

Conventional Forces Modernization

~~(C)~~ Conventional forces modernization centers around low-cost reforms intended to raise the combat effectiveness of the PLA until economic expansion permits large-scale weapons acquisition. Such reforms include enhanced education and training, force restructuring, doctrinal changes, and the selective upgrade of some equipment as an interim measure.

- o ~~(C)~~ After several years of sustained emphasis on improving the officer education system, the proportion of officers with college degrees is now 27.6 percent, up from 10.9 percent in 1981. In addition, older officers have attended remedial education classes, and some 92 percent have completed high school, up from 50 percent in 1981.
- o ~~(C)~~ Unit commanders in the individual military regions are less frequently determining their own training methods and schedules. New training methods are being taught at national-level military schools and this practice has injected some standardization into the training system. In addition, a "pilot unit" concept begun in 1982 has provided control and evaluation of experimental training methods and is developing new tactics, doctrine, and training methods.
- o ~~(C)~~ There is a great deal of debate taking place within the PLA whether the original one million troop reduction (which will be completed this year) should be followed by a further significant reduction in troop strength, somewhere between 500,000 and 750,000. The consensus is that there should be no further demobilization until 1990 at the earliest to allow the lessons of the first reduction to be absorbed.
- o ~~(C)~~ In order to supplement a smaller active force, China is developing a formal reserve force. This force includes reservists proper and armed "backbone" militiamen organized into regimental and lower units.

Administered at the local level in peacetime, these units would round out the active force in wartime.

- o (U) The PLA is implementing a civilian cadre system to insure long-term retention of military scientists and technical personnel. The PLA is also reestablishing a military rank structure and an awards system.
- o ~~(S)~~ China's central military doctrine is changing. Emphasis is shifting toward new strategies for forward defense, local wars, and rapid deployment.

~~(S)~~ Over the past few years the most extensive reforms have occurred in the ground forces. Group Armies created to provide a combined arms capability are now the mainstay of the army. An Army Aviation Corps has been established to provide antitank and airlift capabilities which previously did not exist.

- o (S/WN) China has 24 Group Armies ranging in size from 60,000 to 90,000 men.
- o (S) The Army Aviation Corps will enhance the ability of the PLA to field a credible military force. Although the Corps is still in development, it will provide ground force commanders with reconnaissance, air transport, and aerial antitank assets.

~~(S)~~ Air force modernization emphasizes retiring aged aircraft, selectively enhancing the capabilities of some, and developing new aircraft for specific missions. The air force has also reorganized in order to better perform its various roles. Emphasis has been placed on better coordination with group army operations in combined arms exercises and on increased air defense responsiveness.

- o ~~(S/NF/WN)~~ Since 1985, approximately 1,000 fighters, bombers, and transports were transferred or retired out of combat units, including as many as 100 B-5/BEAGLE bombers, over 600 MiG-15/FAGOT and F-5/MiG-17/FRESCO, and at least 200 transport aircraft. China's newer F-7/FISHBEDs and the F-8/FINBACKs are being selectively deployed as replacements to front-line fighter units. China has an estimated 500-600 F-7/FISHBED and about 70 F-8-1/FINBACK A aircraft.

- o ~~(S/NF/WN)~~ Upgraded variants of both the F-7 and the F-8 aircraft are being developed and will be deployed by the early 1990s. These aircraft will have improved indigenous avionics (including airborne intercept radars) and improved indigenous air-to-air missiles. The F-8-2 will carry a radar-guided AAM (possibilities include the U.S. AIM-7/Sparrow, the Italian Aspide, or a Chinese copy thereof). The improved F-7 will carry the Israeli Python-III all-aspect IR-guided missile.
- o ~~(S/NF/WN)~~ As a follow-on to upgraded F-7 and F-8 aircraft, China is developing a next-generation fighter aircraft, reportedly based on technology used in the Israeli LAVI and incorporating selected Western technology acquired through the F-7 and F-8 upgrade programs. This new fighter is projected to enter service in the late 1990s or early in the next century.
- o ~~(S/NF/WN)~~ To enhance professionalism and streamline its organization, the air force underwent a 25 percent reduction in force, during which it retired older cadre and excess staff personnel.

~~(C)~~ Naval reform is emphasizing selective modernization of some mission-specific equipment. Moreover, the role of the navy is changing as it moves from being an almost exclusively coastal defense force to a limited "blue water" navy.

- o ~~(S)~~ China is purchasing equipment such as torpedoes, radars, guns, command and control systems, and missile subsystems for reverse engineering and is developing technologically more advanced weapons of its own. Limited numbers of improved antiair, antisurface, and antisubmarine weaponry are being installed on LUDA class destroyers and JIANGHU class frigates. Coastal defense forces are similarly being upgraded with ASW sonars and antiair weapon systems.
- o ~~(S)~~ Deployments to the Spratlys, the Ryukyus, and other training cruises indicate that the Chinese Navy is developing blue water capabilities. Changes in command and control on the fleet level, coupled with developments in replenishment at sea and an interest in aerial refueling, point to doctrinal changes and suggest a more aggressive attitude in expanding China's geopolitical boundaries.

~~(C)~~ In spite of the great strides that have been made in all of these areas, conventional force modernization is hampered by lack of funds and a decline in morale.

- o ~~(C)~~ PLA wages and living conditions have not kept up with those of civilians. As a result, it is becoming more difficult to enlist and retain qualified personnel. Moreover, professional soldiers feel that the PLA's prestige has declined as the rest of the nation concentrates on attaining economic prosperity.

~~(S)~~ At the current rate of progress it will be some time before the PLA acquires the capabilities to sustain conventional operations beyond its borders. The PLA will remain inferior to opposing Soviet forces for at least the remainder of this century.