

The Air Staff College Research Memo

## **4. A Study on the People Liberation Army's Capabilities and Increasing Jointness in the East China Sea**

The Strategic Research Group

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes and evaluates the military capability and the trends toward jointness of the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), through the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Writing this paper, we've referred to the following articles.

- 1. China Establishes East China Sea Joint Operation Command Center [Reference 1] <sup>1</sup>**
- 2. China's Air Defense Identification System [Reference 2] <sup>2</sup>**
- 3. China Established "CMC" Joint Operation Command Center [Reference 3] <sup>3</sup>**

### Main Point

#### **1. PLA capability in the East China Sea**

- (1) The infrastructure for joint operations, command and control functions, has been established through the installation of a coastal air defense radar network.
- (2) As construction of a joint operational command system for the East China Sea is continuing, it is necessary to determine the capacity of this system through exercises and other opportunities. Furthermore, the dual leadership

system of political commissars and commanders will continue into the future.

## **2. The Problems and Prospects of creating a Joint PLA**

### **(1) Challenges of associated with becoming Joint**

A. Training a sufficient number of personnel to develop and become responsible for the project, since dedicated personnel are the driving force in whether they will be able to achieve joint integration.

B. Rejection of Joint integration by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

### **(2) The Chinese president Xi Jinping (hereafter as President Xi) promoted the reformation of the PLA, but its future progress is unknown.**

## **1. Overview**

(1) In November 2013, the Defense Ministry issued public notice of the installation of the ADIZ. In February 2014, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) advertised in AIP CHINA<sup>4</sup> that the ADIZ had been effective since March 5, 2006.

(2) According to Reference 1, China's State Central Military Commission issued guidance to establish an East Sea Joint Operations Command Center in Shanghai. Although the East Sea Joint Operations Command Center is a military organization, it reports directly to the National Security Committee. The established purpose of the East Sea Joint Operations Command is as follows:

A. Effectively monitor the ADIZ

B. Do not allow Japanese military operations to be conducted

(3) According to Reference 2, the context behind the announcement of the ADIZ was the improved cooperation between the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). It also refers to the possibility of an ADIZ being established over the South China Sea. We are told that some of the airspace management authority has been transferred from the PLA to the civil aviation authorities.

(4) According to Reference 3: 1) The PLA General Staff in Beijing established a central joint operations command center subordinate to them, 2) President Xi, after being appointed the general secretary, reportedly replaced eight of the

ten members in the Central Military Commission and promoted 24 generals,  
3) President Xi actively visits units of the PLA.

## 2. Analysis

### (1) Establishment of the ADIZ

#### A. History before the establishment

In March 2008, at the same time that the 11th National People's Congress was being held, there was a military news report that the Lanzhou Military Region Air Force Commander, Zhu Qingyi, Lt Gen, PLA Airforce, proposed to strengthen its early warning network and air defense systems. In November 2009, the Air Force commander (now the Central Military Commission's Vice President), Xu Qiliang, referred to a consensus to install an ADIZ, but President Hu Jintao did not consider it an Air Force issue and did give his official permission. However, specific studies on how to strengthen the air defense system were started, and at 18th Chinese Communist Party's Congress in November 2012, President Xi was appointed to be the General Secretary. According to the Asian Weekly, the Air Force Headquarters had submitted a proposal to initiate the ADIZ, to the Party Central Committee, in May 2013.<sup>5</sup>

The details of establishing the ADIZ were coordinated between the CAAC, subordinate to the State Air Traffic Control Commission (SATCC) and the General Staff Department (GSD). After the initial coordination was complete, the announcement was made in November 2013, at the 18th Party Central Committee's Third Plenary Session (hereafter referred to as the Third Central Meeting) that China would "normalize its borders and coastal defense, reviewing the structure and mechanisms of air defense management."<sup>6</sup>

