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Mapping Everything, Everywhere at Once: Examining New Advances in PLA Battlefield Reconnaissance Capabilities

By Kieran Green

Introduction

Over the past decade, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has greatly improved its surveying and mapping (测绘) capabilities. This initiative has come at the behest of China's Party-state leadership, which views access

to high-quality topographical data as instrumental to "fighting and winning local wars under informatized conditions" (Geospatial World, January 31, 2011). **[1]** Consequently, the PLA has enriched the quality of its surveying and mapping systems by integrating information from civilian sources, developing new platforms for sharing battlefield reconnaissance intelligence and providing local commanders with increased access to geographic and navigational data. This mix of technical innovation and institutional reform portends the fruition of PLA efforts to become better tactically adept and more capable of undertaking complex missions such as joint operations.

(Image: Surveying and Mapping Emergency Support Elements performing in the field, **source**: China Military Online**)**

The rationale behind China's drive to enhance its military surveying and mapping capabilities can be gleaned from authoritative and semi-authoritative academic texts published by the PLA, which posit that access to accurate geospatial information is a lynchpin factor enabling modern joint operations. **[2]** For instance, books such as the *Science of Campaigns* (战役学) and *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* (联合

战役信息作战教程) note that highly accurate knowledge of local terrain is crucial for enabling units to conduct complex maneuvers and direct effective long-range fires. **[3]** Moreover, operational guidance books such as the 2013 version of the *Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) assert that surveying and mapping data are core components of modern "informatized combat support systems" (信息化作战保障体系) that could be used to facilitate "operations against Taiwan and other overseas contingencies" (对台作战和海外军事行动). **[4]** Subsequent editions of the *Science of Military Strategy* further elaborate on this point, with both the 2017 and 2020 versions suggesting that military maps, remote sensing data, imagery and other battlefield environment intelligence resources should be integrated into a unified "joint combat information system" (网络信息体系的联合作战体系) in order to coordinate cross-domain wartime operations. **[5]** Both texts also feature sections calling for the construction of interoperable military-civilian infrastructure, under the aegis of military-civil fusion (军民融合), capable of sharing topographical, meteorological and navigational data. **[6]**

The increased importance that the PLA ascribes to surveying and mapping is reflected in its evolving organizational structure and mission set. Currently, responsibility for conducting surveying and mapping tasks lies with the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF), which is the PLA's main organ for gathering and distributing battlefield spatial intelligence. The SSF inherited these responsibilities from the former General Staff Department (GSD) Survey, Mapping and Navigation Bureau in 2016, as part of the broader set of reforms initiated under General Secretary Xi Jinping that aimed to streamline the PLA's organizational structure (China Brief, May 19, 2019). As such, surveying and mapping units are grouped with other components of the PLA tasked with providing information assurance, including those which conduct electronic warfare and oversee PLA space-based assets such as its Beidou navigational satellite constellation. **[7]** This shift is not merely an exercise in organizational rebranding, but is rather reflective of an effort to both deepen and widen the scope of the PLASSF's information support capabilities. The comprehensive nature of this approach is reflected in the term "battlefield environment support" (战场环境保障]), which is a phrase used by the PLA to describe the cross-cutting nature of modern surveying and mapping missions and encompasses a broad range of mission sets ranging from military navigation to oceanography. **[8]** The PLA has also expanded the range of surveying and mapping efforts beyond their traditional focus on supporting ground forces, with one PLASSF brigade commander noting that it holds the goal of "moving from primarily providing support for land-based operations to providing multi-dimensional and multi-domain support" (从陆上保障向多维空间保障转变) (China Military Online [CMO], July 15, 2020).

Charting the Battlespace

In order to fulfill its new battlefield environment support mission, the PLASSF has pursued two main lines of effort focusing on broadening the quantity of data that it collects, while also ensuring that commanders in the field can easily and reliably access those resources. This first line of effort has focused on remediating battlespace data "blind spots" for the PLA by mapping environs that were previously difficult to access such as "dense woodlands, deserts, and isolated islands" as well as areas along China's periphery (CMO, December 9, 2020). In pursuing this undertaking, the PLASSF has benefited extensively from cooperation with civilian bureaucracies such as the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), which have aided in the construction of dual-purpose topographical databases. For instance, PLASSF military representatives routinely liaison with entities such as MNR's National Satellite Ocean Application Center (国家卫星海洋应用中心) for the purpose of gathering marine remote sensing and geospatial data (National Satellite Ocean Application Service [NSOAS], no date; National Satellite Ocean Application Service [NSOAS] , February 24, 2020). The SSF's research branches such as Information Engineering University (中国人民解放军战略支援部队信息工程大学) have also worked hand-in-glove with civilian institutions to draft several new regulations and technical standards aimed at controlling and upgrading the collection of surveying and mapping data (MNR, April 23, 2010). **[9]**. Crucially, these standards include provisions for improving the precision of geospatial information collected on overseas targets (*Fig. 1*), suggesting that China's civilian space-based infrastructure is used to collect battlefield reconnaissance information to support PLA missions abroad.

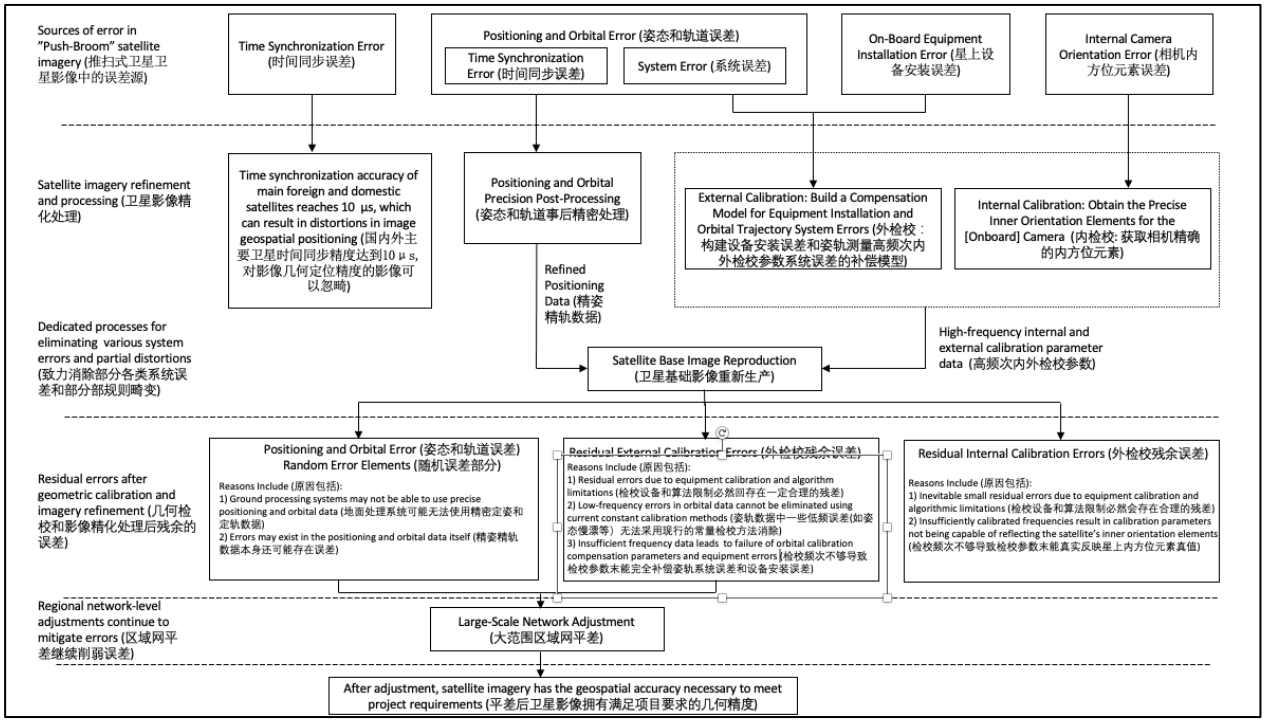

Figure 1: Excerpt from a draft standard published by MNR and co-developed by the SSF outlining procedures for gathering and refining accurate geospatial satellite information under "uncontrolled conditions" (无控条件) such as overseas environments not governed by the PRC. [12]

