

Chinese PLA's Integrated Military Exercises in Tibet

MONIKA CHANSORIA

The posturing of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the border regions shared with India underline the Chinese military's doctrinal intent which resolves to "fight and win local wars on its borders." This poses a challenge to regional stability in general and India in particular given the long-standing territorial and boundary dispute between Beijing and New Delhi. China's long-term military objectives especially in reference to Tibet need to be read in correlation to the larger concept of Chinese national integration—which is being achieved by means of rapid build-up of military infrastructure in the entire Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

As part of Beijing's "Western Development Strategy", the Hu Jintao Administration has significantly tightened its policy over Tibet in an apparent attempt to ensure the proverbial "long reign and perennial stability" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the restive region. More hard line cadres are being appointed to run the TAR. The PLA, paramilitary units, or PLA units which have now been integrated into civilian sectors like the engineering corps or construction corps which are the primary instruments for realisation of China's western development campaign. While unprecedented aid has been pledged for the estimated 6.5 million Tibetans living in the TAR as well as the neighbouring provinces of Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai, the bulk of the new infrastructure projects critically serves in speeding up Han Chinese migration into the region.

Shifting Strategy from Continental to Peripheral Defence

The 1985 transformation of China's national military strategy reoriented the PLA away from its almost exclusive concern with continental defence. The armed forces' new defence guidance required them to defend not just land boundaries, but also protect China's extensive maritime territories and claims. This vivid change in strategy required major modifications in the PLA's operational doctrine, expanding the roles and missions of its air and naval forces, and abrogating essentially all of the principal elements that form the core of "people's war", whether under "modern conditions" or not. The official *White Paper on National Defence* issued by China in 2004, stated that the objective of the PLA was to win local wars under the conditions of informationisation (*xinxihua tiaojianxia jubu zhanzheng*). Development of weaponry and equipment, building joint operational capabilities, and making full preparations in the battlefield are the priority areas. The PLA aims to accomplish mechanisation and make major progress in informationisation by 2020, thus, by and large, reaching the goal of modernisation of national defence and armed forces by the mid-21st century.¹

While delivering a speech to military delegates to China's National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2009, President Hu Jintao urged the military to concentrate not only on building core military capabilities, but also, the ability to carry out 'military operations other than war' (*fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong*). China's long-term, comprehensive military modernisation is aimed at improving the PLA's capacity to conduct high-intensity, regional military operations; anti-access and area denial (A2AD) operations. A new generation of doctrines on command in joint campaigns and operations; building of a joint operational command system is in place.²

The PLA is intensifying strategic and operational level command post training and troop training, in conditions of informationisation, holding trans-regional evaluation exercises, conducting whole-unit night training and carrying out integrated exercises for logistical and equipment support. In October 2010, the PLA conducted its first Group Army-level joint air-land exercise (*shiming xingdong*). The primary participants from the Beijing, Lanzhou, and Chengdu Military Regions practiced manoeuvre, ground-air coordination, and long-distance mobilisation via military and commercial assets as they transited

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between military regions. Given that these military regions are located along China's land borders, the exercise scenario was likely based on potential future border conflict scenarios.³

After conducting its first live military exercise in Tibet in 2010, the PLA for the first time rehearsed capture of mountain passes at heights beyond 5,000 metres recently in November 2011 with the help of armoured vehicles and airborne troops. The Chinese Ministry of Defence made this claim in an official report which described the exercise as a 'challenge' since it was being conducted on a plateau with an elevation of more than 4,500 meters. The exercise was depicted as the "first joint actual-troop drill of the PLA air and ground troops under information-based conditions in frigid area with a high altitude." The joint drill involved the Chinese Air Force, ground troops, armoured columns and a range of support entities. Highlighting that army aviation troops and anti-aircraft missiles provided cover during the exercises, the report provided rare details of the exercise, and stated:

At the very beginning... the new type warplanes of the PLA Air Force conducted accurate strikes at the targets... Shortly after seizing the commanding point, the long-range guns launched full-scale shooting at the command post and the artillery position of the enemy. This was followed by the armoured vehicle group and infantry combat vehicles branching out into columns and launching a "sudden and violent attack on the mountain passes occupied by the enemy. The special operation detachment outflanked the enemy and raided the enemy's command post".⁴