#### B. Strategic Context

In the political report from the Party Congress in December 2012, President Xi declared that China must become a "maritime power" because "maritime power" was necessary in order to fulfill the "dream of a strong country" and the "dream of a strong military." President Xi said that he strongly supports this move as an important component for "great revival of the Chinese nation."<sup>7</sup>

In 1998, China promulgated its “Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Law.” China also extended the Air Force’s original plan of the ADIZ establishment,<sup>8</sup> almost perfectly matching the outside border of the ADIZ with 200m depth contour of the East China Sea. (See Figure 1) And the Chinese Naval Military Court President, Fu Xiaodong claimed the ADIZ to be “over and around our country’s Exclusive Economic Zone.” Taking all of them into consideration, it is likely that the establishment of the ADIZ was, based on the “maritime power” speech mentioned above, done to firm up China’s interests in protecting their East China Sea Exclusive Zone.<sup>9</sup>

The Air Force’s “Strategic Studies” (2013), published by the Academy of Military Science, set out their concept of airspace management in the zone via three lines of control: 1) within airspace, ensuring control over the entire safety zone, 2) from airspace to the first island chain, performing early-warning, reconnaissance, and long-range intercept, 3) from the first island chain to the second island chain, conduct long-range reconnaissance and conducting deterrence missions.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the strategic task of the Navy, seizing maritime supremacy in the North Pacific Ocean, is enabled in the short-term by establishing supremacy in the East China Sea<sup>11</sup> (see Figure 2). If judged in accordance with that strategy in mind, the ADIZ is the first “salam slice”<sup>12</sup> towards a larger goal. The establishment of regional air control by the Air Force is a part of their strategy, including the construction of an offensive and defensive capable Air Force and the “strong military of their dreams,” that the Navy believe will lead them towards their goal of strengthening their dominance in the maritime domain and seizing control of the sea.



Source: 川中敬一「中国の“機動—5号”演習と防空識別圏設定・公表の含意」『海洋情報特報』January 22, Us.

**Figure 1 ADIZ's relationship to the Continental Shelf**

	1990s & 2000s	2010s	2020s	2030s	2040s
Strategic objective	Limited war/ military conflict Deterrence/win	· Command of the sea inside of the first island chain · Win digital limited wars		Seize command of the sea in the North Pacific Ocean	
	Adversaries on the East China Sea, South China Sea, Japan Sea			Hegemonic states/ local adversaries	
	Nuclear countermeasure /threatening capabilities development				
	Establish capabilities for conquering straits and channels inside the First Island Chain				
	Ensure sea lane security through the Indian Ocean				
Weaponing focal point	Local adversaries				
	Large scale/ mid scale platforms, digital weapon systems				
	DDG AWACS DD-FF	forming	DDG AWACS DD-FF	developing	Building a large Carrier Strike Group
SSBN + SLBM					
organization	Three fleets (North Fleet, East Fleet, South Fleet)			Two Fleets(East Fleet , South Fleet) Establish "National Coast Guard, China"	

Source: 川中敬一「中国の“機動—5号”演習と防空識別圏設定・公表の含意」『海洋情報特報』January 22, 2014.

**Figure 2 Direction of Naval Construction in the first half of the 21st Century**

## (2) PLA activities in the East China Sea

### A. Airspace Surveillance Posture in the East China Sea

The East Sea Joint Operations Command Center was established at Shanghai Air Force Base in order to monitor the ADIZ's airspace.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that the East Sea Joint Operations Command Center monitors the airspace via two radar brigades. Some believe that the Air Force's Third Radar Brigade in Shanghai/Chongming Island monitors the northern section from seven centralized radar sites, and the southern section is monitored from six radar sites of the Navy's Second Radar in Ningbo.<sup>14</sup> (See Figure 3)

Around 2006 the PLAAF began to develop an integrated, automated air monitoring system as part of its centralized command and control system, and this has been installed as part of its air defense system along its East China Sea coastline. At the Shanghai Air Force Base, Over-The-Horizon (OTH) non-line-of-sight radar, phased array radar and other radar information from Zhejiang and Fujian is aggregated and linked into the network. It is said that the maritime-aviation cooperation in monitoring this airspace and the networking has greatly increased the airspace surveillance capabili-

ties compared to previously.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, in the aforementioned three-war control system, the Air Force is conducting early warning, reconnaissance and long-range interception operation along the East China Sea including the ADIZ, calling the region as limited controlled, security cooperation division<sup>16</sup> where China cooperates with friendly nations. Thus it is likely that the PLA considers the surveillance missions using early warning aircraft or data link as the basis of its military operations.

