

# Chinese Contingency Planning for Regional Hotspots

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*Chinese Contingency Planning for Regional Hotspots*

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The RAND Corporation<sup>2</sup>

Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

April 13, 2017

China's rise brings with it numerous strategic imperatives and concerns. These include expanded economic engagement in diverse regions, growing political influence and responsibilities, and new challenges to territorial claims.<sup>3</sup> China's leaders have directed the military to prepare itself to secure and protect these interests. People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization and planning efforts thus are driven by a renewed sense of urgency and senior-level interest. These imperatives also are compelling the PLA to develop capabilities directed toward new missions to deal with unpredictable situations and unfamiliar environments.<sup>4</sup> PRC leaders have growing concerns about challenges to China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea. On the Korean peninsula, uncertainty and the potential for instability loom. Potential crises around China's vast periphery present PRC leaders and planners with the possibility of unexpected and dangerous situations. These emerging security challenges are forcing the PLA to adapt how it plans for future contingencies, deploys its forces, and fights.<sup>5</sup> This testimony is based primarily on several types of Chinese military sources, including official press reports, articles from PLA military science journals, teaching materials, and military science research publications. It seeks to address how PLA planners at the national level deal with strategic objectives for potential contingencies, how those objectives are communicated to theater commands, how contingency plans are formulated at the national and theater level, and how planning mechanisms are constructed for dealing with potential resource constraints between theater commands.

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<sup>3</sup> Information Office of the State Council, *China's Military Strategy*, reprinted by Xinhua, May 26, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015.

The need to effectively deal with these situations serves as the backdrop for the PLA's recent reorganization. The reorganization is aimed at ensuring a more agile, operationally oriented force. It is attempting to accomplish this by stripping away legacy structures and missions, reemphasizing core mission areas, and building capacity in critical domains. New organizational entities, particularly the theater commands, are oriented toward multiple territorial defense missions, as well as toward responsibilities for protecting the PRC's maritime claims. In recent years, PLA joint exercises have emphasized long-range mobility and preparing forces to operate in new settings.<sup>6</sup> PRC leaders intend for these organizational and operational reforms to enable the PLA to "effectively control major crises, properly handle possible chain reactions, and firmly safeguard the country's territorial sovereignty, integrity and security."<sup>7</sup>

The primary strategic and operational considerations that drive PLA planning also have changed, reflecting the realities of a more complicated international security environment. The PRC's strategic focus for much of its history has been on land-based threats. Over the past two decades, PRC leaders have recognized that the nation's interests are migrating increasingly toward China's southeast littoral and maritime domains. President Xi Jinping's concern about the PLA's readiness to mitigate and confront challenges in all domains underpins his recent directives for the PLA to prepare for military struggle.<sup>8</sup> These preparations are founded on the recognition that the PLA must improve its flexibility and preparedness to respond to a wide range of potential scenarios. China's most recent military strategy details the need to improve the PLA's joint operations and its ability to conduct system-of-systems operations—two core elements needed to fight and win informatized local wars in the future.<sup>9</sup> Further, these operational imperatives require the PLA to improve its ability to integrate advanced capabilities in all domains and tailor them to the specific characteristics of a given crisis or conflict.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark R. Cozad, *PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-451, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The PLA defines military struggle as "using mainly military means to engage in combat with countries or political groups for certain political, economic or other goals. The highest form is war," and defines "preparing for military struggle" as "engaging in preparations for fulfilling the requirements of military struggle. The core is preparations for war." One analyst said that "preparing for military struggle" is "similar to the concept of operational readiness." See M. Taylor Fravel, "No, Hu Didn't Call for War," *The Diplomat*, December 10, 2011; *PLA Military Terms* [军语], Military Science Publishing House, December 2011, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> The PLA defines *informatization* as the reliance on information networks to integrate and systematize operations designed to obtain information superiority. The "system-of-systems" concept is based on ensuring joint capability by building critical links in command automation, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR), precision strike, and rapid mobility—which the PLA believes is the backbone of modern warfare. For a discussion of the relationship between these two concepts and PLA operational concepts, see Mark R. Cozad and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, "Trends in PLA Air Force Joint Training: Assessing Progress in Integrated Joint Operations" in Edmund J. Burke, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Mark R. Cozad, and Timothy R. Heath, *Assessing the Training and Operational Proficiency of China's Aerospace Forces: Selections from the Inaugural Conference of the China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI)*, Santa Monica, California, RAND Corporation, CF-340-AF, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015. Although this is the first document labeled and published as a military strategy, it follows a biannual series of Defense White Papers that have outlined China's threats, its military structure, and the military's role in supporting these national security objectives. For analysis on the report, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Military Strategy: 'Winning Informationized Local Wars,'" *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 13, Jamestown Foundation, July 2, 2015.

