

A More Powerful China on Parade

Zhang Xiaoming

The 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China offered a glimpse at one of the most controversial aspects of the country's rise: its expanding military might. In the October 1st parade, 56 phalanxes of more than 8,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers, some 500 tanks and assorted military vehicles, and 151 combat aircraft passed by and above the leadership gathered at Tiananmen Square. China claimed that nearly 90 percent of the armaments were displayed in public for the first time, including its most sophisticated nuclear-capable intercontinental missiles, land attack cruise missiles, and airborne warning and control system aircraft (AWACS). Outside of China, defense analysts scrutinized the event, coming to a wide range of conclusions. Some saw the parade as evidence that the PLA is still hamstrung by the same shortcomings that have limited its capabilities for decades—particularly, weak indigenous aircraft production and information warfare capabilities. Others, already self-convinced of a threatening China, pointed fearfully to new asymmetric missile capabilities that may embolden the PLA. However, to gain a clear

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understanding of China's military progress, analysts must cast aside preconceived prejudices about the PLA's limits and intentions. Instead, it is more useful to measure the current PLA against its past capabilities and its own stated goals.

The last military parade was held in 1999 and marked the unveiling of China's third-generation tanks, new strategic nuclear missiles and supersonic fighter/bombers. Chinese media claimed that the reviewed weapons and equipment showed that the PLA already had achieved modern joint operation capacity.² Few Western observers shared their view. According to the US Department of Defense's 2000 report on China's military power, China had only a limited capability to conduct integrated operations; its air force did not even have a technological edge against Taiwan; and its navy was no better off, lagging behind other regional navies in key technological areas. The report concluded that the PLA would not mature into a world-class military force in the near future.³

Perhaps still stuck in a 1999 mindset, many analysts were quick to dismiss the developments on display this year. While the Chinese proudly announced that all weapons systems that appeared in the parade were domestically produced, Western analysts continued to downplay the PLA's progress, claiming that most of them "have traces of cloning from Russian systems."⁴ Though critics were correct to point out the Russian roots of many Chinese weapons, they failed to note the extent to which the PLA has improved the original systems.

The important lesson to take away from this year's parade is perhaps not in the origin of the hardware, but in China's ability to press ahead with modernization in the face of other countries' attempts to restrict China-bound exports of high technology. In the 1999 military parade, the Russian-made Su-27 fighter was China's only third generation warplane. This time the Chinese air force flew its domestically produced third generation J-10 fighter over the parade, along with Chinese-made AWACS aircraft—the KJ-2000 and KJ-200. Though the US government successfully pressured Israel to cancel the sale of the Phalcon AWACS system to the PLA in 1999, China appears to have pulled together sufficient talents and resources to build its own system. Efforts by the United States and European countries to prevent China from obtaining high-tech weapons do not seem to have fully worked.

Judging from the ships and equipment displayed in the April navy review along with the parade in October, China's navy has also made impressive strides since 1999. New Chinese-made surface combat ships equipped with area air defense and Aegis-like battle management systems have entered into service along with the second-generation nuclear-powered attack submarines and advanced diesel subs. The Chinese amphibious warfare fleet has also expanded with the introduction of the indigenously-designed land platform dock, improving the Chinese navy's sealift capabilities. A few years ago, people joked that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be "the million-man swim."⁵ These new developments seem to have changed some minds. China's rapidly growing navy has convinced Department of Defense analysts

that “improvements in China’s capabilities have ramifications” far beyond Taiwan.⁶ The Chinese navy still has a long way to go to become a blue-water navy, but exercises such as the naval deployment to the Gulf of Aden to help protect ships from piracy may help push the PLAN’s modernization agenda forward.

One weapon in the parade that few analysts were quick to dismiss was the medium-range Dongfeng-21C ballistic missile, a precursor to a maritime variant that has been dubbed a “carrier killer”. Along with Changjian-10 (CJ-10) land-attack cruise missiles, these new missiles demonstrate China’s adoption of a sea-denial strategy that can hold at bay US naval forces approaching the Taiwan Strait. During the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis, the United States responded by deploying two aircraft carrier battle groups (Nimitz and Independence) in the region. If the US response brought any feelings of defeat to the Chinese at the time, it also strengthened Beijing’s determination to develop its own capability to deny future naval access to the Taiwan Strait.