The Chinese government announced at the Third Central Meeting the establishment of the National Security Committee,<sup>17</sup> the organization which unifiedly commands each department involved in security and institutionalizes the policy coordination. Thus the Committee is not directly connected to the PLA but is reported to by the East China Sea Joint Operations Command Center.



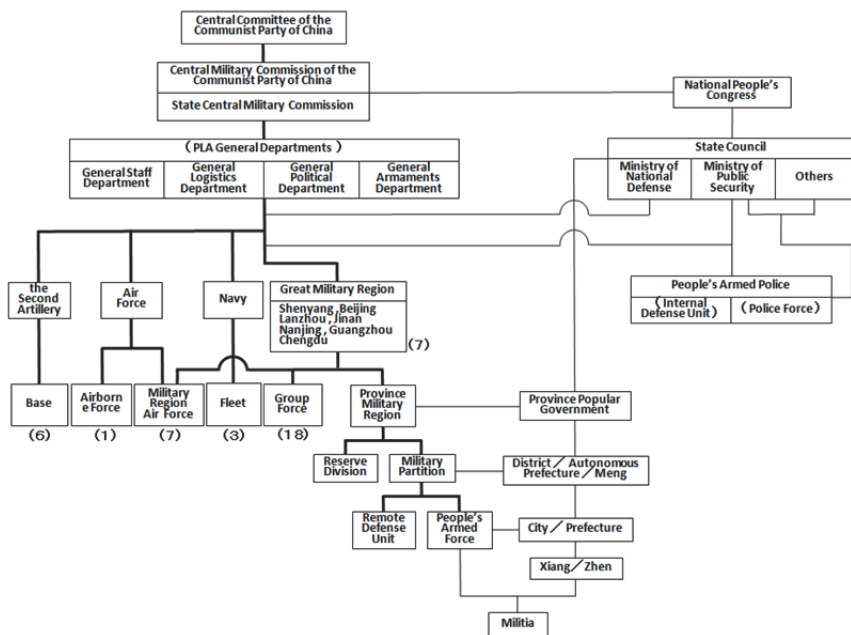
Source: Mark Stokes, "China's Air Defense Identification System", PROJECT 2049 INSTITUTE, September 14, 2014.

**Figure 3** PLA radar surveillance sites along the East China Sea coastline

## B. East China Sea Chain of Command

The conventional PLA organizational chain of command is shown in Figure 4.<sup>18</sup> The PLA is comprised of seven military districts, with each district being led by a commander, under the guidance of the Central Military Commission, who has control over all joint and provincial forces in that region. However, if the District Commander is an Air Force general, then they must wear two hats while leading their troops.<sup>19</sup> The ADIZ is located within the Nanjing Military Region, but the East China Sea Joint Operations Center is considered to be a special emergency (“defensive emergency”) headquarters and thus troops associated with ADIZ activity report directly to the Central Military Commission.<sup>20</sup> However, the chain of command and command relationships for those areas that straddle other military districts is not known at this stage and will be investigated in the future.





Source:武田純一『人民解放軍』ビジネス社、August 17, 2008, p29.

