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## 4. PLA RAPID REACTION FORCES: CONCEPT, TRAINING, AND PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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### BACKGROUND

In June 1985, the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held an extended meeting to develop consensus views on future warfare and set the direction of formulating new military strategies. At that meeting, paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, also Chairman of the CMC, made the following concluding remarks:

there will not be large-scale warfare in the foreseeable future. Factors preventing imminent and large-scale warfare are increasing; such factors are: (a) neither the Soviet Union nor the United States has achieved advantages in terms of military deployment and therefore prevent either side from making the first move; (b) the third world countries are not cooperating with these two powers in terms of military deployment, in fact, people in the third world countries support peace more than war; (c) the importance of technological advantage and sustaining economic competition have replaced the importance of sustaining war-winning military capability and becoming new contested terrain in world competition.<sup>2</sup>

Deng's remark not only impelled Chinese military thinkers to discredit a large-scale warfare scenario, but also replaced conventional war fighting thinking that called for "fighting an early war (*zhao da*), a large-scale war (*da da*), and a nuclear war (*da hezizhan*)" with a call for "military construction under peaceful era."<sup>3</sup>

In the eyes of PLA military thinkers, the world is still unsafe and unstable even though a large-scale nuclear war is highly unlikely, thanks to the collapse of the Soviet empire and the East European communist bloc. Regional instability and potential conflict are characterized by territorial dispute, ethnic and religious conflict, and arms proliferation. Such unstable and war-inducing regional factors

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<sup>2</sup>Peng Guangqian, "Deng Xiaoping's Strategic Thought," in Michael Pillsbury (ed.), *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, pp. 3-10.

<sup>3</sup>Hong Baoxiu, "Deng Xiaoping's Theory of War and Peace," in Michael Pillsbury (ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 19-23.

also exist in China's peripheral areas, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. In order to sustain as long a peaceful period as possible and effectively prevent or win a regional conflict, military operations in the peaceful era should be designed to enhance two military capabilities: first, the capability of modern strategic weapon systems to exert effective deterrence; and second, to develop highly competitive, high-technology-based rapid reaction forces (RRF) (*kuaisu fanyin budui*) to cope with future small-scale, highly intensive regional combat and military operations. Under these two major principles of military construction, the CMC has given orders to learn the lessons of Western rapid deployment forces as the basis of developing PLA's RRF. The PLA began its RRF development in the early 1980s. Since then, RRFs have been set up in PLA Army, Air Force, and Navy units, as well as Army special forces, Army aviation, Marine Corps, and airborne units.

However, lessons of Allied Forces operations in the Gulf War in 1991 forced the CMC to consolidate the development of RRF. In 1992, a special force named "Resolving Emergency Mobile Combat Forces" (REMCF) was created and placed directly under the CMC's control. This special force was given the tasks of border defense, dealing with internal armed conflict, maintaining public order, and conducting disaster relief missions. REMCF has been developed in two phases. Phase one was initiated at the beginning of 1992. Each Group Army corps of every Military Region (MR) selected an infantry division to be the designated REMCF for dealing with emergency situations in every Combat Region (CR).<sup>4</sup> Phase two was implemented in 1994, continuing the development of a second batch of REMCF and enhancing the capability for "quick fighting, quick resolution" under the conditions of high-tech regional warfare. The two phases of the REMCF development program will be completed by the end of 1998, with an estimated 300,000-man REMCF force to be established and directly controlled by CMC.

It is the authors' purpose to analyze the origins, force structure, doctrine, weapons system capabilities, and training for these special units, as well as to assess their general capability in terms of meeting designated task requirements in so-called "future regional warfare."

### CONCEPTION FOR RRFs

The impetus for the PLA's desire to develop RRFs was the 1991 Gulf War. In analyzing the lessons of that conflict, the PLA came to the following conclusions: (a) modern war is high-tech war, and technology can not only fulfill tactical and combat missions but can also fulfill strategic objectives; (b) regional warfare can serve as a viable means for political resolution and render large-scale warfare unnecessary; (c) the existence of high-tech weapon systems holds out the possibility of "quick resolution" by conducting long-distance, high-power, and precision attacks; and (d) high-tech weapon systems have changed the needs of force composition and resulted in new types of combined operation.

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<sup>4</sup>*Chinese Communist Annual Report 1997*, Military Section, Chapter 9, p. 68, Chinese Communist Press Publications, 1998.

In addition to emphasizing notions of applying high-tech weapon systems, the PLA's conceptualization of "rapid reaction" capability emphasizes adaptation to warfare scenarios and developing quick responses to varying battlefield contingencies. In other words, adaptation and responsiveness are two key elements of developing a rapid reaction force, and these elements require sufficient and comprehensive preparation for unexpected contingencies and future war scenarios.

