



China-US: New Military Challenges in East Asia and Beyond

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Executive Summary

- * Beijing is cognizant of the fateful importance of the audacious initiative to remake East Asia, and is therefore anticipating harsh reaction from the US - including possible military undertakings.
- * Starting early 2019, China focused on great power confrontation including the possibility of strategic and nuclear warfare.
- * The PLA started implementing in early January the new guidelines for training and war preparations that Xi Jinping had just signed. Special attention is being paid to the quality of the training of the PLA's manpower.
- * Concurrently, Beijing introduced new regulations for tighter Party supervision of the PLA, and, given the high stakes involved, also unprecedented Party control over the PLA, and, via the PLA, of the country.

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Analysis

The Forbidden City is cognizant of the fateful importance of the audacious initiative to remake East Asia, and is therefore anticipating harsh reaction from the US - including possible military undertakings.

Back on 4 January, the *China Daily* published a broad-brush analysis of the challenges facing China in 2019 and beyond by Hu Yumin, the Vice-Secretary General of the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association. Hu Yumin emphasized the growing threats stemming from the escalation of US operations in East Asia and particularly in relation to the Korean Peninsula. "Making power competition a national strategic focus, the US has accelerated its military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region, including the missile defense network in Japan and the Republic of Korea. The concentration of more than 50 percent of its naval long-range striking forces in the region makes the US strategy to promote extended deterrence in Northeast Asia in both conventional and nuclear fields even more important. Against this background, China is accelerating its investment in major weapons programs, so as to strengthen its self-defense and maintain regional strategic stability." Special attention should be paid to the US approach to the Korea challenge because "the US security policy toward Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula is based on two pillars: to pursue coordination with its allies, with Japan and the ROK in particular; and to pursue diplomacy with countries such as Russia and China."

Therefore, starting early 2019, the Forbidden City focused on great power confrontation including the possibility of strategic and nuclear warfare.

The first step was a military reaction to the escalation of the US Navy's FONOPS in the South China Sea area. In early January, the PLA deployed DF-26 batteries to the Tibetan Plateau and nearby desert areas. The DF-26 is defined as a "nuclear-capable anti-ship ballistic missile capable of targeting medium and large ships at sea." Chinese senior officials added that "mobile missile launch from deep in the country's interior is more difficult to intercept." This DF-26 deployment, they added, "puts the US island of Guam in the western Pacific and American military bases in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean within striking distance."

In mid-January, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) conducted a major test of the anti-US nuclear capabilities that included the launching of a few ballistic missiles under simulated wartime conditions. The exercise included the launching of at least one Dongfeng-41 (DF-41) intercontinental ballistic missile and of at least one Dongfeng-26 (DF-26) intermediate range ballistic missile with improved stability and maneuverability (including mid-flight course adjustment). Chinese senior officials defined the exercise as the "ultimate symbol of PLA destructive potential".

On the eve of the exercises, Chinese senior officials stressed that the PRC adheres to no first use policy. "Without a first strike against China, China will never use the weapons," senior officials told the *Global Times*. "An ICBM loaded with nuclear warheads will likely never be used as it would precipitate an all-out nuclear war, say analysts. The weapon's primary purpose is deterrence, and to facilitate political and diplomatic discussions." Therefore, Chinese ballistic missiles are stored in "underground bunkers" where they "must be able to survive the first wave of hostile nuclear strike."

On 12 January, Xi Jinping presented the 2018 State Preeminent Science and Technology Award to Qian Qihu - the developer of "China's 'Underground Steel Great Wall' [that] could 'guarantee the security of the country's strategic arsenal' against potential attacks, including those from future hypersonic weapons," explained the *Global Times*. "The 'Underground Steel Great Wall' is a series of defense facilities located deep under mountains. ... China's nuclear strategy follows the principle of 'no first use' and requires the country to have



the capability of withstanding a nuclear attack before it responds with its strategic weapons.”

The first exercise was of a DF-26 battery that was rushed from its secured shelters to the middle of the desert plateau in northwest China. The PLARF crews aimed the missiles on the basis of real-time reports from satellites and drones about hostile surface combatants maneuvering at sea, launched the missiles, and kept updating their targeting data until the successful strikes. “China has repeatedly stated that the missile can hit moving targets like ships,” Zhang Baohui, the Director of the Center for Asian Pacific Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, explained. “While the overall probability of war between the US and China remains very low, Beijing is nonetheless concerned by recent changes in the dynamics of Sino-US relations. The public debut of the DF-26 could mean enhancing its general deterrence.”

The second exercise was of a DF-41 battery deployed in northeast China, close to the Russian border. The TEL vehicles emerged from their underground bunker before launching the DF-41. All pre-launch advance preparations and targeting took place in the safety of the bunker. The launch was against long-range targets. According to Chinese senior officials, the “DF-41 drill tested readiness” and “upgrades to [China’s] second-strike capability.” The exercise demonstrated anew, the stressed, “China’s nuclear deterrent capabilities.”

In early February, however, the Forbidden City started hinting on a possible profound change in Chinese nuclear doctrine. This is caused by the looming US threat in Northeast Asia (as distinct from the South China Sea). Beijing is apprehensive that once the US-DPRK negotiations hit the inevitable roadblock over Pyongyang’s known refusal to disarm totally - Trump’s Washington will react with fury. Chinese senior officials believe that the Trump Administration will elect to renew the military pressure on the DPRK and revive the threats of war, including the resumption of military exercises and forward deployment of US strategic forces. The senior officials explain that the Forbidden City is increasingly “under pressure [from the PLA High Command] to reconsider its long-standing ‘no first use’ nuclear policy” in view of the looming threat of US intervention, as well as the revived arms race. Hence, with some of the US forces defined as “nuclear capable”, Beijing has determined to enable the PLARF to apply nuclear deterrence, or threats, in order to deter the US from any type of military intervention on the Korean Peninsula and/or near the territory of China. The ballistic missile exercises served to demonstrate the PLARF’s capabilities to meet the new challenges.

