

U.S. Naval War College

U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons

CMSI China Maritime Reports

China Maritime Studies Institute

6-24-2026

China Maritime Report #55: Loading the Well Deck: The PLA Navy's Maturing Role in Projecting Joint Ground Forces

Joshua Arostegui

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports>

Recommended Citation

Arostegui, Joshua, "China Maritime Report #55: Loading the Well Deck: The PLA Navy's Maturing Role in Projecting Joint Ground Forces" (2026). *CMSI China Maritime Reports*. 55.
<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/55>

This China Maritime Report is brought to you for free and open access by the China Maritime Studies Institute at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in CMSI China Maritime Reports by an authorized administrator of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



中国海事研究所
China Maritime Studies Institute



U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Est. 1884
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Main Findings

- Since 2023, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has established an annualized rhythm of loading PLA Army (PLAA) combat, engineering, and support units onto PLA Navy (PLAN) amphibious ships for international exercises. This integration signals a maturation in Chinese expeditionary logistics, providing Beijing with the proven framework to project sustained, multi-domain combat mass well beyond its regional periphery.
- Overseas military exercises in locations like Cambodia, Malaysia, and Tanzania serve as vital proving grounds for the PLA to stress-test complex port embarkation, loading, and well-deck management. The successful deployment of PLAA ground forces via PLAN lift proves that the multi-branch coordination mechanisms intended by the 2016 military reforms are actively functioning.
- While the PLAN Marine Corps is a relatively light force, the PLAA possesses the heavy armor, indirect fires, and logistical trains required for sustained expeditionary power. By successfully deploying heavy assets like ZBD04A infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) and PCL171 howitzers from PLAN shipping, China demonstrates that its overseas power projection ceiling is not constrained by its marine corps.
- Delivering heavy ground packages enables the PLA to validate its "access without basing" logistics model using civilian port infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific and Africa.
- Transporting ground forces overseas allows the PLA to engage in critical army-to-army diplomacy with partner nations that possess dominant ground forces but lack substantial naval capabilities, helping secure theater access and build geopolitical influence.

Introduction

Assessments of China's maritime power projection traditionally focus heavily on the expanding capabilities of the PLAN surface fleet and the organizational growth of the PLAN Marine Corps. While hull counts and missile ranges are critical metrics of sea denial and sea control, the true metric of a nation's expeditionary maturation lies not merely in the ships it builds, but in the joint forces it can successfully put aboard them. Historically, the embarkation and transport of heavy ground forces was limited to short distance exercises to test the amphibious landing capabilities of armor and infantry. Joint integration was problematic because of the PLA's entrenched "Big Army" (大陆军) organizational structure and overwhelming service-level influence.¹

Prior to the sweeping 2016 military reforms, the PLAA and PLAN operated in deeply entrenched silos. The navy drove the ships, the army drove the tanks, and coordination between the two for a joint operation was limited to near-shore amphibious training events focused on Taiwan. Early post-reform multinational exercises reflected this limitation. Deployments such as the China-Thailand *Blue Strike 2016* exercise saw PLAN amphibious ships travel abroad, but they carried only organic

¹ John Chen, "Choosing the 'Least Bad Option': Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Forces," in Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1747391/choosing-the-least-bad-option-organizational-interests-and-change-in-the-pla-gr/>.

PLAN Marines—a single-service administrative move that did not require cross-branch coordination.²

However, recent multinational exercises conducted between 2023 and 2025, culminating in the October 2025 Peace and Friendship 2025 in Malaysia, indicate that this vulnerability is rapidly improving. Relying mainly on the PLA Southern Theater Command (STC), the PLA has established a recurring, annualized rhythm of loading PLAA combat, engineering, and support units onto PLAN vessels for overseas deployment. This shift marks a permanent transition from single-service maritime diplomacy to true joint expeditionary logistics, providing Beijing with the framework to project sustained combat mass beyond the First Island Chain.

The Army's Dilemma

In 2015, Xi Jinping ordered the PLAA to expand its operational mandate beyond regional border defense to encompass all-domain operations and the protection of the PRC's overseas interests.³ No stranger to long-distance international deployments over land, the army still faced a severe capability gap in strategic lift. Historically optimized for internal lines of communication, the PLAA's organic logistics rely heavily on ground-based transport and are severely insufficient for transport to locations outside of China's periphery. Although participation in overseas United Nations peacekeeping operations garnered the force experience in loading and transporting heavy equipment on civilian shipping, authoritative Chinese military texts explicitly acknowledged that "strategic projection" (战略投送) was the fundamental prerequisite for any overseas military action, and that without robust external lift capabilities, the army's ground combat power remained geographically constrained.⁴

To overcome these organic limitations, the PLAA is structurally pivoting toward a joint projection model that, while still using civilian shipping, relies on the PLAN for heavy strategic lift. Doctrinal texts dictate that distant overseas actions rely primarily on sea and air projection, effectively forcing the ground force to integrate its logistics with naval shipping.⁵ This requires ground units to master the complex, multi-domain logistics of port embarkation, loading operations, and sea-to-shore transitions to ensure seamless connection and conversion with PLAN platforms.⁶

² Prashanth Parameswaran, "China, Thailand Kick Off Military Exercise Blue Strike 2016," *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/china-thailand-launch-military-exercise-blue-strike-2016/>.

³ The original article mentions the PLAA's role in "safeguarding sovereignty, security, and development interests." The term "development interests" (发展利益) generally encompasses overseas interests. 陆军领导机构火箭军战略支援部队成立大会在京举行 习近平向中国人民解放军陆军火箭军战略支援部队授予军旗并致训词 ["The Founding Meeting of the Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force, the Leading Organization of the Army, Was Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Awarded the Military Flag to the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Rocket Force, and Strategic Support Force and Delivered a Speech"], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 1 January 2016, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c_1117646667.htm.

⁴ 李明 [Li Ming], 加强陆军机动投送能力建设的思考 ["Thinking on the Construction of Army's Mobile Projection Capability"], 军事交通学院学报 [*Journal of Military Transportation University*], no. 4 (April 2018), pp. 1-4.

