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536. Chinese Military Improves Capabilities While America Sleeps

Chinese J-20 stealth fighters perform at the Airshow China 2018 in Zhuhai, south China's Guangdong Province on Nov. 6, 2018. (Wang Zhao/AFP/Getty Images)

Chinese Military Improves Capabilities While America Sleeps

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News Analysis

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is undergoing a massive buildup in capabilities while the world is distracted.

The PLA has embarked on a massive buildup in recent years that has been cleverly camouflaged by the pandemic, a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) charm offensive on the diplomatic front, and the supposed "benevolence" of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The goal is to become the world's dominant military power in all facets of kinetic warfare by 2049, the centenary anniversary of the CCP's takeover of China and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). A key element of their misdirection campaign, while this modernization effort has been underway, has been fomenting domestic political discord in the United States by supporting activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter and exploiting the legacy and social media sympathetic to China.

While many Americans have been purposely distracted accordingly, major advances in capabilities have been made by the PLA on all fronts.

Here is a short list based on recent media reports:

Hypersonic Missiles: The general officer in charge of the U.S. Space Force admitted on Nov. 20 that the United States was

"behind" China and Russia in the deployment of hypersonic missiles.

In 2019, the PLA-Rocket Force (PLARF) was the first to deploy the Dongfeng-17 (DF-17) medium-range ballistic missile, which mounts the DF-ZF Hypersonic Glide Vehicle, after displaying it for the first time last fall in Beijing, marking the 70th anniversary of the Communist Party's rule.

"The DF-17 is the first deployed hypersonic strike weapon for the PLA and can travel at speeds of more than 7,000 miles per hour—enough to outrun current U.S. anti-missile interceptors," according to The Washington Times.

This new class of missiles greatly decreases defensive reaction times, and the ability to detect pre-launch actions is complicated, as the weapons do not require easily detected launch preparations, which complicates the tactical decision-making thought process of commanders.

The Chinese have also built silhouettes in the sand in the shape of an American aircraft carrier and Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers in the Taklamakan desert, as part of a new target range complex for long-range missile practice—a very aggressive preparation for potential future hostilities.

A satellite picture shows a carrier target in Ruoqiang, Xinjiang, China, on Oct. 20, 2021. (Satellite Image ©2021 Maxar Technologies/Handout via Reuters)

Nuclear Weapons: There has been a disciplined, decades-long campaign by the CCP to rapidly acquire, re-engineer, and integrate nuclear weapons technologies into an array of sophisticated weapons, missiles, surveillance systems, communications, and command and control capabilities. This culminated in the breakout deployment in Inner Mongolia of an estimated 300 new intercontinental ballistic missile silos.

As reported by the Financial Times just last week, U.S. experts in the Pentagon are forecasting that the PLARF will quadruple its nuclear warhead arsenal to over 1,000 by 2030, which, combined with a massive buildup of conventional warfare capabilities, will

change the strategic balance in East and South Asia. The deployment of road-mobile Dongfeng-26 (DF-26) intermediate-range ballistic missiles also continues apace.

The transformation of China's strategic rocket force from an antiquated mixture of older Soviet technology, plus indigenous modifications into a modern capability that is nearing parity with the United States, is breathtaking both in its scope and also the rapidity in which it was accomplished.

Lastly, with the delivery of two new SSBNs over the past two years, the PLA-Navy (PLAN) now have six operational *Jin*-class Type 094 SSBNs, which gives the PRC a viable third leg of its nuclear triad.

Chinese military vehicles, carrying DF-26 ballistic missiles, drive past Tiananmen Square during a military parade in Beijing, China, on Sept. 3, 2015. (Andy Wong/Pool/Getty Images)

Ships: In a single generation, the PLAN has developed capabilities that are direct challenges to the U.S. Navy, including overhead surveillance satellites, long-range hypersonic missiles, and modern ships and aircraft. The Chinese have recently eclipsed the U.S. Navy in the number of hulls available for naval missions.

According to a recently-released media summary of a U.S. Department of Defense report on Chinese military capabilities, "The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has numerically the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of

approximately 355 ships and submarines, including approximately more than 145 major surface combatants."

A third PLAN aircraft carrier, the Type 003, is currently under construction near Shanghai; it is reportedly equivalent in size to America's new Ford-class nuclear aircraft carrier. A special-purpose ship is also being built to support sea launch and recovery of rockets and space vehicles.

While most of the PLAN deployments are in areas close to the Chinese mainland, a growing number of operations are being conducted in distant waters, including the Western Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and Eastern Atlantic Ocean. The PLAN maintains an out-of-area naval base a in Djibouti and are also funding the construction of new sea ports at Gwadar, Pakistan, Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and—until recently—at Khalifa port in the United Arab Emirates.