Concurrent to these collection efforts, the SSF has sought to build new platforms to integrate remote sensing and geospatial data. For instance, brigade components of the SSF have experimented with developing and adopting "mobile surveillance and mapping" (流动测绘) applications used for terrain modeling and operational planning (Ministry of National Defense, May 22, 2022; CMO, December 9, 2020). These so-called "electronic sand-table systems" (电子沙盘系统) improve upon earlier models by providing three dimensional simulations of rural and urban environments. These systems have the added advantage of being compatible with portable laptop computers, obviating the need to manufacture and distribute specialized hardware (Ministry of National Defense, May 22, 2022). The PLASSF has also taken steps to make accessing battlefield data more intuitive for field commanders. Accordingly, since 2019, units at all levels have access to a "Data Results Catalog" (数据成果目录) curated by the SSF (CMO, July 15, 2020). The Catalog enables officers at the brigade-level and above to request information support from a preconfigured "menu" (菜单) entering in a corresponding serial number in a task request form (CMO, July 15, 2020). Services offered by the Catalog range from provisioning artillery spotting and targeting data to unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)-enabled surveillance and reconnaissance (CMO, January 4, 2021; CMO, July 15, 2020).

Enabling the Warfighter

The second line of effort undertaken by the SSF has focused on ensuring that battlefield commanders have timely and uninterrupted access to mapping and survey data. In order to accomplish this, the PLASSF has sought to transition its surveying and mapping staff away from being a primarily rear-echelon force towards more direct integration with front-line units. Consequently, recent PLA joint training exercises have begun to include small "Surveying and Mapping Emergency Support Elements" (测绘应急保障分队) embedded directly with forward deployed troops (CMO, January 4, 2021). These teams appear to consist of five PLASSF technical specialists who interface with commanders at the Army brigade (陆军某旅) level (CMO, May 10, 2022). These cohorts are responsible for maintaining the information systems used by the brigade, as well as ensuring the secure storage and transmission of the brigade's data in "complex electromagnetic environments" (复杂电磁环境) (CMO, May 10, 2022). The benefits of this model are twofold. First, integrating SSF personnel as a local "battlefield [information] assurance force" (仗型保障力量) is regarded as being a key step in breaking down institutional stove-piping within the PLA and ensuring that commanders have complete access to a full range of data collected from multiple domains (CMO, January 4, 2021). Second, the presence of on-site PLASSF staff helps to ease difficulties inherent to providing long-distance technical support, which heretofore was a major factor preventing the PLA from operating effectively under adverse conditions (CMO, May 10, 2022).

The PLA is presently in the early stages of introducing the aforementioned reforms to its surveying and mapping capabilities, but appears intent on expediting their adoption across its entire organizational structure. For instance, though pilot Surveying and Mapping Emergency Support Elements were only first introduced in 2020, the PLASSF is currently seeking to rapidly diffuse that model among the PLA through frequent rotational and joint training (轮训+联训) exercises (CMO, May 10, 2022). These efforts have been supplemented by initiatives aimed at training brigade commanders across other services and branches on the use of tools developed by the PLASSF, such as its Data Results Catalog. The important priority given to this training is reflected in the high operational tempo of these training exercises. For instance, one PLASSF technical officer is quoted as having traveled to six different brigade-level units within a four day period in order to provide instruction on newly-developed battlefield reconnaissance tools (CMO, July 15, 2020). However, while the PLA appears sanguine as to the benefits that these reformed approaches to battlespace information support will provide, there is still acknowledgement among personnel that the development of these methods remain in a "teething period." In particular, SSF personnel have noted that commanders from other services are often not fully aware of the new information support capabilities or how to access them (CMO, July 15, 2020). In order to remediate these issues, PLASSF is taking an iterative approach to cross-service training, with detachments regularly rotating through other units, collecting user feedback, and relaying those suggestions to decision-makers at headquarters (CMO, May 10, 2022).

Conclusion

The recent advances in the SSF's surveying and mapping capabilities are a significant development with notable implications for future PLA behavior and capabilities. First, the SSF's increased activity in peripheral areas such as littoral regions demonstrate an ambition to collect more granular information in environs such as the maritime domain where PLA geospatial intelligence has heretofore been lacking. Critically, it also signals an intent to conduct more robust operational preparation of the environment in contested areas such as the South China Sea. Moreover, the SSF's growing reliance on dual-use infrastructure such as MNR geospatial assets to aid this mission further muddles the distinctions between Chinese military and civilian surveying activity. It is conceivable that this may result in future incidents such as that caused by the spy balloon overflight of the US in February (Straits Times, April 3).

Second, the creation of the PLASSF's Data Operations Catalog is an important part of its overarching goal of constructing a "joint combat information system." The fact that the SSF serves as the sole arbiter of this system also suggests that the PLA has made strides in rationalizing distribution of geospatial intelligence, with clearer procedures for requesting and provisioning information. While a full rollout of the Catalog appears to have been temporarily stymied by lack of familiarity with the new technology among the PLA officer corps, iterative joint training exercises would probably overcome these roadblocks. As a result, in the future PLA commanders at the brigade-level and above will enjoy access to a broadened range of cross-service information capabilities that is largely unincumbered by institutional stove-piping.

Finally, the SSF's expanded role in providing battlefield reconnaissance data to other services marks an important step forward in its role as the PLA's information support provider. In particular, the routine incorporation of the SSF into joint training exercises is a bellwether development, signaling that the PLA is making strides in putting its long-standing aspiration to conduct joint operations into full practice. Over time, regularized direct integration of SSF liaisons with components of the other services will deepen its institutional knowledge base for conducting integrated information support operations. This, in turn, will make the PLA more adept at undertaking operations that require close coordination of multiple services, such as a possible Taiwan contingency.

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Notes

[1] Marcelyn L. Thompson, "PLA Observations of U.S. Contingency Planning: What Has it Learned" in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015) pp. 43-46.

[2] Within this context, "authoritative" sources refer to collectively-written capstone texts published by PLA military institutions such as the Academy of Military Sciences (中国人民解放军军事科学院). "Semi-authoritative" texts refer to those edited or written by individual named military academicians, but which nevertheless have been vetted and evaluated by committees of high-ranking PLA officers.

[3] Yuan Wenxian (袁文先) ed., *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* (联合战役信息作战教程), (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2009), pp. 216-217; Zhang Yuliang (张玉良), ed., *The Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), 228-230.

[4] Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Research Department (军事科学院军事战略研究部), *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2013), pp. 261-266.

[5] Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮) et al., eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2017), pp. 207-208, 341; Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮) et al., eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), pg. 209.

[6] Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮) et al., eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2017), pg. 341; Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮) et al., eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), pp. 342-344.

[7] John, Costello and Joe McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era" in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, D.C.: 2019, National Defense University Press), pp. 444

[8] Ibid. Pg. 477-478.

[9] Ministry of Natural Resources Ground Satellite Remote Sensing Application Center (自然资源部国土卫星遥感应用中心), "Global Geospatial Information Satellite Resource Remote Sensing Image Adjustment Technical Specifications" (全球地理信息资源卫星遥感影像区域网平差生产技术规范), (Beijing: Ministry of Natural Resources, 2022)

"Rural Managers" Spark Online Outrage

By Genevieve Donnellon-May

(Image: Farmers in rural China sowing peanut seeds in Zaozhuang, East China, Shandong Province, **source**: DFIC.cn**)**

Introduction

In recent months, the (re)emergence of the "Rural Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Brigade" (农村综合行政执法大队) has generated controversy in China. On social media, netizens have nicknamed this brigade as *nongguan* (农管, "rural managers"), echoing the infamous and widely despised urban enforcers of rules and regulations known as *chengguan* (城管, "city inspectors").

