

THE COVID19 AND ITS IMPACT ON CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION

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ABSTRACT

While China is actively pursuing its military technology development program in achieving the concept of "mechanized, informatized, and intelligentized", the Covid19 epidemic has hit worldwide. This highly contagious Covid19 outbreak has caused a very large number of deaths among the Chinese population as well as populations around the world. As a result of the Covid19 outbreak, many areas have been severely affected, including the economic field, affecting development programs in various fields. The Chinese government has had to reduce its expenditure allocation for the military field, including that which includes the modernization program of military technology. Although the Chinese government has undertaken various strategies in curbing the spread of Covid19 in the country, the epidemic remains a major threat to national security. This study analyses what Covid19 has had an impact on China's military modernization program from 2020 to 2021. The researcher uses qualitative methods and the results of the study found that Covid19 has impacted China's military modernization program from 2020 to 2021. China's vision to become a world class military power by 2049 will still have to deal with various unforeseen obstacles such as the threat of the Covid19 pandemic which is likely to be an ongoing issue for the next few years.

Keywords: Covid19; China's military modernization; the year 2020 to 2021; global military power in 2049.

INTRODUCTION

Covid19 has first been detected occurring in the Huanan seafood wholesale market in China's Wuhan province. When first detected, the virus infected almost 70% of visitors and traders in the market. Symptoms of infection are such as severe fever, cough, lethargy and a disturbed digestive system causing pneumonia. There are patients who die after a few days of getting the infection because the Covid19 virus has invaded the human respiratory system and has a critical impact on the function of internal organs such as the lungs, waist, liver and heart. The Huanan wholesale market remained closed but the virus had spread to most of China and began to be detected in foreign countries in January 2020. Among the foreign countries that began to detect the presence of the covid19 virus were Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Germany, the United States, Malaysia and Singapore.

The local government in Wuhan took the approach by conducting a lockdown on January 23, 2020 to reduce the risk of the spread of the virus. After Wuhan, other counties in China also followed the Wuhan Step by creating a large-scale lockdown order. The lockdown method was successful because the Chinese government managed to reduce the risk of virus

spread among the local population and could even reduce the risk of import cases. However, the worldwide Covid19 virus infection and the increasing number of critical patients and deaths caused the WHO to declare Covid19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. As of May 2020, a total of 2,361,998 confirmed infections and 272,094 deaths were reported worldwide (Fan Lin et al , 2020).

In China, after the lockdown was implemented, it has affected daily activities including economic and PLA development activities such as aspects of military training. Although China undertook military modernization activities during the lockdown period, the modernization program received impact as a result of financial factors impacting the affected economy.

Therefore, this paper examines the impact of Covid19 on PLA's modernization in 2020 and 2021. The paper further analyzes the PLA modernization strategy since the previous year. The discussion is divided into two parts: (a) PLA modernization in the previous year; (b) the impact of Covid19 on PLA modernization in 2020 and 2021.

This research used a secondary data collection method consisting of official reports from websites, newspaper writings and journals.

It is found that since Covid19 in 2020 and 2021, the study found that Covid19 has had an impact on the PLA modernization program which resulted in affected PLA military training, defence spending and military industrial.

However, this paper suggests that in order for the PLA increase to the highest capability and become a world class army, the Chinese government must always be prepared for any unforeseen threats such as a pandemic that could cripple the national security at a time when China is increasingly dominating the economic aspects and influence globally today.

CHINA MILITARY STRATEGY

Referring to the definition of 'strategy' by the PLA, it means military planning and guidance such as the planning, implementation and development of military power to achieve political goals (Fravel, 2005). There are several scopes emphasized by the PLA to ensure that military strategy can be achieved at a high level. The scopes are the type of threat, the goals and objectives of the strategy, the direction and methods of the strategy and the coordination of the military struggle. In addition, military strategy is an important component as a tool to

achieve political interests in addition to being considered a symbol of national interests. China's military strategy guidelines or in Chinese as *junshi zhanlve fangzhen* was first formed after Mao Zedong founded the republic of China in 1945. The PLA's military strategy which has been used from 1945 until the 21st century emphasizes the concept of active defense and is clearly found in White Paper (White Paper 2010).

