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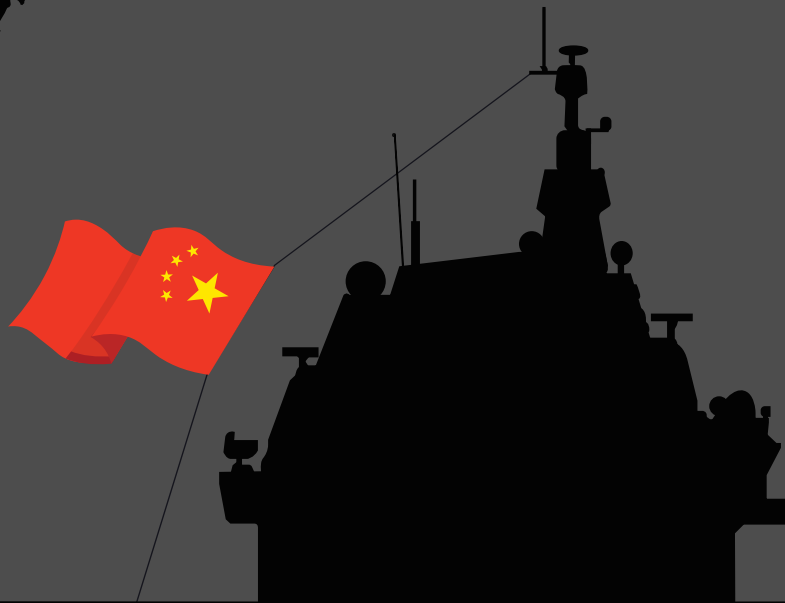
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NOTES: 9



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On the PLAN's "Core Operational Capabilities"

Ryan D. Martinson¹

Key Takeaways

- The PLAN is prioritizing the development of what it calls “four core operational capabilities.” These capabilities include 1) integrated near seas operations, 2) far seas mobile operations, 3) strategic deterrence and counterstrike, and 4) amphibious warfare.
- Analysis of Chinese writings suggest the focus of these efforts is on prevailing in a high-end conflict involving the U.S. military.
- The PLAN seeks the ability to dominate the near seas, strike U.S. bases and sea lines of communication in waters east of the first island chain and in the Indian Ocean, achieve “reliable, credible, and effective” deterrence against the U.S. through SSBN patrols within and beyond the first island chain, and execute sophisticated multi-domain amphibious operations against U.S. allies and partners.

Introduction

In the Xi Jinping era (2012-present), the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has made a sharp shift towards warfighting preparation. Today, it is a service which, while capable of carrying out a range of peacetime operations, is clearly fixated on winning a “high-end” naval conflict.”² This reorientation has naturally impacted how the PLAN allocates attention and resources. Late in 2023, three experts from the PLAN’s Dalian Ship Academy shed light on the current priorities for Chinese naval development, which they call the “four core operational capabilities” (四种核心作战能力). What are they and what are the implications for the U.S. and its allies?

Background

The source in question is an article published in the December 2023 issue of *China Military Science*, a prestigious journal produced by the Chinese Academy of Military Science. The article is entitled “Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces.” It was one of four articles examining Mao Zedong’s writings on military affairs, in commemoration of the Chairman’s 130th birthday.

The article’s three authors are all affiliated with the Dalian Ship Academy’s Department of Political Officer Education and Training. The first author, Senior Captain Yu Lingling (于玲玲), is an associate professor. The second author, Commander Feng Jinbo (冯金波), serves as a lecturer. Both Senior Captain Yu and Commander Feng are “special technical officers” (专业技

术军官), i.e., officers recruited because they possess some esoteric skills or knowledge.³ Lieutenant Commander Liu Zhihao (刘志浩), a MA student, is the third author.⁴

