



CLAWS

An Appraisal of PLA Exercises: Integration and Jointmanship

■ SM Singh

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is in the process of graduating to training for combat at the operational level. In 2009, the PLA conducted three major military exercises: Stride (*Kauayue*) 2009, Airborne Movement (*Kingjiang Jidong*) 2009 and Vanguard (*Qianfeng*) 2009. Participation by forces of such magnitude was last witnessed in 2003. Training in the PLA has become the keystone of reformation or renaissance from the age-old war strategy of People's War to an era of high-technology warfare with modern Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (C4I2SR) systems and Rapid Reaction Forces.

China has learnt lessons from the two Gulf Wars and evolved a doctrine which is under evaluation, validation and review as part of the overall War Zone Campaign philosophy. The aim of the PLA exercises has essentially been to practice mobilisation, effect integration, familiarisation with New Generation Equipment (NGE) as well as practicing concepts, drills and procedures of the respective Services to achieve better synergy. However, exercises related to the employment of air defence, special engineering tasks and artillery were conspicuously missing. The aspects incorporated in the recent exercises were:

- Integration of Arms and Services.
- Practice of Joint Command System.

- Utilisation of civil assets in the planning and conduct of PLA operations.
- Training under informationisation conditions.

Stride (*Kauayue*) 2009 – 01 October to 18 October 2009

Troops from various Military Regions (MR) participated in Stride 2009. Inter-MR moves were practiced during the course of the exercise. However, there is a need to examine how much warning period and preparation time was provided prior to mobilisation. The quantum of military wherewithal and sustainability, including logistics and engineering support, needs to be examined. For example, if 50 percent of armoured vehicles participated, what could have been the reasons? How much track mileage was permitted? What was the performance in the high altitude region, in terms of mobility, target acquisition, engine and weapon system performance including fuel consumption? While the infrastructure, including rails and roads, suggests that a military build-up by China can be effected in three-four days from the time of mobilisation to a point of decision, it needs to be understood that mobilisation is merely a preliminary action for intended operation(s). Training/exercises in a specified period of time may not be an indication of a nation's ability in realistic

No. 21, August 2010

terms, including the familiarisation of troops with NGE and the readiness of the military. The ruggedness and sustenance of performance needs to be factored in while analysing the capability parameters of the armed forces and equipment.

At a macro level, there may be satisfaction and a sense of achievement for the armed forces of China. However, when such activities are practised on the ground, micro issues like tactical drills generate voids which may possibly affect the troops' safety and the outcome of operations, if not adequately addressed.

Mobilisation is a part of the overall scheme, prior to the conduct or launch of operations. Therefore, the ability of the PLA to mobilise from permanent locations by air, rail or road or to carry out trans-MR or trans-regional movement needs to be examined. Are sufficient resources available for trans-regional movement within the respective MR? How much time would be required to muster the requisite resources? Will the PLA be able to meet the time-lines? Combat stress and fatigue involved in such a move during conditions of war need to be given due consideration. Only when answers to all these questions are available, can a realistic assessment of their capabilities be made.

The mobilisation of 50,000 troops from the 1st Division of the 21st Group Army (GA), 162nd Motorised Infantry Division, 54th Mountain Infantry Division from reserve formations, 115th Mechanised Infantry Division of the 39th GA and 121st Motorised Infantry Division of the 41st GA was conducted over two months, allocating two weeks of mobilisation to each formation. This suggests that the movement of large-size forces, besides the preparation and mustering of

resources, will take time and, therefore, can serve as an indicator of likely intent. Post-mobilisation, an exercise was conducted over five days, in which deployment and manoeuvre-cum-force-on-force exercises, followed by live firing, was carried out.

While the 'Dragon' may be breathing fire at a macro level, there appears to be a growing gap between the soldiers on the ground and higher politico-military leadership. The combined exercise of the 162nd Motorised Division and 61st Division by forming battle groups is suggestive of force integration to achieve synergy in force application and swift movement to achieve success. Since there seems to be a preponderance of resources in terms of artillery, equipment and other military stores, the concept of battle groups will facilitate independent lines of operations. Thus, it minimises the hierarchical echelons, making the military organisation flatter, with a view to aid the quick passage of information from both sides.