**Figure 4 PLA’s organization and chain of command**

C. Exercises in the East China Sea Region

In October 2013, before the announcement of the ADIZ, the MANEUVER-5 exercise was conducted to test the Air Force’s and Navy’s ability to cooperate in detecting and identifying the type of aircraft entering the area. The Air Force’s early-warning aircraft were used in monitoring the airspace, while other Air Force aircraft practiced ECM attacks against surface vessels. The surface vessels also conducted training and providing information support to bomber aircraft. This was an example of how, by opening an air command post and using early warning aircraft, China has attained a modern, combat-ready air-maritime joint forces.<sup>21</sup>

From the end of July to August 2014, the East Sea Joint Operations Center

conducted a large scale exercise in the East China Sea, training more than normal and impacting civil aviation in the area. The China Defense Ministry stated “in order to adjust their defense posture it was important to verify their military capability by implementing realistic training.” The Chinese Daily said that Central Military Commission had announced in March that they needed to adopt a “more combative manner” in relation to the East China Sea.<sup>22</sup>

#### D. Effect on JASDF and USAF military aircraft

In June 2014, a JASDF fighter flying along the ADIZ was intercepted by Chinese military aircraft, which flew “abnormally close,” the Japanese Ministry of Defense announced. The Japanese government protested the activity through their embassy in China.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Defense denied the Japanese claims, and responded by criticizing the Japanese, claiming that it had been their aircraft who had approached their patrols in the ADIZ too closely.<sup>24</sup>

In August 2014, the US Department of Defense announced via a press release that Chinese military aircraft had conducted dangerous acts against US military aircraft in the South China Sea. The Chinese Ministry of Defense denied any risky behavior, stating they had only flown out to identify the US aircraft, and countered by saying it was the United States that was causing tension in the region.<sup>25</sup>

With the establishment of the ADIZ, US and JASDF military aircraft are caught up in “Legal Warfare”<sup>26</sup> as China claims the measure is a part of national right to defend its airspace, creating a ready-made factual argument to exercise its authority.<sup>27</sup> China hopes, by using the news, to convince the public in Japan, the United States, and the nations around, to believe China's claims of authority, and if an incident such as an mid-air collision<sup>28</sup> occurs, it can claim own legitimacy. Judging from the other nation's response to China, however, this tactics does not seem to be working well.<sup>29</sup>

#### E. Air Traffic Management

Air Traffic Control for the East China Sea is performed by Airspace management and coordination committee, which consists of Nanjing Military Region Headquarters, Nanjing Military Region Airforce, Shanghai Air Force

Base (Air Defense), the 26th Air Division (early warning), East Sea Fleet Naval Air Force, the East China Sea Air Traffic Control Station, and city representatives.<sup>30</sup>

The SATCC secretariat and the Deputy Prime Minister are the overall authority for air traffic control in China, but SATCC has substantially ceded the authority for air traffic control operations to the GSD operational center which manages all of China's airspace. In conjunction with the establishment of the ADIZ, air traffic control authority for low-altitude civil aviation was handed over to the civil aviation authorities.<sup>31</sup> It is believed that the delegation of low-altitude management to the civil aviation authorities also applies to the ADIZ. In part, the purpose of this move may be to avoid the recent stagnation of the civil aviation and the complicated commercial and private air traffic situation caused by recent unincreased air traffic.

### (3) PLA Joint Integration

#### A. State of the military (organization, characteristics)

In 1985 the PLA reorganized from eleven military districts, that were established after the Korean War and primarily focused on Army forces, to the current seven districts we have today. Within the PLA there is a political commissar that works alongside the unit commander at each echelon, ensuring that the army remains tied to the Communist Party. This dual-command system is a distinguishing feature of the Chinese military.<sup>32</sup>

The allocation of budgets and posts has always been biased towards the Army. Although this is derived from the fact that it was an Army-central fight during their Civil War and the Korean War, this system had been in place before those conflicts. This systematic bias towards the Army has led to dissatisfaction with the Navy and Air Force that continues to this day.<sup>33</sup> The Defense Director and the four members of the party's Central Military Commission are former Army commanders, and the majority of the major positions within the major PLA institutions are Army generals.<sup>34</sup> In addition, while the Central Military Commission's Joint Operational Command Center, in the basement of their Beijing facility, is comprised of staff sections from all of the military branches, and manned by the finest officers, since the structure is compartmentalized into each branch,<sup>35</sup> it is still questionable as to

whether the organization can sufficiently grasp and conduct joint operations.

