

Interpreting the US' China Military Power Report 2020

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Abstract

On 1 Sep 2020, the US Department of Defence (DoD) issued its 'Annual Report on Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China'. The report describes the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in superlatives – largest standing ground forces in the world, largest navy in the world, second largest military spender in the world and so on. It identifies areas – shipbuilding, land-based missiles and Integrated Air Defence System - where China is likely to have achieved parity with or superiority over the United States and suggests that by mid-21st century, PLA is likely to be at par with or in certain areas, superior to US military. This paper seeks to highlight the salient aspects of the DoD Report and analyse the same.

Keywords

China, PLA, United States, DoD Annual Report, India

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Since 2000, the US Department of Defense (DoD) has published ‘Annual Reports on Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China’ (hereinafter called the Report). This year’s comprehensive Report builds on reports of the past two decades and provides an overview of the future. It covers various aspects such as National Strategy, Force Modernisation, Resources and the PLA’s growing global presence. While the Report provides the most authoritative inputs on the China’s Military and Security developments, few caveats are in order.

One, the United States’ aims to maintain military superiority over other countries. As US Deputy Secretary of Defence Bob Work put it,

“The United States has never tried to match a great power tank for tank, ship for ship, airplane for airplane, or person for person...you want operational and organizational constructs that give you an advantage and an offset against your adversaries who might outnumber you” (Work, 2015).

Two, the report is intended to facilitate informed decision-making by the US policy makers by providing them with relevant information on China and hence provides a US perspective of China’s modernisation. Three, being an unclassified Report, “the numbers

ascribed by the United States to China are ... an estimate that we (the US) would be comfortable releasing publicly” (Billingslea 2020). Hence, the Report needs to be corroborated with inputs from other sources and analysed.

China has undertaken comprehensive revision of its National Strategy, Higher Defence Organisations and doctrine to achieve synergy between various agencies

As can be discerned from the annual reports of the past two decades, China’s ambitious goals, long-term vision and planning and a continuous endeavour to achieve these goals by every means possible, has narrowed the gap between the USA and China, with resultant security implications for rest of the World.

Apart from Force Modernisation, China has undertaken comprehensive revision of its National Strategy, Higher Defence Organisations and doctrine to achieve synergy between various agencies during peace and provide timely response during crisis.

Higher Defence Management and National Strategy

China’s National Strategy is aimed at achieving ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ by becoming a global leader

in innovation by 2035 and attaining ‘global power’ status by 2049 (Report, 2020: 4). Commensurate with National Strategy, PLA seeks to complete military modernisation by 2035 and transform into a ‘world class military’ by 2049 (Report, 2020: 30). This synchronisation of national and military goals ensures that the armed forces are allotted necessary resources to build capabilities, essential to support national goals.

The Reserve Force which was earlier under dual command of Provincial Military Commands and Party Committees, has been placed under the Central Military Commission

Prior to 2013, defence, foreign policy and domestic stability were handled by multiple agencies, lacking synergy (Report, 2020: 2). In 2014, China established the Central National Security Commission (*Zhongyang Guojia anquan Weiyuanhui* 中央国家安全委员会) under the Politburo to provide single point advise to the Politburo, synergise planning and implementation of National Security between CCP, NPC, CPPCC, various ministries and PLA and provide a coordinated response to various threats. It will also strengthen the CCP’s rule over China (Zhao, 2015). CCP also issued the first National Security Strategy Outline in 2015, with sub strategies covering traditional and non-traditional aspects of

security to provide guidance to various stakeholders (Report, 2020: 3).

The Peoples Armed Police (along with Coast Guard) which was under the dual command of State Council and Central Military Commission (CMC) earlier, has been restructured and placed directly under the Central Military Commission in 2019 to improve synergy, interoperability with PLA (Report, 2020: 69). Along with the Coast Guard, the Peoples Armed Forces Maritime Militia has been placed under the PLA Navy (PLAN), which will provide a diverse range of options in the East and South China Seas to achieve PRC’s political goals without fighting (Report, 2020: 71). Similarly, the Reserve Force which was earlier under dual command of Provincial Military Commands and Party Committees, has been placed under the Central Military Commission (Xinhua 2020a).

