



The Current Status and Prospects of China's Growing Marine Corps

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Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has been forging ahead with modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for three continuous decades since the early 1990s, unequivocally making China, or the People's Republic of China (PRC), the largest military power in Asia. The Xi Jinping leadership has made "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" a goal since its inauguration in November 2012. In order to recover areas which China considers are "lost territories," such as Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the Spratly Islands, the Xi leadership has intensified "attempts to change the status quo by force," including military force. The PLA, mainly the Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF), have stepped up activities in the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, among other waters in East Asia, putting increasing pressure on Taiwan, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries. At the same time, the PRC has steadily strengthened its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to weaken the U.S. military presence, the biggest obstacle to changing the status quo in East Asia. Beijing's commissioning of aircraft carriers, deployment of anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), development of hypersonic weapons, and enhancement of nuclear capabilities are all seemingly part of its efforts to realize the long-term goal of developing the PLA into a "world-class military force" on par with the U.S. forces.

With this growing capability, the PLA is not only intensifying activities in China's surrounding areas, but also gradually increasing its activities in places far from the mainland. For example, the PLAN has been taking part in international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008. In addition to the PLAN, the PLA Army (PLAA) and the PLAAF are also actively conducting joint exercises with Russia and other countries. Furthermore, the PLA has been expanding its opportunities and capabilities for overseas deployment, including sending units to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), conducting rescue operations for its own nationals and foreign nationals in Yemen, and constructing an overseas base in Djibouti. The same PLA has significantly bolstered the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) as part of the large-scale defense and military reforms which have been promoted in recent years. In general, the role of the PLANMC is to advance from sea to land by leveraging amphibious capabilities, and it is anticipated to carry out expeditionary operations in areas far from the mainland. From this perspective, it is worth giving attention to the strengthening of the PLANMC, which in turn may strengthen the overseas deployment capabilities of the PLA. This article examines the status, capabilities, and objectives of the PLANMC's ongoing reorganization.

The Growth of the PLANMC

The PLANMC as it currently exists traces its roots to the marine regiment established in April 1953, which was enlarged to a marine division in December 1954. However, a marine corps ceased to exist with the marine division's reorganization into the garrison force of the Shanghai Garrison in June 1957. More than 20 years later, the PLAN decided to reestablish

a marine corps in December 1979, and the 1st Marine Brigade, the starting point of the present PLANMC, was founded on Hainan Island on May 5, 1980.¹ Then, in 1998, the PLAA's 164th Division was reorganized into the 2nd Marine Brigade, forming the PLANMC with two brigades and approximately 10,000 personnel under the South Sea Fleet.

The primary mission of the PLANMC subordinate to the South Sea Fleet appears to have been limited to defense or assault of islands and reefs in the South China Sea.² In 1974, the PLA launched an attack on South Vietnamese forces, taking control of the entire Paracel Islands and establishing a military outpost on Woody Island. In 1988, it waged an attack against Vietnamese forces, occupied six reefs in the Spratly Islands, and deployed garrison forces. In 1992, China also occupied the Gaven Reefs and other reefs in the Spratly Islands. The PLANMC played a role in expanding control over these islands and reefs in the South China Sea and in defending them. The impetus behind transferring PLAA units to form the 2nd Marine Brigade in 1998 was presumably the 500,000-man force reduction that began under President Jiang Zemin in the previous year. At this time, China was promoting regional cooperation in response to the Asian financial crisis and adopted a cooperative stance on the South China Sea issue, including agreeing on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2002.³ It was likely in this process of streamlining the overstretched PLAA that the units were transferred to the PLANMC.