The modernization of the PLA has taken place since the era of Mao Zedong's leadership when he himself added the concept of "active attack" and turned the PLA strategy into "active defense, active attack" and also introduced the theme of 'people's war' in the late 1940s to deal with threats from neighbouring countries. like Japan. The theme of 'people's war' was used as an approach to involve the participation of the Chinese people in the war against the enemy especially during the Japanese occupation of China in World War II and the Civil War in China between pro-Mao Zedong groups against the Kuomintang movement. The principles of modernization applied to PLA have gone through various phases in parallel with the latest forms of increasingly complex and volatile security threats at the global level.

The concept of 'people's war' introduced by Mao Zedong was later changed to the concept of 'local war under modern conditions' by Deng Xioping and used by the PLA from 1983 to 1991. During the cold war era, Deng Xioping thought that the possibility of war conflict was very small because foreign countries are more concerned with aspects of national peace and development (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). Deng Xioping considered that China should also focus on economic development and at the same time be vigilant on aspects of national security and defense. The Central Military Commission (CMC) conference held in 1985 provided an opportunity for Deng Xioping to announce the principles of strategic transformation, namely military development in peacetime along with aspects of economic development.

After the Cold War, there was the Gulf War in 1991. The use of modern weapons and technology by the US military and its allies has opened the eyes of the Chinese government's leadership to the latest important changes in the military. Although war will take place abroad, conflicts involving Chinese interests such as the Taiwan issue, the Korean Peninsula issue, and overlapping claims in the South China Sea and in the East China Sea can tarnish China's image when the PLA is unable to retaliate against threats by US troops. and allies. The lack of high -tech elements in China's military needs to be resolved at an immediate rate so that China's national interests that are outside the territory are not threatened. In 1993,

there was an evolution of the PLA when Jiang Zemin announced the latest strategy to be used by the PLA, namely 'local war under high-technology conditions. The idea was sparked by Jiang Zemin after he looked at the use of weapons and high technology by the U.S. military during the Gulf War in 1991 such as long-range missiles, stealth fighter jets, the tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM) and the Conventional Air-Launched Cruise Missile. (CALCM). The success of the U.S. military and allies in defeating Saddam Hussain's troops during the 1991 Gulf War reminded Jiang Zemin that there were still many weaknesses of the PLA in aspects of military technology that needed to be improved so as not to suffer the same fate as the Iraqi army that lost badly in attacks by U.S. troops. In addition, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by NATO and US troops made Chinese leaders aware of the PLA's weakness in facing the military strength of the enemy country.

Changes to China's military strategy guidelines did not stop until 2002. The increasing use of computer systems and information technology knowledge has created significant modernization in various fields including the military. In addition, the influence of computer technology has had a major impact on PLA organizations. In this regard, Chinese leaders argue that it is time for the PLA to combine modern technology with information technology in the military aspect covering land, water and air dimensions. Weapons, communication systems, fighter jets and naval ships have to be operated using computer systems. Information technology has been emphasized by the PLA to continue the viability of the organization starting in 2002 until 2015 (You Ji, 2004). Chinese leaders' awareness of the importance of information technology in military affairs pointed to many weaknesses in the defense system from the 1990s to the early 2000s. In the 1990s, China did not have a complete system that uses the elements of C4ISR namely Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance which is a high-tech system but PLA only relies on the use of low-level and somewhat outdated information technology.

China's position as the second largest economic power globally in 2012 was not enjoyed peacefully. The increasing threat of new forms to national interests was immediately considered a necessity to modernize the elements of the PLA from 'local war under conditions of informatization' to 'winning informationized local war'. The growing conflict especially over issues in the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands is a factor in China focusing its military role on having to dominate the war in the Asia Pacific region to defend the national interests of the Asia Pacific region. In contrast to the military strategy guidelines established in 1993 and 2002, the 2015 military strategy guidelines make it clear that the

scope of national interest is increasing. Chinese leaders are increasingly wary of rising threat issues in the Asia-Pacific region such as U.S. influence, extremist groups in Xinjiang province, the Korean Peninsula conflict, and conflict of overlapping claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. To reduce the weakness of the PLA in the defense aspect of China's interests in the Asia Pacific region, the PLA organization undertook modernization in the combined aspect of the role of the army, navy and air force in military operations. The role of the navy has increased dramatically in 2010 with various changes in military doctrine, namely the Chinese navy has established its task strategy, which is to cover the aspect of 'near up to far sea defense'.