Last but not the least are the Military Civil Fusion Development Strategy and the Joint Logistic Support Force of the PLA, which aim at mobilisation and optimal utilisation of national resources to achieve national and military aims respectively, at much lower costs.

Military Strategy

Changes in National Security Outline are likely to have been followed up with Strategy guidelines to adapt to strategic competition, technological developments and national goals (Report, 2020: 26). Strategic Guidelines

(*Zhanlue fangzhen* 战略方针) provide authoritative guidance from the CMC for the operational doctrine, training and force structure of the PLA (Fravel, 2019). They provide direction for future reforms and have been amended nine times, since the establishment of PRC. While specifics of the revised guideline are not known, the 2019 White Paper suggests that the PLA will be tasked to contribute towards and secure China's global interests and to prepare to fight across various domains including Outer Space (China's National Defence in the New Era 2019). It is also likely to take into account emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence(AI), which some PLA academics believe to be the future of warfare (Li, 2019).

China has refused to join the US-Russia negotiations on nuclear arms and has instead asked the US to reduce the number of Warheads

Nuclear Deterrence

PRC's nuclear strategy is influenced by the US, Russia and India and aimed at creating a nuclear force, capable of surviving a first strike and inflicting unacceptable damage to the adversary (Report, 2020: 85). It is improving its nuclear capabilities by doubling the number of warheads, modernisation, diversification and increase in number of delivery platforms and

improving its readiness to 'Launch on Warning' (Report, 2020: 85-89).

China has 200 plus warheads and nuclear material to produce another 200 (Report, 2020: 85) and is pursuing a viable 'nuclear triad' by a combination of land-based (silo and road mobile) ballistic missiles, H-6N bombers with Air launched Ballistic Missiles and six Type 94 SSBNs with 12 JL-2 SLBMs. It has increased its holding of 4000 km, dual-capable and precision strike DF-26 IRBMs and is likely to build nearly 200 land-based ICBMs with the capability to reaching US, in the next five years. These include the DF-31A, the MIRV capable, road mobile DF-41 and a new ICBM.

Increase in number of nuclear warheads and missiles will improve China's nuclear deterrence and provide greater leverage at the negotiating table if China joins the negotiations for renewal / replacement of New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty which expires in Feb 2021. It has however, refused to join the US-Russia negotiations on nuclear arms and has instead asked the US to reduce the number of Warheads (Hua, 2020) from the current limit of 1550 strategic warheads and 700 missiles and bombers (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

With majority of its missile inventory comprising of Short, Medium and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles, China has also refused the US calls to join the Intermediate

Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). China's refusal has been cited as one of the major reasons for the US withdrawal from Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Pompeo, 2018).

Despite the force reductions, PLAA still comprises approximately 50 per cent of the PLA.

Modernisation of PLA

China's Military Modernisation objectives are commensurate with and part of China's national development aspirations and are supported by its strong economy and Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy. PLA lays stress on development of joint forces capable of conducting sustained multi-domain operations, far from its borders and is strengthening capabilities through structural reforms, induction of modern indigenous equipment, a robust C4ISR network and improved operational readiness.

Progress of Military Reforms

Quoting the 2019 White Paper, "China's National Defense in the New Era" the Report suggests that PLA is unlikely to achieve its goal of 'mechanisation' by end of 2020. Further, PLA is likely to launch the third and final round of PLA reforms by 2021/2022.

PLA's goal of 'Mechanisation' by 2020 has possibly been delayed due to non-restructuring

of formations outside the Group Armies such as in Xinjiang and Tibet, ongoing induction of modern equipment and inability of personnel to optimally exploit modern equipment (Global Times, 2019) and restructured organisations (Blasko 2019).