The PLA originally developed from a militia force, and throughout history has a record of wasteful spending on equipment procurement, in collusion with certain elements, due to their opaque budget process.<sup>36</sup> The ability of the PLA to break away from this pre-modern condition has become a problem. They are trying to reform the PLA by increasing transparency in their accounting and creating a social security system for their military personnel.<sup>37</sup>

#### B. Becoming more Joint

In November 2012, the Air Force general Xu Qiliang was elected as the Vice-President of the Party's Central Military Commission. Two persons other than Army general have held the post in succession. He is responsible for overseeing the strategy section within the PLA, and as the Deputy of the PLA he oversees the headquarters functions. His appointment is seen as a conscious choice to appoint personnel in line with their strategy to improve joint operations.<sup>38</sup>

In November 2013, the Chinese Communist Party unanimously adopted at the Third Central Meeting a strategy to become more joint and to "reform our national defense, military systems and organization." Their goal is to promote the rapid modernization of their military and national defense capabilities.<sup>39</sup> As part of this, they have reduced their forces by 30 million soldiers, so that they can be more responsive to emergencies and facilitate restructuring their military districts. There are reports that a joint headquarters has been stood up, and that operational planning is being studied.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in the past few years the PLA has conducted multiple air-sea exercises to improve their cooperation and coordination, furthering their goal of joint operations. This can be seen as an opportunity for them to practice joint operations, in information warfare conditions, with the goal of achieving victory in a "local war".

#### C. President Xi's promotion of Joint Operations

Before President Xi took office, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin controlled the military through the power of the Vice President of the Central Military Commission, Xu Caihou (Xu was excluded from the position of the Central Military Commission in 2012 and later from all the positions of the Party).

However, President Xi is attempting to seize the seat for himself, placing himself directly at the head of all the PLA generals, gaining first-hand experience on matters of national security. His father was a general of the PLA and he himself has a working experience in the Defense Ministry. In addition, his pro-active involvement in military matters has been positively received by the military, and favorably compared to that of his two predecessors.<sup>41</sup>

In March 2014, President Xi convened the First Plenary Meeting of the “Central Military Commission for Defense and the Leading Group for Deepening Military Reform.” The meeting was divided into five smaller groups, each appointed to discuss “the need to promote reform.”<sup>42</sup> President Xi appointed himself as a small group chairman, and appointed the other chairman based on their “strong military” background and history of supporting the PLA. His goal was to find a mechanism to strengthen the PLA, reduce corruption and strengthen discipline within the military.<sup>43</sup>

President Xi demonstrated his high level of interest in the military by visiting the Central Military Commission’s Joint Operations Command Center several times during the exercise ACTION MISSION 2013. According to the Defense Ministry spokesman, “the PLA inspects its joint command function, and moves toward China’s own joint command system.”<sup>44</sup>

### **3. Evaluation**

#### **(1) East China Sea Operations and Chain of Command**

##### **A. Establishment of Infrastructure for Joint Operations (Command and Control)**

For the PLA, there has been pointed out many familiar challenges with command, military discipline and equipment issues.<sup>45</sup> However, in 2013 the PLA has conducted 40 large-scale exercises in just one year, and they are becoming increasingly sophisticated.<sup>46</sup> Cooperation, including the exchange of information, between troops using various platforms has been increasing in recent years, as we have seen joint exercises using data links to connect air defense networks, naval vessels and aircraft.<sup>47</sup> The proficiency of the troops is unknown, but the infrastructure for joint operations(command and control) has been established and, under a limited scenario, aircraft, vessels and SAM

units within the area of operation can operate under the unified command of the East China Sea Joint Operations Command Center.<sup>48</sup> In addition, as Reference 1 and 2 report, the low-altitude air traffic control authority has been transferred to civil authorities and the East Sea Joint Operations Command Center is to report to the National Security Committee. These show that the PLA can now share information with non-military organizations through the improved grasp of the air situation by networking. The PLA, due to the Air Force's remarks on the ADIZ from 2008 to the present and the recent situation of exercises, has possessed the ability to control the East China Sea airspace since before, and has been establishing the operations infrastructure, enabling them to establish the East Sea Joint Operations Command Center and the ADIZ. This remains a situation that must be carefully monitored.

