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Chinese Military Power: Much Less than Meets the Eye

By Bernard F.W. Loo

Synopsis

China's military power is growing, but while this growing power is grounds for regional concern, the PLA remains far short of being able to assert China's national interests in the South China Sea in a manner that would be detrimental to regional security interests.

Commentary

IS CHINA starting to push its way around in Southeast Asia? Is China, in other words, turning into the regional bully? China's military power certainly has been hogging the headlines in recent weeks – from news of an alleged aircraft carrier-killing cruise missile, to recent tensions between the United States and China over the South China Sea and Southeast Asia. Over the last decade, analysts have started to pay increasing attention on China's growing military power and in particular to China's declared interest in acquiring a genuine aircraft carrier capability. All these 'signs' suggest an increasingly assertive China, backed by an increasingly muscular People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The Modernised PLA

There is no doubt that the PLA is today much more capable than its predecessor of a decade ago. In particular, China has been producing increasingly capable combat capabilities particularly in the naval and air arena. These naval and air capabilities are of particular importance precisely because of the potentially offensive capabilities that these platforms afford China. Certainly, if China intends to be more assertive and have a more muscular regional policy platform, it will need a military organisation that is able to project power into the regions of its interest. Air and naval combat platforms are part and parcel of this potential power projection capability.

Assessing the PLA – Four Caveats

However, the air and naval combat assets of the PLA are only part of the equation. Four sets of variables need to be factored into the equation before a more accurate picture of the PLA and how it can affect the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia can begin to emerge.

The first variable is the size of the PLA, in particular its air and naval components. Importantly, the size of the PLA cannot be considered in absolute terms; rather it has to be considered relative to other military

organisations in the region. And while the growth of the PLA over the last decade has been truly impressive, the numbers and types of air and naval assets that the PLA has, when viewed against other military organisations in the region, begins to lose some of its lustre. Simply put, even if the PLA were to deploy all of its air and naval assets to assert China's interests in the South China Sea in a muscular fashion, when put up against the military power that the United States and its Pacific allies can theoretically muster, the PLA begins to fall short of the mark.

Furthermore, the above scenario is predicated on the assumption that the PLA can deploy all of its air and naval assets at any given time. Particularly for naval assets, this assumption is at the very least highly problematic. All naval forces are typically deployed in thirds, especially so in peacetime. At any given time, a third of any given navy can be deployed at sea. A second part of its fleet will have completed sea deployment and will have to return to base for refurbishment, replenishment and repair. A final part of the navy will have completed refurbishment and repair, and will be undergoing sea trials.

Only when sea trials have been completed will this part of the navy become operationally ready. Therefore, while the PLA's naval assets appear to be impressive in numbers, only a third of this fleet is at any given time ready for operations.

The third variable compounds this increasingly sober assessment of Chinese military power. This is the geographical size of the South China Sea. Lacking an aircraft carrier capability, the PLA's naval assets will have to be deployed beyond the range of ground-based air cover. Without air cover, these naval assets, however impressive they may seem on paper, will "fight like a savage against a modern European army", to use the words of the World War Two German general Erwin Rommel.

The fourth variable refers to the ability of the PLA's naval assets to dominate the South China Sea for an extended period of time. Even absent hostile air power, the PLA's naval assets are simply unable to dominate the region for an extended period of time, because the PLA Navy lacks sufficient replenishment-at-sea capacity. Unless and until this replenishment-at-sea capacity is addressed in a serious manner, PLA naval assets will only be able to remain at sea for as long as the supplies they had on board at the time of deployment. Once those supplies run out, these naval assets will have to return to base to replenish.

Re-Assessing the PLA – Much More Is Needed

This does not mean that the PLA lacks the material capacity to mount military operations in the South China Sea (although material capacity does not equate with the political will or desire to do so). What it does mean is that whatever military operations that the PLA may contemplate, mounting them in the South China Sea are necessarily short-lived. This is in a scenario where the weight of the United States Pacific fleet is absent from the equation. It is difficult to see how such a short-lived naval deployment can serve China's long-term national interests, however. Instead, such short-lived naval deployments can only be, in the long run, deleterious to China's national interests.

Furthermore, even if the PLA Navy were to opt for such short-lived deployments, there are options available to regional navies. Given that the PLA Navy today is a much more capable entity than most of its Southeast Asian counterparts, the strategically dubious option for regional navies would be to confront this Chinese deployment. The Mahanian strategic option – seeking decisive, cataclysmic naval battle – may be great for cinema, but it can make for dubious strategy. It will simply play into the Chinese hand.

Rather, the strategically wiser option would be to simply ignore the Chinese naval presence, avoid confrontation, and once Chinese naval deployments draw down (and draw down they must, given the lack of sufficient replenishment-at-sea), seek to restore the status quo ante.

In short, yes, the PLA is becoming increasingly capable, but it is still far short of what would be required for it to be able to assert China's national interests detrimental to Southeast Asia. Over the long run, China's naval power will almost surely grow further, but now is not the time to press the panic button.

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