

Military Transformation with Chinese Characteristics in the New Century

Li Xiang

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Executive Summary

The development of the worldwide Revolution in Military Affairs provides China with a rare historical opportunity, but also with unprecedented challenges. Seizing the opportunity and accelerating the military transformation with Chinese characteristics is a prerequisite for China's efforts to build a moderately prosperous society. After more than ten years of steady gradual reform, China's national defense and army building has achieved a new historic level of development. However, the task of military transformation with Chinese characteristics is still complicated, involving all aspects of national defense and army building. After the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, the next steps in military reform with Chinese characteristics and the principles, priorities, and goals of development were further defined. Although military transformation with Chinese characteristics has a long way to go and many challenges lie ahead, with the further deepening of reforms, integrity in the modern Chinese military system and revolutionary reform will ultimately be accomplished. Once achieved, China will make a greater contribution to stability in the region and also to world peace and development.

Introduction

With the advent of the new century, along with the continuous worldwide Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and China's deepening reform and opening up, China's military transformation has entered a new stage. Faced with a complex and volatile security environment, and in order to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and respond effectively to various security threats, China's armed forces have had to accelerate the process of military reform. The White Paper *China's National Defense in 2002* pointed out for the first time that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) should "strive to accomplish the historical tasks of mechanization and informationization, thereby bringing about [a] leapfrog development in the modernization of the military."¹ Over the last decade, the PLA has been proactively and steadily pushing ahead with its military transformation, striving to build a system of modern military forces with Chinese characteristics, as reflected by the PLA's intensification of the strategic administration of the Central Military Commission (CMC), optimization of the size and structure of the various services and their arms, development of new- and high-technology weapons and equipment, the promotion of transition in military training, and strengthening the development of qualified military personnel. In the *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012*, Hu Jintao indicated that the PLA should "enhance its capability to accomplish a wide range of military tasks, the most important of which is to win local wars in an information age."² In the future, the PLA will closely follow the world RMA, seize what is an important period

¹ *China's National Defense in 2002*, December 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20021209> (note: this and subsequent white papers cited in this paper were published by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China).

² *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, November 8, 2012, http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm.

of strategic opportunity, comprehensively strengthen its military modernization, and promote the further development of military transformation with Chinese characteristics.

In recent years, China's economy has been developing rapidly, and comprehensive national strength has been steadily enhanced. China continues to promote reform and opening up, while enhancing its international competitiveness and influence, and has achieved remarkable success in its modernization. However, China is at a crucial stage in its peaceful development, facing as it does diversified and complex security threats and challenges, including traditional and non-traditional security threats, as well as threats to its survival and development. In order to safeguard national sovereignty, territorial integrity, its national interest, and security development, the PLA must resolutely fulfil the historical mission of the new century and the new stage it has entered. In thus doing, it must expand its national security strategy and military strategy vision, aim at winning local wars under conditions of informationization, and use the armed forces actively and effectively to respond to multiple security threats and to accomplish diversified military tasks during peacetime.³ Therefore, *China's National Defense in 2012* states that building a strong national defense and powerful armed forces commensurate with China's international standing is a strategic task of China's modernization drive, serves as a guarantor of China's peaceful development and also meets the needs of its security and development interests. China's armed forces must therefore act to meet the new requirements of China's national development and security strategies, follow the theoretical guidance of the Scientific Outlook on Development, speed up the transformation of the generating mode of combat effectiveness, build a system of modern military forces with Chinese characteristics, enhance military strategic guidance, and diversify the ways of employing armed forces as the times require. China's armed forces provide a security guarantee and

³ *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, April 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm.

strategic support for national development, and make due contributions to the maintenance of world peace and regional stability.⁴

⁴ Ibid.

The Context for China's Military Transformation

There are two notable contexts in which military transformation with Chinese characteristics must be understood: one is the worldwide Revolution in Military Affairs, the other is the process of China's reform and opening up.

