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Snapshot: China's Southern Theater Command

By Peter Wood

On December 31, 2015 China began a major overhaul of its structure military organizational structure. This included the abolition of the seven previous Military Regions (军区) and creation of five Theater Commands (战区) (See *China Brief*, [February 4](#) and [February 23](#)). Many units previously under one Military Region have found themselves under a new command. The Southern Theater Command (STC) is one such structure, composed of parts of the former Chengdu and Guangzhou Military Regions. Covering an area almost double the size of Texas and a population (320 million) larger than that of the entire United States (318 million), the Southern Theater Command is responsible for China's important borders with Myanmar and Vietnam and the vast area claimed by China in the South China Sea. [1]

The South is one of China's most important strategic directions (战略方向), as it is a major source of trade, fish resources, and potentially oil, gas and hydrate deposits. Two of China's strongest economies,

Guangdong Province and Hong Kong, sit at the center of the Theater Command. Xi Jinping visited the area shortly after becoming Chairman of the Central Military Commission ([Beijing News](#), December 13, 2012; [Gov.cn](#), December 12, 2012). In an interview, the STC's commander, General Wang Jiaocheng (王教成), described the STC as "guarding the motherland's Southern gate" and as having "shouldered the important mission of protecting [China's] interests in the South China Sea" ([Xinhua](#), February 29). Particularly in the aftermath of the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on China's South China Sea, the STC, the organization directly responsible for enforcing China's claims of sovereignty, demand closer scrutiny. This brief overview and the accompanying map are an attempt to highlight the key features of this important organization within the PLA.

The Army, Navy and Air Force Theater Command Headquarters report to the Southern Theater Command. General Wang has also noted that one of the purposes of the Theater Commands is to improve the coordination between military services (Army, Navy, Air, and Rocket Forces) ([Xinhua](#), February 29). The Southern Theater command, as home to an extensive land border, lengthy coastline (and larger maritime claims) and complex airspace, embodies the importance and difficulty of coordinating these disparate arms of China's military. A brief description of

each of the major services follows, highlighting the Southern Theater Commands' essential units and equipment.



Full-Size Version of Map available online

Ground Forces

STC PLA Ground Forces are commanded by Liu Xiaowu (刘小午). Bai Lü (白吕) serves as commissar (*The Paper*, February 5). The Ground Forces include three Group Armies: 14th, 41st and 42nd. Reporting on military exercises in the region involving the 14th Group Army based in Kunming, Yunnan, indicates that its constituent brigades include a wide range of equipment and units, ranging from towed artillery to Type 96 tanks. Yunnan and Guangxi both share a border with Vietnam. Yunnan's geography is particularly mountainous, posing significant problems for deployment. With the apparent calm in Myanmar's internal conflict in the Kokang region that borders Southwestern Yunnan, stemming the cross-border flow of drugs and counter-terrorism will be the main priority for the areas' security units. Despite past enmity and

occasional tensions over maritime borders, the two sides have a number of established joint patrols and exercises. In late July, for example, Chinese police and border units practiced counter-terror operations with their Vietnamese counterparts (*ChinaNews*, July 29). Given China's plans to further link its provinces to markets in Southeast Asia and along the Indian Ocean via Yunnan, this formerly sleepy corner of China may eventually become a more important transport corridor, raising the importance of PLA units stationed there.

Guangxi province is more densely populated than Yunnan and has an important rail-link between China and Vietnam. During 1979 this border saw the brunt of fighting during China's brief war with Vietnam and subsequent skirmishes for several years afterward. The 41st and 42nd Group Armies, based in Guangxi and Guangdong respectively, are home to a

number of large formations, including the 123rd Mechanized Infantry Division in Guigang, Guangxi, the 124th Amphibious Mechanized Division in Boluo, Guangdong and 163rd Infantry Division in Chaozhou, Guangdong.

Guangdong is by far the most densely populated of the provinces included in the STC, with a population of over a 107 million, not including Hong Kong and Macau. An Army Aviation brigade in Guangdong province has received China's indigenous Z-10 and Z-19 attack helicopters ([Youtube](#), August 30, 2013; [China Military Online](#), January 11). Hainan province hosts the fewest ground troops, though the 132nd Infantry Brigade is based in Wuzhishan.

Navy

The Chinese Navy has emphasized the South as an important strategic direction since at least the early 1980s. In 1983 the Navy began training missions to the Spratly Islands. [2] PLA Navy Commander Liu Huaqing (刘华清), a long-time advocate of improving maritime power projection throughout the South China Sea, visited Woody Island (永兴岛) in 1987 to oversee the construction of a naval monitoring station ([Party History Review](#), April 8). As home to one of China's three fleets (North, East and South), and the primary base for its nuclear-missile equipped submarine force (Type 094 SSBNs) outside Sanya, Hainan, the South Sea Fleet (南海舰队) forms an important leg of China's nuclear and conventional maritime deterrent.

The South Sea Fleet is currently commanded by Shen Jinlong (沈金龙) with Liu Mingli (刘明利) serving as commissar. Noteworthy units include the 2nd and 9th Destroyer *Zhidui*, located in Zhanjiang, Guangdong and Sanya, Hainan respectively. Hainan is also home to a coastal defense battery which appears in satellite imagery to be stationed outside Sanya, protecting the naval facilities there. The importance of the South Sea Fleet is further emphasized by the number of commissionings of advanced destroyers (and long range supply vessels). Military vessels are further backed up by a large number of Coast Guard and other maritime enforcement ships, many of which are recently decommissioned and repainted PLAN ships ([China Brief](#), May 15, 2015).

