Where the Region’s Military Modernization Is Headed

While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.

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Major Progress and Unfinished Business: China’s Military Under Xi Jinping

By Joel Wuthnow & Phillip C. Saunders

For most of China’s history under the Communist Party, the military was dominated by ground forces with limited roles, and little attention was paid to naval or air assets and the ability to project power beyond China’s borders. Plans to modernize the military go back decades, but it has primarily been under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, who took over in 2012, that Beijing has taken strides to develop a world-class fighting force. There are major implications for China’s neighbors, the US and the rest of the world, write Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders.

CHINA’S PEOPLE’S Liberation Army (PLA) has developed into one of the region’s premier militaries, with notable advances made in the past few years under President Xi Jinping. Although the roots of PLA modernization and professionalization stretch back to the 1980s, a number of obstacles slowed the pace of reform under Xi’s two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Through savvy political leadership, Xi has overcome bureaucratic obstacles to push through the most significant set of organizational reforms since the 1950s. PLA hardware has also made major strides during his tenure. As a result, the PLA is better able to carry out its two key missions — winning wars and deterring opponents — as well as its ancillary roles in protecting China’s economic interests and supporting Beijing’s diplomatic agenda.

ROOTS OF REFORM

For 30 years following the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the PLA focused primarily on two priorities: ensuring domestic stability as the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party, a role it performed most notably during the Cultural Revolution; and preparing to counter a land invasion, which at different points of the Cold War included threats from the United States, Kuomintang (Nationalist) forces on Taiwan and the Soviet Union. Both missions lent themselves to a large, army-dominated force structure, with little need for extensive air force or naval capabilities. China’s international isolation and domestic turmoil also inhibited development of modern weapons, leaving the PLA technologically inferior to the superpowers (with partial exceptions in areas such as ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads).

The origins of the PLA’s transformation into a modern military can be traced to Mao Zedong’s death in 1976 and the PLA’s subsequent poor performance in its 1979 border conflict with Vietnam. Mao’s reform-minded successor, Deng Xiaoping, argued that the PLA had become too large, unwieldy and complacent to achieve battlefield success; he encouraged changes such as professionalizing the officer corps, cutting redundant personnel, transferring domestic tasks to the newly established People’s Armed Police, acquiring more advanced equipment and improving training. However, a relatively peaceful external security environment meant that Deng’s primary focus was on domestic economic reform; military budgets shrank and the PLA was relegated to the fourth (and last) of his “four modernizations.” Nevertheless, two events in the 1990s created an impetus for further reform. First was the 1991 Gulf War, in which the US military demonstrated that a combination of advanced technology (especially sensors and precision-guided munitions) and joint warfighting tactics could be used to quickly defeat a large, well-equipped, but poorly led opponent. Second was the deployment of two US aircraft carriers during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis, which raised doubts about whether the PLA could prevail in a cross-strait conflict if the US military intervened. Jiang responded with larger defense budgets, new hardware (especially the acquisition of advanced Russian systems such as Kilo-class submarines and Sovremenny destroyers), and revisions to PLA training and doctrine to focus more on joint operations. Hu continued these efforts in the 2000s, with even greater emphasis on the development of long-range naval assets to protect China’s vulnerable energy imports and growing overseas interests. Jiang and Hu, however, had only limited success in transforming the PLA into a first-rate military. Unlike Mao or Deng, neither had military experience or deep connections within the PLA, which reduced their ability to counter opposition from the would-be losers of reform (especially within the ground forces). Meanwhile, Jiang’s 1998 initiative to force the PLA to divest from commercial business ventures, which Deng had permitted as an additional source of revenue, foundered as senior PLA officers amassed small, or in some cases, large fortunes. Related problems, such as the buying and selling of promotions, proliferated under Hu, who does not appear to have fully established his authority over senior generals appointed by and loyal to Jiang. With half-completed reforms and rampant corruption, questions were raised about the PLA’s readiness to undertake major combat operations.

ENTER XI JINPING

Xi assumed the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (the PLA’s top decision-making body) in late 2012 and immediately stressed the importance of building an army that could “fight and win wars” as part of his “China Dream.” This effort benefited from a pre-existing blueprint for modernization. The basic precepts of reform, established over the preceding two decades, emphasized a cleaner, more professional organization; the ability to carry out complex joint operations, such as island landings and blockades; a continued shifting of resources to the navy, air force and conventional missile force; competence in the information domain (including space and cyber); and closer co-operation between the PLA and the civilian science and technology sector, which would promote indigenous development of advanced military equipment. Xi was intimately familiar with this agenda, having served as Central Military Commission vice chairman during Hu’s last two years in office.
What Xi possessed that his predecessors lacked was the political clout necessary to counter resistance and effect change. Part of his advantage was his background, both as the son of a revolutionary general and as a defense minister’s aide in the early 1980s, which gave him connections and bona fides within the PLA. More important was his adept use of political tools to overcome bureaucratic resistance, including using anti-corruption investigations to intimidate or remove opponents, promoting loyalists, and compensating losers — such as by finding new positions for senior officers whose commands were disman-
tled. He also used the PLA’s propaganda system to raise his own stature within the military, often appearing at events and publishing treatises that became “required reading” for soldiers.

Changes in China’s security environment also buttressed Xi’s military reform agenda. Those included uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula, tensions in the South and East China seas (where China was aggressively pursuing territorial claims) and challenges related to the US rebalance — or “pivot” — to Asia strategy, which featured a shifting of military resources to the region and stronger US alliances and partnerships. Taiwan remained an unresolved issue, despite relatively calm cross-Strait relations early in Xi’s term. Meanwhile, China’s global economic interests continued to expand, eventually including infrastructure projects under Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative, raising questions about how those assets could be protected.

