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Issue Brief

PLA Western Theatre Command Lays Stress on Joint Operations Capabilities

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S*ummary*

The PLA Western Theatre Command (WTC) military exercises highlight their efforts at integrating information command between services, to enhance the capabilities of different operational and support units to achieve assault options. The PLA's army aviation units are being increasingly used to conduct operations near the border areas. There is an increased emphasis on short and targeted operations by the WTC alongside defensive tactics such as air defence, early warning and reconnaissance.

The PLA Western Theatre Command (WTC) has been conducting military exercises that show a marked preference for enhancing joint operations capability. Through joint training exercises, the PLA intends to increase combat capability of its operational units, especially of Special Forces. In addition, the WTC believes that air superiority is needed to win wars in its theatre and therefore gives it a special preference with respect to integration operations. As a result, increased air combat capability, including defensive capabilities such as early warning, air defence and reconnaissance, has strengthened the WTC's ability to conduct joint operations as the information system of various services and units are now integrated. Overall, these efforts aim to increase the PLA's capability to conduct assault operations.

Joint Operations and Air Superiority

One of the drawbacks in the PLA WTC was the lack of air superiority when facing the Indian forces. After military reforms were implemented in 2015, the theatre commands were tasked to develop joint capability according to the actual combat conditions that they faced in the theatre, taking into account the adversary's military strength. The PLA in the 2015 military reforms gave emphasis to achieve an effective air capability. Assessments of the PLA's strength would have made it clear that they did not have air superiority in the WTC. In the Chinese parlance, air superiority is not just about offensive capability but also includes air defences, early warning and reconnaissance capabilities. To achieve air superiority, joint integrated capabilities, in their view, were the way forward.

Since the PLA reforms in 2015, the theatre commands have implemented joint operational command that can reduce the time required to communicate orders to the troops. In terms of combat training, the theatre commands, especially the WTC, focused on integrated joint operations capability to improve the perceived disadvantages it felt against the Indian military forces. Not only do the forces have to cover a large border area, but the terrain is very hostile to the equipment and physical health of the troops. In addition, the air capability of the adversary in the PLA's mind made it difficult to have complete dominance in the theatre.

As a result, integrated training in the WTC was to focus on capabilities that can help in sharing the capabilities of the military services with one another, which can improve joint combat capabilities. For instance, maintaining air superiority in the plateau conditions would mean that along with air strike capabilities, the PLA would have to develop reconnaissance and early warning capabilities as well. The PLA understood that air superiority was not just about having the fire power, but about battlefield awareness of the situation, early warning of the adversary's strikes, and air defences to protect its military assets.

However, defensive capabilities such as air defences, early warning, and reconnaissance capabilities of the PLA Army were deemed inadequate against the

Indian military forces to establish air superiority. One of the ways the PLA has attempted to counter it was for the PLA Army and the Air force to share command chain, which can facilitate the PLA Army units to have early warning data from the Air Force. For instance, the WTC integrated more than 10 air defence units of the PLA Army into the command chain of the PLA Air Force.¹

The integration of air defences is helpful because the PLA Army can get access to the Air Force’s battlefield information system, paving the way for a more flexible deployment of army aviation units. For instance, such integrated joint combat capabilities (一体化联合作战能力) makes it possible for the two services to share one network system, where any army commander can have access to the air force command and vice versa. By gaining the information capabilities of the Air Force, the PLA Army would be able to conduct early strike as the Air Force air defence forces have a large coverage area and can give early warning data.² On the other hand, the PLA Air Force gains more accurate reading from the Army’s air defence network.

The WTC can then organise the ground defence, radar, and communications in front line combat, work with army commanders to tackle the many issues arising out of integrating joint capabilities and formulate common standards for the troops. The integration of the radar capabilities has also helped the PLA optimise its fire power capability. For instance, simulations in exercises showed that the electromagnetic interference of the adversary’s aircraft affected combat capability. Once the integration of the air defence force was done, the integration of the units ensured that battlefield awareness can be achieved between different units.³ In other words, early warning data of the PLA Air Force would be able to contribute to the PLA Army decision to operate its combat units accordingly.

