



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 2 | No. 9 | 29 May 2020

PLA Marine Corps Anti-Piracy Exercise in South China Sea

China Launches Large Floating Dock

Poland Updates National Security Strategy

Russia Conducts Military Exercise in the Arctic

US Withdraws from Open Skies Treaty

US Air Force Space Plane Undertakes Sixth Mission

The Artemis Accords and America's 2024 Moon Mission

Iran and Israel Engage in Tit-for-Tat Cyber Attacks

PLA Marine Corps Anti-Piracy Exercise in South China Sea

The People's Liberation Army-Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC) is the newest arm of the Chinese military. Although it was first established in the early 1950s for liberating Taiwan, it was soon disbanded a few years later only to be re-established in 1979. During the last few years, the Corps has been growing rapidly and evolving into an expeditionary force capable of operating farther from Chinese shores. Its strength has nearly tripled in the past three years to 35,000 troops and it has become a more visible presence in the South China Sea. To enable the swift movement of the Corps' troops, China has in recent months launched two Type 075 landing helicopter dock (LHD) vessels, the first in September 2019 and the second in April 2020. These ships displace 40,000 tonnes and are capable of carrying 30 attack and transport helicopters including landing assault craft to facilitate amphibious landings. They will be supported by other amphibious ships like the Type 071 landing helicopter dock and Type 072 landing ship.



PLA Marine Corps conducts parachuting training.
Source: People's Daily Online

On 5 May, the PLANMC undertook an anti-piracy exercise near the Paracel Islands that showed off its capabilities to China's neighbours at a time of rising tensions in the region. The exercise simulated covert amphibious assaults with fast-moving speedboats and naval aviation aircraft, integrating the corps' operations with the People's Liberation Army Navy. The corps is expected to feature in another

military exercise planned in the South China Sea in August 2020. On the latter occasion, it would be simulating an island seizure operation in what has been reported as the culmination of a two-and-a-half-month-long series of drills involving the army, navy, and marines that recently began off China's northern coast.

Taiwan is expected to be monitoring the movement of China's military. Other claimants to the disputed islands in the South China Sea -- Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam -- are also likely to eye these manoeuvres by Chinese amphibious forces with some concern. China watchers believe that the PLANMC is likely to be the "nucleus" for China's armed forces as they operate farther afield including in expeditionary missions.

China Launches Large Floating Dock

Shanghai-based Jiangnan Shipyard launched its first large floating dry dock in mid-May 2020. With a length of 250 metres, width of 60 metres and capacity to carry 32,000 tonnes of cargo, the dry dock will be used to transport ultra-large ship modules, which is likely to accelerate work on China's third aircraft carrier under construction at the same shipyard.



Jiangnan Shipyard. Source: chinapower.csis.org and IDSA

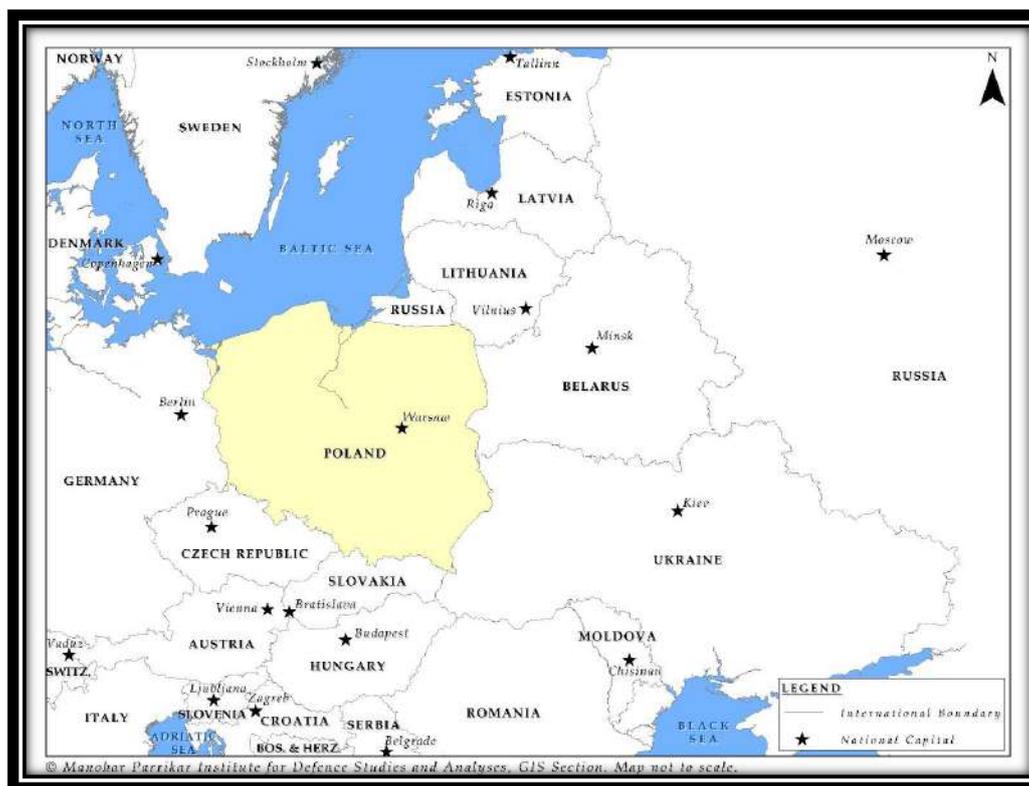
The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) currently operates two aircraft carriers – the *Liaoning*, a 67,500 tonne ex-Soviet carrier commissioned in September 2012, and the *Shandong*, a 70,000 tonne indigenously built carrier commissioned in December 2019. The third aircraft carrier, designated *Type 003*, is reported to have a displacement of 85,000 tons and is set to be launched in the near future at the Jiangnan Shipyard.