Coast Guard and Maritime Militia: China's coast guard is the largest by far of any country in East Asia and includes the 12,000-ton China Coast Guard (CCG) 3901 cutter No. 1123, which is the largest coast guard vessel in the world.

In February, in a sign of increasing Chinese belligerence on the high seas, Beijing "released a draft law that would empower the Chinese Coast Guard to use actual 'military force' against foreign

vessels, and that could potentially be applied in disputes in the South China Sea," according to The National Interest.

China also operates a sizable maritime militia that includes a large number of research and fishing vessels for the purposes of asserting and defending PRC maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea and other near-seas regions.

According to a recent report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "The militia as currently constituted in the South China Sea operates from a string of 10 ports in China's Guangdong and Hainan Provinces. Remote sensing data indicates that roughly 300 militia vessels are operating in the Spratly Islands on any given day."

Chinese coast guard and maritime militia units are also being deployed to "protect" Chinese fishing fleets in such locations as the Galapagos Islands and Second Thomas Shoals (the Philippines).

Aircraft: The PLAAF is the third largest in the world, with over 2,800 total aircraft of which approximately 2,250 are combat aircraft and a continuing stream of regular capability upgrades.

The fifth-generation stealth J-20 fighter jet has been deployed for years in significant numbers, with a "maiden flight of the twin-seat variation" conducted recently, according to state-run Global

Times. Many experts consider the J-20 to be a copy of the United State's J-35 stealth fighter in terms of both stealth and conventional capabilities—with blueprints and other technology probably obtained illegally from U.S. firms such as Honeywell.

A recent Pentagon annual report to Congress discussed the extended range nuclear-capable H-6N bomber and stated, "The PLAAF publicly revealed the H-6N as its first nuclear-capable air-to-air refuelable bomber."

Meanwhile, development continues on the new H-20 stealth bomber, which some consider to be a "B-2 copycat." Conventional aircraft production and deployment continue as well. For example, the latest variant of the JH-7 fighter bomber, designated the JH-7A2, was demonstrated at a Chinese airshow earlier this year. The upgrades include improvements to "its surface attack capability by becoming capable of carrying extra surface attack weapons including stand-off air-to-surface missiles, laser-guided bombs and munitions dispenser," according to state-run Global Times.

If aircraft production and deployment continue at the current rate, the PLAAF could very well have the largest air force in the world by 2049—and certainly achieve China's goal of deploying more stealth fighters than the United States by 2025.

A Taiwanese Air Force F-16 in foreground flies on the flank of a Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) H-6 bomber as it passes near Taiwan on Feb. 10, 2020. (Republic of China Ministry of National Defense via AP)

Space: From almost no space capability in the 1980s, the Chinese regime has borrowed and stolen missile, satellite, command and control, telemetry, and surveillance technologies. These have been fused into a robust multi-purpose space capability consisting of navigation satellites (Beidou), a network of signals intelligence and imagery systems, a variety of redundant communications satellites, a newly-tested potential first-strike strategic suborbital-launched hypersonic glide vehicle capability, and an emerging anti-satellite capability that is approaching parity with U.S. capabilities.

Regarding the latter, China recently launched what it claims to be a "classified space debris mitigation technology satellite." While advertised as a capability for "peaceful use of space," the reality is that the technology is dual-use and could be deployed as an anti-satellite capability. This is entirely consistent with China's civil-military fusion strategy in which its defense industrial base and civilian technology development and industrial base are merged (and difficult to separate) in support of CCP strategic goals and objectives—with Chinese dominance of space being one such goal.

As further proof of that "fusion," Defense One reported: "The infrastructure of China's space program is also heavily militarized. The launch sites, control centers, and many of the satellites are directly run by the PLA."

Lastly, the Chinese have also demonstrated a satellite precision tracking and maneuvering capability aimed at detecting a nearby U.S. satellite and maneuvering a Chinese satellite away.

Conclusion

While the rest of the world has been distracted, including by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years, the Chinese PLA has been engaged in a massive modernization program aimed at

eclipsing the United States as the world's top military power by the PRC's centenary celebration in 2049.

New aircraft, ships, missiles, satellites, weapons systems, command and control systems, and surveillance capabilities are being developed, produced, and deployed in great numbers at an astonishing rate. All of this modernization and development has been fueled by a misguided U.S. policy that amounts to appeasement of the Chinese regime.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment—with the able assistance of Henry Kissinger's "China Hands" since communist China was "opened" in 1972—has facilitated the economic and military growth of the Chinese regime through misguided efforts that are theoretically aimed at "bringing a rogue nation into the international family of nations." In other words, China had unfettered access to the international system, Western capital, technology, and markets. As if promoting Western values—for example, democracy, free enterprise, and the rule of law—has ever worked with a communist government! That policy has led to the dangerous emergence of a highly aggressive communist-led regime in Beijing that is increasingly asserting itself on the world scene—and is backed by the growing military might of the People's Liberation Army.

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