

# Learning by Doing

## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY DIGEST

In an effort to better understand the PLA's ability to employ its developing capabilities in a variety of potential scenarios, *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad* provides a timely and critical look at how the PLA has sought to gain practical knowledge from exercises and noncombat operations. Key findings are listed below.

### Key Areas of PLA Development

#### PLAN EXERCISES AND OPERATIONS

In many ways, the PLAN has been the most visible branch of the Chinese military on the global stage through its port calls, exercises with international partners, and participation in overseas operations such as the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission.

#### DOMESTIC GROUND FORCES EXERCISES

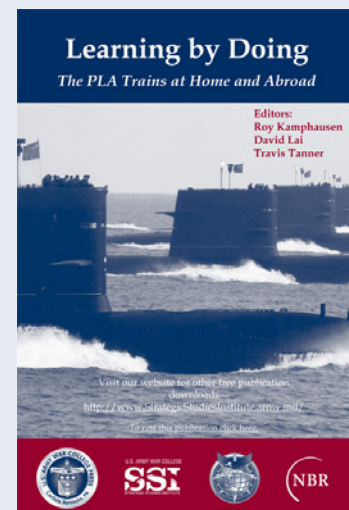
Another key area of development for China's military exercises and noncombat operations are domestic exercises by ground forces, including trans-military region (MR) exercises and related activities conducted by the People's Armed Police (PAP) force.

#### MULTINATIONAL EXERCISES IN INTERNATIONAL SETTINGS

Since the PLA continues to increase its participation in exercises and operations outside China's borders, this volume also examines the level and depth of interactions between the PLA and the militaries of other nations.

#### SYSTEMS AND STRATEGY REFORM

The volume's final area of focus includes an explanation of recent developments related to PLA systems and strategy.



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Roy Kamphausen, David Lai,  
& Travis Tanner, eds.

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### THE PLA CONFERENCE BOOK SERIES

*Produced in collaboration with the U.S. Army War College and the Strategic Studies Institute.*





# Learning by Doing

THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

## PLA Lessons Learned from Increasingly Realistic Exercises

*Roy Kamphausen, The National Bureau of Asian Research*

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For more than two decades, the annual People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference has been a premier source of original analysis on China's military development. Each conference results in an edited volume consisting of the papers presented that year by top PLA scholars. This volume represents the 2011-12 iteration of the event, a workshop titled "Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad," held on February 18, 2012.

In an effort to better understand the PLA's ability to employ its developing capabilities in a variety of potential scenarios, this year's workshop examined how the PLA learns by doing, specifically through its exercises and noncombat operations at home and overseas, and through key logistical and theoretical developments. In many ways, this year's workshop was the second installment of an examination of how the PLA has sought to gain experience in the practice of modern warfare despite lacking recent combat experience of its own. The previous volume in the annual series—*Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars* (2011)—examined what the PLA has learned from its observation of the armed conflicts of foreign nations. This volume seeks to build on these findings and examine how the PLA follows Mao Zedong's maxim to learn by doing by analyzing another major source of the PLA's practical knowledge, namely its exercises and noncombat operations.

The book's key findings can be summarized as follows. First, recent PLAN exercises and operations point to an increasing interest in developing expeditionary naval capabilities and a presence in distant seas, suggesting that a move beyond the current "near seas" focus is both possible and an extension of existing efforts. Second, PLA ground force exercises—rather than aiming to intimidate others by demonstrating the ability to project power beyond China's borders—focus on moving military power within China, both to defend China's borders and perhaps as a prelude to military restructuring in which smaller but more mobile formations could replace larger and more static ones. Third, through its participation in international military exercises as well as peacekeeping operations (PKO) and humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) missions, the PLA is gaining greater capabilities to deploy outside of China's borders for a variety of missions. Finally, PLA operations are increasingly supported by a modern, civilian-integrated military logistics network, though a lack of overseas bases continues to limit the effectiveness of this network as it pertains to overseas power projection capabilities.

The following is a collection of executive summaries from each chapter found in the 2012 conference volume, *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*.

For more information about the PLA Conference series, please visit the NBR website: [www.nbr.org/placonference](http://www.nbr.org/placonference).



