helicopter, one of the local leaders conveyed his enduring appreciation by stating that both the Peace Ark mission and China were deeply valued, affirming that they would always be welcome on the island of Vatulele (China Military Online 2019).

These favorable opinions of the public indicate that the primary mission of the ship, contributing to the main “Global Harmony” mission, has been realized, since the Peace Ark hospital ship carried out the aforementioned missions for a variety of purposes, serving as an extension of China’s foreign policy objectives under the concept of military public diplomacy. For instance, in Kenya, one of the four African countries visited during the inaugural Harmonious Mission in 2010, Chinese doctors conducted medical examinations and surgeries and offered training to Kenyan medical professionals. Additionally, they supplied healthcare materials and resources to support local healthcare systems (Mackenzie 2011: 1). During the visit to Venezuela as part of Harmonious Mission-2017, Delcy Rodriguez, then Vice President of Venezuela, said that the Peace Ark brought cooperation, friendship, and peace to the people of her country, as befits its name. She added that the mission of the Peace Ark was commendable and worthy of praise. During the ship’s visit to the Republic of the Congo during the same period, then-Prime Minister Clement Mouamba described the ship as an ambassador of peace and stated that its activities not only strengthened the friendly relations between the two sides but also deepened mutual trust between the two peoples (Alwihda 2023). During Harmonious Mission 2018, Peace Ark participated in the bicentennial celebrations of the Chilean Navy as a representative of the PLAN. In doing so, it visited the port not as an official warship but in a peaceful and non-threatening capacity (Panyue 2018). The Peace Ark is also equipped to carry out non-combatant evacuation operations. Notably, the number of Chinese nationals working abroad grows annually, increasing the potential need for such missions. In times of crisis, the vessel could play a crucial role in facilitating the evacuation of Chinese citizens from affected regions⁵ (Mackenzie 2011: 19). Peace Ark’s visit to Mozambique and provision of medical services as part of its Harmonious Mission 2024 have also received significant coverage in the local press (Oyinloye 2024).

The positive public response towards the aid of Peace Ark also helped with the continuation of Beijing’s substantial allocation of financial resources to military public diplomacy activities through Harmonious Missions, highlighting the importance of these missions within the greater strategic vision. However, extended personnel deployments pose a logistical and operational challenge for the People’s Liberation Army Navy. Despite these challenges, China’s global

5 During the 2011 Libyan civil war, the Chinese government undertook its largest-ever non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), successfully withdrawing approximately 36,000 Chinese nationals from the conflict zone. Notably, the PLA Navy’s hospital ship, the Peace Ark, was not employed in this mission. There are several reasonable factors contributing to this fact, but the most notable ones are the nature of the crisis itself did not align with the medical and humanitarian functions for which Peace Ark is designed. As a naval hospital ship, its primary capabilities lie in delivering medical assistance and humanitarian relief, rather than executing high-volume transport or emergency extraction missions. Most Chinese nationals in Libya were not injured but stranded and required safe passage out of a conflict zone, not medical treatment. Thus, the deployment of a hospital ship, with limited capacity for passenger evacuation, would not have served the operational requirements of the mission. The other factor is that China’s overseas naval projection capabilities in 2011 were still in a formative stage. Although Peace Ark had been commissioned in 2008, it had yet to be employed in long-distance, crisis-driven deployments. The PLAN had limited experience conducting complex multinational coordination or extended blue-water operations under time-sensitive conditions. Instead, the Chinese government relied on frigates and civilian maritime and aviation assets, which offered greater flexibility and responsiveness in a rapidly deteriorating security environment (Colins and Erickson 2011).

military public diplomacy efforts, initiated through the Harmonious Missions in 2010, can be interpreted as part of its broader assumption of global power responsibilities, mirroring the long-standing practices of the US government. Within this framework, the strategic gains achieved by the Beijing government through the Harmonious Missions can be analyzed under the following key themes:

Enhancement of China's Soft Power: The Harmonious Missions underscore China's capability to deliver humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, reinforcing its narrative of fostering a harmonious and peaceful global order. By offering medical services, disaster response, and rescue operations, the PLAN projects an image of altruism and international cooperation, effectively challenging the perception of China's rise as being primarily centered on military or economic dominance.

Strengthening Bilateral and Multilateral Relationships: These missions often target regions where China's strategic interests align with its need to build stronger relationships, such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. By offering medical aid and humanitarian support during crises, China strengthens its ties with recipient nations, fostering mutual trust and paving the way for deeper diplomatic and economic cooperation.

Mitigating Concerns Over Military Expansion: These missions' humanitarian focus helps alleviate apprehensions about China's growing military power, particularly in regions like the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific. By engaging in non-combat roles, the PLA Navy presents itself as a force for the common good, emphasizing peaceful engagement rather than military assertiveness.

Promoting Global Health Diplomacy: The deployment of the Peace Ark during epidemics, natural disasters, or post-conflict reconstruction contributes to China's global health diplomacy efforts. These missions demonstrate China's capability and willingness to address global health challenges, enhancing its reputation as a cooperative player in international health governance.

