
Explaining China's Participation in Bilateral and Multilateral Military Exercises

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The People's Liberation Army's recent participation in bilateral and multilateral military exercises is a remarkable evolution in China's approach to military diplomacy and national security. These exercises are better understood when viewed within the context of Beijing's confidence-building strategy, recognition of non-traditional threats, emphasis on force modernisation and military operations other than war, and desire to counterbalance the United States. In addition, the analysis of both the benefits and implications these exercises have for the Chinese military provides observers with a better understanding of the People's Liberation Army and its approach to military diplomacy.

China's participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises with foreign militaries is a recent, yet understudied phenomenon. Traditionally, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) did not conduct "combined activities such as training or exercises with any foreign militaries."¹ Yet, in October 2002, several hundred soldiers of the Chinese and Kyrgyz armed forces gathered for a counterterrorism exercise along their borders. Codenamed *Exercise 01*, the two militaries coordinated a simulated joint operation.² Since then, the PLA and the People's Armed Police (PAP) have participated in at least thirty-three ground exercises with thirteen foreign armies, while the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted nineteen international maritime exercises including thirteen foreign navies, and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) took part in one air combat exercise.

This article analyses China's participation in international exercises between 2002 and 2010 to identify its motivations behind this policy change. Five factors were critical in Beijing's decision to embrace international exercises. Firstly, the exercises are valuable in supporting China's confidence-building strategy because they have the potential to promote mutual trust between militaries. Secondly, China's threat perception has taken into account non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, separatism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. Because these challenges are transnational in nature,

¹ David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt, 'Introduction: Patterns of PLA Warfighting', in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt (eds), *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 6.

² Dennis J. Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai and Andrew Scobell (eds), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2010), p. 82.

Beijing has sought to exercise with neighbouring militaries in order to enhance its capabilities and explore the possibilities of cooperative contingencies against these threats. Thirdly, international exercises are valuable opportunities for the PLA to enhance its modernisation efforts through testing key capabilities and learning new doctrines from foreign militaries. Fourthly, the growing emphasis on Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) has provided the PLA with an imperative to participate in bilateral rescue and humanitarian exercises. Finally, Beijing has used international exercises to display and project modern capabilities as a signal of its increasing military strengths to others. In addition to analysing these five factors, observations on the future trajectory of these exercises and their impact on the PLA will be discussed in the closing section.

Multinational Military Exercises: Concept and Purpose

Multinational military exercises constitute one of the most open forms of military diplomacy. At an elementary level, bilateral and multilateral exercises facilitate cooperation. In addition to collaborative activities, it requires militaries to be transparent with regard to their doctrines and tactics. International exercises also represent one of the most sophisticated and challenging forms of military-to-military engagement. Logistically, they are expensive to execute and require the host country to support a sizeable foreign force. Especially in a multilateral exercise, planners face the difficulty of meeting different logistical requirements between forces. Participating militaries must integrate their communications and information-sharing practices under a unified command. In addition, legal, cultural and language barriers must be overcome.

Since multinational military exercises are expensive, their undertaking depends on certain preconditions such as shared interests and a healthy political relationship between states involved. One example is the exercises conducted under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FDPA) between the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. They involve long-established links within the British Commonwealth and a common interest to defend the Malay Peninsula from external attack.³ In addition to preconditions, there must be imperatives that will push both sides to commit to an exercise. They may be of military nature, such as the need for different militaries to develop the technical and tactical capabilities to operate as one cohesive force. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)—characterised by a collective defence commitment—places considerable importance on joint operational capabilities between

³ Desmond Ball and Pauline Kerr, *Presumptive Engagement: Australia's Asia-Pacific Security Policy in the 1990s* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin Australia, 1996), pp. 12, 94.

member forces.⁴ NATO exercises are thus used for perfecting compatibility and interoperability.

However, there are also non-military imperatives. International exercises can be used as a symbolic means to achieve foreign policy, security and economic goals. Non-military imperatives arise mainly from the interests of political leadership. For example, the United States employed the US-Korean Team Spirit exercises with South Korea between 1976 and 1996 as a means of deterring and extracting concessions from Pyongyang.⁵ The imperatives to participate in international exercises are unique to each country and China is no exception.

Overcoming Traditional Resistance to International Exercises

China's past political climate did not generate the preconditions for the PLA to engage in international exercises. Firstly, the PLA's traditional missions provided little scope for facilitating international exercises. Under Mao Zedong, the PLA was ideologically and symbiotically linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁶ The military was required to fulfil political, economic and social roles, in addition to its wartime functions. The PLA's primary responsibilities to this day are to defend China from invasion, prepare for the reunification of Taiwan by force, and protect the CCP. These internal missions provided little common ground for the PLA to cooperate with foreign militaries.

Secondly, China's domestic and external environment was not conducive to international exercises. The 'Great Leap Forward', the 'Cultural Revolution', and the turmoil that surrounded the 'Gang of Four' were severely disruptive for the PLA. Furthermore, the PLA's image was tarnished following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Thirdly, non-transparency has been a traditional barrier to cooperative activities. China has been consistently criticised by the United States and others about its lack of transparency when it comes to defence spending, force structure and armament programs. The PLA is therefore reluctant to expose its forces to foreign observation in order to preserve ambiguity regarding its military capabilities.

Finally, China has announced the pursuit of a "peaceful rise", following Deng Xiaoping's belief that China should avoid assertive displays on the

⁴ Scott Moreland and James Mattox, 'Pressing Contemporary Issues', in Scott Jasper (ed.), *Transforming Defense Capabilities: New Approaches for International Security* (London: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 2009), p. 81.