Additionally, with adaptive training commencing in June 2011, 18 paratroopers of a troop unit under the Xinjiang Military Command of the PLA, parachuted from a helicopter 500-meter high above the ground and landed successfully as part of a parachuting drill in the frigid plateau. The drill provided experience and data support for large-scale plateau parachuting of organic troop units of the PLA Special Forces. It needs to be noted that the thin air of the frigid plateau makes it difficult for the paratroopers to achieve a series of actions within a specified period of time. Given that the air density is lower in the plateau than in the midland, resultantly, the parachute drops faster thus making the ground impact greater.⁵

The mounting military infrastructure also doubles up and provides China with an increased capacity for the rapid build-up of missile units and support facilities. Moreover, it can be argued that since China's official *White Paper on National Defence* of 2004 categorically states that the next war will be fought through "command of the air"—the assumption that missile attacks with extensive use of PLA Air Force (PLAAF) should not be unfounded. The PLAAF has gradually shifted its focus from territorial air defence to one which includes both offensive and defensive operations. With a view towards power projection, it has extended the reach of its combat aircraft and strategic airlift and opted for capital intensive air-to-air refuelling capabilities. The bulk of the PLAAF is concentrated in the five coastal military regions. Despite the fact that today, the PLAAF is the weakest link in the strategic forces, China appears to have developed significant air space denial capability. In reference to this statement, a logistics exercise in August 2010 involving the Qinghai-Tibet Railway line marked the first PLAAF use of the railway for military purposes, with the Military Transportation Department of the PLAAF Logistics Department overseeing the movement of "combat readiness materials" to Tibet.⁶ This would seem to reflect a growing PLAAF role in maintaining security along the Sino-Indian border in the Tibetan area.

In a latest development, the PLAAF of the Chengdu Military Area Command held a live-ammunition drill on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in March 2012, during which it carried out surgical strikes at night by testing the multi-role J-10 fighter jets, in a "first operation of its kind", as reported by China's state-controlled media. It was reported that the ground crew of J-10 regiment fuelled the fighters and loaded ammunition on the 3,500-meter-high plateau at temperatures below -20 C. The J-10 fighters attacked targets with conventional as well as laser-guided bombs.⁷ The J-10 fighter was initially designed as an air superiority fighter, focusing on air combat and interception capability. However, according to Bai Wei, former deputy chief editor of *Aviation World Monthly*, "...with modern sensors, avionics and land attack munitions, it can also perform well in ground attack roles." The J-10 fighters made the first flight during the Chinese Lunar New Year on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in January 2012 with a typical air combat patrol payload, namely two mid-range air-to-air missiles, two short-range air-to-air missiles, and three external fuel tanks.

Conclusion

The maneuvers discussed above will be a vital pointer to PLA's preparedness in India's bordering areas especially as it seeks incorporating air force and air defence

units as well as armour and artillery units in the entire Tibet Autonomous Region. They also accentuate the enhanced ability of China's PLA towards becoming a more mobile and better-equipped fighting force, which can be deployed faster and sustained over a longer period of time across Tibet and provide support for any potential offensive operation outside of its mainland.

Dr. **Monika Chansoria** is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS.

Notes

1. For more details see, Monika Chansoria, *China: Military Modernisation and Strategy*, (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. The PLA has already been focusing on acquiring trans-regional mobility; for more details on this aspect see, Gurmeet Kanwal and Monika Chansoria, "Exercise Stride 2009: China Showcases Trans-Regional Mobility," *SP's LandForces*, vol. 6, no. 6, December 2009 – January 2010.
4. Liu Xing'an, Guo Fengkuan and Liu Yinghua, "PLA holds first air and ground forces joint drill on plateau," Statement by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence cited in, *PLA Daily*, October 26, 2011.
5. Statement given by Wang Junxian, Commanding Officer of the Troop Unit, cited in "PLA Special Force Conducts 1st Plateau Parachuting Drill," cited at the Chinese Ministry of National Defence, Beijing, August 22, 2011.
6. Jiang Jiuhong, "Our Air Force's First Use of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway for Delivering Vital Military Equipment and Materiel to Tibet," *PLA Daily*, August 3, 2010.
7. The *PLA Daily* regularly reported testing of the multi-role J-10 fighter jets in March 2012.