In April, China's national Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs stated that county-level governments have consolidated officers across multiple departments to form so-called "Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Brigades" to strengthen enforcement efforts (State Council, April 15). As per the Ministry's "Guiding Categories of Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement in Agriculture (2020 version)" (农业综合行政执法事项指导目录2020年版) the *nongguan* have administrative penalty powers, such as fines and 21 administrative coercive powers (such as detention and confiscation of property) in China's vast rural areas. These powers cover all aspects of agricultural production, including agricultural products and machinery, fertilizers, and seeds, and come amid Beijing's continued push to safeguard China's food security and ambition of reaching domestic food production targets (China Brief, June 17, 2022).

Yet on Chinese social media, video clips of the behavior of *nongguan* to farmers and in the countryside were shared online and went viral. In Henan, for instance, one video showed farmers being forced to pass a test on basic agricultural skills (such as spraying insecticide) while *nongguan* look on (Baidu, April 16). Elsewhere, in Guangxi, numerous *nongguan* destroyed farmers' tobacco plants (Twitter, April 20). Meanwhile, one farmer reported that all fish ponds in his county had been ordered to be converted into rice patches within two weeks (Twitter, April 23).

These videos, many now censored and removed from websites and Chinese social media platforms (such as Weibo), received thousands of comments, with internet users calling the actions of *nongguan* "ridiculous."

Are Nongguan Necessary?

Although agricultural law enforcement has been in place for a number of decades, it was previously divided across different departments, each responsible for its own area (such as the Agriculture Bureau and the Water Resources Bureau). However, following the establishment of agricultural law enforcement teams, specifically responsible for agricultural input management, at the beginning of this century and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th Party Congress in 2017, China sought to link the administration system and law enforcement teams into one entity—the Comprehensive Agricultural Law Enforcement Team—in order to enforce agricultural law.

While the move to revamp the *chengguan* may seem unnecessary and even a hindrance to farmers, there are, arguably, important and legitimate reasons exist for this role. These minders are responsible for aspects of agricultural production, including tasks such as ensuring the quality and safety of agricultural products in China. This includes, for instance, cracking down on counterfeit agricultural products, such as seeds and pesticides.

Food safety is one area that China has long struggled with, having been plagued by food safety scandals in recent years, a notable example being the melamine-tainted baby milk powder scandal in 2008. This resulted in the death of six children and the hospitalization of thousands of others (CCTV, September 16; see also Sohu

News September 12). To this end, the *nongguan* play a key role in ensuring adherence to food safety standards, particularly when it comes to the shutting down of counterfeit food production. In Shandong province, for instance, more than 100 counterfeit veterinary companies were discovered, resulting in the arrest of 45 individuals involved in these illegal operation (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, April 15). Elsewhere, in Sichuan province, *nongguan* uncovered a major counterfeit pesticide manufacturing and selling operation, which had been selling fake agricultural pesticides to 24 provinces throughout China. As a result, Eight production sites involved in the counterfeit operation were raided and dismantled (Legal Daily, April 18).

Furthermore, the *nongguan* are responsible for monitoring soil environmental pollution, another area that China has struggled to improve. The country's economic success alongside the rapid rate of industrialization in recent decades has come at the expense of the environment. Although rapid industrialization has lifted hundreds of millions of citizens out of poverty, as per China's official statistics, the country's water, air, and soil quality has significantly worsened (China Daily, January 23, 2020).

Soil pollution, in particular, has become a serious health and environmental threat. Posing a serious challenge to Chinese agricultural governance, soil pollution has tainted significant quantities of China's farming land, affecting both public health and food crops, contaminating the food chain with heavy metals, fertilizers, pesticides, and persistent organic pollutants and solvents. Estimates suggest that more than 40 percent of China's soil is degraded from overuse, erosion and pollution (China Daily, November 5, 2014).

Until 2013, however, data on the country's soil pollution was difficult to access. Nonetheless, in December of that year, China's Ministry of Land and Resources reported that the country has 3.33 million hectares of farmland—around 2.5 percent of total arable land in China —that are too contaminated to use. Moreover, in 2014, the central government's soil survey revealed that 19 percent of China's farmland was contaminated by metals such as cadmium and arsenic (People's Daily, April 29, 2014).

To address soil pollution, the Chinese central authorities have implemented various policies, action plans and regulations to improve soil quality. At present, China uses a 10-grade classification system for cultivated land, with grade 1 being the highest (General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection, and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China and the Standardization Administration of China, December 30, 2016). According to a 2019 report, the average grade is 4.76, with two-thirds of all soil being of low or medium quality (PRC State Council, May 13, 2020). In addition, organic carbon content in China's soil is more than 30 percent lower than the global average and less than 50 percent of soil in Europe (Farmer's Daily, August 28, 2021).

In May 2016, the State Council published the Action Plan on Prevention and Control of Soil Pollution (国务院关于印发土壤污染防治行动计划的通知) (State Council, May 28, 2016). Under the Action Plan, 90 percent of polluted farmland soil is to be made safe for human use by 2020 and 95 percent by 2030, benchmarks that are also outlined in China's 13th Five-Year Plan.

Following this, in August 2018, the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress approved the Soil Pollution Prevention and Control Law (土壤污染防治法) (PRC Ministry of Ecology and Environment, August 31, 2018). As the first law dedicated to soil pollution prevention in China, this legal measure outlines several preventative measures that government authorities and land users should undertake to protect the soil and mitigate future pollution. The law also adopted a protection-first and polluter-pays approach.

Municipal and provincial governments have also demonstrated a growing interest in addressing soil pollution as part of their efforts to support the national soil pollution law. Notably, in late 2022, Beijing's municipal government released a list of measures related to soil pollution prevention which came into effect in 2023 (Beijing municipal government, September 23, 2022). The government aims to address soil pollution and related concerns by regulating the use of both chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and also increasing the monitoring of industrial polluters. Also, according to Jiemian News in China, Beijing is one of 15 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities that have introduced local regulations on the prevention and control of soil pollution, with fines of up to 2 million yuan (Jiemian News, October 25, 2022). **[1]**

These action plans and related law support existing efforts to address soil pollution and the management thereof. For instance, the Agricultural Law (《中华人民共和国农业法》), states that agricultural organizations and also farmers should prevent pollution and deterioration of agricultural land (National People's Congress [NPC], December 12, 2012); while the Agricultural Product Quality Security Law (《中华人民共和国农产品质量安全法》) sets out restrictions on the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to avoid land pollution (Gov.cn, April 29, 2006).

At the same time, efforts to improve soil quality and reduce environmental pollution are part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's broader "Green Leap Forward."' Since his arrival to power in 2012, President Xi has made the environment and related policies critical priorities in domestic policy. A key aspect of the Green Leap Forward is "ecological civilization" (生态文明), a conceptual framework for all sectors that seek to balance China's fast-paced economic development and protect the environment, thereby supporting the harmonious coexistence between the environment and humanity, and which draws on ancient Daoist philosophy of Laozi (Xinhua, August 2, 2017). The construction of ecological civilization is also integral to Xi's central project to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation (Xinhua, August 2, 2017). A notable example is Xi's bold commitment to the so-called "dual carbon goals" – to reach peak carbon emissions by 2030 and make China carbon neutral by 2060.

Another significant part of the Green Leap Forward is Xi's "two mountains theory" , under which "clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver mountains" (绿水青山就是金山银山) (Xinhua,

August 2, 2017). Xi first espoused this concept in 2005, when he was Party Secretary of Zhejiang. The "two mountains theory" seeks to guide the Chinese people to protect the natural environment and encourage resource conservation, supported by various domestic policies (Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, April 2, 2021).

