



PLA UPDATE

A monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the PLA

Patrick deGategno and Brian Waidelich, editors

Welcome to the fifth issue of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA's monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Each edition of this newsletter draws on the expertise of CNA's China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division to gather information and provide an update on important developments in the PLA as reported in the Chinese- and English-language media of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In this issue, we review topics including new PRC subject matter expert commentary on how Russia's war in Ukraine has shaped key stakeholders' strategic thinking on Taiwan, PRC media reporting tying recent PLA Navy amphibious assault drills to a Taiwan scenario, PLA emergency response training, and more.

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MAJOR EXERCISES

Among the missions of China's armed forces is the [responsibility](#) to support civilian-led responses to national disasters and other serious emergencies.¹ PRC law stipulates that China's systems for emergency response and for national defense mobilization should be "[linked](#)."² As CNA analyst Cate Welch has argued,

although the two systems are not identical, analysis of PRC responses to domestic emergencies may provide insights into how the PLA and civilian agencies would coordinate mobilization efforts during a conflict.³ The summary below discusses the organization and roles of several PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP) units in a recent earthquake relief exercise led by civilian authorities.

EXERCISE TESTS PLA'S RESPONSE TO MAJOR EARTHQUAKE

Brian Waidelich

PRC media report that China's armed forces demonstrated their ability to operate jointly and support a civilian-led disaster response during a recent exercise. According to a China Military Online report, on May 11, over 5,000 PRC civilian and military personnel came together for [EMERGENCY MISSION 2022](#), an earthquake relief exercise held in Gansu Province on the eve of China's National Disaster Prevention and Reduction Day.⁴ The exercise, designed to test the capabilities of China's emergency rescue system, was led by the PRC State Council's Earthquake Relief Headquarters Office, the Ministry of Emergency Management, and the Gansu Provincial Government. The exercise [scenario](#) featured a fictional 7.5-magnitude earthquake that caused the collapse of buildings, human casualties, road blockages, and interruptions to electricity, water, gas, and communications services.⁵

EMERGENCY MISSION 2022 kicked off with the Earthquake Relief Headquarters Office issuing an order for a Level I emergency response (the highest level in China's [four-tier emergency response system](#)).⁶ Following the order, the Central Military Commission (CMC) Joint Operations Command Center and PLA Western Theater Command (WTC) launched a [preplanned emergency response](#). The WTC established an earthquake relief headquarters because Gansu Province (located in northwestern China) lies within the WTC's area of responsibility, and the Gansu Military District—a provincial-level command under the WTC—reportedly worked with civilian departments in the province to ensure the timely and orderly arrival of military rescue forces to the disaster area.



Left: PAP Gansu Corps rescue element commander designs a rescue plan. Right: "Troops from the PAP Gansu Zongdui Zhangye Detachment troops chainsaw through rubble." Source: [China Military Online](#).

The article boasts that China's armed forces contributed over 800 personnel and over 200 pieces of equipment to the exercise. Units involved in the PLA response included the WTC Army, WTC Air Force, Xining Joint Logistic Support Center, and First Mobile Corps of the PAP. PLA and PAP participants worked with civilians in over 10 exercise topics, including personnel evacuation and road and bridge rush repairs.

EMERGENCY MISSION 2022 reportedly incorporated "new rescue and disaster relief equipment," such as "dangerous goods disposal robots, human exoskeletons, map modeling drones, and 5G remote diagnosis and treatment equipment." According to *PLA Daily*, the exercise "comprehensively tested and improved" the Chinese armed forces' capabilities for "joint command, joint support, and joint action."⁷

PLA NAVY

In the following summary, we discuss recent media reporting on the PLA Navy's first publicized training event involving its first two amphibious assault ships. Of note, media commentary about that "dual ship drill" links the training event to preparations for a Taiwan contingency.