#### B. Operational Chain of Command

The Central Military Commission Joint Operations Command Center monitors the status of each military department, enabling them to grasp the current situation at all times. However, it is unclear what the capacity or function of this center is, nor do we know much about its construction. It is the same with the ability to command operations of the East Sea Joint Operations Command Center. However, in the 2014 China Defense White Paper published in April 2013, they announced that there would be advances made in training, reforming current military training.<sup>49</sup> We assume the command functions associated with PLA joint operations, including internal organizations and constructs are developing. It is necessary to continue evaluating their command and control capabilities from their exercise performance.

Based upon the premise that the PLA is necessary for the survival of the party, the political commissar system is being strengthened.<sup>50</sup> This command structure will likely lead to a general trend away from operational agility, though we have not been able to confirm whether this issue has become a hindrance in exercises.

### (2) PLA Joint Operations Trends

#### A. Challenges to becoming Joint

Currently, there are no known commanders in any major positions in each of the PLA military districts that have experience in modern warfare or the

command of joint air-sea operations. It is also unlikely that the headquarters of a military district will be able to appoint a commander or staff sufficiently versed in joint operations. This lack of human resources has been mentioned as one of the problems they are having with joint operations at this time. This can be seen from the fact that they have been actively promoting measures to develop such human resources and further their ability to achieve the leadership and information technology necessary to establish a military information operations capability by 2020.<sup>51</sup> If the project to create the human resources needed for the Central Military Commission's Joint Operations Command Center makes steady progress, we expect the leadership of their joint strategy to dramatically improve.

On the other hand, this reform must be a conscious effort to address the challenge in breaking down the stove-piped organization of the Central Military Commission in order to reform the military and be able to conduct joint operations from their command center. In particular, there is concern about whether the Army, which has been at the forefront of the national defense, can accept a reduced budget, personnel reductions, and reorganization of the military districts. In 1985, Deng Xiaoping modernized the PLA by reducing its size by more than 100 million personnel, declaring "Quality comes from Quantity." However, military morale dropped, the promotion rate of officers and increase in personnel remained stagnant. This is a problem that they have still not been able to resolve.<sup>52</sup> In light of this situation, it is conceivable that the Army might be reluctant to accept, or even reject, joint integration.

#### B. Promoting Difficult Reforms

President Xi, since assuming the role of Vice-Chairman in February 2014, has pursued corruption and criminal activity within the party membership, deciding along with party leadership who should be expelled. Part of this drive was the purge of the Vice President of the Central Military Commission, Xu Caihou (also charged with criminal liability in military tribunal) on June 1, 2014<sup>53</sup> as part of the attempt to further reform the military. In order to show that they were serious, several cases of corruption were exposed. This indicates that reform is slippery and tricky. President Xi's repeated visits to the military<sup>54</sup> can be seen as a way to monitor the behavior of the military

while also garnering its support. So far, based on the PLA publication and the remarks of the officers, the PLA supports President Xi.<sup>55</sup> However, the exposure of corruption and the removal of special privileges cannot be expected to continue indefinitely without affecting the level of support from PLA officers with vested interests in the status quo. Therefore, it is also conceivable that joint integration will suffer delays should these officers decide they prefer luxury.

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Footnotes

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- 17 "China Establishes East China Sea Joint Operation Command Center"
- 18 竹田純一『人民解放軍』ビジネス社、August 17, 2008, p.29.
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