In the nearly two decades that followed, the PLANMC modernized its equipment but did not undergo any major changes to its composition or chain of command. Then, in April 2017, the PLA significantly enhanced the strength of the PLANMC and sought to reinforce its chain of command. The strength was increased from the two original brigades to four additional brigades, which were transferred from the PLAA's coastal defense force and motorized infantry force, among other forces. In addition, the PLA created the Special Operations Brigade, to which the PLAN's special forces unit, the "Jiaolong Commando Unit," was transferred, and the Aviation Brigade operating transport helicopters. This brought the total to eight brigades and around 40,000 personnel (see Table 1). Some suggest that the PLANMC will be expanded to 100,000 personnel in the future.⁴

At the same time, the PLANMC's own headquarters was established in Chaozhou, Guangdong Province, making the PLANMC the only branch with its own headquarters among the five PLAN branches—the Surface Force, the Submarine Force, the Naval Air Force, the Coastal Defense Force, and the Marine Corps. However, the PLANMC Headquarters is subordinate to the PLAN Headquarters. The first commander of the PLANMC Headquarters was Major General Kong Jun, who served as chief of staff and in other posts in the former Nanjing Military Region, while the political commissar was Rear Admiral Yuan Huazhi, who was a brigade political commissar in the PLANMC and had served in the South Sea Fleet and the PLAN Headquarters.⁵ By having its own headquarters as a navy branch, the PLANMC was anticipated to have a

¹ 军事科学院军事历史研究所 [Military History Institute, Academy of Military Sciences], 中国人民解放军八十年大事记 [Historical Events of the Chinese People's Liberation Army over the Past 80 Years] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Press], 2007), pp. 407-408.

² Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Liberation Army 2021," November 2021, p. 52.

³ Masafumi Iida, "New Developments in China's Policy on the South China Sea," *NIDS Security Reports*, No. 9, December 2008, pp. 12-15.

⁴ "China 'Planning to Fivefold Increase in Marine Force': Expansion Would Take Corps Size to 100,000 and Allow for More Deployment Overseas, Insiders Say," *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017.

⁵ "海军陆战队新领导层亮相: 孔军、袁华智分任司令员、政委 [New Leadership of the Marine Corps Unveiled: Kong Jun, Commander, and Yuan Huazhi, Political Commissar]," *观察家* [Guancha], May 28, 2017, https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2017_05_28_410553.shtml.

relatively high degree of autonomy in planning and implementing operations, planning and conducting exercises, planning equipment procurement, budgeting, and making personnel arrangements, with the expectation that this would improve the command capabilities of the PLANMC.

President Xi Jinping visited the PLANMC Headquarters on October 13, 2020. After viewing an exhibit of the situation of the PLANMC and checking the training status of the units via online videos, President Xi gave “full recognition” to the PLANMC’s post-reorganization construction, development, and task fulfilment status. President Xi then remarked that the strategic design for the construction of the PLANMC need to be enhanced to make the strategic design fit with the needs of China’s development, security, and military strategies, as well as with the needs of the development of a PLA-wide joint operations system and of the transformation of the PLAN. President Xi also urged the PLANMC to clarify the goal, direction, path, and focus of its construction for formulating a clear roadmap and working diagram.⁶ While these remarks do not elucidate the future direction of the construction of the PLANMC, including further increase in force size, it can be understood that the PLA intends to reform the PLANMC in line with China’s defense and military reforms and strengthen capabilities to conduct joint operations with other services and branches.

Table 1: Composition of the Restructured PLANMC

| Brigade Name | Theater Command (TC) | Former Unit Name |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1st Marine Brigade | Southern TC | (Existing) 1st Marine Brigade |
| 2nd Marine Brigade | Southern TC | (Existing) 2nd Marine Brigade |
| 3rd Marine Brigade | Eastern TC | 13th Coastal Defense Division, Fujian Provincial Military Region |
| 4th Marine Brigade | Eastern TC | 2nd Coastal Defense Division, Shanghai Garrison |
| 5th Marine Brigade | Northern TC | Coastal Defense Corps, Qingdao Garrison |
| 6th Marine Brigade | Northern TC | 77th Motorized Infantry Brigade, 26th Group Army |
| Special Operations Brigade | — | PLAN’s “Jiaolong Commando Unit” |
| Aviation Brigade | — | — |

Source: Compiled by the author based on Andrew Tate, “Growing Force: China’s PLA Marine Corps Expands and Evolves,” *Jane’s Navy International*, April 11, 2019, p. 11.

