



Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,

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THE PLA AT HOME AND ABROAD: ASSESSING THE OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES OF CHINA'S MILITARY

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KEY INSIGHTS:

- Signs are emerging that the PLA is becoming more confident about its position vis-à-vis Taiwan. At the same time, China believes that a changing international environment requires the Chinese armed forces to have more diversified capabilities. It is therefore placing relatively more emphasis on developing operational capabilities for missions other than against Taiwan (e.g., humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations, disaster relief, antipiracy, etc.).
- The implementation of Hu Jintao's "New Historic Missions" also affords the PLA the opportunity to make gains in some of its traditionally weaker areas, including logistics improvement, defense industry reform, and the implementation of combined and eventually joint operations.
- Through its 2009 Gulf of Aden antipiracy mission, the PLA Navy has shown that it is capable of undertaking certain types of operations abroad.

Introduction.

More than 70 leading experts on the PLA gathered at Carlisle Barracks, PA, on September 25-27, 2009, for a discussion on "The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military." The conference was conducted by The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) of the U.S. Army War College (USAWC), and The George H. W. Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

To set the stage, participants sought to understand the PLA's evolving view of its roles and responsibilities amid a changing global security landscape. Beginning at home, participants considered the PLA's relationship with the Chinese Communist Party; trends in the PLA's ongoing reforms to informationalize, mechanize, and otherwise adapt to China's evolving defense needs; and the PLA's role in tackling internal security challenges. From there, participants discussed PLA operations abroad, assessing trends in the pace, scope, goals, and success of logistics reform and the impact of these reforms on PLA capabilities. In some cases, it is not known whether the PLA possesses the capabilities to carry out all of the missions it is assigned, while in other areas, the deficiencies are well-documented. Regardless, significant progress is being made, and the exact pace, scale, and success of the PLA's modernization efforts must be assessed.

In order to analyze PLA capabilities, conference participants were tasked to address how the PLA is determining what types of missions it will undertake, and in doing so, analyze the process by which these missions are created and assigned. In addition, attendees were asked to disaggregate the PLA's aspirational goals from its current capabilities. Finally, in addition to examining how the PLA is employing new operational capabilities at home and abroad, participants were challenged to assess the PLA's own measures for improvement.

Conference attendees approached these issues by evaluating individual operational areas within the Chinese armed forces and by addressing the lessons learned by the PLA during specific operations. In doing

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so, participants sought to examine the implications of the PLA's current operational capabilities, while also forecasting what type of reforms the PLA will likely pursue in order to improve weaker areas. Research questions included: How is China's changing global security landscape impacting the PLA's drive to improve upon its operational capabilities? How are doctrinal changes within the Chinese military occurring, and furthermore, how are they driving the development of new operational capabilities? What are the recent trends in the pace, scope, and success of the PLA's rapidly modernizing support mechanisms? What are the operational requirements for international missions such as the Gulf of Aden deployment, as well as domestic security challenges such as the Wenchuan Earthquake rescue effort and domestic stability operations in Tibet and Xinjiang?

Selecting Missions: The Operational Implications.

When determining the necessary operational capabilities for the Chinese armed forces, Chinese leaders face an increasingly complex security environment in which the PLA's principal concern is to secure the necessary conditions for continued economic growth. By protecting the Chinese economy, the PLA must adapt to an expanding number of missions to address a range of long- and short-term concerns. Amid this shifting environment, the PLA seems to assume that a full scale invasion of China is not likely. Furthermore, immediate threats appear to be limited to instability on the Korean Peninsula and the increasingly remote possibility of conflict over Taiwan. However, because of the negative consequences associated with major conflict, Chinese leaders must still prepare for this unlikely event. Considering China's extensive maritime and land borders, as leaders assess the long-term prospects for a myriad of potential state and nonstate adversaries, many of the PLA's concerns appear to be fueled by apprehension over U.S. strategic intent.

Yet when assessing these concerns and the major implications they have for the PLA's operational capabilities, Chinese leaders have also struggled with the traditional security dilemma of how to modernize their forces at a rapid pace without raising alarm within the international community, especially the Asia-Pacific region. Such anxiety could undermine the PLA's principal objective of supporting China's continued economic development.

