

How Well Does Your Adversary Know You?

Assessing PRC and PLA reactions

by Col Scott E. Stephan & Mr. Conor M. Kennedy

The Marine Corps has made headlines over the past few years due to the development of operational concepts designed to provide expeditionary, stand-in forces and the transformative changes proposed and pursued under *Force Design 2030*. The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Eric Smith, recently addressed the impact of 3d Marine Littoral Regiment by stating, "Adversaries do not like this concept at all."¹ Is this assertion true? How would we know?

Assessing People's Republic of China (PRC) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) positions is complicated by language barriers and classification levels in both countries. Few Marines or sailors speak or read Chinese, and it is difficult to access U.S. intelligence community products. The good news is that there is a great deal that can be learned from unclassified, public material published by PRC defense sources.

This article has three purposes. First, to highlight PRC and PLA commentary on Marine Corps operational concepts and Force Design initiatives. To do so, the first section presents a sample of recent unclassified PRC-based Chinese-language sources. Second, the article will identify creditable unclassified English-language sources Marines and sailors can tap into to follow the conversation. Lastly, it seeks to inspire follow-on conversations about China studies in general, and the PLA specifically, in forums such as the *Marine Corps Gazette* that reach a wide audience. While there are limitations on the information, analysis, and conversations that can be presented in unclas-

>Col Stephan is currently serving with III MEF Headquarters. He co-wrote this article while working with the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College.

>>Mr. Kennedy is a Research Associate at the China Maritime Studies Institute of the U.S. Naval War College.

sified settings, Marines and sailors can learn a great deal by accessing publicly available Chinese-language sources and English-language analyses of the PRC and PLA.

Chinese-Language Sources Discussing Marine Corps Development

The first question one may have is whether PLA and PRC experts study and understand the Marine Corps reforms currently underway. The answer is a resounding yes, with a few caveats. Firstly, we do not have access to internal PLA discourse on the subject, such as concept development and wargaming proceedings. This study is drawn from open sources, but the discussion reveals the level of interest in Marine Corps and Navy developments. Second, there is no unitary verdict among Chinese-language sources. They are likely engaged in a debate just as the Marine Corps is, albeit from the opposite side focused on threat assessment. Third, the sources examined here are of varying authority. This is explained where appropriate and the attention given reflects a balance of authority and depth of analysis demonstrated by the various authors.

PRC-based writings demonstrate that they regularly follow the latest changes to the Navy and Marine Corps.

Updates are frequently posted in service newspapers, academic journals, news sites, and television shows noting milestones, failures, and general trends. PRC-based observers are keenly aware of the purpose of Force Design changes and joint operational concepts such as Distributed Maritime Operations, Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, and Expeditionary Advance Base Operations (EABO). Articles written in official PLA sources include detailed descriptions of major line-item changes happening within the Naval Service, such as reductions to specific aviation units, the divestment of tanks and cannon artillery, modifications to unmanned aerial vehicle squadrons, and the acquisition of Maritime Strike Tomahawk missiles and Naval Strike Missiles.²

PRC writings also demonstrate a sober recognition that these concepts are focused on China. One commentator states rapid and dispersed deployment of small-scale units capable of long-range surface strikes onto numerous islands will constitute "a dense, multi-directional intersecting kill zone over large areas west of the island chain," intended to hem in PLA Navy (PLAN) forces and even directly attack mainland coastal targets such as PLA combat

units crossing the sea or ports.³ The recently conducted U.S.-Japan large-scale joint exercise NOBLE FUSION held in the Luzon and Miyako Straits has been described in one nationalistic outlet as validating EABO concepts and associated equipment and “tactics specifically tailored against China.”⁴ These sentiments are unsurprising however since DOD and Marine Corps publications refer to the PRC armed forces as important priorities guiding development.⁵