Equipment and Capabilities of the PLANMC

The PLANMC is steadily expanding its equipment inventory, alongside enlarging its units and strengthening the chain of command. The PLANMC is working to introduce the new Type 05 series of amphibious fighting vehicles, which play

⁶ “习近平在视察海军陆战队时强调 加快推进转型建设 加快提升作战能力 努力锻造一支合成多能快速反应全域运用的精兵劲旅 [During his inspection of the Marine Corps, Xi Jinping emphasizes accelerating its transformation and improvement of its combat capabilities to build the Marine Corps into an elite and powerful troop which has multiple functions, is swift in response, and is capable of operating in all domains],” 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], October 14, 2020.

a major role in amphibious operations to advance into enemy-controlled areas from the sea. The PLA previously utilized the Type 63 amphibious vehicle (ZTS-63A) as its amphibious fighting vehicle. However, the ZTS-63A had weak armor, and the 105-millimeter cannon mounted on it reportedly made it difficult to balance the weight of the hull. During a joint training exercise with the Russian Armed Forces in 2005, two ZTS-63As were submerged in water, causing an accident that killed eight people.⁷ As a new series of amphibious fighting vehicles to replace the ZTS-63A, China has developed and deployed to units the Type 05 amphibious infantry fighting vehicle (ZBD-05), the Type 05 amphibious tank (ZTD-05), and the Type 07 amphibious self-propelled howitzer (PLZ-07B) based on the Type 05 hull.

The ZBD-05, an amphibious infantry fighting vehicle mounted with a 30-millimeter machine gun, can travel at a speed of about 25 kilometers per hour on water, and is considered to fire accurately even while traveling at sea. The machine gun can fire up to 330 rounds per minute, and its maximum range is said to reach 1,500 meters. The ZBD-05 is also mounted with the HJ-73 anti-tank guided missile, which is estimated to penetrate 200 millimeters of rolled homogeneous armor (RHA) at a maximum range of 2,800 meters.⁸ According to *The Military Balance 2021*, the PLANMC has 152 ZBD-05s.⁹

The ZTD-05, an amphibious tank mounted with a 105-millimeter rifled gun, can attack stationary targets on land while in water at Sea State 4, and is considered capable of striking mobile targets in conditions up to Sea State 3. In addition, the ZTD-05 can fire armor-piercing shells and high-explosive antitank rounds, allowing it to wage attacks against the enemy's armored vehicles and fortifications.¹⁰ According to *The Military Balance 2021*, the PLANMC has 73 ZTD-05s.¹¹ By leveraging its powerful assault capabilities, the ZTD-05 is expected to provide firepower support to the ZBD-05 approaching enemy territory to make a landing.

The PLZ-07B is based on the Type 05 amphibious vehicle and is mounted with a 122-millimeter howitzer used extensively by the PLA. The PLZ-07B has a wide firing elevation range from -3 degrees to 70 degrees, allowing the execution of direct and indirect (out-of-view) assault missions. The range of the howitzer fitted on the PLZ-07B is estimated to reach 18 kilometers if a conventional anti-tank howitzer is used. By attacking enemy positions deeply from the sea, the PLZ-07B can conduct missions to support the ZBD-05 and the ZTD-05 approaching enemy territory to make a landing.¹² According to *The Military Balance 2021*, the PLANMC has over 20 PLZ-07Bs.¹³

