

“China’s Expeditionary and Power Projection Capabilities Trajectory: Lessons from Recent Expeditionary Operations”

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Introduction

Co-Chairmen Wortzel and Fiedler, Commissioners of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before this commission to discuss China’s overseas operations and their implications for China’s ability to undertake joint “out of area” expeditionary operations.

On December 26, 2008, three surface combatants of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) weighed anchor from the Sanya naval base in Hainan Island and set sail for the Gulf of Aden to conduct escort and counterpiracy operations. Since that time the PLAN has undertaken twenty-two such deployments. In the course of undertaking those operations the PLAN has learned some invaluable operational lessons to which it can improve its ability to project power far from China’s shores. This will be the first case that I discuss in detail for this hearing. In 2011 following the rapidly deteriorating political and security situation in Libya, the Chinese dispatched an interagency task force to conduct a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) eventually rescuing some 35,000 of its citizens from that country. In 2015 the Chinese followed up with a second NEO when it diverted one of its counter-piracy task forces to rescue citizens from war torn and civil war ridden Yemen. This will be the second case that I examine and discuss with the Commission today. Finally, although China has engaged in peacekeeping operations since its initial foray into this type of activity in 1989, it has only recently deployed combat units for the purpose of conducting force protection and security provision missions. The PLA deployment of infantry units to Mali and to South Sudan in 2013 and 2015 respectively makes up the third case that I will discuss with the Commission today.

The PLA’s Evolutionary Improvements Since 2009

The Gulf of Aden Counter-Piracy Operations

The greatest abundance of information on China’s “out of area” operational deployments can be found in the PLAN’s counterpiracy operations from 2009 to the present. To date, the PLAN has conducted twenty two deployments to the Gulf of Aden for the purposes of engaging in counter-piracy operations. These include escorting merchant shipping, maritime intercept operations, visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) and, if necessary direct action by China’s special forces. Like all good militaries the PLA has collected operational lessons from these deployments and instituted changes throughout the seven year time period. The first of the lessons learned was a recognition that the flotilla required more lift capability in order to perform all of the expected missions in the Gulf of Aden. The initial counterpiracy mission involved a replenishment ship and two destroyers. Subsequent

deployments have included in their force packages the recently acquired Type -71 Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) in addition to a guided missile destroyer and an underway replenishment ship.

A second operational lesson that the PLA Navy has learned and institutionalized is the “normalization” and stabilization of the deployment and rotation process of its flotillas. The initial first to seventh deployments were 3-4 months and then steadily increased to between 170 and 200 days.¹ The 11th Task Force set the record at 200 days and each subsequent deployment has held between 170 and 200 days.² A “normalized” deployment schedule suggests that the PLA has learned and institutionalized force management processes to include a predetermined training and “work up” process; a reliable maintenance and a timely equipment installation process; a closely monitored personnel management system; and some kind of rational scheduling system which determines which of the PLAN’s surface combatants are due to take part in the operation and which are needed elsewhere.

A third operational lesson has to do with the content and extent of the PLAN’s pre-deployment training. The first deployment involved very little pre-deployment preparation, and was very much characterized by a “learn by doing” process. With each subsequent deployment the PLAN has apparently taken its lessons and codified these into a substantial pre-deployment training process. Pre-deployment training for officers involves a two week counter-piracy course held at the Nanjing Naval Command College.³ The crews of the flotillas, additionally, receive pre-deployment training including exposure to likely contingencies on deployment, exposure to a large number of emergency plans, and drill scenarios. Additionally, the crews participate in simulations of rescue operations, participate in live fire exercises, and the special operations units take part in training involving repelling off of shipborne helicopters and Visit Board Search and Seizure (VBSS) techniques. Finally there is some evidence that by the 11th Task Force the Chinese training program has evolved to include a task force (not just individual ship but all three ships in the flotilla) pre-deployment “work up”.⁴ After leaving its homeport, the task force transits through the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the Strait of Miyako, and into Northwest Pacific where it engages in at-sea exercises.⁵ This training process is close enough to a U.S. Navy carrier group or Amphibious Ready Group “work up” cycle that it is hard not to conclude that the training program is part copy of U.S. Navy pre-deployment cycle and part lessons learned from Gulf of Aden operations.

