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'Beyond Hardware and Technology': The Intangibles of China's Naval Power (Part 2)

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This is part two of a three-part series on China's naval power

(PART 2: OPERATIONAL LEVEL)

As introduced in Part 1, so far, most analyses of China's naval power worldwide have examined the PLA Navy's existing and projected force-levels, and its associated hardware inductions and technological progression, with little emphasis on the 'intangibles' of China's naval power, such as the strategic intent, objectives and strategy; tradition, operational experience and joint-service synergy, and the trends with regard to training and exercises, maintenance philosophy, and so on.

While Part 1 assessed China's naval doctrine at the 'military-strategic' level, Part 2 undertakes an assessment of the intangible elements of China's naval power at the 'operational' (campaign) level. Part 3 will address the 'tactical' level.

Operational Planning & Operational Art

Since Sun Tzu's Art of War – the oldest treatise on operational art – Chinese military operational theory has developed in insular environs. This has led to a substantial difference between the Chinese and other militaries in fundamental doctrinal nomenclature and concepts. The Chinese express operational art in a very different manner, which is difficult for a non-Chinese analyst to understand. For instance, there is no single word in Chinese that directly corresponds to 'doctrine', but many documents talk

about 'operational theory,' which is linked to 'operational practice' through 'military science.'

The doctrinal variance is best exemplified by the differences in the two strategy board games – the Chinese 'Weichi' and the Western 'Chess', which explains how the Chinese think vis-á-vis their counterparts in the West. In 'Chess', the player aims to checkmate the opponent's king (operational 'centre of gravity') through a single decisive encounter. On the contrary, 'Weichi' is essentially an 'encirclement game' involving multiple battles over a wide front, whose objective is to fully surround a larger total area of the board than the opponent. Clearly, therefore, the Chinese 'Weichi' is oriented to fighting a land campaign, and thereby – unlike the western 'chess' – entails capture of territory. On the other hand, 'chess' is more akin to a naval campaign, which does not entail holding of territory, unless during an amphibious campaign; in which case too, the military objective lies inland.

Another difference between Chinese and Western operational thought lies in the subtle nuances of 'operational manoeuvre.' Although 'manoeuvre' is the cornerstone of Sun Tsu's treatise, and also essential in the Chinese game of 'Weichi,' its relevance is confined only to the initial part of the campaign to avoid the strength of the adversary. In the Chinese operational thought, decisive victory is achieved at a later stage only through 'attrition'. In contrast, in Western doctrine, as exemplified by the 'Chess' game, 'manoeuvre' is critical for the entire length of the campaign, particularly since the operational objective would not usually involve capture of territory. This variance possibly emanates from the historical-cultural divergence between China and West. Whereas the western militaries having learnt lessons from its 'bloody' history, seek to avoid 'attrition' of own forces at all costs, China's perceives its strength to lie in numbers – in terms of both platforms and human resource – and thus its ability to absorb 'attrition' of own forces.

Chinese operational theory, therefore, evolved largely for land campaigns, capitalizing upon the numerical advantage of forces. Later, China adapted to the operational design of naval warfare by imitating the practices of the major naval powers. Fundamentally, therefore, the PLA Navy's operational tenets of warfighting are not different from those of the western navies. To a casual observer, nevertheless, the difference may seem conspicuous due to two reasons.

- First, conceptual and linguistic differences have been a major challenge for the PLA Navy to adapt to the western operational doctrine. This has led to Chinese naval operational art being 'underdeveloped' vis-à-vis the other major navies.

- Second, while China and the non-Chinese navies alike follow the practice of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, the deductions for China usually differ substantially from those of the western powers, necessitating a vastly different approach by the PLA Navy. For instance, China's substantial technological inferiority vis-à-vis its potential adversaries in the Western Pacific rim leads to the deduction that it must employ its numerical strength and asymmetric capabilities like anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), submarines and missile boats.

