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**Epidemic-Related Unrest and the CCP’s Reinforced
Political Loyalty Indoctrination for China’s Police**

By John Dotson

Introduction: A Riot on the Border of Epidemic-Wracked Hubei Province

The central Chinese city of Wuhan, in Hubei Province, was the original epicenter from which the COVID-19 viral outbreak first emerged in November-December 2019. Hubei Province was placed under a strict lockdown in mid-January that lasted for over two months ([China Brief](#), January 29). On March 25, authorities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) announced the lifting of most travel restrictions for residents of

Hubei Province, with the exception of Wuhan City itself ([Xinhua](#), March 25). (Restrictions for residents of Wuhan were later eased on April 8). However, the lifting of these restrictions has not proceeded entirely smoothly. On March 27, a major social disturbance occurred on the bridge over the Yangzi River that connects the town of Xiaochi in far eastern Hubei with the town of Jiujiang in northern Jiangxi Province. On that Friday, Hubei residents attempted to cross the bridge, but were blocked by police from the Jiangxi side. A tense stand-off escalated into a riot that reportedly involved not only citizens and police, but also clashes between police from the two bordering provinces (*see accompanying images*) ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 27).



Images: Still images from video of the March 27 incident on the Jiujiang Yangzi River Bridge on the Hubei-Zhejiang provincial border: angry citizens climb onto and stomp a police car (left), overturn a police van (center), and clash with police (right). (Source: [HK Free Press](#), March 27)

Regional tensions were revealed in video of the incident, in which angry citizens could clearly be heard to chant “Let’s go, Hubei” (湖北加油, *Hubei jiyau*) when marching to confront barricades set up by Jiangxi police ([HK Free Press](#), March 27). The police barricades were presumably ordered by Jiangxi officials—acting in apparent contravention of official national policy—who were fearful that an influx of people from Hubei could once more spread COVID-19 infections. This likely revealed skepticism on the part of regional officials towards the central government’s message that the epidemic has been contained in Hubei. It also revealed issues of fear and discrimination against Hubei persons on the part of Chinese from other provinces, a problem acknowledged in official PRC press outlets ([China Daily](#), March 30).

The March 27 incident provided a dramatic example of the sort of social unrest that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials have clearly feared could materialize in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths inside China and across the globe. [1] Hubei citizens have been subject to harsh conditions under government quarantines, resulting in a steady build-up of popular anger ([China Brief](#), April 1). This incident may not be the last of its type to emerge as a result of the pandemic, and the CCP has taken active steps over the past two months to reinforce political indoctrination for local police agencies—thereby attempting to ensure that police officers will remain loyal to the ruling party in the event of

any major incidents that might threaten “social order and stability” (社会治安稳定, *shehui zhi'an wending*) in the country.

Intensified Propaganda and Political Loyalty Indoctrination Directed at Chinese Police

Since at least early February, PRC local government and state media outlets have emphasized consistent themes that, amid the ongoing pandemic crisis, Chinese police must “maintain a high-level sense of political responsibility” (*baochi gaodu de zhengzhi zerengan* / 保持高度的政治责任感)—thinly coded language for loyalty to the ruling CCP. Police have been further advised to “keep a steadfast political position [and] maintain a high level of uniformity with the Party center” (有坚定的政治立场,时刻同党中央保持高度的一致 / *you jianding de zhengzhi lichang, shike tong dang zhongyang baochi gaodu de yizhi*). These exhortations also frequently involve the message “Don’t Forget [Our] Original Purpose, Keep Firmly in Mind the Historical Mission” (不忘初心, 牢记使命 / *bu wang chuxin, laoji shiming*), a slogan closely associated with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping since it was unveiled last year ([China Brief](#), July 31, 2019).

Specific illustrations of this trend, drawn from media coverage of the Public Security Bureaus (公安局, *Gong An Ju*) in three different regions of the country, are provided in the examples below. The themes (and often, specific use of phrasing) are broadly consistent among these examples, suggesting higher-level direction for a propaganda campaign intended to reinforce police loyalty to the CCP. These examples also extend to regions far beyond the pandemic’s epicenter in Hubei, indicating that CCP authorities are concerned for bolstering the political indoctrination of police agencies nationwide.

Xinghe County (兴和县), Inner Mongolia

Reporting on the Public Security Bureau in Xinghe County (Inner Mongolia) indicates that “in epidemic prevention work the first matter is the political mission (政治任务, *zhengzhi renwu*), keeping to one’s post, combating the epidemic, preventing dangers [and] ensuring public security and promoting stability.” Both the regular People’s Police (民警, *min jing*) and the Auxiliary Police (辅警, *fu jing*) were praised for “maintaining a high sense of political responsibility [and] sense of the historical mission.” Per this account, the Xinghe police were so dedicated in their loyalty to the CCP that, alongside their other responsibilities, they “especially talked politics” (特别讲政治, *tebie jiang zhengzhi*) while manning security checkpoints established for the purpose of epidemic control ([Peng Pai News](#), February 2).

Zhumadian City (驻马店市), Henan Province

A press account from Henan Province provides a heroic account of Guo Yuanzhe (郭元哲), a political instructor with the Public Security Bureau in Zhumadian (驻马店) City, Henan Province. Guo is praised as a model police official and Party member, who is both tireless in his work on behalf of the public, and absolutely loyal to the central CCP leadership. Per this account, once the epidemic broke out, Guo “energetically answered the call to raise high the Party’s flag on the front line of the epidemic prevention battle.” To this end, Guo helped to organize “Party member shock troop teams” (党员突击队, *dangyuan tujidui*) to disinfect

suspected contaminated areas. Guo also worked to inspire fellow CCP members among the police by organizing lectures to emphasize that his colleagues "must resolutely bring into play the party organization fortress combat functions, and set forth party members as a model vanguard" amid counter-epidemic operations ([Henan Xinyu Wang](#), March 30).



Image: Personnel of the Public Security Bureau in Zhumadian City (Henan Province) pose for a photo with the CCP flag, February 2020. The photo accords with similar images featured in PRC state media since early February, which depict police officers making symbolic declarations of loyalty to the CCP.

(Image source: [Henan Xinyu Wang](#), March 30)

Qingyang District (青羊区), Chengdu City (成都市), Sichuan Province

Another account is provided by the civil government of Qingyang District in the city of Chengdu. In addition to the standard calls for police to display a "high-level sense of political responsibility" and to "strengthen political consciousness" (强化政治意识, *qianghua zhengzhi yishi*), police are advised that "Party leadership must run through epidemic control work from beginning to end" (把党的领导贯穿疫情防控工作始终, *ba dang de lingdao guanchuan yiqing fangkong gongzuo shizhong*). Both the practical and ideological work of the police should be merged, in order to "combine together the deployment of political thought work with prevention and control duties."

Per this reference, police should also view the epidemic crisis as an opportunity to strengthen both Party organizations and "wartime political thought work" (战时思想政治工作, *zhanshi sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo*). The police should "build the combat fortress of party organizations on the front line of epidemic control work," while party cadres should serve as examples to the public. The epidemic also provides an opportunity to build the CCP's image: "propaganda follows in the footsteps of the police, [and] propaganda follows the circumstances of the battlefield" ([Qingyang District Government](#), February 19).