The employment of the Air Force in the movement of troops was essentially done for command and control elements. This would imply that adequate time will be available to command and control elements for reconnaissance, planning and establishment of communication so that a minimum amount of time is spent on the application of troops arriving in the area of operation(s). The independent movement of military equipment and men is an advancement in mobilisation concepts. However, sufficient testing needs to be carried out for movement of equipment in actual operations from their staging areas, in planned time and space for it to be a viable initiative.

The PLA is well aware of the limitations and capabilities of its Air Force (PLAAF). Rehearsals with reference to air strikes and chemical attacks were also conducted during this exercise. There is an expectation of the employment of chemical weapon system(s) in the overall operational philosophy of the PLA, which would probably be the reason for troops to practice anti-chemical weapons drills.

During Stride 2009, the forces were deployed along roadside(s), which could be suggestive of limited

While the 'Dragon' may be breathing fire at the macro level, there appears to be a growing gap between the soldiers on ground and higher politico-military leadership.

camping areas (vulnerability to air attacks) or lack of ‘operational adaptation’ to deploy, duly dispersed and camouflaged. Such aspects merit attention in view of military discipline and military leadership at the operational and tactical levels.

Airborne Movement (*Kingjiang Jidong*) 2009 – 18 October to 06 November 2009

Conceptually, this appears to be a mobilisation exercise for the 15th Airborne Corps conducted in eastern China (Guangzhou and Nanjing provinces). However, it is pertinent to mention that none of the formations which participated are on the initial Order of Battle (ORBAT) of the Airborne Corps. The exercise could have been meant for the Corps Staff to practice the nuances of mobilisation or experimenting grouping and regrouping of formations under the 15th Airborne Corps. The four divisions involved in the exercise, which moved independently of each other were:

- 61st Division of the 21st GA (Lanzhou MR) moved to Shenyang MR – Taonan Combined Arms Training Base (CATB).
- 162nd Motorised Infantry Division of the 54th GA (Jinan MR) travelled to the Guangzhou MR – Luzhai CATB.
- 115th Mechanised Infantry Division of the 39th GA (Shenyang MR) moved to Lanzhou MR – Qingtongxia CATB.
- 121st Motorised Infantry Division of the 41st GA moved to the Jinan MR Queshan – CATB.

The time taken for movement and conduct suggests that in two to three days, not including the time spent on preliminary or preparatory activities, a division-size force can reach the intended area of operations. Practicing forces in movement and live fire exercises indicate the units’ capabilities in terms of familiarity with equipment, its performance and procedures in the conduct of task(s) in quantifiable terms. However, the same may not be construed as operational capability.

The exercise was the first in the series planned for joint operations under a GA. This was on the basis of doctrinal concepts practiced and evolved during the 2000 and 2006 versions of “The Science Campaigns” (*Zhanyi Xue*).

The redeployment practiced during the exercise is silent on procedures for relief of troops, their logistics and handing over of the ‘Area of Operation’ which is an important facet of military activity. The exercise is also silent on the number of paratroopers who carried out live jumps during both day and night.

Vanguard (*Quanfeng*) 2009 – 21 October to 28 October 2009

The exercise was conducted at the Queshan CATB. The participants were elements of the 15th Airborne Corps composed as a battle group with an armoured brigade of the 20th GA (an all-brigade structure), including the Army Aviation Regiment and aircraft from units in Guangzhou and Jinan MR Air Forces.

