

Integrating the forces: The PLA Navy as a first step

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Training is a poorly understood area in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernisation programme. However, Chinese sources are becoming more helpful in explaining the topic. In recent years, the three fleets of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have moved away from their previous strict regional approach. They have been conducting more exercises in each other's areas, as well as more joint exercises, including beyond the first island chain and as far as the second island chain.⁴⁷ This trend began to intensify in 2014 with the first large-scale joint exercises of the three fleets around Japan, in the context of tense relations with Tokyo.⁴⁸ The trend towards increased military engagement and integration of the Navy with other forces fits in well with the new PLA reforms announced at the end of 2015, which called for the establishment of a "joint operation command system".⁴⁹

The PLA commentaries discussed in this essay focus on two major exercises carried out in 2015. These exercises exemplify the new cooperative approach, since both drills involved coordination with other services.

The July 2015 exercises

After a large amphibious exercise in the disputed South China Sea on 26-27 July 2015, more than 100 PLAN warships were deployed to the area on 28 July, for what seems to have been a first: a one-day joint exercise with China's strategic missile force (then called the Second Artillery Corps, renamed the Rocket Force in December 2015) and with electronic warfare units from the Guangzhou Military Region. The forces faced off against each other as "blue"

and "red" teams in an exercise that simulated a confrontation aimed at achieving control of the sea in a "complex electromagnetic environment"

(复杂电磁环境, *fuzha dianci huanjing*). One PLAN officer who was involved in the exercise said that it was aimed at testing intelligence and counter-intelligence, jamming and counter-jamming, and real-time reconnaissance.

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47 The first and second island chains refer to strategic lines delimited by major archipelagos out from the East Asian continental mainland coast. The first chain begins at the Kuril Islands and includes Taiwan, while the second chain is situated in the middle portion of the Pacific Ocean.

48 On the 2014 drill, see "Why PLA keeps low profile about exercise in Western Pacific?", *China Military Online*, 17 December 2014, the English version is available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-12/17/content_6274732.htm.

49 On the "joint operation command system", see Cristina Garafola's article in this issue.

The officer also said that the exercise tested the use of surface ships and submarines in conducting anti-submarine warfare, the successful interception of incoming supersonic anti-ship missiles, the use of naval aviation against low-flying targets, and the air defence capability of the PLAN's new frigates.⁵⁰

PLAN Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, a frequent commentator in the Chinese media, said that the exercise was designed to test the capability of the Second Artillery Corps (now the Rocket Force) to sink enemy warships.⁵¹ Yin discussed the DF-21D ballistic missile, known as "the carrier killer", which was developed by Changfeng Mechanics and Electronics Technology Academy to target and sink large warships. Yin said that the DF-21D missiles are extremely hard to intercept after they are launched, and he said that the Second Artillery Corps has the right to deploy these missiles should China's mainland and islands be attacked.

China's new warships were also tested during the exercises. Yin said that the abilities of the Type 052C and D guided-missile destroyers and of the Type 054A guided-missile frigates to defeat enemy aircraft, missile, and electronic reconnaissance were tested in coordination with naval aviation and the Second Artillery Corps. Yin added that the Chinese warships had successfully disabled the radar systems of the enemy's early warning aircraft with the assistance of the electronic warfare units in Guangzhou Military Region.⁵² In another interview, Yin said that the exercise helped the PLA develop its ability to compensate for its relatively weak anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capacity. The ASW part of the exercise involved surface ships, submarines, and navy surveillance aircraft.⁵³

Ministry of Defence spokesperson Liang Yang said that drills of this kind were in line with international law and practice, and that the navy would continue to hold similar drills in the future.⁵⁴ But Yin indicated that the exercise was launched for political reasons, in order to prove that China can defend its territory: "It was not launched against any country, but the exercise should serve as a warning." He gave a further veiled warning, although he reassured readers that China would not escalate as if the drills already went far enough: the exercise was launched, he said, "to simulate a campaign-level combat situation [... but] even if a war between China and other nations really starts in the region of the South China Sea, it will

50 "The Navy opposes real troops in a training exercise in the South China Sea and its air-space" (海军在南海某海空域举行实兵对抗演练, *haijun zai nanhai mouhai kongyu juxing shibing duikang yanlian*), *PLA Daily*, 29 July 2015.

51 "Expert: The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea are at the level of actual warfighting" (专家: 海军南海演习属战役级, *zhuanjia: haijun nanhai yanxi shu zhanyi ji*), *Renminwang*, 30 July 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0730/c1011-27384352.html> (hereafter, *Renminwang*, "The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea").