Image: CCP members in the Public Security Bureau of Qingyang District, Chengdu City (Sichuan Province) conduct a ceremony to renew their party membership oaths (undated, February 2020).

(Source: [Qingyang District Government](#), February 19)

Conclusion

Even in the most settled of circumstances, “social stability” is a cornerstone concern for the CCP. Aside from its human toll, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal life across vast regions of China, severely damaged the economy, and created a crisis of governance for the CCP central leadership centered around Xi Jinping. As the CCP’s first line of defense against social unrest (with the heavier paramilitary People’s Armed Police in reserve behind them), local police agencies are naturally a focus of attention for the CCP authorities at a time when the prospects for social unrest are greater than ever. As both Chinese citizens and CCP officials seek to cope with the fallout of the pandemic, the Party is likely to grow ever-more insistent in its calls for police to maintain the proper “political position.”

Notes

[1] As of April 12, figures gathered by the Johns-Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center indicated that over 114,000 persons had died from the disease worldwide—to include, per official PRC statistics, 3,343 persons in China ([Johns-Hopkins CRC](#), XX). However, the official PRC statistics have been widely suspected of being vastly underreported, in terms of both cases of infection and fatalities ([Reuters](#), February 5; [NY Times](#), April 2).

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Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics

By Joel Wuthnow

Introduction

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has portrayed its response to the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in heroic terms: battling against an insidious enemy, PLA personnel courageously and tirelessly helped to mitigate the disaster in the epidemic-ravaged city. The PLA has even made the amazing (and highly improbable) claim that it accomplished this while suffering zero infections within its own ranks ([China Military Online](#), March 3). Despite the hype, the crisis has provided an opportunity for the PLA's newly reformed logistics system to test its ability to mobilize resources in exigent circumstances.

The Joint Logistic Support Force (联勤保障部队, *Lianqin Baozhang Budui*) or JLSF, which was created in September 2016 as part of Xi Jinping's larger overhaul of the military, has been at the forefront of the PLA's response. [1] The JLSF's role in Wuhan illuminated several key strengths of the PLA logistics system—including centralized control, effective use of information technology, and civil-military coordination—while also suggesting potential deficiencies. At a minimum, the crisis likely resulted in “lessons learned” that could improve the JLSF's role in supporting commanders during wartime.

An Evolving Logistics Force

A key dilemma for PLA logistics is how troops and materiel can be transported across long distances and sustained away from their home bases. Such operations could be required in a variety of circumstances—including a large-scale natural disaster, civil unrest, or as part of a wartime mobilization in which reinforcements would be sent from the interior to the frontlines. For two decades, the PLA has made progress in alleviating this challenge, through measures such as: introducing regulations under which supplies could be requisitioned from the local economy; building civilian transportation infrastructure to military standards; and upgrading information support for logistics operations. Various exercises have also been held to test the PLA's ability to operate across theaters. [2] However, the organization of the logistics system posed a continuing obstacle: key capabilities were balkanized between the General Logistics Department and the seven Military Regions, each of which controlled separate Joint Logistics Departments.

Reforms to the PLA's logistics system aimed to diminish this challenge by promoting a centralized organizational structure. Cobbled together from the previous system, the JLSF consists of a headquarters (coincidentally located in Wuhan) and five Joint Logistic Support Centers (联勤保障中心, *lian qin baozhang zhongxin*), or JLSCs, each aligned with one of the five Theater Commands [3]. The JLSCs in turn oversee a vast array of resources, including mobile logistics brigades, refueling stations, supply depots, and military hospitals. This system encourages visibility and standardization across the joint logistics enterprise, while

diminishing the influence of the theaters: JLSF headquarters, responding to Central Military Commission (CMC) orders, can facilitate the timely movement of critical resources across theater boundaries. While the JLSF has supported more than 50 PLA exercises ([China Daily](#), October 21, 2019), the Wuhan crisis was the first time it was put into practice to respond to a national emergency.



Image: PLA Army medics arrive at Tianhe International Airport in Wuhan (Hubei Province) on February 13 to assist with COVID-19 medical relief efforts in the city. Per state media coverage, the flights that brought these and other PLA medical personnel to Wuhan represented “the first time for China’s domestically developed large transport aircraft Y-20 to take part in [a] non-military action... [and] the first time for the Air Force to send large and medium transport aircraft on active service to carry out urgent air transport tasks on a large scale.” (Source: [China Daily](#), March 3)

Contributions to Epidemic Control in Wuhan

The JLSF’s response to the COVID-19 epidemic occurred in roughly three phases between January and March 2020. Although the coronavirus had been circulating in Wuhan since November, JLSF involvement did not occur until the week of January 21. This coincided with Xi’s January 20 remarks to the Politburo on the need to strengthen epidemic control, though it is unclear whether he provided specific guidance to the PLA in his capacity as CMC chairman that triggered the mobilization: none was publicly reported. [4] Nevertheless, within a week the Central Theater Command General Hospital (subordinate to the Zhengzhou JLSC) had dispatched 66 doctors to two civilian hospitals in Wuhan; the JLSF had arranged transportation and housing for 450 medics from three cities ([China Military Online](#), March 12); and three JLSCs (Zhengzhou, Guilin, and Shenyang) had assembled and transferred medical gear to Wuhan via rail, including 200,000 masks and 10,000 sets of protective clothing ([Xinhua](#), January 26).

Next, on February 1-2, the JLSF facilitated the transit of 950 medics, as well as 70 tons of medical supplies, from several parts of the country to Wuhan. Chinese media reported that these personnel, some of whom possessed experience dealing with the SARS and Ebola epidemics, were drawn from hospitals subordinate to the five JLSCs, and arrived via a combination of air, rail, and bus transportation (which included both civilian assets and military units, such as the PLA Air Force's relatively new Y-20 heavy transport aircraft) ([Beijing Daily Online](#), February 25). These medics supported the transfer of the Huoshenshan (火神山) Hospital, which had been hastily constructed as a makeshift treatment location, from the Wuhan city government to the JLSF, and treated patients at that facility.

Finally, between February 13 and 17, the JLSF coordinated the arrival of another 2,600 military medics in two batches. These personnel, who represented all of the PLA's services, departed from 19 cities and arrived in Wuhan via bus, air, and rail transportation ([China Military Online](#), February 13). In total, the JLSF coordinated transportation and sustainment for more than 4,000 military medics from its subordinate units and other parts of the PLA, and brought thousands of units of critical medical supplies to Wuhan over a six week period.