The exercise was the first in the series planned for joint operations under a GA. This was on the basis of doctrinal concepts practiced and evolved during the 2000 and 2006 versions of “The Science Campaigns” (*Zhanyi Xue*). Earlier, the training activities were conducted under a MR. However, the exercise was now conducted under a GA, suggesting a delegation of authority, and accordingly, flexibility in employment towards facilitating command and control of forces in execution of task(s) in the field. The delegation of powers over a period of time is also indicative of the degree of deliberation and time taken by (having a younger age profile) the PLA and the Central Military Commission (CMC), and in

upgrading and validating concepts, including before implementing at the field level. It may be prudent to understand that a combined task force does present certain challenges, including:

- Terrain orientation of forces.
- Command and staff mindset at unit, battalion and service-specific levels.
- Mental mobility and adaptability.
- Logistics capabilities.
- Coordination and rehearsal for all kinds of battle situations, including reinforcement, counter-attack, and follow-up echelons linked to time and space.
- A reality check with respect to the sustenance of airborne and heliborne operational capabilities and the ability to link-up with the main force at various altitudes needs to be done in the overall framework of combined task force operations

The 20th GA stationed at Jinan is reportedly a test-bed for the evaluation of operational and tactical concepts which appear to be in their infancy, implying thereby that adequate efforts are being put in to evolve procedures for the training of field forces, addressing mental fixations, and evolving a new-generation modernised military. However, there seems to be a gap in the integration of resources, frequency management and communication security. Maj Gen Xu Jingnian, commander of the 20th GA, also expressed difficulties on issues pertaining to real-time intelligence gathering and data sharing with various branches. Air support from rotary and fixed wing aircraft for ground operations, immediate and pre-planned air support, including

surveillance, close air support, battlefield air interdiction and communications were practiced. However, the efficacy of coordination and integration in the spirit of jointmanship is suspect; in fact, according to Gen Xu, it is at the developmental stage. Aspects related to the logistics of such battle groups appear to have been missed out in the scope of the exercise.

Lessons for the Indian Armed Forces

The reasons which have compelled China to reduce its military strength may be the economics of maintaining such large-size forces, an unwieldy organisation, or an adverse age profile of the personnel. However, what is being projected to the outside world is the creation of elite forces with rapid build-up capability. The reduction is only in ground forces and not in the PLAAF and PLA Navy (PLAN). China's projection of the reduction of forces, with a transformation in its military philosophy, i.e. changed focus from People's War to Technology War could imply the application of precision systems for lethal surgical strikes and swift manoeuvres, in an attempt to target the enemy's centre of gravity (mind and resource denial), as well as the rejuvenation of combat units.

India should build up its armed forces with the ability to counter Sino-Pak capabilities, and shoulder regional and international responsibilities. To that intent, the following steps are recommended:

- Build the ability to expeditiously mobilise forces, including inter-corps and inter-command i.e. inter/intra theatre movement of troops, equipment and stores by air, rail and road.
- Maintain a high state of readiness by suitably deploying forces in potential areas for timely application.
- Upgrade and create the required infrastructure in a time-bound manner including rail-road communication systems, as also habitation facilities, by involving the private sector in remote areas.
- Modernise and equip forces, including making up the manpower deficiency, surveillance capability, command and control facilities.

China's projection of the reduction of forces, with a transformation in its military philosophy, could imply the application of precision systems for lethal surgical strikes and swift maneuvers.

- Practice jointmanship in the spirit of fighting a coordinated battle in a cohesive and integrated manner.
- Replace and phase out obsolete equipment.
- Training through exercises involving the politico-military-bureaucratic leadership. Public-private partnerships need to be strengthened and made more meaningful.
- Evolve and practice the 'Battle Group Concept' with rapid reaction capability.
- Suitable defence budget allocations and following the 'Fast Track Procedure' for procurement in actuality and without biases.

- Practice the concept of integration of the national and state security apparatus.
- Developing and practicing 'opinion shaping' or 'perception management' at the national, regional and trans-regional levels.

Conclusion

While the PLA is working towards speedy mobilisation, the creation of modular elite forces, introduction of NGE and training of a new-generation of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) cadre, who are better qualified in terms of education and specialisation, it may be prudent to examine the man-machine performance under field conditions, problems of leadership, and validation of jointmanship.

The exercises discussed suggest that the movement of troops in composite

battle groups is being actively practiced. However, the efficacy of such exercises at the tactical level needs further analysis. The utilisation of civilian assets, i.e. outsourcing of logistics for mobilisation, movement and sustenance of large-size forces are responsibilities generally given to the administration, but routing them through military regional commanders may be beneficial in a quick build-up. The PLA has also started giving compensation to the locals for damages, a step which is indicative of a change in policy and attitude towards the public in China.