52 *Renminwang*, "The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea".

53 Qiu Yue, "The Chinese anti-submarine warfare capabilities are improving" (中国海军反潜能力提高, *zhongguo haijun fanqian nengli tigao*), *Renminwang*, 30 July 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0730/c1011-27384230.html>.

54 "Don't excessively interpret South China Sea drill", *Xinhua*, 26 July 2015, the English version is available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-07/26/content_21409466.htm.

not go beyond this level”.⁵⁵ The following day, a PLA Daily editorial pointed out the increasing “possibility of chaos and war” near China’s shores in a “more complex maritime security environment”.⁵⁶ Continuing to develop and practice amphibious capabilities will be vital to China’s ability to respond to threats to its territorial claims and to other maritime security issues.

The December 2015 exercises

Repeating the drills of 2014, on 16-17 December 2015, the PLAN organised a series of naval and air exercises involving the South Sea fleet and the East and North Sea fleets. The East and North Sea fleets took the part of the aggressor, the “blue” forces, while the “red” forces, the South Sea fleet, represented the defenders. The scenario obviously simulated an incoming American Task Group – played by the East and North Sea fleets – trying to test the defences of the South Sea Fleet. The articles published after the exercises provided many details on the difficulties encountered by the parties and their efforts to cope with the situation. The training focused on reconnaissance, early warning, command and control, submarine attack, anti-submarine warfare, mine warfare, logistics, and the defence of a task force in a multi-threat environment.⁵⁷

The exercise began on the morning of 16 December, in the middle of Typhoon Jasmine, with strong winds and high waves. The Chinese press gave a number of operational details about the exercise: the red side used submarines to defend itself and a new early warning aircraft (AWACS) protected by a fighter escort to locate the blue forces. The red side allegedly maintained radio silence throughout. However, when its early warning aircraft was lost, the reds were unable to provide the necessary intelligence support. Chinese commentators said that the AWACS plane was the reds’ preferred means of reconnaissance; other means, such as passive detection by satellite, were used only as an alternative. The blue side took advantage of the reds’ lack of intelligence to fire a missile over the horizon against the red destroyer Hengyang. Hengyang took evasive manoeuvres, zigzagging at high-speed, firing flares and close-in weapons to fight the incoming missile, while its shore-based aviation looked for the attackers. But just when the red side appeared to be winning, the flagship Lanzhou was hit and disabled. The destroyer Lanzhou was replaced as the command ship by the guided-missile frigate Linyi, and the exercise continued with air defence and anti-submarine drills before concluding with minesweeping and submarine rescue operations.

Detachment commander Liu Jie explained the difficulty of mating a Deep Submarine Rescue Vehicle (DSRV) to a

sunken submarine and successfully opening the hatches to evacuate and treat a crew in a state of shock.⁵⁸ Red side fleet commander Admiral Li Yan, deputy chief of staff of the South China Sea fleet, commented that the battle was conducted in very unfavourable conditions, which had provided “the realistic conditions that would help win a real war”.⁵⁹ Yin Zhuo agreed: “the future of our military operations depends on this grouping and no longer on the implementation of administrative group exercises. Moving the three fleets together and giving them the opportunity to operate jointly is very important, especially when one does not know the area”.⁶⁰

Overall, the PLA offered a more candid and credible description than usual of its efforts to improve training and interoperability, admitting to the difficulties it encountered. These exercises also carry a strong message for the United States, Taiwan, and China’s neighbouring countries: China is determined to deter and if necessary to fight against foreign interference in its sovereignty disputes.

⁵⁵ *Renminwang*, “The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea”.

⁵⁶ Editorial, *PLA Daily*, 1 August 2015.

⁵⁷ Huang Zijuan, “The exercises of the three fleets in South China Sea are very close to warfighting” (三大舰队南海演习似实战, *sanda jiandui nanhai yanxi si shizhan*), *Renminwang*, 22 December 2015, available at <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2015/12-22/7682314.shtml> (hereafter, Huang, “The exercises of the three fleets”).

⁵⁸ “The Navy’s three fleets gather in the South China Sea” (海军三大舰队齐聚南海, *haijun sanda jiandui jiju nanhai*), *Renminwang*, 20 December 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2015/1220/c1011-27951709.html> (hereafter, *Renminwang*, “The Navy’s three fleets gather”).

⁵⁹ *Renminwang*, “The Navy’s three fleets gather”.

⁶⁰ Huang, “The exercises of the three fleets”.