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Learning From the Best The Chinese Response to U.S. Defence Transformation

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FEW countries have been more affected and influenced by the United States' defence transformation than China – and with good reason. The U.S. increasingly regards China as *the* key peer challenger to its primacy in the Asia-Pacific region. China, for example, was singled out in the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* as having, among the “major and emerging powers...the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States”. And while not explicitly mentioning China, the QDR goes on to say that the U.S. will

“attempt to dissuade any military competitor from developing disruptive or other capabilities that could enable regional hegemony or hostile action against the United States or other friendly countries....Should deterrence fail, the United States would deny a hostile power its strategic and operational objectives.”

China's growing worry

While this may sound like a reasonable hedging strategy to the U.S., it has generally been viewed with increasing alarm in Beijing. China is concerned that the current realignment and transformation of the U.S. military in the Asia-Pacific region is mainly directed against it. “Strategic flexibility,” for example, implies that U.S. forces once dedicated solely to the defence of South Korea or Japan will now be made available for counter-Chinese operations in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea – and, indeed, the U.S. military has done little to assuage Beijing of those fears. Moreover, Tokyo's expanding security relationship with the U.S. – bordering on collective defence – along with Japan's growing power projection capabilities, has caused Beijing to suppose even more that it is becoming the object of a U.S.-led multilateral strategy to contain China.

At the same time, the U.S. is moving more military equipment closer to China. The U.S. military plans to add an additional aircraft carrier to its Pacific fleet – including basing a nuclear-powered carrier at Yokosuka – and to shift 60 percent of its submarine forces into the region. Guam is also being built up as a forward staging area for U.S. forces operating in the western Pacific, particularly as a base for long-range bombers and cruise missile-carrying submarines.

Consequently, U.S. efforts to transform its forces have served both as a challenge and a guide to Chinese military modernization. Current Chinese efforts to modernize and transform its military are largely intended to counter or blunt U.S. power projection capabilities in the

region, particularly in the event of a China-Taiwan conflict. Under such circumstances, China would want to deter, delay, or complicate any U.S. intervention on behalf of Taiwan, while also being able to carry out offensive operations against Taiwan, including air and missile attacks, a naval blockade, or even an outright invasion of the island.

China has long studied the writings of U.S. military theorists on the revolution in military affairs (RMA). U.S. combat operations in Iraq in 1991, in Kosovo in 1999, and again in Iraq in 2003 were sobering lessons for the Chinese, and they reinforced the importance of reforming and modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) along the lines of greater mobility, jointness, power projection, precision-strike, and, above all, greater attention to information capabilities.

Beijing's own RMA

The PLA has been particularly influenced by the information technologies-led RMA. Beijing is currently engaged in a determined effort to transform the PLA from a force based on Mao Zedong's principles of "People's War," to one capable of fighting and winning "Limited Local Wars under Conditions of 'Informatization'." This new doctrine revolves around short-duration, high-intensity conflicts characterized by mobility, speed, and long-range attack, employing joint operations fought simultaneously throughout the entire air, land, sea, space, and electromagnetic battlespace, and relying heavily upon extremely lethal high-technology weapons.

Consequently, PLA has in recent years put considerable effort into acquiring new capabilities for mobility, power projection, and precision-strike. This has meant deemphasizing ground forces in favour of building up the PLA's air, naval, and missile forces. At the same time, China's military is increasingly focused on the information-technologies aspect of the RMA. According to Chinese military analyst You Ji, the PLA is currently engaged – as part of an ambitious "generation-leap" strategy – in a "double construction" transformational effort of simultaneously pursuing both the mechanization and informatization of its armed forces. Initially, the PLA intends to digitize and upgrade its current arsenal of conventional "industrial age" weapons – through improved communications systems, new sensors and seekers, greater precision, etc. Concurrently and with equal emphasis, the Chinese are trying to leapfrog development in building informationalized capabilities, by putting greater effort and resources into command, control, communications, computing, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) infrastructures, networking, and information warfare.

The PRC is combining these force modernization efforts with actions intended to increase professionalization and jointness within the PLA. PLA air forces devote more time training to supporting amphibious operations, while PLA ground forces are increasingly integrating training and exercises with maritime, airborne, and special operations forces, and have to put greater emphasis in their training on jointness, rapid mobilization, deployability, and over-the-sea operations – most likely with a Taiwan contingency in mind.

To pay for all this, Chinese military expenditures have nearly quadrupled in real terms since the mid-1990s. China's official 2006 defence budget is 281 billion yuan, or US\$35 billion – a 14.7 percent increase over the previous year. This upward trend is likely to continue for some time. In May 2006, Beijing approved a new 15-year national research and development plan for defence science and technology, focusing on high-technology and "IT solutions."

Why PLA's transformation is significant

The transformation of the PLA is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the Chinese are currently engaged in building an “army within an army”: a small force – perhaps 15 percent of the entire PLA ground forces – equipped and trained to carry out rapid attacks, supported by missile strikes, coordinated air and sea attacks with precision-guided weapons, increasingly sophisticated tactical C4ISR systems, and an offensive information warfare capability. While such a force would most likely be used to attack and defeat Taiwan, while also deterring or denying U.S. intervention on Taipei's behalf, these capabilities could also be applied to other regional contingencies, such as conflicts over natural resources.

Second, “informatization” is a potentially critical new development in the PLA's warfighting capabilities, implying a fundamental shift from *platform-centric* toward *network-centric* warfare. China's military transformation has, more than any armed force in the Asia-Pacific region, mimicked U.S. transformation in terms of ambition and scope. Long-term trends in Chinese military modernization have the potential to pose a credible threat to militaries in the region, and, in particular, to challenge the U.S. at its own game.

Of course, China has a long way to go before it can say that it has truly transformed its military, and history has shown that it has faced considerable hurdles turning its aspirations into reality. Additionally, the “double-construction” approach of concurrent mechanization and informatization is fraught with risk: attempting to leapfrog development by skipping certain steps in development may actually turn out to be more time-consuming and expensive than anticipated, and there is always the danger of going down the wrong technology pathways.

Nevertheless, the PLA has made undeniable progress since the late 1990s in expanding its capabilities in several areas, particularly missile attack, power projection over sea and in the air, and precision-strike. Chinese military power relative to its potential competitors in the Asia-Pacific region – perhaps even the U.S. – will likely increase considerably over the next 10 to 20 years. China's readiness to confront the U.S. politically, economically, and militarily in Asia – over Taiwan, in the East and South China Seas, and elsewhere in the region – will likely rise accordingly.

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