PLA and PRC observers generally agree with the logic behind the current reforms. Many articles recognize the urgency for reform and the impact the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had over twenty years. One *Navy Today* (当代海军) article from mid-2020 states the Marine Corps’ amphibious landing capabilities gradually atrophied to the breaking point. The authors note the Marine Corps is ill-prepared to deal with a stronger adversary, having faced enemies with no structured air forces, modern air-defense systems, or large-scale armored forces. They argue the Marine Corps’ overall combat capabilities were reduced in its “duplication of army roles,” and its force structure is unsuited to modern warfare.⁶

Some interpret the changes in force structure as a major boost for the Marine Corps. Authors in a *China Military Online* (中国军网) article note that despite reductions in the force’s ability to conduct large-scale ground warfare, the post-reform Marine Corps will be “even more suited to the requirements of amphibious operations, with an overall increase in mobility and firepower and a large improvement in its rapid response capabilities.”⁷ Another author writing in the PLAN’s official newspaper, *People’s Navy* (人民海军), finds that greater integration with the Navy should bring increased flexibility and combat power to the Marine Corps. This observer points out that “the current reductions in personnel and armaments is by no means a contraction in the size of the force or a weakening of its combat functions. Nor can it be regarded as a second-best choice due to tightening defense budgets.”⁸ The *China Military Online* article recognizes the significance of the Marine

Corps’ reforms, especially the creation of the Marine Littoral Regiment. They note the combination of modern and traditional tactics into a contemporary version of “island hopping” and regard the 31st MEU’s exercises since 2019 as initial testing of this concept.⁹ The creation of the Marine Littoral Regiment is seen as an attempt to integrate existing and developing Marine Corps capabilities, such as further integrating the F-35B and manned ships with unmanned systems and anti-ship missile batteries, to form a new combat system for littoral operations.¹⁰

Some observers point out the importance of Marine Corps concepts to the larger U.S. strategy of “containing” China. One source from *Tank and Armored Vehicle* (坦克装甲车辆), a magazine sponsored by China North Vehicle Research Institute, states functioning expeditionary advance bases can amplify the effectiveness of conventional large-scale forces, which will have to pay a heavy price to get inside the anti-access/area denial zone without them. Having its own anti-access/area-denial system in place will effectively blockade China, prevent its military from entering the Western Pacific and even shut off commercial and trading activities.¹¹ Another observer states in *Military Digest* (军事文摘) that CMC Berger’s concept for Stand-in Forces will not only combine cognitive and kinetic effects but also apply political pressure against the PRC by forcing decision-making dilemmas prior to the fight (“stepping on and testing red lines”).¹²

It is not difficult to find PRC-based sources that describe the Marine Corps as a key element of the U.S. military and a creditable threat. However, equally important are the voices that doubt the aspects of successfully implementing these reforms or the effectiveness of new Marine Corps tactics.

What is the likelihood of success in the Marine Corps’ transformation according to PLA sources? Apart from the expected indignation resulting from the perceived aim of the Marine Corps’ shift toward great power competition, there are PLA-affiliated perspectives doubtful the endeavor will succeed. Authors in *Navy Today* expressed the

following risks to *Force Design 2030*. The ten-year redesign of the force will require CMC Berger’s successor to hold a similar mindset, otherwise “the new-comer will have to start from scratch.” Further, another war or crisis could greatly disrupt this transformation, a fair possibility over ten years. The authors also highlight concerns within the United States that current initiatives are overly focused on great power competition to the detriment of the Marine Corps’ ability to respond to other more likely contingencies in the Middle East and other remote regions. They note that this plan could simply be wishful thinking because of complications from inter-Service battles for funding, the Marine Corps’ longstanding low-budget allocation, and its position within the Department of the Navy. Lastly, they point out the difficulty the Marine Corps has in determining what equipment to develop and acquire, citing examples from both Gulf Wars.¹³

In addition to official publications, the PRC has a robust community of unofficial defense analysts. While authoritative PLA sources are often restrained in voicing concerns or opinions, unofficial commentators provide in-depth analysis and discussion. For example, a longtime contributor to *Shipborne Weapons* (舰载武器), a journal sponsored by China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation, provides an analysis of how the PLAN can counter the threat posed by EABO. Demonstrating a thorough understanding of the core elements of the concept, the author, an analyst writing under the pseudonym Tianying (suggesting military affiliation), presents the main problem for the PLA: finding, identifying, and monitoring in realtime the movements and actions of small-scale forces in parts of the First Island Chain and the Near-Seas.¹⁴ This author hits the nail on the head. The reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance game (scouting and screening) that could play out in the western Pacific will be critical to the Navy and Marine Corps’ success within the PLA weapon engagement zone, especially considering the PLA’s impressive array of shooters.