The PLA Navy's South Fleet continues to receive a higher proportion of advanced warships such as the Type 052D guided missile destroyer Yinchuan (银川) ([China Military Online](#), July 12). Along with the deployment of land-based Surface Air Missile batteries such as the HQ-9 battery recently rotated out from Woody Island, these destroyers—including other members of the 9th Destroyer *Zhidui* outside Sanya—are improving China's coastal air defense ([China Brief](#), March 28). A large number of new long-distance supply ships (including most recently the *Honghu* and *Luomahu*) have also been commissioned into the South Sea Fleet, building up the logistic backbone needed to sustain operations far from shore ([China Navy Online](#), July 15). The South Sea Fleet is also home to China's two Marine Brigades (the 1st and 164th) (see also [China Brief](#), December 3, 2010). The Marine Force was initially set up to provide the PLA with a dedicated amphibious force to take Bach Long Vi Island and other islands disputed between it and Vietnam. [3] These forces would be carried into combat by elements of the 6th Landing *Zhidui*, which includes the large amphibious landing ships such as the *Jinggangshan* (井冈山).

PLA Naval Aviation

The South Sea Fleet's PLA Naval Aviation (PLANAF) 8th and 9th Divisions include a mix of legacy fighter aircraft as well as upgraded and indigenously produced variants such the J-11B and H-6K bombers. Their primary role is to defend China's maritime airspace and, in the case of conflict, use a number of long-range anti-ship weapons such as the YJ-10 and YJ-100 that can be launched by JH-7B fighter bombers from Hainan or H-6Ks strategic bombers flying out of Guiping-Mengshu Air Base in Guangxi ([ChinaMil](#), February 4).

PLANAF elements of the South Sea Fleet have had a prominent role in challenging U.S. military electronic and maritime surveillance flights in international airspace near China's coast and reclaimed islands. In 2001, a PLANAF J-8 fighter from the flying out of Lingshui Air Base on Hainan collided with an EP-3, forcing it to land at Lingsui AB. In August 2014, a J-11 fighter flying from Jialaishi AB, also on Hainan, performed a barrel roll over a P-8 aircraft.

Air Force

PLA Air Force Theater (PLAAF) Commander Xu Anxiang (徐安祥) was promoted to the Southern Theater Command Deputy on July 25 ([The Paper](#), July 26). An Zhaoqing (安兆庆) serves as political commissar. The Southern Air Force Theater commands a number of large units equipped with Su-27, J-11 and J-10 fighter jets, as well as older models such as the Mig-21 derived J-7. In 2015 The PLAAF deployed J-7s closer to the border with Myanmar after violence between government and ([China Brief](#), July 17, 2015). These will likely be phased out as additional J-10s become available.

Chinese TV and print media released photos on July 18th showing an H-6K bomber flying over Scarborough Shoal (黄岩岛) ([Sina](#), July 18). An accompanying statement trumpeted the PLAAF's ability to conduct long range strikes and patrols. Though not confirmed by the reports, the bombers' identification numbers appear to indicate that it belongs to the 8th Bomber Division, 24th Air Regiment of Leiyang, Hunan (See map). Other bombers of the same variant belonging to the PLANAF have conducted similar long distance patrols, through international air space in the East China Sea to the east of Okinawa. In the 1980s, during a period of similar unrest over territorial claims, earlier variants of the H-6 bomber belonging to Chinese Naval Aviation flew to Swallow Reef and Northeast Cay, making a similar statement. [3]

The 8th Bomber Division also operates some of China's small fleet of aerial refueling tanker aircraft. This latter capability currently forms an important bottleneck to improving the capability of the Chinese Air Force and may be resolved as China brings its Y-20 strategic transport aircraft, or other airframes that could be converted to tankers, online.

Rocket Force

The Rocket Force (formerly 2nd Artillery) also has bases and a number of launch brigades located within the borders of the Southern Theater Command. Though the Rocket Force, which is not examined here, reports to the Central Military Commission,

they would no doubt play a role in Theater-level campaigns. [4]

Although the Southern Theater Command has yet to complete its reorganization of constituent units and needs to further improve communications between the services it commands, the fact of its creation is a clear sign of China's commitment to streamline and upgrade its military forces. As units refine training and receive upgraded equipment, China's ability to project power and deter along its strategic Southern axis will surely see a marked improvement.