These new developments come on-top of Xi Jinping’s long-standing apprehension of a future war with the US over the realization of the new Thirty Years War. Consequently, the PLA started implementing in early January the new guidelines for training and war preparations that Xi Jinping had just signed. The *PLA Daily* reported that “regiments all over the country had started a series of combat exercises” on the basis of the new guidelines. “The Chinese military is expected to ramp up training in 2019, a year of rising geopolitical challenges and several key anniversaries for the People’s Liberation Army,” explained Liu Zhen in the 8 January issue of the *South China Morning Post*. Given the growing possibility of military intervention on the Korean Peninsula, the PLA emphasized high-quality training of the 79th Group Army in Shenyang.

Special attention is being paid to the quality of the training of the PLA’s manpower. On 20 January, Liu Xuanzun of the *Global Times* observed that “weapons alone cannot win wars, as integrating the operator and weapon plays a very important role.” On 5 February, Guo Rui of the *South China Morning Post* addressed the PLA’s new manpower challenges. “As China expands its military might with new aircraft carriers, advanced fighter jets and other world-class weaponry, questions have been raised about whether the People’s Liberation Army can compete with other advanced forces.” Guo Rui explained that “size was only one determining factor in modern warfare, and hardware could only answer part of the question as China raced to



catch up with leading powers like the US and its top allies, including Japan. ... It is the people who use these weapons that count, and that essentially boils down to our level of training. ... The rapid development of new hardware could also pose challenges for training Chinese troops, especially in helping them master the skills necessary to use and understand the new weapons.”

Meanwhile, the PLA is undergoing profound structural changes in order to optimize its capabilities to meet the challenges posed by US and allies. In mid-January, Xi Jinping ordered that these changes be completed as soon as possible given the growing tension in East Asia. “The Chinese military has significantly boosted its navy, air force and new strategic units and downsized its land-based army as part of a strategic shift designed to transform the People’s Liberation Army into a comprehensive modern force,” Xinhua reported. On 21 January, Liu Zhen of the *South China Morning Post* wrote that “the four other branches of the PLA - the navy, air force, rocket force and strategic support force, which is responsible for areas such as cyberwarfare - now together make up more than half of the Chinese military, overtaking the army, which has traditionally been the dominant unit of the PLA.” Consequently, “the Chinese army now makes up less than half of PLA’s strength as [the] military aims to transform itself into modern fighting force”.

Concurrently, Beijing introduced new regulations for tighter Party supervision of the PLA, and, given the high stakes involved, also unprecedented Party control over the PLA, and, via the PLA, of the country. On 21 January, the *Global Times* reported that “China has appointed military officials as members of provincial standing committees of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 31 provincial-level regions following the military reform.” The CPC instructions stressed the great responsibility accorded to the PLA officers. “The military officials will attend local Party standing committee sessions, ‘take part in the local major decision-making process,’ and will be in charge of ‘coordinating relations between civilians and the military,’ as well as ‘assist in local social economic development,’ the [CPC] report said,” the *Global Times* reported.

These changes come in the context of tightening Party control over the PLA and all military activities - particularly war preparations and training. On 11 February, Xinhua reported, Xi Jinping “signed an order to release a trial regulation on the supervision of military training, the first of its kind in the country. The regulation, which will take effect on March 1, 2019, focuses on improving the combat readiness of the People’s Liberation Army. The regulation formulates measures to rectify practices that are inconsistent with the requirements of actual combats. It also details the criteria for identifying malpractices and discipline violations during military training. The regulation also clearly states the responsibilities, power and priorities of military training supervision and regularizes the methods and procedures for carrying out such work. The regulation is expected to consolidate the strategic role of military training under the new circumstances, strengthen the management of military training, and deepen military training under combat conditions.” On 13 February, the *China Daily* elaborated that the PLA’s new “regulation governing military training” just signed by Xi Jinping “will effectively boost the PLA’s combat capabilities.” The CPC report stressed that “the regulation is the first of its kind for the Chinese military. It aims to improve training inspections and ensure that PLA units focus on combat capability”.

On 15 February, Xinhua reported, senior officials and political officers attended “a meeting of the military on political and legal affairs in Beijing” that was chaired by Zhang Youxia (a Member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission). The objective of the meeting was to introduce to the political officers the new modalities by which the Party, through them, will “make new advances in the work of political and legal affairs and ensure strict governance



over the military.” Zhang Youxia delivered the key address. “Military officers responsible for political and legal affairs should work to safeguard political security, support the troops in war preparedness and enhance the building of a strong military in the new era,” he said. Zhang Youxia ordered the attending officers “to be absolutely loyal, pure and reliable” and “to vigorously fight against all kinds of infiltration and sabotage activities, eradicate graft and corruption in accordance with the law and forestall major military security risks.” The PLA, they were told, is preparing to face “paramount challenges” and it is their responsibility to facilitate the Party’s tight control over these preparations. On 18 February, the *PLA Daily* reminded that Xi Jinping directed the PLA “to make improving combat readiness its top priority” for 2019.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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