

# The People's Liberation Army's Command and Control Affects the Future of Out-of-Area Operations

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the challenges that China faces in developing an effective command-and-control (C2) structure to support its out-of-area military operations. Beijing's expanding global interests, unresolved territorial disputes, and increasing economic opportunities necessitate a strong military presence, which China hopes to achieve through a proficient out-of-area operations force. However, the current over-centralized decision-making process within the Central Military Commission (CMC) and its Joint Staff Department (JSD) causes inefficiencies in decision making and undermines the autonomy of unit-level operations outside of the First Island Chain. The article identifies the need for improvements in interservice collaboration, theater command responsibilities, and overall global C2 infrastructure to create a more effective and autonomous force. Additionally, the article discusses China's approach to the division of labor between theater commands and services and the role of political commissars in out-of-area operations. The article concludes that unless China makes these necessary changes, it will struggle to protect its increasingly global interests.

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China's expanding global interests, unresolved territorial disputes, and increasing economic opportunities have forced it to rely on its armed forces to defend its interests. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will need to improve the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) out-of-area operations beyond the First Island Chain to maintain a robust presence worldwide.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this goal, the PLA needs to reform its command and control (C2) doctrine and make improvements in inter-service collaboration, clarify theater command responsibilities, and bolster global C2 infrastructure. A proficient out-of-area operation force can project combat power, engage in humanitarian assistance, and conduct

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the definitions of *near seas operations* and *far seas operations* are inherited from Phillip Saunders and the National Defense University. *Near seas operations* are conducted within the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. *Far seas operations* all occur past the First Island Chain. See, Phillip Saunders, "Command and Control of Overseas Operations in a Reformed PLA," in *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, ed. Joel Wuthnow, et al. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2021), 107–22. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

other vital missions worldwide. Failing to make these necessary changes will limit China's ability to protect its growing global interests.

## Issues with Chinese C2

At present, Chinese tactical decision making, weapons employment, and day-to-day decisions are predominantly funneled through the Central Military Commission (CMC) and its Joint Staff Department (JSD).<sup>2</sup> However, due to the over-centralized decision-making process, China struggles to establish a powerful C2 infrastructure and to effectively act autonomously during out-of-area operations.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is evident in China's out-of-area exercises, such as joint firepower operations and long-distance missions with ballistic missile submarines. This lack of autonomy for unit-level operations beyond the First Island Chain creates scenarios that do not prepare the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for large-scale conflicts or conflicts outside of its peripheral regions. This obstacle was intentionally built into the command structure by the CCP and CMC in response to past experiences with communication, logistics, and other issues during the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> However, these practices continue to plague theater-level missions across the services to this day. Therefore, there is a need to alter the current C2 doctrine and establish an efficient infrastructure that enables the Chinese military to carry out out-of-area operations autonomously, project combat power, provide humanitarian assistance, and carry out other vital missions globally.

China's C2 capability, although improving technologically, still lags behind the United States' abilities. In 2002, Major General Dai Qingmin, responsible for electronic countermeasures and radars for the PLA, recognized that the PLA's attention should focus on "integrated networks and electronic warfare."<sup>5</sup> However, experts at the time admitted that the PLA's current force lacked the necessary skill sets, infrastructure, and doctrine to engage in warfare that requires the coordinated use of sensors, digital networks, and secure communications to

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington: National Defense University, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kartik Bommakanti and Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "China's Military Modernization: Recent Trends," *Observer Research Foundation*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Burkitt, Larry M. Wortzel, and Andrew Scobell, *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 2003), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>, and Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Yulin Ying "PLA Cyber Operations: A New Type of Cross-Border Attack" in *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, ed., Joel Wuthnow, et al. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2021), 295–307. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

disrupt net-centric systems.<sup>6</sup> While the PLA is slowly improving its C2 capability, it has yet to integrate these capabilities within its C2 doctrine for out-of-area operations. Moreover, the centralization of the PLA and theater commands makes it difficult to pass weapons release authority or information through C2 networks to leaders. These cultural operating norms have hindered the PLA's experience in integrating digital elements of C2 in out-of-area theater operations, presenting a major challenge to C2 doctrine.