Special Forces in Joint Operations

The WTC’s joint operations between the PLA Army and PLA Air Force, while enhancing their air capabilities, has aided the use of Special Forces to improve their joint strike capabilities. For instance, in one of the exercises conducted in January 2019 , the 62nd combined arms brigade conducted joint operations, where various units in the WTC were involved, including the SF brigade, army aviation units and support units directly affiliated to the theatre (SSFs) to showcase their joint strike capabilities. In this particular exercise, the Reconnaissance Battalion of the Special Forces Brigade of the 76th Group Army entered in advance and used information

¹ Yang Jin and Yang Songsong, “**The PLA Western Theatre Command Air Force Focus on War Preparations and Exploring the Construction of Joint Air Defence System**” (西部战区空军聚焦备战打仗探索构建联合防空体系), *The PLA Daily*, 27 April 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Tang Bin, Xue Hao and others, “**From Target Shooting to Fighting Wars, How Far is it to Achieve?**” (从“打靶”到“打仗”，到底有多远?), *Corps Studies*, 2 March 2019.

system, which the PLA considers similar to the Joint Fire Support System (JFSS) JASMINE system, to ascertain the adversary’s forward position, thereby increasing the situational awareness of the unit.⁴

Typically, the units are supposed to call for air-to-ground strikes from the Air Force, as in the case with the US. However, the PLA Air Force does not have the capability to execute heavy air-to-ground strikes, and as a result, the task is left to the artillery units of the PLA Army. The Joint Staff Department of the WTC played a major role in establishing the integrated network information for the troops which would enable the sharing and fusion of information relating to troops, weapons and equipment in the command system.⁵

The SF battalion is supposed to identify the enemy’s command post, artillery positions, communication hubs in the exercises, and tanks are marked to do the strikes. The 62 Combined Arms Brigade Armoured Forces conducts the strike campaign. In addition, the 76th brigade reconnaissance battalion is equipped to attack behind enemy lines and uses rotor-craft for movement. With the help of these battalions, once the battlefield environment is clear, then joint operations by Special Forces unit and Combined Arms brigade unit carries out attack behind enemy lines, with the help of rotorcrafts from the Army aviation units. The objective of these exercises also reveal that the PLA intends to suppress the fire power of the adversary in the WTC within 150 kilometres from the Chinese border, which meant using the 99A tanks and ZBB-o4A tracked infantry fighting vehicle combined with fire strike units of other services.⁶ Moreover, the Special Forces are needed if the PLA has to take control of mountain heights as evidenced by their exercises at the Karakoram Pass in March 2022.

In addition, helicopters are now increasingly used in exercises to familiarise with uneven and dangerous terrains, as well as carry out operations during day and night time, including complex meteorological flights, equipped with over-the-horizon capabilities. These joint operations further involve the Special Forces so that it can aid in carrying out short and sophisticated offensive attacks in the border regions. For instance, in one of the exercises in September 2022, the PLA WTC used its army aviation helicopters to transfer weapons and ammunition, where the Special Forces

⁴ Wang Shichun, “**Western Theatre Command Army: Find the Problem Shorten the Winning Gap**” (西部战区陆军：问题查摆到底 缩短打赢差距), GuanCha Zhewang, 16 January 2019. The JFSS Jasmine seems to be in use by the Polish Armed Forces. See “**JASMINE System with Air Platforms Support**”, Defence24, 24 May 2019.

⁵ Wang Daobin, “**Let ‘Thousands of Troops and Ten Thousand Horses’ Connect, Call and See Anytime**” (王道彬：让“千军万马”随时联得通、叫得应、看得见), *Science and Technology Daily*, 9 September 2022.

⁶ Note 4.

guided fire strikes based on the information available to them.⁷ The Special Forces units are sent to artillery, army aviation and many other units to gain tactical understanding of the units and equipment. The goal of these joint operation was to counter the WTC’s low-degree of mechanisation and outdated equipment, apart from the lack of a common data link.