As PLA security concerns have expanded, so too has the PLA's official doctrine. China's 2008 Defense White Paper reiterates Hu Jintao's proclaimed "New

Historic Missions," which include guaranteeing communist party rule, safeguarding national development, defending national interests, and protecting world peace and common development. In addition, this document also makes reference to the previously articulated diversified military tasks, a term thought to reconcile the new historic missions with the traditional PLA task of winning local wars under informationalized conditions. Moreover, for the first time the 2008 White Paper makes specific reference to the term military tasks other than war (MOOTW). For the PLA, MOOTW appears to refer to a broad range of peacetime operations that include counterterrorism, stability maintenance, disaster relief, emergency rescue, and international peacekeeping, among others.

The PLA appears to face several challenges when implementing the missions to which it is assigned. The most significant of these challenges include maintaining focus, managing tensions between civilian and military leaders, reconciling demands on the military despite limited funding, and balancing priorities between MOOTW and conventional capabilities.

Likewise, China's civil-military relations also appear to be in a state of transition during which the fusion of the civilian and military establishment into a symbiotic relationship no longer guides China's overall political development. Rather, as the PLA has become increasingly professionalized, and as military leaders have ceased holding dual roles in both the civilian and military organs of government, the PLA retains a less substantial position in domestic politics, especially on issues outside of the national security domain. Instead, the PLA appears to be increasingly autonomous in its decisionmaking on matters of national defense. Assuming the PLA continues its rapid pace of modernization, the possibility of more autonomy for the PLA in defense matters has tremendous implications for U.S. policy toward Asia.

Supporting Missions: The Operational Necessities.

The PLA understands that in order to win modern conflicts or undertake MOOTW activities, it must have the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capacity to carry out joint operations in an integrated, seamless fashion. Evidence suggests that the PLA currently does not possess the C4ISR capabilities necessary to conduct joint operations. Beyond this broad judgment, the exact status of China's current C4ISR implementation can be difficult to assess. But

assuming Chinese accounts of the existence of an uncoordinated bottom-up implementation of C4ISR are correct, 2009 appears to be a crucial year for the PLA as it attempts to carry out an increasing number of joint training exercises and promote a growing number of reforms that will allow the PLA to integrate units that were previously unable to work together in a coordinated fashion.

Furthermore, concrete steps toward C4ISR integration include the PLA's creation of a model system and a concerted effort to resolve issues of horizontal integration that arise over the inability for different IT systems to be used jointly. Assuming that the PLA implements a top-down approach to standardizing systems, and assuming that the PLA can prevent individual units from buying components that are not compatible with other units, the opportunity exists for the PLA to gain full interoperability within the next few decades.

As the PLA attempts to turn its theoretical strategies for military modernization into reality, the status of reform within China's defense industry has become an important metric by which to assess the military's current and future operational capabilities. Over the last 10 years, the PLA has undertaken dramatic reforms in its defense industry. And, although these reforms have brought with them a great deal of bureaucratic infighting, highly successful individual systems have emerged from this massive reorganization.

Beyond these individual successes, it remains to be seen how recent reforms aimed at improving the competitiveness of the Chinese defense industry will unfold. Moreover, questions remain as to whether recent reforms can have an impact on China's bloated state owned defense industry in the burgeoning areas of shareholder reform, competitive bidding, and privatization. Although little evidence points to major breakthroughs in these areas, it now appears that some defense contracts are being awarded through a competitive process, and government leaders appear to be increasingly ready to allow the defense industry to utilize market forces to raise funds for their development.

In addition to C4ISR and defense industry reform, the PLA has also come to the conclusion that without significant improvements to its logistics support capabilities, it will not be able to carry out the missions for which it has been tasked. Clearly, the Chinese military logistics system has made significant progress in recent years. However, the PLA still has many operational challenges to overcome, and the ability to integrate logistics improvements across military regions and draw upon existing civilian logistics

systems will dictate the pace at which improvements continue.

Furthermore, the PLA's focus on improving its ability to sustain units abroad was also evident this past year during the PLA Navy's (PLAN) involvement in a Gulf of Aden antipiracy mission. Following this mission, the PLA will likely continue to pursue logistics improvements aimed at more effectively undertaking missions at distance. Within these improvements, joint logistics will likely be a high priority. Finally, on the controversial subject of PLA logistics abroad, debate continues over whether the PLA will pursue overseas basing rights. In the near term, China may make expanded use of commercial interests to secure access for logistical support abroad.