An important factor to consider is the Chinese perspective on the division of labor between services and theater commands. In 2015, President Xi Jinping initiated joint military reforms aimed at modernizing China's military and achieving parity with other global armed forces. The reforms restructured China's military from a regional-based structure to five theater commands that prioritize joint command of ground, naval, air, and rocket forces.<sup>7</sup> This transformation marked a significant shift for the PLA, moving away from a primarily ground-mobile army and toward integrating naval and air capabilities into joint war-fighting operations.

This new division of labor in the Chinese military was intended to enhance interoperability between the theaters and services in joint planning, training, and execution. However, in practice, this division of labor has caused inefficiencies and confusion as each mission's responsibility and authority varies across the spectrum of Chinese operations. For example, international peacekeeping missions are under the JSD Overseas Operations Office,<sup>8</sup> while antipiracy operations, noncombatant evacuation operations, and other evacuation operations remain under the control of the navy service headquarters.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, exercises with foreign militaries are likely to be under service headquarters control, with the CMC Office of International Military Cooperation playing an authoritative role in planning and execution.<sup>10</sup>

There is significant confusion regarding the division of labor and command authority during out-of-area operations in the Chinese military. Although the 2015 military reforms created five theater commands to improve joint warfighting capabilities, practical implementation has led to inefficiencies and

<sup>6</sup> Ying "PLA Cyber Operations."

<sup>7</sup> *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), <https://www.dia.mil/>.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Scobell and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "The Flag Lags but Follows: The PLA and China's Great Leap Outward," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

<sup>9</sup> Scobell and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "The Flag Lags but Follows."

<sup>10</sup> Scobell and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "The Flag Lags but Follows."

inconsistencies in responsibility and authority across various missions. Additionally, the role of political commissars, who report directly to party leaders and have duties equivalent to commanding officers, adds to the confusion over weapons release authority and command decision making during missions.<sup>11</sup> These “managers of risk” report evidence of nonconformity or abnormalities directly back to party leads ashore. Commissars embarked on naval missions or on individual maritime units may carry differing guidance and instruction than the commanding officer. The presence of two individuals seemingly in charge creates confusion regarding who holds weapons release authority for self-defense or wartime operations. In his July 2020 article *USNI News* article, John Grady suggested that confrontational moves by Chinese warships may not be the decision of the commanding officer, but rather a political commissar taking control.<sup>12</sup> The PLA's tight handling of day-to-day operations through the political commissar inhibits the development of officers and prevents them from practicing essential elements of C2 doctrine such as commander's intent and command by negation when operating beyond the First Island Chain. *Commander's intent* refers to the accomplishment of the desired end state and should be understood and executed two levels below the issuing commander.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, *command by negation* involves officers using their own initiative to carry out orders until a superior issues a negative order, enabling theater-level superiors to focus on the bigger picture while unit leaders manage daily operations more efficiently.<sup>14</sup>

In Chinese culture, there is a strong emphasis on respecting elders and superiors, which can discourage officers at all ranks from exercising initiative. Decision-making is often viewed as a collective process rather than an individualistic task.<sup>15</sup> These values are prevalent in authority relationships and decision-making processes in China.<sup>16</sup> However, in certain circumstances, taking initiative could lead to an officer being audited or forced into early retirement. President Xi's reforms prioritize conformity among officers and seek to remove those who do not align

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<sup>11</sup> Ryan Kinsella, Brian Chao, and Kenneth Allen, “China's Military Political Commissar System in Comparative Perspective,” *China Brief* 13, no. 5 (2013), <https://jamestown.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> John Grady, “Political Commissars on Chinese Warships Play Crucial Role in Interactions with Foreign Vessels,” *USNI News*, 3 July 2020, <https://news.usni.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> W. Michael Phibbs, “Commander's Intent: A Framework for Success,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 6 October 2016, <https://leb.fbi.gov/>.

<sup>14</sup> James E. Higgins, “Future Warfare and the Viability of Command by Negation” (student paper, Naval War College, March 1996), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), <http://ark.cdlib.org/>.

<sup>16</sup> Lieberthal and Lampton, *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision*.

with party ideology or are perceived as disloyal.<sup>17</sup> These complexities make it challenging to apply a one-size-fits-all model to Chinese out-of-area operations or speculate about how the CMC would delegate strategic capabilities and decisions to theater commands during peacetime or wartime.