A fourth operational lesson appears to have been the improved integration of naval intelligence with operations. Prior to the PLAN’s Fifth Task Force deployment the PLAN traditionally conducted area patrols between two main points about 600 nm apart.⁶ By July 2010, according to Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, the PLAN task forces started adjusting their escort rendezvous points to match “geographic trends in pirate attacks.”⁷ The counter-piracy task force extended the route of coverage to the eastern part of the Gulf of Aden to address the fact that the pirates had adjusted their location of

¹ Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, “No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden”, CMSI #10, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, November 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

attacks against shipping.⁸ Additional evidence that the PLAN is making use of intelligence in its counterpiracy planning can be found in reports that later counterpiracy task forces were adjusting their tactics to address the intelligence they were receiving that pirates were shifting their attacks to larger merchant ships. PLAN task forces began placing Chinese special forces troops on some of these larger ships.⁹ The rapid dispatch of the counterpiracy task force to Yemen as its political and security situation quickly deteriorated suggests that the Chinese have taken some effort to marry its expeditionary operations with improved operational intelligence. This strongly suggests that the PLAN has learned how to fuse information on the current situation at sea and adjacent land areas into a coherent intelligence picture which can then be translated into a planning process and into maritime operations.

A final lesson appears to have been a growing comfort and facility with managing out of area logistics support. The initial deployment involved minimal in-port access and the first crew had no liberty opportunities despite being at sea for 3 to 4 months.¹⁰ The PLAN has evolved the logistics support network to include an evolving network of facilities and bases in which the counter-piracy surface combatants can replenish themselves. At the beginning of the counterpiracy mission, the PLAN was reluctant to pull into ports for replenishment and tended to only use its replenishment ship to take on stores and then subsequently conduct replenishment at sea for the rest of the task force; however, it is apparent that the PLA has become adept at managing logistical support for these task forces. COSCO with its many agents and networks of ties has served as a key player in assisting Chinese embassies and consulates in arranging for supplies for the PLAN task forces.¹¹ As a consequence, over time the counter-piracy task forces have become quite comfortable pulling into foreign ports, replenishing, conducting military diplomacy with the navies of the region, allowing the crew liberty, and then continuing with the mission.¹²

Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs)

The PLA has also learned from its Non-Combatant Evacuation (NEO) of 2011 and applied some of those lessons to the subsequent 2015 Yemen NEO. In 2011 as the political and security situation in Libya steadily deteriorated following some of the chaos and collapses of Middle East regimes during the “Arab Spring”, the Chinese government dispatched a mixed civilian and military task force to conduct a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) of Chinese citizens working and residing in Libya. The operation involved a combination of a single PLA Navy frigate diverted from the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy operation, PAAAF military aircraft dispatched from China, commercial aircraft, COSCO shipping, and leased ferries from third nation countries.¹³ The inter-agency task force was under the command of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and like western management of NEOs directly managed by the Chinese Ambassador to Libya. The NEO took place without any significant set backs. One

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, “Learning by Doing: PLAN Operational Innovations in the Gulf of Aden”, *China Brief*, Vol. 13, Issue 21, Jamestown Foundation, October 24, 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “Implications of China’s Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya”, *China Brief*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, Jamestown Foundation, March 10, 2011.

interesting note is that the Chinese were not prepared for the sheer number of citizens needing to be rescued, with the eventual number of 35,000 Chinese citizens evacuated from Libya shocking the Chinese military and civilian officials alike.¹⁴

The first lesson which appears to have been derived from the Libya experience is of course the importance and difficulty of Inter-agency coordination and management. The process in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in charge and required extensive coordination and planning with other major players was said to have been unwieldy and needed to be streamlined and simplified.¹⁵

The process may have been so unwieldy that a second lesson appears to have been the recognition that there are benefits to a NEO involving a military only task force and not a hybrid of civilian and military assets to conduct the operation. The Yemen NEO involved only naval vessels diverted from the counter-piracy task force operations. From conversations the author has had with PLA observers of the Libya NEO the PLA was aware that had the Libyan situation been more chaotic and had Chinese citizens not been able to get to the coasts the civilian platforms and the limited Chinese military assets would not have been able to get to those citizens.¹⁶ The author has also learned from his interviews that the complexity of the inter-agency process in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was given control over the operation made the operation more complex than was necessary.¹⁷ The Yemen NEO which involved only naval assets suggests that at least in some cases the PLA considers that the cost of inter-agency complications outweigh the benefits of such an inter-agency operation.