Image: PLA medical personnel prepare facilities at the Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan (Hubei Province), February 3, 2020. The hospital was rapidly constructed in late January – early February for use in PLA medical relief efforts. (Image source: [Xinhua](#), February 28)

Key Strengths

By facilitating the transfer of medical personnel and supplies from various theaters, the JLSF demonstrated at least a minimal capability to support trans-regional operations. Several features of the system contributed to this outcome. One factor was effective central leadership. JLSF commander LTG Li Yong (李勇) is a Theater Deputy Leader grade officer who previously served as a deputy chief of staff of the Central Theater Command ([Peng Pai](#), December 1, 2018). As with other senior leaders, his appointment signified Xi's confidence in his abilities. Using his authorities under the new command arrangement, Li was able to mobilize resources from all five JLSCs. To his credit, he pulled off this feat despite his headquarters being located in the epidemic zone. One report indicated that he was able to mitigate the challenge by shifting some operations online ([China Military Online](#), February 10).

Another attribute was the JLSF's reliance on information technology, which enabled the rapid identification, delivery, and distribution of supplies from across the country. For example, one vignette stated that the Zhengzhou JLSC used bar codes, automated forklifts, and other technology to complete the delivery of several truckloads of supplies to a civilian hospital in Wuhan within a short timeframe ([Xinhua](#), February 8). Information support also allowed doctors at the PLA General Hospital in Beijing to conduct telemedicine over 5G networks with patients at the Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan ([Xinhua](#), February 10). These examples suggest that PLA investments in "informatizing" the logistics system over the last twenty years have paid dividends. [5]

Civil-military coordination also proved instrumental during the crisis. Chinese media focused on the Military Representative Offices (MRO), which, under the control of the JLSCs, coordinate with civilian transportation agencies. More than 100 military representatives in 20 locations reportedly played a role ([Jiefangjun Bao](#), February 16). For example, an MRO in the Shenyang JLSC worked with local railway officials to prioritize the transportation of supplies from the northeast to Wuhan ([Zijing](#), March 3). In addition, JLSF purchasing agents in Wuhan contracted with civilian vendors to obtain necessary supplies and services. This included leasing apartments for military staff ([China Military Online](#), March 12), opening local bank accounts to support the Huoshenshan Hospital ([China Military Online](#), February 10), and securing life insurance policies for frontline medics ([Jiefangjun Bao](#), February 26).

Conclusion: Implications for Wartime Operations

While portrayed in Chinese media as a complex operation, medical relief in Wuhan did not expose the JLSF to the same challenges that they would face during a war. No enemy was seeking to disrupt the PLA's supply lines, communications systems, or databases. Moreover, the scale of the effort was much smaller than what would likely be required in wartime. Nevertheless, the crisis offered a real-world test of the JLSF's abilities in multiple areas: exercising new command and control relationships; determining how to balance frontline vs. rear area requirements; quickly identifying and mobilizing scarce resources; maintaining reliable

communications; simultaneously transporting personnel from several regions and sustaining them on the ground; and coordinating with local civilian officials and companies. PLA planners could use this experience to identify weaknesses in the logistics systems and make improvements that could better position the force to operate under more difficult circumstances.

Nevertheless, several aspects of the joint logistics system could pose problems in a larger contingency. The first of these is a potential overreliance on information technology. The success of the JLSF's "hub and spokes" system requires information support to track supplies and facilitate requests across a distributed network. This may work effectively in peacetime, but in a conflict this system would likely be a target for China's adversaries. How well the PLA has instituted redundant networks in the logistics system, and how quickly it can repair systems that go offline (or find "low-tech" workarounds), could be critical to its success in facilitating the rapid redeployment of supplies in wartime. Without effective risk management, the logistics system could present the same weaknesses for PLA operations that Chinese strategists perceive to be vulnerabilities in the U.S. warfighting model. [6]

The second issue relates to lingering questions about the role of the theater commanders. The new system is designed to mobilize resources across theaters by centralizing authority under JLSF headquarters, an attribute that appeared to work well in the Wuhan crisis. However, the new system stands in tension with broader PLA reforms that seek to unify theater-level joint operations under the theater commanders. How the system will actually function in wartime is unclear, though a professor at the PLA Logistics Academy speculated that the JLSCs could be "chopped" to the theaters ([Peng Pai](#), November 27, 2016). A challenge for the CMC will be determining how much authority over logistics forces should be delegated to the theaters and how much should be centralized. An improper balance could hamstring PLA operations.

A final problem concerns tensions between JLSF headquarters and officials in Beijing. While the JLSF reports directly to the CMC, it needs to coordinate with the CMC's Logistic Support Department (LSD), a separate entity that handles matters such as setting policies and overseeing construction. While the PLA's recent reforms have sought to create a division of labor between the two organizations—the JLSF being responsible for operations, and the LSD taking charge of administration—friction between them could emerge, especially if the LSD meddles in operations. Indeed, during the Wuhan crisis, the CMC appointed an LSD deputy director to monitor discipline and ensure quality control ([Jiefangjun Bao](#), February 15). There are no indications that this slowed the pace of operations in this particular case, but miscommunication or tensions between JLSF and LSD officials could complicate the logistics system's ability to respond quickly and efficiently in a future contingency.

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Notes

[1] Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping,” *China Strategic Perspectives* 10, NDU Institute for National Strategic Studies (March 21, 2017).

[2] Dennis J. Blasko, “PLA Exercises March Toward Trans-Regional Joint Training,” *China Brief* (November 4, 2009). <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-exercises-march-toward-trans-regional-joint-training/>.

[3] For an overview, see LeighAnn Luce and Erin Richter, “Handling Logistics in a Reformed PLA: The Long March Toward Jointness,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al. (eds.), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 257-292. See also Kevin McCauley, “Modernization of PLA Logistics: Joint Logistic Support Force,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (February 15, 2018). The JLSF oversees common use supplies and services, while a service-centric logistics system is responsible for more specialized items.

[4] The JLSF issued a “mobilization order” (动员令, *dongyuan ling*) on February 4, but this should be seen more as a political tool than a trigger for JLSF involvement, which began two weeks earlier ([Peng Pai](#), February 4).

[5] For background on IT modernization in the PLA logistics system, see Susan M. Puska, “Taming the Hydra: Trends in China’s Military Logistics Since 2000,” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (eds.), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), pp. 578-584.

[6] See, e.g., Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon’s Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), pp. 60-62.

The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor: Delays Ahead

By Sudha Ramachandran

Introduction

Although no new deals were struck during People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping's trip to Myanmar on January 17 and 18, the visit was significant for several reasons. The visit was the first by a PRC president to Myanmar in 19 years, and the first by Xi to this country in his role as president. The visit was widely touted as marking the 70th anniversary of the establishment of relations between the PRC and Myanmar. However, Xi's first trip abroad this year was aimed at expediting implementation of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([CGTN](#), January 17). During the visit, the two governments signed 33 agreements, memorandums of understanding, protocols and letters of exchange relating to railways, industrial and power projects, and trade. Several of these agreements firm up Myanmar's commitment to the CMEC's three central components: the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which includes a deep-sea port, an industrial park and other projects; the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone; and an urban development plan for Yangon ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 18).