One notable mission set where the Chinese struggle with weak C2 and inefficient leaders is out-of-area operations requiring aircraft identification and airspace control. The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) still faces significant challenges in conducting combat operations in a joint engagement zone where both surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and fighter interceptors operate within the same airspace. Reports indicate that the PLAAF relies heavily on cooperative targeting recognition methods to identify aircraft in such zones, which often results in lengthy identification times and incorrect identification of friendly or foe aircraft when other methods are used.

Furthermore, ground-based forces remain unable to identify Chinese helicopters, resulting in the downing of friendly aircraft despite following proper protocol upon entering a joint engagement zone. In situations where electronic interrogation is not possible or where equipment is affected by electromagnetic interference, the PLAAF does not typically rely on C2 capabilities held by other services within the theater to overcome joint-engagement barriers.<sup>18</sup>

These exercises demonstrate the urgent need for the PLA to improve its out-of-area operations capability. If Chinese forces continue to operate under basic C2 functions in training environments, it is unlikely that they would succeed in real-world operations beyond the First Island Chain. Therefore, developing the PLA's C2 infrastructure, in conjunction with strengthening officer autonomy, could enhance training and lead to greater accuracy and efficiency in joint engagements.

## Recommendations

First, the Chinese must continue to develop a diverse C2 global framework. Combining intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) data across network-centric systems can provide for prompt decision-making advantage in major combat operations. These interconnected networks can work in tandem with the PLA's goals to integrate information technology and improve information usage during military operations and warfare. China's C2 infrastructure is beginning to rely heavily on command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to produce

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<sup>17</sup> Wuthnow and Saunders, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*. In Wuthnow's piece, the author refers to this as *political orthodoxy*, also prevalent, if not strictly necessary, in the echelons of CCP and PLA leadership.

<sup>18</sup> Bonny Lin and Cristina L. Garafola, *Training the People's Liberation Army Air Force Surface-to-Air (SAM) Missile Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/>.

sophisticated common operating pictures, through phases known as *digitization*, *networkization*, and *intelligentization*.<sup>19</sup> Future capabilities will require advanced sensor input and integration from space systems and undersea assets, particularly as the Chinese begin to rely on cross-domain functions during warfare. These capabilities will provide improved latency and communication throughout all levels of theater and service commands, brigades, and units operating out-of-area. PLA forces can then practice and implement C2 into their day-to-day operations to build experience in passing commands during peacetime and war. Faster acquisition of data and communication will inevitably lead to faster, more informed decisions. As the nature of warfare continues to shift toward a digitized environment, China is likely to further fuse these technologies to improve C2 across theaters.

In addition to these improvements, the CMC must clearly delineate the division of labor. The CMC must allow theater commands, in collaboration with service headquarters, to establish and retain control over missions and operations. The 2015 military reforms have left the PLA without clarity regarding whether the service or theater commands will have full responsibility for mission planning and execution. Setting clear guidelines on who will lead operations such as humanitarian assistance, forward presence, and antipiracy operations would simplify the allocation of resources, deployment of fast-action teams, and management of out-of-area operations for theater commands. The PLA could benefit from adopting the structure of US combatant commands regarding the delineation of duties and responsibilities. Out-of-area missions are largely coordinated by the service heads within a specific theater or area of responsibility. Through interservice collaboration, a combatant commander identifies a mission lead who executes the theater commander's intent for the mission with little to no oversight. This would also alleviate any ambiguity in the division of leadership between commanding officers of air and naval units and political commissars. Such a clear division of labor will allow PLA forces to pursue more robust functions in areas where Beijing seeks to project military power.

This recommendation highlights the importance of empowering military officers to exercise operational independence and commander's intent at all levels of leadership. The PLA must adopt doctrine such as command by negation at the unit level with minimal oversight from force-level and theater-level commanders. However, implementing this change is no easy feat and may be the most challeng-

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<sup>19</sup> Elsa B. Kania, *Battlefield Singularity: Artificial Intelligence, Military Revolution, and China's Future Military Power* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, November 2017), <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>.

ing change the PLA needs to undergo. The PLA must reform education for officers early on in their service to develop decision-making skills that will enable them to act autonomously in out-of-area operations, including exercising self-defense and weapons release.