In the article, the Yu, Feng, and Liu argue that Mao had valuable insights into naval matters, and that that these insights can be profitably applied to current efforts to transform the PLAN into a “world-class” navy. To their credit, the authors have clearly ransacked all of Mao’s collected writings, official chronologies, and other primary sources in search of any connections between him and the People’s Navy—which turn out to be few, superficial, and mostly limited to the 1950s.⁵ But the article’s true value stems from their efforts to draw lessons for the present. In doing so they necessarily delve into the policies of today’s PLAN, a topic about which they write with obvious authority.⁶

The Four Core Operational Capabilities

The content of interest appears in section three, which argues for the contemporary applicability of Mao Zedong’s ideas on the construction and use of naval forces. The authors first highlight the PLAN’s current focus on warfighting:

Given that the issue of national unification [with Taiwan] remains extremely tangled and complex, and that a certain military great power [i.e., the U.S.] continues to carry out a military encirclement (围堵) against us from the maritime direction, in the New Era *we must make warfighting missions and tasks the Navy’s primary missions and tasks* and strive to improve core military capabilities relevant to winning a local war characterized by heavy reliance on information technology and intelligent systems [emphasis added].⁷

The authors then discuss, with some specificity, how the PLAN can transform itself into the powerful navy that Mao wanted but never ultimately built. It is here that Yu, Feng, and Liu cite the need to prioritize “four types of core operational capabilities,” discussed below in the order listed.

“Integrated near seas operations” (近海综合作战能力)⁸

Fundamentally, this phrase refers to the PLAN’s ability to operate effectively within the first island chain in a major maritime campaign involving disputed island territories, i.e., Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the islands and reefs of the South China Sea.⁹ In one form or another, the concept of integrated near seas operations has appeared in PLAN national defense white papers since 2004.¹⁰ Few sources, however, ever offer benchmarks for what the PLAN aspires to achieve in these waters. Yu, Feng, and Liu provide useful insights. In their words, the concept means “having the ability to seize and maintain control over the main waters of the near seas.”¹¹ Additionally, they write, the PLAN must “develop a certain comprehensive advantage against real and potential enemies when it comes to achieving unification of the motherland, and safeguarding sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdictional rights within waters under Chinese jurisdiction, and *countering the powerful enemy’s maritime military intervention and interference* [emphasis added].”¹²

“Far seas mobile operations” (远海机动作战能力)

This term generally refers to the PLAN’s ability to operate effectively, as needed, beyond the first island chain—in the so-called “far seas.”¹³ The phrase does not appear until the 2013 iteration of China’s national defense white paper, despite entering the PLAN lexicon several

years earlier, following the service's adoption of the "far seas protection" (远海防卫) doctrine.¹⁴ According to one article published in late 2008, for example, the PLAN's far seas mobile operational capabilities were already "developing steadily" (正稳步发展).¹⁵ Through the years, few sources have defined the concept.¹⁶ One exception is China National Defense University's *Science of Military Strategy*, which describes far seas mobile operations as maritime operations occurring far away from the mainland, with the following aims: "expelling the enemy from the near seas, controlling key strategic passages, protecting [China's own access to] sea lines of communication, safeguarding overseas interests, containing (遏止) maritime military crises, and safeguarding world peace [emphasis added]." Due to the remote distances involved, the PLAN would operate without land-based air and logistics support, putting it at a disadvantage against its enemies, "especially the powerful enemy," i.e., the U.S. military. To compensate, it would have to use asymmetric methods, described as "far seas sabotage guerilla operations (远海破袭游击作战)."¹⁷

In their article, Yu, Feng, and Liu suggest that the PLAN has updated the concept, perhaps taking into account recent improvements in its operational capabilities. According to their description, the aims of far seas mobile operations are to "damage and attack (破袭) key enemy strategic passages (战略通道) and lines of communication (交通线) and conduct long-range precision strikes against the enemy's strategic overseas bases and strategic targets on its own territory, alone or jointly with other services." They describe the geographic scope of these operations as "the Northwest Pacific Ocean beyond the first island chain and the Indian Ocean."¹⁸