In the history of human warfare, there have been several major military reforms, such as the invention of cold weapons, the invention of hot weapons, and mechanized warfare. The new RMA occurred in the military field in the early 1990s. The core nature of this new RMA is informationization, its goal being to transform a mechanized army in the industrial age into an informationized and technologically advanced army in the information age. This tendency toward increasingly high-technology and informationized wars can be seen in the major wars of recent years, such as the Gulf Wars, the Kosovo War, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and other large-scale regional wars.

RMA has been motivated by the dynamics of the security situation, driven by new- and high-technology, especially information technology, promoted by the development of military theories, and centered on the adjustment of military systems. It is an all-round, all-domain, and system-wide Revolution in Military Affairs. Its main features can be characterized as follows: the informationization of operational effectiveness; flattening of the command system; modularization of organizational structure; smartness of weapons and equipment, and confrontation between war systems.

The twenty-first century has brought with it rapid development in the breadth and depth of RMA. First, a large number of high-tech weapons and equipment have appeared. Indeed, developed countries are spending huge sums to develop high-technology—especially informationized technology—as quickly as

possible in order to achieve informationized weaponry. In light of the technological breakthroughs, such as invisible technology and nanotechnology, new and more efficient weapons will come into being, including new-concept weapons. Second, the transformation of the armed forces is currently in full swing, and military informationization has made significant progress. Third, there has been constant innovation in military theory. With the further development of RMA, a number of new ideas, new concepts, and new theories have appeared, whereby operational theory is the focus of innovation in military theory. Fourth, military organizational reform will achieve substantial breakthroughs. The armed forces of most countries are developing along lines that emphasize modularization, miniaturization, and integration.

Among the most prominent examples of RMA are the United States' military transformation, which was launched by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; Russia's military reform with the rebuilding of its army under the Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin administrations; military transformations in NATO countries; Eastern European countries' military transformations though adopting Western countries' mode of military development; and Japan and India's establishment of the joint operational command system as the core of their military reforms. Faced with this global development, it is a matter of national security and unity for China to follow the trend, seize the opportunities, and accelerate its own RMA with Chinese characteristics.

Reform and opening up has served as the prelude to the streamlining as well as the modernization, regularization and revolutionization of China's armed forces. It provides the most basic historical conditions for the process of military transformation with Chinese characteristics, and constantly pushes it forward. In the early 1990s, the international situation and trend of modern warfare were such that the PLA began to explore how to create

informationized armed forces with Chinese characteristics, as well as considered how to readjust the major policies regarding military modernization. The strategic thinking concerning RMA with Chinese characteristics thus began to be formed. Accordingly, a series of major decisions were taken that sought to promote military reform with Chinese characteristics and the development of research. The focus of research during that period was how to continue to uphold Marxist military doctrine and the military guiding ideology of the Communist Party while, at the same time, paying attention to the global trend of RMA.

At the dawn of the new century, the PLA was endowed with new missions as follows: providing an important guarantee for consolidating the Communist Party's ruling status; providing a strong security guarantee in safeguarding the significant strategic opportunity for the country's development; providing effective strategic support for protecting national interests; and playing an important role in ensuring world peace and promoting common development.⁵ At the same time, the study of military transformation with Chinese characteristics continuously developed in greater depth and breadth. As innovation in military theory leads to practical innovation, there was a consensus that developing military science should be a top priority. RMA with Chinese characteristics is thus the latest phase of Marxist thought in China to have emerged, which has given a clear direction and inspiration for further research. The priorities for the future development of military science are to rigorously study how best to build the army and to understand the relevance of the "people's war" strategy and tactics under new historical conditions. In October 2007, the report of the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China laid out a program for boosting military reform with Chinese characteristics and a systematic plan for the development of national defense and the army. Under the guidance of the report and inspired by the great achievements of 30 years of

⁵ Chen Bingde, "Actively promote military training changes during the historic process of military transformation with Chinese characteristics," 2009.

reform and opening up, there has been an upsurge in research on military transformation with Chinese characteristics.