⁵ John F. Farrell, 'Team Spirit: A Case Study on the Value of Military Exercises as a Show of Force in the Aftermath of Combat Operations', *Air & Space Power Journal*, vol. 20 (Fall 2009), p. 94.

⁶ Andrew Scobell, *Chinese Army Building in the Era of Jiang Zemin* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, August 2000), p. 12.

international stage.⁷ Chinese leaders continue to articulate the principle of peaceful rise. For instance, Premier Wen Jiabao stated that “China will not pose a threat to any other country.”⁸ In addition, Chinese leaders have repeatedly resisted the suggestion of joining or creating military alliances.⁹ China’s participation in international military exercises could reveal the PLA to be an alarmingly aggressive force. Alternatively, a sustained programme of intense exercises with another country could lead others to believe that China was pursuing an alliance. China’s peaceful rise is not a roadblock to the PLA’s participation in international exercises. However, to avoid major contradictions to its portrayed image as a responsible stakeholder and non-threatening actor, it does limit the scope of external activities the armed forces can engage in.

Given this, Beijing’s decision to participate in international exercises is a remarkable step forward. This development is attributable to the existence of preconditions and imperatives. China has achieved rapid economic growth and attained a high degree of political stability. The nation’s growing confidence on the world stage and renormalisation of diplomatic relations with most countries has fostered a favourable external environment. These developments give rise to some of the preconditions for the execution of bilateral and multilateral military exercises. In particular, economic interdependence and pragmatically driven diplomacy leads to a convergence of interest in dealing with common security issues, thus facilitating opportunities for bilateral and multilateral security cooperation. But preconditions alone do not automatically lead to military cooperation. The dramatic shift in policy is the result of political and military imperatives that have pushed the PLA on a trajectory towards the pursuit of international exercises.

Exercises with Chinese Characteristics

Between 2002 and 2010, the PLA and the PAP participated in 52 bilateral and multilateral exercises.¹⁰ China’s rate of participation in international exercises has increased considerably in recent years, with fourteen and twelve exercises held in 2009 and 2010, respectively. By 2010, the PLA had

⁷ Evan Medeiros, ‘Agents of Influence: Assessing the Role of Chinese Foreign Policy Research Organizations after the 16th Party Congress’, in Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel (eds), *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2004), p. 297.

⁸ Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, ‘The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of “Peaceful Rise”’, *The China Quarterly*, vol. 190 (2007), p. 298.

⁹ Richard Weitz, ‘Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises’, *Small Wars Journal* blog, 30 September 2009, p. 10.

¹⁰ Exercise figures and data collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources; including the *PLA Daily*, the Chinese Ministry of Defence website, Chinese National Defence White Papers, and essays written by Blasko. Prior to publication, there was no single source offering a total number of international exercises that the PLA had participated in.

participated in exercises with foreign militaries from all inhabited continents. Excluding maritime exercises, Chinese air and ground forces were deployed to twelve countries for exercises. Activities ranged from live-fire manoeuvres involving combined arms operations and counterterrorism training, to maritime search and rescue (SAR) and disaster relief. Most exercises involved a modest number of Chinese personnel. But the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO) counterterrorism exercises were larger in scale. The SCO, comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, held five major ground exercises. Each exercise included armour and infantry manoeuvres, supported by special forces, aviation and artillery. A Chinese force of 700 soldiers participated in *Coalition 2003*, the first multinational exercise involving most SCO members.¹¹ *Peace Mission 2005*, mainly a bilateral exercise between China and Russia, saw a peak in participation with 8000 Chinese troops and the deployment of heavy and advanced weapons from both sides.¹² In the following three *Peace Mission* exercises, the PLA contributed at least 1000 personnel to each operation.

Despite the impressive milestones, the superficial nature of these exercises has been scrutinised by analysts. The exercises to date do not reflect realistic combat scenarios. As Blasko points out, the exercises are conducted in daylight, the short duration of the operations do not pose significant logistical challenges to the militaries, and the scripted sequence of battle means commanders rarely have to make tactical decisions based on changing conditions.¹³ It is questionable whether these exercises offer any improvement to the participating militaries' war fighting capabilities. The restrained nature of these exercises might mean that the PLA has either decided against or is incompetent in testing the true extent of its capabilities when exposed to foreign militaries.

Regarding the execution of *Peace Mission* exercises, Weitz observes that Chinese and Russian forces chose to manoeuvre towards their objectives in parallel as opposed to developing integrated operations.¹⁴ The PLA therefore prefers to preserve the autonomy of its forces from foreign command structures, as opposed to embracing integrated command. In addition, these exercises do not come close to the complexity and scale of those conducted by the United States and its allies. For instance, while *Peace Mission 2005* boasted a total of 10,000 Russian and Chinese troops,

¹¹ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 385.

¹² Weitz, 'Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises', pp. 3-4.

¹³ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 410.

¹⁴ Weitz, 'Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises', pp. 7-8.

200,000 American and South Korean personnel participated in *Team Spirit 1986*.¹⁵

However, over-reliance on comparative assessments of the PLA's performance disregards the strategic significance of these exercises. International exercises mark a critical turning point in the PLA's thinking. Defending and upholding national interests is no longer reserved to activities within China's borders. The military's growing confidence in conducting cross-border and overseas exercises, coupled with the PLAN's focus on blue water operations and its recent decision to deploy warships to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden, demonstrates that the PLA is placing increased value in defence activities outside the mainland.

