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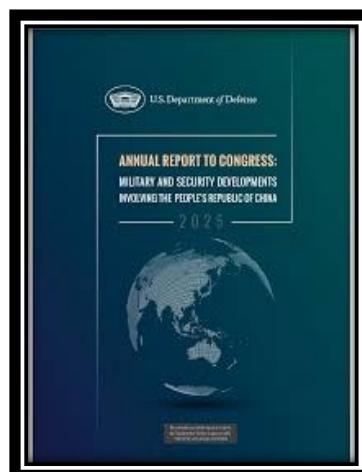
US DoD Annual Report on Chinese Military and Security Developments

Russia-Ukraine War at a Crossroads: Trump-Zelensky Talks and the Road to 2026

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US DoD Annual Report on Chinese Military and Security Developments

The US Department of Defence's 2025 annual report on military and security developments involving China, released on 24 Dec 2025, details how Beijing's expanding military power and strategic ambitions are reshaping security dynamics across Asia and beyond. The report portrays China's leadership as committed to building a modern, integrated military capable of conducting joint operations across land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains. Military modernisation is embedded within China's broader aim of achieving "national rejuvenation" by mid-century. Sustained defence spending, institutional reforms, and the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, and space capabilities support it. The report argues that this rapid modernisation is central to China's ability to challenge the United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific and to assert global influence.



sophistication, with aircraft carriers, submarines, and advanced surface vessels that enhance power projection and sea control well beyond regional waters. Air forces are also expanding in capability, with fifth-generation fighters and long-range strike platforms extending Beijing's operational reach. Strategic missile forces, including conventional and nuclear systems, have grown rapidly; the report notes a significant increase in intercontinental ballistic missiles and silo fields, underscoring China's intent to bolster its strategic deterrent. Investments in space and cyber capabilities are designed to support integrated operations and to challenge adversary command, control, and intelligence networks.

Operationally, the report emphasises China's increasingly assertive behaviour in contested areas. Around Taiwan, the People's Liberation Army has conducted frequent air and naval operations intended to signal resolve and deter external involvement, which the report interprets as coercive but calibrated to avoid outright conflict. In the South China Sea and East China Sea, Chinese maritime forces and maritime militia remain active in enforcing extensive territorial claims that run counter to international law and the interests of regional states.

Within the broader Indo-Pacific context, the report highlights evolving India-China dynamics, noting that while recent tensions along the Line of Actual Control have eased following de-escalation agreements, Beijing appears to be leveraging the temporary calm to reset relations with India and offset the strategic momentum of closer India-US ties. The report suggests that China aims to blunt the impact of India's growing cooperation with the United States by emphasising border stability, even as it deepens security cooperation with Pakistan. It also notes that China's expansive territorial rhetoric, including references to Indian states such as Arunachal Pradesh, fits a pattern of broad sovereignty claims that could be used to justify future diplomatic or coercive pressure.

A particularly significant development highlighted in the report is China's offer to provide up to 40 advanced fifth-generation Shenyang J-35 stealth fighters to Pakistan. These aircraft, if acquired and integrated into the Pakistan Air Force, would mark a significant escalation in Sino-Pakistani defence cooperation and could alter the airpower balance in South Asia. The inclusion of the J-35 offer in the Pentagon's assessment underscores how China is using high-end defence exports to deepen strategic ties and expand its defence industrial footprint among key partners.

For the Indo-Pacific region, China's expanding military capabilities challenge the existing balance of power, compelling regional states to reassess defence strategies and partnerships. Enhanced Chinese reach and precision-strike capabilities, combined with assertive postures in contested waters, place pressure on freedom of navigation and overflight, which are essential to the region's security and economic stability. This dynamic increases the complexity of deterrence, particularly around crisis-prone areas such as the Taiwan Strait and the Himalayan frontier.

As per the US DoD assessment, regional actors, including India, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN member states, may accelerate defence modernisation and deepen interoperability among themselves and with external partners to hedge against coercive pressure. For India specifically, the twin pressures of stabilised but unresolved border disputes with China and the potential for advanced Chinese military technology to proliferate among neighbouring states, such as Pakistan, underline the importance of reinforcing its strategic partnerships, investing in indigenous capabilities, and maintaining diplomatic agility to manage complex, multi-layered security challenges.