An example of training that could be used as a model is the PLAAF's noncommissioned officer corps (NCO) training, which focuses on building resilient NCOs capable of receiving task directives and acting upon them in environments where communication with leadership is limited or compromised.<sup>20</sup> While this training is a step in the right direction, it is only a small one. PLA leadership must innovate to develop a formalized training process that builds comfortability with tough decisions and that is tailored to their cultural nuances. PLA officers need practical experience to hone these skills if they are to conduct out-of-area operations effectively without heavy input from theater-level leaders.

To effectively integrate all these elements together into practice, the PLA must prioritize exercises that rely on digital C2 capabilities and encourage leaders throughout theater commands and service components to exercise initiative and autonomy. The PLAAF has already conducted several exercises that closely simulate out-of-area operations, spanning a five-year period with concentrated efforts to hone their capabilities in "competitive and multi-dimensional skills competitions."<sup>21</sup> These multibranch exercises integrated combined-arms simulations, including SAMs and anti-aircraft artillery across services. They tested the PLAAF's ability to engage with "system-of-systems confrontational drills," a central concept in Chinese military training.<sup>22</sup> Pilots even used real-time video and flight data recordings to assess performance and analysis. According to a RAND study, PLAAF trainings combine conventional and strategic capabilities while integrating C2 doctrine into exercises.<sup>23</sup> Emulating these trainings and building experience in C2 and initiative will enable Chinese commanders to operate vessels, aircraft, and troops promptly and accurately. Such operations will allow units to engage in weapons release and effectively determine if situations meet doctrinal requirements for engagement. Exercises like these are the best way for PLA forces to practice joint integration, C2 doctrine, and leadership in out-of-area operations.

One way China is actively working toward improved integration is through a series of events titled "Cross-Military Branch Talks." The series aims to break

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<sup>20</sup> Bommakanti and Shivamurthy, "China's Military Modernization: Recent Trends."

<sup>21</sup> Lin and Garafola, *Training the People's Liberation Army Air Force*.

<sup>22</sup> Lin and Garafola, *Training the People's Liberation Army Air Force*.

<sup>23</sup> Lin and Garafola, *Training the People's Liberation Army Air Force*.

down barriers across the services and branches and achieve greater system integration. Through these interactions, forces can strengthen relationships across the military to allow for dialogue and the exchange of insights. Thanks to these talks, regiments and aviation divisions in Beijing regularly observe each other's exercises, recognize the benefits of training together, and learn the strengths and weaknesses of different combat methods firsthand.<sup>24</sup> SAM units now recognize the urgent need to coordinate military action and train jointly.

Moreover, evaluations of Chinese PLAAF SAM units have evolved to assess teams on their individual and joint ability to survive and complete an exercise. On a global scale, the PLA has conducted an increasing number of joint military exercises with Pakistan, Russia, and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These exercises allow involved ground, naval, and air units to use improved and digitized infrastructures to practice C2 doctrine under theater command supervision.<sup>25</sup>

With greater confidence in the ability of PLA officers to lead large and complex operations in accordance with military doctrine, the PLA can pursue a more decentralized C2 framework in long-distance military operations. Decentralized C2 will promote joint interoperability and pave the way for increased effectiveness in out-of-area Chinese operations. By diversifying the capabilities of their force through the aforementioned recommendations, the PLA can efficiently support and protect Chinese interests around the globe.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, China's economic expansion and unresolved territorial disputes have forced the country to rely on its armed forces to defend its interests. To keep up a robust global presence, China needs to improve its out-of-area operations, which would require a significant shift in its command and control (C2) doctrine. The lack of autonomy in unit-level operations and centralization of decision-making funnels in the Chinese military pose significant challenges to effective C2 infrastructure. China's current C2 abilities, while improving in technical and digital capacity, still lag far behind American C2 capabilities. Therefore, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) must look to make significant improvements in inter-service collaboration, clarify theater command responsibilities, and bolster overall global C2 infrastructure. These changes would allow the PLA to project

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<sup>24</sup> Lin and Garafola, *Training the People's Liberation Army Air Force*.

<sup>25</sup> Lin Congyi, "Past Decade Sees Normalization of China-Foreign Joint Military Drills and Games," *China Military Online*, 12 August 2022, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.



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combat power, engage in humanitarian assistance, and conduct other vital missions anywhere in the world. Failure to make these changes could lead to significant challenges in protecting China's increasingly global interests. Ultimately, the success of China's military and its ability to defend its interests in the international arena will depend on the country's ability to adapt to the changing global security environment and modernize its C2 infrastructure. 🌟

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