A third lesson from the Libya NEO is the importance of accurate intelligence for the operational plan of the NEO task force. The Libya NEO task force is said to have been surprised at the sheer number of Chinese citizens (over 35,000) requiring rescue.¹⁸ Chinese planners thought that there was a much smaller number of expatriate citizens which is consistent with U.S. planning assumptions for NEO operations. When ARG/MEU planners are given an initial assessment of the number of citizens to be evacuated, they often treble the number as a more accurate prediction of how many citizens are actually going to get evacuated.¹⁹ There appears to have been no reports of similar intelligence/information failures in the subsequent Yemen NEO.²⁰

A fourth operational lesson from the Libyan NEO is the recognition of the importance of access to third party country airfields, ports and other facilities in support of these kinds of operations. The PLAAF aircraft, four IL-76s, refueled at Khartoum, Sudan, before continuing on to Libya where it evacuated 1,700 Chinese citizens.²¹ As the U.S. military learned during its “Libya raid” operation

¹⁴ Author interviews. Beijing, March 2011.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Authors experience as a civilian analyst attached to the staff of Commander, Amphibious Group Two, from September 1998 to August 2001. In his capacity as the command’s Center for Naval Analyses field representative the author took part in numerous ARG/MEU “work ups” which included preparation for Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs).

²⁰ “PLA Navy Use for First Time in Naval Evacuation from Yemen Conflict”, *China Brief*, Vol. 15, Issue 7, April 3, 2015.

²¹ Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “Implications of China’s Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya”, *China Brief*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, Jamestown Foundation, March 10, 2011.

(Operation El Dorado Canyon) some twenty nine years earlier, not having access to airbases and airspace can significantly complicate a military operation. As Erickson and Collins point out another lesson from this operation is that the Chinese now have learned the diplomatic and international coordination efforts necessary to get access not only to its “Out of Area” naval operations, but also for its expeditionary air operations as well.²²

UN Peacekeeping Operations in Africa

The third and last example of Chinese expeditionary and out of area operations is its involvement in UN peacekeeping operations, particularly in Africa. China first deployed peacekeepers in 1989 when it dispatched 20 civilian personnel to the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) monitoring elections in Namibia.²³ It first deployed military units in 1992 when it dispatched a small number of troops to the UN Transition Authority in Cambodia for an 18 month period.²⁴ Since then its involvement and participation in UN peacekeeping operations has steadily increased and has contributed close to 20,000 peacekeepers since the mid-1990s. In 2009 the majority of Chinese peacekeepers offered engineering, transport or medical support.²⁵ Most of the PLA’s activities in support of UN peacekeeping operations has involved the building of roads, bridges, treating patients and clearing mines. In 2009 China was the 13th largest contributor of civilian police in support of UN peacekeeping operations.²⁶

In May 2009 China’s General Staff Department (GSD) announced that it would be establishing an “Arms Force System” for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). The announcement indicated that “the aim is to strengthen PLA’s emergency response system and enhance its capacity for rapid deployment both inside and outside of China.” Five specialized type of forces would be created to support this system: Flood and disaster relief forces; a post-earthquake emergency rescue force; a nuclear, chemical and biological disaster rescue force; an emergency relief force for transportation facilities; and finally, an International Peacekeeping Force.²⁷ This development suggests that the PLA sees peacekeeping operations as part of an emerging and developing expeditionary force management system.

China’s most recent peacekeeping deployments to the African continent have involved a significant shift in the scale and type of these kinds of operations. In 2012 rebel groups had driven government forces out of northern Mali and by early 2013 were threatening the capital.²⁸ For the purposes of supporting the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) the

²² Ibid.