Key elements in PLA's rapid reaction concept are

- a. Training
- b. Speed
- c. Strength
- d. Effectiveness.

The key elements in rapid reaction effectiveness are

- a. Emphasizing an "active defense strategy"
- b. Emphasizing "inferiority vs. superiority" and "weak vs. strong"
- c. Emphasizing mobility and the strategy of attacking.

### **Policies for Enhancing the RRF's Operational Readiness**

To increase RRF combat capability and cope with the requirements of future high-tech regional warfare, the PLA has operationalized policies to enhance RRF's operational readiness. These measures include:

- a. Identifying possible targets and intensively assessing conditions of the war zone (*zhanqu*);
- b. Applying imported technology to store, assess, and revise every operational plan and implementing these plans in training and exercises so as to adjust combat capability in different war scenarios;
- c. Deploying motorized vehicles, electronic warfare equipment, and modernized logistic support to RRF units to enhance force mobility, long-range deployment, electronic countermeasure and electronic counter-countermeasure capabilities; and
- d. Reducing the timeframe for transforming levels of operational readiness, such as transforming operational readiness from level 4 to level 1 in a time period not exceeding three days.

In addition to promulgating policies to enhance an RRF's operational readiness, CMC also issued a document entitled "Regulations for Constructing REMCFs" as a blueprint for REMCF training. It includes the following points:

- a. Require every soldier in RRF units to undertake special training, such as swimming, skiing, and mountain climbing. Apart from basic training, infantry

soldiers with service above two years should acquire proficiency with every weapon system assigned to the company units;

- b. Consolidate “three attacks and five defenses” (*san da wu fang*) and conduct the “three real trainings”<sup>5</sup> to enhance capabilities of anti-guided and precision weapon systems, and C<sup>4</sup>I etc.; and
- c. Enhance command and control efficiency.

To implement these training directives, the PLA has conducted various exercises since 1995, concentrating particularly on long-range and intraregional rapid mobile deployment. For example, RRF units in different MRs have been selected to conduct long-range and mobile combined exercises. To this end, RRF combined exercises were carried out in 1995 and 1996 in the Gobi desert, the Tibetan and Xinjiang highlands, and in the southwestern tropical forests to enhance the RRF’s adaptative survival capabilities.

The RRF’s training and exercises in 1996 emphasized the following objectives:

- a. Ground forces focused on broader retaliatory capabilities for attacking in mountain regions with combined forces and amphibious landings;
- b. Naval forces focused on Ro/Ro [roll on-roll off] amphibious landings, electronic warfare, air-sea combined operation, anti-submarine warfare, anti-air operations, and ship-to-ship guided missile training;
- c. Air forces focused on long-range interregional air attack, long-range mobile transit, air-to-sea attack, airborne training; and
- d. People’s Armed Police (PAP) and reserve units focused on responding to mobilization calls and providing logistic support.

### **Current Status and Operational Capabilities of RRFs**

*Army Special Forces.* The PLA has established a regiment-level Army Special Force (ASF) in every MR as an RRF unit, directly under the MR headquarters command. The principal officers of an ASF, including the commander, political commissar, and chief of staff, are full colonels. Officers above the platoon level are required to be university graduates and receive further education in the Army Command Academy. In every Group Army, a battalion-level special reconnaissance task force has been set up under the Group Army HQ’s command. Officers and men of this ASF are selected from reconnaissance and technical units of every Group Army. The wash-out rate is about 50 percent after receiving further tests and training. In addition, every MR has established special training facilities for their RRF units. Special skills, such as martial arts, are also included in the training.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>“Three attacks” refers to attacks on helicopters, tanks, and airborne troops. “Five defenses” means to defend against nuclear/biological/chemical attacks, electronic countermeasures, and precision-guided weapon systems. “Three real trainings” refers to deploying real troops, conducting real operations, and using live ammunition in training.

<sup>6</sup>Zhou Mon-wu, “Elevation of PLA Special Force,” in *Military Digest*, October 1997, pp. 2–3.

Each RRF unit is equipped with the most advanced weapon systems, equivalent to special forces in Western countries. They also possess remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs), night-vision goggles, and GPS satellite communication systems. The total strength of ASF may be as high as seven regiments and twenty-four battalions, or approximately 25,000 personnel.