In addition, the PLA also modernized in 2016 when it replaced the military region system with theatre command during Xi Jinping's presidency. Under the administrative authority of the Chinese Military Commission (CMC), the five theatre commands that have been formed will focus on all military operations in their areas that do not involve nuclear war. The military operations mobilized are based on perceptions of threats that are and are likely to exist. For example, Eastern Theatre Command focuses on the threat of Taiwan, Japan issues and overlapping claims in the East China Sea while issues in Xinjiang province, Tibet and the border with India are placed under western theatre command. The concept of theatre command used by the PLA is not new as it was also used by the United States military after the Second World War and India in 2001.

Taking into account factors such as geostrategic, the PLA has undergone modernization from 1949 to the year 2021. US influence on the Taiwan issue is an important agenda of China in shaping the PLA's military strategy in the 21st century.

CHINA MILITARY DÉFENSE SPENDING.

The increase in China's military spending occurred very significantly in 2000 in line with rapid economic development after the Open-Door Policy was introduced by Deng Xiaoping and made China the second-highest country in military spending allocation after the United States. In 2000, the amount allocated for PLA modernization was USD22.93billion and jumped to USD32.14billion in 2002. PLA's focus on modernizing aspects of information technology used by all team branches in PLA contributed to the increase in the value of such expenditures.

China is increasing spending on the military in the 21st century on two main factors. First, the PLA modernization program is very active to achieve the status of the most modern military force by 2027. Xi Jinping in his speech during the National People's Congress on June 1, 2021, the PLA modernization program will focus on aspects of reform, modernization and standardization to achieve the objectives of the country and the PLA to achieve status as a world-class military force in 2049.

Second, the global security situation and competition with the United States is a major agenda for Chinese leaders so that the PLA immediately achieves the quality of modern military forces in the 21st century. Conflict in Taiwan, security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific, conflict in the South China Sea, Australian Cooperation, The UK and the United States in AUKUS and QUAD pose a security threat to China. President Xi Jinping announced the government would not hesitate to allocate large allocations to the field of defense so that the PLA could achieve a modern and strong military force.

From 2010 until the following year, the international community increasingly paid attention to additional aspects of China's spending in the military field. After Xi Jinping was appointed President, he immediately called for modernization to be enhanced in five domains namely land, sea, air, outer space and cyber. The allocation given to the Ministry of Defense is used to purchase UAVs, J-20 fighter jets, Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW & C), battle tanks, guided missile systems, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery systems, and ground-based electronic warfare and combined arms subsystems (Joe, 2020 Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/chinas-military-advancements-in-the-2010s-air-and-ground/>). Subsequently, the PLA has received an increasing total expenditure allocation from 2015 to 2019 of USD214.47billion to USD240billion. Large-scale changes are focused on improving the efficiency of land, sea, air and rocket forces. By 2020, China's total military allocation will be USD178billion and the value will increase to modernize more scope of the PLA organization. Growing security threat factors such as cyber threats, the conflict in the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue and Hong Kong's pro-democracy contributed to the additional spending for PLA modernization.

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID19 ON PLA MODERNIZATION IN 2020 AND 2021.

Covid19 has had an impact on the modernization of the PLA in 2020 and 2021. The impact not only affects aspects of military training, but also the military industry.

The first implication is in the aspect of military training. In 2020, the PLA postponed a series of military exercises to reduce the risk of Covid19 infection and also military personnel was deployed to assist health agencies in the logistical and treatment aspects of patients. Military exercises that were supposed to be conducted in May 2020 at the PLA Zhurihe base in a remote area of Mongolia had to be postponed due to the risk of sending military personnel when the Covid19 pandemic hit the country. Zhurihe base is one of the main training centres for PLA forces and is also the largest military base in Asia. The PLA is targeting this military exercise in Zhurihe in preparation for a confrontation with the United States and NATO in the 21st century.