Image: PRC President Xi Jinping (left), accompanied by Myanmar President U Win Myint (center-left) and State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi (center-right), attends a state dinner during an official visit to Myanmar, January 17, 2020. (Source: [CGTN/YouTube](#))

However, just weeks after Xi's visit saw the two sides take steps to expedite CMEC projects, Beijing's plans have run into new problems. CMEC projects are running late, and in an op-ed piece published on the eve of his Myanmar visit, Xi stressed the need for CMEC projects to be moved from "the conceptual stage to

concrete planning and implementation” ([New Light of Myanmar](#), January 16). The coronavirus pandemic has emerged as the latest challenge in the long list of obstacles that have slowed CMEC projects over the years. According to Khriezo Yhome, a New Delhi-based analyst of developments in Myanmar, it “may be too early to assess the impact of the coronavirus crisis on CMEC projects,” given that the pandemic is still only at an “initial phase” in Myanmar; however, there is “no doubt” that it “will slow down the implementation of CMEC projects in the short-term.” [1]

The CMEC is a Major Priority for China

The 1,700 kilometer-long CMEC runs from Kunming in China’s Yunnan province to Mandalay in central Myanmar, where it then forks both southward to Yangon and westward to Kyaukphyu. Kyaukphyu, which is CMEC’s maritime gateway, has enormous strategic value given its location on Myanmar’s Bay of Bengal coast. CMEC is expected to bestow China with immense economic and strategic benefits. It provides landlocked Yunnan province with access to the sea and will boost its economy. Importantly, successful construction of the CMEC would also strengthen China’s presence in the Indian Ocean. It would offer imported products from South Asia, West Asia, and Africa with a shorter route to the Chinese mainland, thereby cutting transport time and costs. China’s trade is already drawing on some of these benefits: gas and oil have been transported via pipelines on this route since 2013 and 2017, respectively. CMEC will reduce China’s dependence on the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, thus lessening its vulnerability to oil imports and other trade from being choked off by hostile powers in the event of a conflict. CMEC’s completion is therefore a priority for China.

Consequently, Beijing has been pushing Myanmar to speed up implementation of CMEC projects. Its leverage to do so has increased over the last couple of years, as Myanmar’s relations with the West have deteriorated over alleged atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. The Myanmar government also faces allegations of genocide in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague. As international pressure on Myanmar increases its dependence on the PRC for diplomatic and other support, ties between the two states have deepened. This has accordingly opened up space for Beijing to nudge Naypyidaw on project delivery. Xi’s visit, which came just a little over a month after State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi defended her government at the ICJ, seems to have been timed to take advantage of this opportunity. It was the “right moment” for him to push Myanmar to deliver on its project commitments ([Observer Research Foundation](#), January 16). Given the priority it accords to CMEC and the inordinate delays in decision making and implementation on the part of Myanmar, Xi’s focus on expediting projects was to be expected.

Costs and Concerns

Many in Myanmar recognize the potential benefits of CMEC projects. They recognize that CMEC offers Myanmar the opportunity to modernize its decrepit infrastructure, which is essential for economic growth ([China Brief](#), September 19, 2018). It is also seen as having the potential to create jobs for Myanmar’s youth

and to boost its trade ([Frontier Myanmar](#), September 26, 2018). Still, the Myanmar government is taking a cautious approach to CMEC projects, and their high cost has been an issue of major concern. The Muse-Mandalay section of a planned railway project will cost almost \$9 billion ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 14, 2019); the New Yangon City project carries a price tag of \$1.68 billion ([Frontier Myanmar](#), March 8, 2019); and the Kyaukphyu port was originally pegged at \$10 billion (\$7.3 billion for the port and \$2.7 billion for the SEZ).

Project price tags have prompted experts to question the need for Myanmar to pursue such expensive projects, and to question their economic viability ([Myanmar Times](#), November 15, 2019). The Kyaukphyu port, for instance, will bring only limited returns to Myanmar unless the accompanying SEZ attracts significant business and flourishes. However, that seems unlikely given Kyaukphyu's distance from Yangon and other commercial hubs ([Observer Research Foundation](#), January 14). Moreover, there are fears that costly projects would increase Myanmar's debt burden—and given its extreme dependence on China, push the country into a “debt trap” of the sort experienced by Sri Lanka ([Mizzima](#), March 7; [China Brief](#), January 5, 2019). Additionally, local communities are apprehensive that mega-projects will cause environmental degradation and mass displacement of locals. The Kyaukphyu project, for instance, has evoked strong opposition from local fisherman and farmers, who fear that fishing restrictions and the acquisition of land by the government will result in loss of their livelihoods ([Mizzima](#), December 8, 2019).

Delays in Decision-Making

Several of the apprehensions that CMEC projects have evoked in recent years are similar to the questions that were raised with regard to the \$3.6 billion Myitstone hydropower project. Activists in the Kachin State (where the project was to be located) have argued that while 90% of the electricity generated was to be sold to China, they would suffer loss of livelihoods and end up bearing the costs of environmental degradation. Massive protests erupted, forcing Myanmar's then-President, Thein Sein, to suspend the project in 2011. Currently, the project remains suspended—and should Myanmar ultimately decide to cancel it, it will have to not only compensate China but possibly suffer political blowback for that decision. The government cannot cancel the project on account of the implications it would have for Sino-Myanmar relations—but it cannot revive it either, as that would provoke mass unrest across the country ([China Brief](#), April 24, 2019).

The Myitstone experience has prompted Myanmar's present government to move cautiously on CMEC projects. It has avoided closing deals swiftly or simply endorsing Chinese proposals. Approvals are given to only those Chinese project proposals that conform to Myanmar's priorities, policies and procedures. Consequently, just a fraction of proposed projects have been approved so far ([Frontier Myanmar](#), May 24, 2019). Of the 30 project proposals that China put forward, Suu Kyi reportedly signed just nine CMEC “early harvest” projects during the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April 2019 ([Frontier Myanmar](#), September 26, 2019).

The Myanmar government has renegotiated project terms, trimmed down projects, and bargained hard to bring down costs. The Kyaukphyu port project, for instance, has been scaled down to include just two berths from the originally planned ten. Its cost has been slashed by 80% and the China-Myanmar holding ratio was brought down from 85:15 to 70:30 ([Myanmar Times](#), July 12, 2018). Myanmar's hard bargaining with China has taken time, but it has been able to change project terms to better suit its interests and development priorities.



Image: Representatives of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone Management Committee and the PRC state-owned CITIC Consortium sign the framework agreement for the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone Deep Sea Port Project in the Myanmar capital of Naypyidaw, November 8, 2018. (Source: [Myanmar Ministry of Information](#))



Image: a graphic showing the intended location of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone on the Bay of Bengal coast in southwest Myanmar. (Source: [The Irrawaddy](#))

Small Steps Forward

While bureaucratic red tape has always slowed the pace of decision-making in Myanmar, enhanced scrutiny of CMEC project proposals under the National League of Democracy government has further added to delays. However, while Myanmar's decision-making and implementation of projects may not be going according to Beijing's plans or timetables, things are moving forward, albeit slowly. This is evident even with regard to the highly controversial Kyaukphyu port. Although rights activists continue to raise objections to the environmental and social costs of the project, differences between the Myanmar and Chinese governments "have been resolved at least on paper over financing of the project and scale of the project to be developed in a phased manner," after the Myanmar government renegotiated project terms in 2018 and following Xi's recent visit to Naypyidaw. [2]

During Xi's visit, the two sides signed a concession agreement and a shareholders' agreement relating to the Kyaukphyu project ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 18). In the weeks that followed, a consortium led by China's state-owned corporation CITIC indicated intent to initiate bidding for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) consultant for the Kyaukphyu port project ([Myanmar Times](#), March 11).