# Learning by Doing

## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### China's Navy Prepares: Domestic Exercises, 2000–10

*Bernard D. Cole, National War College*

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This chapter examines Chinese naval modernization demonstrated during a decade of training ashore and exercising at sea.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

During the 10 years between 2000 and 2010, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted a series of carefully planned exercises designed to advance its capability to execute assigned missions across the spectrum of naval operations. These exercises focused on all the standard naval warfare areas, with a concentration on preparing for informationalized warfare at sea. Many specific exercise objectives were achieved; the end result was a PLAN more capable both of dealing with modern naval operations and of serving its nation as an effective instrument in safeguarding vital security interests.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- The 10 years of exercises examined for this chapter demonstrate that the PLAN is getting better. This must be a consideration for American policymakers evaluating the use of the navy in supporting national security policies. The United States still has maritime dominance in East Asian waters, but two factors have emerged. First, the PLAN is posing the most serious challenge to the U.S. Navy since 1945; second, maintaining U.S. maritime dominance in East Asia may now require exerting power not just at sea, but also projecting power ashore, against targets on the Asian mainland.
- Beijing is modernizing its navy for publicly announced maritime interests vital to its national security; these are most simply stated in the phrase “san hai” or “three seas,” denoting the Yellow Sea and the East and South China Seas.
- The United States also defines vital national security interests in East Asian waters; first is the requirement for access to those waters, required by both commercial trade and by the need to fulfill the responsibilities of U.S. security treaties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, as well as lesser commitments to Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand.
- Where these two sets of perceived vital maritime interests coincide or conflict define the points of contention between China and the United States in this century.



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### PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners

*Michael McDevitt, Center for Naval Analyses*

This chapter addresses the lessons that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has learned in its interactions with foreign navies. The main focus is on lessons learned during extended anti-piracy deployments.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

Thanks to 3 years of continuous anti-piracy deployments to the Arabian Sea, the PLAN is mastering the operational skills necessary to deploy and sustain surface combatants, amphibious ships, and support ships on distant stations for long periods of time. For the PLAN, these deployments have become a real world "battle-laboratory," thanks to daily interactions with foreign navies. The PLAN has an opportunity to observe the day-to-day operations of most of the world's great navies and absorb best practices for its own use. In short, it is learning the sorts of lessons that are absolutely essential to the effective operation of an expeditionary navy.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- Since the Cold War ended, the United States has been unconstrained when deploying naval forces off the coast of another nation to support Western interests and signal determination. A PLAN capable of "distant seas" operations provides Beijing with a new "tool" it can employ to support its friends and buttress its policies. Should the PLAN be employed in this fashion, it could greatly complicate U.S. policy approaches by introducing a new factor into crisis response options.
- The PLAN is becoming "integrated" into the maritime life of the region around the Strait of Hormuz. China already depends upon Gulf oil much more than the United States. Over time it may be desirable to encourage the PLAN to become more of a positive contributor to the overall peace and stability of the region. The military issues that cause tension between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the U.S. military are East Asia-specific, whereas there is a very close alignment of interests (but not necessarily policies chosen to advance those interests) between Washington and Beijing in this region.
- The introduction of modern amphibious ships, and shortly, an aircraft carrier force, provides the PLAN with a credible power projection capability that is generating the acquisition of area denial capabilities such as submarines and land-based aircraft with anti-ship cruise missiles by neighboring littoral states. It is also raising the attractiveness of the U.S. naval presence along the long Indo-Pacific littoral. The Barack Obama Administration's rebalance to Asia seems perfectly timed.



# Learning by Doing

## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### “Controlling the Four Quarters”: China Trains, Equips, and Deploys a Modern, Mobile People’s Armed Police Force

*Cortez A. Cooper III, RAND Corporation*

This chapter focuses primarily on Chinese People’s Armed Police (PAP) capabilities development for counterterrorist and anti-riot missions and, specifically, on lessons learned from training, exercises, and deployments. The application of these lessons has resulted in a better trained, equipped, and ready PAP than had been the case at any previous period in the force’s history.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

The author proposes that a pivotal transition for the PAP occurred in response to a series of events in early-2008 to late-2010. The outcome is manifest in both the manner of PAP deployments and in mission capabilities. This chapter summarizes five areas of PAP capabilities development, in the form of administrative adjustments, joint integration, “informatization,” equipment modernization, and logistics and infrastructure enhancement. The chapter then examines the PAP’s capacity to handle diverse missions, as evidenced in exercises and emergency deployments. PAP training and deployments provide a picture of increased and sustained readiness across the force, and indicate the adoption of new operational concepts to meet expanding mission requirements.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- For U.S. and partner policy and decisionmakers, the implications of a highly ready, mobile, and increasingly capable PAP fall into three general issue areas: advantages and disadvantages of bilateral exchanges on policing, disaster relief, and counterterrorism initiatives; advantages and disadvantages of multilateral engagement for peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations; and promotion of People’s Republic of China (PRC) transparency regarding PAP wartime roles and missions.
- As China’s leaders seek more measured approaches to handling domestic unrest, exchanges with U.S. and partner police forces can provide concepts of operation and techniques that may facilitate de-escalation of domestic crises and improve responses to terrorist activity. These same exchanges, however, potentially provide training for the PAP to quell nonviolent public demonstrations more effectively.
- Despite the inherent problems, a cautious approach to exchanges, focusing on small-unit, nonescalatory crowd control and techniques for specific counterterror operations such as hostage rescues, likely shifts the balance in favor of engagement.
- On the multilateral front, the advantages further outweigh the risks. A variety of PAP forces, to include medical units, provide a wide range of policing and security force options for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and multilateral HADR missions.
- Engagement with the PAP also provides a potential window into wartime missions for the force. Promoting transparency regarding PAP conflict roles and missions could provide a better understanding of PRC mobilization and escalation control.