Notes

1. Data is from China Bureau of Statistics 2014 and includes Hong Kong and Macau.
2. [Declassified] CIA-RDP84S00928R0003000050006-0, National Archive CIA Records Search Tool (CREST), China: Military Options Against Vietnam p. 10. The first training mission to the Spratly Islands occurred in May 1983.
3. CREST, pg. 11.
4. Ibid.
5. These include launch brigades equipped with DF-21 C/D Anti-ship Ballistic Missiles (AS-BMs) and CJ-10 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) that have ranges of 1,500km. *Annual Report to Congress on the Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, DOD, April 26, 2016. Pg. 25

Intellectuals Lobby for More Freedom as President Xi Faces Pushback From Party Rivals

By Willy Lam

Academics, journalists and other free-thinking intellectuals have taken the bold step of calling for

more freedom of expression and less Internet censorship. Others want to resuscitate long-stalled political reform. For the first time since Xi Jintao took power in late 2012, the official media have also run articles that seem to challenge the supremacy of the President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the Chinese tradition, open expressions of dissent usually occur when major factions of the party are engaged in a power struggle. Given the overall conservative nature of the leadership, however, it is unlikely that a new round of what late patriarch Deng Xiaoping called “thought liberation” is in the offing.

In June, seventy-eight scientists from the elite Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and other top scientific and engineering institutes sent a petition to the CCP calling on General Secretary Xi to lift censorship of the Internet. The petition said Chinese researchers’ failure to have access to the Internet would “greatly impede progress of science and technology in China.” The official *China Science News* quoted one academic as saying that “stringent Internet control has resulted in severe losses to people engaged in scientific research” (*Voice of America*, June 6; *Radio Free Asia*, June 2).

This show of defiance is notable as President Xi’s power struggle with other factions of the party—particularly the Communist Youth League (CYL) Faction headed by former president Hu Jintao and the Shanghai Faction led by ex-president Jiang Zemin—intensifies in the run-up to the 19th Party Congress scheduled for next year (*China Brief*, May 11).

Even bolder than the academics’ petition was a recent article in *People’s Daily* that was construed as casting indirect aspersions on Xi’s dictatorial statecraft. In a piece entitled “Absolutist egomania will bring a nasty demise to top cadres,” commentator Hou Li-hong appeared to zero in on Xi’s power grab and one-upmanship. Although Hou cited mostly regional officials in her article, it is obvious that her critique could also be applied to supreme leader Xi. For example, Hou warned that *yibashou* (“No. 1 bosses”; 一把手) often made the mistake of “megalomania and the wanton use of power.” “If the big boss regards his public authority as private power and looks upon own his words as policy, this egoistic use of

power becomes very dangerous and will lead to a dismal end for the top leader,” Hou noted (*People’s Daily*, June 13; *Radio French International*, June 13).

That the *People’s Daily* dared run such an article has been attributed to behind-the-scenes maneuvers by Politburo Standing Committee (PBOC) member in charge of ideology and propaganda Liu Yunshan, who is considered a protégé of former president Jiang (*Apple Daily [Hong Kong]*, June 17). Xi’s dissatisfaction with Liu was evidenced by the president’s visit to the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV last February, in which party chief called upon the three top media to *xingdang* (姓党) or “take the CCP as its surname.” Xi’s implicit criticism was that these mouthpieces had deviated from instructions laid down by the *zhongyang*, or central party authorities led by the General Secretary (*People’s Daily*, March 9; *Xinhua*, February 19).

In what is seen as an attempt to rein in PBSC member Liu, President Xi earlier this year asked the Central Commission for Disciplinary Commission (CCDI) to assign a Central Inspection Team to the Department of Propaganda, which reports to Liu. The CCDI is headed by PBSC member Wang Qishan, a princeling who is considered Xi’s closest ally. It is significant that instead of focusing on issues related to corruption, Wang Huaichen, the head of the inspection team, dwelled on the poor ideological standards of propaganda officials. In a report that was carried by most central media in June, Wang noted that cadres in the department “do not have a high political alertness, and there are discrepancies [with central edicts] in implementation of policies.” Wang, a former head of the Political-Legal Department of the Sichuan Province Party Committee, also faulted the Propaganda Department for its failure to observe the “four consciousness” (“consciousness about politics; consciousness about the whole situation; consciousness about [obeying] the core [of the party]; and consciousness about seeing eye-to-eye [with the *zhongyang*].” The last two requirements—about cleaving to the “core” and the *zhongyang*—are understood to represent Xi’s demands that his edicts must be followed (*China.com*, June 8; *Sina.com*, June 8).

Xi’s well-documented disagreement with Premier and PBSC member Li Keqiang—who heads the CYL

Faction—has also resulted in a rare clash of views in the official media. A case in point is the now-famous interview given by an “authoritative figure” to *People’s Daily* that was splashed across its front page on May 9. The authoritative figure, widely thought to be Liu He, Xi’s chief economic adviser, disputed views given by the State Council (China’s cabinet, which is headed by Premier Li) that the Chinese economy had attained a “rosy start” in the first quarter of this year. “The entrenched contradictions in the economy have not been defused, while new problems are more than anticipated,” the article noted. The authoritative figure was quoted as saying the Chinese economy was headed toward an “L-shaped trajectory” and that this trend would last for “more than one, two years.” He then laid into government officials who favored aggressive monetary and fiscal policy to boost the economy through means including infrastructure projects that are bankrolled by loans. “Our economy has sufficient potentials and resilience... the speed of growth will not fall much even without stimulus,” he concluded. As to what can be done, the authoritative figure suggested measures recommended by President Xi: “lowering [production] capacity, reducing inventory, deleveraging, cutting production costs and boosting weak sectors” (*People’s Daily*, May 9; *New Beijing Post*, May 9).