Coronavirus Strikes

However, whatever momentum Xi's visit may have provided to CMEC projects could wane in the coming months, with the coronavirus pandemic posing new challenges. Implementation of CMEC projects is unlikely to escape the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic. So far, the pandemic has not hit Myanmar as hard as it has either China or its other neighbors. Still, the pandemic has already dealt a blow to Myanmar's economy since China dominates the country's tourism, trade, agricultural, and industrial sectors. Supply lines have been disrupted and have impacted agriculture, aquaculture, and seafood sectors. Chinese businessmen have returned home taking their equipment and machinery with them ([Frontier Myanmar](#), February 19). The shutting down of border crossings and trade has cost Myanmar dearly: since January 27, it is said to have lost trade worth \$8 million per day via the Muse border gate alone ([The Irrawaddy](#), February 11).

Although Myanmar has a roughly 2,200 kilometer-long border with China and has almost a million Chinese visiting annually, coronavirus infections have so far come primarily from Western countries, and not China. However, anti-Chinese sentiments have always been strong in Myanmar and could surge—even violently—if cross-border infections were to rise in the weeks ahead. Violence targeting Chinese workers in Myanmar could trigger an exodus that would likely impact project implementation. Beijing appears eager to head off such problems in Myanmar by spreading a positive message about its global outreach, and has sent a team of medical experts and supplies (masks, gloves, overalls, and testing kits) to Myanmar ([CGTN](#), April 8).

Conclusion

The Chinese government has begun acting to normalize economic engagement with Myanmar: for instance, customs clearance at trading posts along the Sino-Myanmar border has been eased, and border trade has been revived ([Eleven Myanmar](#), April 3). According to PRC Ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai, Beijing has reaffirmed its commitment to “carry on” with all “agreed-upon [CMEC] investments and projects... despite the impact of the coronavirus” crisis. However, projects that need “exchanges between technical staff” of the two countries “may be impacted” ([Myanmar Times](#), March 30).

It is likely that, as the coronavirus crisis in Myanmar worsens, momentum on CMEC projects could wane. The Myanmar government can be expected to focus on dealing with the viral outbreak and preventing its spread, as well as limiting the pandemic’s impact on livelihoods. Work on the projects could take a backseat for some time. As for China, it “may want to keep the focus on humanitarian assistance in the immediate-term.” [3] Preoccupation with the coronavirus’ deadly impact could therefore see the two governments put CMEC project implementation on the backburner in the coming months.

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Notes

[1] Author’s interview with Khriezo Yhome, research fellow at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation’s Neighbourhood Regional Studies Initiative, April 4.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

**Mind the Trap: What Basing Rights in Djibouti and Sri Lanka Reveal
About the Limitations of Debt as a Tool of Chinese Military Expansion**

By Scott Wingo

Introduction

On November 24, 2019, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa told reporters during his first interview as president that he hoped to renegotiate the terms of the deal that gave a Chinese firm a 99-year lease over the Hambantota Port ([Strategic News International](#), November 24, 2019). The port had been handed over as Sri Lanka struggled to make loan payments on the loss-making Chinese-built facility—thereby leading to debates as to whether the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had set a “debt trap” by intentionally lending Sri Lanka more than it could afford to repay, in hopes of eventually foreclosing on the port ([China Brief](#), January 5, 2019). The subtext was that with a leasehold in hand, the PRC could use the port as a naval installation geared toward patrolling Indian Ocean shipping lanes.



Images: Two different heads of state, and two very different relationships with China. Image left: Xi Jinping accompanies Djiboutian President Omar Ismail Guellah for a welcoming reception during the latter’s visit to Beijing in November 2017. PRC state media used the occasion to announce a “strategic relationship” between the two countries (Source: [Xinhua](#), November 23, 2017). Image right: Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in a November 2019 interview, during which he declared intent to renegotiate the terms of the agreement that gave the PRC a 99-year lease (and de facto control) of the Hambantota Port (Source: [Sri Lanka Guardian](#), November 25, 2019).

As can be observed by the Sri Lankan government’s desire to renegotiate, this has not happened. To the contrary, Sri Lankan security policy has trended against China since the debt-equity swap occurred. A comparison with Djibouti, where the PRC has established its only overseas military base to date, illuminates

how this came to pass. In both Djibouti and Sri Lanka, Beijing has used infrastructure loans as a means to entice political leaders to allow naval access. However, three factors led to very different outcomes: 1) the recipient countries' inherent willingness to host a base; 2) the degree of political competition faced by recipient leaders; and 3) the degree to which recipient leaders can diversify toward different sources of funding to reduce overreliance on China.

Djibouti

Most countries are not interested in hosting foreign troops, but Djibouti is an exception. With little in the way of natural resources, arable land, or population, it has few economic advantages other than its location at an important maritime chokepoint. It has capitalized on its location in part via basing revenues from foreign militaries, six of which had forces stationed there before China's arrival ([SIPRI](#), April 2019). All six countries negotiated access with one of Djibouti's two post-independence leaders: the current President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999, or his predecessor (and uncle) Hassan Gouled Aptidon. Such concentration of power has made it easier for the Djiboutian government to handle the inevitable domestic objections to foreign bases, but did not always sit well with many international investors.



Image: PLA Navy Rear Admiral Guan Bailin, commanding officer of the "Harmonious Mission-2017" mission of the visiting PLA Navy hospital ship PEACE ARK (和平方舟, Heping Fangzhou), shakes hands with Chief of the Djiboutian Navy Captain Abdourahman Aden Cher at the Djibouti port facility (August 23, 2017). The PRC has been successful in establishing Djibouti as a base for naval operations, in contrast with the difficulties it has encountered in Sri Lanka. (Image source: [China Military Online](#))

This changed with the arrival of China. Inspired by its own experience building clusters of economic activity at home, the PRC bet big on Djibouti as a logistics hub, beginning with agreements to build a railway to neighboring landlocked Ethiopia (2011), a parallel water pipeline (2011), and a new seaport (2013) ([CNA](#), July 1, 2017). Construction of the port was not yet complete when, in January 2016, the PRC Foreign Ministry announced that a naval facility would be built adjacent to the new port ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), January 21, 2016). The infrastructure cluster was predominantly backed by debt from the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim), and Djibouti has indeed run into trouble repaying it since the port's May 2017 opening ([IMF](#), April 6, 2017; [PRC Ministry of Commerce](#), May 25, 2017). However, Djibouti's debt distress came only *after* agreeing to a Chinese base. This was not a "trap"—it was a voluntary exchange of bank credit for naval access.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka shares Djibouti's potential as a resupply site for Indian Ocean naval patrols, but its fractious political system leaves less room for enduring arrangements with foreign powers. During Sri Lanka's bloody, decades-long civil war, China was one of the few countries to back the Sri Lankan government ([National Interest](#), November 28, 2018). This fact was not forgotten by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who took power in 2005 and hoped to find outside funding to rebuild from both the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the war, which ended in 2009. Like Guelleh, Rajapaksa relied heavily on Chinese funding. This included projects in and around the capital of Colombo but also a now-notorious grouping in his hometown of Hambantota. Home to only 40,000 people, Hambantota managed to draw over \$1 billion in loans from China Exim for a new deepwater seaport, airport, and cricket stadium. The idea of a port at Hambantota had been circulating for years, but a feasibility study had ruled it uncompetitive with the country's existing major port at Colombo, and few other financiers were interested ([CSIS](#), April 2, 2018).