Undertaking Missions: The Operational Requirements.

As a result of the expanded pace and scale of its domestic and foreign activities, opportunities to improve PLA operational capabilities have emerged. On the domestic front, the PLA has recently been called upon to cooperate with the People's Armed Police (PAP) to provide MOOTW support during disaster rescue and relief operations in the snow and ice emergency of January/February 2008 and the Wenchuan earthquake of May 2008. During these emergency situations, significant operational deficiencies were revealed. Such weaknesses included legal restraints, organizational failures, and the inability to provide satisfactory mobilization for the forces necessary. Furthermore, the PLA's participation in these events appears to have stimulated debate on whether focusing on MOOTW might distract the PLA from its primary mission of national defense.

In addition to environmental disasters, the PLA also responded to domestic mass uprisings in Tibet in March 2008 and Urumqi in July 2009. During the Tibet incident, the PLA's primary role appears to have been logistical support. However, during the turbulence in Urumqi, it appears that the PLA took a more active role in restoring order. Based upon these two incidents, it appears evident that the PLA and PAP can work in unison to restore order following mass incidents. Furthermore, as a general principle, it appears that the PLA's and PAP's training and equipment are satisfactory for these roles. And, while the PLA has not published widely on what lessons it learned from these incidents, it does appear that its response to these events revealed deficiencies within military intelligence, civil-military integration, and PLA/PAP mobilization.

On the international front, the PLAN undertook unprecedented actions abroad during its antipiracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden. The motivations and preparations for this mission were based on China's assessment that there was a genuine threat to Sea Lines of Communication in the Gulf of Aden. Furthermore, this mission has allowed the PLAN to prove its operational capability to deploy forces far from Chinese shores. Evidence for this improvement includes the PLAN's ability to keep a ship underway for over 60 days, provide logistics support over a long distance, undertake at-sea replenishment and refueling, and participate in port visits. Also, the PLAN was able to improve its satellite tracking and communication skills, as well as enhance its coordination mechanisms with foreign navies. This mission also portends the possibility of future rapid PLAN improvement in the areas of equipment, personnel, and logistics.

The PLA has also participated in an increasingly wide variety of ground exercises with foreign forces. Since October 2002, the PLA has participated in 24 such exercises, the vast majority of which were focused on nontraditional security issues. These exercises have largely focused on antiterrorist capabilities, but also other operational capabilities that the PLA has sought to improve to include disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, antidrug smuggling, border security, and emergency response. Although the PLA seems to recognize that such nontraditional exercises may not contribute directly to traditional warfighting capabilities, the PLA leadership appears to have determined that the benefits of their participation merit attention, and that some types of nontraditional training can lead to improved conventional operational capabilities.

One final area in which the PLA's operational capabilities are evolving and improving is in the area of military-to-military diplomacy. These diplomatic efforts appear to include steps to reassure other countries about the peaceful nature of the development of the PLA's operational capabilities, to improve China's image as a responsible member of the international community, to garner technological knowhow from foreign militaries, and to deter threats from outside forces by displaying the PLA's strengths. China's use of military diplomacy manifests itself in several ways, the most notable of which are high level exchanges such as strategic dialogues and consultations; enhanced public diplomacy efforts through military attaché offices; and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) website maintained by the MoD's new Information Office. In addition, the PLA also

participates in what have been labeled functional military exchanges that include making PLAN port calls, participating in combined exercises, sending foreign observers to outside exercises, committing to peacekeeping operations, and participating in the Gulf of Aden antipiracy mission.

Conclusion.

The Chinese military has entered a period of great transition. As this transition unfolds, signs are emerging that the PLA is becoming more confident about its position vis-à-vis Taiwan, more willing to undertake certain types of missions abroad, and more capable of undertaking modernization efforts aimed at logistics improvement, defense industry reform, and implementation of joint operations. Moreover, China's civil-military relations and official doctrine are undergoing a period of adaptation. In forecasting how these developments have affected the PLA's operational capabilities, recent activities at home and abroad have shown signs of both progress and frustrations. The PLA is clearly seeking to improve its operational capabilities; however, its ability to overcome significant deficiencies will dictate the scope, scale, and success of future modernization efforts.

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