"Strategic deterrence and counter-strike" (战略威慑与反击能力)

This phrase refers to the capabilities of the PLAN's small but growing fleet of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Every national defense white paper since 2008 has called for the PLAN to improve its strategic deterrence and counterstrike capabilities—but without elaboration. The *Science of Military Strategy* includes a section on "sea-based strategic deterrence and counterstrike capabilities," yet it offers only general descriptions of the advantages of placing nuclear weapons on naval platforms.¹⁹ In their article, Yu, Feng, and Liu explain that the term means "having the ability to carry out reliable (可靠), credible (可信), and effective (有效) nuclear deterrence and nuclear counter-strike against the powerful enemy [i.e., the U.S.] both within and beyond the first island chain [emphasis added]."²⁰ This seems to imply that PLAN SSBNs will ultimately serve their deterrence and counter-strike function both through patrols in bastions near the Chinese coast and deployments further afield.

"Amphibious warfare" (两栖作战能力)

The fourth core operational capability is a much more recent addition to the PLAN's list of priorities. No national defense white paper published since 2006 has mentioned amphibious warfare in the naval section.²¹ However, the 2019 iteration did cite amphibious warfare in a short list of "new type operational forces" (新型作战力量) that should be prioritized as the PLA continues to undergo reform. The *Science of Military Strategy* lists it as one of eight "main capabilities" (主要能力) that the PLAN must develop, defining it as having the ability "to project marines and special forces at campaign scale in a single movement (能够一次投送战役规模的海军陆战队和特种部队)."²² This implies a major landing on Taiwan or against a disputed island/reef in the East China Sea or South China Sea. In their article, Yu, Feng, and Liu

add that the PLAN “must strengthen its amphibious warfare capabilities for conducting flexible (灵活) and multi-dimensional (多维地) power projection (力量投送).”²³ The PLAN’s prioritization of this advanced form of amphibious warfare is demonstrated by the massive expansion of its Marine Corps and the service’s procurement of large-deck amphibious assault ships.²⁴

Conclusion

If Yu, Feng, and Liu’s description is accurate—and there is no reason to doubt that it is—the PLAN has a very clear prioritization for its near-term development. It has settled on a set of four objectives that even PLA political officers, who are not known for pith or clarity, can summarize in a single paragraph. Unsurprisingly, these “four core operational capabilities” are all focused on high-end military conflict in East Asia.

All four capabilities directly implicate the U.S. military. They include 1) superiority within the first island chain, even if the U.S. military is involved; 2) long-range precision strikes against U.S. sea lines of communications and military bases east of the first island chain (and in the Indian Ocean) in the event of a conflict involving the U.S.; 3) SSBN patrols both near and far, aimed at deterring the U.S.; and 4) sophisticated amphibious assaults against Taiwan and/or other islands claimed by U.S. partners and allies. Of particular note are PLAN expectations for far seas mobile operations (capability #2), which appear to have been elevated due to recent improvements in its ability to conduct high-end combat operations at remote distances from the Mainland.

¹ The views and opinions expressed here are the author’s alone and do not reflect the assessments of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government entity.

² Ryan D. Martinson, “Winning High-End War at Sea: Insights into the PLA Navy’s New Strategic Concept,” CIMSEC, 18 May 2023, <https://cimsec.org/winning-high-end-war-at-sea-insights-into-the-pla-navys-new-strategic-concept/>.

³ Kenneth Allen and Morgan Clemens, *The Recruitment, Education, and Training of PLA Navy Personnel*, (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, August 2014), p. 4.