Furthermore, the PLANMC began deploying the new ZTQ-15 light tank. The ZTQ-15 mounted with a 105-millimeter rifled gun has high mobility compared to heavy tanks. Since 2018, taking advantage of the characteristics of light tanks, the ZTQ-15 has begun to be deployed to the PLAA in plateau areas, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, and in the Southern Theater Command where there are many soft ground areas. Two ZTQ-15s are said to fit in China's new Y-20 transport aircraft. In addition, the Type 726 air-cushioned vehicle operated by the PLAN can carry two ZTQ-15s, while the Zubr-class air-cushioned vehicle can carry four ZTQ-15s. By deploying the ZTQ-15, the PLANMC may be able to improve its ability to conduct diverse operations not limited to amphibious operations.¹⁴

⁷ Tanaka Saburo, "Chugoku daienshu! Taiwan shinko chakujoriku sakusen [Chinese Large-scale Maneuver! Taiwan Invasion and Landing Operation]," *Gunji Kenkyu [Japan Military Review]*, December 2021, p. 61.

⁸ Samuel Cranny-Evans, "Red Seas: China's Advancing Amphibious Force Capabilities," *Janes International Defence Review*, March 25, 2019, p. 5.

⁹ The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2021* (London: IISS, 2021), p. 254.

¹⁰ Cranny-Evans, "Red Seas," pp. 5-6.

¹¹ IISS, *Military Balance 2021*, p. 254.

¹² Cranny-Evans, "Red Seas," p. 6.

¹³ IISS, *Military Balance 2021*, p. 254.

¹⁴ Gabriel Dominguez, Samuel Cranny-Evans, and J Michael Cole, "PLANMC May Be Re-equipping for Combined

The PLAN is equipping the PLANMC with landing ships, with one of the objectives being to transport the above-mentioned amphibious fighting vehicles and other vehicles to areas of operation and support their amphibious operations and land operations. The main landing ship currently used by the PLAN is the Type 071 landing platform dock (LPD), a large landing ship with a displacement of around 20,000 tons capable of deploying amphibious fighting vehicles and air-cushioned vehicles from a well deck to the sea. In addition, it has a wide flight deck, allowing two helicopters to be operated simultaneously.¹⁵ The Type 071 LPD is considered capable of transporting four Z-8 transport helicopters, four Type 726 air-cushioned vehicles, around 20 armored fighting vehicles, and 600 to 800 personnel. The PLAN has so far commissioned eight Type 071 LPDs, which are deployed to the East and South Sea Fleets.¹⁶

In April 2021, the PLAN commissioned the *Hainan*, the first of the Type 075-class landing helicopter docks (LHD), and deployed her to the South Sea Fleet. The Type 075 LHD is a large vessel which displaces around 40,000 tons and has a well deck and a full-length flight deck. In addition to a large number of amphibious fighting vehicles, the Type 075 LHD is thought to be capable of transporting approximately 30 helicopters, three Type 726 air-cushioned vehicles, and around 1,900 personnel,¹⁷ boosting capabilities in troop transport and helicopter operations compared to those of the Type 071 LPD. The Type 071 LPD and Type 075 LHD are expected to provide the PLAN with greater capacity, endurance, and flexibility to conduct long-range operations.¹⁸ Following the *Hainan*, the PLAN is building the second and third ships of the Type 075-class LHD. Some indicate that the PLAN is also planning to build the Type 076 amphibious assault ship which will be equipped with catapults and enable the use of fixed-wing aircraft.¹⁹

As described above, the PLANMC has recently been outfitted with advanced equipment. Nonetheless, challenges to strengthening its capabilities have been noted. One of the major challenges is insufficient capabilities of the four brigades which were newly formed out of units transferred from the PLAA. The execution of amphibious operations requires complex command and operational capabilities combining sea, land, and air forces. They also require proficiency in the operation of amphibious fighting vehicles and other specialized weapons. Having sufficient equipment and training is indispensable. While the PLAA has several amphibious units that have and operate amphibious fighting vehicles and medium-sized landing craft, the units transferred to the PLANMC in the recent reorganization were units which had no equipment or experience to conduct amphibious operations, including the motorized infantry division and coastal defense division. A considerable amount of time is needed for these four brigades transferred from the PLAA to acquire amphibious operations capabilities to be field-ready.²⁰ Since the newly formed four brigades are not adequately equipped or trained, only the two original brigades are said to be fully operation capable.²¹ When the expansion of the PLANMC initially

Arms, Multidomain Operations,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, June 3, 2021.

