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EXPLORING THE “RIGHT SIZE” FOR CHINA’S MILITARY: PLA MISSIONS, FUNCTIONS, AND ORGANIZATION

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Key Points:

- Sustained and large increases in China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) defense budget are likely in coming years as increasing national-level demands for new PLA missions require increasing capability.
- “Surprise” PLA modernization programs—such as the 2004 Yuan-class submarine development—will likely continue to emerge, particularly in those cases where service programs have not yet caught up to national requirements.
- As modernization continues and systems become more complex, the human dimensions of the PLA—education, training, personnel management—become more critical.

On October 6, 2006, more than 60 leading experts on China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) convened at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, for a two-day discussion of the drivers of PLA force modernization. The 2006 PLA Conference was co-sponsored by National Bureau of Asian Research and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. Entitled “Exploring the ‘Right Size’ for China’s Military: PLA Missions, Functions, and Organization,” the conference explored continuities and discontinuities in the forces driving PLA force modernization, assessed how current modernization efforts are linked to national requirements, and examined what such development reveals about China’s national defense strategies.

Current trends in Chinese defense spending—a decade and a half of double-digit growth, and a 15 percent expenditure increase from 2005-06—suggest a major effort to modernize PLA military capabilities. This dramatic force modernization has the attention of both regional and international communities. Is there a systematic plan to this bold buildup that implements a national strategy? What is the appropriate “size” for China’s military, in terms of manpower and capabilities, given the missions the PLA has been handed, and what are the implications for the Asia-Pacific region and the United States?

Participants approached these questions by looking at the current needs, wants, and haves of the PLA on a service-by-service basis. By debating the rationale for stated needs, an understanding of current efforts becomes clearer—and a more lucid picture of the “right size” for the PLA emerges. What does this final collage, layering rhetoric on reality, tell us about the transparency of the PLA? Is there consistency between PLA doctrine development and force structure modernization?

Sizing It All Up: PLA “Haves” Versus “Wants” and “Needs.”

The PLA’s four arms—Army, Air Force, Navy, and strategic systems—in recent years have matured, but their “wish lists” and rationales for modernization differ. Army modernization appears to fit within the framework of a force preparing for a range of missions. These include preparation for potential conflict over Taiwan (with deterring Taiwan’s moves toward secession as a first priority); stability on the Korean peninsula; border defense; and, most importantly, potential conflict with the United States over the above-mentioned interests.

As the ground forces still constitute two-thirds of the PLA, the modernization of conventional land capabilities presents both major challenges and opportunities. Ground forces comprise 35 maneuver divisions and 45 maneuver brigades and have a wide range of missions—spread over a vast territory from the western border with India to central Asia and beyond. Managing the disparate missions and types of ground forces has resulted in a “hybrid” mix, blending old and new capabilities, unit organizations, and equipment. The bureaucratic domestic competition over scarce defense resources likely has prevented the systematic analysis of an uneven modernization effort among the ground forces in China’s seven military regions. One trend that has captured analysts’ attention is the PLA’s acquisition and deployment of newer helicopters, including Russian Mi-17s, that allow the PLA to project presence more easily and rapidly.

Training—increasingly conducted through ever-more sophisticated simulators—emphasizes amphibious operations, border defense, disaster relief, and perhaps the beginnings of PLA-style close-air support. Again, these activities seem to implement a long-term

strategy concerned foremost with regional security and with contingencies arising from U.S. interests in the region.

A human element, however, may widen the gap between the Army’s wants and needs. Party loyalty, institutionalized both through the political officer system and the party committee system, is critical to successful operations. With the current trends in personnel downsizing, the increasing incidence of corruption, and the subsequent low morale among troops, human resource development—in quality as well as quantity—becomes crucial. The lack of a cadre of capable noncommissioned officers compounds the Army’s challenge.

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) possesses a different set of haves, wants, and needs. With the potential threat of high-tech air forces around China’s periphery—from the United States, Russia, Japan, and India—as well as the challenge of winning a possible air campaign against Taiwan, the PLAAF has shifted its focus to prepare for offensive missions, including the advancement of strike capabilities, from fighters to strategic bombers. Like the Army, it currently possesses a mix of older equipment and modern systems. Meanwhile, PLAAF officers are better represented in the senior ranks of PLA leadership.

