

The PLANMC

Will the PLA Marine Corps become its own Service

by Steve Ostrosky

In September 2016, shortly after President Xi Jinping announced the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s most recent reform, Chinese and international media reported that the PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC) was going to increase from the previously assessed 10,000 personnel to 100,000 personnel, this increase was hard to believe because the PLANMC's parent service, the PLA Navy (PLAN), totals approximately 235,000 personnel, meaning the PLANMC will be nearly half the size of the PLAN. However, more than two years into the reform effort, reputable sources are still reporting that the PLANMC will increase to 100,000 personnel.¹ This development was even briefed to the U.S. Congress.² One plausible explanation for this substantial increase is that the PLANMC will become the PLA's sixth service.

Prior to the 2016 reform announcement, the idea of a PLANMC expansion did not seem plausible. For decades, the PLANMC was a small unit made up of two brigades and approximately 10,000 to 12,000 marines with a narrow mission (island/coral reef assault/defense) in the South China Sea.³ Presently, reporting indicates that the PLANMC consists of a corps-level headquarters, an estimated 30,000 marines, and 6 brigades (possibly expanding to 9). Potential additional brigades include an aviation brigade (air assault/air mobility), a special operations brigade, and an operational support brigade.⁴

In hindsight, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the PLA telegraphed the PLANMC's expansion before Xi announced the reform. The PLA was caught flat-footed in Libya in 2011 and was still under-prepared and under-equipped for the noncomba-

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tant evacuation in Yemen during 2015. The 2015 Defense White Paper pointed to an increased focus on protecting China's resources, infrastructure, and citizens overseas, as well as protecting maritime routes in the New Silk Road (Belt Road Initiative/One Belt One Road).⁵ In 2014, the PLANMC began to conduct basic expeditionary training to prepare for operations in a variety of environments.⁶ The PLA's base in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa, was

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opened in August 2017, and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the base's purpose—and presumably the marines stationed there—was to protect Chinese interests in the region, provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and conduct counterterrorism operations. These activities suggest that the PLANMC's mission has expanded significantly by moving away from its narrow focus of amphibious assault in the South China Sea to a broader focus of securing China's resources, infrastructure, and citizens beyond China's periphery. This expanding mission requires a larger PLANMC.

Brief History

The PLANMC's origins date back to the 1950s, presumably out of the central government's frustration with the PLA's inability to seize Taiwan from Chinese separatists. That organization was soon disbanded, but a 1974 battle with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands partially motivated the PLA to reconstitute its marine corps.⁷ The current PLANMC was created in 1980 with the establishment of the 1st Marine Brigade; 18 years later, the 164th Marine Brigade was created. The PLANMC's original mission was to defend PLAN mainland bases in the South Sea Fleet and China's outposts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.⁸¹ The Chinese media often referred to the PLANMC as a national rapid-reaction force; this reference was typically noted during PLANMC responses to natural disasters in China. One could surmise that this mission was given to the PLANMC because it was an easily deployable small force with few operational responsibilities that would need to be backfilled, unlike larger PLA forces focused on internal security missions and securing China's land borders. These deployments provided opportunities for internal and external propaganda, allowing the PLANMC to demonstrate how quickly it could respond to and aid China's citizens, but the missions did very little to advance the PLANMC's combat capability. The PLANMC's size and mission did not change between 1980 and 2016, and it remains untested in combat.

PLANMC Compared to Other Marine Corps/Naval Infantry Units

At its current estimated size of approximately 30,000 marines, China now has the second largest marine corps/naval infantry force in the world, surpassing South Korea (29,000 per-

sonnel), Mexico (25,000 personnel), Colombia (24,000 personnel), and Russia (12,000 personnel) (see Figure 1).⁹ Out of those four countries, only South Korea's marine corps is a separate service. The U.S. Marine Corps is the only amphibious/naval infantry force that operates on a global scale with permanent overseas bases and marine expeditionary units deployed around the world. The remaining amphibious forces—all belonging to either island nations or countries that border oceans or seas—operate as elite combat forces to fight insurgencies, combat domestic and international terrorism, operate as counter-trafficking forces, or perform as asymmetric warfare units in defense of their homeland.