Li’s forces struck back within a week. Guo Tongxin (a collective pen name for the National Statistical Bureau of the State Council) published an article in the May 16 edition of *People’s Daily* arguing that “our economy has attained a relatively good start [and that] it is being run in a stable manner...The economic structure is being optimized and people’s livelihood has improved.” “The national economy has on the whole followed a steady track and progress has been made in the midst of stability.” The piece also denied that economic growth had been attained due to over-leveraging, or excessive debt accumulation. It noted that steady expansion of the economy was due to “the ignition of reform, the boosting of innovation, and the push of [structural] transformation” (*Xinhua*, May 16; *People’s Daily*, May 16).

Apparently because of the “struggle between the two lines” at the apex of the party, a number of academics have expressed dissimilar opinions on the future directions of the economy. While some support the

stance favored by Xi and Liu He, quite a few experts have faulted the views of the “authoritative figure” as contained in the May 9 *People’s Daily* article. For example, well-known Fudan University economist Zhang Jun pointed out that “boosting economic growth is more important than deleveraging.” Yao Yang, an expert on development economics at Peking University, stressed that excessive curtailment of capacity would hurt economic growth: “Lowering production capacity, reducing inventory and deleveraging will depress overall demand and hurt economic expansion” (*Ming Pao [Hong Kong]*, June 9; *Phoenix TV Net*, June 8).

Free-thinking intellectuals who were hemmed in by Xi’s apparent restoration of Maoist norms have also spoken out. This is true particularly of retired cadres who once worked for former party secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who are still revered as the CCP’s icons of liberalization. For example, Li Rui, who once served as Mao’s personal secretary, pointed out in an article this spring that without overall political reform, the country would remain backward and it would be unable to claim a leading place in the community of nations. “Reform of the party and improvement in society depends on science and democracy,” Li wrote. “These are universal values” (*VOA*, April 18; *Sohu.com*, April 18). In a similar vein, former head of the America Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Zi Zhongxun noted that “when there is absence of freedom of expression and rule of law, coupled with severe social inequality, social elite such as public intellectuals should speak out to uphold justice” (*360doc.com [Beijing]*, June 19; *Sohu.com*, June 17).

Despite the challenges he faces, Xi is still the most powerful CCP leader since Mao Zedong. Political circles in Beijing are watching whether the supreme leader will allow this relatively daring outpouring of opinions to continue. On the one hand, it is in the vested interest of the party General Secretary to at least project a façade of unity within the party as preparations for the Congress are switching into high gear. On the other hand, if Xi succeeds in marginalizing his political foes, he may soon be tempted to reintroduce Chairman Mao’s notorious “one voice chamber.”

Xi's ambivalence regarding giving more leeway to intellectuals is reflected in two recent talks. In a seminar with intellectuals, model workers and youth representatives in Hebei, Anhui Province last April, Xi sounded a conciliatory note to members of the educated class. "To bravely set trends and to spearhead innovation is the requisite characteristic of the great masses of intellectuals," the President said. "We should enthusiastically welcome the ideas and criticisms of intellectuals provided that they are well motivated," Xi said, adding that the party should adopt the "right" kind of suggestions from the educated classes. "We should be more tolerant and magnanimous toward ideas and criticisms that are off the mark or even wrong," Xi argued. Using a well-known Chinese proverb, Xi said the authorities should not "grab hold of the pigtailed [of intellectuals], pin [pejorative] labels on them or hit them with sticks" (Xinhua, April 30; South China Morning Post, April 30).

That Xi is not prepared to give intellectuals a significantly longer leash, however, is evident from his much-noted speech on the role of philosophy and the social sciences in nation-building. While talking to an elite group of scholars and professors in May, Xi pointed out that they must always regard Marxism as the be-all and end-all of knowledge. "The facts have proven that, irrespective of changing times... Marxism still demonstrates the powerful force of a scientific theory and it still occupies the high ground in terms of truth and morality," Xi said. Academics, researchers and cadres in general should "self-consciously insist upon the guidance of Marxism," Xi noted. "They should have clear-cut theoretical consciousness, resolute political beliefs, and a scientific way of thinking" based on Marxism and socialism with Chinese characteristics, the party chief said (People's Daily, May 18). Yet taking the old road of orthodoxy could stifle creativity and innovation that the CCP badly needs to inject new momentum to reform, which remains the most potent pillar of legitimacy for the 95-year-old party.

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Growing PLA Transparency Part 2: PLA External Signaling since the 18th Party Congress

By Kenneth Allen

This article, the second of a two-part series, examines the PLA's use of soft power for external signaling. The first article, available, [here](#) examines Chinese military soft power as part of internal signaling.

As noted in part one of this series, China has made major improvements in its military transparency. Though much of it is focused on a domestic audience, the increasingly number of English-language materials and programs, such *China Armed Forces* magazine—not to mention *China Daily* and English editions of the Ministry of Defense's website, CCTV, and the *Global Times* all highlight PLA activities as a matter of course. Specifically, one of the common PLA themes since the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, concerning transparency is that the PLA is becoming more open and confident as a result of engaging in more combined arms, joint, and combined exercises. [1] Highlighting the Chinese military's progress, and even its shortcomings, have important roles in both helping the PLA improve and as a deterrent to potential enemies.