Increasing Influence in International Institutions: By participating in joint humanitarian exercises and collaborating with international organizations, the PLA Navy strengthens China's position within global governance frameworks. These efforts contribute to China's long-term strategy of influencing international norms and shaping a global order that reflects its values and priorities.

Boosting Domestic and International Legitimacy: Domestically, these missions promote national pride by showcasing China's technological advancements and ability to contribute meaningfully to global affairs. Internationally, they reinforce China's image as a responsible and proactive member of the global community.

Conversely, despite the considerations above, the military public diplomacy initiatives undertaken by the PLA Navy as part of the Harmonious Missions have faced notable criticisms. These critiques primarily emphasize the perceived lack of transparency on the part of the Beijing administration, particularly from the perspective of Western observers. Critics

argue that these missions promote China's strategic interests under the pretext of providing humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

With the emphasis placed on military-led soft power in the US and China, the absence of a deeper and more critical evaluation of these fundamental assumptions represents a significant shortcoming in academic studies. This study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by presenting how hard power can be used as a soft power tool by objectively analyzing the impact of China's Harmonious Mission activities, focusing on its Peace Ark initiative. These missions are a cornerstone of China's public diplomacy strategy, leveraging humanitarian and non-combat operations to enhance its soft power and global influence.

The Beijing government views the expanding global presence of the PLA as a vital component of its overarching international strategy, designed to facilitate the nation's broader goal of national rejuvenation. To this end, the PLA has been tasked with developing power projection capabilities that extend beyond China's borders, safeguarding its overseas interests, and advancing its foreign policy objectives. These efforts, alongside the harmonious missions initiated in 2010, reflect China's readiness to utilize a blend of humanitarian incentives and strategic measures to strengthen its global security and development agenda. Furthermore, the PLA's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, anti-piracy missions, and military diplomacy underscores its intent to institutionalize its presence on the international stage.

The Peace Ark hospital ship epitomizes Beijing's integration of military public diplomacy within its broader foreign policy framework. Through its Harmonious Missions, the vessel has provided humanitarian assistance, medical outreach, and disaster relief, alleviating immediate needs while simultaneously enhancing China's global reputation. These efforts mitigate concerns over China's growing military influence and showcase its capacity to address transnational challenges and contribute to international stability. Domestically, such missions instill national pride and reinforce China's image as a technologically advanced and globally responsible power.

In addition to shaping its global image, China's public diplomacy is a complementary tool to its hard power strategies, supporting broader foreign policy goals such as the Belt and Road Initiative. These public diplomacy initiatives are particularly directed toward strategically significant regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where China aims to deepen bilateral relationships and expand its influence. These engagements help to foster trust, open avenues for economic and political cooperation, and consolidate China's role as a responsible global stakeholder. Furthermore, public diplomacy applications allow China to alleviate concerns surrounding its military expansion. By emphasizing its naval operations' humanitarian and softer nature, China reassures neighboring countries and the international community that its growing military capabilities are geared toward peaceful engagement rather than hegemonic dominance.

While the Harmonious Missions have generated global goodwill through their provision of humanitarian aid, they have also attracted skepticism regarding China's underlying motivations. Critics argue that these initiatives primarily serve China's geopolitical interests under the guise of humanitarianism, thereby raising concerns about transparency and strategic intent. This skepticism is further reinforced by a perceived inconsistency between China's official discourse of a "peaceful rise" and its assertive behavior in regional disputes, particularly in the East China Sea with Japan. Nevertheless, the long-term significance of the Harmonious Missions may lie in their dual function: simultaneously addressing global humanitarian needs and serving as instruments of China's broader strategic ambitions. By focusing on regions critical to its interests—such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—China continues strengthening its bilateral and multilateral relationships, fostering trust and paving the way for deeper engagement. Furthermore, by emphasizing humanitarian engagement, China seeks to mitigate concerns over its military expansion while bolstering domestic legitimacy and national pride. Inspired partly by the US humanitarian naval diplomacy, China's approach reflects a calculated blend of soft power projection and strategic interest, positioning itself as a cooperative global actor while advancing its geopolitical influence.

The Harmonious Missions, particularly the deployment of the Peace Ark hospital ship, exemplify the duality of military-led humanitarian initiatives. These missions are instrumental in addressing pressing global needs and advancing China's aspirations for global leadership and governance aspirations. As China's international influence continues to expand, the Peace Ark and similar efforts will remain central to its strategy, striking a balance between soft power projection and the strategic imperatives of a rising global power. Future research could further enhance the understanding of military public diplomacy by conducting comparative analyses of similar initiatives by other global powers, evaluating long-term perceptions of these missions in recipient countries, and investigating the domestic implications of military-led soft power strategies on national identity and civil-military relations. Additionally, further research might focus on assessing the transparency and perceived authenticity of military public diplomacy efforts and their effectiveness in achieving strategic foreign policy objectives.

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