²³ Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang, “China’s Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications”, SIPRI Policy Paper #25, November 2009, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm, Sweden, p. 4.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁸ Frans Paul Van der Putten, “China’s Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security: The U.N. Deployment of Chinese Troops for U.N. Force Protection in Mali; Clingendael Report, September 2015, p. 9.

PLA deployed for the first time infantry and special forces troops.²⁹ Whereas before Chinese peacekeepers had been deployed as support units and subsequently folded into other Peacekeeping units, this time the PLA deployed as a separate integrated unit to provide force protection to the multinational UN presence.³⁰ Of equal significance, Chinese special forces deployed on China's counter-piracy task force ships already under a UN mandate. These troops were subsequently authorized to be on-call to support the Mali mission.³¹ The PLA forces deployed to Mali as a UN peacekeeping force have had to contend with a deteriorating security situation, including the possibility of attacks against the UN compound, UN encampments and UN personnel. The Mali operation has provided definite operational learning experiences to the PLA. The most apparent benefit has been to provide experience in the field to the PLA's infantry units. The mission has also given the PLA a direct exposure to the force protection mission.

In early 2015 China deployed an infantry battalion comprised of some 700 soldiers to South Sudan as part of the UN Mission to the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS). These troops like the troops in Mali, were armed with light weapons and furnished with armored personnel carriers (APCs).³² The PLA peacekeeping mission provided force protection to UN personnel operating in South Sudan. Again, like Mali, the PLA peacekeepers were made up of both infantry and special forces troops. In South Sudan however the mission assigned was more expansive. There the PLA were tasked with protecting "the local people and other countries' personnel engaged in peaceful activities".³³ These included humanitarian assistance and economic development activities. The UN mandate in fact specified that the PLA's mission was to "deter violence against civilians, including foreign nationals, especially through proactive deployment [...] and identification of threats and attacks against the civilian population, [...] in areas at high risk of conflict including [...] oil installations."³⁴ Although the South Sudan mission does not specify that the PLA mission in South Sudan is to protect Chinese property and expatriate citizens, the PLA forces in South Sudan could conceivably be utilized for this purpose.

Having described in general the evolution of China's UN peacekeeping activities, what specific operational lessons might the PLA have learned from the recent shift of the types of PLA units being deployed to African peacekeeping missions—that is, from engineers, medical personnel and policemen to infantry units and special forces? Although PLA peacekeepers have not engaged in combat operations the more security oriented focus of these latter deployments do add considerably to the PLA's bag of operational lessons learned.

First, throughout China's experience with peacekeeping the PLA has gained experienced operating in challenging environments. However, with the PLA's role shifting to a direct security provision mission the PLA will have gained operational experience in riot control, patrolling, operational intelligence gathering and analysis, civic affairs, military inter-operability with other nations, and managing a large scale military emergency command system. Secondly, the deployment of an infantry battalion into an austere environment will have provided the PLA with direct experience in expeditionary logistics and the requirements of preparing a ground combat force to deploy overseas for

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, p. 20.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 20-1.

contingency operations—not an easy task. The Chinese will have learned what gear to pack on a grand scale, how much of their gear should be packed and how that gear should be packed and configured in whatever forms of transportation are available for the PLA. Since the PLA forces have been transported to Africa by various means (the infantry battalion by commercial air, the Special Forces by PLAN ships) PLA logisticians and combat cargo officers will have gained invaluable experience loading combat forces on various forms of transport platforms. Finally, having deployed to Africa the PLA will have gained direct knowledge and intelligence on a range of locales which will help in future operations. These include direct knowledge of ports and facilities, air fields, bridges, roads, ethnic and cultural groupings, local politics and local politicians, foreign presence, and the military capabilities of national and local governments.