Zhang Junshe, a researcher at the Naval Military Academic Research Institute, reflecting on 2014's accomplishments noted that all of the training and exercises that year allowed the PLA to make remarkable achievements, while also exposing some weaknesses in operational command and information technology application. He also noted that improve-

ments were needed in strategic delivery, rapid reaction and joint operations. According to Hou Xiaohe, an associate professor with the PLA's National Defense University, all of the drills and exercises address problems that could be resolved in order to be able to fight real battles ([China Military Online](#), December 17, 2014).

Combined Training, Meetings, and Agreements with Foreign Militaries

Since the 18th Party Congress, the PLA has been actively involved in bilateral and multilateral combined training with foreign militaries, including Russia and the United States. [2] Russian and Chinese forces held the "Maritime Joint Exercise 2013" (海山联合 2013) in the waters and airspace near the Peter the Great Gulf from July 5–12, 2013. Meanwhile, their forces held the "Peace Mission-2013" (和平使命 2013) combined anti-terrorism exercise in Russia's Chelyabinsk Region from July 27 to August 15, 2013. Subsequent exercises the following years, the mechanized combined "Peace Mission-2014" exercise with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in August 2014 and "Maritime Cooperation-2014" [Joint Maritime-2014] exercise, yielded new breakthroughs with notable progress in coordination and real-combat capacity. 2014 also saw the PLA Army (PLAA) and PLAAF compete in separate international competitions (Tank Biathlon-2014, Aviadarts-2014) in Russia in July and August 2014, respectively, which was the first time that the PLA had ever competed in an international competition. China has continued to attend these events in 2016 ([Reference News](#), July 16; [China Air Force Online](#), July 26).

Military exercises have also formed an important part of building trust between the U.S. and Chinese militaries. There was a breakthrough in China-U.S. practical cooperation at the 9th seminar on Humanitarian Assistance/ Disaster Relief (HA/DR) drill held from November 10–20, 2013 in Hawaii. Although the PLAN attended the biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise as an observer in 1998, it was a full participant in the 24th exercise in June to August 2014 for the first time, "an important step toward building the new-type major-country relationship and military relationship between China and the United States. It will play a positive role in pushing

China's friendly cooperation with the U.S. and other Asian-Pacific countries and enhancing the PLAN's capability to carry out diversified military tasks." The Chinese and American presidents jointly announced on November 12, 2014 that the two sides had signed Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) establishing "two mutual trust mechanisms," namely the mutual reporting and trust mechanism on major military operations and the code of safe conduct on naval and air military encounters between the two sides.

The Chinese military has also taken a more active role in international search operations, including the PLAN and PLAAF's unprecedented efforts to search for the missing Malaysia Airlines MH370 passenger plane beginning in March 2014. China also assisted Vietnam's search for missing military aircraft in the South China Sea ([Sina](#), June 20).

The PLA also appears to have seized on the importance of international for a as a method of presenting its ideas. In November 2014, the 5th biennial Xiangshan Forum was held in Beijing. Compared with the previous four forums, 2014's Xiangshan Forum was upgraded from a track-2 unofficial event for exchanges to a track-1.5 high-level security and defense forum integrating both official and unofficial features. It was the first time that the PLA organized such a high-level multilateral security dialogue. Notably, there are indications that China made this move to compete with the annual Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, which itself has featured important speeches by senior PLA figures in recent years.

Additionally, two in high-profile events, China showcased its military at home and abroad during the September 3, and May 9, 2015, parades in Beijing and Moscow celebrating the 70th anniversary of end of World War II.

Joint and Combined Arms PLA Exercises and Training

Besides combined training, the PLA has been expanding its joint (e.g., two or more services) and combined arms (e.g., two or more branches within the same service) training under actual-combat conditions. During 2014, the PLA conducted numerous

exercises and training events under actual-combat conditions, including an exercise that was held at the Zhurihe training base in Inner Mongolia during May to June and was observed by foreign military attaches. In 2015, the entire military expanded the development of actual-combat strategic and campaign training, including joint and combined arms training, night training, training in a complex electromagnetic environment (CEME) and difficult terrain and weather conditions, as well as combined training with foreign militaries.

PLA Navy Activities

Since the 18th Party Congress, the PLAN has been at the forefront of showing the flag overseas, to include combined exercises, *Peace Ark* hospital ship visits, round-the-world voyages linked with escort task force missions in the Gulf of Aden, evacuation of Chinese and other citizens from Yemen, and hosting the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). PLAN “Maneuver-5” (机动-5号) open-sea combat exercise involving all three fleets in the Western Pacific from October 18 to November 1, 2013. Ironically, although not a bilateral or multilateral combined exercise, this was identified as a military diplomacy event. The *Peace Ark* hospital ship (和平方舟号医院船) provided post-typhoon humanitarian medical aid to the Philippines from November 21 to December 15, 2013. From June 17–20, 2013, the *Peace Ark* and 110 personnel participated in a joint disaster relief and military medical science exercise in Brunei under the mechanism of the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Plus (ADDM-Plus).