PLA Army (PLAA)

The report terms the PLA Army (PLAA) as the 'World's largest standing ground force' with 915,000 active-duty personnel in combat units, which may be incorrect as the strength of the Indian Army is higher (Sethuraman, 2017). This variation could possibly be due to assessment of strength in combat units of both armies. Major highlights of PLAA modernisation are :-

Combined Arms Battalions have become the basic tactical unit and have been restaffed for optimal employment of revised organisations and multiple resources (Report, 2020: 41).

Induction of Type-15 tanks and Z-20 helicopters (Report, 2020: 42) are indicators of the PLAA's priorities of mechanisation and aviation.

Despite the force reductions, PLAA still comprises approximately 50 per cent of the PLA. Unlike the other services which have scope for modernisation in terms of technology, PLAA has to innovate in terms of organisation, operational concepts, tactics and selective areas for advanced technology both to retain its

relevance and to be ready for the future. The organisational changes are aimed at a flatter and leaner organisation and will translate into better command and control, faster tempo of operations and improved capability to conduct joint operations. It is likely that the third round of reforms will take this further. Type-15 tanks and Z-20 medium helicopters represent selected areas for technological advances.

Combining necessary resources at battalion level will enable better command and control and translate into faster tempo of operations and improved capability to conduct joint operations.

Combined Arms Battalions (hecheng ying 合成营) have components of various arms such as Armour, infantry, artillery, combat support and logistic support and access to Theatre Command / Group Army assets such as Electronic Warfare, Aviation and Air Force. Earlier these were available at the regiment or higher levels. Based on operational mission and equipment composition, they are further classified as Heavy, Medium, Light, mountain and amphibious (Qian 2020). Combining necessary resources at battalion level will enable better command and control and translate into faster tempo of operations and improved capability to conduct joint operations.

Type 15 tanks, intended for areas where employment of armour is traditionally restricted such as High Altitude, are considered as potent and flexible due to their light weight; missile firing capability and air-transportability.

Z-20 medium-lift helicopters have been inducted as part of PLA Army Aviation brigades deployed in High Altitude. Army Aviation / Air-assault brigades provide flexibility at the Theatre/Group Army level to induct Special Operations Forces and light infantry in enemy's operational depth. Generally overlooked, further innovations and inductions can be expected in Army Aviation.

PLAN

The PLAN is upgrading to meet its intended role of "protection missions in the far seas". While the Report terms PLAN as the world's largest Navy with nearly 350 ships and submarines (Report, 2020: 44), the US Navy is almost three times larger in terms of tonnage and specific classes of ships such as aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships (Livingston, 2018). Major highlights on PLAN and comments are given below: -

PLAN is laying a strong foundation in building a C4ISR network, aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, submarines, aviation and missile capabilities which will facilitate PLAN's expansion beyond its immediate periphery.

Submarine force remains a focus area with 12 nuclear submarines and nearly 50 conventional submarines. Type 39 A/B diesel submarines (with AIP), Type 093B SSGN and Type 96 SSBN are likely to be inducted over the next decade to maintain the force level between 65 to 70 (Report, 2020: 45).

These amphibious capabilities are supplemented by civilian shipping since 2012 and PLA conducts regular exercises to improve its sealift capabilities

In 2019, PLAN commissioned its indigenous aircraft carrier and launched the first Type 75 Amphibious Assault Ship and the sixth Type 55 cruiser which will improve its operational capabilities. Second indigenous aircraft carrier is likely to be operational by 2024 (Report, 2020: 46-47).

It is improving its anti-surface warfare capabilities by induction of YJ-18 Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles and development of C4ISR capabilities to provide targeting information. In the near term, PLAN is likely to induct Land Attack Cruise Missiles for flexible long-range strike options beyond the Indo-Pacific (Report, 2020: 46).