Factor 1: Confidence-building

Undertaking bilateral and multilateral exercises for the purpose of confidence-building is driven predominantly by political imperatives. Chinese leaders are aware of the international community's unease towards its rise. Southeast Asian countries have bolstered their militaries to counter Chinese expansion, while India and Australia have identified China as a long-term security challenge.¹⁶ These concerns undermine Beijing's ambition to pursue a leadership role in the region. In response, Chinese leaders have intensified military diplomacy, as well as other diplomatic and economic engagement strategies, with the aim of promoting cooperation and minimising tensions along China's periphery.¹⁷

There are numerous activities contributing to China's confidence-building strategy. The PLA offered to train and educate twenty-three Indonesian military officers in 2008.¹⁸ In 2009 and 2010, the Chinese Defence Minister toured Europe and Asia to meet with his counterparts.¹⁹ US Pacific Fleet commanders were invited to visit China's First Marine Brigade in 2006 and 2008, while the PLA invited foreign observers to attend a range of military exercises including the *Jiaolong-2004* amphibious exercises.²⁰ Despite the increase in military diplomacy activities, it is arguable whether these actions

¹⁵ Farrell, 'Team Spirit', p. 95.

¹⁶ Bhaohul Zhang, 'Chinese Foreign Policy in Transition: Trends and Implications', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 39 (2010), p. 53.

¹⁷ Kristen Gunnes, 'China's Military Diplomacy in an Era of Change', paper prepared for the National Defense University Symposium on China's Global Activism: Implications for US Security Interests, National Defense University, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington D.C., 20 June 2006, p. 3.

¹⁸ Thomas Lum et al., 'Comparing Global Influence: China's and US Diplomacy, Foreign Aid, Trade, and Investment in the Developing World', CRS Report for Congress, Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service, 15 August 2008, p. 9.

¹⁹ Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, 'China-Southeast Asia Relations: Military Diplomacy and China's Soft Power', *Comparative Connections*, vol. 12 (2010), p. 75.

²⁰ Dennis J. Blasko, 'China's Marines: Less is More', *China Brief*, vol. 10, no. 24 (December 2010), <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37246&cHash=42a8cbf6c2> [Accessed 20 December 2010].

represent genuine efforts by the Chinese leadership to improve the quality of military-to-military engagement. Most of the activities observed to date are more or less token expressions of friendship. Nonetheless, the range of military diplomacy activities is expanding, permitting the incorporation of international military exercises.

Bilateral exercises represent an important confidence-building measure. A major source of conflict between nation states stems from a lack of information about capabilities and intentions.²¹ Military exercises serve to suppress this uncertainty. They provide opportunities for militaries to better understand each other's capabilities and intentions. Bilateral exercises additionally generate confidence because they reflect areas of mutual interest. The exercises may also soften the competitive mindsets of the participating militaries, funnelling their energies from confrontation to cooperation.

The Chinese military will only engage in international exercises when long-term military-to-military relations reach a mature stage. A high level of trust must exist between the two sides before bilateral military exercises are considered seriously. This was the case in China's confidence-building strategy with India.²² Trust was initially generated by elementary confidence-building measures. These included the 1996 'Lines of Actual Control' agreement and a naval port call by two Chinese warships in 2001. Soon after, Indian and Chinese ships conducted a bilateral naval SAR exercise off the coast of Shanghai in 2003. Following a friendly sporting event between the two militaries, Chinese and Indian border troops conducted their first ground exercise in 2004. Chinese troops crossed the border on India's Independence Day and the two armies executed mountaineering drills.²³ Since then, both sides have carried out four additional exercises. The latest was an anti-terror exercise codenamed *Hand-in-Hand 2008*.²⁴ The history of Sino-Indian military cooperation illustrates the PLA's general approach to international exercises. The PLA will not initiate bilateral exercises until other forms of confidence-building measures are implemented. Time is given for the inter-military relationship to consolidate. After the success of one or two 'trial' exercises, both sides reach a sufficient level of confidence to regularise bilateral training activities. The same process can be observed

²¹ David H. Bearce, Kristen M. Flanagan and Katherine M. Floros, 'Alliances, International Information, and Military Conflict Among Member-States', *International Organization*, vol. 60 (2006), p. 603.

²² Srikanth Kondapalli, 'The Chinese Military Eyes South Asia', in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel (eds), *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2006), pp. 222-4.

²³ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 386.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

in China's military engagement with other countries, including Russia, the Central Asian states and Thailand.

However, this process does not always apply. China still commits to exercises on an irregular basis with some foreign militaries. This is observed in Sino-Australian military diplomacy. The two countries had previously facilitated senior officer visits, port calls, defence consultations and educational exchanges.²⁵ Subsequently, both sides executed a basic maritime SAR drill in the Tasman Sea in 2007, an exercise that coincided with a PLAN visit to New Zealand and Australia.²⁶ The next exercise, however, did not occur until 2010, in the form of a Sino-Australian live-fire naval exercise.²⁷ Unless both sides have the political will to facilitate regular exercises, bilateral exercises with China will be mainly a one-off occurrence rather than a repeated feat.

In particular, political will may not consistently be maintained on the Chinese side. For instance, the PLA may not think it necessary to exercise regularly with the Australian military. Australia does not constitute an immediate security concern along its periphery, unlike India. There is therefore no urgency to utilise regular exercises as a confidence-building instrument. Alternatively, China may not see Australia as a prospective security partner because of its geographical distance. Nonetheless, this is not to say that China undervalues military exercises with Australia. Exercises with its distant partners serve as a valuable opportunity to publicly and politically enhance China's image, in spite of the lack of consistency in Beijing's approach.