During a voyage through the Western Pacific from September 3 to December 11, 2013, three PLAN South Sea Fleet (SSF) vessels (*Lanzhou* guided missile destroyer, *Liuzhou* guided missile frigate, and *Poyanghu* comprehensive supply ship) passed through the Strait of Magellan for the first time and visited Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. [1] They then passed back through the Strait on their way home. Following the commissioning of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier into the fleet in 2012, the PLAN established the first flight group (航空兵部队) in May 2013. In April 2014, the PLAN hosted the 14th biennial WPNS for the first time, which was joined by more than 150 naval leaders and representatives from

25 countries. To help celebrate the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations with several African countries, three vessels from the PLAN’s 13th Gulf of Aden escort task force sailed all the way around Africa from September to December 2014 for the first time and visited eight countries. During March 2015, the PLAN evacuated 613 Chinese plus 279 foreign nationals from 15 countries out of Yemen thus emphasizing the PLA’s ability to respond to emergencies abroad.

PLA Air Force Activities in the East China Sea ADIZ

Aircraft of the PLA Air Force also continue to play an important role in highlighting growing Chinese strength. The PLAAF sent seven J-10s from the August 1st (Bayi) Aerobatics Team to the PLAAF’s first airshow abroad in Russia on August 21, 2013. On November 23, 2013, China established an ADIZ in the East China Sea. Besides being involved in search efforts for the Malaysian airliner, it has also been actively involved in implementing the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) established in the East China Sea in November 2013. On November 27, 2015, PLA Air Force H-6K bombers and other aircraft flew through the Miyako Channel past the first island chain into the Western Pacific for the fourth time to conduct training. It also sent multiple fighters, bombers, and airborne early warning aircraft to conduct patrols in the East China Sea ADIZ. Together, these activities have increased the PLAAF’s far seas deployment and combat capabilities (*Xinhua*, November 28, 2015).

United Nations Peacekeeping

Although the PLA first became involved in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) in 1990, it has gradually expanded its participation over the past three years, including dealing with the Ebola outbreak and deploying its first infantry units. Since the 1990s, China’s UNPKO participants included engineering, transportation, medical support, and police (警察) units. In December 2013, China sent its first peacekeeping task force to the Republic of Mali, which included the first small group of PLA security forces (警卫/安全部队) consisting of infantry troops. In September 2014, the PLA assigned troops

to aid West Africa in fighting Ebola for the first time. It successively assigned about 300 people in multiple medical teams to Sierra Leone and Liberia, areas in West Africa that are seriously hit by Ebola, since mid-September. In April 2015, China deployed its first PLA Army infantry battalion to a UNPKO in South Sudan, whose mission was to protect China's own non-combat troops. Both groups have subsequently taken casualties due to terrorist attacks and domestic unrest (SOURCE).

Understanding Chinese Exercises

After reviewing Chinese military exercises, one of the key questions, remaining is how much has the PLA shaped the view of itself in the international arena and to what affect? The simple answer is that PLA writings about itself have clearly affected how the foreign press views it, whether positive or negative. One of the problems, however, is that very few articles provide a comparison of the PLA and the U.S. military in terms of international relations. Because most U.S. military relations activities are "normal," they do not receive as much press as when the PLA does something for the first time. For example, from 2002 through 2012, the PLA held 28 combined exercises and 34 combined training sessions with 31 countries in accordance with relevant agreements or arrangements (MOD, April 16, 2013). However, this pales in comparison with the U.S. Pacific Command that participates in more than 1,500 exercises and other engagement activities with foreign military forces each year, and the U.S. Navy component is involved in 700 training events and 170 exercises each year in the Asia-Pacific region (*China Brief*, May 1, 2015). In 2015 alone, Pacific Fleet ships sailed about 700 combined days in the South China Sea (*Navy Times*, March 3).

What does draw attention to individual U.S. and Chinese military activities, however, are certain single events. For example, in May 2015, PLAAF H-6 bombers flew their first ever mission in the Western Pacific after transiting the Bashi Channel (CRI, January 4). It then flew three additional missions during 2015 through the Miyako Strait and Bashi Channel. On the U.S. side, much press attention was given to freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) missions in the South China Sea by the U.S. Navy destroyer

USS Lassen (DDG-82) in October 2015 and by two U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers in November (*The Diplomat*, January 6; *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2015).

Conclusion

As Chinese military exercises continue to grow and expand, they deserve to be closely monitored. However, such analyses should keep the exercises purpose and frequency in perspective. China, as with all countries that participate in them, use such exercises to practice real world skills, improve domestic and foreign interoperability and signal resolve.

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Notes

1. Joint exercises involved two or more services. Combined arms exercises or drills involve two or more branches.
2. Of note, whereas the international community refers to this as combined training, the PLA refers to it as joint training.
3. Zeng Xingjian and Hong Yihu, "Passing the Strait of Magellan," *China Armed Forces*, No. 24, Vol. 6, 2013, pp. 80–83. Official Chinese English-language publications, such as the biennial *Defense White Paper*, refer to the South Sea Fleet as the Nanhai Fleet.

ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations at 25

Prashanth Parameswaran

During his remarks at the 18th ASEAN-China Summit last November in Kuala Lumpur, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang lauded the “new progress” that could be made in the relationship between the two sides as they prepared to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their dialogue partnership in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 22, 2015). But with uncertainty still hanging over some of China’s new economic initiatives and a much-awaited ruling on China’s South China Sea territorial claims last month going decisively against Beijing, it is unclear how friendly relations between the ASEAN states and China will be.