What a near term PLA joint expeditionary operation will probably look like

Given what we have just observed of PLA “out of area” operations, it is safe to make a few predictions on what near future PLA expeditionary operations have a good chance of looking like. First, it is likely to be the case that the PLAN will continue their counter-piracy deployments, possibly in another guise as the piracy problem increasingly fades as an issue. Given the success of the past seven years of the UN, EU and Chinese counter-piracy missions and the drop off of piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden, there is now less of a pressing need for this mission. Although the counterpiracy mission could simply shift to another geographic area—perhaps in West Africa by the Gulf of Guinea where piracy is still a problem there. The counter-piracy task force is likely to evolve into a more comprehensive “out of area” force supporting Beijing’s larger “out of area” security interests. Thus, a second characteristic of China’s near term joint expeditionary operations is that the PLA will most likely normalize special operations and ground troop deployments with the task forces as possible force packages to address contingencies ashore. We saw this manifest itself in the use of PLA special forces deployed on the nineteenth counterpiracy task force as a ‘ready force’ to support Chinese UN peacekeeping operations in Mali. I have been on the record as stating that the PLA is probably not far off from deploying PLA ground forces like the USMC deploys MEUs on ARGs.³⁵ This recent development suggests that I was correct in that assessment.

A third characteristic of future PLA joint expeditionary operations is the continued deepening and refinement of the PLA’s logistics support network and access agreements with facilities throughout the IOR. The PLA has since 2009 developed a sophisticated network of facilities to which its task forces have relied on for logistics support. This has involved a concerted effort by the Chinese consulate/embassy staffs and close coordination with Chinese State Owned Enterprises with assets and personnel on the ground to lend assistance. I have been on the record as stating that the likely next step will be the acquisition of some kind of logistical support facility designed to support the PLA’s out of area non-traditional threat missions.³⁶ The recent announcement that Djibouti is permitting the PLA to construct and make use of such a facility appears to have vindicated that view point.

Finally, a fourth characteristic of future joint expeditionary operations is likely to be the military only nature of these operations. That is, as PLA power projection capabilities improve and the PRC becomes less reliant on SOEs and commercial assets to conduct out of area operations such as a NEO,

³⁵ Christopher D. Yung, et al, “Not An Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the Twenty First Century”, *China Strategic Perspectives # 7*, NDU Press, October 2014.

³⁶ Ibid.

the nature of the operation is more likely to look like the Yemen NEO than the Libya NEO. Relieving the Chinese government of having to manage a complex inter-agency process by having a strictly military operation is a sound enough rationale to predict that these out of area operations are going to be less inter-agency and more solely military.

How to Assess the long-term trajectory of China's Out of Area Operations

While these incremental changes to PLA Navy "out of area" operations suggest a gradual improvement in the ability to operate in the Far Seas, this begs the larger question of how extensive a power projection reach is China likely to have in the decades to come? Should the United States be concerned militarily about China's expeditionary trajectory? The answer to the second question is obviously dependent on the first. The first question I will address here and the second I will address in a subsequent section of this written testimony. In 2010 I co-authored a National Defense University study³⁷ whose purpose it was to assess the long-term trajectory of China's out of area naval deployments. In that study the NDU team concluded that any evaluation of the long-term future direction of China's out of area military deployments should be examined using five criteria: (1) ability to manage distance; (2) ability to manage duration; (3) the ability to sustain capacity; (4) the ability to manage increasing complexity of coordination at long-distances; and (5) the ability to manage an extensive hostile environment.³⁸

Distance: A number of developments in the PLA Navy suggest that China will gradually and eventually master the tyranny of distance in its "out of area" operations. One data point to ponder is that the modernization of China's surface combatants has allowed China's task forces to operate at greater distances. For example one Jiangkai II (Type 054A frigate) sailed over 42,000 nm or two times the earth's circumference during its counter-piracy deployment.³⁹ A second development in support of China's "distance" problem is the aforementioned evidence that China is building a more formalized network of facilities to which it will have access and the recent news that China will establish a logistics and supply facility on Djibouti for the purposes of servicing and supporting its counter-piracy task forces. This latter development will significantly mitigate logistical problems China's counterpiracy task forces have had to face given the long distances between China and the flotilla.

Duration: The ability of China's counter-piracy task forces to stay out for longer periods of time and operate for greater periods of time is also in evidence. As mentioned previously the PLA task forces had initially been operating for a 3-4 month duration, this duration has increased to the point that a typical task force is expected to operate for about 170 to 200 days.⁴⁰ In part this is the result of improved logistical support networks as well as modernized surface combatants. However, it is also safe to say that greater duration may also be a function of improved training, an increased number of naval personnel accustomed to "out of area" deployments and an increasing number of PLAN modern surface combatants.

