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China's Revolution in Military Affairs: Good Enough for Government Work?

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China is in the midst of a major recapitalization of its armed forces, but it is doubtful whether this effort constitutes a "revolution in military affairs" (RMA). Rather, the PLA seems to have adopted the rhetoric of the RMA while pursuing a more conventional "modernization-plus" approach. Even so, the PLA is emerging as a much more potent – and worrisome – military force.

CHINA is currently engaged in a determined effort to transform its military from an army based on Mao Zedong's principles of mass-oriented, infantry-heavy "People's War," to an agile, high-technology force capable of projecting power throughout the Asia-Pacific. A corollary to this assertion is that this modernization process is nothing less than a larger effort by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to engage in a "revolution in military affairs" (RMA) that will revolutionize the way it fights. Certainly it is true that the PLA is in the midst of perhaps the most ambitious upgrading of its combat capabilities since the early 1960s, and that it is adding both quantitatively and qualitatively to its arsenal of military equipment. But is it an RMA? Probably not, but that may not matter.

What is an RMA?

First of all, what is a "revolution in military affairs"? According to its leading proponents, an RMA is necessarily a process of *discontinuous, disruptive, and revolutionary* change. To them, the RMA is nothing less than a fundamental change – a "paradigm shift" – in the character and conduct of warfare. According to Andrew Krepinevich of the Washington, DC-based Center for Budgetary and Strategic Assessments, an RMA occurs when

the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organizational adaptation in a way that fundamentally alters the character and conduct of a conflict. It does so by producing a dramatic increase...in the combat potential and military effectiveness of armed forces.

What an RMA is *not* is simply an overlay of modernized equipment over an existing force structure. An RMA entails much more than "just" force modernization. Hardware and technology are obviously crucial and primary components – the fundamental building blocks for the RMA. A "true" RMA, however, is not simply a techno-fix. Rather, it entails fundamentally changing the way a military does its business – doctrinally, organizationally, and institutionally.

The conventional wisdom is that the *current* RMA is being primarily driven by the ongoing revolution in information technologies (IT), which in turn has made possible significant advances in the areas of sensors, seekers, computing, communications, and precision-strike. Therefore, the current RMA is particularly and inexorably linked to emerging concepts of *network-centric warfare* (NCW): it is more than just vastly improved and more capable command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) infrastructures. We are also talking about networking these C4ISR capabilities with weapons and combat platforms in order to achieve synergistic payoffs in terms of battlefield knowledge, agility, jointness, and lethality.

The Chinese “RMA”

The PLA’s current operational guideline is to fight “Limited Local Wars Under Conditions of ‘Informatization,’” entailing short-duration, high-intensity conflicts characterized by mobility, speed, and long-range attack; employing joint operations fought simultaneously throughout the entire air, land, sea, space, and electromagnetic battlespace; and relying heavily upon extremely lethal high-technology weapons. PLA operational doctrine also increasingly emphasizes preemption, surprise, and shock value, given that the earliest stages of conflict may be crucial to the outcome of a war.

As such, the PLA has acquired or is in the process of acquiring a number of new high-tech weapons systems, including fourth-generation fighter aircraft, large surface combatants, new nuclear and diesel-electric attack submarines, precision-guided munitions (including land-attack cruise missiles and supersonic antiship missiles), airborne early warning aircraft, air-to-air refueling aircraft, improved air defenses, and the like. Of particular note, according to *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, the PLA is forming a core of approximately a dozen division- or brigade-sized rapid reaction units, including three airborne, four amphibious or marine divisions, and several Special Operations units – shock troops that could be used for a variety of regional or even out-of-area contingencies.

Moreover, in accordance with the principles of “informatization,” the Chinese military has put considerable emphasis on upgrading its C4ISR assets – including launching a constellation of communication, surveillance, and navigation satellites – while also developing its capabilities to wage “integrated network electronic warfare” – an amalgam of electronic warfare (jamming the enemy’s communications and intelligence-gathering assets), and offensive information warfare (disrupting the enemy’s computer networks), and physical attacks on the enemy’s C4ISR network. In addition, similar to the US Army’s “Land Warrior” programme, the PLA is reportedly experimenting with “digitizing” its ground forces, right down to outfitting the individual soldier with electronic gadgetry in order to provide him with real-time tactical C4ISR.

But Is It an RMA?

Ultimately, the PLA hopes to turn itself into a modern, network-enabled fighting force, capable of projecting sustained power far throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and which, in the US Defence Department’s words, would “pose credible threats [sic] to modern militaries operating in the region”.

But is what the PLA doing technically an RMA? In fact, there is very little evidence that the Chinese military is engaged in an RMA-like overhaul of its organizational or institutional structures. The bulk of the PLA ground forces, for example, remain traditional infantry units. The PLA’s highly hierarchical and top-down command structure does not seem to have changed, and even the Pentagon acknowledges the PLA’s deficiencies when it comes to things like jointness. It is also worth noting that much of the RMA-related activities being undertaken by the Chinese military are still very nascent and even

experimental, and we possess only a vague idea as to the PLA's paths and progress in many areas of informatization, such as information warfare or digitization, or whether these programs will ever be effectively implemented.

Moreover, recapitalizing the Chinese military with modern equipment – and in particular pursuing improvements in C4ISR – does not in and of itself constitute an RMA; on the contrary, acquiring these systems makes perfect sense even without worrying about “transforming the force”. A military does not need to believe in the RMA in order to appreciate the importance of precision-guided weapons, modern fighter jets and submarines, and better intelligence.

Not an RMA, but a 21st Century People's War

Finally, it is possible that PLA transformation may turn out to be much less revolutionary in practice. Dennis Blasko, in his book, *The Chinese Army Today* (2006), argues that the current concept of limited, informationalized war is simply “People's War” adapted to 21st century requirements and capabilities. In particular, he quotes the PLA officer's training manual as noting that while the PLA appreciates the effectiveness of “transformational” systems, it does *not* see them as decisive in battle, instead relying ultimately on the military's “superiority in conducting a People's War”.

On the whole, the PLA seems to have done a better job adopting the *rhetoric* of the RMA while pursuing a “modernization-plus” approach to transforming itself. China's current military buildup is ambitious and far-reaching, but it is still more indicative of a process of *evolutionary, steady-state, and sustaining* – rather than disruptive or revolutionary – innovation and change.

Not that this is necessarily a wrong path for the Chinese military, nor is it one that shouldn't give other nations considerable cause for close attention. Perfection, it is said, is the enemy of good enough, and even absent a full-blown RMA, the PLA is adding considerably to its combat capabilities. For better or for worse, the PLA is emerging as a much more potent military force, and that, in turn, will increasingly complicate regional security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific and even beyond.

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