One of the most critical elements in meeting these new challenges is centered on improving the PLA's planning processes and command automation systems. Several PLA exercises supporting Xi's directive to prepare for military struggle have emphasized operational planning, particularly at the theater level.<sup>11</sup> In addition, key exercises have also tested new command automation systems, including the integrated command platform (ICP), a system designed to provide commanders and staffs with up-to-date intelligence, targeting, and command and control information, along with simulations and automated decisionmaking aids to support commanders' planning and command functions.<sup>12</sup> The PLA's recent efforts to train its staffs for joint planning and command reflect a sense of urgency in addressing a long-standing problem while simultaneously implementing necessary changes that led to the PLA's new organizational structure.<sup>13</sup> The PLA's ability to meet these challenges will have a direct effect on the PRC's success in preparing for and responding to the potential crises it may confront in the future.

## Managing National-Level Objectives

The national-level objectives that drive contingency planning are found largely in two primary sources: the Military Strategic Guidelines (MSG) and the National Military Strategy (NMS). Both documents contain information outlining the PLA's military modernization objectives, its primary strategic concerns, and core missions for the PLA and each of its services and branches. In addition, the PLA produces a large body of military science material that supports the development of these key documents and informs PLA leaders on progress in areas of concept development, strategic and operational thought, and a variety of other fields essential to modern warfare.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Cozad, 2016. Joint command and planning was a core content issue in exercises held under the Stride, Mission Action, and Joint Action exercise series conducted during the end of the 11th Five Year Plan (2006–2010) and the 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2015).

<sup>12</sup> Wang Yinfang, "Gain Combat Strength Through the Build-Up of Command Capability," *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 7, 2016, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed assessment of weaknesses in the PLA's modernization efforts, see Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> There are several key documents that the PLA produced in recent years that fall into this category. For examples, see Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013; Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005; Zhang Yuliang [张玉良], ed., *The Science of Campaigns* [战役学], Beijing: National Defense University Press [国防大学出版社], 2006; and Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye [王厚卿, 张兴业], eds., *The Science of Campaigns* [战役学], Beijing: National Defense University Press [国防大学出版社], 2000. These are considered authoritative works that, over time, have informed researchers' understanding of PLA processes for developing military strategy and plans. In addition, Chunguang and Guojun discussed several Academy of Military Science (AMS) successes, including its role informing the development of the MSG: Yu Chunguang and Bao Guojun, "Academy of Military Science Provides Solid Theoretical Support for Defense and Army Building," *Jiefangjun Bao*, March 21, 2008.

The MSG sets the PLA's operational planning parameters and provides overarching guidance on a wide range of issues that dictate the future missions, force structure, and operational scenarios for which the PLA must plan.<sup>15</sup> Its comprehensive guidance defines the PLA's strategic objectives, strategic military tasks, main strategic direction, and other imperatives that give focus to operational planning and development timelines.<sup>16</sup> Four areas within the MSG have particular importance for PLA operational planning: the strategic objective, the main strategic direction, strategic deployment, and the patterns of strategic action. In essence, the MSG tells the PLA what it is fighting for, what it is attempting to achieve, where its efforts will be directed, and the type of conflict for which it must prepare.