⁴ Yu and Feng are accomplished researchers, with numerous articles published openly, often in periodicals centered on PLA political work, including the Dalian Ship Academy’s own *Political Work Journal* (政工学刊). While much of their work does focus on problems associated with the political officer profession in the PLA, they do sometimes write research articles on strategic issues. In 2019, for example, Commander Feng published a piece about Xi Jinping’s personal influence on Chinese naval development. Thus, it is not surprising that the two colleagues would co-author an article analyzing Mao Zedong’s thinking on military affairs. For examples of their writings on political work, see 冯金波 [Feng Jinbo] 政治干部要加强自我教育 [“Political Officers Must Strengthen Their Self-Education”], 政工学刊 [*Political Work Journal*], no. 5 (2022), pp. 89-90; 于玲玲 [Yu Lingling], 做实海上抢险救灾中政治工作 [“Bolster Political Work for Maritime Rescue and Disaster Relief”], 人民海军 [*People’s Navy*], 3 March 2023, p. 3. For Feng’s work on Xi Jinping, see 谢适汀 [Xie Shiting], 王道伟 [Wang Daowei], and 冯金波 [Feng Jinbo], 新时代科学统筹和推进海军转型建设的根本遵循——深入学习习主席关于海军转型建设重要指示 [“The Fundamental Principle for Scientifically Coordinating and Advancing the Navy’s Transformation in the New Era—An In-Depth Study of Chairman Xi’s Important Instructions for Transforming the Navy”], 政工学刊 [*Political Work Journal*], no. 5 (2019), pp. 37-39. Yu and Feng published an article on Mao’s thinking on naval affairs in the December 2023 issue of the Dalian Ship Academy publication *Political Work Journal* (政工学刊). See 冯金波 [Feng Jinbo] and 于玲玲 [Yu Lingling], 毛泽东关于海军建设论述探要 [“An Exploration of Mao Zedong’s Discourse on Naval Construction”], 政工学刊 [*Political Work Journal*], no. 12 (2023), pp. 8-9.

⁵ Other Chinese scholars have sought to extract value from Mao’s remarks on naval matters. See, for example, 战立鹏 [Zhan Lipeng] 毛泽东人民海军建设思想及启示 [“Mao Zedong’s Thought on Navy Building and Its Inspiration”], *军事历史* [*Military History*], no. 3 (2009), pp. 16-21.

⁶ As instructors at the Dalian Ship Academy, the author’s do not formulate naval strategy or policy; nor are they likely to be present at the meetings where key strategic issues are debated and settled. But their positions as researchers and educators at a major PME institution ensure that they have privileged access to PLAN policy documents. This is the basis of their authority.

⁷ The authors do not simply ignore peacetime (or “non-war”) military operations. They also argue that given that China’s interests are expanding in the maritime direction, the service must “energetically improve its ability to conduct non-war military operations.” See 于玲玲 [Yu Lingling], 冯金波 [Feng Jinbo], and 刘志浩 [Liu Zhihao], 毛泽东海军建设运用思想探要 [“Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces”], *中国军事科学* [*China Military Science*], no. 6 (2023), p. 52.

⁸ The term 综合 may be translated as “integrated” or “comprehensive.”

⁹ In PLA parlance, the “near seas” include the Bohai Gulf, Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, and some waters just east of Taiwan. See 中国人民解放军军语 [*PLA Dictionary of Military Terms*] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), p. 952.

¹⁰ The 2004 national defense white paper calls for the PLAN to “increase its ability to carry out integrated operations in a maritime campaign in the near seas.” See 2004 年中国的国防 [*China’s National Defense in 2004*] 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], December 2004, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2005-05/27/content_2615731.htm. The 2006 national defense white paper calls for the PLAN to “gradually increase the strategic depth for near seas defense and boost its integrated maritime operational capabilities and nuclear counterattack capabilities.” See 2006 年中国的国防 [*China’s National Defense in 2006*], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], December 2006, http://www.81.cn/2017jj90/2011-01/06/content_7671719.htm. The 2008 white paper calls for the PLAN to “comprehensively boost its integrated near seas operational capabilities.” See 2008 年中国的国防 [*China’s National Defense in 2008*], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], January 2009, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2009-01/20/content_2615769.htm. The 2010 iteration of the national defense white paper calls for the PLAN to “focus on improving integrated operational force modernization levels according to the strategic requirements of near seas defense.” See 2010 年中国的国防 [*China’s National Defense in 2010*], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], March 2011, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2011-03/31/content_2618567.htm. The 2013 national defense white paper calls for the PLAN to “focus on improving integrated near seas operational force modernization levels.” See 中国武装力量的多样化运用 [*The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], April 2013, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2013-04/16/content_2618550.htm. The 2015 and 2019 national defense white papers do not use the term.

