A General Overview of the Chinese Military

by Victoria Herczegh and Andrew Davidson - February 3, 2025

The modernization of China's military over the past few years has raised justifiable questions over whether Beijing can someday challenge the U.S.-led international order. But the answer to that question depends on what China intends to do – and is capable of doing – with its growing military capabilities.

China boasts the world's largest standing military with more than 2 million active-duty soldiers and another 500,000 reserves. It is rapidly expanding its navy, which it intends to use in places like the South China Sea to secure maritime trade routes. The construction of a fourth aircraft carrier (and plans for a fifth) enhances this naval presence. Even so, its military as constituted today doesn't pose much of an offensive threat in the region, let alone the world. The military should be seen primarily as a deterrent against threats that can, in time, project power regionally. China is currently more concerned about internal issues and national defense. Border security is vital in this regard – in the south for political stability and in the west for economic security.

The structure of the military reflects as much. It has divided its ground forces into regional commands to decentralize command structure and to execute specific tasks. Every military theater command is orientated toward a different area: Eastern (East China Sea, Japan, Taiwan), Southern (South Central China, Vietnam), Northern (Mongolia, Russia, Korean Peninsula), Central (Beijing, military reserve) and Western. The largest is the Western Theater Command, which is aimed at India, Central Asia and the western provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang. The latter two are especially revealing: They show how seriously Beijing takes threats posed by its restive reaches. Security there is vital for trade routes established with Central Asian nations and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This is the same reason that Beijing is expanding its navy so quickly. Sea-based routes account for 60 percent of exports, on which China's economy relies. Yet China is hemmed in by what's known as the first island chain, a string of nations more-or-less friendly to the U.S. If Washington closed these transport routes, it would bring the Chinese economy to its knees. Thus Beijing has every intention of shoring up western, land-based routes to ensure a viable alternative in a worst-case scenario.

Though the army clearly has the ability to amass forces at China's borders, there's little reason to believe it could successfully venture beyond them. Even if Beijing weren't so preoccupied with internal security, the fact remains that long-range logistical support has never been truly tested.

Deploying large combat forces far from home is currently not seen as sustainable. Its logistical needs are too many, and its overseas bases are too few.

In other words, despite the military's many improvements, it still suffers from many problems that will prevent it from challenging the West anytime soon. First, it is untested. It has plenty of new weapons platforms, but it lacks the experience in using them, and they have yet to be used in prolonged combat situations.

Second, it has recruitment problems. The People's Liberation Army is part conscript, part volunteer, and it needs about 400,000 young people each year to volunteer to fill up the army's personnel pool. About 35 percent of the PLA consists of two-year conscripts drawn from poorer rural areas who see service as a better way to make money than staying home. Over the past few years, extra conscription rounds were also held for university graduates who did not manage to find jobs appropriate for their qualifications in the armed forces. These efforts have an important domestic aim: to lower the country's high youth unemployment rate. But since pay for new recruits is still generally low, attracting a sufficient number of talented volunteers remains difficult. The PLA has been charged by Beijing with expanding the scope for potential recruitment, so it launched special high school courses meant to cultivate talent early. It has also supported the return of veterans with command experience or tech expertise. (Importantly, poor morale and leadership work against recruitment. Broadly speaking, non-commissioned officers tend to assume their roles without sufficient – or any – military experience beyond basic training. Officers are trained longer and more thoroughly, so they tend to feel superior to NCOs. Unsurprisingly, there are socioeconomic undertones at play.)

Third, there is a **corruption problem**. High-ranking officials are increasingly found guilty of "procurement violations" – purchasing weapons of flawed or questionable quality at a lower cost than the budget allocated for the procurement and pocketing the rest. There are reports of procurement-related investigations virtually every month, and it apparently affects several different departments of the PLA. This indicates a widespread lack of transparency for the central government, which is supposed to know in detail the steps and circumstances of each procurement process. More than just a matter of underhanded dealing, the corruption in question is so systemic that the leadership has lost some degree of control over the military. The purges and reshufflings that characterized military leadership in 2024 are thus likely to continue.

In China, the fates of the military and society are intertwined: Military power is widely considered essential to maintaining national security, safeguarding national sovereignty and projecting China's global influence. And building a mighty military force is a demonstration to the people that the country

is stable and thriving. Which is why the biggest issues within the PLA reflect the biggest issues within Chinese society: a general discontent due to financial uncertainty, social inequality and an overall bleak outlook on life. Resolving these issues has been the focus of President Xi Jinping's recent speeches addressing national security. "Social governance malfunctions" and "domestic dangers" have been described as the top concerns for the country, with other perils, including pressure from the U.S., being mentioned only briefly.

Two measures currently underway – the substantial stimulus measures meant to revive the country's lagging economy and the efforts to regain full control over and modernize the military – are self-reinforcing. If the economy manages to regain traction, measures to reform the military will also become easier to implement. New recruits can be offered better wages, high school military programs and courses can get a bigger budget, and longer, more frequent, more targeted and higher quality training can take place in the PLA. Technological capabilities can also receive a steadier inflow of money. Under such circumstances, China could root out the most pressing problems and achieve the desired level of modernization. But that could take as long as 15 years, and in the meantime, the risk of escalation to armed conflict with the U.S. remains low.

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