⁵ 张凤虎 [Zhang Fenghu] and 梅林 [Mei Lin], 陆军境外军事行动能力建设浅析 ["A Brief Analysis of the Army's Capability for Overseas Military Operations"], 军事学术 [*Military Art*], no. 1 (2022), pp. 71-72.

⁶ 陈子建 [Chen Zijian], 郭振东 [Guo Zhendong], 冯沙沙 [Feng Shasha], and 胡小霞 [Hu Xiaoxia], 新形势下陆军运输投送建设发展研究 ["On Construction and Development of Army Transportation Projection Under New Situation"], 军事交通学院学报 [*Journal of Military Transportation University*], no. 4 (April 2021), pp. 5-8.

International military exercises serve as a critical mechanism for the PLAA to validate and stress-test this joint maritime projection framework. The army utilizes transnational deployments, such as joint military exercises, as a proving grounds for this new mode of cross-border projection. By leveraging these overseas deployments, the PLAA can practically test the joint command mechanisms required for coordinating air, sea, and land transport in complex, unfamiliar environments.⁷ Crucially, by continuously generating these heavy lift demands through international exercises, the army can also influence the navy to accelerate the development and expansion of its own strategic transport capacities to support the ground force's evolving global requirements.

Cambodia's Early Role in 2023 and 2024 Force Projection Exercises

The baseline for improving this joint capability was established during the *Golden Dragon* (金龙) series of exercises in Cambodia. Previous iterations of the exercise relied heavily on airlift, land transport, and commercial shipping, clearly lacking a naval contribution to the event. However, the March 2023 iteration served as a watershed public demonstration of cross-service integration as the PLAA component arrived with its equipment transported via naval shipping.⁸

Golden Dragon-2023

The PLAN's Type-071 amphibious transport dock *Jinggangshan* (Hull 999) sailed roughly 1,300 nautical miles from its homeport in Zhanjiang, Guangdong to Cambodian waters while transporting CSK181 wheeled assault vehicles, support vehicles, weapons systems, mine clearance platforms, medical systems, and other equipment.⁹ Chinese state media explicitly confirmed that the *Jinggangshan* carried a tailored, mixed force consisting of troops from the PLAA and the PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF). Both services contributed to the navy's development of loading plans and processes, in addition to providing security during loading and participating in underway emergency drills.¹⁰ This was not a localized training drill; it was a public declaration that the STC could successfully execute a joint embarkation, a (simulated) contested maritime transit, and an administrative offload of army ground forces into a foreign theater.

⁷ Zhang and Mei, "A Brief Analysis of the Army's Capability for Overseas Military Operations," p. 72.

⁸ Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, "China's Military Diplomacy," *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 19 (2025), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/4222744/chinas-military-diplomacy/>. An assessment of whether the PLAA previously used naval shipping for international exercises was cross-checked with data from the report's linked spreadsheet.

⁹ 陈羽 [Chen Yu] and 梁秋坪 [Liang Qiuping], 中柬'金龙-2023'联演中方参演部队出征 ["Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia 'Golden Dragon-2023' Joint Military Exercise Depart for Cambodia"], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], 17 March 2023, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0317/c1011-32646332.html>.

¹⁰ 贾文婷 [Jia Wenting] and 常红 [Chang Hong], 中柬'金龙-2023'参演部队结合任务实际锤炼实战能力 ["Chinese and Cambodian Troops Participating in the 'Golden Dragon-2023' Exercise Hone Their Combat Capabilities in Light of Realistic Mission Scenarios"], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], 20 March 2023, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0320/c1002-32647461.html>.



Figure 1. PLAA and PLAN personnel coordinating the loading of medical support vehicles into *Jinggangshan* before departure to Cambodia for *Golden Dragon-2023*.¹¹



Figure 2. PLA Army and Navy personnel finalize the loading of equipment into *Jinggangshan* before departure to *Golden Dragon-2023*.¹²

¹¹ 直击中柬“金龙-2023”联演 071 型综合登陆舰罕见公开吊装卸载画面！20230322 | 军迷天下 [“Rare Footage of the Type 071 Amphibious Transport Dock Being Lifted and Unloaded During the China-Cambodia “Golden Dragon-2023” Joint Exercise! 20230322 | Military Enthusiast World”], 央视网 [CCTV], 3 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM93cayP6BE>.

¹² [军事报道]参加中柬‘金龙-2023’联演的中方部队出征 [“[Military Report] Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2023’ Joint Exercise Depart for Cambodia”], 央视网 [CCTV], 15 March 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/03/15/VIDESw0vGnlX3b6MAPoSjWC0230315.shtml>.



Figure 3. A PLAA CSK181 wheeled light high-mobility assault vehicle getting unloaded from *Jinggangshan* in Cambodia for *Golden Dragon-2023*.¹³

According to official PRC Defense Ministry statements, the exercise, which took place from 20 March to 8 April at the Chon Lek Hil Gendarmerie Training Base in Kampong Chhnang province and in the waters near Sihanoukville, had three main characteristics:

- Previously, the *Golden Dragon* exercises belonged solely to the army. The 2023 event expanded it into an army and navy event, while increasing the overall number of troops to 3,000 from both sides.
- The 2023 event established a joint command that explored bilateral command processes to better achieve joint organization, planning, response, and mechanisms.
- It introduced more complex training subjects like coordinated navigation, mine clearance, explosive ordnance disposal, and epidemic prevention.¹⁴

Despite the use of PLAN transport to get to the exercise, the focus remained solely on land-based training with a theme of “Security and Humanitarian Assistance Operations for Major Events” (重大活动安保和人道主义救援行动). PLAA units from the STC Army 75th Group Army and the PLA JLSF joined their Cambodian Armed Forces counterparts in live-fire counterterrorism, hostage rescue, and multiple emergency response drills. The overall commander of the Chinese delegation was PLA STC Army Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Chen Mintian (陈敏田), demonstrating

¹³ “Rare Footage of the Type 071 Amphibious Transport Dock Being Lifted and Unloaded During the China-Cambodia “Golden Dragon-2023” Joint Exercise! 20230322 | Military Enthusiast World.”