¹¹ Here, the phrase “main waters of the near seas” (近海主要海域) likely refers to the militarily important ocean areas within the first island chain, which at the very least include all 3.0 million km² of maritime space over which Beijing claims jurisdiction.

¹² Yu, Feng, and Liu, “Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces,” p. 52.

¹³ The “far seas” (远海) include all waters other than the near seas. See *PLA Dictionary of Military Terms*, p. 952.

¹⁴ See *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*. For more on the PLAN’s adoption of “far seas protection” and its roots in the Hu Jintao period, see 寿晓松 [Shou Xiaosong], ed., *战略学* [*Science of Military Strategy*] (Beijing: China Military Science Press, 2013), p. 209. See also Ryan Martinson, “China’s Oceanic Aspirations: New Insights from the Experts,” *Orbis* (February 2022), pp. 253-254.

¹⁵ 钱晓虎 [Qian Xiaohu], 于春光 [Yu Chunguang], and 李德 [Li De], 改革开放 30 年，是中国海军走向世界的 30 年 [“The Three Decades of the Reform and Opening Are Three Decades in Which The Chinese Navy Has Gone Out into the World”], *解放军报* [PLA Daily], 18 December 2008, p. 15.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the available information on “far seas mobile operations,” see Martinson, “China’s Oceanic Aspirations,” pp. 260-261, 263-265, 268.

¹⁷ 肖天亮 [Xiao Tianliang], ed., 战略学 [*Science of Military Strategy*] (Beijing, NDU Press, 2015), p. 342. The revised 2020 edition of this volume removed the content about “expelling the enemy from the near seas” and the particular threats posed by the “powerful enemy,” presumably because it was judged too sensitive. See 肖天亮 [Xiao Tianliang], ed., 战略学(2020年修订) [*Science of Military Strategy (2020 revised edition)*] (Beijing, NDU Press, 2020) pp. 362-363.

¹⁸ Yu, Feng, and Liu, “Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces,” p. 52.

¹⁹ See Xiao, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, 2015 edition, p. 341. The 2020 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* shortens an already short section. See Xiao, ed., *Science of Military Strategy*, 2020 edition, p. 362.

²⁰ Yu, Feng, and Liu, “Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces,” p. 53.

²¹ The 2004 national defense white paper called for “emphasizing construction of maritime operational forces, especially amphibious operations forces.” See *China’s National Defense in 2004*.

²² 新时代的中国国防 [*China’s National Defense in the New Era*], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [Information Office of the PRC State Council], July 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm.

²³ Yu, Feng, and Liu, “Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces,” p. 53.

²⁴ 刘少伟 [Liu Shaowei], 徐中慧 [Xu Zhonghui], 程嘉豪 [Cheng Jiahao], and 焦飞宇 [Jiao Feiyu], “舰”证新时代 [“Witnessing the New Era”], 人民海军 [*People’s Navy*], 17 May 2022, p. 3; Conor M. Kennedy and Daniel Caldwell, “The Type 075 LHD: Development, Missions, and Capabilities,” China Maritime Report No. 23, China Maritime Studies Institute, October 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/23/>; Conor Kennedy, “The New Chinese Marine Corps: A ‘Strategic Dagger’ in a Cross-Strait Invasion,” China Maritime Report No. 15, China Maritime Studies Institute, October 2021, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/15/>.