Factor 2: Threat Perception

China's recognition of non-traditional security threats is an important rationale supporting the PLA's participation in international exercises. Since 2000, there has been a gradual shift in China's strategic orientation. In addition to separatism, Beijing's recognition of non-traditional threats now incorporates terrorism, religious extremism, drug-trafficking, illegal migration, piracy, and transnational crime.²⁸ Although the PLA's missions and

²⁵ PLA Daily, 'Guo Boxiong's Visit Will Enhance China's Military Ties with Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia', Ministry of National Defense of The People's Republic of China, 11 May 2010, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Opinion/2010-05/11/content_4155141.htm> [Accessed 18 December 2010].

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Royal Australian Navy, 'Royal Australian Navy Joins China in Live-fire Exercise', Royal Australian Navy, 24 September 2010, <http://www.navy.gov.au/Royal_Australian_Navy_joins_China_in_live_fire_exercise> [Accessed 6 January 2011].

²⁸ Keith Crane et al., *Modernizing China's Military: Opportunities and Constraints* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2005), p. 199. Reference to non-traditional threats is also made in General Cao Gangchuan's speech during his visit to Tajikistan. See Roger N. McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007*, Occasional Paper (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, October 2007), pp. 5-8.

responsibilities have been expanded to meet new security challenges, the Chinese leadership recognises the limits of unilateral actions given the transnational nature of non-traditional threats. Consequently, Beijing has acknowledged the advantages of bilateral and multilateral military cooperation.

THE THREE EVILS: TERRORISM, SEPARATISM AND EXTREMISM

Beijing considers terrorism, separatism and extremism as the “Three Evils”.²⁹ The issue of separatism in Xinjiang province has been prominent on Beijing’s agenda. Although it has been traditionally treated as a matter of domestic security, the issue has transnational aspects. The Chinese government is concerned about the links between insurgents in Xinjiang and Islamic militant groups in Central Asia.³⁰ Secession or conflicts sparked by Islamic extremists in Central Asia would drastically impair security along China’s western borders and encourage Uighur separatists. Because separatism transcends China’s borders, Chinese authorities have recognised the mutual benefits of working with Russia and Central Asian states to curb the threat.³¹

Beijing has also identified international terrorism as a threat to its interests. China closed its borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan due to concerns that Al Qaeda fighters might flee across the border, while Chinese workers in Pakistan were victims to terrorist attacks on at least two occasions.³² The SCO is the predominant cooperative framework in China’s counterterrorism and anti-separatism strategy. During the Shanghai Five’s Alma-Ata summit in July 1998, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan declared that “any form of national splittism, ethnic exclusion and religious extremism is unacceptable”.³³ The common threat perception resulted in a series of regional military exercises designed to simulate multinational operations against terrorists and separatists. *Exercise 01, Cooperation 2003, Coordination 2006*, and the three most recent *Peace Mission* exercises exhibited similar features. For example, the opposing forces in these SCO exercises assumed the role of small terrorist forces, operating in mountainous regions and having occasional access to unconventional weapons.³⁴

²⁹ Hak Yin Li and Zhengxu Wang, ‘Assessing China’s Influence in Central Asia: A Dominant Regional Power?’, *Briefing Series*, vol. 53 (2009), p. 5.

³⁰ Ariel Pablo Sznajder, ‘China’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization Strategy’, *Journal of IPS*, vol. 5 (2006), <<http://irps.ucsd.edu/assets/004/5367.pdf>> [Accessed 15 December 2010], pp. 93-5.

³¹ Michael Snyder, ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A New Order in Central Asia’, *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. 8 (2008), p. 17.

³² Kondapalli, ‘The Chinese Military Eyes South Asia’, pp. 235-6.

³³ Ming-Yen Tsai, *From Adversaries to Partners? Chinese and Russian Military Cooperation After the Cold War* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), p. 65.

³⁴ Blasko, ‘People’s Liberation Army and People’s Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces’, p. 378.

The deterrent function of SCO exercises has been useful for advancing Beijing's strategy to curb the 'Three Evils'. It sends a political message to non-state actors that SCO member states have the means and political will to deliver a potent response. The exercises have also been timed as political responses to crises. *Peace Mission 2007* was designed to reflect the Andijan Crisis in Uzbekistan in 2005.³⁵ *Peace Mission 2009* was conducted after the July riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Major General Wang Haiyun, former Chinese military attaché to Russia, admitted that "to some extent, the July 5 Xinjiang riot pushed forward anti-terrorism cooperation between China and Russia."³⁶ *Peace Mission 2010* was interpreted as a direct response to the overthrow of the Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev and a terrorist ambush that killed 25 Tajik soldiers earlier that year.³⁷ Although the SCO has evidently failed to prevent these crises, multilateral exercises have purported to deter similar incidents from happening in the future. Therefore, the Chinese government has embraced these exercises for their value in deterring non-state threats and demonstrating the unified resolve of the SCO to combat the 'Three Evils'.

China has also pursued anti-terror exercises with militaries in South and Southeast Asia as a way of promoting a regional consensus against this threat. The PLA conducted cross-border counterterrorism exercises with Pakistani forces in 2004, 2006 and 2010.³⁸ Anti-terror exercises have also been held with India and Thailand. In 2009 and 2010, the PLA launched exercises with the Singaporean Armed Forces (SAF) to practice joint responses to a nuclear, biological or chemical terrorist attack.³⁹ The exercises with Singapore are unique in the sense that they focused on emergency responses to urban terrorism.