³⁷ Christopher Yung et al, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions", *China Strategic Perspectives # 3*, NDU Press, December 2010.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 30-3.

³⁹ Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, "No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden", CMSI #10, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, November 2013.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Capacity: On the issue of a deepening Chinese Navy force structure, the increasingly modern PLAN addresses yet another factor shaping the prospect of China’s long-term expeditionary capability—capacity. China will likely be able to sustain long-term operations in the “Far Seas” because it will have a larger number of modern surface combatants to rotate into the region for long periods of time. In 2009, an initial shortcoming and an “Achilles Heel” for Chinese Out of Area operations was the small number (only two at that time) of modern replenishment ships in China’s inventory. This has recently been addressed with the acquisition of additional modern comprehensive replenishment ships bringing China’s replenishment force up to seven.⁴¹ Similarly the continued acquisition of modern frigates, destroyers and cruisers also gives China a larger pool of surface combatants to draw from and enter into a pool of rotating ships thereby assisting in addressing the capacity problem. China is expected to add six Luyang-II/Type 052C and a dozen Luyang III/Type 052D destroyers, 20 Jiangkai-II/Type 054A frigates, which will substantially add to China’s modern surface combatant capacity.⁴²

Complexity of Coordination: Since the size of the PLAN counterpiracy task forces has remained constant over the past six years, China’s ability to manage and coordinate an increasingly larger naval task force “out of area” has not been illustrated by observations of the Gulf of Aden deployments. However, PLA Navy exercises in the Western Pacific have been increasingly more complex suggesting a process of improved command and control at the task force level.⁴³ Additionally, there is some evidence of improved ability of the PLA Navy to coordinate and control vessels being escorted through an effective use of VHF with foreign flagged vessels. This is furthermore manifested in coordinating rendezvous, managing ships of varying speeds and duration, and working out optimal formations for the protection of the escorted vessels.

Hostile Environments: With regard to China’s long-term prospects to deal with hostile security environments in the “Far Seas” there is some evidence that China is taking steps to address this. The acquisition of the Liaoning aircraft carrier and the news that China is in the process of building an indigenous carrier would provide additional protection to the counter-piracy task force. Unclassified reports that China will soon be procuring a Type 081 larger amphibious ship such as an LHD⁴⁴ would—with its large flight deck and capacity to hold more aircraft than is currently the case with the Type 071 LPD—go a long way toward providing increased AAW and ASUW protection to future counter-piracy task forces. By 2018 the PLAN may field more ships with phased array radar than its rivals in the Far East (e.g., the JMSDF) and has been equipping its most recently acquired surface combatants with helicopter hangars which can be expected to improve ASW in the long-run.⁴⁵ Additionally there are unclassified assessments which claim that China is developing a cruiser sized combatant which can, if equipped

⁴¹ “Trends in China’s Naval Modernization”, Testimony of Jesse Karotkin, Office of Naval Intelligence before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 30, 2014, p. 5. See also Dean Cheng, “China’s Pivot to the sea: The Modernizing PLA Navy”, *Backgrounder # 3084*, Heritage Foundatin, December 17, 2015.

⁴² Dean Cheng, “China’s Pivot to the sea: The Modernizing PLA Navy”, *Backgrounder # 3084*, Heritage Foundatin, December 17, 2015.

⁴³ Christopher H. Sharman, “China Steps Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy”, *China Strategic Perspectives # 9*, NDU Press, April 2015.

⁴⁴ Ronald O’Rourke, “China’s Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 21, 2015, pp. 37-8.

⁴⁵ Dean Cheng, “China’s Pivot to the sea: The Modernizing PLA Navy”, *Backgrounder # 3084*, Heritage Foundatin, December 17, 2015.

properly, assist in the missile and area defense mission over time.⁴⁶ However, in so far as the PLA needs dedicated anti-missile ships capable of providing protection to its task forces like USN cruisers do for the U.S. carrier strike groups, China's AAW and missile defense systems are still in their infancy so it is safe to say that for the foreseeable future PLAN "far seas" operations would still be vulnerable to a concerted missile attack from land based aircraft and other seaborne aircraft .