Three factors are affecting the Air Force’s “needs versus wants” debate. First, the PLAAF must decide whether to downsize to a smaller, more lethal force—while building force multipliers like airborne early warning (AEW) and aerial refueling—or, alternatively, to maintain large numbers of less capable but cheaper systems. A second question relates to how the PLAAF reconciles its internal and external needs, as technology requirements are complicated by the agenda of the domestic defense industry to advance its own capabilities. Finally, the PLAAF must agree on a division of labor within the PLAN Air Force, more thoughtfully delegating personnel for defense missions and defining who gets priority on new acquisitions. These trade-offs have implications for the PLAAF modernization efforts, creating the possibility of inter-force tension and exacerbating issues of technology compatibility, communication, and even training.

Meanwhile, the PLA Navy (PLAN) is developing in areas where threats and interests coincide. Among these drivers are, once again, deterring Taiwan’s move toward independence and protecting the sea lines of

communication—long-term challenges that require significant force modernization. While China’s military strategy historically has been land-based, the PLAN now seems to be assuming a defensive posture, not unlike the Cold War Soviet model of maintaining sea control to the “first island chain,” or about 200 miles out. The PLAN may be moving toward a strategy of sea denial, developing maneuverable medium-range ballistic missiles to bulwark the “second island chain” about 1,000 miles out.

The importance of amphibious warfare to China’s emerging sea control/sea denial strategy is paramount, to be sure, but doubts still linger about the PLAN’s ability to employ its new weapons under real conditions. If asymmetries in technology affect operations, the PLAN may have more problems than it bargained for. Nevertheless, the pace of modernization indicates that naval modernization remains a very high priority for the PLA.

Drivers of strategic systems are consistent with China’s broader long-term security interests; they involve issues of prestige and coercive/deterrent capabilities. Of late, for example, the PLA has been developing a more articulate version of the second artillery nuclear doctrine. It asserts that the role of nuclear weapons is deterrence-oriented, designed to mitigate costs incurred from employing conventional warfare. In terms of Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), the PLA may only be 2 to 5 years from reaching the level of networking that U.S. forces possess today. Indeed, the information war already has begun, and sophisticated acts of spying and espionage occur daily in cyberspace.

China makes little effort to veil its desire to develop systems capable of challenging those of the United States, the “gold standard” against which warfare capabilities currently are measured. Official pronouncements and literature suggest Beijing is exploring ways to apply ancient Chinese military doctrine to the information age in five domains: land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace. To this effect, there seems to be consistency between strategic systems doctrine development and force structure modernization—that is, a reasonable degree of transparency between what the PLA has, what it wants, and why.

Conclusion.

The most pressing threats to China’s security are domestic, including the challenges of separatism, particularly with Taiwan; increasing protests over corruption; and nontraditional and transnational threats such as terrorism, pandemics, and narcotics. While pressing, however, none of these in its own right drives PLA modernization. Similarly, in terms of external threats, neither territorial disputes—a long-standing historical concern of China’s—nor an unfavorable regional environment seem to dictate certain modernization efforts. Rather, successful diplomatic implementation of a “good neighbor” policy of active engagement appears to be bearing fruits for China and its regional objectives. China seems poised to develop a network of friendly, economically interdependent neighbor states aligned in ways favorable to Beijing.

Most importantly, then, China worries that it has no ability to provide its own security of the international sea lines of communication, through which flow the maritime commerce fueling the engines of China’s meteoric economic growth (including ever-increasing amounts of energy products). Here, the United States has the greatest potential to damage China. China’s response has been to develop the bilateral relationships that defray this potential threat while amassing considerable naval capabilities of its own.

Ultimately, the current security landscape offers an ideal juncture for China and its military. With a relatively benign threat environment, the PLA can pursue military modernization largely unconstrained, orienting itself towards potential and long-term threats—especially the United States. Yet, modernization efforts and rationale vary among the PLA’s different arms, and by layering “needs” over “haves”—and scrutinizing the doctrines supporting them—a picture of discrepancies emerges. As the PLA grapples with the human elements of force modernization, steep learning curves in technological advances, and an increasingly wary international community, it will be pressured in the coming years to align its “walk” with its “talk.”

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