The PLA's specific operational planning efforts rest on the MSG's determination of the main strategic direction, which is the key to realizing strategic objectives and accomplishing strategic tasks.<sup>17</sup> The main strategic direction is determined by the direction and severity of primary threats and is based on the nature and priority of competing interests, the relative strengths of forces, geography, and the overall strategic situation in the region. The delineation between the primary and secondary strategic directions is largely based on the weighting of one threat against others in their respective directions. Historically, changes in the main strategic direction have occurred infrequently and were based on major changes in the international security environment.<sup>18</sup> At this time, Taiwan remains the main strategic direction driving PLA planning and individual service missions; however, the 2015 NMS calls for the PLA to prepare itself better to respond to crises in multiple domains and geographic regions.<sup>19</sup> Based on this guidance, PLA planning across theaters and within the Central Military Commission (CMC) now must address a wide range of potential threats and scenarios that may arise in secondary strategic directions. As a concept that applies to both the strategic and campaign levels of warfare, the designation of primary and secondary strategic directions is the crucial link between national objectives and warfighting.<sup>20</sup>

The need to ensure readiness for multiple simultaneous threats requires coordinated planning and deconfliction of resources and efforts among a dispersed set of geographic boundaries. The PLA's military reforms in early 2016, particularly the establishment of theater commands, were meant to remove old administrative layers (e.g., military regions) and provide a command structure capable of managing crisis situations or military conflict.<sup>21</sup> Understanding which strategic directions present the most significant concerns provides critical information about the

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<sup>15</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, p. 168.

<sup>18</sup> Fravel, 2015; David Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, Carlisle, Pa.: Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2007, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Xiaosong [寿晓松], 2013, pp. 198, 209, 221; Information Office of the State Council, 2015, pp. 5–6.

<sup>20</sup> Finkelstein, 2007, p. 91. For additional analysis on the MSG please see Fravel, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> For details regarding the PLA's reorganization please see Ken Allen, Dennis Blasko, and John F. Corbett, "The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What Is Known, Unknown and Speculation (Part 1)," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Jamestown Foundation, February 4, 2016.

focus of PLA operational planning efforts. In light of a more volatile security situation and Xi's guidance to prepare for military struggle, PLA planners at both the strategic and theater levels now are planning and preparing for potential conflicts in secondary directions.<sup>22</sup> Notably, recent PLA military science publications have pointed out that during the PRC's history, China has faced conflicts in its secondary strategic directions far more often than it has in the main direction.<sup>23</sup>

## Communicating Objectives

Once national-level objectives that guide PLA contingency planning are set, they are delivered to the respective theaters via two methods. The first is through dissemination of strategic guidelines and official policy statements. Documents such as the MSG and NMS—along with official statements, speeches, and other publications resulting from party and military meetings, such as All-Army conferences—provide various levels of detailed direction that guide PLA planning, deployment, and modernization. As discussed earlier, the MSG is the most authoritative and enduring of these policy statements. Other guidelines and regulations are developed based on the MSG's content and direct specifics for particular PLA areas of concern. At the strategic level, modernization requirements established by the MSG shape the PLA's Equipment Development Strategy, a plan that guides military research, development, and acquisition in ten-year increments.<sup>24</sup> Recent examples of operationally oriented guidance include the 2014 CMC document entitled *Opinions on Raising the Level of the Realistic Battle Orientation of Training* and the General Staff Department's (GSD's) *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Campaign and Tactical Training*, issued in 2015.<sup>25</sup> Both documents are closely tied to directives calling for preparations for military struggle, a concept discussed at length in China's 2015 NMS. Finally, other guidance stems from dedicated plans focused on developing core capabilities and operational concepts. For example, the PLA initiated its program to develop joint operations concepts in 2001 with the *Five-Year Plan on Headquarters' Informatization Building, 2001–2005*.<sup>26</sup> This program served as the bedrock for later PLA joint planning and command automation development.

Command automation is a critical element for ensuring that national-level objectives are communicated to commanders and units in the various PLA theater commands and services. The integrated command platform serves as the common element in ensuring that objectives,

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<sup>22</sup> Ouyang Wei, *On Strategic Disposition*, Beijing: PLA Press, 2010, p. 263.