# Learning by Doing

## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### Clarity of Intentions: People's Liberation Army Transregional Exercises to Defend China's Borders

*Dennis J. Blasko, Independent Consultant*

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This chapter examines People's Liberation Army (PLA) Army and Airborne transregional exercises conducted from 2006 to 2011.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

Since 2006, official Chinese sources have identified transregional mobility as among the major training objectives for PLA ground forces. Several exercises have focused on moving large units (brigades and divisions) from one Military Region (MR) to another, incorporating into these exercises other experimental training topics such as command and control for joint operations, operations in a complex electromagnetic environment, formation of combined arms battalion task forces, and logistics support. Chinese media reports have documented many of these exercises in considerable detail.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- None of the transregional exercises to date have been designed to intimidate Taiwan, but rather have focused on reinforcing operations in distant regions within China after a conflict has broken out. Cross-border operations outside China would require different logistics support than has been demonstrated in these exercises.
- Within the context of the PLA's entire training program, transregional exercises are exploring many operational concepts that other advanced militaries have implemented for decades. Based on their own comments and observations, Chinese military leaders are aware that PLA experimentation in modern tactics and techniques probably will take much longer for them to achieve proficiency than many foreign observers imagine. If deemed successful, transregional exercises could provide the rationale for future cuts in ground units and allow personnel slots and funding to be applied to transportation assets necessary for long-distance movements, a recognized shortfall in PLA capabilities.
- Contrary to perceptions about a lack of transparency in PLA intentions, transregional exercises have been clearly identified as a training objective, and the exercises themselves have been covered by the Chinese media, enabling foreign analysis. In short, the PLA told us what it was going to do, then did it so we could see it.



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## Looking Good on Paper: PLA Participation in the *Peace Mission 2020 Multilateral Military Exercise*

*Daniel M. Hartnett, Center for Naval Analyses*

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This chapter presents an in-depth look at the Chinese military's participation in Peace Mission 2010, a multilateral military exercise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It does this in order to determine what, if any, lessons the People's Liberation Army (PLA) may have learned to benefit its modernization efforts.

### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

Although Peace Mission 2010 appeared on paper to have been a complex and advanced military exercise, a closer look reveals it was actually a superficial exercise. Exercise weaknesses included a highly scripted nature and lack of realism, as well as rudimentary coordination among the participating forces. These weaknesses reflect the inherent nature of the SCO as a primarily political and not military institution. As such, the PLA likely gained little from other SCO militaries about how to further its military capabilities. Instead, the only benefits the PLA took away were the experiences it gained from deploying a large ground force complete with equipment to a neighboring country and projecting air power into China's periphery.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- The United States should not view SCO military exercises as providing the PLA with opportunities to learn from its fellow militaries. The nature of the SCO hinders the emergence of robust military exercises from which the PLA could learn. Instead, any progress the PLA makes will be due to its own efforts.
- The United States should consider the growing possibility that PLA ground forces may someday deploy outside of China's territory in the event of a regional crisis. When planning for regional crisis scenarios, such as a collapse of the North Korean regime, U.S. strategic planners should incorporate potential PLA ground force involvement rather than risk being caught unprepared.
- The United States should recognize that the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is transforming into an incipient expeditionary air force. While still in its nascent phase, the PLAAF is slowly moving toward the ability and mindset necessary to project air power outside of China's territory. As such, regional security planners should increasingly incorporate the possibility of PLAAF operations in future crisis scenarios.