Indeed, while the major PRC state-owned conglomerate China Harbour was building a debt-fueled white elephant as a favor to the president, rival China Merchants had been taking an actual equity stake in expanding the port at Colombo. China Merchants was backed partially by a \$300 million loan from the Japanese-led multilateral Asian Development Bank ([Asian Development Bank](#), May 16, 2013). Colombo quickly outpaced Hambantota, which could not bring in enough shipping traffic to cover its debt payments. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Sri Lanka and promised \$391 million in equity investment for further improvements at Hambantota by both China Harbour and China Merchants ([China Brief](#), January 5, 2019). In other words, Sri Lanka would not be taking on more debt, and China Merchants was moving in on China Harbour's territory. Lest anyone forget what the Chinese government hoped to gain, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarine visited Colombo at the time of Xi's visit and was followed by another six weeks later ([PRC Ministry of Defense](#), November 27, 2014).

By 2015, it was Sri Lanka's turn to question the arrangement at Hambantota. Running on an anti-corruption platform, opposition leader Maithripala Sirisena scored an upset victory in that year's presidential election,

despite money from a Chinese-backed Hambantota construction fund allegedly finding its way into Rajapaksa's campaign chest ([The Hindu](#), July 1, 2018). Under financial pressure from its predecessor's debts, the new government in June 2016 came to a \$1.5 billion loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which wanted budget cuts ([IMF](#), June 4, 2016). Most of Sri Lanka's debt was owed to private bondholders with zero tolerance for missed payments—as of December 2016, the IMF estimated all Chinese loans *combined* at only 10 percent of Sri Lanka's outstanding external debt—and most of these funds went to more productive projects ([IMF](#), April 6, 2017). This left Hambantota, a symbol of the last administration's cronyism, on the chopping block. In July 2016, the Sri Lankan government proposed a resolution to the problem: cancelation of all debts at the port and airport in exchange for Chinese equity stakes.



Image: An undated photo of the port facility at Hambantota, on the south coast of Sri Lanka. The Hambantota Port has struggled financially, as most shipping traffic for the country still uses the port facilities at Colombo. In exchange for debt relief connected to the construction costs of Hambantota, in December 2017 the Sri Lankan government turned over a controlling stake in the port to the PRC state-owned corporation China Merchants Port Holdings Company. (Image source: [Belt and Road News](#))

Beijing refused the offer. PRC Ambassador Yi Xianliang said that such a deal “was not possible according to China's laws” ([Sunday Times \(SL\)](#), July 31, 2016). He did not elaborate, but any objections were almost certainly related to the losses faced by the Exim Bank. By October 2016, the parties had found a workaround: the Hambantota port facility was to be placed under the custody of a joint venture, in which a Chinese investor would take a majority stake. In exchange, the Chinese investor would assume the port's remaining debts, meaning that Exim would have claims on the port's future profits (were they to materialize). Sri Lanka was given a choice between China Merchants and China Harbour as the investor and ultimately sided with

China Merchants, which had earned itself a good name with the Colombo port expansion ([Forbes](#), October 28, 2016).

This deal allowed the Sri Lankan government to remove a financial albatross from its shoulders; it also allowed China Merchants to edge its rival out of Sri Lanka, and for China Exim to reduce its losses. Notably absent in this deal was the Chinese security establishment. China Merchants owns a majority stake in the company tasked with providing security at the port, indicating that the port could probably be used for intelligence-gathering or sanctions-busting purposes ([Thorne & Spevack](#), April 17, 2018). However, the terms of the handover agreement explicitly bar naval access without express Sri Lankan permission, and such permission has yet to be given. Requests for further Chinese submarine visits have been denied since a May 2017 visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Since the handover, ships from the Japanese and Australian navies have visited Sri Lankan ports ([Japanese Ministry of Defense](#), October 30, 2018; [Australian Department of Defence](#), March 30, 2019). Sri Lanka has signaled sovereignty over Hambantota itself by relocating its navy's Southern Command there, and holding joint exercises in the area with the U.S. Navy ([Reuters](#), July 2, 2018; [U.S. Navy](#), April 22, 2019). This does not imply that Sri Lanka will take sides—it has accepted one donated Chinese warship and turned down a status of forces agreement with the United States—but rather that it intends to stay neutral ([PRC Ministry of Defense](#), August 24, 2019; [SCMP](#), July 8, 2019). This trend toward diversification has been mirrored in economics, as Sri Lanka has taken on projects from the Asian Development Bank, India, Japan, the Chinese-led multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and even a refinery project at Hambantota to be built by a company owned by an Indian parliamentarian ([ADB](#), December 31, 2019; [Nikkei Asian Review](#), May 20, 2019; [JICA](#), March 11, 2019; [AIIB](#), April 4, 2019; [Economic Times](#), March 30, 2019).

China briefly attempted to regain some influence as one of the few countries to remain open to Rajapaksa's attempted comeback during a 2018 constitutional crisis, but his bid to return to office did not succeed ([Rajapaksa](#) Twitter, October 27, 2018). In November 2019, Rajapaksa's younger brother, Gotabaya, took office as President, but so far has not turned full tilt back towards Beijing. Why did China back the elder Rajapaksa's reelection campaign in 2015, initially resist the Sri Lankan-proposed debt-equity swap, and accommodate Rajapaksa's attempted comeback even *after* the port had changed hands? The obvious answer is that the port's handover was a significant setback for Chinese interests: the PRC took on \$1.1 billion in distressed debt and an empty port, and in exchange lost the prospect of naval access. This was not a successful "trap": it was a failed iteration of the same loans-for-military access strategy that succeeded in Djibouti.

Conclusion

It is difficult to convert economic influence into military access without either some degree of willingness on the part of the recipient—as was the case in Djibouti—or an outright invasion of the type which served the

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British Empire in Hong Kong, but has since happily faded into history. Competition from both domestic political rivals and international sources of funding, where they exist, make militarization even less likely. This dynamic can even work with rivals from within China, as happened when China Merchants used funding from a multilateral development bank to best its rival state-owned enterprise China Harbour. Chinese basing ambitions can succeed in countries with few economic alternatives and low elite turnover—Cambodia fits this bill, and perhaps Pakistan—but are unlikely to succeed elsewhere, regardless of debt.