Inter-Service (Functional) Integration/ Jointness

For a long time since China's emergence as a nation-state, joint-service planning/operations has been virtually non-existent in the Chinese armed forces. The primary reason for this has been the continental disposition of the Chinese and the primacy of land-based operations in China's military-operational doctrine, resulting in the dominance of the PLA Army. This led to the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force being merely branches of the Army-dominated PLA, not only in nomenclature, but also in functional terms. The PLA Army's functional integration/ jointness with the PLA Air-Force was somewhat justifiable, but its synergy with the PLA Navy was considered unnecessary, since the latter operated in a completely different (maritime) realm, and was thus required to deal with its maritime security functions on its own. In order to ward off the enemy's amphibious assaults across its seaward frontiers, China developed the Marine Corps in the 1950s for the PLA Navy. This diminished further the need for PLA Navy's functional integration with the PLA Army.

In the mid-1990s, as a strategic guideline for fighting a 'Local War Under High Technological Conditions', China implemented the 'War Zone Concept' (WZC). As per the WZC, during war, all army, navy and air forces from more than one Military Region were to be brought directly under the command and control of the HQ of one Military Region, which was then reconstituted as a "war zone" (theatre) [战区], with the operational command exercised by a single unified commander. However, the WZC had two serious voids.

- First, the WZC was not a permanent organisation. In peacetime, the Chinese military continued to operate with the erstwhile Command and Control organisation of seven military region (MR) commands representing China's seven geographic regions.

- Second, although the WZC did cater to a maritime conflict – such as in a Taiwan scenario – it was based on the seven Military Regions, and was thus largely optimised to fight a land-based war.

In 1999, emulating the western defence structures, China promulgated its first-ever Joint Campaign Guidance (*Gangyao*) – along with Joint Logistics Campaign Guidance (*Gangyao*). However, this endeavour was also flawed. The Chinese term "Gangyao" (联合) literally means 'united' (rather than 'joint' or 'integrated'), merely indicating that the units of two or more services are operating together at the tactical level, and are not joint (or integrated) at the operational level. This realisation dawned upon the Chinese military in 2004, when it coined a new term, "Integrated Joint Operations" (体化联合作战), to describe what the western defence forces refer to as theatre-level 'joint planning and operations'. The concept was formally incorporated in China's Outline of Military Training and Evaluation (OMTE) only in 2009. Since then, China began emphasizing upon this 'integrated' concept in its Defense White Papers. However, even thereafter, inter-service integration has been more of rhetoric and symbolic than substantive, as also indicated by the kind of tactical exercises undertaken by the PLA even today (examined in detail later in part 3 of this paper).

In December 2015, China replaced the WZC with a permanent 'Theatre Command Concept',when the former seven MR Commands were replaced by five Theatre Commands. The reorganisation emerged from Beijing's realization that inter-service operational integration needs to cater effectively to fight a maritime war. Accordingly, the PLA Navy's East Sea Fleet (ESF) and the South Sea Fleet (SSF) now form part of the Eastern and Southern Theatre Commands respectively. Notably, with this reorganisation, a PLA Navy Vice Admiral (Commander of the Southern Theatre Command) became the first non-PLA Army officer ever to command a Military Region (MR) or a Theatre Command (TC).

Soon thereafter, in 2016, to achieve a genuine jointness in defence planning, China undertook a major reorganisation of the PLA Headquarters' (PLA HQ) under the Central Military Commission (CMC). The PLA HQ and its four "general departments" (Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armaments) were hitherto performing two concurrent functions, as follows:

- HQ of the PLA Army, similar to to the HQs of the PLA Navy, the PLA Air Force, and the PLA Rocket Force (formerly known as the Second Artillery Force).

- HQ of joint staff responsible for overall policy and strategy formulation for the Chinese military.

The four "general departments" were dismantled; all joint staff–type functions were assigned directly to the CMC, and a separate PLA Army HQs was created.