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## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### **PLA Engagement with International Partners: PLA Involvement in International Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief**

*Chini-Hao Huang, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*

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This chapter looks at the Chinese security forces' increasing participation in two major engagements with international counterparts—peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—over the past 10 years. The chapter also explains some of the main motivating factors undergirding China's security approach, and identifies some of the major and recent developments in terms of military capabilities and security challenges.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

In recent years, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has taken on a broader perspective on security challenges to include both traditional warfare as well as nontraditional security threats. This chapter focuses on the evolving Chinese perspectives and responses to some of these nontraditional security challenges, particularly in the areas of humanitarian crises and natural disasters. As a result of this evolution, the Chinese armed forces have expanded their involvement in international peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises, all the while increasing their ability to carry out military operations other than war (MOOTW) abroad. Continued deployments in such exercises are transforming the PLA's skills and capabilities and merit closer observation and analysis of their significance and implications for regional and global security, as well as for U.S. national security interests in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

The analysis calls for greater U.S.-China cooperation on international peacekeeping and HADR. While some may question whether improving the Chinese armed forces' MOOTW capabilities could in turn become a challenge to the U.S. military and the security interests of its allies in the region, peacekeeping and HADR training and other capacity-building exercises serve as useful platforms to build confidence, mutual trust, and understanding between the two militaries—aspects of bilateral military relations that, when lacking, contribute to misunderstanding and miscalculation. Moreover, engaging with China in peacekeeping and HADR exercises provides an invaluable opportunity to gain greater insights into and assessments of the PLA's structural strengths and weaknesses, especially regarding the state of its joint command system, training, and integrated support capabilities.





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### PLA Logistics 2004–11: Lessons Learned in the Field

*Abraham M. Denmark, The National Bureau of Asian Research*

This chapter describes advances in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) logistics capabilities from 2004 to 2011 as demonstrated by exercises and responses to domestic and foreign security challenges.

#### MAIN ARGUMENT:

As the PLA has been required to respond to a diverse set of military tasks across an increasingly broad geography, PLA logistics has been rapidly adjusting. From responding to domestic natural disasters to rescuing civilians in Libya, PLA logisticians have been gradually improving their ability to support operations in the field. Concurrently, PLA strategists are attempting to modernize their logistical systems by introducing complex information systems; incorporating market forces; improving civil-military and interservice logistical integration; enhancing readiness for diverse military roles; and ensuring logistical support for operations on land, sea, air, space, and in the electronic domain. Still, PLA logistics continue to confront significant challenges across the board, and its ability to support operations far from the Chinese mainland remains significantly reliant on a peaceful and accommodating international environment.

#### POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

*China has significantly improved its domestic and external logistical capabilities.*

- Logistical systems have been somewhat modernized, logistical processes have been somewhat rationalized, and decisionmaking has been streamlined.
- PLA logisticians have demonstrated an improved ability to improvise.
- Chinese logistics benefits tremendously from the utilization of civilian resources.

*Although the PLA's logistics system has come a long way, it still has a long way to go.*

- Insufficiently resilient infrastructure and a lack of prepositioned resources have in the past hampered logistics supporting responses to domestic security challenges.
- Inefficiencies and a lack of power projection capabilities hamper external logistics.

*Until China establishes a network of foreign bases, China's ability to project and sustain power beyond its immediate periphery will remain significantly dependent on a peaceful and accommodating external environment.*

- During a time of conflict or crisis—when the external environment may be hostile to Chinese power projection efforts—the PLA's effective power projection capability will likely shrink to Chinese territory and its immediate periphery.



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## THE PLA TRAINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### The Agony of Learning: The PLA's Transformation in Military Affairs

*David Lai, U.S. Army War College*

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This chapter examines Chinese learning from other peoples' wars and military transformation and the impact of this learning on China's military thoughts, traditions, and the overall PLA institution.

#### **MAIN ARGUMENT:**

For well over a century, the Chinese have been learning from the outside world to modernize China's military machine. However, due to their ideological and cultural barriers, the ability of the Chinese to learn from other peoples' wars and military transformation has been selective and tortuous. Chinese military modernization consequently is still on a winding and uncertain journey. In their latest efforts on this mission, the Chinese have adopted the U.S. military's integrated joint operations as a model for China's military transformation. This chapter finds that while the learning of this U.S. model and its implementation would help the Chinese military to improve its fighting capabilities, the impact of this learning on China's military thoughts and traditions is limited.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

- It is important for the United States to see the Chinese learning from other peoples' wars and military transformation and predicaments the Chinese have in their learning process. The United States should also prepare to meet the challenges from China and its military, who have gone through this agonizing learning process.
- Due to its selective learning of the military "hardware" (the capabilities) but rejection of the "software" (the political, economic, and cultural underpinnings) from the U.S.-led West, China will improve its military's fighting capability but continue to set itself apart from the United States and other Western powers. A China with a more capable military that still does not share the fundamental values with the U.S.-led West is a great challenge in the future.
- The ideological and cultural divide will continue to prevent China and the U.S.-led West from dealing with each other in good faith. Engagement with the Chinese military will continue to be difficult.
- While the impact of Chinese learning from other peoples' wars and military transformation on China's military capability is significant, it is less so on China's military institution and the Chinese military traditions—namely, the Chinese way of war, about which U.S. leaders still have only limited understanding. It is imperative that the United States take measures to meet this challenge in the future.