*Army Aviation Unit.* The Army Aviation Unit (AAU) was established in April 1986. Its main task is to deploy helicopters and light aircraft to support ground operations. The AAU is directly under General Staff Department (GSD) command, and has been seen in many combined exercises in Northern China (Huabei) performing anti-tank, special forces insertion, and electronic countermeasure operations. The AAU possesses small numbers of S-70C Sikorsky helicopters, which have been converted into command, control, and communication platforms. The AAU's main helicopter fleet includes 200+ Z-8 transports, 100+ Z-9A, and 30+ Mi-8/Mi-17. Harbin Aircraft Co. has also developed a gunship variant of the Z-9A (WZ-9) for the AAU. Twelve of the Gazelle helicopter gunships were procured in 1988 and deployed to the 38th Group Army in the Beijing MR. In 1993, China Aviation Technology Import and Export Co. entered into a joint venture with Singapore Aviation Industry to co-produce EC-120 light helicopters, and China has ordered 150 EC-120 for the AAU. The PLA is planning to import helmet-mounted night-vision devices to enhance the AAU's night-fighting capability.

As shown in recent PLA exercises, the AAU has taken part in various combined exercises such as anti-tank, personnel transport, command post relocation, reconnaissance, and electronic countermeasures missions. This demonstrates that PLA is trying to improve its fighting capabilities in a high-tech environment.

*Marine Corps.* The PLA Marine Corps was established in December 1954 and was consolidated into a full-fledged amphibious landing force in 1979. The Marine Corps is attached to the South Sea Fleet, headquartered in Zhanjiang. Equipment and weapons systems for the Marine Corps include: Type 63 amphibious landing tanks, Type 7711/7712 amphibious armored personnel carriers, Type 54 artillery, and HJ-73 anti-tank missiles. Between 1995 and 1996, the PLA has conducted several amphibious landing exercises and deployed helicopters, hovercrafts, and other amphibious landing equipment, demonstrating that the Marine Corps seeks to enhance its amphibious landing capability through combined exercises.

*Airborne Troops.* The 15th Airborne Corps of the PLAAF is composed of three airborne brigades. The 43rd brigade, stationed in Kaifeng, Henan Province, is attached to the Jinan MR. The 44th brigade, stationed in Yinshan, Hubei Province, is attached to the Lanzhou MR. The 45th brigade, stationed in Huangpi, Hubei Province, is also attached to the Lanzhou MR. The airborne troops are accompanied by the 13th transport division of the PLAAF. The airborne troops are directly under CMC control. Strategically, the airborne troops are considered to be a reserve force, yet in tactical terms the airborne troops are deployed as an advance force. It could be reconstituted as an air mobile rapid attack force. The airlift capability of the PLAAF is composed of 10 IL-76 heavy lift, Yun-8, and Yun-7 transports, as well as Mi-17, Mi-8, S-70c, Z-8, and Z-9 helicopters. In terms of weapon systems, the airborne

troops are equipped with BMPs [Russian armored personnel carriers], Hongjian-8 anti-tank missiles, Hong Yin 5A anti-air missiles, and Russian-made flame-throwers. In recent years, the airborne troops have developed several technical combat units, including reconnaissance, communication, artillery, and anti-chemical units.

The airborne troops have conducted exercises in different types of terrain, as well as all-weather, daytime, and night conditions. The exercises are normally conducted at the company level. The timeframe of each exercise is three days and troops are given a two-day food ration. The exercise missions include occupying and defending strategic key points, sabotaging airfields, anti-air attack, anti-reconnaissance, and survival course training. In the 1996 Taiwan Strait exercises, an airborne battalion was parachuted to Dongshan Island, supporting a Marine amphibious landing exercise.

### **RRF Exercises Since 1996**

RRF exercises were conducted in each of the following MRs:

#### *Nanjing MR*

- a. Nanjing MR conducted three-phased exercises from March 8 to 21, 1996 in the Taiwan Strait:

Phase I: 2nd Artillery fired Dongfeng-15 (M-9) missiles off Keelung and Kaohsiung harbors.

Phase II: Air Force and Navy conducted air attack and missile firing exercises, electronic warfare, low-level penetration air attacks, blockade, and air-sea combined exercises.

Phase III: Air-sea-land forces conducted amphibious landing exercises on Pingtan Island. AAU helicopters, Su-27 fighters, and airborne troops were also deployed.

- b. In September 1996, the East Sea Fleet conducted combined exercises off the Zhejiang coast, including air-sea combined exercises and anti-submarine warfare.
- c. In October 1996, another air-sea combined exercise was conducted with emphasis on air superiority and sea control capability.
- d. In November 1996, an air-land combined exercise was conducted in Anhui. A simulated "Blue force" was attacked by a "Red" tank regiment. The Air Force deployed Su-27 and J-8II jet fighters to attack the "Blue" force. All land forces were rapidly transported by railways and vehicles to the exercise region.

