

CHINA'S MILITARY: WHAT'S NEW? AND WHAT'S NEXT?

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RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) enters 2015, it can take pride in several years of impressive accomplishments. These span the spectrum of combat capabilities, ranging from weapons upgrades, organizational changes, more sophisticated training exercises, and leadership.

Upgraded Weaponry

In terms of weapons, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) launched the country's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, in 2013. In the following year, the Liaoning deployed out of territory for the first time. As if marking its territory, the carrier circumnavigated the Japanese archipelago and the Taiwan Strait before docking at Sanya, home of the nuclear submarine base of PLAN's South Sea Fleet. The navy has also recently deployed Jin-class ballistic missile nuclear submarines equipped with missiles whose estimated range is 7,400 kilometers, hence providing China with its first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent. The nuclear-powered attack submarine force has also expanded. The Chinese air force (PLAAF), the largest in Asia, has test-flown a stealthy fighter, the J-20, as well as a second next-generation fighter prototype that is similar in size to the American air force's F-35. The Second Artillery Force, PLASAF, which is the PLA's strategic missile arm, improved its already impressive ballistic missile capabilities. In August 2014, China's *Global Times* confirmed the existence of a new ICBM, the DF-41, which is capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads as far as the United States.¹ A hypersonic missile has been tested. Designed to be launched from an ICBM, glides and maneuvers at speeds from five to ten times the speed of sound from near space to its targets, which are presumably U.S. missile defenses.² The Chinese success has been all the more striking in view of setbacks in American efforts to develop hypersonic weapons. An August 2014 U.S. test launch failed four seconds after take-off from its Alaskan base.³ Chinese generals continue to issue incendiary statements via social media, and even occasionally in official media,⁴ though these may be intended more for domestic propaganda purposes than as statements of actual intent.

¹ *Agence France Presse*, August 1, 2014.

² Bill Gertz, *Washington Free Beacon*, January 13, 2014.

³ <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140825/DEFREG02/308250004/US-Army-s-Hypersonic-Missile-Fails-During-Test>

⁴ <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304211804577500521756902802> *Wall Street Journal* July 1, 2012.

The PLA's cyberspying is sophisticated and worrisome to countries it targets. According to a detailed report issued by the private security investigation firm Mandiant, much of this is orchestrated by the PLA's cyberespionage arm, Unit 61398. Several PLA members have been indicted for allegedly stealing from American companies in the nuclear power, steel, and solar industries.⁵ In September 2014, the Senate Armed Forces Committee released a heavily redacted report detailing the Chinese military's cyber penetration of U.S. transportation command contractors. The report warned that, should the United States find itself in armed conflict, attacks based on the information gleaned from cyberspying are expected to include denial of service, corruption of data and supply chains, sabotage activities by infiltrated traitors, and both kinetic and non-kinetic attacks at all levels from underwater to space. U.S. guns, missiles and bombs might not fire, or could be directed against American troops. Resupply, including food, water, ammunition, and fuel might not arrive when or where needed.⁶

Organizational Reforms

Organizationally, soon after assuming the titles of president, party general secretary, and chair of the central military commission (CMC), Xi Jinping announced his intention to reorganize the military. This initiative included the establishment of five leading small groups for all aspects of military work. Among salient questions being addressed were how to right-size the PLA and how to eliminate military corruption. With regard to the former, a transition from military regional control to joint operations that has been suggested could result in significant reduction of redundancy in personnel at the top levels of the country's seven military regions.

Additionally, in March 2013, four of the country's five maritime enforcement agencies were merged into the China Coast Guard under the aegis of the State Oceanic Administration, in order to eliminate overlap in command and functions. In November of the same year, Beijing announced that it intended to establish the country's first National Security Commission (NSC) to coordinate security policy formation and provide strong central leadership. According to the official *Renmin Ribao*,

...The current leading groups and their offices for foreign affairs, national security, and anti-terror work under the Party Central Committee are characterized by their non-official and provisional nature. It is difficult for them to trace, analyze, and coordinate routine affairs as the core organs for state security affairs. Also, they lack sufficient manpower and resources to respond to sudden contingencies and to formulate, coordinate, and supervise the implementation of national security strategies of comprehensive nature.⁷