Economics continues to be the heart of ASEAN-China relations. China has been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009, and ASEAN has been China’s third largest since 2010. Last year, both sides agreed to double their bilateral trade to \$1 trillion as well as to upgrade the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the world’s largest such agreement by population.

Both sides have focused on a few priority areas this year. One of them is production capacity cooperation, which has emerged as a key focus of China’s economic diplomacy. Beijing sees this as a way to both deal with the surplus of production capacity in the Chinese economy while also meeting the demand for more investment, technology and labor in emerging markets including Southeast Asia (Xinhua, June 15, 2015). ASEAN and China are expected to ink a joint statement on this issue later this year.

Meanwhile, at the sub-regional level, China has been focusing on developing its new Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Framework with mainland Southeast Asian countries along the Mekong River. Beijing has characterized the initiative as designed not just to promote its own economic interests, but to help narrow development gaps within ASEAN and to support the building of an ASEAN community. In March at the inaugural LMC leaders’ meeting in Sanya, Hainan province, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said that China had committed to \$11.5 billion in loans and credit for Mekong countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 23).

ASEAN countries are also benefiting from the rollout of new Chinese economic initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR). According to Citibank, Southeast Asian infrastructure is already emerging as a major beneficiary of OBOR, with Chinese companies accounting for 17 percent of infrastructure investment across the region in 2015 (Supply Chain Asia, July 11). Last month, Indonesia also became one of the first four recipients of AIIB projects (Jakarta Globe, June 26). Other ASEAN states are keen to follow suit.

China-ASEAN Security Cooperation

On the political-security side, while observers tend to overwhelmingly focus on the South China Sea issue, there is in fact a whole series of areas where ASEAN and China already cooperate, particularly in non-traditional security areas like natural disaster response, transnational crime and countering drug trafficking. Over the past few years, Beijing has also been attempting to deepen its ties with ASEAN as a whole as well as with individual Southeast Asian states. Last year, ASEAN and China held their first ever informal defense ministers’ meeting in Beijing, which was viewed as a landmark development.

China has been looking to deepen ties even further this year. At the sixth China-ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Informal Meeting in Vientiane in May, Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Chang Wanquan said that China intended to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN in several areas (China Daily, May 26). Of particular note was his mention of greater anti-terrorism cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing and exercises, given that a number of maritime Southeast Asian states—most notably Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines—have grown increasingly wary of the threat of the Islamic State to their national security. Chang also said that Beijing would be willing to enhance collaboration between the People Liberation Army’s Southern Theater Command and the militaries of ASEAN nations in a wide range of fields including border and coastal defense, maritime security and anti-terrorism.

ASEAN and China have also looked to better manage the South China Sea issue. One of the concrete outcomes expected for the year is an ASEAN-China joint statement on the implementation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)—a series of protocols for the safety of naval vessels initially negotiated at the 2014 Western Pacific Naval Symposium. A number of members including Singapore, the country coordinator for 2016, are looking to advance this as a way of better managing potential tensions.

Another expected outcome is the establishment of a hotline between foreign ministries to manage maritime emergencies. As a confidence-building measure, China has also proposed a joint exercise with militaries from ASEAN nations including maritime search and rescue, disaster relief and application of CUES. Beijing proposed the exercise be held in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province—the headquarters of the South Sea Fleet—and its coastal waters in the second quarter of 2017.

The two sides also continue to work toward the implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the conclusion of a binding code of conduct (COC). At the 12th ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) on the Implementation of the DOC in Vietnam in June, ASEAN countries once again stressed the need for the early adoption of an effective COC, including through increasing the frequency of the SOM as well as joint working group meetings on the implementation of the DOC (Vietnam News, June 10). The next round of meetings will be held in China this month.

The third and final component both sides have emphasized this year is people-to-people ties. A number of activities are planned for the rest of the year in this realm, including the organization of an ASEAN-China Young Entrepreneur Forum as well as a Second ASEAN-China Youth Exchange Visit. This year, the focus has been on education, with both sides designating 2016 as the Year of China-ASEAN Education Exchange. Yang Xiuping, the Secretary General of the ASEAN-China Center, reiterated last month at the ASEAN-China Forum of Youth and Humanities in Jilin province that the target for the next

few years is to have 100,000 ASEAN students studying in China by 2020 (Embassy of the Philippines, June 20).

Another important field within the people-to-people realm is tourism. At a speech on July 12 in Jakarta to commemorate the 25th anniversary of China-ASEAN dialogue relations, China's ambassador to ASEAN, Xu Bu, said that the two sides were considering the possibility of designating 2017 as the Year of China-ASEAN Tourism Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 11). Though China has already emerged as the largest source of foreign tourists to ASEAN countries, a number of Southeast Asian countries have expressed interest in further increasing that number. Indonesia's Tourism Minister Arief Yahya, for instance, has said that he wishes to double the number of Chinese tourists visiting Indonesia at the earliest possible date.

While there are advances that both sides intend to make in their relationship this year, it is clear that significant challenges remain. Despite some progress, there are still some challenges to China's broader economic objectives in Southeast Asia. Beijing's long-term goals for infrastructure development within the framework of the broader OBOR project include the ambitious plan to build a Pan-Asia Railway Network that will see three 4,500—5,500 kilometer railway lines link China with Southeast Asia. Central, western and eastern routes of this planned railway network will run from Kunming through Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia and Malaysia and Singapore. However, such a large scale and ambitious project has predictably run into trouble in the negotiation of its details between Beijing and the seven governments upon whose land the rail lines will be built.