The PLA Navy has been the fastest growing navy in the world by far during the last 10 years or so. It saw a dramatic expansion in the period 2005 to 2015, adding close to 100 ships. Continuing to expand, it presently surpassed the US Navy in terms of number of ships. At its present rate of growth, the PLAN is projected to possess a 400-ship navy by 2025 and a 425-ship force by 2030.

In addition to modernising its navy, China has in recent years substantially increased the size of its Coast Guard. The Chinese coast guard is, by far, the largest of any country in East Asia. China also operates a sizeable maritime militia that includes a large number of fishing vessels. China relies primarily on its maritime militia and coast guard to assert and defend its maritime claims in its near-seas region, with the navy operating over the horizon as a potential backup force.

Poland Updates National Security Strategy

On 12 May, President Andrzej Duda approved Poland's new National Security Strategy (NSS), which replaced the previous one that had been adopted in 2014. The strategy redefines the potential threats to Poland's security, including non-traditional challenges, and dwells on the means and methods to combat them. Unsurprisingly, in the present circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, health security has been prioritised.



Notably, the NSS identifies Russia as the ‘most serious threat’ and contends that the Kremlin’s ‘neo-imperial policy’ – an oblique reference to Russian military interventions in Crimea, Georgia and Moldova – has upended Poland’s regional security landscape. Moscow’s asymmetrical hybrid warfare receives particular attention, given the disruption it has been alleged to have caused in Eastern Europe. In order to reduce Poland’s dependence on Russian energy, the new NSS calls for diversifying energy imports.

The European Union and NATO, meanwhile, continue to be the anchors of Poland’s strategic stability. While acknowledging ongoing tensions in the trans-Atlantic partnership, the NSS identifies the presence of NATO forces in Poland and cooperation within the Three Seas initiative as the country’s new security bulwarks.

The NSS also envisions a qualitatively new strategic partnership with the US in the ‘security, technology, trade and energy’ arenas. Interestingly, the strategy

document's call for increasing Poland's defence spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2024 blends in with President Trump's clarion call on NATO members to assume a greater share of the burden of collective defence.

While reflecting the evolving security challenges that Poland faces, the NSS is, however, likely to intensify the Russia-West competition and confrontation in Eastern Europe – a region where Moscow still enjoys escalation dominance.

Russia Conducts Military Exercise in the Arctic

Russia has conducted large scale military exercises in the Arctic. Spread over three days, the highlight of the event was the world's first ever para-jump in the Arctic from an altitude of 10,000 metres. Military analysts have hailed this jump as a 'feat of human endurance' and an 'incredible display of logistics, courage and ingenuity'. The exercises also involved the deployment of *Pantsyr-S1* surface-to-air systems, anti-submarine ships and helicopters.



Russian Paratroopers. Source: TASS

The Arctic's importance can be gauged from its geo-strategic location and abundant natural resources. The opening of the Arctic due to the melt of polar ice throws open the possibility of reorienting global maritime routes. This will not only dilute the significance of existing maritime chokepoints but also increase the relevance of Arctic littoral states. However, the prevalence

of multiple territorial contestations in the Arctic highlights the regional complexities at play.

Today, Russia appears to be driving home the 'first mover' advantage it possesses in having the world's longest Arctic coastline and the largest fleet of nuclear ice breakers to expand its Arctic dominance, anchored in the militarisation of the Far North. At a time when the military is a key instrument of Russia's domestic and foreign policies, particularly in the context of its ongoing confrontation with the West, these military exercises reinforce Russia's Arctic recalibration.

US Withdraws from Open Skies Treaty

On 21 May, the United States announced that it has served a notice of withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, citing Russia's non-compliance with the treaty's provisions. According to the provisions of the 34-member Treaty, a Party wishing

to withdraw should serve a six-month notice, although the notice may also be cancelled before the end of the six-month period. The Trump administration has let it be known that it may cancel the notice of withdrawal if Russia were to resume full compliance with the provisions of the treaty.