¹⁵ Andrew Tate, “Growing Force: China’s PLAN Marine Corps Expands and Evolves,” *Jane’s Navy International*, April 11, 2019, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Sekai no Kansen [Ships of the World]*, April 2022, p. 66.

¹⁷ Tanaka Saburo, “Chugoku kaigun rikusentai wa doko wo osounoka!? [Where Will the PLANMC Strike!?],” *Gunji Kenkyu [Japan Military Review]*, May 2020, p. 96.

¹⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Liberation Army 2021,” November 2021, p. 51.

¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities, Background and Issues for Congress,” Updated January 20, 2022, pp. 33-34, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/259>.

²⁰ Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, “The Chinese Navy’s Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization,” *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 3, February 1, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/>.

²¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Liberation Army

began, the goal was to eventually reach 100,000 personnel, according to some observers. This target may be under review under the defense and military reform policy that emphasizes improving quality over increasing quantity.

Lack of helicopters has been noted as another challenge to strengthening the capabilities of the PLANMC. In addition to making landings from the sea by ships, such as amphibious fighting vehicles, air-cushioned vehicles, and landing craft, amphibious operations require air transportation of troops on transport helicopters as well as air fire support on armed helicopters. For this reason, the PLAN commissioned Type 071 LPDs and Type 075 LHDs that are capable of operating helicopters. However, there are insufficient helicopters to be carried on the ships. The PLANMC established a new aviation brigade and is developing ways to operate helicopters independently. Although the aviation brigade needs at least 120 attack and medium-lift helicopters to complete its mission, the number of helicopters it has received does not reach that level.²² According to *The Military Balance 2021*, the PLANMC's arsenal of helicopters encompasses no more than five Z-8C transport helicopters.²³ The PLAN has about 120 helicopters, but only 38 are heavy transport helicopters.²⁴ With China planning to commission the third aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, it may have limited assets to assign to the PLANMC. As for assault helicopters, some note that the Z-9 helicopter of the PLAA may be supplied temporarily to the PLANMC.²⁵ However, helicopters with PLAA specifications which are not designed, maintained, or repaired for use at sea are said to have a major weakness, i.e., they are susceptible to salt damage.²⁶

Objectives of Growing the PLANMC

As examined above, the PLANMC has worked to significantly enlarge its size, as well as enhance and bolster its equipment. Despite some challenges to strengthening amphibious operations capabilities, the PLA intends to continue to promote the buildup of the PLANMC. China may be strengthening the marines for the following three objectives.

The first objective is to strengthen the capability to defend or attack islands and reefs, primarily in the South China Sea. This was the original mission of the PLANMC, and its importance has further increased in recent years. The PRC has expanded its control in the South China Sea, including seizing control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012. Since 2014, Beijing has conducted large-scale reclamations in seven reefs and islets in the South China Sea, created artificial islands, and transformed them into military outposts. At the same time, the PLA has been vying with the U.S. forces over the South China Sea, and pressure from the U.S. forces has been rising from China's perspective. In other words, as activities by hostile forces intensify, it has become necessary for China to grow the PLANMC to execute the mission of defending a larger number and more expansive outposts than before. Of course, in addition to defending islands and reefs controlled by China, the PLANMC with enhanced amphibious operations capabilities is also expected to play a central role in expanding control over islands and reefs controlled by other countries. In recent years, China has ratcheted up military pressure on Taiwan, and some note that Beijing may take some kind of military action against the Taiwan-controlled islands of Itu Aba and the Pratas Islands.²⁷ The PLANMC with greater amphibious operations capabilities

2020," September 2020, p. 79.

²² Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Liberation Army 2019," May 2019, p. 61.

²³ IISS, *Military Balance 2021*, p. 254.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Blasko and Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1."

²⁶ Andrew Tate, "Growing Force," p. 9.

²⁷ See Iida Masafumi, "Taiwan wo meguru gunjiteki kincho no takamari to Nihon no anzen hosho [Rising Military Tensions over Taiwan and Japan's Security]," *Koryu [Exchange]*, November 2021, pp. 18-24.

would be best suited to carry out the mission of occupying the islands, which are far from mainland China and are defended by the Taiwanese armed forces.

Similarly, some contend that the PLANMC, capable of conducting landing operations on remote islands far from the Chinese mainland, would be useful for China to occupy the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which are the inherent territory of Japan.²⁸ Defensive forces, including the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF), are currently not stationed on the Senkaku Islands. However, SDF and Japan Coast Guard assets are deployed in the surrounding sea and airspace. Airborne force projection using helicopters is believed to be suitable for breaking through Japan's defensive forces and landing troops on the Senkaku Islands. The PLANMC established two new brigades in the Eastern Theater Command that covers the East China Sea. While it appears that these brigades are not yet fully operational, their amphibious operational capabilities are thought to increase if their equipment is bolstered and their training proficiency improves. Japan will need to closely follow developments concerning the PLANMC in the Eastern Theater Command.

The second objective is to play a key role in a full-scale invasion operation against Taiwan. For the Xi Jinping regime, which has set “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as its long-term goal, the following tasks are vital also for the CCP regime to maintain its rule: the annexation of Taiwan, which is regarded as lost territory, and the realization of Chinese unification. While the Xi administration places emphasis on achieving “peaceful unification” based on “one country, two systems,” it has explicitly stated that it may use force against the “independent forces” in Taiwan and the “external forces” that support them.²⁹ If the CCP leadership decides to unify Taiwan by force, it will use missiles and air power to attack bases and other targets of the Taiwanese armed forces. However, this alone may be inadequate to contain Taiwanese resistance. In order to neutralize the resistance and achieve unification, Beijing may need to land a large number of personnel on Taiwan to suppress its military and people that continue to resist.

Amid the PLANMC's expansion efforts, the PLAA continues to retain the amphibious mechanized units of the 71st, 72nd, and 73rd Group Armies in the Eastern Theater Command and of the 74th Group Army in the Southern Theater Command. These units have repeatedly conducted landing exercises mainly in areas facing Taiwan. Even the size of these exercises suggests that the units will become the chief forces in landing operations against Taiwan. In contrast, the PLANMC will use its firepower to break through enemy defenses, even under the enemy's power, together with projection capabilities to promptly deploy troops from the sea and air. Marines are expected to lead the landing operations and establish bridgeheads, opening the way for a full-scale landing by the amphibious mechanized forces which will follow.³⁰ The PLANMC is anticipated to further increase its inventory of Type 071 LPDs and Type 075 LHDs. If the deployment of helicopters to the PLANMC aviation brigade progresses, the PLANMC's ability to conduct invasion operations against Taiwan is projected to increase. Attention needs to be paid to future expansions of the PLANMC's capabilities, also in terms of following the developments in the Taiwan Strait.

²⁸ David Lague, “Special Report: China Expands Amphibious Forces in Challenge to U.S. Beyond Asia,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2020.

²⁹ “为实现中华民族伟大复兴 推进祖国和平统一而共同奋斗——在《告台湾同胞书》发表 40 周年纪念会上的讲话 [Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification: Speech at the Meeting Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan],” *人民日报* [*People's Daily*], January 3, 2019.