¹⁴ Li Qingtong, “The China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon’ Joint Exercise Is an Important Platform for Exchanges, Mutual Learning, and Realistic Combat Training Between the Two Militaries,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 14 April 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16217014.html>.

continued army control of the exercise. However, STC Deputy Commander, PLAN Vice Admiral Wei Wenhui (魏文徽), served as the PLA's senior representative during closing ceremonies.¹⁵

Golden Dragon-2024

The PLA did not treat the 2023 deployment as a one-off experiment. Instead, it rapidly institutionalized the capability into an annual joint event. The following May, during *Golden Dragon-2024*, the Type-071 *Qilianshan* (Hull 985) transported joint-force troops directly to Sihanoukville Port. Chinese media prioritized publication of photos and videos showing the loading and unloading of equipment, including at least three PLZ10 tracked 120mm mortar-howitzer combination guns, twelve CSK181 wheeled assault vehicles, and several other trucks and support vehicles.¹⁶

The *Qilianshan* sailed to Sihanoukville on its own for three days before joining two PLAN corvettes, *Bazhong* (Hull 625) and *Wenshan* (Hull 623), that had been in Cambodia since December 2023.¹⁷ During the exercise, the *Jinggangshan* and training vessel *Qi Jiguang* (Hull 83) also arrived in Sihanoukville as part of a goodwill visit. Although the two vessels did not participate in the exercise, their presence demonstrated the capability of the PLAN to efficiently use civilian port facilities for a deployed flotilla of five vessels.¹⁸

¹⁵ 张欣然 [Zhang Xinran], 中柬‘金龙-2023’联演开幕 [“The China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2023’ Joint Exercise Opens”], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 23 March 2023, https://www.news.cn/world/2023-03/23/c_1129458796.htm; 刘上靖 [Liu Shangjing], 中柬‘金龙-2023’联演圆满落幕 [“The China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2023’ Joint Military Exercise Concluded Successfully”], 中华人民共和国国防部 [Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China], 5 April 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16214671.html>; “[Military Report] Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2023’ Joint Exercise Depart for Cambodia”. The CCTV video showed CSK181 vehicles from an unidentified light combined arms brigade of the 75th Group Army as the exercise participants, but never explicitly referenced that group army’s participation.

¹⁶ Huang Panyue, “Chinese Troops Arrive in Cambodia for ‘Golden Dragon 2024’ Joint Exercise,” *China Military Online*, 14 May 2024, <http://www.81.cn/ChinaMilitary/BILINGUAL/16308674.html>; 中柬‘金龙-2024’联演中方参演部队出征 [“Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2024’ Joint Exercise Depart”], 央视网 [CCTV], 10 May 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/05/10/VIDEhctY2oD7bqYPmRzk9C5240510.shtml>.

¹⁷ “Cambodia, China ‘Rescue Hostages’ at the End of Joint Naval Drills,” *Radio Free Asia*, 28 May 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/cambodia-china-naval-drills-05282024035157.html>.

¹⁸ “Record Number of Chinese Warships Operating in Cambodia,” *Radio Free Asia*, 21 May 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/china-cambodia-warships-05212024043446.html>.



Figure 4. STC Army personnel loading CSK181 wheeled light high-mobility assault vehicles and PLZ10 tracked 120mm combination guns into *Qilianshan* for participation in *Golden Dragon-2024*.¹⁹



Figure 5. A PLAA PLZ10 tracked 120mm combination gun getting unloaded from *Qilianshan* after arrival to Cambodia for *Golden Dragon-2024*.²⁰

¹⁹ “Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2024’ Joint Exercise Depart.”

²⁰ [正午国防军事]中柬“金龙-2024”联演 柬埔寨 中方参演部队抵达西哈努克港 展开装备卸载作业 [“[Noon Defense & Military] Cambodian Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia "Golden Dragon-2024" Joint Exercise Arrive at Sihanoukville to Begin Unloading Equipment”], 央视网 [CCTV], 14 May 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/05/14/VIDEVXzWfZydLS7gA1601CH2240514.shtml>.



Figure 6. PLA members working with Cambodian port workers to unload a PLAA PLZ10 tracked 120mm combination gun in Sihanoukville Port, Cambodia.²¹



Figure 7. PLA members working with Cambodian port workers to unload a PLAA PLZ10 tracked 120mm combination gun in Sihanoukville Port, Cambodia.²²

²¹ “[Noon Defense & Military] Cambodian Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia “Golden Dragon-2024” Joint Exercise Arrive at Sihanoukville to Begin Unloading Equipment.”

²² Ibid.



Figure 8. PLA members working with Cambodian port workers to unload a PLAA PLZ10 tracked 120mm combination gun in Sihanoukville Port, Cambodia.²³

After PLAA and PLAN personnel worked closely with Cambodian port officials to unload the equipment from the *Qilianshan*, the 15-day exercise took place from May 16 to May 30 in the same locations as the year prior. With the theme “Joint Counterterrorism Operations and Humanitarian Relief” (联合反恐行动与人道主义救援), the exercise provided opportunities for the more than 2,000 personnel from both countries—including 760 from the PLAN, PLAA, PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and PLA JLSF—to participate in both maritime and land events.²⁴

Golden Dragon-2024 witnessed the first combined live-fire drills between the PLAN and Cambodian Navy, with the PLAN’s three-ship flotilla joining 13 Cambodian vessels in carrying out maritime anti-terrorism and anti-hijacking operations. The separate land-based drills included hostage rescue in urban regions, elimination of enemies in mountain camps, and other counterterrorism training events.²⁵ At least one high-mobility infantry company from an unidentified STC Army light combined arms brigade joined a firepower platoon from an unidentified STC Army heavy combined

²³ Huang, “Chinese Troops Arrive in Cambodia for ‘Golden Dragon 2024’ Joint Exercise.”

²⁴ Soth Koemsoeun, “The Golden Dragon 2024 Naval Exercise Concludes Successfully,” *Khmer Times*, 27 May 2024, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501495926/the-golden-dragon-2024-naval-exercise-concludes-successfully/>; 王嶼 [Wang Di], 中柬‘金龙—2024’联演正式落下帷幕 [“The China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon-2024’ Joint Military Exercise Officially Concluded”], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 30 May 2024, <https://www.news.cn/20240530/0c24079916d24619b1cdc725bcf52036/c.html>.

