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CHINESE MARINE CORPS

EVOLUTION AND PURPOSE

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China has historically had a land-oriented focus. The People's Liberation Army Navy-Marine Corps is one of the smallest and newest branches within the People's Liberation Army. Post the 2015-2016 reforms, the Armed Forces of China are collectively referred to as the People's Liberation Army, with the Army now being called the PLA Army/ PLA Ground Force. Both the PLA Navy and PLA Army maintain Amphibious units. As of 2022, the PLA Army maintains 6 amphibious assault brigades¹, with the Marine Corps referring to the Navy's Amphibious units.

Recently, increasing coverage from Chinese Party-Linked and PLA sources has thrown this formation into the limelight, with there being increasing efforts to analyze the capabilities of this force and their strategic and tactical importance in China's military strategy. This paper will trace the evolution of the force, its purposes, the impact of the 2016 reforms, the differences it has with the amphibious units maintained by the PLA Ground Force, and its implications.

History

The origins of the Marines can be traced back to the formation of a PLA marine regiment in 1953, later expanded to a division in December 1954. It promptly saw action in the First Taiwan Straits Crisis against Taiwan, a few weeks after the division's formation. Battle-hardened troops from Korea were later transferred to the Marines, bringing up the Marines to a force comprising of around 110,000 men in 8 Marine divisions, to lead an Amphibious invasion of Taiwan.²

¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (2022), Order of Battle: People's Republic of China, The Military Balance 2022, Routledge, Pg 256. ISBN 9781032279008.

² Isajiw, Christopher P. (2013), China's PLA Marines: An Emerging Force, The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/chinas-pla-marines-an-emerging-force/> Accessed 21 April 2022

However, with the PRC in the late 1950s abandoning any plans of launching an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, the Marines had no purpose left, and their equipment and personnel were both transferred to the PLA Army, with the PLA Navy maintaining a few odd Naval Infantry regiments. However, the dismal performance of the PLA against the Vietnamese, especially in the Parcel Islands made the Central Military Commission see the need for a dedicated Amphibious force as part of the PLA Navy (Although Amphibious units were also part of the PLA Army).

To that end, the PLAN Marine Corps was re-established in 1980, with the first Marine Brigade being raised at Hainan. For seventeen years, this was the sole Marine Brigade, until as a part of force reduction, the 164th Army Division was downsized to a brigade and handed over to the Marines. Both brigades were under the command of the Southern Sea Fleet, therefore indicating that their area of operations was in the South China Sea. Their equipment suggests a focus on small-scale landings and limited operations mostly in the reefs of the South China Sea.

Both these Brigades were among the better-armed and equipped formations in the PLA, although the first Brigade usually received priority over the 164th Brigade. The PLAN-MC's training and recruitment standards are equivalent to Chinese Special Operations Forces. This may lead one to believe that the PLAN-MC is a SOF, when it really is not. The PLAN-MC is trained in hand-to-hand combat, amphibious tactics, undersea and surface-land-air insertion tactics, and underwater demolitions to clear defences on beaches.

The PLA Marines are considered the epitome of China's increasing focus on quality instead of quantity. However, a few notable issues linger. These include the lack of vessels capable of supporting amphibious operations and absence of helicopters within the Marine Corps, leaving them dependent on the aviation units assigned to the Southern Sea Fleet, and reducing flexibility.³

³ Blasko, Dennis J. (2010), China's Marines: Less is More, China Brief, Volume 10 Issue 24, Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-marines-less-is-more/> Accessed 21 April 2022

2016 Reforms

As part of the widespread reforms initiated by President Xi Jinping, a huge boost was given to the PLAN-MC, which is seen as a result of PRC Strategists assigning increased importance to the role that marines could play, as opposed to the Taiwan-Centric Army amphibious units.

The Marine Corps was expanded by three times, receiving six new Brigades, of which four were regular Combined Arms Brigades, one SOF Brigade, and a Naval Aviation Brigade under Marine Command. A new Marine Corps HQ would be formed, with a command structure somewhat similar to China's Airborne Forces⁴.

However, there is not much clarity on command of the units themselves, With Lt Col Blasko feeling that the patterns of deployment suggest that the Marine Brigades are not subordinated to specific naval fleets and come under the direct command of the MCHQ.⁵ The US Department of Defense notes that the bases where these brigades are stationed come under the command of specific theatres and fleets. However, it is the 'bases' that come under command of the theatre commander. Nothing has been mentioned of the Brigades themselves. This ambiguity seems deliberate in one's own opinion, and further analysis of future PLAN-MC deployments may be needed to confirm the same.

None of the brigades transferred to the Navy were amphibious brigades and that the PLA Ground Forces continue to operate amphibious brigades. This suggests that the Central Military Commission is not looking for an immediate short-term benefit but is willing to play the long game. After all, it will take time for these units to be re-trained and re-equipped, and will probably take a few years till these units develop SOPs and unit cultures etc. and become fully operational.

⁴ Blasko & Lee (2019), The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganisation, China Brief, Volume 19 Issue 3, Jamestown Foundation <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/> Accessed 21 April 2022

⁵ Blasko & Lee (2019), The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 2: Chain-Of-Command Reforms and Evolving Training, China Brief, Volume 19 Issue 4, Jamestown Foundation <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-2-chain-of-command-reforms-and-evolving-training/> Accessed 21 April 2022

The new Marine SOF Brigade is based on the PLA Navy's SOF Regiment (Jialong), which would probably be upgraded to a brigade with the addition of SOF elements from the pre-existing Marine brigades. The Marine Aviation Brigade seems to exist more on paper than in reality, as a standard Aviation Brigade in the PLA consists of around 70-80 helicopters, and the PLA Navy also lacks experience in using Attack helicopters, which would form a crucial part in a Marine Aviation Brigade. This Marine Aviation Brigade would draw on Elements from the Navy's 3 Aviation Regiments and would take a few years to get to full strength of both Transport and Attack helicopters and to use them enough to develop doctrine and SOPs for them.