The Chinese central government's interest in soil pollution management and broader efforts to improve the environment is further demonstrated by plans to invest billions of dollars in soil remediation in the coming years. In part to avoid further degradation and eventually increase the amount of arable land in China to help meet domestic food production targets, the Chinese authorities have implemented various measures. According to official statistics, between 2013 and 2019, China 'lost' more than 5 percent of its arable land due to factors such as excess fertilizer use and land neglect, in China. Given that Chinese farmers use on average four times more nitrogen fertilizer per hectare annually than the global average, according to researchers at the China Agricultural University in Beijing, high levels and overuse of chemical pesticides and fertilizers have further exacerbated soil quality issues. **[2]**

In February 2022, the PRC State Council announced that a survey of the country's soil would be carried out by the vice premier and supported by leaders of China's Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. It is expected to be completed in 2025 (State Council, February 16, 2022). This follows the publication of soil pollution studies in 2014 (State Council, April 17, 2014) and 2018 (State Council, November 30, 2019).

In this light, the *nongguan* play a key role in helping ensure that targets related to the monitoring of soil pollution and by extension, soil quality improvement are met, thereby supporting major domestic policies and development plans.

Public perception of "*Chengguan*" and "*Nongguan*"

In response to video footage of *nongguan* circulating on Chinese social media websites such as Weibo, Chinese internet users took to social media platforms to express their concerns that the country's farmers would be as treated as poorly by the *nongguan* as street vendors are the notorious city inspectors (*chengguan*). Found in nearly all cities in mainland China, city inspectors primarily crack down on illegal street vendors but are also responsible for enforcing rules on city sanitation and landscaping, as well as parking.

Yet *chengguan* officers have often been criticized for their tactics and have been accused of using bullying in incidents, some of which have resulted in injuries or even death. Although PRC authorities have sought to improve the *chengguan* image in recent years, ugly incidents, such as the beating up of a female fruit vendor in Chongqing, Sichuan province, in 2020 (Nan'an District public security bureau Weibo website, September 20) or in 2013 when a Hubei man was beaten by more than 10 *chengguan* after calling them "thugs" (China

Daily, December 11, 2013), of brutality by *chengguan* continue to make headlines in China and spark outrage on social media.

However, the poor public perception and continued anger to both *chengguan* and *nongguan,* also reflects continued fears about the brutality of law enforcement at the grass-roots levels. This comes also after three years of draconian COVID-19 controls during the zero-COVID policy and continued public anger over the violent enforcement of lockdowns and quarantine orders (China Brief, November 28, 2022). For instance, a recent video uploaded to social media showed a large number of residents from neighborhoods took to the street to block the vehicles of *chengguan* from leaving in response to an incident where *chengguan* assaulted an egg vendor in Neijang, Sichuan (Twitter, June 13; Twitter June 14).

Beijing's Response

In response to public outrage over rural managers, China's national Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs posted a lengthy question and answer response on its website in April to outline the role and responsibilities of rural managers" (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, April 14). On the website page, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs also warned its "rural managers" that "nothing can be done without legal authorization."
Both actions suggest that Beijing has recognized and is wary of public outrage towards the "rural managers" spilling over into other areas where internet users are discontent.

Return to the Mao-era?

The concept of "rural managers" dates back to a controversial system introduced in China during the 1950s. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), Chairman Mao Zedong implemented various policies that aimed to rapidly transform the country's economy, with a focus on increasing agricultural production. As part of this, the Chinese central government introduced a system known as "Production Brigade" to organize agricultural production in rural communities.

Under this system, local officials or cadres were appointed as rural managers and given the responsibility to oversee agricultural production and farming operations, enforce production quotas, supervise farming operations and the distribution of resources, as well as to mobilize peasants to engage in large-scale farming projects in villages. In addition, the rural managers were tasked with promoting socialist ideals and encouraging labor-intensive practices to achieve high agricultural yields.

Initially, the concept of "rural managers" was seen to increase productivity, achieve self-sufficiency in food production and support rural development. However, as time went on, the implementation of the system faced various challenges and controversies implementation of the system faced numerous challenges and resulted in severe consequences.

One of the main criticisms was the excessive power and authority given to the rural managers. They had significant control over the lives of the rural population, including land distribution, resource allocation, and even personal matters such as marriage and family planning, impact farmers and their autonomy.

The collective nature of the system often also limited farmers' control over their land and production decisions. As the forced collectivization made peasants join farms to work collectively, often against their will, both traditional land ownership and individual farming practices were abolished. This, in turn, lead to the disruption of the traditional farming systems and the loss of personal incentives.

Another concern with the rural management system during this time was the overemphasis on quantity over quality. In pursuit of meeting ambitious agricultural production targets, "rural managers" often ignored other key aspects such as soil quality and crop diversity. Due to the persistent focus on quantity over quality, thereby resulting in a decline in overall agricultural productivity.

At the same time, the concentration of power in the hands of "rural managers" led to instances of abuse, corruption, and exploitation, as some rural managers used their authority for personal gain or to enforce strict policies on the rural population.
However, in the 1980s, China implemented significant agricultural reforms, shifting towards a more market-oriented economy and granting farmers more autonomy. As a result, the *nongguan* system underwent changes, and its influence was gradually reduced.

However, remnants of the system still exist in some rural areas. As a result debates about its legacy and the role of local governance in agricultural development continue, with the more controversial aspects such as abuses of power and limitations of farmers' autonomy, have made it a subject a criticism and scrutiny.

Conclusion

On the one hand, *nongguan* are being used by the Chinese central authorities to help meet soil quality and related targets, which are integral to the PRC's efforts to achieve its plans for an ecological civilization. The role of the *nongguan* in improving China's poor soil quality is essential for Beijing to also meet its increasing number of domestic production targets (such as for soybeans) as part of broader efforts to safeguard the country's food security. On the other hand, the strong, public (re-)emergence of *nongguan* and also *chengguan* reflect the growing power and state control that authorities hold in Xi's China, demonstrated by tools such as facial recognition and mass surveillance systems, which are increasingly deployed in rural areas.

In this light, the heavy-handed use of the *nongguan* has undoubtedly sparked fears of the re-collectivization and the return of Maoist policies, which resulted in famines as well as significant political and social instability throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, the agricultural crisis in China in 1959-61, after the initial success of the collectivization movement, resulted in millions of deaths. While the situation may not have reached this

level, yet, *nongguan* are an unfortunate reminder of the currently decreasing power and autonomy of Chinese farmers.

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Notes

[1] According to Jiemian News, these provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities are as follows: Hubei, Shandon, Shanxi, Jiangxi, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Henan, Hebei, Jiangsu, Fujian, Yunnan, Guangxi, Ningxia and Beijing. Moreover, other provinces like Sichuan and Hunan are in the process of formulating local regulations.

[2] Zhenling Cui, et al, **"**Pursuing sustainable productivity with millions of smallholder farmers" *Nature,* 555, 363–366 (2018).

PLA Airborne Capabilities and Paratrooper Doctrine for Taiwan

By Daniel Fu

(Image: PLA airborne troops practicing jumps over the desert, **source**: italk.ifeng.com**)**

Introduction

In the event of a Taiwan contingency, PLA airborne troops are likely to assume a substantial role. Decapitation strike scenarios and the prospects of an airborne invasion are widely discussed by analysts, scholars, and policy practitioners in both the US and Taiwan. Despite PLA ambitions to rapidly expand their airborne capabilities, there are a growing number voices that downplay the threat or likelihood of an airborne assault across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwanese security analysts such as Liu Tai-ying (劉泰英), founder of the Taiwan Research Institute, have stated that "if paratroopers were used, the losses for China would be very high" and minimized their threat by stating that there are few landing spots available to PLA airborne forces (Taipei Times, September 26, 2022). Notably, many of these conclusions revolve around the viewpoint held by a growing number of military experts, who contend that "mass airborne operations are a thing of the past" (Modern War Institute, December 10, 2016). These views, however, fail to consider the robust drive on part of the PLA to

improve the combat readiness and capabilities of its airborne troops. They also ignore substantial progress the PLA has already made towards that goal, both in terms of the training and preparation of its paratroopers and in decisive factors such as heavy airlift. In short, documenting the progress of PLA airborne troops' capabilities may play a crucial role in assessing Chinese deployment strategies during a potential Taiwan invasion scenario.