<sup>23</sup> Xiaosong, 2013, p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> Gong Chuanxin, ed., *Lectures on the Science of Military Equipment*, Beijing: PLA Press, 2004, p. 73; Jiao Qiuguang, *Science of Military Equipment Management*, Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Xu Tongxuan, "Where Does Training Go From Here? Viewing Realistic Battle Training During Informatized Transformation From the Perspective of Air Force Defense Penetration and Assault Competitive Assessments," *Kongjun Bao*, July 16, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> "Push Forward Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics, Build Informatized Command Organs—Excerpts of Advanced Typical Experiences from the All-Army Conference on Headquarters Building," *Jeifangjun Bao*, September 28, 2004, p. 3.

intelligence, and situational assessments are delivered to commanders and their staffs on a timely basis.<sup>27</sup> These systems ensure that strategic objectives are passed to units to ensure deconfliction of resources and efforts. Systems such as the “Theater Joint Command Post Campaign Planning Simulation and Aid to Decision Making System” provide commanders and their staffs with the capability to generate plans for different courses of action developed through simulations that fuse various information sources—including intelligence, terrain and weather data, and situational awareness tools.<sup>28</sup> These systems are core elements in how the PLA ensures that its Theater Commanders have access to critical tactical and operational information and strategic-level guidance. Training to improve ICP functions and operator proficiency has been under way for several years. For example, the former Chengdu and Shenyang Military Regions conducted operational experiments to develop ICP functionality and use in 2011 and 2012, respectively.<sup>29</sup>

## National and Theater Planning Process

Organizationally, the CMC is responsible for ensuring that national objectives are factored into strategic planning and management across the PLA. Within the CMC, the Joint Staff Department is charged with three main functions: (1) operations planning, (2) command and control, and (3) operations command support.<sup>30</sup> Theater commands are tasked with developing theater-specific plans to deal with threats within their directional focus. Based on official press reporting, it appears that planning responsibilities have been delegated down to the theaters in a way they never were to the military region-level under the PLA’s previous organizational construct. In particular, the CMC Joint Operations Department has been overseeing a program across the theaters to ensure that staff officers and planners are qualified to fulfill their designated roles.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Yinfang, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Mei Shixiong, Zhang Kunping, and Zhao Guotao, “For Navigation in Joint Operations: Profile of Chief Engineer Wen Lixin of a Mapping and Navigation Team of the Central Theater,” *Xinhua*, January 4, 2017. The official Chinese press uses a number of different names for the systems and subsystems that compose the ICP. The system referenced here is one component of the ICP.

<sup>29</sup> Zhao Hongwu, Guo Xinsong, Kong Lingmei, Zhanqi Bao, and Liang Hongqing, “Quickening the Pace of System-of-Systems Operations—A Factual Account of the Military Region Headquarters’ Command Automation Work Station Providing Support for Integrated Command Platform,” *Zhanqi Bao*, December 15, 2011; Chen Wanli, Fan Xin, and Rong Lin, “Information Highly Integrated, Situation Promptly Shared: Prominent Effect of Exercise With Integrated Command Information Systems Network of Various Services and Arms in Theater,” *Qianjin Bao*, August 3, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Zhang Zebin, Liang Pengfei, and Zhang Zexing, “Focus on One’s Main Job for Winning,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, November 26, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Zebin, Pengfei, and Zexing, 2016. Certification training for the Eastern Theater is also described in Cheng Yongliang, “Certification Required to Command Joint Operations,” *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, February 23, 2017. For the Southern Theater, see Huang Honggui and Meng Bin, “One Network Tests Everybody as the Southern Theater’s First Batch of Joint Operations Duty Personnel Is Tested Before Going on the Job,” *Jiefangjun Bao Online*, March 30, 2016; for the Central Theater, see Mei Shixiong and Zhao Guotao, “PLA Central Theater Command Starts Its Work by Energetically Enhancing Joint Operations Command Capability,” *Xinhua*, April 1, 2016; for the Northern Theater, see Du Shanguo, Wang Jun, and Wang Qinghou, “Let Combat Readiness Be the Sole Status—The Northern Theater Command Focuses on Its Duty and Mission of Taking Charge of Military



The planning process at the strategic level begins with the definition of strategic objectives and associated key missions. Strategic plans are, in part, composed of the strategic assessment, strategic missions, strategic deployments, strategic support measures, and strategic rear area work.<sup>32</sup> Assigned strategic missions are prioritized and distinguished by phase and geographic necessity. The main and secondary strategic directions are then selected based on national objectives and the designation of strategic missions. Planning in the main strategic direction will be driven by the nature of the threat, strategic disposition, and geographic considerations.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, determinations on strategic phasing and deployment will dictate the forces available for strategic actions and tasks. Based on these considerations, the scope of strategic actions will vary depending on the adversary's objectives, capabilities, and the potential for escalation. Key strategic actions may include war mobilization, strategic attack, strategic air raid and counter air raid, deterrence, information operations, and protection—among many others.<sup>34</sup> Plans for strategic actions are then incorporated into an overall strategic plan. In the end, strategic plans unite the war plans developed by theater commands for each strategic direction and guide war preparation and implementation during each conflict phase.<sup>35</sup>