The modernisation of forces and a reduction in manpower is suggestive of developing the ability to rapidly build-up forces, implying thereby that in the future, the need for large-size standing forces may not exist. According to Maj Gen Wang Xixin, the commander of the 38th GA, in the present-day environment, while the PLA's mobilisation capability has achieved satisfactory standards, the modernisation is not commensurate with the demands of situational dynamics and changing paradigms of security, for which trained and qualified troops and NGE are a necessity. However, the endeavour is being made by the PLA to match up to the operational and situational requirements of the armies of the Western countries.



Brig SM Singh served with distinction as Senior Fellow, CLAWS, from November 2008 to October 2009. He passed away on 15 August 2010 while in command of 24 Mountain Brigade. A rare scholar-warrior, he made an immense contribution to CLAWS in a short span of time. His untimely demise is a great loss for the CLAWS fraternity.



Research findings are disseminated through the Centre's publications: CLAWS Journal, Issue Briefs, Manekshaw Papers, Monographs, Books and Website. The research faculty of CLAWS comprises a balanced mix of serving military officers and civilian scholars. CLAWS publications include the following:

Books

- **The Unmaking of Nepal** Rs.375
R S N Singh
- **India's War on Terror** Rs.680
Gurmeet Kanwal and N Manoharan (eds.)
- **Chinese WMD Proliferation in Asia: US Response** Rs.680
Monika Chansoria
- **The Bridge on the River Meghna Dash to Dhaka, Bangladesh Liberation War 1971** Rs.680
Ashok Kalyan Verma
- **Net-Centric Warfare** Rs.620
Vijay Oberoi (ed.)
- **Army Aviation 2025** Rs.460
Vijay Oberoi (ed.)
- **Special Forces: Doctrine, Structures and Employment Across the Spectrum of Conflict in the India Context** Rs.620
Vijay Oberoi (ed.)
- **Army 2020: Shape, Size, Structure and General Doctrine for Emerging Challenges** Rs.620
Vijay Oberoi (ed.)

Monographs

- **Human Rights and Armed Forces in Low Intensity Conflicts** Rs.225
K S Sheoran
- **Assam: Terrorism and the Demographic Challenge** Rs.195
Anil Bhat

Manekshaw Papers

Rs.90 per copy

- The Tibetan Diaspora in India and their Quest for the Autonomy of Tibet
- National Strategy for Cyberspace Security
- Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won

- Jammu and Kashmir: The Emerging Contours and the Way Ahead
- 'Informationising' Warfare: China Unleashes the Cyber and Space Domain
- Understanding the Indian Mujahideen
- Changing Nature of Conflict: Trends and Responses
- Militancy and the Pakistan Army
- The Emerging Balance of Power in Asia: Conflict or Cooperation
- India's Missile Defence Programme: Threat Perceptions and Technological Evolution
- Winning Hearts and Minds: Lessons from Jammu and Kashmir
- Sri Lanka: The Last Phase in Eelam War IV - From Chundikulam to Pudumattalan
- Principles of War: Time for Rethink
- Why India, Why Not Pakistan? Reflections on South Asian Military Politics
- India's Strategic Culture: The Impact of Geography
- Left Wing Extremism in India: Context, Implications and Response Options
- Insurgency in the FATA & NWFP: Challenges and Prospects for the Pakistan Army
- The Rising Tide of Left Wing Extremism in India and Implications for National Security
- Iran's Nuclear Quagmire: Trends and Challenges
- Trends in Pakistan's Defence Spending
- Armed Forces in Disaster Management
- The Al Qaeda in India
- Indo-US Strategic Convergence: An Overview of Defence and Military Cooperation
- The Impact of Geo-politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan: A Medium-Term Perspective

CLAWS Journal

It is a bi-annual flagship publication of the Centre. Launched in 2007, the Journal carries high quality original articles by serving and retired members of the armed forces and civilian scholars. Contents fall under three major categories: commentaries on topical issues, research articles and book reviews. The Journal will be published as a quarterly in the near future.