Progress and Improvements in Airborne Capabilities

For a long time, the capabilities of PLA airborne troops have lagged behind those of the US and Russia's. The PLA faced substantial challenges with heavy airlift and airborne troops lacked adequate firepower and capabilities. The latter was made apparent in 2008, when the PLA dropped 500 soldiers into Sichuan to assist with disaster recovery efforts following the 2008 earthquake (中国事务, July 4, 2008). During the disaster relief mission, only 15 troops managed to hit their drop zones given difficult weather and terrain. However, more recently, Chinese sources have repeatedly emphasized the successful implementation of enhanced capabilities in "remote access" and "systems integration" (China Youth News, September 17, 2020). China Youth News （中青在线）， a media outlet affiliated with the Communist Youth League, highlights that Chinese paratroopers have developed "all-weather airborne combat capabilities" through extensive experience training in diverse locales, ranging from Qinghai and Tibet to the South China Sea. Furthermore, systems capabilities have improved in developing light, medium, and large transport aircraft, helicopters, and other airborne technology. All branches of the PLA now regularly practice parachute jumps, with the PLA Army Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC) even conducting parachute drills over the sea (PLA Daily, November 16, 2021). In May 2018, the PLA demonstrated its increasing airborne capabilities when Chinese paratroopers made their inaugural jump from a domestically-manufactured Y-20 transport aircraft (China Military Online, May 10, 2018).

In light of these advancements made in technological capabilities and expertise, the PLA has witnessed a significant improvement in its capacity for heavy airlift. The aggregate number of Chinese military aircraft capable of heavy transport has been bolstered by construction of the Y-20, of which China now has at least 31. This, combined with pre-existing Russian-built IL-76s, of which China has around 20, means that the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has at least 51 aircraft capable of heavy airlift. The PLAAF also has at least 55 aircraft capable of medium airlift, namely 30 Y-8s and at least 25 Y-9s. [1] Lyle Goldstein, a former research professor at the US Naval War College, estimates that using such aircraft and the PLA's helicopters China would be capable of landing 50,000 soldiers on Taiwan in the first wave of an invasion and 100,000 total soldiers in the first 24 hours. [2]

Heavy transport aircrafts such as the Y-20 play a significant role in military operations and logistics, as they are able to carry more than just troops. At least one PLAAF Airborne Corps brigade has been equipped with the ZBD-03 infantry fighting vehicle which can facilitate the maneuverability of airborne troops during ground operations. Chinese state-media has claimed that the Y-20, which can allegedly carry the weight equivalent to eight international standard shipping containers (CCTV, August 31, 2019), has the ability to carry three ZBD-03s (163.com, January 15) or Type 99A main battle tanks (Global Times, April 8, 2020). [3] Both would improve the firepower and mobility of troops during potential ground operations in Taiwan. Further improvements in heavy airlift have been notable. In February 2022, the PLAAF received new Y-12 light transport aircraft to replace its aging Y-5s. Y-12 aircraft, which Chinese combat pilots state have superior engines and handling abilities compared to other light transport aircraft, could potentially be used for paratrooper and special operations missions (Global Times, February 27, 2022) and have already been used to test Taiwan's frontline response to airborne incursions (SCMP, February 15, 2022). Reports have further suggested that the PLA has begun serial production of the Y-20U transport aircraft, an air-to-air refueling tanker variant of the Y-20 (Sina News, December 9, 2018). It is worth noting that the PLAAF Airborne Corps has also practiced forward resupply and support of its forces using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (Janes Defence Weekly, December 14, 2021).

Chinese military experts have spoken to the great strides made in the PLAAF's heavy airlift capabilities, particularly with the Y-20. Experts such as Wang Mingzhi (王明志), Director of Strategy and Teaching at the PLA Air Force Command College, have stated that the "Y-20 already has combat capability" and can independently "shoulder the responsibility of dropping airborne troops and equipment." [4] Senior Colonel Li Zhenbo (李振波), a prominent engineer at the research institute of the PLA Airborne Corps, has stated that China's "airborne capabilities have improved quickly" and that China's "airborne soldiers can drop things that other leading countries can drop" (Phoenix New Media, August 8, 2017). He has touted that "we have much more advanced tactical means than before" and that "before you even see the plane, our people will have already landed." [5]

Structurally, the PLAAF Airborne Corps has undergone reorganization and institutional reform to bolster combat readiness. In 2018, action was taken to integrate combined arms units within the PLAAF Airborne Corps at the brigade level. Zhao Jinjun (赵进军), the deputy Chief of Staff of the Airborne Corps, stated that "the less command structures there are, the more we can shorten the response time of divisions and troops can be delivered more quickly." He stated that the reforms were motivated by a desire to "improve the acceleration of response times of paratroopers" (Phoenix New Media, August 28, 2017). Leadership changes have also sought to improve the airborne capabilities of all services in the PLA. Lieutenant General Liu Faqing (刘发庆), former Commander of the PLAAF Airborne Corps, for example, was appointed deputy commander

of the PLA Army component in October 2018. This marked the first time a general from the Airborne Corps became a leader in the PLA Army and was significant since the vast majority of inter-service transfers in the PLA have been undertaken by political commissars rather than tactical commanders. Analysts have suggested that his appointment was motivated by a desire to improve the Army's capabilities related to special airborne operations (The Diplomat, April 20, 2019).

Airborne Operations Against Taiwan

In the context of the rapid improvement of the PLA's airborne capabilities, it becomes important to examine how Beijing could deploy them in a military offensive against Taiwan. Major PLA textbooks such as *Science of Campaign* (战役学) state that airborne forces will play a role in two main phases of a joint island landing campaign (JILC). The first is preliminary operations and the second is establishing a target beachhead and then conducting assault and landing operations. In preliminary operations, special operations units could be dropped behind enemy lines to carry out decapitation strikes against Taiwanese leaders and operations that target Taiwanese airfields, radar, command and control, and munitions infrastructure. Next, airborne troops would be transported and dropped at designated landing zones after which they would commence ground operations. When transporting airborne troops, *Science of Campaigns* emphasizes the importance of protecting the main "campaign transport formation." This involves the utilization of four other formations, including the reconnaissance formation, the jamming formation, the suppression formation, and the cover formation. The reconnaissance formation would be in charge of providing reports on "developing enemy conditions" and weather conditions on approach, the jamming formation would be tasked with jamming the electronic equipment of the enemy's air defense system, the suppression formation would be responsible for suppressing the enemy's radar capabilities and air defense missile and anti-aircraft installations, and the cover formation would be responsible for intercepting attacking enemy aircraft and providing "zone cover" while the main transport formation heads to the landing zone. [6]

Other points are notable from *Science of Campaigns*. Chapter 29 states that "surprise attack is one of the key ways to airborne campaign victory." It contends that "in addition to selecting unexposed locations in the rear for secret concentration and preparations, a military strategist should also set up "bogus areas of concentration" and carry out "deceptive ferry exercises," as well as implement fire preparation at false airlanding sites and electronic diversions to "deceive and confuse the enemy." Furthermore, "air transport should, as much as possible, take advantage of darkness of the night and inclement weather." [7]

PLA airborne troops have already conducted drills for an island airdrop scenario aimed at Taiwan. As far back as the 1996 Taiwan Strait exercises, an airborne battalion was parachuted onto Dongshan Island to support a amphibious landing exercise. [8] Between 2018 and 2022, the PLAAF Airborne Corps conducted several training exercises potentially related to a Taiwan contingency. In 2018, it participated in Red Sword exercises oriented around force-to-force confrontation for the first time (The Paper, May 25, 2018). In September 2020,

a training exercise saw the Y-20 and other transport aircraft move elements of a brigade together and in April 2021, day and night airborne training was conducted successfully (Sina Military, April 28, 2021; Sina Military, August 13, 2021). In March 2022, an airborne brigade and a PLA Air Force aviation regiment conducted a day and night armed training exercise using Y-20s that involved upwards of 1,000 paratroopers (China Military Online, March 4, 2022). The Airborne Corps' "Thunder God" (雷神突击队) special operations forces (SOF) brigade has also undergone training for high-altitude jumps and operations to capture high-value targets for intelligence purposes in an island-landing scenario (CCTV, February 25, 2021). Furthermore, Chinese state-media outlets have frequently published images depicting paratroopers firing anti-tank missiles (China Military Online, May 2, 2018). Paratroopers armed with Hongjian-8 anti-tank missiles, among other weapons systems, could leave tanks Taiwan sends to confront landing Chinese airborne forces vulnerable.