Whether China's participation in bilateral and multilateral anti-terror exercises has deepened military cooperation in combating terrorism is debatable. Counterterrorism exercises serve a useful political and deterrent function in Beijing's calculations. They are also an indication that the PLA is becoming increasingly proactive in exploring cooperative contingencies against terrorist threats. Substantive cooperation in counterterrorism beyond these exercises, however, cannot be achieved without the establishment of follow-on bilateral or multilateral mechanisms. The SCO's regional anti-terror structure has facilitated intelligence analysis and exchange between

³⁵ McDermott, *The Rising Dragon*, p. 16.

³⁶ Weitz, 'Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises', p. 9.

³⁷ Richard Weitz, 'China's Growing Clout in the SCO: Peace Mission 2010', *China Brief*, vol. 10, no. 20 (2010), p. 8-9.

³⁸ Kondapalli, 'The Chinese Military Eyes South Asia', p. 234.

³⁹ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 401.

member states.⁴⁰ But the effectiveness of the structure in preventing and combating terrorism in Central Asia is difficult to measure. While the PLA is likely to increase its participation in anti-terror exercises, it remains to be seen whether Beijing is willing to commit its political and military resources towards sustaining long-term multinational anti-terror regimes.

DRUG TRAFFICKING

Beijing has identified the international narcotics trade as a transnational threat to Chinese society.⁴¹ Drug abuse is problematic in all provinces. Over 800,000 individuals were infected with HIV through drug use, and there were over a million registered drug addicts in China by 2003, although the figure could be as high as 12 million users.⁴² A major crackdown over a six-month period in 2004 resulted in the arrest of 34,719 suspects and 2186 gangs involved in the narcotics trade.⁴³ As much as it is a domestic law enforcement issue, Chinese authorities implemented countermeasures against the drug trafficking networks operating along its southern and western borders. China has also turned to multinational activities. This includes some military-to-military cooperation. The Sino-Thai exercises of 2007 and 2008 reflected the interest of both countries in combating drug smugglers. While *Strike 2007* was largely composed of confidence-building and teambuilding activities between small numbers of troops from both sides, the live-fire phase of the exercise involved a coordinated attack on a smuggler's camp.⁴⁴ The exercises are significant in two regards. Firstly, training with foreign militaries that are experienced in anti-drug operations, like the Thai army, will enhance the PLA's competency in carrying out its domestic anti-drug mission. Secondly, the exercises offer experience for the PLA in executing anti-smuggling operations with its neighbours should the need arise for a coordinated military response against drug traffickers.

ILLEGAL TRANS-BORDER ACTIVITIES

China considers regional cooperation in border management a means of securing its frontiers. SCO members have a shared concern regarding:

⁴⁰ Hugo Dobson, 'Leadership in Global Governance: Japan and China in the G8 and the United Nations', in Christopher M. Dent (ed.), *China, Japan and Regional Leadership in East Asia* (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 2008), pp. 206-8.

⁴¹ Niklas Swastrom, 'Narcotics and China: An Old Security Threat from New Sources', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4 (2006), p. 116.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 115-20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 391.

the smuggling of weapons, ammunitions, explosives, and drugs [as well as] organised transnational crime, illegal immigration and mercenary troop activities.⁴⁵

PLA and PAP border defence units have thus participated in cross-border exercises with their neighbouring counterparts. The first bilateral border management exercise was carried out by Chinese and Russian forces in 2003. The exercise involved dozens of frontier defence troops in the coordinated interception and apprehension of border-crossers.⁴⁶ The Sino-Kazak exercise in 2009 consisted of troops forming a bilateral command mechanism to coordinate patrols and checkpoints.⁴⁷ In addition, PAP and Russian frontier units held a rescue drill in an area between Heihe and Blagoveschensk.⁴⁸ These exercises are not given the same level of attention as the SCO's counterterrorism exercises. Nevertheless, they have proven valuable in enabling China's border defence units and their counterparts to coordinate bilateral responses to a variety of trans-border threats.

FAILED STATES AS A SECURITY THREAT

The total collapse of any country along China's borders would be a humanitarian disaster. It would present Beijing with tremendous challenges in terms of the potential for refugees, instability and violence spilling over into China. These factors were major contributing factors underpinning *Peace Mission 2005*, an exercise held in China's Shandong Province nominally executed under the SCO banner, with the principal participants being China and Russia. The scenario required Russia and China to respond to an appeal for assistance from hypothetical "Country S", with the consent of the United Nations.⁴⁹ A coordinated action involving ground forces, the insertion of paratroopers, and an amphibious landing was carried out in order to secure the hypothetical nation. McDermott observes that non-combat elements usually associated with humanitarian interventions, such as peacekeeping and policing operations, were absent.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding these inaccuracies, however, it was a symbolic demonstration of Moscow and Beijing's ability to coordinate a military response to a failed state-situation. Although Chinese officials have consistently dismissed the idea that *Peace Mission 2005* was aimed at a

⁴⁵ Pan Guang, 'The SCO's Success in Security Architecture', in Ron Huisken (ed.), *The Architecture of Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Canberra: Australia National University E-Press, 2009), p. 36.

⁴⁶ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 384.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 398-9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 388-9.