Perhaps the clearest way to measure the PLA’s progress is against its own goals, which are clearly outlined in a three-step strategy in China’s 2008 defense white paper. According to the white paper, China expects to lay the foundation for the development of the PLA into a more high-tech, network-centric, balanced and joint force by 2010; accomplish mechanization and make major progress in informatization by 2020; and to reach the goal of modernization of national defense and armed forces by the mid-21st century.⁷ Chinese military modernization is approaching the first milestone of the three-step strategy.

According to recent statements by Defense Minister Liang Guanglie, the PLA’s further goals are to: prioritize mobility over regional defense; increase coastal defense and blue-water fighting capabilities; transform the air force from one based on territorial defense to one capable of both offensive and defensive operations; and develop a missile force capable of both conventional and nuclear launches. The parade demonstrated that the PLA’s modernization is moving closer towards these stated goals with the display of the new combat vehicles, land based anti-ship missiles and multirole aircraft. China’s potential aircraft carrier and large destroyer programs also represent progress towards these goals. Furthermore, while the absence of two new nuclear missiles—the DF-41 and JL-2—at the parade fed foreign speculation that missile programs were faltering, this, along with the appearance of the DF-21C, may instead indicate China’s increasing emphasis of conventional over nuclear missiles.

With all the attention paid to the incremental increases in technology, many have overlooked the bigger story out of the parade: the PLA units brought to the parade represent China’s past efforts to restructure and professionalize its force. This year’s parade featured fewer marching blocks but more blocks of weapons, showing the military’s transformation from a human-intensive force to a science-technology orientated force. These units are not only outfitted with high-tech weaponry and equipment, but are also smaller in size, with automation of command and control.

Although the parade did not offer any hint about the integrated combat capabilities of the PLA, military exercises conducted before and immediately after the parade are a signal that the Chinese military is also striving for integration of its newly acquired weapon systems and restructured forces to create effective combat capabilities.

Only a portion of the Chinese military is equipped with what was shown in the parade, and China has much to do before it comes close to reaching parity with American power. Past arguments about China's military weakness may continue because defense technology is still developing. Yet China's military today is not the same as a decade ago. The PLA has reduced its size, and it is rumored that it may cut a further 700,000 troops over the next two to three years. At the same time, this will open up greater funding for sophisticated weapon systems procured from abroad and from China's own defense industry. While the PLA remains a long way from achieving its aspirations, the gap between its stated objectives and its actual capability has been drastically reduced. The recent parade suggests that the PLA may be on track to realizing its three-step development strategy.

Perhaps most importantly, China's military leaders seem pleased with the PLA's progress. Speaking highly of China's military modernization, Defense Minister Liang Guanglie said, "China has basically all the kinds of equipment possessed by Western countries, much of which reaches or approaches advanced world standard," and the PLA's "capabilities in conducting defensive operations under modern conditions have taken a quantum leap."⁸ General Liang's rhetoric seems in step with China's general growing confidence in its military capability. Deng Xiaoping's exhortation to "keep a low profile" appears to be gradually giving way to a bolder approach, as reflected in the recent confrontation with the US Navy over survey missions in the South China Sea. If nothing more can be drawn from the parade, it can be said that the PLA's warfighting potential has grown in tandem with China's economy. Assuming its economy continues along a steady trajectory, China will be able to commit further resources to more challenging aspects of the three-step strategy, such as informationization. Should these goals be realized, the United States and other powers face a genuine challenge in terms of preparing themselves for an increasingly powerful China in the coming decade. 🇨🇳

NOTES

- ¹ The views expressed in this article are mine and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or the US Government.
- ² "1999 National Day Military Parade," <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/60th/2009-08/27/content_8623814.htm>.
- ³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China," June 2000.
- ⁴ Andrei Chang, "Parade Shows China's Long-range Strike Capability," Oct. 1, 2009, Kanwa Daily News, <<http://www.kanwa.com/mrdt/showpl.php.id=734>>.
- ⁵ This term has been used first by Eric McVadon, former US defense attaché to Beijing, see McVadon's 2005 discussion paper, "The Balance of Powers in the Taiwan Strait and the Role of the United States," <http://www.swp-berlin.org/common/get_document.php?asset_id=2703>.
- ⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China," 2007.
- ⁷ "China's National Defense Paper in 2008," <http://www.gov.cn/english/official/200901/20/content_1210227.htm>.
- ⁸ "Liang Guanglie: the PLA has powerful combat capability, and the military parade boosts China power and military might," Sept. 22, 2009, <<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2009/09-22/1878156.shtml>>.

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