The *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China* stated that the PLA should adapt to the new trends in world military development, accelerate military transformation with Chinese characteristics, prepare for military struggle, and improve the capabilities of the armed forces in countering various security threats and accomplishing diversified tasks.⁶ In order to thoroughly implement the spirit of the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, it is necessary to grasp the latest trends of the worldwide RMA and its profound impact on the PLA by taking into account the current state of China's armed forces and their development requirements. In so doing, effective measures can then be taken to accelerate China's military transformation, which should strive to command the strategic heights and take the strategic initiative in military areas.

⁶ *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, October 15, 2007, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm>.

The Content of China's Military Transformation

The main features of China's military transformation include: innovation in military theory; realignment of the organizational structure; optimization of military formation; building a joint operational system; promoting military training; upgrading weaponry and equipment, and stepping up the training of personnel.

Promoting military transformation with Chinese characteristics and achieving the strategic objectives of "building an informationized force and winning an informationized war"⁷ can only be realized by adhering to the guidance of the Scientific Outlook on Development, and at the core of this concept is the People First principle. Adhering to the Communist Party's absolute leadership over the PLA and insisting on the nature and tenets of the PLA are both fundamental guarantees for implementing the aforementioned principle. In order to achieve innovation in military doctrine, China must start with Mao Zedong's military thought, Deng Xiaoping's thinking on army building in the new period, and Jiang Zemin's thinking on the building of national defense and the armed forces, respectively. It is then necessary to clarify the basis of the preparation for military struggle, and the basic principles and operational thinking of strategic guidance, and to promote the concepts of information superiority, system integration, and confrontation between different systems as per the important instructions of former President Hu Jintao. The PLA should focus on the preparations for military struggle, explore new forms of the people's war concept, develop the strategies and tactics of the people's war, and create an integrated and joint operations theory with Chinese characteristics under conditions of informationization.⁸

⁷ *China's National Defense in 2004*, December 2004, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20041227>.

⁸ Li Dianren, "Boost military reform with Chinese characteristics under the requirements of the Scientific Outlook on Development," *News of the Communist Party of China*, September 1, 2006, <http://theory.people.com.cn/>

Military theory is the study of the laws of war, which is aimed to extract an operational theory that is in line with actual warfare. The laws of war themselves are an important component of operational theory. However, as Mao Zedong pointed out, “the different laws for directing different wars are determined by different circumstances of those wars—differences in their time, place and nature. As regards the time factor, both war and its laws develop; each historical stage has its special characteristics and cannot be mechanically applied in another stage.”⁹ Thus, the study of military theory must be based on the observation of actual warfare. Operational theory is the core of military science. Operational theory is at the heart of all developments in military science, military theory, and military technology. Under conditions of informationization, military technology develops rapidly, which has led to constant changes in the patterns of war, and continues to promote innovation and development in military science. Therefore, factors that have an impact on war’s economic, political, and cultural dimensions are increasing, and the level of complexity of war is unprecedented. Without any suitable operational theory, it would be difficult to adapt to the changing nature of war.

Operational theory research and innovation is one of the most important aspects of China’s military transformation. Chinese theory for military operations is in line with both China’s national and military conditions, and can effectively guide military operations. China’s military strategic principle is “active defense,” and the core of operational theory is “destruction of systems.” The PLA works to win local wars under conditions of informationization.

Optimizing the PLA’s Structure through Readjustment

Since the dawn of the new century, the PLA has actively promoted reform of its organizational structure, and has constantly achieved

GB/40557/51631/4771117.html.