The two latest measures of 2015-16 are indeed notable, which could potentially transform China's joint warfighting effectiveness in the Western Pacific rim. However, these would need some years to 'settle down' to contribute effectively to its envisaged purpose. Besides, these are not devoid of significant challenges, particularly in terms of the operational effectiveness of the PLA Navy in a maritime conflict:

- First, although the PLA appears committed to integration, the Army's historic dominance over other services may complicate these efforts. Some officers have complained that the ongoing dominance of the "great infantry" concept across the military has affected the development of joint operations and training.

- In March 2017, China announced its plans to expand the size of its Marine Corps from the existing 20,000 troops to about 100,000 troops. Beijing, considers this upgrade essential for China to provide the PLA Navy an integral forward-deployed quick-reaction capability overseas, beginning with Djibouti and Gwadar. Notably, this is indicative of China's quest to emulate the force planning of the major western powers. However, this would dilute the motivation and efforts to integrate the PLA Navy with the other armed forces of China, for enhanced inter-service synergy for a campaign in the Western Pacific.

Naval Operational Logistics

Over the years, the lack of inter-service functional integration has also adversely affected naval logistics for joint operations in the Western Pacific rim. Until recently, maritime logistics has also been a notable void for PLA Navy's independent missions. The three key causes are the following:

- The PLA Navy has been compelled to maintain a high teeth-to-tail ratio to counter the militarily superior adversaries in the Western Pacific rim through an 'anti-intervention strategy'. This has led to an emphasis on combat platforms at the expense of their supportive logistic elements.

- The PLA Navy's ship-borne logistics concept has traditionally been based upon provision of fuel, food and water. This is inadequate for comprehensive sustenance of naval forces overseas over extended periods, and also necessitates the provision of technical and other services, the associated spare-parts and ordnance/ ammunition.

- Traditionally, the PLA Navy's warship crews have lacked experience of extended sea deployments, which also bears upon the expertise for routine maintenance of machinery and equipment during such deployments (examined later in Part 3 of this paper).

The voids in PLA Navy's maritime logistics became conspicuous during its counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden beginning December 2008. Among the most salient problems was the low operational availability of logistics ships. Until mid-2011, due to the poor material state of its older logistic ships, the PLA Navy was compelled to deploy its two latest logistic ships *Weishanhu* and *Qiandaohu* for consecutive missions, and alternate between these, leading to considerable strain on their material and crew.

However, over a very short period, the PLA Navy transformed its operational logistics in the Gulf of Aden. From mid-2011, the strain encountered by *Weishanhu* and *Qiandaohu* was shared by the new logistic ships – beginning with *Qinghaihu*, and later by *Taihu and Chaohu*. By end-2014, the PLA Navy had achieved the comfort level to deploy its seven new logistic ships in succession.

Traditionally, China was conceptually reliant on the ships of State-Owned Enterprises (SoE) like the *China Ocean Shipping Company* (COSCO) for providing support to the PLA Navy during a crisis necessitating distant operations like logistic support and strategic sealift. In 2015, Beijing issued a set of new guidelines to build all Chinese commercial ships to warship standards. The option to employ these ships for logistic support in the Gould of Aden mission was considered. However, it is likely that Beijing realized the highly specialized nature and demands of maritime operational logistics, and thus discarded the option. Besides, tasking these vessels would be detrimental to their primary commercial function, thereby adversely affecting Chinese economy, at a time when the PLA Navy's *raison d'etre* is to support 'economics', and not the other way around.

Notably, for the first time, China's 2014 Defense White Paper lays emphasis on 'sustenance' of the forward-deployed naval platforms through "strategic prepositioning". This indicates that China is likely to seek overseas access facilities – possibly, even full-fledged military bases – in the Indian Ocean, or even resort to the U.S. concept of 'sea-basing'. The latter possibility is supported by recent news-reports about China developing

large 'Mobile Landing Platforms' (MLP) similar to those used by U.S. expeditionary forces. This trend constitutes the key indicator for China's intent for distant force-projection in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond.

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