In what was seen as a move to further consolidate his power, Xi Jinping was named head of the NSC. There have been persistent rumors that the Chinese Communist Party's control over the military has eroded, despite regular denials that this is the case.⁸ These rumors received a degree of credence in 2007 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied knowledge of the PLA's destroying a satellite in outer space after news thereof had appeared in a respected American defense magazine and been confirmed by the U.S. Department of Defense.⁹ A second instance occurred four years later, when the J-20 was tested during U.S. Secretary of State Robert Gates' visit. Responding to Gates' query about what appeared to be a calculated insult, then-president Hu Jintao replied that he had had no prior knowledge of the test.¹⁰ Although Xi Jinping has never been in active-duty service, he has better connections with the military than his predecessor and is regarded as more likely to be able to tighten control on the basis of these ties.

In addition to being named head of the NSC, another reform that seems aimed at increasing Xi's power as well as enabling the better use of PLA resources, has been the campaign against military corruption. Part of a campaign against corruption in all spheres, it has ensnared several high-ranking military officers in addition to a large number of lesser known figures. Among the most notable of the former was Politburo member and CMC vice-chair General

⁵ Serdar Yegulalp, *Infoworld Tech Watch*, May 19, 2014. <http://www.infoworld.com/article/2608241/cyber-crimeu-s--charges->

⁶ Available at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SASC_Cyberreport_091714.pdf

⁷ *Renmin Ribao* (overseas edition), November 13, 2013.

⁸ For example, then-deputy chief of the PLA's general staff General Xiong Guangkai told visiting Japanese politician Ozawa Ichirō "People say that the PLA are hawks and the civilian leadership are doves, but the PLA just obeys the government's orders." *Xinhua*, May 3, 1996.

⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1539948/Chinese-missile-destroys-satellite-in-space.html>. January 19, 2007.

¹⁰ <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704428004576075042571461586>. January 12, 2011.

Xu Caihou, who was accused of selling military ranks, an illegal but relatively common practice that netted General Xu many millions of dollars.¹¹ Deputy head of the PLA's General Logistics Department Lieutenant General Gu Junshan has been accused of profiting from the purchase and sale of military real estate. Four truckloads of goods, including a boat and a statue of Mao Zedong, were confiscated from his mansion.¹² General Guo Boxiong, another former CMC deputy chair who was under investigation, reportedly fled to evade arrest but was detained at customs. 39 Chinese netizens were arrested for spreading rumors that included photographs purporting to show the general dressed as a woman and wearing a wig.¹³ Under Chinese law, spreading rumors is a crime whether or not the rumors are true.

Assertive Behavior

Almost simultaneously with the establishment of the NSC, Beijing proclaimed the creation of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that encompasses areas contested with Japan and South Korea. Still more worrisome was the announcement that other ADIZ might follow. The intent of these organizational changes was to tighten control over the waters of the East China Sea and South China Sea, which the PRC contests with several other countries. An oil-drilling rig was set up in waters claimed by Vietnam, and Chinese naval vessels have blocked the Philippines from resupplying a ship Manila had grounded on a South China Sea shoal as a marker of its sovereignty. In May 2014, construction began on five contested reefs and shoals to create new islands that would allow the PRC to claim it has an exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles around each, as well as to allow the installation of surveillance equipment, including radars.¹⁴ Chinese fishing boats regularly appear in the East China Sea waters around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which are under Japanese jurisdiction but are claimed by China.

Japanese sources have stated that the Chinese navy is sending increasing numbers of civilian vessels, including members of maritime militias, into disputed waters and paying them rewards. Maritime militiamen in civilian ships reportedly also appeared around the oil rig in disputed South China Sea waters, complicating the efforts of Vietnamese coast guard ships to approach the area.¹⁵ American reconnaissance planes are regularly harassed, the latest incident occurring in mid-August when a Chinese jet flew dangerously close to a P-8 Poseidon in international waters. Beijing replied to Washington's protest by saying that the practice would continue as long as the U.S. flights did.¹⁶ On the eve of Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi, the first by a Chinese president in eight years, a thousand PLA soldiers crossed the line of actual control (LAC) in a border area disputed by the two countries. They were accompanied by heavy construction equipment and workers who stated they had received orders to build a road that would intrude five kilometers into the LAC.¹⁷ The aim would seem to be to move the LAC forward, to the disadvantage of India. In Africa, China has been accused of using a United Nations Peacekeeping Operation as a cover for sending its troops, in the form of a 700-man UN PKO force, to protect its oil workers and investments in South Sudan.¹⁸

The intent here may be what Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov has called non-linear warfare. Also sometimes referred to as hybrid warfare, it involves a range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures in a carefully integrated design, which in this case would be consolidation of the PRC's territorial claims in areas it contests with its neighbors as well as the protection of assets in areas it does not contest.