⁹ *Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume 1* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991), 181.

breakthroughs in important areas. By the end of 2005, the PLA had reduced its personnel by 200,000 to a total size of 2.3 million. The PLA has made new progress toward the goal of optimizing its size and structure, as well as streamlining its organization to be swift and flexible in command and powerful in fighting capacity. The army has been the focus of force reduction with the authorized number of personnel having been reduced by more than 130,000. Furthermore, over 60,000 military personnel have been removed from the headquarters and directly affiliated units of military area commands and provincial military commands. Through restructuring, the proportion of the navy, air force, and Second Artillery Force in the PLA has risen by 3.8 percent while that of the army has decreased by 1.5 percent. Meanwhile, the PLA has reduced the number of its officers by 170,000. More than 150 officer posts at or above the corps level have been eliminated, nearly 70,000 posts formerly occupied by officers are now filled by non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and over 20,000 posts formerly occupied by NCOs are now filled by contract civilians.¹⁰

The PLA headquarters has also undergone substantial adjustments. The leadership and command system of the general headquarters/departments has been enhanced through adjusting the functions of relevant departments and improving joint operational command. For example, the Communication Department of the General Staff Headquarters (GSH) was reorganized into the GSH Ministry of Information, the PLA Strategic Planning Department was established, and the GSH Military Training and Arms Department was reorganized into the Ministry of Military Training. In addition, the navy has cut the naval aviation department and converted naval bases into support ones. The air force has closed corps (base) headquarters and set up regional command posts. Following these adjustments, the combat troops of the navy and air force are now directly under the respective fleets and the air commands of the military areas.

¹⁰ *China's National Defense in 2006*, December 2006, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/194421.htm>.

The army has cut a number of combined corps, divisions, and regiments, and has increased the number of combined corps whose order of battle is corps, brigade, and battalion. It has been gradually making its units smaller, more modular, and multi-functional. In line with the strategic requirements of mobile operations and tri-dimensional offense and defense, the army has invested additional efforts in reform, innovation, and development, and has advanced the overall transformation of the service. The army has emphasized the development of new types of combat forces, optimized its organization and structure, strengthened military training in conditions of informationization, accelerated the digitized upgrading and retrofitting of main battle weaponry, organically deployed new types of weapon platforms, and significantly boosted its capabilities in long-distance maneuvers and integrated assaults. The army mobile operational units include 18 combined corps, plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades).¹¹ For its part, the navy has accelerated its strategic transformation. It has cut some of its ship groups, set up high-tech surface ship units, and enhanced blue-water cooperation and capabilities to deal with non-traditional security threats. The air force has accelerated its transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive capabilities. The Second Artillery Force has optimized its combat force structure, and built a missile operational system suited to informationized warfare.

Building Joint Operation Systems and Promoting the Transition in Military Training

The PLA takes the building of joint operation systems as the focal point of its modernization and preparations for military struggle, and strives to enhance its fighting capabilities based on information systems. It conducts thorough research on the topic of operational theory, strengthening the building of combat forces, and

¹¹ *China's National Defense in 2010*, March 31, 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm.

improving operational command systems. A new generation of doctrines on command in joint campaigns and operations, and other relevant supporting doctrines, have been issued and implemented, and a series of theoretical works and training textbooks on joint campaigns have been compiled, which have formed the basic theoretical framework for joint operations and a methodological system for joint campaign training. To ensure an authoritative, lean, agile and efficient operational capability, the PLA is speeding up the building of a joint operational command system, which features a sound structure and organization, applicability in both peacetime and war, tri-service integration, optimized mechanisms, smoothness in operation, and high efficiency.¹²

As a basic approach to creating and developing combat effectiveness in peacetime, military training plays a critical role in ensuring victory in local wars under conditions of informationization, as well as improving the capacity of dealing with various security threats and fulfilling diversified military missions. Particularly under conditions of informationization, China should rely more on high-quality military training if it wants to make use of highly qualified personnel and high-tech weapons and equipment to improve its comprehensive war-fighting capabilities.