Other unofficial articles focus on

specific systems. One frequent PRC military commentator conducted a focused analysis published in the magazine *Modern Ships* (现代舰船) in early 2022 on the Marine Corps' use of unmanned ground vehicle-based fires to gain sea control. After a close analysis of ROGUE Fires and the features of the Navy/Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System, the author argues the system still has vital flaws. These include its relatively short range of 185 kilometers, of which an opponent need only account for greater distance from enemy coastlines and islands during campaign planning, physically avoiding the threat. The author also argues for boosting ship defenses against this threat by strengthening sensors and interception capabilities. Nonetheless, the author concludes this system deployed in the First Island Chain could become a shackle on the PLA, and if not effectively countered, could lock the PLAN in the Near-Seas.¹⁵

While it is too early to discern the PLA's overall views of Marine Corps initiatives, this section highlighted the wide-ranging PRC writings covering the subject. The perspectives examined are not final and will evolve as Marine Corps concepts materialize in major exercises and deployments, and PLA counters are developed. At a minimum, these sources provide important feedback for the Marine Corps and Joint Force deterrence and warfighting efforts.

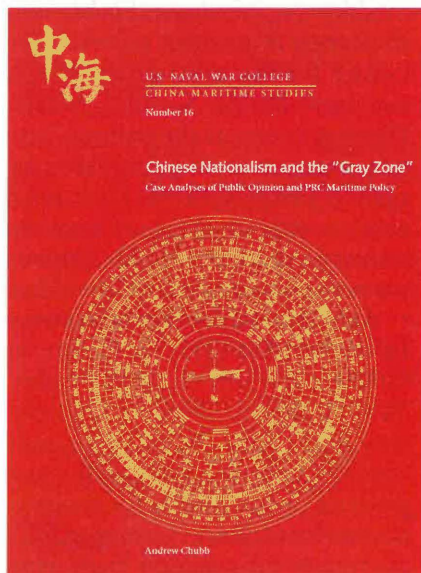
Resources for Marines and Sailors

The second purpose of this article is to identify unclassified, English-language resources available to Marines and sailors. There are so many sources and so much material available for the Indo-Pacific, the PRC, and the PLA that it is difficult to know where to begin. The challenge has only increased as attention shifted to the region over the last ten years. Rather than trying to provide an exhaustive list, the following section identifies sources that are accessible and appropriate for a general audience.¹⁶

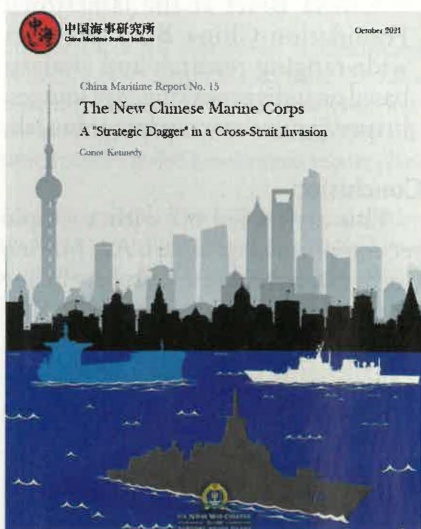
Websites of Interest

- **China Maritime Studies Insti-**

tute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College. CMSI scholars perform academic research using Chinese language sources to develop deeper insight into key aspects of China's growing maritime power. Research is published to inform the Navy and engage the nation: <https://usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Research-Centers/China-Maritime-Studies-Institute>.