Training Exercises

In terms of training, recent exercises have built incrementally toward the goal of achieving full territory operational capabilities, meaning the ability of troops to rapidly maneuver over long distances outside of their regional boundaries while confronting an enemy force. In 2013 these cross-region exercises included maritime force

¹¹ *New York Times*, July 1, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/world/asia/china-moves-against-one-of-its-top-leaders.html?_r=0

¹² <http://english.caixin.com/2014-01-16/100630028.html>

¹³ <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/816873-netizens-arrested-for-spreading-rumors-of-runaway-chinese-general/> July 28, 2014.

¹⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/world/asia/spratly-archipelago-china-trying-to-bolster-its-claims-plants-islands-in-disputed-waters.html?_r=0 *New York Times*, May 18, 2014.

¹⁵ <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001561024>, September 12, 2014,

¹⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/9/13/us-usa-china-surveillance-idUSKBN0H72KN20140913> *Reuters*, September 13, 2014,

¹⁷ <http://www.dailyexcelsior.com> *Daily Excelsior* (Jammu), September 19, 2014.

¹⁸ <https://ca.finance.yahoo.com/news/china-using-un-cover-sending-190109147.html> *Reuters*, September 17, 2014.

projection and amphibious landings. Exercises also included a long-distance aerial attack. Most recently, “Stride-14” was billed as the first event in a four-year plan to evaluate all ground force combined arms brigades and specialized single-arm brigades. The precise use of quantitative data for evaluation was to be used to determine future reorganizations. According to official media, Stride-2014 had significantly raised the bar in training standards.¹⁹

THE ROAD AHEAD

2015 will build on these accomplishments. The Liaoning is expected to add an operational air wing, and a second aircraft carrier, the first to be produced by China, is reportedly under construction. A deep-sea base at Qingdao, home of the North Sea Fleet, is being constructed to serve as home port for PLAN’s manned deep-sea submersible, the Jiaolong. Newer submarines are expected to incorporate better quieting technologies as well as torpedoes and anti-ship cruise missiles. Research is being conducted on a hypersonic, scramjet-powered vehicle that can either take off independently or be launched from a bomber. Progress is to continue on efforts to make the PLA leaner and hence putatively more combat-effective, and generous resources are to be allocated to this endeavor.

Plans do not always come to fruition and obstacles must be overcome. It can be seen from the explanations given for the founding of the National Security Commission and the consolidation of the various maritime patrol units that the central government perceives serious problems of command, control, and coordination. Efforts to tighten control and streamline will inevitably meet resistance from entrenched interests. Bureaucracies that have traditionally exercised control within a certain sphere do not take kindly to having their prerogatives circumscribed and are adept at finding blocking strategies. With specific regard to China, this is epitomized in the saying “you [i.e. the central government] have a policy; I have a counterpolicy.”

There are hints of resistance to the small groups, with the head of one reporting, for example, that progress in the conduct of two surveys of military infrastructure and real estate had been “uneven,” as well as a comment from Xi Jinping that seems to indicate that local levels are resisting the leading group’s efforts: “No unit can speak objectively or discuss the conclusions.”²⁰ Several suicides and unexplained deaths that appear to be suicides have been reported, the latest being that Rear Admiral Jiang Zhonghua of the South Sea Fleet’s armament department had fallen to his death from a Zhejiang hotel.²¹ What affect the purges will have on military morale and, more broadly, on Xi’s relations with the military, is not known. Nor is it a foregone conclusion that military corruption will markedly decrease. Many Chinese are cynical. Believing that most people in high positions, whether in the military, party, government, or commercial spheres, are corrupt, they tend to see those charged as no more guilty than those who have not been charged, but rather as collateral road kill in a high-level political power struggle.