The 2025 DoD report portrays China's military rise as a defining factor in Indo-Pacific security, one that demands vigilant, calibrated engagement from regional and extra-regional stakeholders alike. The report argues that effective deterrence in the Indo-Pacific will depend on sustained, robust defence capabilities, strengthened alliances, and coordinated responses to emerging threats.

Russia–Ukraine War at a Crossroads: Trump–Zelensky Talks and the Road to 2026

During December 2025, the Russia–Ukraine conflict entered a phase marked by persistent and escalating military clashes on the ground, even as diplomatic efforts have intensified at the international level. Russian forces continued to press offensives across several frontline sectors, particularly around the Donetsk and northeastern axes, where artillery barrages, drone strikes, and infantry assaults have kept Ukrainian defenders under extreme pressure. In late December 2025, Russia launched a series of air and drone attacks targeting urban infrastructure and the energy grid in southern Ukraine, including strikes in the Odesa region that left significant portions of the power network offline amid winter conditions.

Ukrainian forces, while holding key defensive positions, have at times conducted tactical withdrawals from exposed salients to preserve combat effectiveness, using

drones and precision fires to inflict counter-damage on Russian logistics nodes and supply lines. In one notable Ukrainian operation, drones struck a Russian oil depot at Rybinsk, underscoring Kyiv's willingness to extend its offensive reach deep into Russian territory despite continued hostilities at home.

Amid this intense combat environment, nuanced diplomatic moves have unfolded, with a particularly consequential development in late December 2025, when U.S. President Donald Trump hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at his Florida estate for a dedicated peace negotiation. Trump publicly stated that the United States and Ukraine were "closer than ever before" to forging a peace deal to end the nearly four-year war, characterising the discussions as constructive and signalling that draft negotiations were "about 90–95 % complete."



The talks, which took place at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club, covered an extensive agenda including security guarantees for Ukraine, the future status of contested territories such as the Donbas, and mechanisms for a ceasefire and demilitarised zones. Trump also shared that he had spoken with Russian President Vladimir Putin both before and after, and suggested that both leaders appeared willing to work toward an agreed settlement.

President Zelensky, while echoing optimism about progress, was more circumspect about the terms. He emphasised that Ukraine sought substantial, long-term or even multi-decade security guarantees to ensure its sovereignty and deter future aggression. Some reports indicated Ukrainian discussions included proposals for multi-decade security arrangements, with Zelensky warning that national referendum approval might be necessary if the deal contemplated territorial adjustment. At the same time, Zelensky reiterated that he would not sign a weak peace deal.

Russia's response to the Trump–Zelensky meeting was mixed and largely noncommittal, revealing deep divisions within Moscow over how it perceives the negotiations. While some Kremlin officials publicly praised Trump's "peace efforts" and described them in conciliatory terms, suggesting that the international community appreciated U.S. engagement, Russia's broader posture remained resistant to concessions. Moscow has insisted that any settlement must reflect what it calls the "new territorial realities" on the ground, effectively seeking recognition of Russian control over occupied regions and the annexation of areas such as the Donbas and Crimea. Russian leaders also reiterated long-standing demands that Ukraine abandon its NATO aspirations and limit its military capacity.

Thus, the diplomatic milieu remains precarious. The Trump-Zelensky meeting has injected new momentum into peace planning, with U.S. and European envoys expected to pursue follow-up consultations in early 2026. European leaders, including those from France, Germany, and other NATO members, plan further meetings to consolidate positions and coordinate with Kyiv on security guarantee proposals. Yet Moscow's hardline conditions, coupled with unresolved issues such

as the status of key industrial regions and the sequencing of troop withdrawals, continue to pose significant barriers to a final agreement.

Looking ahead to 2026, the war's trajectory appears poised between several possible outcomes shaped by the interplay of military attrition, diplomatic negotiation, and external support dynamics. Politically, both sides face domestic pressures: Ukraine is desperate to secure security assurances that could reduce the risk of future invasion, while Russia seeks to entrench its geopolitical gains and avert strategic losses that might accompany a negotiated settlement. External actors — particularly the United States and European allies — will remain central in shaping incentives for compromise, with Washington's role as a mediator now underscored by the Trump–Zelensky talks.