²⁵ “Chinese, Cambodian Navies Conduct 1st Joint Live-Fire Drill as Part of Golden Dragon-2024,” *Global Times*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202405/1313224.shtml>.

arms brigade for the land exercises.²⁶ They were joined by PLAAF personnel who flew reconnaissance drones and PLA JLSF medical personnel who also provided services to the Cambodian population.²⁷



Figure 9. STC Army equipment transported by PLAN lift in formation during the opening ceremony of *Golden Dragon-2024* in Cambodia.²⁸

In a change from previous years, a PLAN officer served as the Chinese exercise commander. Rear Admiral Gao Xiucheng (高秀成), PLA STC Assistant to the Chief of Staff, attended the opening ceremony and oversaw the PLA's participation. In addition to his command responsibilities, Gao also served as temporary party secretary for the exercise's provisional party committee.²⁹ Although PLA STC Deputy Commander and concurrent Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Jia Jiancheng (贾建成) arrived to provide closing comments for the exercise, Rear Admiral Gao's oversight of China's participation in *Golden Dragon-2024* demonstrated two things: the exercise was "upgraded" from a PLA STC theater army event to a PLA STC HQ event and Beijing trusted that a senior naval officer could command a joint unit with a large ground force component at a high-profile international exercise.³⁰

²⁶ "Chinese Troops Participating in the China-Cambodia 'Golden Dragon-2024' Joint Exercise Depart."

²⁷ Koemsoeun, "The Golden Dragon 2024 Naval Exercise Concludes Successfully."

²⁸ [正午国防军事]中柬“金龙-2024”联演今天上午举行开始仪式 [“[Noon Defense & Military] The Opening Ceremony of the China-Cambodia "Golden Dragon-2024" Joint Exercise Was Held This Morning"], 央视网 [CCTV], May 16, 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/05/16/VIDE6cNPKzO1RUonZR00YfUD240516.shtml>.

²⁹ 李岩 [Li Yan], 曾任海军参谋部作战局局长的将军履新！乘登陆舰带队出国 [“Former Director of the Operations Bureau of the Naval Staff, General Gao Xiucheng, Has Been Appointed to a New Post! He Will Lead a Detachment Abroad Aboard a Landing Ship”], 搜狐网 [Sohu], 21 May 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/780542842_137462.

³⁰ Soth Koemsoeun, "6th 'Golden Dragon 2024' Military Exercise Concludes Successfully," *Khmer Times*, 30 May 2024, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501497775/6th-golden-dragon-2024-military-exercise-concludes-successfully/>.

Straddling the Malacca Strait: Force Projection Exercises in 2025

With the experience gained from the previous two years, the PLAN transported PLAA ground forces and equipment to two major exercises in 2025 that occurred on both sides of the Malacca Strait—a sea line of communication that Beijing depends on for most of its oil imports that is also potentially vulnerable to foreign naval blockade.³¹ While the strategic importance of the locations was never emphasized in official Chinese media, *Global Times* referenced the proximity of the exercises to the Malacca Strait in articles covering the events.³²

Golden Dragon-2025

Occurring from 14-28 May, the *Golden Dragon-2025* exercise represented a dramatic increase in the numbers and types of army equipment transported in amphibious shipping. PLAA troops loaded the Type-071 *Changbaishan* (Hull 989) in Zhanjiang with roughly a battalion-size component of equipment, including four ZBD04A IFVs, a company-set of CSK181 wheeled assault vehicles, a battery-set of PCL171 122mm truck-mounted howitzers, ammunition supply vehicles, an air surveillance radar detachment set of vehicles, and several other support vehicles.³³

The embarked troops were again heavily involved in loading the equipment as well as participating in onboard emergency drills during the transit. Upon arrival, the army forces also supported unloading operations alongside Cambodian elements, marking the first instance of the PLA using the newly opened Cambodia-China Joint Support and Training Center at Port Ream for live force operations.³⁴

³¹ Lucas Myers, “China’s Economic Security Challenge: Difficulties Overcoming the Malacca Dilemma,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 22 March 2023, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/conflict-security/chinas-economic-security-challenge-difficulties-overcoming-the-malacca-dilemma/>.

³² Peng Nian, “China-Cambodia Drills Counter Hype with Openness,” *Global Times*, 20 May 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202505/1334490.shtml>; “‘Peace and Friendship-2025’ China-Malaysia Joint Exercise Kicks Off,” *Global Times*, 15 October 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202510/1345728.shtml>.

³³ Chen Zhuo, “PLA Troops Set Out for China-Cambodia Golden Dragon 2025 Joint Exercise,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 9 May 2025, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16385083.html; “In Pictures & Video: Cambodia-China Kicks Off the 7th ‘Golden Dragon Exercise’ with Over 2,000 Participating Troops,” *Khmer Times*, 17 May 2025, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501685383/in-pictures-cambodia-china-kicks-off-the-7th-golden-dragon-exercise-with-over-2000-participating-troops/>.

³⁴ Li Weichao, “PLA Troops Participating in China-Cambodia Golden Dragon 2025 Joint Exercise Arrive in Cambodia,” *China Military Online*, 13 May 2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16385828.html; Tian Yi and Liang Jun, “Live-Force Drills of China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon 2025’ Joint Exercise,” *People’s Daily Online*, 28 May 2025, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2025/0528/c90000-20320712.html>.



Figure 10. PLAN personnel prepare embarked soldiers for onboard emergency management drills while transiting to Cambodia for Golden Dragon-2025.³⁵



Figure 11. PLA personnel provide details on the CSK181 wheeled light high-mobility assault vehicle during transit to Cambodia for Golden Dragon-2025.³⁶

³⁵ Zhou Zihang, [周自航] and Guo Shudong [郭澍东], 中柬“金龙-2025”联合演习 | 中方参演部队抵达云壤港 [“China-Cambodia “Golden Dragon-2025” Joint Exercise: Chinese Participating Troops Arrive at Ream Port”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], March 13, 2025, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jsxd/16385705.html>.

³⁶ Ibid.