For example, in March, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha announced that the Thailand-China high-speed rail project would be canceled due to disagreements over terms. Though the Thai government has said it will proceed with the 250 kilometer section of the rail line that links Bangkok to the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima, it was nonetheless a serious blow to Beijing, as Bangkok is the planned center for all three of the lines (Bangkok Post, March 24). Similar hiccups and delays have also occurred

previously in Myanmar and Laos. Beyond political issues in individual countries, there are also structural and engineering concerns in building such an extensive network including challenging landscapes, different railway gauges and poor track conditions.

Meanwhile, as China seeks to boost its economic ties with ASEAN states, there continues to be unease in some Southeast Asian capitals about their implications. Though China has argued that its economic initiatives can help forge ASEAN unity, some fear that the gravitational pull of Beijing will lead individual Southeast Asian states to put their relationship with China ahead of regional interests. Cambodia has been repeatedly accused of toeing Beijing's line in recent years, while the rhetoric of the new Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte has led some to believe that he may advance an economics-first approach that makes Manila overly dependent on Beijing ([Rappler](#), July 8). In April, prominent Malaysian commentator Tan Sri Munir Majid rather soberly wrote "Like individuals, some countries may sell their soul for money. Others may even trade territorial integrity" ([The Star](#), March 26).

South China Sea Dispute: The Elephant in the Room

On the security side, the South China Sea issue has been the proverbial elephant in the room in 2016, even before the verdict this month. For instance, multiple diplomatic sources confirmed that at the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Yuxi in June, China made a heavy-handed attempt to pressure ASEAN to adopt Beijing's preferred stance on the South China Sea and then divided the grouping when it was going to act against Chinese interests, thereby preventing it from issuing a joint statement ([The Diplomat](#), June 21).

Even though this statement was not eventually adopted, its nature and content revealed the seriousness of the South China Sea issue for Southeast Asian states. Apart from the fact that the statement was unprecedentedly set to be issued solely by ASEAN rather than in concert with Beijing, the language was also as close as ASEAN has ever come to a direct rebuke of China on the South China Sea question: "We expressed our serious concerns over recent and

ongoing developments, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and which may have the potential to undermine peace, security and stability in the South China Sea." [1]

Across regional capitals, Yuxi was seen as an early warning for ASEAN ahead of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Vientiane ([PacNet](#), June 24). Though the AMM did see ASEAN avoid a repeat of Phnom Penh in 2012—where disagreements over the South China Sea prevented the issuance of a joint communique for the first time in the grouping's history—the statement was also weaker than even the minimum standard of what was expected. Most clearly, the phrase "full respect for legal and diplomatic processes," a reference to the ruling included in both the U.S.-ASEAN Sunnylands Statement and the Yuxi non-statement, was removed from the South China Sea section of the statement and shifted to the introductory part to accommodate Cambodia's South China Sea-specific concerns. While Beijing once again denied a hand in Phnom Penh's obstructiveness, its announcement of \$600 million in aid to Cambodia just days ahead of the AMM did not help its case.

Although China continues to insist that the South China Sea issue ought to be kept in perspective and not undermine broader ASEAN-China relations, Beijing's own actions—be they its assertive actions or its efforts to undermine regional consensus—have themselves heightened regional anxieties and led ASEAN to have to speak out even as it tries to advance ties with the Asian giant. As the ASEAN statement at Yuxi noted, "[W]e also cannot ignore what is happening in the South China Sea as it is an important issue in the relations and cooperation between ASEAN and China." How China chooses to respond on the South China Sea issue following the ruling will play a major role in how the issue affects ASEAN-China relations in the coming months. .

Beyond the South China Sea issue, structural limits on how far ASEAN-China security ties can advance have continued to play themselves out in 2016. Southeast Asian states are only beginning to see the benefits of joint exercises with China, and even so, they are fully aware that their militaries do not gain

nearly as much practical experience or technical expertise as when they conduct such drills with the United States. Following the visit of Xu Qiliang, Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, a Malaysian defense official noted this was "why you see how slow [Sino-Malaysian defense ties] moved since we started." [2]

Furthermore, most ASEAN countries have tended to source their military equipment from Western countries or Russia, which raises issues of compatibility, interoperability, or familiarity when it comes to entertaining Chinese proposals in areas such as defense purchases or industry collaboration. For instance, despite China's unlikely victory over Germany and South Korea in the race to build Thailand's first submarines in June, Bangkok continues to face questions about its choice, ranging from the reliability of Chinese equipment to the effects that further Chinese involvement in the country's defense industry could have on its alliance with the United States (Bangkok Post, July 1).

Conclusion

To be sure, some of these challenges can be overcome by ASEAN and China in the coming months and years. Overall, there is still optimism about ASEAN-China relations in spite of lingering uncertainty in both the economic and security realms. However, after 25 years, it is still unclear how sunny the future of the China-ASEAN dialogue will be.

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Notes

1. Interview, June, 2016.
2. Author's copy of the statement.

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