PLA NAVY DUAL AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT SHIP DRILLS LINKED TO TAIWAN

Ryan Loomis and Patrick deGategno

The PLA Navy's new Type 075 "Yushen" class landing helicopter assault (LHA) ships conducted mid-April dual ship drills, which PLA media and commentators linked to a Taiwan scenario. According to an April 26 China Military Online [report](#), Southern Theater Command Navy vessel CNS *Hainan* (LHA-31) and Eastern Theater Command Navy vessel CNS *Guangxi* (LHA-32)—the PLA Navy's first two operational amphibious assault ships—conducted "dual ship drills" in mid-April. The drills involved the two ships sailing in formation, conducting dual Z-8 helicopter flight operations, and simultaneously deploying Type 05 amphibious armored vehicles and Type 726 air-cushioned landing craft.⁸

According to an April 23 *Global Times* [report](#), Senior Captain Wang Yanguang, political commissar of an unnamed naval training center, claimed the dual ship drills' displays of air, surface, and amphibious capabilities demonstrate that the PLA is "rapidly achieving capabilities for multidomain, multidimensional landings."⁹



Screenshot from video of CNS *Guangxi* (LHA-32) and CNS *Hainan* (LHA-31) sailing in formation. Source: [PLA Navy Weibo](#)

Other media coverage of the exercise asserted that the dual ship drills were focused on training for a Taiwan scenario. An official PLA Navy [video](#) clip features the two LHAs sailing in formation while CNS *Guangxi*'s "flagship battle song" plays in the video's background. The song lyrics assert that the ship's mission is "national reunification," a reference to the reunification

of Taiwan with mainland China.¹⁰ Several *Global Times* reports echoed this Type 075 "reunification" mission statement.¹¹ One of these *Global Times* reports from [May 12](#) quoted an unnamed "military expert" who asserted that, should "a reunification-by-force operation take place," the LHAs can either "be deployed east of Taiwan from the south and the north" or form a "dual LHA group, concentrating forces for a landing."¹²

According to an April 21 *Global Times* [report](#), CNS *Hainan* is now "ready for amphibious operations" after being commissioned in April 2021. In addition, CNS *Guangxi* was commissioned in April 2022, and a third as-yet unnamed LHA is undergoing sea trials after being "launched" in January 2021.¹³ The *Global Times* report quotes unnamed military analysts who opined that the Type 075 LHAs' amphibious capabilities "are potentially required in places like the island of Taiwan and the South China Sea, as well as in military operations other than war."

PLA AIR FORCE

In our next summary, we discuss the PLA Air Force convening military and civilian officials with defense industry companies at the first high-level national aerospace forum since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous six forums in this series focused on gathering similar groups of military, government, and commercial entities to discuss matters of national security and the implications for military activities in the air and space domains.

PLA AIR FORCE HOLDS SEVENTH AEROSPACE SECURITY FORUM

Ryan Loomis and Patrick deGatego

The PLA Air Force hosted the latest National Aerospace Security and Development Forum in Beijing in mid-April, the first such forum since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to an April 22 *PLA Daily* [report](#), the forum convened civilian and military officials, as well as aerospace industry and academic experts, to discuss new technology, future warfare, operational support, and command and control (C2) issues related to the air and space domains.¹⁴ According to [Xinhua](#), forum attendees exchanged views on topics such as “the use of cutting-edge theoretical achievements in the aerospace field and air force building” and “resolving major practical issues in air force combat readiness and warfighting.”¹⁵

PRC media reporting did not identify attendees of the 2022 forum (beyond the generic description that “representatives, experts, and scholars from relevant military and civilian units” attended). However, a *PLA Daily* report on the [fifth forum](#) in 2018 noted that representatives of 21 military, government, civilian academic, and defense industry organizations attended, including the PLA Air Force Research Institute, PLA National Defense University, Chinese Academy of Sciences, and Aviation Industry Corporation of China.¹⁶

EMERGING CAPABILITIES

The summary below, a reprint from [Issue 15](#) of CNA’s *China AI and Autonomy Report*, describes purported progress in PLA efforts to detect and track underway US surface combatants in real time.¹⁷ Although not mentioned in the cited PRC media report, the PLA Strategic Support Force would be the likely user of such a capability given its responsibility for the space domain.