The most plausible scenario for 2026 may be a managed stalemate or partial settlement framework that reduces large-scale hostilities without fully resolving core disagreements — a transition toward a frozen conflict with periodic flare-ups rather than an outright end to the war.

Yemen's Conflict Enters New Phase as Saudi-UAE Rift Deepens



Yemen's decade-long civil war, already the world's worst humanitarian crisis, shifted dramatically in late December 2025. Once united in their opposition to the Iran-aligned Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) now find themselves in open disagreement that risks fracturing the anti-Houthi coalition and deepening instability across the Arabian Peninsula.

On 30 December 2025, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on the southern Yemeni port city of Mukalla, claiming the strikes targeted a weapons shipment from the UAE destined for the Southern Transitional Council (STC) — a powerful separatist faction seeking

independence for southern Yemen. Riyadh framed the operation as a necessary response to an "imminent threat" posed by the arms delivery, which Saudi officials said arrived aboard vessels that turned off their tracking systems before off-loading combat vehicles, ammunition and other military equipment.

The UAE vehemently denied supplying weapons to any Yemeni faction, acknowledging only that it had sent vehicles for use by its own personnel and calling for restraint and dialogue. Despite rejecting Saudi allegations, Abu Dhabi soon followed with a startling announcement: it would withdraw its remaining military forces from Yemen and end its counterterrorism mission there.

This withdrawal represents a significant shift in Gulf involvement. The UAE had already scaled back its presence after withdrawing most of its troops in 2019, but the latest decision terminates its last combat role in Yemen. Riyadh backed the move after Yemen's internationally recognised Presidential Leadership Council

(PLC) demanded that all Emirati forces leave within 24 hours, framing the step as a sovereignty imperative.

The Mukalla airstrike and the UAE's pullout have exposed simmering tensions in Riyadh-Abu Dhabi relations, turning strategic disagreements into a direct clash. Once close allies whose cooperation underpinned multiple Gulf interventions—from the 2017 blockade of Qatar to joint efforts in Libya and Sudan—the two monarchies now face a serious disagreement over Yemen's future. Analysts attribute the rupture not only to divergent military strategies in Yemen but also to broader geopolitical and economic rivalries that have accumulated over recent years.

The STC, supported historically by the UAE, has made significant territorial gains throughout 2025. By early December, STC forces had expelled Saudi-aligned government troops from much of Hadramawt and Mahra provinces, securing key ports, oil facilities, and trade infrastructure near the Saudi border. This advance alarmed Riyadh, which views a powerful, UAE-backed quasi-state in southern Yemen as a direct threat to its territorial security.

In response to the Mukalla strike, the PLC declared a 90-day state of emergency, cancelled a defence pact with the UAE, and imposed a temporary blockade on ports and border crossings in territory it controls. Yemeni anti-Houthi forces also severed cooperation with the UAE and announced a 72-hour closure of key access points, illustrating how intra-coalition ties have rapidly deteriorated.

Despite the UAE's decision to withdraw its forces, there is little indication that the STC will abandon territory it now controls. Southern separatists have resisted calls to retreat from Hadramawt and Mahra, instead insisting their gains reflect legitimate aspirations of Yemen's southern population for self-determination. This stance suggests that territorial consolidation by the STC is likely to persist, raising the risk that Yemen's south may effectively secede.

International reactions reflect a mix of concern and diplomatic caution. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that a resumption of full-scale fighting could destabilise the wider Red Sea region, heightening refugee flows and threatening global trade routes. The United States urged restraint and continued dialogue among the parties. At the same time, regional players such as Oman have sought to facilitate talks between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to prevent further escalation.

For Riyadh, the Mukalla episode underscores the limits of a strategy that relies on proxy forces with competing agendas. The Kingdom's attempt to counter the Houthis through allied Yemeni factions is now complicated by the STC's assertive push for southern autonomy—backed until now by a partner that Riyadh increasingly sees as prioritising its own regional footprint. Abu Dhabi, for its part, is recalibrating its approach after years of deploying forces across multiple theatres, emphasising diplomatic engagement and strategic realignment.

As Gulf relations recalibrate, Yemen's prospects remain grim. A power struggle not only with the Houthis in the north but also among erstwhile allies in the south threatens to turn the conflict into a three-way deadlock.