Planning at the operational level is driven by two general organizing principles: campaigns and combat systems.<sup>36</sup> Campaigns provide a joint organizational construct that includes an operational-level command structure with service- and function-oriented operations groups. Campaigns are the building blocks of PLA wartime planning at the operational level. They are based on a broad analysis of modern warfare and the key operations performed by military organizations. In essence, they describe a specific type of military operation (e.g., border counterattack, anti-air raid, or island blockade) and serve as an organizational template consisting of multiple operations groups that fall along a generally consistent set of organizational and functional lines.<sup>37</sup> As a general guideline, campaigns can thus consist of a range of operations groups—including ground, air, naval, missile, information operations, special operations, deception, combat support, and logistics.<sup>38</sup>

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Operations, Strives to Advance the Building of Joint Operations Command Capability,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, June 16, 2016.; and for the Western Theater, see Long Shaohua and Yang Xiaobo, “PLA Western Theater Command Organizes ‘Three Improvements’ Concentrated Training for Enhancing the Joint Command Capability of the Command and Staff Organ, Gathering Hundreds of Generals and Colonels to Make up for Insufficiency Through Precise and Fine Training,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 7, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, pp. 171–174.

<sup>33</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, pp. 171–174.

<sup>34</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, pp. 171–174.

<sup>35</sup> Guangqian and Youzhi, 2005, pp. 171–174.

<sup>36</sup> Li Yousheng, *Lectures on the Science of Joint Campaigns*, Beijing: Military Science Press, 2012, p. 72; Xue Xinglin [薛兴林], ed., *Campaign Theory Study Guide* [战役理论学习指南], Beijing: National Defense University Press [国防大学出版社], 2001, p. 66. System-of-systems structures are also widely discussed in Information Office of the State Council, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Zhang Xingye, *Campaign Theory Study Guide*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2002, p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Yousheng, 2012, p. 173.

Combat systems are closely related to campaigns, but the organizing principle behind them is functional rather than organizational. Combat systems are characterized by advanced weapons systems being coordinated and integrated across domains and services. According to PLA doctrinal materials, “modern campaigns are the confrontation between combat systems.”<sup>39</sup> This distinction is essential for PLA warfighting, which seeks to destroy or degrade an adversary’s systems while protecting its own, particularly under what the PLA terms informatized conditions.

Responsibility for developing the Theater Command’s joint campaign plan falls to the Theater Command’s Chief of Staff, who receives overall direction from the theater commander.<sup>40</sup> The main contents included in the plan are (1) the campaign goal, (2) the main operational direction, (3) the campaign disposition, (4) the basic fighting methods, (5) campaign phasing, and (6) campaign initiation time.<sup>41</sup> The campaign resolution is the most critical component for any campaign plan and serves as the basis for campaign development and execution.<sup>42</sup> Joint campaign coordination is accomplished through a unified campaign plan that coordinates the activities of all operational groups in line with the campaign resolution and plans. This coordination effort is intended to ensure that all campaign activities are synchronized and integrated and possess the necessary capabilities and support to accomplish their assigned tasks.

## Planning Considerations Across Contingencies

The most recent version of *Science of Military Strategy*, published in 2013, outlined a framework of warfare types that China might face in the future. It included four categories of war: (1) a “relatively large-scale high-intensity anti-separatist war” that would center on Taiwan; (2) a “medium-scale, low- to medium-intensity self-defense and counterattack operation” along the periphery that could involve encroachments or threats to PRC maritime claims; (3) a “small-scale, low-intensity anti-terrorist, stability maintenance” operation to protect internal stability and Chinese citizens in China and abroad; and (4) a large-scale ground invasion.<sup>43</sup> The large-scale ground invasion was viewed as only a remote possibility. The author contended that the PRC’s most significant threat involved a large-scale attack by a “powerful enemy” designed to destroy China’s war potential and force the PRC’s capitulation. The likeliest threat came from a limited conflict in the maritime domain. In the end, the author concluded that the scenario requiring most preparation involved Taiwan—a “large-scale, relatively high-intensity local war in the sea direction against the backdrop of nuclear deterrence.”<sup>44</sup>

While the PLA has multiple campaigns relevant to the categories of conflict outlined in this framework, one authoritative PLA teaching guide identifies the Island Blockade Campaign, the

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<sup>39</sup> Yousheng, 2012, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Yuliang, 2006, p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> Yuliang, 2006, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> Yuliang, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Xiaosong, 2013, pp. 98–100.