Data Link Technologies in Joint Operations

In China’s view, the data link is the most important technology in joint operations. It can link information between different combat units to different combat systems, leading it to increase the perception and transparency of the battlefield. The data link can integrate sensors of the space, air, sea, and land to improve the perception of the battlefield, and improve joint capability by shortening decision times. This helps to coordinate joint operations, and provides joint commanders various battlefield information quickly.⁸

The data link between services has emerged as a game-changer in the WTC. So far, it has introduced faster communication between the various units of the WTC. However, it is unclear to what extent, the PLA is able to achieve the common data link between all the operational units in the WTC. The joint operations according to the PLA’s understanding relies on having the integrated circuit technology, which assimilates different data into the system, whether it is to prepare the training exercises or actual combat. It requires the command to incorporate various facets of the terrain from weather information, to the troop location, to the command integration, which should ensure seamless communication and coordination between the units. The joint commanders should be able to access a variety of such information in their command area so that they can plan their defensive and offensive tactics according to the needs of the situation.

There are challenges to the WTC’s joint operations. First, the health of the Air Forces officers is of huge concern, especially pertaining to orthopaedic diseases.⁹ The high-altitude plateaus put high strain on the soldiers and the PLA has to give high-quality

⁷ Cheng Ye and Wang Yukai, “**A Brigade of the Army in the Western Theatre Command Joins Forces with Multiple Arms Units**” (西部战区陆军某旅携手多支兵种部队), *The PLA Daily*, 6 September 2022.

⁸ “**Data Links: The Glue of Joint Forces Capability**”, (数据链：联合作战力量“粘合剂”), State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense, 29 September 2013.

⁹ Tan Zhenwei and others, “**Analysis and Prevention Strategies of Orthopaedic Diseases Among Officers and Soldiers of the Air Force in the Western Theatre Command**” (西部战区空军部队官兵骨科疾病巡诊情况分析 and 防治策略), *Xinan National Defense Medicine*, 2019 (8). Also see, “**Coordinate High-Quality Medical Resources to Serve Frontier Officers and Soldiers in the WTC**”, (西部战区统筹优质医疗资源服务戍边官兵), *PLA Daily*, 11 February 2022.

medical treatment to maintain the health of the soldiers. When the PLA was shifting its training from the plains to the plateau regions to expose the soldiers to actual combat conditions, the climatic conditions had a “great impact” on the physical and mental health of the soldiers.¹⁰ The PLA now believes that it has made adjustments to cope with the weather.

Secondly, battlefield awareness is key to winning the war and the PLA has made strides in integrating some aspects of the command structure of the PLA Army and Air Force. However, the PLA still lacks a comprehensive and integrated air domain awareness in the WTC against the Indian military forces. The Chinese version of the common data link system as the JASMINE system is not fully matured. In fact, the Chinese analysis points out that the Russian military lacks integrated command system, which is reducing the battlefield awareness and does not have the capacity to conduct joint fires strike operations in military operations in Ukraine which reduces their ability to conduct large-scale precision strikes. Therefore, in the PLA’s view, integration of combat units, weapon capabilities and joint training would invariably multiply the ability to maintain air superiority as well as conduct joint operations that are lethal and quick.

Conclusion

The PLA has been used to exercising in the plains but not in the plateau regions. Ever since the reforms in 2015, the PLA’s training exercises in the plateau regions have increased and has led to the improvement in their capabilities as it exposed many of their fault lines. The lessons learnt from the 2020 military standoff would inevitably be applied to the PLA’s combat training and more probing of the Indian defences would be incorporated to their battlefield capability. The integrated joint training shows a focus on achieving eyes on the air domain, with the aim of aiding the PLA’s capability to use joint strike capabilities against the adversary. The PLA believes that modern wars are fought with joint fire strike system and their army aviation units are being increasingly used to conduct operations near the border areas. There is an increased emphasis on short and targeted operations by the WTC alongside defensive tactics such as air defence, early warning and reconnaissance. Such capabilities are set to increase as the PLA will increasingly use 5G networks and AI capabilities in the WTC.

¹⁰ Note 3.

About the Author



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