Areas in Taoyuan and Hsinchu, given their narrow terrain and close geographical distance to the mainland, have been identified as targets of brigade-level helicopter air assault operations to occupy points of strategic importance and carry out decapitation strikes (163.com, January 15). An exceptionally likely target are the runways at Taipei Taoyuan International Airport. The Y-20 and Y-9 would be used for further targets in Yilan, Hualien, and Taitung, where airborne troops could be dropped to capture strategic installations such as Chiashan Air Force Base in Hualien and "cut off [the] retreat routes of Taiwan authorities" (QQ News, January 15). Chinese sources are confident that airborne troops can be dropped efficiently, with some stating that in a surprise attack scenario the PLA's airborne troops can land on Taiwan and set up "forward positions" within 30 minutes (QQ News, January 15). These air or airborne assaults will likely occur in the early morning immediately preceding amphibious landings (US Economic and Security Review Commission, April 13, 2017).

Conclusion

Beijing's increasingly formidable airborne capabilities significantly complicate security and deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. However, notable shortcomings in the PLA's airborne capabilities remain. Long-standing obstacles associated with the political commissar system pose notable challenges for Chinese forces. In the aforementioned Red Sword exercises conducted in 2018, for example, a simulated combat jump in the western desert of China went wrong amid strong winds (Association of the US Army, August 12, 2021). The breakdown in the chain of command following the loss of the battalion commander severely impacted the operation's effectiveness. The inefficiencies inherent in the commissar system exacerbated the situation, resulting in a critical delay to carrying out the mission, which in turn enabled the opposing force to inflict significant casualties. Failed military exercises such as these cast doubts in the PLA's current combat readiness. Despite these limitations, the PLA is nonetheless making rapid strides in the professionalization and capabilities of its military. Among these advancements, China's airborne capabilities are expected to assume a more pivotal role in its strategic planning.

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Notes

[1] Garafola, Cristina L. "China Maritime Report No. 19: The PLA Airborne Corps in a Joint Island Landing Campaign." *U.S. Naval War College*, Jan. 2022, 11-12.
[2] Goldstein, Lyle. "Stop counting warships. China's special-operations forces are Taiwan's real problem." *Business Insider*, December 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-special-operations-forces-are-taiwan-real-problem-not-warships-2021-12.

[3] "Forging an Airborne Army: Exploring the Airborne Forces of the Chinese People's Liberation Army," (锻造空降雄师 走进中国人民解放军空降兵军), *CCTV 13,* August 3, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_7gF4tqZUo. 12:10.
[4] Ibid, 14:29-14:53.
[5] "Senior Engineer of the Airborne Corps Research Institute Li Zhenbo and the First Parcahute Jump for Wenchuan Earthquake Relief Li Zhenbo: I Am A Drop of Water in the Sea" (空降兵研究所高级工程师、汶川地震救灾伞降第一跳李振波：我是大海中的一滴水), *The Voice (开讲啦) CCTV*, November 2, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L17iGV81cmc. 34:04.

[6] Zhang Yuliang (张玉良) ed., Science of Campaigns (战役学), (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), 680-681. See CASI Translation: https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2020-12-02%20In%20Their%20Own%20Words-%20Science%20of%20Campaigns%20(2006).pdf.
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[8] Yang, Andrew N.D., and Milton Wen-Chung Liao. *PLA Rapid Reaction Forces: Concept, Training, and Preliminary Assessment* in Mulvenon, James C. and Richard H. Yang, The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999. https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF145.html.

The Long Arm of the Law(less): The PRC's Overseas Police Stations

By Martin Purbrick

(**Image**: The principals of the Fuzhou Overseas Police Service Station, **source**: US DOJ)

Introduction

In April, the FBI charged two Chinese-Americans, both US citizens, with conspiring to act as agents of the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by establishing an "overseas police station" on behalf of the Fujian Public Security Bureau in New York. The defendants allegedly organized counter-protests against the Falun Gong, harassed a Chinese fugitive to return to the PRC and hassled a pro-democracy activist living in California.

On June 6, the UK Government Minister of State for Security, Tom Tugendhat, made a statement with an update on Chinese "Overseas Police Service Stations" reportedly located in Croydon, Glasgow and Hendon (UK Parliament, June 6). He stated that "the Police have visited each of the locations identified by Safeguard Defenders [the NGO that reported the locations], and carefully looked into these allegations to consider whether any laws have been broken and whether any further action should be taken. I can confirm that they have not, to date, identified any evidence of illegal activity on behalf of the Chinese state across these sites." The reactive approach in the UK is notably different from the US, where proactive intelligence led investigations by the FBI have led to multiple arrests.

International concern regarding the extent of law enforcement activity by Chinese agencies outside of their home country jurisdiction has recently increased. Such activity has been reported as "Chinese Overseas Police Service Centers" (Safeguard Defenders, September 2022), "Chinese Assistance Centers" (China Brief, January 5, 2019), joint patrols in Italy with local police, structured training to local police such as in the Solomon Islands, harassment and intimidation of Chinese dissidents, and extra-judicial action to return fugitives from overseas that effectively constitutes extraordinary rendition. These activities are characterized by their diversity and, as a result, should not be considered part of a single strategy. Rather, the multiple purposes served by Chinese police forces' expanding overseas activities can be better understood by tracing how these efforts have evolved over the past decade.

Since 1978, the successful opening up of the PRC's economy has fostered the international expansion of Chinese companies and contributed to large diaspora communities of Chinese nationals around the world. Following a surge of emigration in the 1990s, an estimated 10.5 million PRC citizens lived overseas by 2020. **[1]** Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a global project linking Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and Oceania to the growing Chinese economy, involving projects in 147 countries costing the PRC an estimated $1 trillion. **[2]** The rapid economic growth from the early 1980s on also generated rampant corruption. The decade-long anti-corruption crackdown overseen by General Secretary Xi Jinping during his tenure has resulted in 4.4 million cases of corruption investigated (by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, CCDI). The efforts to root out corruption have also led the PRC to launch overseas "Fox Hunt" operations have apprehended over 9,000 overseas corruption fugitives "extradited" from 120 countries with over 20 billion yuan ($2.9 billion) repatriated (Xinhua, September 19, 2022).

The global economic expansion of the PRC has contributed greatly to the enlargement of the Chinese diaspora overseas to encompass workers, emigrants, dissidents, criminals and corrupt officials, which has required the Public Security and State Security agencies to take a new approach (China Brief, May 13, 2022). Workers, emigrants and dissidents must be monitored to assess their political stances, while criminals and corrupt officials must be pursued to face justice (or injustice) through the PRC legal system. This has required a new international outlook from PRC agencies. In addition, the growing Chinese diaspora is a primary target of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front strategy. Such efforts should be considered in relation to the

"Chinese Assistance Centers" as building the United Front has far greater long-term importance for the CCP than the pursuit of criminals.

There are a range of diverse activities attributed to these "overseas police stations" (or service centers), which require analysis to determine the aims and the PRC agencies involved.

The Public Security Bureau in New York

A key role of "overseas police stations" seems to be the harassment of Chinese political dissidents. This was illustrated in April, when the FBI arrested two Chinese nationals in New York "in connection with opening and operating an illegal overseas police station, located in lower Manhattan, New York, for a provincial branch of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) of the PRC" (FBI, April 17). The defendants, aged 59 and 61, were charged with conspiring to act as agents of the PRC as well as obstructing justice by destroying evidence of their communications with an MPS official. The defendants allegedly established the first overseas police station in the US for the Fuzhou Public Security Bureau, which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security.