At the all-army conference on military training on June 27, 2006, Hu Jintao declared that China should more conscientiously and actively push forward the transition from machine-based military training to that based on information, given the combined development of mechanization and technological advancement.¹³ While attending the meeting of PLA delegates during the second session of the eleventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China on March 11, 2009, Hu Jintao reiterated that the whole army must stick to the military modernization drive guided by the preparations for military struggles. The focus should be placed on reinforcing the core military capacities while building non-war

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hu Jintao's speech at a conference on PLA military training, June 2006.

military operation capacities.¹⁴ After that, the PLA established joint training as the main thread to guide all levels of training for various arms and services, carried out theater joint training, organized group training for different operational directions, proposed the “Five steps”¹⁵ joint operational training system, developed new domains of bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises, discussed strategic and operational war-gaming systems, and employed networked training, simulation training, and other advanced training methods.

Regarding training tasks, in accordance with the new edition of the Outline for Military Training and Evaluation, the PLA is intensifying the training of command organs, training in operating command information systems and informationized weaponry and equipment, and information skills. It is enhancing training to fulfill its missions, strengthening research and training in maintaining maritime, space, and electromagnetic space security, and is carrying out MOOTW training. According to training methodologies, based on and supported by command information systems, the PLA organizes combined training of different combat components, assembly training of various combat elements, and joint training of all systems and all components. It is further intensifying joint training of task formations and confrontational training, and places emphasis on training in complex electromagnetic environments, unfamiliar terrain, and complex weather conditions. The PLA had sped up the construction of large-scale integrated training bases that meet the requirements for joint training, as well as IT-based upgrading of combined tactical training bases, with the priority being given to the construction of complex electromagnetic environments. The PLA strives to develop simulation

¹⁴ Hu Jintao’s speech at the meeting of PLA delegates during the second session of the Eleventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China, March 11, 2009.

¹⁵ The “Five steps” are: scientific posts and positioning, establishing quality standards, optimizing training modes, strict examination and evaluation, and improving training files.

training devices and systems, and to improve training information networks.¹⁶

Accelerating the Development of Military Technology, Updating Weapons and Equipment

Focus on the development of advanced weapons and equipment has manifested itself in high-tech research, an increase in the application of information technology, the strengthening of operations and support effectiveness in the areas of information technology equipment, precision-guided weapons, and high-tech combat platforms, and the building of new weapons and equipment to adapt to wars under conditions of informationization. As the situation currently stands the following objectives have basically been achieved: the army has established the land combat equipment system, which consists of helicopters, armored assault vehicles, air defense, and neutralization weapons; the navy has established the sea combat equipment system, which consists of new submarines, surface ships, and sea attack aircraft; the air force has established the air combat equipment system, which mainly consists of new combat aircraft and surface-to-air missiles, and the Second Artillery Force has established an equipment system mainly consisting of medium-and long-range ballistic missiles.¹⁷ In addition, *Liaoning*, China's first aircraft carrier, was commissioned into the navy in September 2012, its major systems and equipment having been produced and modified in China.

The *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012* pointed out that the PLA should enhance the capacity for innovation in defense-oriented research and industries.¹⁸ In order to plan the future development of weaponry and equipment, the PLA should understand and master the features and rules of information technology as being compatible,

¹⁶ *China's National Defense in 2010*, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, *op. cit.*

systematic, integrated and holistic; the PLA further seeks to promote the organic compatibility and composite development of weapon platforms and integrated electro-info systems. With the use of advanced and mature technologies and devices, the PLA is working, selectively and with priorities, to retrofit its existing weapons and equipment to upgrade its comprehensive performance in a systematic, organic, and integrated way, so as to increase the cost-effectiveness of developing weapons and equipment.¹⁹

Implementing the Strategic Project for Talented Individuals to Strengthen the Ranks of Officers and Soldiers

Whether the strategic objective of building an informationized armed forces and winning informationized wars can be achieved basically depends on whether we can train and foster a new-type and high-caliber of military personnel. In order to meet the requirements of military modernization, the PLA is continuously pushing forward personnel development under conditions of informationization, exploring strategic plans for personnel training with Chinese characteristics, such as facilitating macro-planning and top-level design, strengthening coordination, and utilizing human resources rationally.