The result was the most ambitious organizational restructuring of the PLA since the 1950s.¹ Major adjustments included a revamped joint command-and-control structure; creation of a system of five regional commands, each focused on cross-border contingencies; a 300,000-per-

¹ For details, see Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications, China Strategic Perspectives 10 (March 2017).
Son downsizing, focused mainly on the ground forces; establishment of a Strategic Support Force to consolidate space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare activities; empowered supervisory organizations that could tackle corruption and instill discipline; realigned professional military education, aimed at producing a more competent officer corps; and a renewed focus on military innovation. Steps towards a lighter, more mobile force structure were also made with the reduction of army and air force divisions to brigades. Although largely the result of prior investment decisions, PLA hardware also improved steadily under Xi. The Chinese navy reached 300 ships, the most in Asia. This included an expanded submarine force, new large cruisers and deployment of China’s first aircraft carrier (a retrofitted Soviet Kuznetsov-class hull, which will be followed by several carriers produced indigenously). New air force capabilities included the J-20 stealth fighter, which entered service in September 2017, upgraded H-6 bombers, and a growing fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles. The PLAs rocket force deployed a new generation of nuclear-armed DF-41 and DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), DF-21D medium-range ballistic missiles, designed to hit moving targets such as aircraft carriers, and the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, which foreign media labeled the “Guam killer” since it could reach US bases in the western Pacific. The PLA has also deployed new long-range ballistic missiles, designed to hit moving targets such as aircraft carriers, and the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, which for- eign media labeled the “Guam killer” since it could reach US bases in the western Pacific.

Looking ahead, Xi has outlined an ambitious vision for continued PLA reform. At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he described the need for further progress in areas such as personnel management, defense mobilization, military innovation and veterans’ affairs. While the current round of reforms is slated to end in 2020, Xi also proposed two longer-term goals: by 2035, national defense modernization should be “basically completed,” and by 2050, the people’s armed forces (including the PLA, the People’s Armed Police, and the reserves) should have been “fully transformed into world-class forces.”

**REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

China’s military progress has produced a PLA that is better able to accomplish its key and supporting missions, including winning wars, deterring opponents and protecting overseas Chinese interests. Although lack of recent combat experience will continue to pose constraints — the PLA’s last war was the 1979 conflict with Vietnam — a combination of more talented personnel, streamlined organization, increasingly realistic training (with a focus on joint operations) and new hardware all enhance China’s combat capabilities. Depending on the circumstances, the PLA might not necessarily prevail, but its ability to perform well in future conflicts, especially in areas adjacent to Chinese territory and along its maritime periphery, will have significantly increased.

The implications for Taiwan are especially worrisome, given the island’s geographic proximity to China, limited defenses and worsening cross-Strait relations. Greater proficiency in joint operations will increase the PLA’s ability to plan and execute a blockade, destroy key military targets, and conduct an amphibious landing. Those capabilities are complemented by an overall shift in resources to the navy and air force (which is improving its ability to operate over water) and apparent plans to increase the strength of the PLA Marine Corps several times over. Deployment of advanced long-range missiles, a larger submarine force, growing counter-space capabilities and other changes could also raise the costs and risks of US military intervention on behalf of Taiwan.

Short of war, the PLA could have greater success in managing crises and deterring adversar-ies. One of the most notable features of China’s new command-and-control structure are 24/7 operations centers that continually monitor the security environment and orchestrate quick responses. On the sea, the stronger presence by Chinese naval and other forces (including the coast guard and the maritime militia), aided by newly constructed military facilities in the South China Sea, will increase China’s ability to deter rival claimants, such as Japan and Vietnam, and challenge US naval operations. On land, the PLA could have the confidence and ability to inter-vene in a North Korean crisis and, as the summer 2017 crisis in the Doklam border region illustrates, to confront India.

The PLA will also be better positioned to safeguard China’s overseas economic interests. Already, Beijing has deployed naval and coast guard assets to defend oil rigs, fishing fleets and other economic assets within China’s maritime periphery. Further afield, additional submarines and large surface ships, supported by newly-con-structed overseas bases — the PLA’s first foreign base, located in Djibouti, opened in August 2017 — will allow the Chinese navy to protect critical shipping lanes. With more rapidly deployable forces, the PLA will also be able to more effectively carry out evacuations of Chinese expatriates, including those involved in Belt and Road projects, in the event of regional instability or natural disasters, or to respond to large-scale terror-rist incidents.

Moreover, while only tangentially related to recent reforms, the PLA will support China’s larger diplomatic goals by shaping the regional security environment. Military attaches posted to Chinese embassies play a role in delivering strategic messages to friends and foes alike. Pursuit of closer military relations with the US — a goal promoted by Xi — provides new avenues for strategic messaging, but could also result in stronger crisis management mechanisms. Security assistance programs, high-level military engagements and joint training all support China’s diplomatic agenda, including cementing strategic partnerships with states such as Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. Longer-range assets will enable the PLA to pursue co-operative activities outside of Asia, such as in the eastern Mediterranean and Baltic regions.

In sum, Xi has achieved great progress in completing the unfinished business of reforming the PLA left over to him by his predecessors. This has increased China’s warfighting capabilities, which in turn requires China’s neighbors, and the US, to evaluate their own capabilities and assess the best ways to preserve their own interests. The path ahead for the PLA remains uncertain due to issues such as declining budget growth, latent corruption and the possibility that Xi’s successor (if and when one is named) could have different priorities. Yet, all the evidence thus far speaks to a high level of commitment to further modernization, which, in Xi’s terms, helps promote the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” — with Xi at the helm.

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