⁵⁰ McDermott, *The Rising Dragon*, p. 6.

specific country, analysts believe that North Korea may have been the intended target given the fallout from a regime collapse in Pyongyang.⁵¹

Factor 3: PLA Modernisation

International exercises have contributed to China's military modernisation by providing the PLA with opportunities to observe foreign tactics and doctrines. Exercises with the combat seasoned Russian military represent a useful opportunity for the PLA to observe alternative tactics. In *Peace Mission 2009*, Guo Yaodong, commander of the Ninth PLA Army Aviation Regiment, was so impressed with the way Russian helicopters approached and departed their targets at low altitudes that he recommended the PLA to enhance its flight training.⁵² During the same exercise, Hua Yi, commander of the 190th Brigade, was advised by his Russian counterparts not to employ armoured assets during the urban phase of the exercise due to their vulnerability in close quarters combat.⁵³ Chinese officers therefore appreciate the opportunity to observe their counterparts in action. Their observations will most likely enrich and challenge the PLA's doctrines.

Overseas and cross-border exercises have given the PLA a unique opportunity to practice long-distance deployment. The PLA recognises that one of the prerequisites for becoming a major military power is mastering forward deployment away from China. *Peace Mission 2010* was the latest opportunity for the PLA to test their power projection capabilities. It used a mix of air and rail transport to rapidly move an expeditionary force of over 1000 men and their vehicles from Eastern China to Kazakhstan, a journey covering 5000 kilometres.⁵⁴ The success of this undertaking was a testament to the PLA's improved logistics. In addition, *Peace Mission 2010* was the first time the PLAAF simulated a long distance air-strike outside China. In previous Peace Mission exercises, the PLAAF had forward deployed only a handful of strike aircraft for close air support. But on this occasion, the PLAAF tested its newly developed integrated air strike capabilities. Four H-6 bombers with two J-10 fighter escorts, supported by tankers and an airborne command aircraft, took off from a base in Xinjiang and struck their targets in Kazakhstan.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications*, Policy Paper No. 25 (Elanders, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2009), p. 20.

⁵² Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 403.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Weitz, 'China's Growing Clout', p. 10.

⁵⁵ Roger McDermott, 'China Showcases Expeditionary Military Power in Peace Mission 2010', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 7, no. 174 (2010), <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36955&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=484&no_cache=1> [Accessed 22 December 2010].

China has also capitalised on international exercises as a way of enhancing the quality of its officers and troops. The PLA now prizes overseas experience for its soldiers. An example is Chen Changfeng, commander of the First Marine Brigade, who spent two years in Germany receiving an MA in Military Science, speaks German, and has participated in SCO exercises.⁵⁶ In addition to sending personnel on peacekeeping operations, foreign visits, and study abroad programmes, the PLA considers international exercises a means of giving its troops exposure to the outside world. To add to the experience of operating with foreign troops, Chinese personnel have also been given opportunities to engage in cultural exchange and education activities that usually take place before or after an exercise. For instance, soldiers participating in the *Peace Missions 2007* and *2010* exercises were provided lectures on Russian language, culture and law.⁵⁷

Factor 4: Military Operations Other Than War

Because MOOTW enhances China's soft power, Beijing has been more supportive towards externalising the military's non-combat activities. These include peacekeeping and disaster relief missions. One of President Hu Jintao's 'New Historic Missions' for the PLA, to "help ensure a peaceful global environment and promote mutual development", reinforces the military's existing commitment to peacekeeping.⁵⁸ China has been contributing observers, engineers, medical personnel, staff officers and police officers to United Nations peacekeeping operations since 1990. As of April 2008, 1981 Chinese peacekeepers were deployed on twelve peacekeeping missions.⁵⁹ The PLA has sought to strengthen military cooperation in this area by sending its officers to peacekeeping courses in other countries, hosting a number of international seminars on peacekeeping, and training foreign mine-clearing personnel.⁶⁰ These activities were complemented by an eight-day Sino-Mongolian peacekeeping exercise held in Beijing in June 2009. Approximately ninety troops from both sides formed a combined peacekeeping company and participated in a series of drills.⁶¹ In addition to providing PLA troops with experience in coordinating overseas operations with foreign militaries, the exercise was also a useful public relations tool to demonstrate China's emerging leadership in peacekeeping.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Hague, 'PLA Career Progressions and Policies', in Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell and Travis Tanner (eds), *The 'People' in the PLA: Recruitment, Training and Education in China's Military* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2010), p. 253.

⁵⁷ McDermott, *The Rising Dragon*, pp. 12-3.

⁵⁸ Hartnett, 'The PLA's Domestic and Foreign Activities', p. 1.

⁵⁹ Lum, *Comparing Global Influence*, p. 41.

⁶⁰ Gill and Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping*, pp. 17-8.

⁶¹ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 401.

The PLA General Staff Department has accelerated efforts to enhance the military's disaster relief capabilities in order to better respond to domestic and external disasters.⁶² The push for disaster relief capabilities can be attributed to recent natural disasters in China and the Asia-Pacific. The 2008 snowstorms and the Sichuan earthquake exposed weaknesses in the PLA's disaster relief capabilities. China also lacked the capacity to offer meaningful assistance to Southeast Asian countries following the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.⁶³ As a result, the PLA has pursued several opportunities to work with foreign militaries in disaster relief activities. Chinese and Gabonese army medics participated in *Peace Angel 2009* which simulated a mine disaster.⁶⁴ This was followed by a similar relief exercise with Peru in 2010.⁶⁵ These exercises not only provide the PLA with experience in deploying rescue teams overseas, but also allow China to flex its soft power in developing countries.