The fundamental goal of promoting the informationized transformation of personnel development under the guidance of the Scientific Development Outlook is to improve the military capabilities of the PLA in countering various security threats and accomplishing diversified military tasks. The key solution to the problem of incompetence in commanding and winning informationized warfare is to give prominence to the two “strategic priorities,” namely, joint operation commanders and high-caliber specialized technical experts, so as to promote the overall development of military personnel.

¹⁹ *China's National Defense in 2010, op. cit.*

One of the priorities of the PLA is the cultivation of commanders of joint operations. The onus is thus on the PLA to establish and improve cultivation models for commanders at the strategic and operational level, improve the training system for joint operation commanders, reform the teaching programs and methods for joint operations, increase post-rotation and cross-training for commanding officers, and to consolidate emergency training for commanders of joint operations. Various measures are being taken to step up efforts to train commanding officers for joint operations, such as institutional education, on-the-job study and rotation of posts. Incorporating joint operations into the whole training process, the PLA carefully distinguishes between the training tasks of educational institutions of different levels and types, and couples institutional education with training in units, so as to establish a system for training joint operations commanding officers which emphasizes both institutional education and practice in units. In this regard, the PLA has launched the Key Projects of Military Educational Institutions and has made step-by-step progress in these projects.²⁰

A second priority should be the cultivation of high-caliber specialized technical experts. Specifically, we should focus on the cultivation of three kinds of talented individuals: leaders in science and technology who can design and lead important interdisciplinary projects; pioneers in various disciplines who can direct and advance academic and technological innovations; and specialized technical experts who can tackle complicated problems in the technical support of equipment. With these three kinds of talented individuals as the focus, we should promote the overall development of specialized technical personnel and provide intellectual support for the informationization drive. We must vigorously advance the innovation project for the cultivation of high-caliber specialized technical personnel, energetically implement the Project for Strengthening the Military with High-Caliber Personnel,

²⁰ *China's National Defense in 2008*, January 20, 2008, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7060059.htm.

and put emphasis on the cultivation of middle-aged and young specialized technical officers with great potential. We must depend on educational and research institutions with strong technical forces, set up workstations for scientific and technological innovation, and cultivate top experts and innovative teams through cooperation on important scientific and technological projects. We must attach importance to key technical support personnel for new equipment, combine systematic training in educational institutions with practical training for the troops who will be fielding the new equipment and raise the combat support level of technical personnel. We must also improve the methods of assessing specialized technical personnel for their promotion, expand training avenues, enhance capabilities in scientific and technological innovation and transform scientific and technological advances into practical combat effectiveness.

Challenges Facing China's Military Transformation

The development of the worldwide RMA provides China with a rare historical opportunity, but also with unprecedented challenges. Seizing the opportunity and accelerating the military transformation with Chinese characteristics is a matter of national security and unity, and underlies China's efforts to achieve a moderately prosperous society. However, because of different base levels and levels of investment in RMA by different countries, the strategic benefits gained from RMA have not been uniform. Currently, there is a considerable gap between the PLA and developed countries in the form of military technology. As world RMA continuously develops, the military quality and combat capability of the developed countries has improved rapidly. Many new combat styles have emerged, such as information warfare, network warfare and integrated joint operations, which has made it all the more urgent for the PLA to make improvements to and innovations in its military combat capabilities, operational methods and combat support.

The *Report of the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012* set out the major issues related to the overall situation and long-term development of national defense and the army, and also set out an overall strategic plan. The report proposed that the PLA should closely follow the new global military revolution that is gathering pace, advance reform of our national defense and armed forces in a both active and prudent way, and deepen military transformation with Chinese characteristics.²¹ At the same time, the report further defined the principles, priorities, and goals of the development of Chinese military transformation, which stated that “with innovative military theories taking the lead, we should enhance our capacity for

²¹ *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, op. cit.*

innovation in defense-oriented research and industries, modernize the military organizational structure, and build a system of modern military forces with Chinese characteristics.”²² The second decade of the twenty-first century is an important stage for the accelerated development of the PLA’s informationization drive. To complete the transition from mechanization to informationization, the army is bound to face many challenges.