Figure 12. PLAN LPD *Changbaishan* pier-side at Port Ream, Cambodia, before unloading its army equipment for *Golden Dragon-2025*.³⁷

Themed “Joint Counter-Terrorism Operations and Humanitarian Relief Work,” the exercise involved 845 PLAN, PLAA, PLAAF, and PLA JLSF personnel and more than 1,300 Cambodian Armed Forces members. It comprised two parts: a land and air exercise at the Royal Gendarmerie Training Center in Kampong Chhnang province and a sea and air exercise in Preah Sihanouk province. In addition to the naval vessels and large amount of ground equipment, the exercise also witnessed both countries using helicopters, including PLAN Z-20 medium lift helicopters, for the drills.³⁸

The PLAA platforms transported to this seventh iteration of the China-Cambodia exercise included powerful maneuver, fire support, and air surveillance capabilities not found within PLAN Marine Corps organic tables of equipment. The unique combination of heavy and light vehicles from STC Army heavy and light combined arms brigades was the first instance of the army deploying many of its most advanced tactical systems to an international exercise. Although the PLAN Marine Corps already fields CSK181 light high-mobility assault vehicles, the experience gained by the PLAN in loading systems like the PCL171 122mm howitzer, which uses the same universal chassis as the CSK181, could lead to future procurement of the easily transportable artillery system.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ In Pictures & Video: Cambodia-China Kicks Off the 7th ‘Golden Dragon Exercise’ with Over 2,000 Participating Troops;” Huang Panyue, “Flashback of China-Cambodia ‘Golden Dragon 2025’ Joint Exercise,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 31 May 2025, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/Videos/16389205.html.



Figure 13. Cambodian news video of PLAA (from left to right) PCL171 122mm wheeled high-mobility howitzers, CSK181 wheeled light high-mobility assault vehicles, ZBD04A tracked IFVs (covered), and a YLC-2V long-range 3D air surveillance radar detachment; all vehicles were transported on PLAN lift for *Golden Dragon-2025*.³⁹

Finally, the commander of PLA troops at *Golden Dragon-2025* was PLAAF Major General Lü Guangkun (吕广坤), the PLA STC Assistant to the Chief of Staff. Lü embarked with the *Changbaishan* as it made the three-day trip to Ream and participated in the high-profile welcoming ceremony at Port Ream, as well as the exercise opening ceremony.⁴⁰ Lü’s participation represented continued high-level support from PLA STC HQ, and also demonstrated how the STC assistant to the chief of staff position was more important for commanding the Chinese side than being in a specific service. This can also be seen in PLA STC Deputy Commander Vice Admiral Wei Wenhui’s second appearance at the exercise’s closing ceremony as the senior Chinese VIP—the third consecutive time the STC deputy commander served in that role.⁴¹

Peace and Friendship-2025

Less than five months later, the PLA Southern Theater Command dispatched a three-ship flotilla to Port Klang, Malaysia, to transport ground forces for *Peace and Friendship-2025* (和平友谊-2025, also called *Aman Youyi-2025*). The exercise was a humanitarian assistance and maritime security training event that took place 15-23 October at Puchong National Disaster Relief Base, Port Klang,

³⁹ “Cambodia, China Kick Off the 7th Joint “Golden Dragon 2025” Military Drill,” Fresh News, 17 May 2025, <https://en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/60153-2025-05-17-05-20-46.html>.

⁴⁰ “Golden Dragon ‘A Symbol of the Robust and Unbreakable Military Cooperation’ Between Cambodia and China,” *Khmer Times*, 18 May 2025, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501685606/golden-dragon-a-symbol-of-the-robust-and-unbreakable-military-cooperation-between-cambodia-and-china/>.

⁴¹ Hang Punreay, “Golden Dragon Drill Ends with Boost for Cambodia-China Defence Ties,” *Khmer Times*, 28 May 2025, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501691474/golden-dragon-drill-ends-with-boost-for-cambodia-china-defence-ties/>.

Subang Air Force Base, and the Strait of Malacca.⁴² The PLAN Type-071 vessel *Jinggangshan* (Hull 999) again took the lead in moving heavy equipment to an international exercise, this time escorted by the Type-052D destroyer *Yinchuan* (Hull 175) and Type-056A corvette *Jingmen* (Hull 606). The embarked ground forces, as has become the norm, participated in onboard training events during the transit.⁴³

According to Chinese media, more than 700 personnel from the PLA STC Army, Navy, and Air Force, in addition to elements from the PLA Hong Kong Garrison and PLA JLSF, transited to Malaysia via sea transport. The *Jinggangshan* carried trucks and a variety of wheeled vehicles, unmanned systems, small boats, and other equipment.⁴⁴ The ship's well deck was filled with large vehicles of varying types, and four trucks were secured topside.⁴⁵



Figure 14. PLAA equipment getting loaded into *Jinggangshan* in preparation to transit to Malaysia for *Peace and Friendship-2025*.⁴⁶

⁴² 王豪 [Wang Hao] and 赖瑜鸿 [Lai Yuhong], ‘和平友谊-2025’联合演习闭幕 [“The ‘Peace and Friendship-2025’ Joint Exercise Concludes”], 中华人民共和国国防部 [Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China], 24 October 2025, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jsxd/ly/16417121.html>.

⁴³ Cheng Sihao, “Chinese Vessels Participating in China-Malaysia Joint Exercise Arrive at Malaysian Port,” *China Military Online*, 14 October 2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/H_251454/L_251456/16415050.html.

⁴⁴ Huang Panyue, “Chinese Troops Set Out for Peace and Friendship 2025 Joint Exercise in Malaysia,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 9 October 2025, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16414212.html.

⁴⁵ ‘和平友谊-2025’联演中方参演部队起程 [“Chinese Troops Participating in the ‘Peace and Friendship-2025’ Joint Exercise Depart”], 央视网 [CCTV], 8 October 2025, <https://tv.cctv.com/2025/10/08/VIDEM66txXOrQ1Ax2ZCzrm5s251008.shtml>.

⁴⁶ “Chinese Troops Participating in the ‘Peace and Friendship-2025’ Joint Exercise Depart.”