#### *Jinan MR*

- a. From late October to early November 1996, an air-land combined exercise was conducted in the Anyang and Tongbao mountain regions of Henan Province. Artillery, communication, anti-air, Army Aviation, and Air Force units all took

part. “Red” troops attacked a simulated Republic of China (ROC) army company that was occupying strategic points.

- b. From 19 to 31 October 1996, an air-sea combined exercise was held in the Yellow Sea. Submarines, destroyers, and Navy fighters and bombers simulated “Red” vs. “Blue” war games.

#### *Guangzhou MR*

- a. In September 1996, an electronic warfare exercise was held in the Yangquan and Yangjiang area of Guangdong Province. Electronic countermeasure (ECM) and counter-countermeasure (ECCM) courses were practiced.
- b. In mid-October 1996, an amphibious landing exercise was held in Zhanjiang, Yangjiang (Guangdong Province) and the Wutong region of Guangxi Province. Forces included an infantry division, communication, ECM, and logistic support units, two landing ships (LSTs) and an aviation unit of the South Sea Fleet, including 10 H-6 bombers, F-7s, and Su-27s of the Southern Air Force regiment. Troops were deployed to the exercise region by motorized transport. The exercise also included “Red” vs. “Blue” war games.
- c. March 12–20, 1996, a missile and artillery live-fire exercise was held in Nanao (Guangdong Province). Nuclear submarines, destroyers, and conventional submarines from North Sea Fleet, East Sea Fleet, and South Sea Fleet were deployed to the exercise zone. Naval aviation collaborated with naval ships in conducting missile attacks, ECM, and anti-submarine warfare drills.

#### *Beijing MR*

A large combined exercise was held in Hebei Province and Inner Mongolia in late August 1996. Forces included a tactical missile unit, an infantry division, a logistics unit, and Army aviation helicopters, as well as A-5, J-7, H-5, H-6, and ECM aircraft of Northern Air Force regiment. The main drills of this exercise sought to enhance long-distance rapid-deployment capability, air-land counter-attack capability, and logistics support capability.

#### *Shenyang MR*

- a. In mid-September 1996, an amphibious landing combined exercise was held on Changshan Island of Bohai Bay. Forces included a mechanized infantry division, LSTs, landing craft (LCMs), and Air Force aircraft.
- b. In late October 1996, an air-land combined exercise was held near Harbin. Forces included a mechanized division, artillery and tank brigades, and communication units. The exercise emphasized long-distance rapid-deployment capability and force coordination.
- c. Between late October and early November of 1996, an exercise was held in Liaoning and Jilin. Forces included an artillery brigade, an anti-aircraft brigade, a tank division, a helicopter unit, and a logistics support unit. Exercise drills included long-distance rapid deployment, counter-attack, live firing, and logistics efficiency.

### *Lanzhou MR*

- a. A 1000-mile railway transport rapid-deployment exercise was held in Lanzhou MR in August 1996. The purpose was to enhance mobile deployment capability.
- b. In late August 1996, a Northern Air Force bomber and fighter regiment (including Su-27s) from various MRs were assembled in Gansu Province and conducted an air attack exercise, targeting a simulated ROC Ching Chuan Kan airbase that was built in Dingxin. The exercise included air combat, air-to-ground attack, and the firing of a new type of surface-to-air missile
- c. From late September to early October of 1996, a “Red” vs. “Blue” combined exercise was held in Shanxi Province. The exercise simulated a counter attack against an invading Russian army.