PLAN Marine Corps has expanded to eight brigades for operations beyond the First Island Chain (Report, 2020: 47- 48). Its presence in

Djibouti permits PRC to protect its interests in Africa and Middle East (Report, 2020: 48).

PLA continues to prepare for Taiwan contingency and has developed a range of options from Air/Maritime Blockade, limited force or coercive options, air and missile campaigns and is capable of amphibious operations short of full invasion (Report, 2020: 112-4).

The size and scale of aircraft carriers and amphibious ships suggest ocean-going capabilities rather than for a conflict in the near seas. These amphibious capabilities are supplemented by civilian shipping since 2012 (Peoples Daily, 2012) and PLA conducts regular exercises to improve its sealift capabilities (China Military Online, 2020). The Marine Corps is supplemented by PLAA's 4 – 5 amphibious brigades. As PLA's responsibilities expand to support China's growing presence around the world, it is likely that the PLAN along with Marine Corps will undergo further expansion.

PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

Along with PLAN Aviation, PLAAF is the largest air force in the Indo-Pacific with more than 2500 aircraft and is catching up with USAF. PLAAF aims to be a strategic air force capable of long-range airpower projection (Report, 2020: 50). Major highlights are:-

Its fleet of long-range bombers permit targeting of Guam and warships beyond the Second Island Chain and provide the airborne leg of nuclear triad. A new strategic bomber is under development which will enhance its power projection capability (Report, 2020: 51).

PLA considers Information Operations as critical to achieve Information Dominance at the onset of conflict

The multi-layered Integrated Air Defence System(IADS) (Report, 2020: 52) will provide Ballistic Missile Defence and Air-dominance in its periphery and permit allocation of greater resources towards offensive operations.

PLAAF's Airborne Corps has six CABs (including an air-assault brigade), SOF Brigade, Service Support Brigade and an Air-Transport Brigade (Report, 2020:53), which enhance its reach and combat capability.

PLAAF has been upgrading J-20s in increments to improve its capabilities (Diplomat, 2018 and National Interest, 2019) and is working on its sixth-generation fighter programme (Global Times, 2020). In addition to combat aircraft, it is investing in Force-Multipliers such as airborne swarms, AEW & C aircraft, Electronic Warfare and other specialised aircraft.

Major deficiencies which inhibit its aim of becoming a 'strategic air force capable of long-

range air-power projection', are stealth bombers, air-to-air refuellers, heavy lift helicopters and aircraft engines and are under development.

PLA Rocket Force(PLARF)

PLARF is responsible for land based nuclear and conventional missile forces and has long term plans to enhance strategic deterrence. It has increased its holding DF-26 IRBMs capable of carrying out precision strikes at ranges of 4000 km with both conventional and nuclear warheads. Other developments are Xing Kong-2 hypersonic wave-rider, DF-17 missile, a new ICBM under development and construction of satellite based Early Warning System with Russian Assistance (Report, 2020: 55-56). International Institute of Strategic Studies estimates of China's conventional land based missile holdings are much lower (China Power, 2020). Nevertheless, they are substantial and are backed by a strong military industrial complex and Reserve Force.

Strategic Support Force (SSF)

SSF is responsible for operations in three domains - Space, Cyber and Electro-Magnetic Spectrum. Major highlights are:-

PLA considers Information Operations as critical to achieve Information Dominance at the onset of conflict (Report, 2020: 74). To achieve this, the Network Systems Department is responsible for Command, Control,

Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4I) networks along with Cyber, Electronic and Psychological Warfare.

PRC considers Space as a critical domain in “international strategic competition” and critical for national development (China’s National Defense in the New Era, 2019). The Space System Department has substantial capabilities to deny adversaries’ use of space during conflict and ensure PRC’s continued and optimal utilisation of space for both civil and military applications.

PLA is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure and is likely to have considered additional locations in Indo-Pacific and Africa, in addition to its existing base in Djibouti.