<sup>44</sup> Xiaosong, 2013, p. 100.

Joint Firepower Strike Campaign, and the Island Offensive Campaign as “foremost among” all campaigns in the context of modern warfare.<sup>45</sup> The development of PLA joint training and core operational concepts in recent years demonstrates the PLA’s commitment to preparing for these types of operations. Recent experimentation on the operational concept of target-centric warfare has emphasized firepower strike capabilities and focused on engaging mobile targets and employing opposition forces in order to challenge exercise participants.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, PLA joint exercises since 2010 have focused on developing a variety of key operational capabilities while centering on Taiwan or contingencies on China’s borders. In many respects, these operational concepts reflect long-term thinking about two of China’s most significant potential conflict scenarios: Taiwan-centered operations and “chain reactions” along the PRC’s periphery.<sup>47</sup> The most significant feature of recent PLA discussion about preparing for military struggle is not which potential conflict scenario is designated as most likely or most dangerous; instead, it is the extent to which PRC leaders are forcing the PLA to become more flexible and ready to deal with a much wider range of potential crises than in the past.

## Managing Competing Requirements and Resource Constraints

The PLA’s emphasis on preparing for contingencies in multiple theaters will place a premium on the effective coordination of resources among theaters. The emphasis of wartime coordination at both the war and campaign levels stems from several factors. The nature of the threat, both in terms of capabilities and the scope of its objectives, will dictate whether preparations will encompass more than one theater and the types of offensive and defensive capabilities that will need to be arrayed for both deterrence and homeland defense. The most challenging planning consideration requires preparations—especially in the PLA Navy, PLA Rocket Force, PLA Air Force, and Strategic Support Force—to counter a “strong enemy,” a term reserved for the United States.<sup>48</sup> In addition, several scenarios ranging from maritime claims in the south and east to stability issues on the Korean peninsula raise the prospect that the United States will act with allies against the PRC. For instance, PLA studies have highlighted what they perceive as a recently more assertive Japan.<sup>49</sup> Against modern adversaries, such as the United

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<sup>45</sup> Yousheng, 2012, pp. 201–202.

<sup>46</sup> Ding Yahan and Li Dezhong, “In This Battle, Aiming at the ‘Vulnerable Spot’ When Firing—Close-Up View of the Military Region’s ‘Qeshan Decisiveness 2013A’ Exercises with Troops, Part III,” *Qianwei Bao*, December 8, 2013, p. 2; and Chang Xin, “Use Military Innovation Theory to Guide Substantial Leap in Combat Power—In-Depth Reforms and Target-Centric Warfare-Adapted Command Methods Guide Transformation; Active Innovations and Target-Centric Warfare-Adapted Training Models Push Forward Transformation; Comprehensive Integration and Target-Centric Warfare-Adapted Information Systems Support Transformation; Gradual Completion and Target-Centric Warfare-Adapted Supports Serve Transformation,” *Qianwei Bao*, March 31, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> One example of the United States referred to as the “strong enemy” comes from a PLAAF periodical reporting on recent training innovations: Dong Bin, “Win Gold Medals and Become Ace Units Through the ‘Brand-Name’ Training Events,” *Kongjun Bao*, June 30, 2016, p. 1. See, also, Xiaosong, 2013, p. 120.

<sup>49</sup> Information Office of the State Council, 2015. In particular, the NMS states, “Japan is sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies. Such development has caused grave concerns among other countries in the region.”