Exercises and Deployments

Initially, the PLAN MC was focused on the reefs and islands in the South China Sea, and their training and exercises were reflective of the same. Marines mostly conducted independent exercises with limited Navy support, with no participation in multi-service exercises. PLAN Marines conducted their first foreign exercises with Russia in 2005, after which they started engaging in more exercises with other countries such as the US.

China's Gulf of Aden Counterpiracy mission has been extremely useful for the PLA Navy it can be attributed as the single most important factor in helping the PLAN from transitioning to a Blue-Water navy. The PLAN Marine Corps has also been active in this regard, sending contingents on these ships and even taking part in actions against pirates.

2014 marked a huge change for the PLAN-MC as they took their first steps in the direction of developing expeditionary capabilities. The PLAN-MC conducted winter training exercises in Inner Mongolia. This was also succeeded by other exercises including desert, forest, plateau and mountain warfare, far from the Tropical and Island terrain the PLAN-MC traditionally operated in⁶.

⁶ Lin, Ying Yu (2020), New Wine Into New Wineskins: The Evolving Role of the PLA Navy Marine Corps in Amphibious Warfare and Other Mission Areas, China Brief, Volume 20 Issue 2, Jamestown Foundation <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/> Accessed 21 April 2022

Of particular interest is the fact that China's first overseas base at Djibouti is garrisoned by the PLAN-MC. The PLAN-MC thus is expected to secure not only the base itself but could be asked to secure Chinese interests in the region. The PLAN-MC also faces a unique challenge when it comes to operational deployments. Unlike the other arms, the PLAN-MC is expected to conduct operations far from home. This means that it cannot rely on support systems and mechanisms available to other arms posted in the Chinese Mainland. Thus, the PLAN-MC must develop capabilities to be able to operate independently and to be mobile and light.

PLAN-MC vs PLAGF Amphibious Units: The Taiwan Scenario

As mentioned earlier, the PLAGF continues to maintain its amphibious units even in the face of a marine expansion. This begs the question as to why these amphibious units were not simply transferred to the PLAN-MC, as was expected by most analysts, and was considered the most logical step.

Here the differences between these units must be brought out. These units are intended for different purposes, and as such focus on different areas. The PLAN-MC is being formed as an expeditionary force, expected to fulfil a wide variety of tasks and operate in a huge range of terrains, thus needing to be the most flexible of all the arms of the PLA. The PLAGF Amphibious Brigades, on the other hand, are made for one task only, which is an amphibious invasion of Taiwan.

This has led to the PLAN-MC focusing mostly on mobility and freedom of action, therefore having relatively light equipment and undertaking unconventional operations, whereas the PLAGF amphibious units have been equipped with more heavy equipment, to launch a large-scale assault into Taiwan and secure ground.

In the scenario of a Taiwan invasion, it is the PLAGF Amphibious Units that would take the main role, with the PLAN-MC playing mostly a secondary role. The PLAN-MC, with its lighter equipment, and focus on mobility, will first land on multiple points along the coast. The Marines are to then consolidate and form a secure Bridgehead. Once a Bridgehead has been secured, operations are then to be handed over to the PLAGF, who would then launch an assault through

Taiwanese lines and carry out most of the fighting. Meanwhile, the PLAN-MC would then focus on unconventional warfare, hitting the enemy's command and control structures and critical infrastructure, causing general chaos to further help the Chinese offensive⁷.

Conclusion

China has up until recent times, had enough on its plate and has not felt confident enough of venturing outside its immediate neighbourhood. However, propelled by its meteoric economic rise and growth in influence around the world, China has become more confident and assertive. China has Launched an ambitious Military Modernisation Program to fully modernize its capabilities by 2035 and make a world-class military at par with the US by 2049, according to what Xi Jinping has called as 'The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation'.

As mentioned earlier, the path that China has taken to bolster the PLAN-MC is a long-term method with no immediate gains. This is in keeping with the above-mentioned goals, and China has no intention of rushing things. Thus, post-2035, one can expect to see greater activeness from the PLAN-MC, when it should be operationally ready, and by when China should be overall more confident in its military might and would be more willing to use force to secure its claims. The Russian Fiasco in Ukraine would also serve as an added reason for China to be patient and wait for its military to mature in the wake of the 2016 reforms.

As of now, the PLAN-MC is still in its infancy as a result of years of neglect. However, increased focus on the maritime sphere has given the PLAN-MC a huge boost. Thus, the PLAN-MC serves as a classic example of how the PLA is modernizing both its equipment and expertise to play a key role in securing Chinese overseas interests. After all, the Chinese will have to flex their muscles outward if they want to compete with the Americans. The PLAN-MC is just the tool for the job.

⁷ Gill, Mehul S. (2022), The Chinese Revolution in Military Affairs: Implications for India, Issue Brief, Centre for Security Studies, O.P Jindal Global University https://www.cssjsia.com/files/ugd/348fae_4ae1c1bab0704372a976f0689eeeb3e7.pdf Accessed 21 April 2022

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