In addition, as part of its transition to a blue water navy, the PLAN has been encouraged to address its shortcomings in the areas of maritime SAR and anti-piracy missions by learning from other navies.⁶⁶ China has conducted bilateral maritime SAR exercises with a number of navies, including Australia, Pakistan, India, New Zealand, Thailand, France, the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶⁷ In addition, the PLAN participated in *AMAN 07* and *09*, hosted by Pakistan. These were multinational exercises intended to improve international coordination in anti-piracy operations. Bilateral and multilateral maritime exercises allow the PLAN to observe other countries' SAR and anti-piracy procedures. They also offer the PLAN an opportunity to train communications with their foreign counterparts in international waters.

However, it should be noted that international maritime exercises so far only offer limited improvements to the PLAN's MOOTW capabilities. The

⁶² Gill and Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping*, p. 15.

⁶³ Harold M. Tanner, 'The People's Liberation Army and China's Internal Security Challenges', in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai and Andrew Scobell (eds), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2010), pp. 242-51.

⁶⁴ Blasko, 'People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces', p. 400.

⁶⁵ Yang Zurong, 'PLA Medical Team Participates in Medical Rescue Joint Operation in Peru', Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 18 November 2010, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/MilitaryExchanges/2010-11/18/content_4208815.htm> [Accessed 10 January 2011].

⁶⁶ The PLAN is the "most flexible and outwardly focused arm of the PLA" and has proven to be a "useful tool with which to demonstrate China's soft power". See International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'China's Three-Point Naval Strategy', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 16, comment 37, 2010, <<http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-16-2010/october/chinas-three-point-naval-strategy/>> [Accessed 5 January 2011].

⁶⁷ Heidi Holz and Kenneth Allen, 'Military Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics: The People's Liberation Army Experience with Military Relations', in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai and Andrew Scobell (eds), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2010), pp. 449-51.

activities have been more useful to Beijing as public relations events, rather than sophisticated exercises that strengthen the navy's conduct at sea. This may reflect the PLAN's still limited capacity in cooperating with foreign navies under complex conditions. However, in the long-term sustained operational experience in the Gulf of Aden and ongoing engagement in regional forums on maritime security will no doubt contribute to China's maritime MOOTW capabilities.

Factor 5: Counterbalancing Washington's Hegemony

On the one hand, China seeks to weaken American influence in Asia. A string of US bases in Northeast Asia and the Western Pacific as well as the existence of American-led military alliances reinforces Chinese perceptions of a containment strategy orchestrated by Washington. Consequently, Beijing has launched diplomatic, economic and military measures to push back America's influence in the region. In Central Asia, the SCO has been one of the main instruments in China's strategy to exert political pressure on Washington. For instance, in 2005 SCO member states called on Washington to set a timetable for the withdrawal of its military from Central Asia.⁶⁸ Chinese leaders have also employed the SCO's Peace Mission exercises as a reminder to Washington that Beijing considers Central Asia part of its sphere of influence. However, China will not replace the United States or Russia as the dominant military power in Central Asia as long as Beijing lacks a permanent military presence and does not offer defence guarantees to the region.⁶⁹ In addition, divergences in Chinese and Russian interests will further weaken the prospects of an anti-US strategic alliance.

On the other hand, China has begun to exert military influence in regions beyond its periphery in a calculated move to counter Washington's hegemony. Beijing is hostile towards a unipolar international system dominated by the United States.⁷⁰ It considers American hegemony to have the ability to disrupt and isolate China's rise.⁷¹ The two exercises held with the Turkish military in 2010 indicate that Beijing has begun to exploit international military exercises as a diplomatic tool to weaken US influence. China and Turkey have growing economic ties and a common interest in fighting separatists.⁷² Within this bilateral framework, Turkey hosted an air combat exercise with the PLAAF and a ground exercise with the PLA.⁷³

⁶⁸ Richard Weitz, 'China and Russia Hand in Hand: Will it Work?', *Global Asia*, vol. 2 (2007), p. 55.

⁶⁹ Richard Weitz, *China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism Without Partnership or Passion?* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2008), p. 63.

⁷⁰ Crane et al., *Modernizing China's Military*, p. 195.

⁷¹ Tsai, *From Adversaries to Partners?*, p. 58.

⁷² Rosita Delios and Nadir Kemal Yilmaz, 'Turkey and China: A Study in Symmetry', *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 2 (2008), pp. 16-26.

⁷³ For a Turkish perspective on the exercises and how they fit within Turkey's own political/strategic ambitions, see Business Monitor International, 'China and Turkey: A

There are two significant aspects to these exercises. Firstly, given that Turkey is a US ally and key member of NATO the exercises have reinforced Beijing's diplomatic efforts to persuade the Turkish Government to shift away from a pro-Western foreign policy. Secondly, China is trying to use military diplomacy to pull more countries into its orbit, including traditional US allies. While the PLA is not currently in a position to compete with the US military's global presence, China's intensification of military diplomacy could slowly erode the unipolar status quo.

Future Prospects

China's participation in international exercises is driven initially by political imperatives. Chinese leaders recognise the political value of these activities. The goal to abate regional anxieties about China's rise will provide the political momentum to expand the PLA's participation in international exercises. This is illustrated by official reports indicating the PLA's readiness to conduct maritime rescue and anti-drug trafficking exercises with the Philippines.⁷⁴ This gesture aims to improve confidence-building and security cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbour. However, interest within the PLA's ranks is providing another source of momentum. The opportunities to provide its personnel with greater exposure to foreign environments, to test new capabilities overseas, and to improve the domestic and international image of the armed forces has generated a professional imperative for the PLA to participate in international exercises.