This summary is similar to one included in the fourth issue of [PLA Update](#) that discussed AI-enabled satellite tracking of a ground-based target.¹⁸ It describes PRC media reporting on an effort to track a US Navy aircraft carrier during training off the east coast of the United States. Both summaries provide examples of reported PRC efforts to integrate AI into target tracking in ways that could potentially enhance PLA space-based reconnaissance capabilities.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ENABLES PRC SATELLITE TO TRACK US AIRCRAFT CARRIER

Kevin Pollpeter

A PRC journal article describes real-time tracking of a US aircraft carrier by satellite. On May 10, [South China Morning Post](#) reported that an April article in the PRC peer-reviewed journal *Spacecraft Engineering* detailed research involving an unidentified PRC satellite tracking USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN-75) in real time while it was conducting training near Long Island, New York, in June 2021.¹⁹

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the *Spacecraft Engineering* article noted that the PRC’s previous use of satellite data to track US naval vessels required extensive processing on the ground, which is often

completed after an exercise is finished. However, the satellite tracking CVN-75 detected the ship automatically using specially designed AI chips that meet the space, weight, and power requirements of the tracking satellite and are also hardened against radiation.

MILITARY CIVIL FUSION

Beijing's military-civil fusion (MCF) [strategy](#) seeks to more effectively leverage commercial and defense resources in support of PRC strategic objectives, including the effort to transform the PLA into a "world-class military" by mid-century.²⁰ One focus area of MCF is the acquisition of foreign dual-use technologies, which PRC actors may procure through both [legal and illegal means](#).²¹ The first summary in this section addresses reported concerns about transfers of US technology to China and finds that a PRC scholar underplays the risks associated with outbound US investment and export controls.

MCF also seeks to improve the PRC's [military procurement](#) system by increasing the number of domestic civilian enterprises involved in defense contracting.²² The second summary in this section describes reported problems in related efforts in the wake of the PLA's release of a series of new procurement regulations in recent years. (We discussed one of these new regulations in the first issue of [PLA Update](#).)²³

PRC EXPERT DENIES US FIRMS' CIVILIAN TECHNOLOGY HAS DUAL-USE POTENTIAL IN CHINA

April Herlevi and Brian Waidelich

A PRC scholar has dismissed reported concerns about technology transfer between US defense firms and Chinese companies. On May 16, Fox Business [reported](#) on the growing risks of US companies doing business in the PRC, particularly US defense contractors with ties to PRC government-backed firms. Quoting the CEO of a risk consultancy, the related report states that "US defense contractors need to better understand their risk exposure to China and the Chinese Communist Party."²⁴

In response to the report, the *Global Times* ran an [article](#) on May 17 in which Lü Xiang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "refutes" Fox Business's cited concerns (an English [translation](#) of the article is available on China Military Online).²⁵ According to Lü, US defense contractors having operations in the PRC is a non-issue because "the US government has strict restrictions on the investment behavior of its defense companies, which have already undergone a compliance review by the US government before conducting business in China." Lü claims "some US politicians" hold incorrect assumptions about how civilian technologies could be applied in military settings and dismisses the notion that the PLA is dependent on US firms. As Lü puts it, China can "independently develop its own military technology."²⁶

Lü Xiang's commentary is accurate in asserting that China has made significant strides in developing its own defense technology, but the *Global Times* article underplays the risks associated with outbound US investment and export controls. Xi Jinping's elevation of MCF to a national strategy in 2014 and the release of follow-on [policies](#) have increased PRC actors' incentives to attract foreign investment in sectors China considers "strategic" and to acquire foreign technologies with military application potential.²⁷ The US government has updated some elements of its export control regime, most notably with the passage of the [Export Control Reform Act of 2018](#), but limitations on the export of particular items are distinct from the monitoring of outbound investment.²⁸ Lü Xiang's commentary about "strict restrictions on the investment behavior of [US] defense contractors" does not accurately capture the current reality. Updated [US Executive Orders](#) and the US Department of the Treasury's [Non-SDN Chinese Military-Industrial Complex Companies List](#) (known as the NS-CMIC List) have begun to change how US companies should conduct due diligence

prior to operating with PRC firms.²⁹ However, these US compliance efforts remain relatively narrow in scope and do not necessarily apply to all commercial operations in China.