Figure 15. PLAA support vehicles loading into *Jinggangshan* before departure for Malaysia for *Peace and Friendship-2025*.⁴⁷

The flotilla’s other two vessels departed from Sanya and Hong Kong with embarked elements from each location before joining the *Jinggangshan* for transit to Malaysia, giving the STC Navy HQ an opportunity to execute command and control of joint forces transiting from multiple ports. The task force’s composition, made up of an amphibious transport dock to carry ground forces, a destroyer with advanced air defense and surface strike capabilities, and an escort corvette designed for littoral and anti-submarine warfare missions, represented progress is the PLA’s move to project force abroad.⁴⁸

The *Peace and Friendship* series of exercises are typically unsophisticated, designed for Malaysia to uphold its non-aligned foreign policy so as not to anger the U.S. and PRC.⁴⁹ Although 2025 was the sixth iteration of the exercise, it was the first time the PLAN dispatched an amphibious vessel to Malaysia to deliver ground equipment. Previous exercises only included small numbers of destroyers, corvettes, submarines, and support ships. Therefore, the equipment unloading process at Port Klang likely provided a valuable opportunity to use foreign civilian infrastructure like that found in other international ports that could enable “access without basing.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ “Chinese Troops Participating in the ‘Peace and Friendship-2025’ Joint Exercise Depart.”

⁴⁸ “Malaysia and China Launch ‘Aman Youyi 2025’ Joint Military Drill in the Straits of Malacca,” *Defence Security Asia*, 13 October 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/malaysia-china-aman-youyi-2025-joint-military-exercise/>.

⁴⁹ Ian Seow Cheng Wei and David Han Guo Xiong, “IP26028 | Malaysia-China Joint Military Exercises: Significance and Limitations - RSIS,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, 25 February 2026, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip26028-malaysia-china-joint-military-exercises-significance-and-limitations/>.

⁵⁰ The “access without basing” concept refers to the use of *strategic strongpoints* in the Indo-Pacific region that the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* describes as nodes from which to support overseas military activities, or, alternatively, as forward bases for deploying forces overseas. According to June 2024 analysis from RAND, the term *strategic strongpoints* generally refers to potential dual-use overseas facilities, including foreign commercial ports over which the PRC expects to exert some degree of control. Howard Wang and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Not Ready for a Fight: Chinese Military Insecurities for Overseas Bases in Wartime*, Research Report RR-A1800-2 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1800-2.html.

Like the 2024 and 2025 *Golden Dragon* exercises, the PLA dispatched a STC assistant to the chief of staff to lead the Chinese forces in Malaysia. This time, Major General Dai Bin (戴斌) served as the Chinese exercise commander, giving a PLAA general officer the unique opportunity to have overall control of a naval flotilla and the joint service members preparing for an international training event.⁵¹ Unlike the exercises in Cambodia, Dai also served as the senior VIP at the exercise's closing ceremony.⁵²

Tanzania as the "Far Seas" Stress Test

While complex, the integration of PLAA and PLA JLSF forces into PLAN shipping in Southeast Asia from 2023 to 2025 occurred within the localized logistics umbrella of the Southern Theater Command. To truly measure the PLA's global expeditionary capability, analysts must look to the "Far Seas," an area of emphasis for the PLAN over the last two decades, and a focal point for Xi Jinping's desire to make the navy a world-class force.⁵³

The *Peace and Unity-2024* (和平团结-2024, also called *Amani Umoja-2024*) exercise conducted with Tanzania and Mozambique provided the ultimate stress test for this joint capability. Unlike the relatively short transits across the South China Sea or the Gulf of Thailand, deploying a joint force to East Africa required significant planning for complex international logistics coordination and operations entirely disconnected from mainland support.⁵⁴

In July and August 2024, the PLA deployed a battalion-sized ground force element, complete with wheeled armored vehicles, medical equipment, and a variety of other support systems, across the Indian Ocean via two Type-071 amphibious transport docks: *Qilianshan* (Hull 985) and *Wuzhishan* (Hull 987). The two amphibious vessels were escorted by one Type-052D destroyer, *Hefei* (Hull 174). Crucially, this sealift was coordinated with strategic airlift from Y-20 transport aircraft, marking a rare and complex instance of Chinese air and naval strategic lift operating in tandem to support joint ground force projection in Africa.⁵⁵

⁵¹ "Peace and Friendship-2025' China-Malaysia Joint Exercise Kicks Off."

⁵² 赖瑜鸿 [Lai Yuhong] and 王豪 [Wang Hao], '和平友谊-2025'联合演习闭幕_腾讯新闻 ["The 'Peace and Friendship-2025' Joint Exercise Concluded"], 腾讯网 - 南部战区 [Tencent - Official PLA STC], 23 October 2025, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20251023A0650L00>.

⁵³ Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Future World-Class Navy: Ends, Ways, and Means," in *The PLA's Long March Toward a World-Class Military: Progress, Obstacles, and Ambitions*, ed. Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch (Washington, D.C., The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025), pp. 208–11.

⁵⁴ 李梦一 [Li Mengyi], '和平团结-2024'联合演习——东非演兵场打出联合反恐'组合拳' ["The 'Peace and Unity-2024' Joint Exercise—A Coordinated Counter-Terrorism Effort—Demonstrates Its Effectiveness on the East African Training Grounds"], 科技日报 [*Science and Technology Daily*], 20 August 2024, https://www.stdaily.com/web/gdxw/2024-08/20/content_216923.html.

⁵⁵ Jake Vartanian, "Peace and Unity: China's Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania," US Army War College - Strategic Studies Institute, 9 October 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3930357/peace-and-unity-chinas-growing-military-footprint-in-tanzania/>; Jeremy Binnie, "China Deploys Significant Force to Tanzania for Exercise," *Janes*, 2 August 2024, <https://www.janes.com/defence-intelligence-insights/defence-news-details/land/china-deploys-significant-force-to-tanzania-for-exercise>.



Figure 16. PLAN LPD *Wuzhishan* prepares to dock next to *Qilianshan* in Tanzania prior to unloading embarked PLAA equipment for Peace and Unity-2024.⁵⁶



Figure 17. PLAA (from left to right) wheeled command, control, and communications vehicles; ZBL08 8x8 wheeled IFV; CSK181 wheeled light high-mobility assault vehicles; ZSL92 6x6 wheeled IFVs; and additional CSK181 vehicles transported to Tanzania by PLAN lift.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ [军事报道]“和平团结-2024”任务编队抵达坦桑尼亚 [“[Military Report] The "Peace and Unity-2024" Mission Formation Arrives in Tanzania”], 央视网 [CCTV], July 25, 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/07/25/VIDEwZE6L2GPe5a916HHwV80240725.shtml>.