Long-term Indications and Warnings (I&W)

These long-term developments just described do not necessarily portend a direct threat or challenge to future U.S. national security interests or to international security writ large. However, it is possible to identify a number of long-term developments that would suggest threatening developments inside China and would be a concern for U.S. national security interests. The first of these of course would be the construction and establishment of a formal overseas base with significant naval and air assets stationed there. The increasingly formal network of facilities that the PLAN currently has access to cannot be put in this category. I am also on the record as expressing my skepticism that such a "String of Pearls-like" development would occur.⁴⁷

A second I&W would of course be the persistent development of a blue water capability comprised of significant power projection assets. China developing and constructing several aircraft carriers as well as such attendant force protection assets as missile defense surface combatants, a long-range submarine force, a surface combatant force capable of conducting effective ASW, and numerous effective air wings all portend military developments that would directly challenge U.S. and Indian military superiority in the IOR regardless of China's strategic motives.

A third I&W would be a consistent effort on the part of the PLAN and the PLA to conduct large scale joint exercises with a few of the militaries in the Indian Ocean Region. The repeated presence of the PLAN in increasingly larger numbers of surface combatants conducting joint naval drills with some of the militaries in the region, would suggest an effort on the part of the PLAN to become familiar with the operational capabilities of potential partners and to the operational environment in which a future conflict might take place. Such a development, of course, does not encompass PLAN participation in joint naval drills with the U.S., India, and Australia as happens with the Malabar exercises.

A final I&W would be China's willingness to take action and deploy troops on the ground in Africa and elsewhere in the absence of a U.N. mandate or an invitation by a potential host nation to assist in a security situation. At present China's officials are on the record as indicating that any overseas Chinese deployment of forces either at sea or on the ground requires one or both of the above mentioned conditions. With such expanding interests in Africa it is conceivable that the Chinese might find themselves in a situation requiring that it deploy ground forces to help protect Chinese citizens or property. It is possible that China could take such an action in the absence of a UN mandate or an invitation by the host nation without necessarily threatening U.S. national security interests; however, were this to happen this suggests that the Chinese leadership has undertaken a fundamental shift on its attitudes toward out of area operations and what is permissible for Chinese intervention abroad.

⁴⁶ Ronald O'Rourke, "China's Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 21, 2015, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Christopher D. Yung, et al, "Not An Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the Twenty First Century", *China Strategic Perspectives # 7*, NDU Press, October 2014.

Policy Implications

Whether Chinese joint expeditionary operations go down a path that would be of concern to U.S. policy makers or not, a PLA with an increasingly global reach certainly will have strategic implications for U.S. policy. First, such a military will allow the PRC to exert a degree of political pressure that it is only now beginning to enjoy. Such a capability combined with a “One Belt, One Road” foreign economic policy initiative will represent a degree of Chinese political leverage/influence over some of the governments of the IOR that is significantly above what China enjoys today. If China also establishes a more permanent military presence on one of the region’s facilities I am on the record as stating that the U.S. relationship with some of the countries of the IOR has probably fundamentally shifted⁴⁸—in short, some of the countries of the region have concluded that they are not necessarily aligned with the U.S. and have thrown their hats in with the Chinese.

A second implication is that the PLA Navy will have been transformed into such a capable force that U.S. assessments of China’s warfighting capabilities will need to be re-evaluated as they pertain to the more likely “Near Seas” contingencies (e.g., a Taiwan scenario or a South and East China Sea scenario). Therefore, a 2035 PLA Navy which has experienced over 25 years of improving “Far Seas” operations is likely to be a much more lethal naval force than is presently the case. A confrontation between China and the U.S. over a Taiwan scenario in 2035 would mean the U.S. confronting a Chinese Navy which has much improved ASW, ASUW, AAW and sea borne logistics.

Third, if China is able to comfortably project power in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond, that implies that China will be able to exert political and diplomatic pressure through the threatened use of force in areas that China has not traditionally done in the past. Although certain such coercive activities have been declared “off limits” by Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials and Chinese academics, and representative of hegemonic behavior U.S. policy makers should be cognizant that the Chinese could serve as a competing voice on larger geo-political issues to which the U.S. has a significant interest.