The number of exercises conducted from 1995 to 1996 far exceeded the number of exercises conducted between 1992 and 1994. The focus of the exercises shifted from anti-airborne, anti-amphibious landing to amphibious landing and airborne offensive operations. In particular, the 1997 exercises emphasized amphibious landing capabilities and urban combat tactics. New types of equipment, such as Ro/Ro cargo ships, imported Russian BMPs, and flame throwers were deployed in supporting these operations. However, the PLA is still incapable of conducting a cross-strait amphibious landing. Specifically, the current two-brigade Marine Corps attached to the South Sea Fleet is not capable of a successful amphibious landing attack against Taiwan. Recently, the CMC relocated several Army divisions, along with airborne troops, to assist amphibious landing exercises. This is a clear indication that PLA is trying to enhance its amphibious landing capability. These intentions were further verified by a seminar in October 1996 held at PLA-NDU (National Defense University) to discuss the effectiveness of combined forces in amphibious landings. Aside from building new LSTs, LCMs, and Ro/Ro amphibious landing ships, the PLA has developed a “wing in the ground” vehicle with the assistance of Russian engineers and specialists. In 1997, PLA successfully produced the DXF100 “wing in the ground” vehicle. New heavy-duty tires for this vehicle are currently being tested.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>China successfully developed a first-generation “wing in the ground” (WIG) vehicle in January 1997, code-named DXF100. The DXF100 vehicles were tested in Taihu in Jiangxi Province. Its maximum lifting capacity is 4.5 tons, and it is capable of flying 1–5 meters above water with a maximum speed of 120 km per hour. It was designed and developed at the China Institute of Technology and Development, the Beijing Institute of Aerodynamics, and the Hubei Institute of Amphibious Aviation. These design and development centers are developing and producing new civilian-use and military-use types of WIG vehicles. Types H and I are for military cross-sea amphibious landing operations. The H model weighs 140 tons and can travel at speeds up to 400 km per hour. It has a lift capacity of 30 tons of cargo, or 250 fully armed soldiers. The I model weighs 400 tons and can travel at speeds of 500 km per hour. It can carry a full battalion (500 men and equipment). Its heavy lift capacity, low radar detection profile, and high speed make WIGs very attractive and lethal for future cross-strait military operations. (Liao Wen Chung, unpublished report on Asia Aviation Exhibition in March 1998. During his visit to the air show in Singapore, Mr. Liao interviewed Russian technicians specializing in WIGs and learned that there are a number of Russian scientists and engineers working closely with Chinese specialists in China to develop various types of WIGs.)

## CONCLUSION AND COMMENT

1. The creation of RRFs and REMCFs is a new development in PLA force structure. A 100,000-man RRF was established in 1994, bolstered by a 300,000-strong REMCF in 1997, made up of the Army's 91st division and 121st division, the Navy's 5th amphibious landing detachment, and 15th Airborne Corps. The establishment of RRF and REMCF is in line with PLA's force reduction policies. Clearly, RRF and REMCF will be the backbone force of the PLA in the near future. At the same time, these new units not only increase the complexity of the MR system but also create challenges in terms of force coordination, logistic support, and C3I. However, it could be argued that the establishment of RRFs and REMCFs is an inevitable step in the rationalization of the PLA since 1985, when the slogans of professionalization and fighting and winning a high-tech regional warfare were first introduced.

The impetus for these changes was manifold. Lessons learned from the 1989 Tiananmen operation demanded that the PLA improve its operational efficiency, should it be called upon to deal with similar crises in the future. PLA commanders are fully aware that their forces are not capable of dealing with much more complex crises, such as military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea. The 1991 Gulf War provided the PLA with an opportunity to learn the ways and means of implementing RRF concepts, theories, and force operations. China's reform and open-door policies along with the ending of the Cold War also provided ample opportunities for PLA commanders and senior officers to conduct intensive and comprehensive interactions with external advanced military forces, which allowed PLA officers to learn modern high-tech warfare operations.

At the same time, the establishment of RRFs and REMCFs has clearly affected the PLA's existing force structure and operational doctrines. Frequent and aggressive combined exercises have encountered little criticism within the PLA, an indication that there is widespread consensus among top commanders and officers in supporting these new force units. The adding of the General Equipment Department and streamlining of the National Defense Commission for Science and Technology are other indications of gradual structure change.

2. RRF and REMCF are mission-oriented task forces designed to meet PLA's revised strategic perceptions for the post-Cold War era and to deal with domestic and peripheral potential threats if necessary. It is still too early to say the PLA can effectively deal with new threat contingencies should RRF or REMCF be confronted by equally strong or stronger adverse forces. The establishment and development of the PLA rapid reaction forces can also be linked to the PRC's changing threat perceptions, especially vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, Tibet, and Xinjiang. In the Taiwan Strait scenario, Beijing's military preparation takes into account the possibility of confronting U.S. and Japanese military forces. To this end, these forces have conducted various exercises in the East China Sea since 1995. Judging from these exercises, the PLA is vigorously practicing combined force operations with emphasis on long-range mobile rapid-deployment and amphibious landing capabilities. The PLA even constructed a simulated "Taiwan Special Region" near the mountainous areas of Anhui Province, where it conducted "Red" vs. "Blue"

war games, including amphibious landings, as well as airborne, air-to-sea, sea-to-air, and ECM/ECCM operations. Deployment of rapid reaction forces is subject to adequate air and sea lift capabilities. Evidence suggests that the PLA is increasingly upgrading these lift capabilities by building new Ro/Ro ships and importing heavy lift transport, such as the IL-76MF. The development of hydrofoils is another example of enhancing lift capability for rapid reaction operations.