Initially, the PLA was forced to slow down its military exercises, but later resumed, patrols near Taiwan in response to a visit by a U.S. congressional delegation to the island. The PLA even sent an aircraft carrier group through the Miyako Strait and conducted exercises in the South China Sea as a part of a cross-regional mobilization at a moment when US aircraft carriers and USS Theodore Roosevelt, were in the news for outbreaks onboard. China's Defence Ministry said that The drills in the area of the Taiwan Strait are a necessary measure to safeguard national sovereignty and this joint war preparedness patrol by the Eastern Theater Command was prompted by the seriously incorrect words and actions of relevant countries over the issue of Taiwan and the actions of those advocating the self-governing island's independence (NBC News, 2020).

Secondly, the implication on the defence budget. Although China announced an increase in total military spending in 2020 and 2021, the percentage rate is low compared to 2015 and before. From 2007 to 2015, the expenditure allocation rate was double digit which is between 17%-10%. However, starting in 2016 until 2021, the rate is below the value of 10% which is 7.6% in 2016 and is declining to 6.8% in 2021 (Global Security, 2022). Therefore, studies related to China's total annual military expenditure should be seen in percentage terms in addition to the total value. The total expenditure and these percentage rates are explained in table 1. The lower nominal percentage reduction in 2020 compared to 2019 is due to the economic growth of the country affected as a result of the Covid19 outbreak. The budget for the defense sector was announced in April 2020 while a lockdown was implemented in March 2020 and many economic sectors were ordered closed and residents were instructed not to leave their homes.

Year	USD billion	Rate (%)
2013	114.3	10.7
2014	132	12.2
2015	145	10
2016	146.7	7.6
2017	151	7
2018	175	8.1
2019	177.6	7.5
2020	178	6.6
2021	209	6.8

Table 1: China's Defence Budget

Source: SIPRI, 2013-2021.

Third, the implications for the military industry. Wuhan is a major military industry research center for China. There are 350 research centers and industrial institutes, including 1,700 companies that develop space technology, shipbuilding, biotechnology sector, manufacture military technologies such as satellites, missiles and spacecraft launchers. One of the military assets whose use was delayed was the aircraft carrier type 003 which was supposed to be launched in April 2023. As workers had to be laid off due to concerns over the Covid19 outbreak, the ship had not been completed within the stipulated timeframe. Aircraft carrier type 003 is the third carrier aircraft for the PLA that will assist naval tasks in waters of Chinese interest. Besides that, the diesel-electric submarine (SSK) industry is also affected since Wuhan is the centre for the manufacture of such subs. Current-model Yuan-class (Type-039A) and Song-class (Type-039) SSKs are both constructed at Wuchang Shipbuilding in Wuhan, for the PLA Navy (PLAN) and export. Consequently, the PLA now possesses the largest navy in the world and they need more assets such as submarines and frigate ships. In recent years, the PLAN has acquired six Type-055 cruisers, 23 Type-052D destroyers, 30 Type-054A frigates, 12 nuclear-powered submarines, and 30 modern diesel-electric submarines. The PLAN commissioned its first indigenous aircraft carrier in 2019, with a second carrier entering service in 2023. Moreover, the PLAN operates more than 1250 short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, and over 1000 4th-generation and 5th-generation combat aircraft (Bitzinger, 2020).

CONCLUSION.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the PLA's progress in implementing the various reforms and modernization goals even though during the Covid19 is a challenge for the modernization being fully applied. The PLA also noted progress in increasing its warfighting readiness as they aim to achieve PLA embarks on a quest to modernize its military in the "new era" and strives to achieve its long-term 2035 and 2049 goals to become a world-class army. But the PLA needs to be constantly vigilant against any unforeseen security threats that could affect the PLA's modernization program in the coming year.

Covid19 will remain a threat to health security but despite this challenge, the People's Liberation Army remains active in its military modernization program especially while realizing the United States will always intervene indirectly in issues in Taiwan and the South China Sea conflict.

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