⁵⁷国防军事早报]“和平团结-2024”联合演习 坦桑尼亚 举行开幕式 联合演习即将全面展开 [“[Defense and Military Briefing] Tanzania Holds Opening Ceremony for "Peace and Unity-2024" Joint Exercise; Joint Exercise Imminent”], 央视网 [CCTV], July 30, 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/07/30/VIDEYFLUeTpiWG9DO8dt2KV6240730.shtml>.

The force package the PLA transported to Tanzania was the largest ever sent abroad for an exercise that did not require rail transport. Making it even more unique was that most of its ground forces came from the PLA Central Theater Command (CTC), including elements from a PLAA 82nd Group Army medium combined arms brigade and the 82nd Special Operations Forces (SOF) Brigade. These units joined participants from the PLAN, PLAN Marine Corps SOF, PLAAF, PLA JLSE, and newly established PLA Information Support Force to conduct joint counterterrorism and maritime security drills with their Tanzanian counterparts. Official Chinese media noted that the exercise was the first time the PRC had held joint exercises with African countries that included both navy and army participation.⁵⁸

During *Peace and Unity-2024*, the PLA notably incorporated a command-and-control structure that included leaders from two theater commands with senior army officers in overall charge. Following the traditional oversight construct, PLAA Lieutenant General Huang Xucong (黄旭聪), PLA CTC Deputy Commander, served as head of delegation, while the Chinese exercise director and commander for PLA forces was PLAA Major General Ye Dabing (叶大斌), PLA CTC Assistant to the Chief of Staff.⁵⁹ Yet, the size and scope of the exercise demanded senior leadership from both the army and navy to command their forces in the respective land and maritime drills. PLAA Major General Xue Zhengyun (薛正云) commanded the ground force elements from the PLA CTC for the land-based training, while PLAN Rear Admiral Yang Bo (杨波), PLA STC Navy Deputy Chief of Staff, served as Chinese maritime commander in the joint command post.⁶⁰ The STC Navy flotilla that transported and escorted the ground force elements before participating in the combined maritime drills was under the command of PLAN Senior Captain Li Bo (李博), ensuring a naval officer remained in command while at sea.⁶¹

By proving that they can push a tailored, joint ground-naval package across the globe, the PLA signaled that its expeditionary jointness is no longer a regional capability—it is a global reality.

What the PLAN Gains

While the PLAA relies on these deployments to solve its strategic lift deficiencies, the navy reaps substantial institutional and operational dividends from serving as the primary conduit for joint ground forces. Strategically, by becoming the indispensable enabler of the PLAA's global mandate,

⁵⁸ Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, “PLA Continues Peace Unity-2024 Exercises in Africa,” *Global Times*, 6 August 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202408/1317509.shtml>; Vartanian, “Peace and Unity: China’s Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania.”

⁵⁹ 李岩 [Li Yan], 中部战区部队结束在非演习，三位将军出席仪式 [“Central Theater Command Troops Conclude Exercises in Africa; Three Generals Attend Ceremony”], 搜狐网 [Sohu], 14 August 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/800897450_137462; Vartanian, “Peace and Unity: China’s Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania.”

⁶⁰ Li, “Central Theater Command Troops Conclude Exercises in Africa; Three Generals Attend Ceremony”; 王禹衡 [Wang Yuheng] and 杨牧 [Yang Mu], 中坦海军，同频共振 [“Chinese and Tanzanian Navies Resonate in Unison”], 人民网 [People’s Daily Online], 2 August 2024, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0802/c1002-40291495.html>; 驻坦桑尼亚大使陈明健出席“和平团结-2024”联合演习中方海军舰艇编队甲板招待会 [“Ambassador Chen Mingjian Attended a Reception on the Deck of the Chinese Naval Fleet Participating in the ‘Peace and Unity-2024’ Joint Exercise”], 中华人民共和国驻坦桑尼亚联合共和国大使馆 [Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United Republic of Tanzania], 30 July 2024, https://tz.china-embassy.gov.cn/sgdt/202407/t20240730_11463299.htm.

⁶¹ 王金石 [Wang Jinzhi], 参加“和平团结-2024”联合演习的中方舰艇编队抵达坦桑尼亚 [“The Chinese Naval Fleet Participating in the ‘Peace and Unity-2024’ Joint Exercise Arrived in Tanzania”], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 26 July 2024, <https://www.news.cn/milpro/20240726/d13b2e5c6a1d4f338e40c58afaa0fb9/c.html>.

the PLAN elevates its own institutional relevance within the PLA's joint command structure. Transporting heavy ground forces demonstrates that the navy is not merely a regional sea-control instrument, but the pillar of China's global power projection. Furthermore, utilizing its amphibious transport docks for long-range, multinational logistics helps justify the massive capital investment in the Type-071 and emerging Type-075 classes, proving their utility extends far beyond cross-strait contingencies into global military operations other than war.

Operationally, embarking non-organic army units enables the PLAN to transform routine diplomatic transits into rigorous, live-environment stress tests for naval logistics and well-deck management. The PLAN Marine Corps is a relatively light force; in contrast, loading the PLAA's heavy weapons platforms, such as tracked ZBD04A IFVs and PLZ10 120mm combination guns or high-mobility wheeled PCL171 howitzers, presents unique challenges in weight distribution, securement, and at-sea sustainment. By executing these complex loading and offloading evolutions, the PLAN forces its own deck crews and logistics officers to generate and refine new tactical standard operating procedures for heavy lift, directly improving the fleet's overall expeditionary proficiency.

Delivering these heavy ground packages to foreign shores allows the PLAN to actively validate its "access without basing" model at commercial ports across the Indo-Pacific and Africa. When a PLAN task force successfully offloads PLAA combat vehicles using civilian infrastructure in places like Sihanoukville or Port Klang, the navy is mapping the logistical realities of the Belt and Road Initiative's maritime footprint. This gives the PLAN critical repetitions in navigating foreign port bureaucracies, coordinating local tug and stevedore services, and testing the physical load limits of regional piers—intelligence and experience that are vital for future naval operations requiring rapid, sustained access abroad.

