Colloquium Brief Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,
The National Bureau of Asian Research,
and
The Bush School of Government and Public Service
at Texas A & M University

PLA MISSIONS BEYOND TAIWAN

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KEY INSIGHTS:

- The PLA is being assigned and training for an increasing variety of missions, including nontraditional battlefields such as outer space and cyber space, as well as nontraditional functions, such as United Nations peacekeeping operations.
- These new PLA missions have created a large gap and resulted in tension vis-à-vis PLA capabilities and traditional missions such as internal security, as well as major questions about operational and doctrinal integration.
- Clearly, China's neighbors are watching the modernization of the PLA and the expansion and redefinition of its missions very closely, especially those affecting Chinese border regions.

On September 26, 2008, more than 70 leading experts on China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) convened at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, for a 2-day discussion on "PLA Missions Beyond Taiwan." The 2008 PLA Conference, conducted by The National Bureau of Asian Research, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, and the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, sought to look beyond the PLA's primary focus on Taiwan to explore China's other military missions and objectives.

Analysis of China's armed forces tends to focus on its role in a potential Taiwan scenario, which is understandable, given that the PLA retains a central mission in the reunification of Taiwan or prevention of its de jure independence. However, it is also becoming clear that China's interests and foreign policy objectives are growing in number and complexity in tandem with its increasing power and international stature. As a result, it is reasonable to expect the PLA to be asked to perform a wider variety of missions in support of Chinese interests and objectives than it has traditionally, from disaster and humanitarian relief and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKO); to counterterrorism and border defense; to outer space and cyber space security; and extending even to the protection of ethnic Chinese abroad.

With this in mind, the conference participants' core objectives were to examine the interplay between China's armed forces and its complex foreign policy and international security environment in order to understand the requirements of several newly emerging PLA missions, and to consider how these specific interactions affect policy towards Taiwan and the wider Asia-Pacific region. They

approached these issues from both geographical and functional perspectives, seeking to identify potential policy tradeoffs resulting from the evolution in China's security policy. Are PLA missions beyond Taiwan becoming central to the military's training and capabilities development? Does this mean that the PLA is moving away from traditional missions of internal security? Does the PLA see new missions as an opportunity or as a distraction, and how might China's neighbors and the international community react to the PLA's expanded missions?

New Missions, New Battlefields.

Events over the past year, including winter snowstorms, the Sichuan earthquake, unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, the Beijing Olympics, and continued conflict in Sudan, have seen the Chinese armed forces involved in a wide variety of missions. While not all of these missions are new, the depth of PLA involvement in so many different kinds of activities, including frontier security, peacekeeping and humanitarian relief efforts, as well as traditional internal security roles, has brought into stark relief the gaps between PLA missions, current capabilities, and existing operational doctrines.

In the realm of PKO, it is clear that China has made a conscious effort to participate much more deeply in UN PKO around the world, increasing its contribution of peacekeepers 20-fold since the 1990s. As a result, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is now the 12th largest contributor of peacekeeping personnel overall and the second largest contributor of civilian police. Although Chinese peacekeepers serve in UN PKO around the world, three-quarters of them are concentrated in Africa, and the majority of those in Liberia and Sudan. The four main drivers of China's increased PKO efforts include, first, the desire to gain international stature and reassure uneasy neighbors about its peaceful rise; second, to contribute to the stabilization of areas of conflict, especially those affecting Chinese national interests; third, to use its PKO efforts to balance what it sees as overly strong U.S. and Western influence in international security organizations; and fourth, to gain benefits for its own modernization efforts through increased operational and cultural experience. In some cases, China also seeks specific diplomatic gains vis-à-vis international recognition of Taiwan and economic benefits, especially access to energy resources and raw materials.

However, China remains constrained in its PKO efforts philosophically by its principle of nonintervention in other states' sovereign affairs, and geographically by its wariness to become involved in PKO operations close to home or outside a UN mandate. Also PKO operations can become dangerous and messy, and the question remains how China would react to a major fatality incident involving Chinese peacekeepers. To date China has been less involved in humanitarian relief missions than in peacekeeping ones, in part because of a lack of necessary capabilities such as heavy-lift. However, China has taken note of the goodwill accumulating to the United States in the wake of its tsunami relief efforts in the region and is currently pursuing relevant capabilities such as a hospital ship.

In addition to new functional missions, the PLA is also putting increasing resources into new fields of battle such as outer space and cyberspace. China is already a space power with the ability to design and produce its own satellites and launch systems. Several recent firsts, such as its downing of a defunct satellite and first manned space walk, have emphasized this fact as well as raised questions about China's strategic goals in space and willingness to follow existing international norms. As early as 2002, space was already being described in Chinese sources as becoming part of the global battlefield, and in 2004 Chinese President Hu Jintao underlined the importance of space to the future of the PLA. In Chinese thinking, the concept of space dominance is closely tied to information dominance, which it sees as key to operational success against more conventionally powerful foes. Space is potentially unique from more traditional battlefields in other ways as well, including that whoever moves first would seem to have the advantage, and that there are both "hard kill" (i.e., destroying hardware) and "soft kill" (i.e., electronic jamming) options available. In this, as in other PLA missions beyond Taiwan, it is less clear whether China has a specific military space doctrine to go along with its rapidly developing capabilities, though there is some

evidence that there may be greater willingness to use space deterrence capabilities compared to traditional deterrence because of the perceived lower risks.