Complex Environment

The first challenge is that the external environment for the promotion of the in-depth development of China’s military transformation is becoming increasingly complicated. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the second decade of the twenty-first century is a critical period for China’s national defense and the second step of the “Three-Step”²³ military modernization strategic concept. However, in recent years, the international security environment has become increasingly complex and China is facing growing non-traditional security challenges. The issues of subsistence and development security and the traditional and non-traditional threats to security are interwoven.²⁴ The comprehensiveness, complexity, and variability of security issues have grown significantly, and the urgency of the situation is unprecedented. With differentiation in the international system accelerating, international security risks and variables are increasing, and China is inevitably involved in disputes over international interests, with friction and collisions continually increasing. With the eastward shift of the center of

²² Ibid.

²³ The first step of this national defense and military modernization ended in 2010, with an emphasis on downsizing and optimizing the structure and performance of advanced weapons development; the second step is scheduled to end by 2020, striving to achieve a basic level of mechanization and informationization; the third step, after 30 years of effort, namely by the time of the centenary of the People’s Republic of China in 2049, will mark the point at which the process of the modernization of national defense and the armed forces will be considered complete.

²⁴ *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*, April 16, 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm.

the world economy and, furthermore, the “rebalancing” strategy and expanded regional military presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, the external pressure applied on China is increasing. At the same time, unstable and uncertain factors of China’s peripheral security environment are increasing substantially. On issues concerning China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some neighboring countries are taking actions that complicate or exacerbate the situation, and recently Japan has been causing trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu Islands.²⁵

Domestically, China is facing threats posed by “three forces,” namely, terrorism, separatism, and extremism, all of which are on the rise. The “Taiwan independence” separatist forces and their activities are still the biggest threat to the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. Serious natural disasters, accidents, and public health incidents are recurrent. Factors affecting social harmony and stability are growing in number, and the security risks to China’s overseas interests are on the increase.²⁶ At the same time, national security and development interests are gradually exceeding the limits of traditionally defined territory, territorial waters, and airspace, expanding as they are to encompass the ocean, outer space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace. The army is thus compelled to improve its ability in these domains to protect the interests of the country, which include safeguarding its national unity, territorial integrity and development interests. Completing the dual historical tasks of mechanization and informationization will by no means be easy, including achieving the second step development goals as scheduled and ultimately realizing RMA with Chinese characteristics. In particular, the *Report of the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012* pointed out that China must make major progress in modernizing national defense and the armed forces.²⁷ The word “major”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, op. cit.*

indicates that achieving RMA with Chinese characteristics is both urgent and arduous.

Intensifying China's Military Transformation

Hence, the second challenge—that is, promoting the in-depth development of China's military transformation—is no easy feat. In the next period, the core mission of China's national defense and army building is to “intensify efforts to accomplish the dual historic tasks of military mechanization and full IT application, striving to basically complete military mechanization and make major progress in full military IT application by 2020.”²⁸ During this period, China's national defense and armed forces should complete the military organization transition from mechanization to information technology.

First of all, there is an urgent need for innovation in military theory. Due to the ever-changing security threats, the development of national defense and army building faces new problems, which must be tackled strategically in the preparations for military struggle, such as maritime, space, and cyberspace security. Meanwhile, innovation in military theory requires innovative military strategic thinking, as well as breakthroughs in regard to the traditional mechanized set thinking. The ideas should adapt to the new trend of the accelerated transition from mechanized warfare to informationized warfare. Second, it is urgent to enhance the independent innovation of defense-related science, technology, and industry. Scientific and technological progress is essential for implementing key information technologies, consequently improving the information level of weapons and equipment. However, there are still many problems to be solved in the national defense science and technology industry of China. For example, the structure is irrational; enterprise reform has not been deep enough; competition and capacity still need to improve; and there is also a lack of strategic planning and institutional building of integrated military-civilian

²⁸ Ibid.

development. These prominent contradictions should be solved in the second decade of this century. Third, it is urgent to promote the in-depth reform of national defense and the armed forces. At present, China's national defense and army reform has entered a crucial stage, facing deep-seated contradictions and problems in national defense policy, military system and structure of services, organization and operation, coordination of departments, and institution of joint operations—all of which will take great efforts to solve.