Implications for U.S. Planners

Despite the PLAA's mission to become a globally mobile force, the army is still primarily focused on the PRC's regional issues like Taiwan, India, and the Korean Peninsula. The transport of army forces to international exercises via naval amphibious lift does not indicate a change in the expeditionary priority for either the PLAA or PLAN Marine Corps. China's marines will remain Beijing's expeditionary force of choice as it grows its modern amphibious fleet, while the PLAAF Airborne Corps will remain its primary rapid reaction force for international crises. Instead, the army's overseas exercise deployments have several implications that U.S. defense planners should understand:

1. They Validate the PLA's Joint Command Structure

The successful embarkation, transit, and offload of army units via navy ships proves that the theater commands are functioning exactly as intended by the 2016 reforms. Not only do they demonstrate the success of the "theater commands lead combat, services lead construction" (战区主战、军种主建) concept that emerged as part of the reforms, but they also force interoperability between the PLAA and PLAN.⁶² Despite the army's use of navy tank landing ships and other amphibious platforms during exercises in the Taiwan Strait, long-distance overseas maritime deployments require the two services, as well as other PLA services on board the vessels, to resolve technical and doctrinal frictions. These could include everything from the physical tie-down of PLAA vehicles and weapons to integrated communications and tactical party committee coordination during transit. The

⁶² Chen, "Choosing the 'Least Bad Option.'"

PLA has almost certainly now developed, tested, and normalized the standard operating procedures required to coordinate a multi-branch deployment at sea—an absolute prerequisite for executing any complex operation, from a South China Sea contingency to a full-scale cross-strait invasion.

2. They Redefine Expeditionary Combat Mass

The expansion of the PLAN Marine Corps is a notable development, and it illustrates Beijing's plans to develop a persistently deployed afloat capability.⁶³ However, China's marine corps remains a relatively light force with limited numbers of force packages available to deploy for international exercises. Sustained expeditionary power requires heavy armor, massive logistical trains, organic indirect fires, and deep reserves of manpower—assets belonging exclusively to the PLAA. By demonstrating that the PLAA can seamlessly deploy ZBD04A IFVs and PCL171 howitzers from PLAN amphibious ships, China is explicitly signaling that its overseas power projection ceiling is not limited by its marine corps.

3. They Serve as a Testbed for “Access Without Basing” Capabilities

Utilizing PLAA maneuver elements for international exercises provides a critical, real-world testbed for Beijing's "access without basing" concept. Unlike the PLAN Marine Corps, whose amphibious and wheeled armor platforms are designed to project combat power directly over the beach, the PLAA relies on heavier, non-amphibious mechanized equipment that necessitates formal port infrastructure for debarkation. By deploying these army assets via PLAN sealift, the PLA is forced to execute the complex, pier-side logistics—such as heavy crane offloading and staging-area management—required to utilize a host nation's commercial or dual-use maritime facilities. Consequently, these joint deployments allow the Chinese military to validate the administrative, diplomatic, and physical friction points of projecting sustained combat power through temporary overseas access points, proving they can insert heavy forces without relying on permanent overseas military installations.

4. They Expand the PLA's Vehicles for Military Diplomacy

Adapting to the reality that many targeted partner nations—like Cambodia, Malaysia, and Tanzania—possess dominant ground forces but lack substantial naval or marine corps capabilities, the PLA must engage army-to-army. To effectively build military-to-military ties and secure access in these regions, the PLAN must rely on army ground forces for partnership development. This approach bears a resemblance to U.S. Army Pacific's (USARPAC) campaigning in the Indo-Pacific with activities like Operation Pathways.⁶⁴ Just as USARPAC leverages persistent, expeditionary ground force deployments to build interoperability with army-centric allies and secure theater access, the PLAA is deliberately using its own overseas exercise deployments to achieve similar strategic signaling and partnership capacity, transforming long-range ground force projection into a critical tool for geopolitical influence.

⁶³ Carl O. Schuster, “The PLA Navy's Marine Corps: China's Expeditionary Force of Choice,” *Real Clear Defense*, 7 May 2026, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/05/07/the_pla_navys_marine_corps_chinas_expeditionary_force_of_choice_1181050.html.

⁶⁴ U.S. Army Pacific, *USARPAC Theater Army Strategy* (2026).

Conclusion

The evolution of Chinese expeditionary power is defined by the steady, systematic integration of its separate military branches. The metric for success is no longer simply arriving at a foreign port; it is the composition of the specific combat power that rolls off the ramp. By utilizing PLAN amphibious assets to project PLAA armored fighting vehicles, indirect fire assets, and JLSF medical units into Cambodia, Malaysia, and East Africa, the PLA is permanently eroding the logistical seams that once hampered its operations.

The PLA is actively using the Type-071 platforms as a live-fire laboratory to generate the critical TTPs that will allow its future amphibious fleets to project joint, multi-domain combat power on a global scale. For the U.S. and its allies, the visual and operational evidence is unambiguous: the PLA is building a joint expeditionary force capable of projecting sustained, mechanized operations beyond the safety of the First Island Chain, while also building army-to-army partnerships that could prove valuable in future wars where access will become a premium. The success of bilateral exercises like Golden Dragon, which is set to occur again in the second half of 2026, will embolden the PLA to expand such activities with other partner nations in other strategic locations.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ben Sokhean, “Cambodia, China Gear Up for Drill to Bolster Defence Ties,” Khmer Times, May 29, 2026, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501907707/cambodia-china-gear-up-for-drill-to-bolster-defence-ties/>.

About the Author

Joshua Arostegui is the Chair of China Studies and research director of the U.S. Army War College's China Landpower Studies Center. His primary research topics include Chinese strategic landpower, People's Liberation Army joint operations, and Indo-Pacific security affairs. Mr. Arostegui is also a chief warrant officer 5 in the U.S. Navy Reserve, where he serves as a flag adviser in the Information Warfare Community.

The opinions and views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Government, U.S. Department of War or its components, to include the Department of the Navy or the U.S. Naval War College.