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**The PLA Navy's ZHANLAN Training Series:
Supporting Offensive Strike on the High Seas**

By Roderick Lee

Introduction

In early 2020, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted the fifth iteration of its "ZHANLAN" far seas training series ([Ministry of National Defense](#), February 2, 2019). [1] The PLAN established ZHANLAN in 2016 as an annual far seas training event, with each iteration growing in complexity ([Ministry of National Defense](#), May 27, 2016). Live fire and combat training often draws the most attention during such PLA training events, but the critical highlight of ZHANLAN-2020A was the training focus on combat support, rather than kinetic operations. The key takeaway from this training event is that the PLAN is developing the proficiencies to sustain limited offensive strikes against U.S. forces—perhaps as far out as Hawaii.

This article argues that the PLAN is close to being able to execute offensive naval operations outside of the first island chain (and perhaps beyond the second island chain) in a wartime environment. The PLA has long discussed the concept of conducting offensive naval operations beyond the first island chain, and by comparing observables from the ZHANLAN-2020A training event with the list of proficiencies necessary to conduct deep strike, the PLAN is likely close to operationalizing this concept.



Image: Vessels from the ZHANLAN-2020A training task force sail in a parallel formation (undated). The FUYU class (Type 901) combat support vessel CHAGAN HU (查干湖) (Hull 967) is identifiable in the center. (Source: [CCTV/Youtube](#), February 25)

The ZHANLAN-2020A training task force consisted of four vessels: DONGDIAO-class AGI (AGI-857); FUYU class (Type 901) support ship CHAGAN HU (查干湖) (AOR-967); LUYANG III class (Type 052D) guided missile destroyer HOHHOT (DDG-161); and JIANGKAI II guided missile frigate XIANNING (FFG-500). A fifth

vessel, the ocean-going tug NANTUO-195 (南拖-195), took part in a limited role during the task force’s return journey.

A History of the ZHANLAN Series

In 2016, the PLA described a then-South Sea Fleet training deployment as the PLAN’s first “annual normalized far seas training mission” ([Ministry of National Defense](#), May 27, 2016). The PLA subsequently began to refer to the annual Southern Theater Command (STC) Navy (STN) far seas training deployment as “ZHANLAN” (湛蓝). [2] Authoritative press sources have conclusively identified the previous iterations of ZHANLAN-2017A, ZHANLAN-2018A, and ZHANLAN-2019A ([China Military Online](#), September 28, 2018; [China Net](#), February 21, 2018; [First Naval Hospital of Southern Theater Command](#), March 4, 2019).

What About “B”?

Calling these training events “ZHANLAN-(Year)A” suggests that the PLAN also holds a “ZHANLAN-(Year)B” event. Although there is no observable consistent at-sea activity that can be tied to a ZHANLAN-B, one possibility is that phase “B” could be an in-harbor or tabletop event held after the task group completes the at-sea “A” phase.

Although no source identifies the 2020 STN far seas training task deployment as ZHANLAN-2020A, the deployment has all the characteristics of the ZHANLAN series. The following table summarizes the progress seen over the last five iterations of ZHANLAN in order to place the 2020 iteration in better context:

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Time	04 - 27 May	02 Feb - 7 Mar	01 - 25 Feb	16 Jan - 18 Feb	17 Jan - 25 Feb
Duration (days)	23	25	25	34	41
Distance (NM)	8,000	8,000	8,000	10,000	14,000
Training Focus	Basic warfare disciplines [3]	Formation air defense [4]	Naval combined arms [5]	Joint operations [6]	Far seas combat support
Integration	Basic integration of surface combatants and limited integration of embarked rotary wing assets. [7] [8]	Rotary wing assets now also used to provide early warning for surface combatants. [9]	Integrates shore-based air defenses and fixed-wing early warning aircraft into task group operations. [10]	Task group integrates Air Force, Rocket Force, and Strategic Support Force. [11] STC Headquarters personnel present. [12]	STC Headquarters staff play a larger role in task group command (task group deputy commander). [13]
Notes	Likely served as a baseline for future iterations.	Event likely complicated by ongoing PLA reforms.	First time “deep land attack” mentioned. [14]	First time the task group is referred to as “joint” (联合, <i>lianhe</i>).	Transit calculations suggest task group could have reached Hawaii.

The Concept of Offensive Naval Operations in the Far Seas

The PLA Academy of Military Science's 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* (军事战略, *Junshi Zhanlue*) states that the PLAN should place an emphasis on deep, offensive, joint, and asymmetric operations in the future. [15] This publication characterizes “deep operations” (突出纵深作战, *tuchu zongshen zuozhan*) as coordinating operations in both near and far seas in order to confront both the frontline and rear areas of the enemy. [16] “Offensive operations” (突出攻势作战, *tuchu gongshi zuozhan*) are strikes conducted by maritime formations, submarines, and aircraft in order to paralyze the enemy and seize the initiative. [17]

The PLA National Defense University's 2017 edition of an identically titled *Science of Military Strategy* (军事战略, *Junshi Zhanlue*) discusses using maneuver operations in the far seas to keep the enemy away from the near seas. This publication also discusses the need to carry out “far seas sabotage and guerilla attack operations” and to “carry out surprise raids against enemy forces at sea”. [18] These two publications make it apparent that conceptually, the PLA places great value on far seas naval offensive operations.

A RAND Corporation study from 2000 provides a useful framework to understand the prerequisite skills for naval force competencies, to include “deep strike” missions. [19] The study identifies the following technologies and integrating factors as being necessary for “multi-mission air control, limited sea control, and deep strike proficiencies”:

Technologies	Integrating Factors
Advanced Carriers	Advanced Fleet Exercises
Underway Replenishment Ships	Joint Exercises
Basic Satellites	Advanced Damage Control and Anti-Air Warfare
Advanced Radars	Advanced Maintenance
Advanced Naval Missiles	Advanced Logistics
Advanced Datalinks	Underway Replenishment
	Advanced Intelligence

During ZHANLAN-2020A the PLAN conducted training in at least four of the seven integrating factors: jointness, advanced damage control, underway replenishment, and advanced intelligence. The following sections discuss how training conducted during ZHANLAN-2020A is consistent with these factors.

Jointness

The PLAN's ability to leverage joint PLA assets at the tactical level drops off precipitously beyond the second island chain. However, any PLAN operations in this area during wartime must still be in alignment with the

overall joint plan. The PLA recognizes this and states that even relatively independent naval operations in the far seas must still be conducted within the overall joint operational scheme. [20]

To this end, the PLAN elevated the importance of understanding the joint operational picture at the tactical decision-making level during ZHANLAN-2020A. The PLA pushed command staff from STC headquarters down to the task group starting in 2019, but these officers filled relatively minor roles. This year, the STC Joint Staff Department Bureau Director, Senior Captain Ying Hongbo (应洪波), served as the task group's deputy commander ([CCTV/YouTube](#), February 25). [21] The presence of a senior officer from the STC Joint Staff Department likely ensured that tactical commanders within the task group were constantly aware of the overall joint operational scheme within a training environment.