States, PLA commanders and planners are compelled to prepare for long-range precision strikes against PRC's war potential. PLA planners see these types of attacks as a key feature of modern warfare and problematic because they expand the conflict's strategic space and increase the need for additional resources for national air defense, strategic protection of key assets, strategic counterattack capabilities, and rear area services.<sup>50</sup> More powerful adversaries with expansive goals may raise the potential for escalation in an attempt to hold China's strategically important targets at risk and potentially threaten PRC interests in other strategic directions. Multi-axis attacks present significant complications, requiring additional air defense to defend and offensive capabilities to retaliate. A final concern for managing competing requirements and interests is that of "chain reactions" or opportunistic challenges to contested claims on China's periphery that occur during conflict and outside of the main operational and strategic direction.<sup>51</sup>

Strategic management in crisis or war rests with the CMC—and within the CMC structure, it will fall to the organization with the specific functional responsibility. Strategic management and command of operational capabilities, activities, and disposition is under the purview of the CMC Joint Staff Department, with the mobilization and logistic support departments within the CMC exercising similar authority in their respective areas. At the national level, these activities likely will be performed through the CMC's Joint Operations Command Center providing guidance and direction to the Theater Command Joint Operations Centers.

## Implications for China's Approach to Regional Security

The PLA's military reforms and reorganization are intended to build a military that is more responsive to what China's senior leaders see as an increasingly uncertain security environment. No longer is it possible to focus modernization and planning on one primary purpose without doing adequate preparation for other more likely (though less prominent) situations that could present crises. Over the past few years, PLA activities have emphasized building a military capable of responding to situations in multiple geographic regions and critical domains. The development of theater commands capable of planning and executing missions in their respective areas of responsibility will be a key factor in the PLA's success or failure in achieving these objectives. Similarly, the attempt to build a joint strategic command structure within the CMC suggests that PRC leaders recognize the importance of integrating operational and support activities across multiple theaters in future conflicts. The major issue facing the PLA will remain its ability to adequately train and prepare staffs for this new environment. Although there has been a significant amount of training and exercise activity in recent years to develop these capabilities, there are indications that significant shortfalls still remain.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Xiaosong, 2013, p. 109.

<sup>51</sup> See Information Office of the State Council, 2015; Xiaosong, 2013, p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> Han Guangming, "Take Aim at Missions and Tasks, Push Forward Joint Training," *Jiefangjun Bao*, November 1, 2016, p. 6.; Wang Quan, Yang Fangmei, and Ouyang Zhimin, "Southern Theater Army Soundly Advances Its War-Realistic Training: Practice and Enlightenment," *Renmin Lujun*, Dec 16, 2016, p. 1; Ouyang Zhimin, Ma Fei, and Xiao Chiyu, "Joint Training Is a 'Chemical Reaction': Viewing the Plying Effect of the New Force Structure on Joint Training From the 'Southern Ground-2016' Joint Live Force Exercise," *Jiefangjun Bao*, February 3, 2017,

The PLA has made significant progress in several key modernization areas over the past two decades. Many of the new systems the PLA is bringing into its inventory are world-class and incorporate the latest technology. The proportion of the PLA that is considered modern by Western standards is increasing steadily. However, one of the most significant challenges for the PLA has been its ability to integrate these capabilities into the type of system-of-systems architecture it judges necessary for future conflicts. Its joint operations concept development has been focused on various aspects of this and there has been significant progress in several areas. That said, the PLA's 2016 reorganization raised questions about its ability to plan and integrate these functions in a range of scenarios. At this early point in the new structure, the PLA is still grappling with how to train its commanders and staffs for joint command. By all accounts, the training is well under way but the results are questionable. It remains uncertain at this point how effective the PLA will be in future crises (especially major crises) at integrating information, activities, and capabilities across multiple theaters and among the PLA's services and branches. Shortcomings in planning and integration not only present potential military weaknesses in conflict, but also may create unstable situations in crises. If the PLA has difficulty managing resources and activities within its own organization, it will be more difficult for Chinese state and party entities to gain information and take courses of action to deescalate in a crisis. This could prove a devastating shortfall in many of the potential crisis areas or conflict scenarios that PRC leaders believe they may face in the future.

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p. 5; Shi Hua, Zheng Jinhua, and Xu Zhongguang, "Integrated Command Platform Training Must Deal With Concrete Issues," *Qianwei Bao*, April 15, 2012, p. 4. Sources in Footnote 27 also describe shortcomings in this area.