International exercises have had an important psychological impact on the PLA. They offer Chinese personnel the unique opportunity to interact with foreigners and deploy overseas. Language and communication becomes an obvious difficulty. To illustrate the extent of the challenge, over 200 interpreters were used in *Peace Mission 2007* while PLA personnel could only make use of simple English and hand gestures to communicate with their Thai counterparts.⁷⁵ Yet, the exercises have also played an important role in boosting the PLA's confidence. Chinese troops become more confident in their ability to interact with foreign militaries and to operate in offshore environments. The PLA also gains confidence from overcoming severe logistical challenges in a variety of new missions.

Still, Chinese interest in holding bilateral exercises may not be met with the same level of enthusiasm from other states. Lingering suspicion and distrust

Partnership to Reshape the World?', *Business Monitor International Newsletter*, 25 October 2010, <<http://www.riskwatchdog.com/2010/10/25/china-and-turkey-a-partnership-to-reshape-the-world/>> [Accessed 12 January 2011].

⁷⁴ D. J. Yap, 'China Ready to Hold Military Exercises with PH', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 December 2010, <<http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20101223-310597/China-ready-to-hold-military-exercises-with-PH>> [Accessed 15 January 2011].

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 392, 394.

towards China's rise prevents some militaries in the region from engaging in more active forms of cooperation. China will also be reluctant to exercise with some countries in the foreseeable future. For instance, there is little optimism for more Sino-Japanese military cooperation, given the distrust between the two nations.

China's activeness on the international stage will have a positive effect on its participation in international exercises. The increasing number of exercises is indicative of China's rising confidence in projecting its military influence overseas. On the one hand, bilateral exercises are likely to be employed in tandem with existing military diplomacy activities, such as arms sales, education exchanges and training assistance, as a way of enhancing China's influence in developing countries. On the other hand, China could enhance its image as a responsible great power by participating in more exercises that focus on disaster relief and non-traditional threats. The medical rescue exercises with Gabon and Peru reinforce this point. Chinese leaders are expected to explore additional means to demonstrate the PLA's expanding capabilities in MOOTW, with the end goal of enhancing Beijing's soft power.

The PLA is likely to test its capabilities in more complex operations in future international exercises. Logistical and infrastructure support for Chinese forces deployed to exercises are gaining sophistication. For instance, the PLA practiced long-distance power projection capabilities during *Peace Mission 2010*. The PLA's participation in aerial war games with Turkey was also the first time Chinese combat aircraft conducted a transcontinental flight across Eurasia. In addition, the types of missions being covered by the exercises are becoming increasingly diverse. *AMAN 07* focused on multinational anti-piracy and SAR operations; the Sino-Singaporean anti-terror exercise was designed to prepare both sides for chemical and bioterrorism; and the Sino-Turkish air exercise involved air combat training between the two participating air forces. China's ambition to develop a modern military force, its desire to learn from foreign militaries, and the military's increasing confidence will ultimately provide the momentum for the PLA to test itself in a greater diversity of missions.

Frequent exercises under the SCO banner may mislead observers to conclude that a Sino-Russian or Central Asian military alliance is emerging. Although the exercises reflect the success of Sino-Russian cooperation, they lack components that are vital for sustaining a military alliance. A military alliance such as NATO concentrates on developing joint capabilities at both strategic and operational levels. These capabilities include interoperability, shared assets, information sharing, battlefield synchronisation and joint training.⁷⁶ None of these sophisticated capabilities, vital to the development of a military alliance, have been exhibited or tested in the SCO's exercises.

⁷⁶ Moreland and Mattox, 'Pressing Contemporary Issues', pp. 81-7.

The fact that Chinese and Russian units preferred to retain their autonomy by manoeuvring in parallel during *Peace Mission* exercises shows that neither side is prepared to agree on an integrated command structure. While exercises between China, Russia and other SCO members will continue on a regular basis, they do not lead to a military alliance framework.

From a Western perspective, the depth of China's transparency in these exercises is debatable. On the one hand, the exercises have demonstrated an unprecedented level of cooperation in a number of areas. On the other hand, it appears that the PLA has taken no major steps towards enhancing its transparency. The elementary nature of most exercises and their orientation towards MOOTW means that the participating militaries are unable to observe the true extent of the PLA's capabilities. The small scale and short duration of most exercises also prevents foreign observers from determining the precise nature of the PLA's electronic warfare, command and control, and logistics capabilities. International exercises may present foreign militaries with the opportunity to work alongside Chinese troops. But the doors leading to greater PLA transparency remain tightly shut.

Conclusion

The growing number and increasing complexity of international exercises marks a unique evolutionary step for both the PLA and for Beijing in the way it approaches national security. The PLA's pursuit of international exercises is driven by multiple, overlapping factors that have prompted the China to embrace bilateral and multilateral exercises. The exercises have been employed for the purposes of fostering a regional climate of trust. While exercises alone cannot solve lingering territorial disputes or eliminate the unease expressed by some governments towards China's rising power, they have helped the PLA build bridges with other militaries. International exercises play an important role in the PLA's missions in the twenty-first century.

They demonstrate the PLA's growing interest in pursuing international collaboration against non-traditional threats. As the PLA embraces missions that require its forces to deploy regionally and globally, it is likely to participate in more exercises to test its capabilities in foreign environments and learn from experienced counterparts. Simultaneously, the PLA's participation in overseas exercises has become an invaluable means for Beijing to exert its regional and global influence. Finally, China's participation in international exercises represents an important stepping-stone in the PLA's transition into a modern fighting force. The recent developments reflect the PLA's rising confidence and China's growing assertiveness in the twenty-first century.

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