Source: US State Department Website
Archive 2009-2017

The United States has been repeatedly highlighting various instances of Russian non-compliance with the treaty since 2005, a mere three years after the treaty came into force. More recently, however, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, charges of Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections, and Russia's assertive actions in the Caucasus, Europe, and West Asia have all led the United States to characterise Russia as a strategic rival. That, in turn, has led the US to lower its threshold of tolerance vis-à-vis Russian actions that

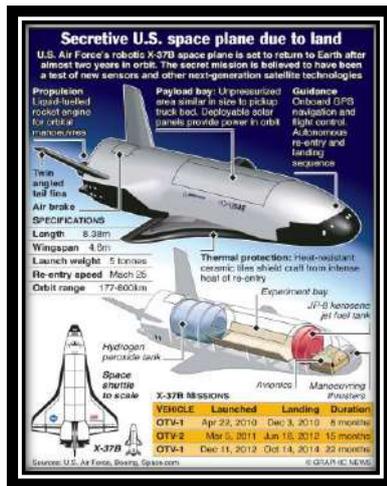
restrict US Open Skies flight operations over Russian territory, including restrictions and limitations on flights over Chechnya, Kaliningrad, and the Georgia border.

While the Trump administration has issued a notice of withdrawal accusing Russia of non-compliance, it is not clear whether that is an excuse for getting rid of another multilateral commitment or an attempt to get the treaty renegotiated to meet America's 21st century interests and requirements. One of the bones of contention with regard to the treaty as it exists is the use of imagery collected during overflight missions. It also appears that the US would like to rope China into the Open Skies Treaty as indicated by Trump.

US Air Force Space Plane Undertakes Sixth Mission

The US Air Force's X-37B space plane began its sixth mission after being launched into orbit aboard an Atlas 5 rocket on 17 May. Dubbed Operational Test Vehicle 6, the space plane's mission included executing several US military and NASA science experiments. Weighing about 11,000 pounds (roughly 5000 kilograms), and standing at nearly 29-foot long and 9.5 feet tall, the X-37B is an autonomous reusable space plane for low Earth orbit and long duration missions lasting up to two years.

Though the specifics of the sixth mission are classified, some details have been made public. These include: experiments related to propulsion technologies (FalconSat-8 developed by the US Air Force Academy), study of radiation and



Source:

engtechmag.wordpress.com

other space effects on materials (NASA), and the use of microwave beams to send solar power to Earth from space (US Naval Research Laboratory).

There is speculation that the X-37B is a space weapon to be used for anti-satellite and counter-anti-satellite operations. However, the X-37B, which autonomously cruises back to Earth, essentially appears to be a reusable spacecraft for conducting long-duration experiments in space and recovering them on return to Earth. The X-37B programme was initiated in 1999, made the first flight in 2010 and has completed five missions so far, spending a total of 2,865 days in orbit.

The Artemis Accords and America's 2024 Moon Mission

On 15 May, NASA unveiled a list of ten principles – dubbed the Artemis Accords – for bilateral agreements with the space agencies of various countries keen to participate in the lunar exploration programme known as Artemis. NASA's Artemis programme, which intends to land the first woman and the next man on the surface of the Moon by 2024, is a sustainable long-term lunar exploration plan. Early last month, President Donald Trump had signed an executive order, *Encouraging International Support for the Recovery and Use of Space Resources*, which asserts that the moon's water, ice and other natural resources can be mined and used by the United States. The Artemis Accords are seen as the Trump administration's plan to move away from the treaty process at the United Nations, and use bilateral agreements with "like-minded nations" instead.



Source: scitechdaily.com

The Artemis Accords outline the broad themes that will form the basis of agreements which the US will negotiate with each country participating in the programme. The aim is to ensure international cooperation and a "safe, peaceful, and prosperous future". The US claims that the Accords are grounded in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which permits the use of lunar resources for peaceful purposes. The US will eventually

start negotiations with its close space exploration partners such as Canada, Japan and the European Space Agency. Though the initial Russian reaction was not 'positive', Moscow now appears to be open to discussions with Washington with regard to the proposed Artemis Accords. China has also expressed its desire to be part of America's lunar exploration mission.

Iran and Israel Engage in Tit-for-Tat Cyber Attacks

On 19 May, Israel reportedly carried out a cyber attack on Iran's Shahid Rajaei port terminal. The terminal is located 23 kilometres west of the port city of Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz. With activities at the terminal coming to a halt, satellite pictures showed container ships waiting outside the port and long traffic jams on highways leading to it for many days. The attack was in retaliation for an attempt made by Iranian hackers on 24 April to shut down Israeli water supply systems by targeting the control systems of wastewater treatment plants, pumping stations and sewers. With official accounts underplaying any damage, the actual impact of these tit-for-tat cyber attacks remain murky.



Source: Google Earth picture of Shahid Rajaei Port Terminal

Israeli officials emphasised that the retaliation on the Shahid Rajaei port terminal was proportionate to the scale of the Iranian attack and the resulting damage to its water supply systems. Consequently, the Israeli attack was designed to both avoid causing lasting physical damage and prevent escalation.

Iran responded on 21 May with a massive cyber attack that resulted in the defacement of over 2000 Israeli websites. Since, however, no Israeli government website was affected, it may be concluded that Iran simply wanted to convey that it had the capacity to disrupt critical infrastructure without escalating matters further.