One of the defendants, Lu Jianwang, allegedly assisted the MPS since around 2015, including by organizing counter-protests against the Falun Gong (a religious group banned in the PRC) during President Xi Jinping's visit to Washington, D.C. that same year. A Deputy Director of the MPS who was a member of Xi's entourage during the visit presented a plaque to Lu, seemingly in reward for his assistance.

Both defendants are US citizens, who belonged to a Fujian association established in Manhattan in 2013. They are reported by the FBI to have been recruited by an MPS official in Fujian Province in 2018 and subsequently tasked with ascertaining the locations of persons of interest in the US Lu's relationship with the PRC authorities was not only with the MPS but also with officials from the United Front Work Department, in particular with a senior official of the Fuzhou All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (US Department of Justice, April 5). He is also a member of the Fujian Provincial Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The national CPPCC and its provincial subsidiaries are the core United Front forums that facilitate collaboration with other political parties as well as political consultation with groups and individuals under the CCP's direction.

The defendants allegedly established the "Fuzhou Police Service Station for Overseas Chinese" in 2022 in a lower Manhattan office. The FBI believes that in January 2022, the Fujian Public Security Bureau held a ceremony in Fuzhou, the provincial capital, marking the establishment of a worldwide chain of "overseas police service stations."

The FBI case provides insight into how such "overseas police service stations" may function. An MPS official asked defendant Lu Jianwang in March 2022 to confirm the location of a Chinese political dissident living in California. The dissident was a leader of protests against the PRC government during the 1989 Tiananmen

Square protests, an advisor to a former US Congressional candidate and the target of a harassment operation organized by the PRC Ministry of State Security (MSS) involving arrests by the FBI in March 2022.

The FBI also identified Chinese news media reports from April 2022 that reported on the role of the Fujian Police Service Center for Overseas Chinese and explained how they help Chinese nationals in the US renew their driver's licenses via a WeChat application submitted to the Traffic Management Center of the Fujian Public Security Bureau. It is not yet clear if the driver's license renewal process was a cover for the United Front and political harassment activities or if the services were actually provided on location.

Chinese Assistance Centers

In a January 2019 article for the Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* on "Chinese Assistance Centers" Grow United Front Work Department Global Presence," Matt Schrader detailed an international network of thirteen "Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centers" (hereafter: "police cooperation centers") established by PRC expatriates (China Brief, January 5, 2019). This was the first credible reporting of what was assessed to be an international expansion of the PRC's law enforcement activities.

As Schrader observed in 2019, the "overseas police centers" established in South Africa appeared closely related to "Overseas Chinese Service Centers" established since 2014 in at least 39 countries. This assessment held that these centers were involved in providing services to locally resident Chinese, but with clear links to the CCP United Front Work Department. This indicates that the centers are a channel for United Front activities targeting the global Chinese diaspora.

The global Chinese diaspora is a primary target of the CCP's United Front Work strategy. Since the formation of the CCP, United Front Work has been a means of co-opting political and social groups to support the dominance of the CCP and has further developed into a key tool that the Party uses to engage with the global Chinese diaspora (Jamestown Foundation, April 12). The expansion of Public Security and State Security activities targeting the Chinese diaspora outside the PRC has been well reported in recent years, but United Front activities remain less well understood.

A recent example of the alleged political influence of United Front related groups is in Canada, where multiple politicians claim to have been victims of such activities. Erin O'Toole, a former Conservative Party leader in Canada, claimed recently that the Canadian Secret Intelligence Service (CSIS) briefed him that the United Front Work Department "organized and directed" groups of people to "amplify misinformation efforts" against him. In addition, PRC agencies also allegedly targeted him by disseminating misinformation and undertaking voter suppression efforts (Globe and Mail, May 30). In May, Canadian Member of Parliament Jenny Kwan stated that she has also been briefed by the CSIS that she has been targeted by the PRC government because of her advocacy work for human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang (Vancouver Sun, May 29).

Chinese Overseas Police Service Centers

In 2022, the NGO Safeguard Defenders published the investigative reports: "110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild" (Safeguard Defenders, September 2022 and "Patrol and Persuade: A follow-up investigation to 110 Overseas" (Safeguard Defenders, December 2022).

Safeguard Defenders states that 230,000 people suspected of fraud and telecom fraud were successfully persuaded to return to the PRC. This does not seem likely to be related to the global network of "overseas police centers." The endemic fraud conducted by and against Chinese nationals, as well as nationals of other countries, is largely conducted from Southeast Asia. Fraud syndicates have been especially active in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, where large numbers of PRC nationals, along with gangs from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, have gravitated (China Brief, March 25, 2022). Safeguard Defenders has claimed that there are 102 overseas police service stations in 53 countries, which is a far wider geographical scope than necessary to combat the largely Asia-based fraud epidemic targeting Chinese nationals.

The figure of 230,000 people persuaded to return to the PRC requires clarification. In fact, the PRC government has stated that between April 2021 and July 2022, "police nationwide resolved about 594,000 telecom and online fraud cases, and 230,000 people involved were re-educated or persuaded to return from overseas, significantly reducing the number of Chinese nationals going abroad to commit crimes against Chinese citizens" (PRC State Council, September 19, 2022), which indicates that a part of this number were people within the PRC (i.e. those "re-educated"). The global network of "overseas police centers" do not contribute to combatting the largely regional fraud problem in Asia, and other purposes should be considered as more likely.

It is noteworthy that the instructions from some local authorities to not travel to nine countries with serious fraud crime problems, Myanmar, Cambodia, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Turkey and Indonesia, unless necessary, were issued by county or provincial authorities. No indication of such instructions originating from the MPS has been discovered.

Indeed, in 2019, 250,000 Chinese nationals were reportedly living in Cambodia, but after the government announced a ban on online gambling operations, 6,000 left each day, with a total of 120,000 people departing after two weeks (Radio Free Asia, September 6, 2019). As Safeguard Defenders notes, tens of thousands of fraud suspects have been "persuaded" to return to the PRC from Cambodia and Myanmar, where major hubs of telecom and online fraud are located. The proximity of Cambodia and Myanmar to the PRC's land borders are why so many Chinese criminal groups have established fraud hubs in those countries and are also the reason many Chinese nationals have travelled to these locations.

The role of "overseas police stations" has been well clarified by the Taiwanese government, which has extensive experience in dealing with covert PRC activities. In May, the National Security Bureau (NSB) of Taiwan reported to the Legislative Yuan that the PRC has been operating over one hundred "police-qiao

(diaspora) service stations" since 2016 to track political dissidents as well as criminals. The NSB reported that the "police stations" operate from convenience stores, restaurants and private homes and are used for surveillance of overseas Chinese nationals and to persuade fugitives to return to China. The NSB also reported that most of the "police service stations" are supervised by Public Security Bureaus of Wenzhou, Lishui and Qingtian cities in Zhejiang Province, Nantong City in Jiangsu Province, as well as Fujian Province (Focus Taiwan, May 23). Taiwan NSB Director General Tsai Ming-yen confirmed at the Legislative Yuan that the PRC "secret overseas police" may be active in Taiwan, though they take different forms, and he warned citizens to remain alert to the threat of covert surveillance by illegal Chinese overseas police stations (Taiwan News, April 26).

The PRC government has stated that there are "no so-called overseas police stations" and that "the relevant institutions helped overseas Chinese who could not return to China due to the pandemic renew their driving license and perform physical examination. Hence, the government maintains these are not so-called police stations or police service centers at all. Rather, they have been organized by local Chinese groups and volunteers who helped provide venues for the services, not Chinese police personnel.

Beijing avers that given the evolving COVID situation and making services available online, "the relevant service centers have been closed" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 16). Interestingly, the PRC government has admitted that such service centers exist, but denies they provide any "police" services.

In response to the UK Government statement in June, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Wang Wenbin, stated that "China strictly abides by international law and respects other countries' judicial sovereignty. We've made our position clear on the issue more than once. The truth is that there are no so-called "secret police stations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, June 7). This continued denial comes after clear evidence from Chinese government websites of "overseas police service centers" operated by provincial Public Security Bureau offices.