³⁰ Lin Ying-Yu, “New Wine into Wineskins: The Evolving Role of the PLA Navy Marine Corps in Amphibious Warfare and Other Mission Areas,” *China Brief*, Vol. 20, No. 2, January 29, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-wine-into-new-wineskins-the-evolving-role-of-the-pla-navy-marine-corps-in-amphibious-warfare-and-other-mission-areas/>.

China's third objective of growing the PLANMC is to carry out expeditionary operations in areas far from the Chinese mainland. As the Chinese economy becomes increasingly globalized, many Chinese enterprises and Chinese workers are advancing into other countries, and there are various projects around the world in which China has interests. These overseas assets connected with China are collectively referred to as "overseas interests" in the PRC. As the "overseas interests" grow, protecting them has become a key issue for Beijing. China's National Defense White Paper, released in July 2019, notes that "China's overseas interests are endangered by immediate threats such as international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy. Chinese diplomatic missions, enterprises and personnel around the world have been attacked on multiple occasions," and lists "provide strategic support for ... protecting China's overseas interests" as one of the four major missions of the PLA.³¹

In order to protect the "overseas interests" around the world, it is essential that the PLA strengthens its expeditionary capabilities to independently carry out missions in areas far from mainland China. By acquiring the capability to independently operate sea, air, and land forces in an integrated manner, the PLANMC is expected to carry out expeditionary operations to protect "overseas interests" in areas beyond the first island chain.³² Personnel from the PLANMC's special operations unit are aboard the PLAN vessels conducting anti-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden. In addition, PLANMC units are stationed and guard a base in Djibouti opened by the PLA in 2017. In recent years, marines, mainly the special operations unit, have repeatedly conducted training exercises in desert, cold highland, and southern jungle terrains.³³ Such training reveals that the PLANMC aims to become capable of conducting operations in various regions of the world. In the future, the PLANMC will likely play an important role in the PLA's force projection through overseas expeditionary operations.

Conclusion

According to a commentary published in the *PLA Daily* regarding the new characteristics of amphibious operations, their mission is no longer limited to landing operations from the sea and has expanded to a wide range of activities. It explains, "The missions and tasks of amphibious operations are not limited to traditional landing operations and the occupation and control of islands and reefs. They have gradually expanded to multifaceted operations, including forward presence, maritime interdiction, control of critical points, navigational escort in distant waters, overseas defense, and humanitarian relief. The number of low-intensity operations and missions as well as non-combat military tasks have also gradually increased, and the use of a full range of capabilities, rapid reach, and combination of deterrence and combat are becoming predominant."³⁴ The PLANMC, too, is not only building up its capability to conduct traditional amphibious landing operations; it also seems to be bolstering its mechanisms to become capable of conducting a range of missions to protect "overseas interests" in various regions of the world, far away from the Chinese mainland. President Xi Jinping,

³¹ The State Council Information Office, "新时代的中国国防 [China's National Defense in the New Era]," 新华网 [Xinhua Net], July 24, 2019.

³² Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Liberation Army 2021," November 2021, p. 53.

³³ Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 2: Chain-of-Command Reforms and Evolving Training," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 4, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-2-chain-of-command-reforms-and-evolving-training/>.

³⁴ 陈卫东 [Chen Weidong], "透视两栖作战新特点 [Insight into the New Characteristics of Amphibious Operations]," 解放军报 [PLA Daily], September 16, 2021.

who visited the PLANMC Headquarters in October 2020, stated, “The PLANMC is an elite combat force for amphibious operations, and it shoulders the important duties of safeguarding the country’s sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, maritime interests, and overseas interests.”³⁵ As the PLA aims to become a “world-class military force,” the PLANMC is anticipated to develop into a key force for carrying out various missions beyond amphibious landing operations in the East Asian region.

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³⁵ “习近平在视察海军陆战队时强调 [During his inspection of the Marine Corps],” 解放军报 [PLA Daily], October 14, 2020.