PLA-WIDE EDUCATION CAMPAIGN SEEKS TO RAISE PROCUREMENT COMPLIANCE

Timothy Ditter and Brian Waidelich

The PLA has launched a months-long series of activities to clarify responsibilities and stem corruption in China's military procurement system. On May 5, Xinhua [reported](#) that the CMC Logistic Support Department recently launched a military-wide education campaign to improve personnel knowledge of procurement regulations and procedures. In recent years, the PLA has released a series of new regulations on military procurement requirements, review and approval, contract management, emergency procurement, and quality-price evaluation. According to the Xinhua report, the regulations reportedly lacked clarity because “units had long reported issues such as unclear divisions of responsibility.” In response to related complaints, the CMC Logistic Support Department kicked off the “All-Military Procurement Industry Policy and Regulation Propagation and Implementation Activities” in April 2022. These activities, which are intended to last through the year’s end, include in-person and virtual training sessions for key personnel engaged in procurement—including party committee leaders at various levels, requirements departments, and members of the procurement industry. Although Xinhua did not detail the education campaign’s ties to combating military corruption, the report noted that training personnel on procurement policy and regulations will help the PLA “securely fasten the cage of anti-corruption institutions and open up a green channel to victory.”³⁰

COMMENTARIES ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES

We end by summarizing two recent examples of PLA observations of foreign military activities related to the Russia-Ukraine war. The first is a retired PLA officer’s commentary on how the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has shaped key security stakeholders’ thinking on the cross-Strait security situation.³¹ The second is an example of a PLA academy studying the war as Beijing continues to tightly control the public narrative on this topic through the PRC media.

RETIRED PLA OFFICER DISCUSSES IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR FOR TAIWAN

Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGateño

Zhang Tuosheng claims that Russia’s war in Ukraine has influenced strategic thinking about Taiwan and that the US must change its policy toward Taiwan to avoid war. On May 16, Zhang published an [op-ed](#) titled “Russia-Ukraine War’s Impact on Taiwan” in the Hong Kong-based online journal *China-US Focus*.³² Zhang is a former deputy defense attaché in the PRC Embassy in London and a former PLA National Defense University fellow. He is currently the director of research at the PLA-affiliated China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and the director of research at the non-governmental Grandview Institution. Zhang opens the article by asserting that the war in Ukraine has been “reshaping strategic thinking about Taiwan” and proceeds to discuss several impacts on Taiwan, the US, and the PRC.

Impacts on Taiwan. Zhang states that the war in Ukraine has increased Republic of China (ROC) fears of a PLA invasion, despite the geostrategic differences between Taiwan and Ukraine. Referencing a survey from

an unspecified “Taiwan-based think tank,” the author claims that most respondents expressed worries about the Tsai administration’s antagonistic policy toward Beijing and expressed declining confidence that the US would send troops to support Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict.

Impacts on the United States. According to Zhang, the US is concerned that its initial response to the Russia-Ukraine war damaged its credibility with Taiwan, and has therefore mustered resources (e.g., delegations of government officials, a new arms sales package to Taiwan) to bolster its credibility. The op-ed suggests, however, that the US could become increasingly worried about facing two concurrent wars (the current war in Ukraine and a potential cross-Strait conflict) as the war in Ukraine drags on. As a result, Zhang writes, Washington could be motivated to decrease its support to Taipei in a bid to reduce tensions with Beijing.

Impacts on China. Zhang asserts that the “mercilessness and destructiveness of war” seen in the current Russia-Ukraine conflict will motivate China to “become more resolute in its determination to pursue peaceful reunification with Taiwan.” However, Zhang is not implying that the PLA should scale down its frequent activities around Taiwan. The author contends that going forward, China will “strengthen deterrence” against “Taiwan separatists” and against countries like the US and Japan that seek to provoke a cross-Strait military conflict.

NOTES

¹ According to the PRC’s Emergency Response Law, “The Chinese People’s Liberation Army, the Chinese People’s Armed Police Force and the militia shall participate in emergency rescue, relief and handling in accordance with the provisions of this Law and of the relevant laws, administrative regulations and military regulations, as well as the orders issued by the State Council and the Central Military Commission.” The law states that *emergencies* include “natural disasters, calamitous accidents, public health accidents and public security incidents, which occur abruptly and cause or may potentially cause serious social harm and for which measures for handling emergencies need to be adopted.” See *Emergency Response Law of the People’s Republic of China*, adopted Aug. 30, 2007, effective Nov. 1, 2007, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2009-02/20/content_1471589.htm.

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