The operation of police centers in foreign countries without consulting host nation governments is a breach of the United Nations Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961, which in Article 12 states that "The sending State may not, without the prior express consent of the receiving State, establish offices forming part of the mission in localities other than those in which the mission itself is established." (United Nations, April 18, 1961). The provisions of the Vienna Convention relating to sending government representatives to other countries requires mutual consent. The PRC government has disregarded this requirement having admitted that "local Chinese groups" were engaged to assist other Chinese nationals with certain government services. This seemingly contravenes international law and may also breach related local laws in the countries where "the relevant service centers" have been located.

Joint Patrols with Local Police Forces

The expansion of PRC law enforcement activities has been most visible with joint patrols with local police in other countries. In 2016, following an agreement between the PRC and Italy, four Chinese officers joined Italian officers for joint patrols in Rome and Milan. The joint patrols were reportedly intended to safeguard Chinese tourists through Chinese-language assistance. As part of the reciprocal agreement, four Italian police officers went to Beijing and Shanghai to patrol with Chinese police. In 2017, the Chinese police joint patrols were expanded to Florence and Naples with eight officers deployed. Liao Jinrong, director of the Ministry of Public Security's International Cooperation Bureau, stated that such joint patrols were also being considered with Austria and Spain (PRC State Council, April 25, 2017).

By 2018, ten Chinese police officers were traveling to Rome, Milan, Venice and Prato for joint patrols (China Daily, May 30, 2018), which seemed to be occasions for showing off uniforms and holding a ceremony rather than actual law enforcement. In 2019, Chinese police officers traveled to Rome, Milan, Turin and Padua for three weeks of patrols, the fourth year of the joint patrols (China Daily, November 6, 2019). Multiple "overseas police service centers" have been identified in Italy.

In Croatia, six Chinese police officers joined the first joint patrol in 2018 in Zagreb for one month during the peak tourist season. Notably, Croatia hosted 87 foreign police officers from about 20 countries for joint patrols, hence, the PRC was hardly the only country involved (China Daily, August 15, 2018). However, no "overseas police service center" has been identified in Croatia.

In Serbia, six Chinese officers from Hebei Province conducted joint patrols with Serbian police in Belgrade and Novi Sad (Xinhua, September 16, 2019). An "overseas police station" has allegedly been established in Belgrade, although it is not linked to the joint patrols.

Collaboration with other police agencies is not new for the PRC. In March, PRC officers took part in the 127th Mekong River joint patrol with law enforcement authorities of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. Three Chinese vessels were involved in the continue focus on cracking down on cross-border crimes along the Mekong River, which is a vital waterway for cross-border shipping. The PRC authorities have been conducting joint patrols on the river since December 2011 (MPS, March 23).

The joint patrols have a real law enforcement purpose in regions such as the Mekong River, where piracy pervades, and the People's Armed Police has made some headway in combating the problem through cooperation with neighboring countries. However, in most other regions, joint patrols are largely a diplomatic tool. Italy and Serbia are both part of the BRI and consequently, the PRC has used MPS officers as part of charm offensive efforts in both countries as well as to further its security interests by building collaboration with overseas police agencies. However, PRC police joint patrols in other countries are not directly related to "overseas police stations" and should not be conflated with them.

Training Local Police

In addition to joint patrols, PRC police officers are also increasingly engaged in training and cooperation with overseas police agencies. In 2022, as examined in *China Brief*, the PRC and the Solomon Islands finalized a security agreement that was leaked on social media (China Brief, July 15, 2022). The deal included provisions for "China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement to the Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties; China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in the Solomons" (Dr. Anna Powles, Twitter, March 24).

The agreement led to the deployment of a China Police Liaison Team led by Zhang Guangbo, an officer of the rank of Commissioner third class, who stated that this PRC presence was intended to protect the safety of Chinese communities in the Solomon Islands as well as contribute to overall stability in the islands (Embassy of the PRC in the Solomon Islands, March 4). The PRC also sent police riot equipment to the Solomon Islands to better equip the local police (MPS, January 6, 2022). However, no "overseas police service center" has been identified in the country.

Extraordinary Rendition in All but Name?

A key part of MPS activity in relation to "overseas police service stations" is to track down fugitives wanted for corruption in the PRC. The "Fox Hunt" and "Skynet" programs to chase fugitives who had fled overseas were launched during President Xi Jinping's tenure after 2012. The MPS launched "Fox Hunt" (猎狐) to locate the more than 18,000 officials who had reportedly fled overseas taking over 800 billion yuan ($125 billion) with them, largely to Asia- Pacific countries with large Chinese communities (China Daily, November 12, 2014).

"Sky Net" (天网) was launched in 2015 and involved multiple agencies. The State Supervisory Commission pursued fugitives and stolen goods for duty-related crimes. The Ministry of Public Security tracked down officials hiding abroad. The People's Bank of China targeted offshore companies and underground banks that transferred illicit money overseas. Finally, the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate undertook judicial action against those apprehended for crimes (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, March 3). "Sky Net" has been a holistic, whole-of-government global program, which seems to have led "overseas police stations" to effectively engage in extraordinary rendition.

Conclusion

The issue of "overseas police stations" or "service centers" is complex and needs to be considered holistically in the context of the continued expansion of PRC policing internationally as well as CCP United Front efforts and other influence activities around the world. Safeguard Defenders has assessed that the "overseas police stations" are linked to the nationwide campaign by the PRC to combat fraud and telecommunication fraud perpetrated by Chinese nationals living abroad, as well as other activities. However, the vast majority of Chinese fraud suspects are located in Asia, notably in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand, whereas the "overseas police centers" are largely located in Europe. As a result, "overseas police stations" are unlikely to be primarily concerned with dealing with criminal fraud suspects. Rather, they are likely focused instead on ensnaring fugitives fleeing punishment for corruption, intimidating political dissidents and influencing the Chinese diaspora and foreign political systems (Jamestown Foundation, April 12). Such stations may possibly also perform administrative work, such as renewing driving licenses, but this explanation may also be a clumsy cover story.

The Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* found in 2019 that "overseas police centers" were established in at least 39 countries from 2014 on. Safeguard Defenders have identified 102 "overseas police stations." The Director General of the Taiwan National Security Bureau has stated that there are over one hundred. The FBI has reported that the Public Security Bureau in Fujian Province has established a worldwide chain of "overseas police service stations." Hence, an extensive network of informal PRC service centers that are utilized for public and state security purposes clearly exists.

However, the evidence thus far indicates that this network of "overseas police centers" has been established by city and provincial Public Security Bureau offices. There is no indication that the national Ministry of Public Security Bureau directed the establishment of these centers. As a result, it is unclear if this is part of a wider strategy on Beijing's part or simply improvisation by provincial officials who have grasped an opportunity to improve their performance indicators by returning fugitives wanted for corruption violations, silencing political dissidents and influencing Chinese nationals in other countries. The network seems to have been improvised and to have developed on an ad hoc basis.

In addition, the use of "Overseas Chinese Service Centers" in United Front activities is likely to be a key part of their role. CCP United Front operations cut across PRC government departments, and hence, collaboration between public security and state security agencies is a given. The denials of the operations by the PRC government are disingenuous. Beijing contends that these "overseas police stations" are not law enforcement entities, but in reality are assistance organizations, which are themselves unlawful in much of what they do. The disclosures by Safeguard Defenders in 2022 as well as the Jamestown Foundation in 2019 have shed light on this aspect of the expansion of PRC overseas law enforcement and United Front activities. A critical next step is enforcement action against this activity by appropriate law enforcement agencies in each jurisdiction where they are located.

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Editor's Note: This piece exceeds the standard length for *China Brief* articles but is being published due to its timeliness and reader interest.

Notes

[1] See Heidi Østbø Haugen and Tabitha Speelman, "China's Rapid Development Has Transformed Its Migration Trends," Migration Policy Institute, January 28, 2022.
[2] See James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, updated February 2, 2023.