Image: Sailors of the LUYANG III class guided missile destroyer HOHHOT (DDG-161) man their watch stations during the ZHANLAN-2020A PLA Navy training deployment (undated).

(Source: [CCTV/YouTube](#), February 25)

Advanced Damage Control

The PLAN made a notable effort to improve their damage control training during ZHANLAN-2020A. Damaged ships that manage to return to port (either under their own power or under tow) more often than not can be repaired and put back into service quickly. The ability to prevent the loss of a damaged ship to fire or flooding, as well as the ability to recover damaged ships, is a critical element in preserving combat effectiveness. However, doing so far from one's own shores is extremely difficult.

The PLAN has incorporated a limited amount of damage control training into all of its ZHANLAN iterations, but this year's iteration featured the most complex damage control training to date. In addition to shipboard

damage control, the PLAN also used the ocean-going tug NANTUO-195 (南拖-195) to conduct rescue towing, supplementary damage control, and fleet battle damage control during the return leg of the voyage ([Navy News](#), February 20). Specifically, NANTUO-195 helped put out a simulated fire on the FUYU-class AOR-967, deployed supplemental damage control personnel to help AOR-967's crew manage simulated flooding, and initiated a rescue tow of AOR-967 ([Navy News](#), February 20).

Underway Replenishment

A naval formation is lethal only as long as it can keep its magazines filled with munitions. Historically, magazine depth was not a major issue for the PLAN, given its expectation that wartime operations would occur mostly on its own doorstep—where trips back to port would be short. However, in the far seas, the PLAN faces the same challenges as the U.S. Navy when it comes to magazine depth. [22]

The PLAN is at least beginning to think about how to address this problem in the far seas. ZHANLAN-2020A featured the first known instance of the PLAN training to transfer ordnance (besides naval artillery rounds) while underway outside of the first island chain. During an underway replenishment (UNREP) training evolution, the PLAN transferred at least one probable HQ-10 close range surface to air missile canister from AOR-967 to LUYANG III-class DDG-161 through alongside connected replenishment. The PLAN also transferred at least one lightweight torpedo through vertical replenishment using a Z-9 helicopter ([CCTV](#), February 20).



Image: Sailors of the ZHANLAN-2020A training task force conduct underway replenishment (UNREP) operations (undated). (Source: [CCTV/YouTube](#), February 25)

Given the FUYU-class replenishment ship's primary purpose of providing logistical support to the PLAN's growing aircraft carrier fleet, this training evolution builds basic proficiencies for replenishment ships to transfer aircraft ordnance to aircraft carriers in future training events. Additionally, UNREP of munitions is also a prerequisite for surface combatants to conduct reloads at sea. Although the PLAN has not demonstrated the ability to reload HQ-10s or any vertically launched munitions at sea, training surface combatant crews to transfer munitions is a step in the right direction.

Advanced Intelligence

Even if a naval formation is well resourced, the further it wanders from friendly shores, the more it must rely on its own organic capabilities to sense what is around it. Shipboard sensors on major PLAN surface combatants provide foundational situational awareness to the formation commander. However, the PLAN recognizes that it also needs to improve intelligence support for distant seas deployments. [23]

The PLA attached DONGDIAO-class AGI (AGI-857) and elements from the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) to the task group during ZHANLAN-2020A, likely in order to provide supplemental intelligence capabilities ([Ministry of National Defense](#), February 21; [CCTV/YouTube](#), January 27). Although Chinese press does not discuss what role the AGI or SSF personnel played during this training event, one can extrapolate reasonable ways that these assets could augment the task group's organic intelligence capabilities.

Although it is nearly impossible to identify what specific sensors an AGI brings to the table, it is safe to assume that a DONGDIAO-class AGI features additional sensors that are not outfitted on PLAN surface combatants. Furthermore, AGI's inherently provide additional processing, exploitation, and dissemination capabilities through embarked computing capacity and specialist personnel.

Without additional details, the presence of SSF personnel embarked on a task group can indicate several capabilities. Since the SSF is tasked with space, cyber, and information operations, it is reasonable to assume that these personnel bring at least one of these capabilities to the table. [24] Any one of the three provides supplemental intelligence capabilities not typically available to naval tactical commanders.

Conclusion

The Department of Defense (DOD) already acknowledges in its *China Military Power Report* that the PLA is "developing power projection capabilities and concepts of operation in order to conduct offensive operations within the second island chain, in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and in some cases, globally." [25] ZHANLAN-2020A demonstrates that the PLA is probably closer to operationalizing those capabilities and concepts than some DOD officials are comfortable with acknowledging. The evidence from ZHANLAN and other training evolutions suggests that the PLA Navy is making significant progress in joint operations,

damage control, logistics, and intelligence—to the extent that they may soon be able to operate on the doorstep of U.S. Navy port facilities in wartime.

This new reality will inevitably present the United States with new challenges. Preexisting time phased force deployment data (the driving information regarding how the United States will get necessary materiel into theater) may require reconsideration as the geographic threat envelope expands. U.S. planners may also be forced to rethink priorities on defended asset lists, as critical assets previously assumed to be safe come under threat from PLAN maritime strike forces. Although the time window in which the PLAN will operationalize the capability to conduct deep strikes still lies in the future, the time for U.S. decisionmakers to fully process this new reality is now.

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Notes

[1] Although “ZHANLAN” translates roughly to “Deep Blue” or “Azure”, the article uses “ZHANLAN” to maintain consistency.

[2] The PLAN's “JIDONG” (机动) training series is not an annual or regularized event.

[3] [Ministry of National Defense](#), May 27, 2015.

[4] [Xinhua](#), February 17, 2015.

[5] [People.cn](#), February 25, 2018.

[6] [Ministry of National Defense](#), January 18, 2019.

[7] [China News](#), May 27, 2019.

[8] [Ministry of National Defense](#), May 27, 2015.

[9] [Xinhua](#), February 17, 2015.

[10] [CCTV](#), February 20, 2018.

[11] [Ministry of National Defense](#), February 2, 2019.

[12] [YouTube](#), February 18, 2019.

[13] [YouTube](#), February 25.

[14] [People.cn](#), February 25, 2018.

[15] [The Science of Military Strategy](#), pg. 216, PDF pg. 234

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] See the PLA National Defense University's 2017 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 342

[19] Tellis, Bially, Layne, and McPherson, *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000). https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1110.html.

[20] *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), pp. 216 and 234.

[21] The senior-most STC officer deployed to the 2019 task group was a regiment grade officer serving as the task group's command group deputy director (编队指挥组副组长). SCAPT Ying Hongbo is a division grade officer- an elevation relative to 2019.

[22] The PLAN is already proficient in conducting underway replenishment of fuel, water, and stores.

[23] See the PLA National Defense University's 2015 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, pg. 346-347.

[24] Costello, John and McReynolds, Joe *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*. Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2018.

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1651760/chinas-strategic-support-force-a-force-for-a-new-era/>

[25] See Department of Defense, Annual Report: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2019.

https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf