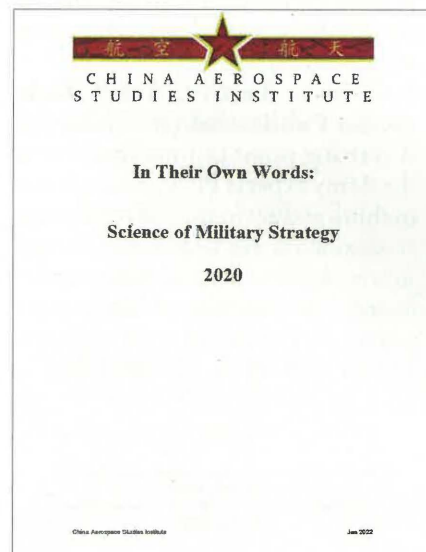


China Maritime Studies "Red Book" No. 16
Chinese Nationalism and the "Gray Zone,"
Case Analyses of Public Opinion and PRC
Maritime Policy.¹⁷ (Photo provided by author.)

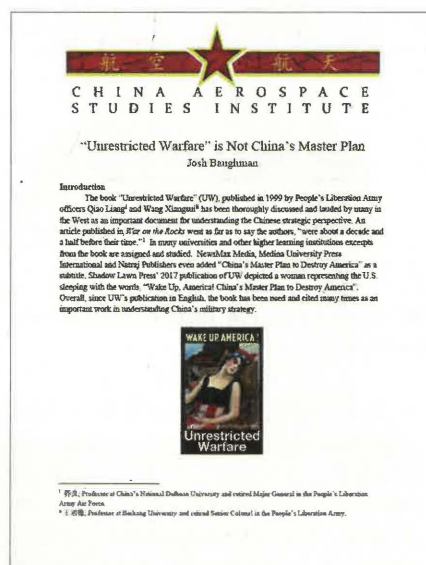


China Maritime Report No. 15—"The New Chinese Marine Corps, A 'Strategic Dagger' in a Cross-Straight Invasion."¹⁸ (Photo provided by author.)

• **China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI)** at the Air Force Air University CASI is a hub for PLA studies with a focus on aerospace capabilities. Its mission is to advance understanding of the strategy, doctrine, operating concepts, capabilities, personnel, training, and organization of China's aerospace forces and the civilian and commercial infrastructure that supports them. CASI provides expert research, analysis, and translations of Chinese language sources: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI>.



In Their Own Words: Science of Military Strategy 2020.¹⁹ (Photo provided by author.)

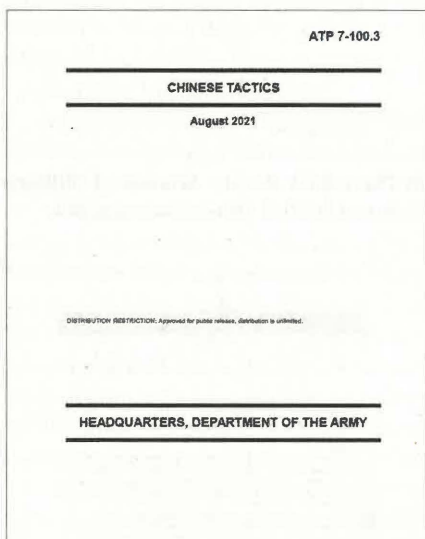


“Unrestricted Warfare” is Not China’s Master Plan.²⁰ (Photo provided by author.)

• **Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)** at the U.S. Army War College-SSI is the U.S. Army's institute for geostrategic and national security research and analysis. SSI publishes a variety of sources related to China and regional studies: <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu>.

• **Operational Environment Watch** at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. A monthly publication produced by the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, KS. Operational Environment Watch provides translated material and expert analysis: <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/oe-watch>.

• **Chinese Tactics, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 7-100.3.** A starting point to understand how the Army expects PLA ground forces to think and act in tactical operations. Assessments are based on Chinese source documents and observations from recent events: https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1023379.



ATP 7-100.3 Chinese Tactics. (Photo provided by author.)

• **China at RAND-RAND's** China experts conduct research and provide analysis on a wide variety of issues related to the PRC, including the relationship between national policy and military power: See <https://www.rand.org/topics/china.html>.

• **Indo-Pacific Security at the Cen-**

ter for a New American Security The Center for a New American Security Indo-Pacific Security Program addresses transnational opportunities and challenges in the region: <https://www.cnas.org/research/indo-pacific-security>.

• **China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs at the Center for Naval Analysis.** The China and Indo-Pacific programs provide research and analysis addressing the relationship between all sources of national power. "The Center for Naval Analysis' China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division is one of the nation's largest non-governmental Asian security analytic groups, with over three dozen analysts with language skills and in-country experience."²¹ See <https://www.cna.org/centers/cna/cip/china>.

• **Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI)** at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "AMTI aims to promote transparency in the Indo-Pacific to dissuade assertive behavior and conflict and generate opportunities for cooperation and confidence building. AMTI aggregates information from news sources, as well as specially designated research and nonprofit organizations, public sector institutions in Asia, and individuals."²² See <https://amti.csis.org>.

• **China Brief** at the Jamestown Foundation-China Brief provides wide-ranging research and analysis based on indigenous language sources: <https://jamestown.org/programs/cb>.

Conclusion

This article led off with a simple yet complicated question. Are Marine Corps initiatives causing anxiety in our adversaries, in particular the DOD's pacing threat: China? Ultimately, it is challenging to provide a simple and direct answer. China is a nation of 1.4 billion people, and the PLA is a complex bureaucracy—much like the U.S. military. What can be said definitively is that the PRC's defense establishment is watching the Marine Corps closely. Cautious in their assessments, observers know they will need to continue to monitor the development of concepts

like EABO as it involves changes to the Marine Corps system and organization that are still being tested and proven.²³ Similarly, U.S. leaders need to carefully listen to the evolving perspectives and discussions contained within PRC Chinese-language sources to gauge the effectiveness of deterrence initiatives.

This article will have achieved its three purposes if readers have an increased awareness of the conversations that are occurring in PRC sources, know where to find English-language material related to those conversations, and have an interest in learning more about how the United States' primary competitor in the Indo-Pacific views the Marine Corps. "China Hands" will rightly point out that there are many additional sources available, perhaps some that are better than those listed here. The authors hope this article will spark further conversation.

Notes

1. Philip Athey, "Marine Corps Launches New Littoral Unit that US Adversaries Reportedly Hate," *Defense News*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-marine-corps/2022/03/02/marine-corps-launches-new-littoral-unit-that-us-adversaries-reportedly-hate>.

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3. 天鹰 [Tianying], 打破捆绑: 中国海军如何应对对美军远征前进基地作战样式的挑战 ["Breaking Bonds—Challenge of USA's Expeditionary Forward Base Operation Pattern to Chinese Navy"], 舰载武器 [Shipborne Weapons], No. 10 (October 2021).

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5. Commandant Berger stated "We are Modernizing the Marine Corps using the PRC as a benchmark" on page one of the May 2022 Force Design 2030 Annual Update. Also see: Department of Defense, "Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy," *U.S. Department of Defense*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2980584/dod-transmits-2022-national-defense-strategy>.

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9. *Marine Corps Times* reports that the 31st MEU conducted a "simultaneous split operation" in 2019 spanning over 4,000 miles as well as additional dispersed logistics exercises meant to test operations in a contested littoral environment. See: Philip Athey, "31st MEU Put Corps' Littoral Tactics, '21st Century Foraging' to the Test," *Marine Corps Times*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2020/01/22/31st-meu-put-corps-littoral-tactics-21st-century-foraging-to-the-test>.

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14. "Breaking Bonds."

15. 王笑梦 [Wang Xiaomeng], 美国海军陆战队 "以岛制海" 无人车家族深度分析 ["An In-Depth Analysis of the United States Marine Corps Unmanned Vehicle Family for 'Controlling the Sea from Islands'"], 现代舰船 [Modern Ships], No. 1 (2022).

16. The sources identified reflect the authors' views and are not necessarily endorsed by the U.S. Naval War College or the Department of the Navy. Further, they are not listed in any order of priority.

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