Bridging the Gap between Vision and Reality

The third challenge is that there is still a great gap between the vision and the reality of promoting the in-depth development of China's military transformation. To build a modern military power system with Chinese characteristics is an important goal in achieving the above. While there have been some achievements, there are still many problems.

First of all, that the joint operations system is still in its preliminary stage is reflected by the following facts: the theory of joint operations is still lagging behind with there being difficulties in moving away from mechanized thinking; it is difficult to guide practice because of a lack of innovation in joint operational theory; joint operational systems are running sluggishly and the level of joint campaigns and tactics is not high enough; intercommunicability between different combat platforms is weak; and combat elements are difficult to effectively integrate. Second, changes in the mode of combat remains slow. China has been in peacetime for many years. The Chinese army can only explore and summarize features and laws of warfare in military training in conditions of informationization and build on existing achievements of national defense and army building. It is arduous to adjust and optimize the structure of combat forces, and there will be some twists and turns in transformation. Third, the investment in national defense and army building remains low. Based on its own historical and cultural traditions, basic national conditions, and the nature of

its social systems, China always unswervingly pursues a defensive national defense policy. Investment in national defense has been lagging for many years compared to the level of economic and social development, which has seriously impeded the process of China's national defense and army modernization. Although China has increased its defense budget in recent years, a considerable part of the budget goes to compensate for insufficient investment in the past. China's defense investment, whether compared to GDP ratio or state financial expenditure, or even to the number of soldiers, is not only far lower than developed countries, but also lower than that of some neighboring countries.²⁹ In this situation, China has to complete the building of a modern military system in line with Chinese characteristics.

²⁹ Wang Guanzhong, "Strive to build and consolidate a strong national defense and armed forces," *People's Daily*, December 13, 2012.

Conclusion

There is still a long way to go to promote the in-depth development of China's military transformation. However, there are both challenges and opportunities. China's military transformation is gradually deepening in various fields such as military theory, weapons and equipment, organizational structure, military training and logistics, which will ultimately fulfill the integral and revolutionary change of the system of modern Chinese military power. The armed forces of China will always strive to build a people's army that is loyal to the Communist Party, one which always wins the wars in which it is engaged and does so in fine style—to be the steel wall defending national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, and a strong force safeguarding world peace and development.

After more than ten years of steady gradual reform, China's national defense and army building has achieved a new historic development. The most important aspects of this are as follows: the PLA's ideological and political construction has been comprehensively strengthened; the level of strategic management has been significantly increased; military organization is more reasonable; preparation for military struggle is constantly being expanded and deepened; the transformation of military training and weaponry is more informationized; and the building of military personnel has been significantly enhanced. These have effectively defended national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, and accomplished Military Operations Other than War, such as disaster relief missions, peacekeeping operations, and convoy escort missions. The effectiveness of the ongoing military transformation with Chinese characteristics has been significant. However, that is not to say that this task has been completed; indeed, it is very complicated, involving all aspects of national defense and army building.

After the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the next step in military reform with Chinese characteristics and the principles, priorities, and goals of development was further defined. Although military transformation with Chinese characteristics has a long way to go and is full of challenges for the future, we are confident that with the further deepening of reforms, we will ultimately accomplish integrity in the modern Chinese military system and revolutionary reform. Once completed, China will make a greater contribution to stability in the region and also to the world's peace and development.

About the Author

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