Finally, on a more positive note a gradually improved PLAN with an effective rotational presence in the Indian Ocean and the ability to conduct complex far seas operations has the potential to be a more effective global partner—assuming that the U.S. and China see eye to eye on a range of maritime security issues. Consequently, a China that is acting like a partner in global security has potential for greater opportunities to conduct joint exercises with the U.S. military and to engage in other cooperative activities with the U.S. such as joint NEOs or joint humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations, and even possibly joint counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency operations abroad.

Conclusion

The People’s Liberation Army over the past seven years has accumulated a number of invaluable operational lessons from its counter-piracy, NEO and peacekeeping operations. These lessons have unquestionably improved the PLA’s ability to operate “out of area”. American PLA watchers may disagree over the depth and extent of the Chinese Navy’s improved capability; however, no expert observer would disagree that the Chinese Navy has become much more “salty” or comfortable with blue

⁴⁸ Ibid.

water and “out of area” operations. Similarly, no China watcher would disagree with the idea that PLA ground forces are much more comfortable operating in alien, foreign, and increasingly challenging security situations since initiating PLA participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

The PLA’s comfort with these kinds of “out of area” operations manifest themselves in how the Chinese military has been adjusting its operations to improve effectiveness. These adjustments, in turn, provide clues on how the PLA is likely to conduct joint expeditionary operations in the future. The most eye opening likelihood is that PLA ground forces are likely to be deployed on PLAN task forces, as USMC MEUs deploy on USN Amphibious Ready Groups, and will be tasked to address a wide range of Chinese overseas contingencies (e.g., NEOs, HA/DR, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency). A second likelihood is that the PLA will deepen and make more extensive its logistical support system, developing divisions of labor, and eventually evolving into a semi-permanent Chinese overseas military personnel presence. I have labeled this type of facility a “dual use logistics facility” elsewhere. Finally, as China’s military power projection capabilities mature we are likely to see less inter-agency, hybrid “out of area” operations and more military only expeditionary operations..

This paper examined the long-term trajectory of China’s “out of area” operations using criteria developed in a previously published National Defense University report. I argued in that report that evaluating China’s long-term out of area trajectory should be based on five criteria related to distance, duration, capacity, complexity of coordination, and mitigating hostile environments. This paper has argued that China appears to be on a positive trajectory towards dealing with these obstacles. The paper has also identified specific “warning signs” or “indications and warning” which would provide clues to U.S. policy makers and strategists that China’s “out of area” operations have taken a dangerous turn. These I&W are: (1) formation of and utilization of a full fledged overseas military base; (2) the formation of a comprehensive offensive blue water power projection capability; (3) repeated involvement in “out of area” joint exercises with several of the nations of the IOR; and (4) Chinese willingness to operate “out of area” in the absence of a U.N. mandate or permission from a host country.

Finally, there are long-term strategic and policy implications of this assessment. Regardless if the I&W listed above start to manifest themselves or not, if the Chinese military by 2030 are comfortable conducting “far seas” operations and have developed an extensive network of supporting logistics facilities, the Chinese will be in a position to exert greater political pressure on the region than has previously been the case. This will pose a large political challenge to the United States given that Chinese interests in the region will not necessarily overlap with American interests. Twenty years of effective Chinese “far seas” operations will also add to the lethality of the PLA Navy in a “near seas” contingency which is more likely to involve the United States than would a “far seas” contingency. Lastly, a more professional and effective PLA Navy and PLA ground force, comfortable with “out of area” operations, would, under positive circumstances make a more effective global security partner with the United States if U.S. and Chinese security interests overlap for some, if not all, situations,

Over the past seven years, the PLA has taken some significant steps toward improving its ability to operate abroad. This is a remarkable achievement in such a short period of time. This does not necessarily portend a threat to U.S. national security, however, a robust, effective PLA capable of challenging U.S. security interests far out from China demands prudence and vigilance. It is my hope

that my testimony today has helped congress, this administration, and subsequent administrations in their evaluation of China's long-term joint expeditionary capabilities.