Major developments include launch of Long March-5, likely completion of Beidou Satellite constellation by mid-2020, Chang’e-4 lunar lander and launch of first satellite of Tianlian-2 data relay constellation to improve connectivity between ground stations and satellites (Report, 2020: 63, 64). The Beidou Satellite Constellation has since been made operational (CGTN, 2020) and provides global coverage.

Future space plans include construction of permanent space station by 2022, construction of lunar research station by 2025 and

establishment of crewed lunar research base by 2050.

Counter space capabilities include direct ascent, co-orbital, Electronic Warfare and Directed Energy Weapons (Report, 2020: 64), aimed at contesting or denying adversary’s access to and operations in space domain during conflict.

While use of space for military activities is prohibited under the Outer Space Treaty (Outer Space Treaty, 1967) of which PRC is a signatory, it is likely that SSF will prepare for operations in Outer Space, particularly with the creation of US Space Force.

PLA’s Growing Global Presence

China believes that PLA’s growing presence creates a favourable international environment for China and has tasked PLA to think beyond its immediate periphery and support and defend China’s evolving interests. These include One Belt One Road, Military Diplomacy, acquisition of overseas bases, Influence Operations and considers itself to be a ‘near Arctic State’.

The Report suggests that the PLA is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure and is likely to have considered / pursued additional locations in Indo-Pacific and Africa, in addition to its existing base in Djibouti. These include Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles,

Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan. While Cambodia declined the US offer for renovation at Ream Naval Base, PM Hun Sen announced that the base would be open to China and other countries (The Asean Post, 2020).

There is a need to review our own understanding of PLA, especially its numerous shortcomings such as lack of combat experience and over-centralisation.

Conclusion

The Report provides a comprehensive and authoritative assessment of the China's military power. Few areas where the Report influences public opinion are nuclear weapons, Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and Naval Capabilities. Indeed within a month, US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper announced Battle Force 2045 which envisages a US Navy with 355 ships by 2035 and 500 by 2045 built around 70 to 80 submarines, aircraft carrier fleet and optionally manned and unmanned platforms (Esper, 2020) and announced the fielding of land-based intermediate range missiles (Reif, 2020).

Trends observed from China's military reforms are removal of traditional silos and organisational barriers which have inhibited cooperation and synergy amongst various

agencies, streamlining command and control, size and composition of PLA and other agencies, centralisation of power with the CCP Politburo and Central Military Commission. It creates a solid foundation for the PLA's regional and global expansion and takes advantage of China's growing economy and technological development and is focused towards 'seizing the commanding heights of the battlefield' in all domains by leap-frogging technologies, what the PLA terms as 'overtaking on a curve' (*Wan dao chaoche* 弯道超车) (Dahm,2020).

Further reforms are likely in the near future as announced in the Report as well as in Chinese Media (Xinhua, 2020b). These would necessitate additional time for the reforms to stabilise and for the PLA to be operationally ready, possibly by 2035 (Blasko, 2019). In the interim, China is likely to avoid a major war but will fight with 'what it has', if its core interests are threatened.

There is also a need to review our own understanding of PLA, especially its numerous shortcomings such as lack of combat experience and over-centralisation. It must be kept in mind that these are based on PLA's own assessments and criticisms and PLA makes persistent efforts to rectify these shortcomings. The PLA's biggest strength is its capability to introspect, identify issues for rectification and follow them through to their logical conclusion. Two examples are its focus

on realistic training (Report, 2020: 42) and demand for greater independence for middle level commanders (Dongshao,2018 cited in Blasko, 2019).

As a Chinese saying goes, the PLA's transformation over the past two decades provides guidance for predicting its future. The PLA's narrowing gap with the US would translate into a widening gap with India and this gap is likely to widen further. However, given its national goals, priorities and ongoing reforms, it is unlikely that China would fight a major war in the short and medium terms. India should use this period to carry out defence reforms and build its defence capabilities. The PLA's modernisation also provides valuable lessons for India's defence reforms and hence needs to be studied in detail.

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