Computer network operations (CNO) is another expanding mission for the PLA that has received a lot of attention in recent years with the rise in reports of Chinese hacking incidents. However, one thing that has become clear is that from the perspective of the Chinese government, "patriotic hacking" by Chinese civilians is not entirely good, as the "noise" from large-scale cyber attacks can actually undermine military objectives such as signaling and strategic pausing. In recent years the Chinese government has sought to guide such "patriotic hackers" through opinion pieces in government news outlets. Nonetheless, it remains unclear to what degree the PLA operates its own hacking capability and where within the PLA the cyber attack "actor" is located. Also opaque is whether CNO has been fully integrated into the PLA operationally and doctrinally.

Portable Capabilities, Stationary Doctrine.

As the PLA retools for these new missions and battlefields, one constraint is the continuing lag between the development of new capabilities and the attendant military doctrines to guide their use and integration. Thus, some suggest the PLA might be investing in cyber or space assets before they have necessarily thought through how to use or integrate these capabilities into the larger force or PLA strategy. It is clear from the arrival of previous PLA capabilities, such as short-range ballistic missiles, that operational doctrine often substantially lags (and certainly does not inhibit) the development and deployment of a new military capability.

The lack of clear doctrinal guidance is exacerbated by the concern that many of the capabilities under development are potentially "portable," meaning that while created for use under one scenario or mission, they might easily be used in service of another. For example, amphibious landing craft originally acquired for a Taiwan contingency might be used in any number of other maritime scenarios; space and cyberspace assets developed for civilian needs could be used to disrupt an enemy's command and control capabilities during the opening phases of a military conflict. The lack of clear strategic guidelines for when and how such "portable" PLA capabilities would be employed leads to increased concern over PLA modernization efforts more generally.

A final critical piece of the nexus between PLA capabilities and doctrine in considering missions beyond Taiwan is the poorly understood relationship between China's civilian and military leadership, and how the PLA itself views new missions. Does the PLA primarily view missions such as UN peacekeeping operations as an opportunity to gain access, assets, and operational experience, or as a distraction from its core national security mission? This question is complicated by the fact that different services within the PLA might benefit from the inclusion of different missions and capabilities; likewise, it remains unclear to what degree PLA elites are shaping PLA modernization priorities and strategic thinking vis-à-vis their civilian counterparts.

The Frontier Dilemma.

Many of the PLA's missions and fields of battle other than Taiwan involve China's frontiers, broadly understood. This is important because the areas of instability of greatest concern to China are often found along its own borders, from weak Central Asian states, to rogue regimes in Burma and North Korea, to contentious areas in the East and South China Seas. The challenges of maintaining security and stability in its frontier regions pose several difficult issues for the Chinese government and the PLA. Not least of these is that China seeks ways to encourage stability and economic development on its doorstep, while still adhering to its central doctrine of nonintervention in the affairs of other sovereign states. The PLA is particularly challenged by states that exercise less than full sovereignty over their own territory and people, as well as by nontraditional spaces in which the concept of sovereignty is less fully developed (air, space, cyber). Another frontier dilemma confronting the PLA is that the very same activities in which it engages in pursuit of stability and security, such as infrastructure development and a heavy security presence, are also those that can contribute to increasing problems on its borders such as illicit trade and public discontent among minority populations.

Finally, there remains great reticence to use the PLA in matters of border or internal security, despite its many and increasingly relevant capabilities. This is partly as a result of the scars of Tiananmen, as well as China's desire to develop a more professional force able to focus on power projection and warfighting contingencies. This shift in doctrine over the last decade was illustrated by the relatively minor and surreptitious role played by the PLA during the unrest in Tibet. For example, the shortages of manpower and leadership during the crisis were partly a result of this change in mindset and the continued strategic ambiguity about the use of the PLA in cases of domestic unrest. The resolution of this paradox surrounding the minimal use of the PLA in support of what is supposedly its most central mission, and its differing employment in the southeast and western frontier of China, remains critical to any understanding of potential PLA missions beyond Taiwan.

Conclusion.

The PLA is being assigned an increasing number and variety of missions at home and abroad in addition to contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. This does not mean that reunification is no longer the central issue in PLA and the Chinese government's planning, but rather that the PLA's capabilities are increasing in accordance with China's rising power and expanding national interests. The modernization of PLA capabilities often leapfrogs the modernization of its strategic doctrines. This raises troubling questions about to what ends these capabilities are being developed, under what contingencies they might be employed, and the potential "portability" of assets between different PLA missions.

However, there remain many constraints to PLA missions beyond Taiwan, first and foremost the continued dedication of resources to the Taiwan issue itself. Additionally, the PLA is constrained by its relationship with the civilian leadership, concern over regional and international perceptions, gaps between capabilities and strategic doctrine including the principle of nonintervention, and a continued lack of coherent command and control integration. The ability of the PLA and the Chinese government to address and mitigate these tensions and constraints will help determine future PLA missions beyond Taiwan.

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