In any case, there are recent indications that the impact of the anti-corruption campaign has gone too far and may be called off or at least severely curtailed. In the words of Hubei Party Secretary Li Hongzhong, the campaign has caused cadres to become “panicked and insecure, making being an official even more difficult than it already was” while others believe that “although the current anticorruption wind is ferocious, it is really only a gust—that the campaign won’t have a lasting impact, because there’s too much focus on punishing corruption and not early enough on building a better government.”²²

Another area in which hints that plans for better centralization have not come to fruition is in maritime surveillance. In order to enlist the help of coastal provinces in maritime surveillance, the Beijing government has had to provide more modern, seaworthy ships that can better withstand the waters further offshore, and which the provinces were not eager to bear the financial costs of. These enhancements to provincial-level units undermine the underlying premise for the 2013 centralization reform. Moreover, since different provinces have different rules and operating procedures, a delicate and difficult task of persuading local units to implement what is referred to as “guidance” from above will be required before standardization can be achieved.²³ While outright resistance is unlikely,

¹⁹ *Xinhua*, August 7, 2014.

²⁰ Cited by James Mulvenon, “Groupthink? PLA Leading Small Groups and the Prospect for Real Reform and Change in the Chinese Military,” *China Leadership Monitor*, September 2014, p. 2.

²¹ *Ming Pao*, September 5, 2014. The paper reported that the death had occurred on September 2.

²² <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/09/19/is-it-just-a-matter-of-time-before-chinas-last-decent-housing-market-cracks-too/?mod=WSJBlog&mod=chinablog> September 19, 2011.

²³ Ryan Martinson, “Power to the Provinces: The Devolution of China’s Maritime Rights Protection,” *China Brief*, Vol. 14, Issue 17,

negotiation and, failing that, feigned compliance are effective ways to modify or even vitiate the aims of any or all of these reform plans.

Nor do obstacles end with the human element. Bringing the Liaoning and its future sister ships to the level of Western carriers will require several years and sustained attention. Reportedly, two PLA pilots have already died while training on jets slated to operate from the Liaoning.²⁴ The Liaoning has a ski jump rather than a catapult launch, the latter being needed for heavier fighters. Military expert Richard Fisher predicts that future carriers will be larger and include these. According to naval analyst James Bussert, the Liaoning will also need to add shore-based maritime patrol aircraft such as the TU-154 anti-submarine planes and Shaanxi Y-8 airborne early warning and control aircraft as well, since they are within range of most carrier operation areas and add capabilities the Liaoning's aircraft do not have, including longer loiter time and range as well as several sensors, communications equipment, and weapons.²⁵ The carrier's logistics capability is limited due to lack of onboard delivery equipment such as provided by the U.S. navy's C-2 Greyhound.²⁶

The Chinese military is well aware of the deficiencies in its combat capabilities, and efforts to address them will continue. In the absence of some major, and highly unlikely, economic catastrophe, the double-digit increases that have characterized the defense budget since 1989 will go on, providing adequate funding for improvement and a continuation of the rapid progress of the past two decades. Provocative behavior in the East and South China seas and on the border with India is likely to continue.

These present great risks for both China and its neighbors. Japanese sources note that the young militiamen who are encouraged to enter the waters around the Senkaku-Diaoyu are inexperienced in weapons handling and steeped in anti-Japanese propaganda; hence they may be tempted to commit acts of foolish bravado.²⁷ Harassing U.S. reconnaissance planes in international waters and international flights that challenge China's contested ADIZ may have more severe consequences than the April 2001 incident that resulted in the death of a Chinese pilot and the crash landing of the American plane. Moreover, the most sophisticated training exercises cannot compensate for lack of actual combat experience. Officers, who have purchased their commissions through bribery, doubtless because they provide the holders with possibilities for financial gain, may not prove the most competent or motivated of commanders. In sum, the PLA faces 2015 as a work in progress with impressive achievements but structural difficulties that may constrain the pace of future improvements. The future, as always, is uncertain.

September 10, 2014.

²⁴ Official Chinese sources deny these reports. *Xinhua*, September 8, 2014.

²⁵ Cited in <http://www.defensenews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2104309070015>, September 7, 2014.

²⁶ According to data supplied by Northrop Grumman, the C-2 can deliver high priority needed equipment such as jet engines up to 10,000 pounds within a few hours, and can also carry passengers. It is equipped with litters for medical evacuation.

<http://www.northropgrumman.com/Capabilities/C2AGreyhound/Pages/default.aspx>

²⁷ <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001561024>, September 12, 2014

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