Country	Number of Personnel in Naval Infantry/ Marine Corps
United States	180,000
China	30,000
South Korea	29,000
Mexico	25,000
Columbia	24,000
Russia	12,000
United Kingdom	7,700
Philippines	7,500
Argentina	5,500
Netherlands	2,300

Figure 1: Naval Infantry/Marine Corps personnel world-wide.

However, does it make sense to turn the PLANMC into a separate service within the PLA? The United States Marine Corps and the Republic of Korea Marine Corps are the only separate services within their military structures. China's goal may be to emulate the United States Marine Corps—with Chinese characteristics—but it is unlikely that the PLA will make the PLANMC a separate service simply to match the Marine Corps. It made



Is the Chinese goal to create a separate Marine Corps? (Photo provided by the author.)

historical sense to put China's marines under the PLA Navy; it is unknown whether the PLANMC will outgrow the PLAN in size, stature, and mission. The PLANMC will need to be a separate service if the CMC's goal is to grow the PLANMC to 100,000 personnel. The CMC has already taken the necessary administrative steps to separate the PLANMC by creating a headquarters element and transferring the responsibility for the mission to man, train, and equip the PLANMC from the PLAN to PLANMC. Standing up an aviation brigade and a support brigade will also create the necessary infrastructure to establish the PLANMC as an independent service. The PLANMC will then only be reliant on the PLAN for the sealift mission. Expanding PLANMC training beyond its amphibious mission and toward expeditionary operations is another indication the PLANMC is preparing to meet strategic mission requirements beyond those of the PLAN. Lastly, the seemingly permanent deployment of a PLANMC combat unit to Djibouti, and the potential for future PLANMC deployments to new PLA military bases in other countries, serves as a strong indicator that the CMC, not the PLAN, needs to manage the PLANMC's command and control.

There are operational, administrative, and political reasons to support the

PLANMC becoming the PLA's sixth service. Operationally, the move will flatten operational control to increase combat effectiveness (a primary CMC goal from the 2016 reform effort). Administratively, the PLANMC will be too large for the PLAN to manage. Politically, Beijing needs to ensure it knows the activities and behaviors of PLANMC units deployed to foreign countries. China is still learning how to cohesively work with other governments and populaces where it is economically invested, and there is evidence they are not faring well. To ensure stability, the CMC must closely monitor the operations of China's forces overseas.

As a separate service, the PLANMC will have a more impactful role in the PLA's effort to become a joint force. By removing the PLAN from the administrative and operational chain of command, PLANMC leaders will be able to work directly with the other services and theater commands. Becoming its own service will streamline operational tasking and increase communications and interoperability with the army, air force, and rocket forces while still maintaining the PLANMC's connection with the PLAN for amphibious operations. The PLANMC will be a more effective rapid-reaction force if its leaders and staff were able to manage PLANMC logistics, mobility, and

training for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations as well as a host of other military operations short of war—including non-combatant evacuation operations.

However, there are also reasons to keep the PLANMC under PLAN control. The PLANMC is the ground combat arm of the PLAN. Keeping the PLANMC under PLAN will ensure continuity and unity with the PLAN when securing and protecting key sea lines of communication and ensuring freedom of navigation and economic security for China. A sixth service in the PLA also creates additional organizational issues. Although the organiza-

South America and potentially the global commons). China's leaders have likely realized—albeit grudgingly—that they cannot rely on military forces to deploy from China to protect assets abroad. Protecting assets in other countries will require China to have a dedicated military service that is lethal, scalable, mobile, trained to operate independently, and skilled in regular and irregular warfare. Establishing the PLANMC as a separate service will optimize China's ability to protect its assets outside its borders.

Collectively, the points presented in this article are valid arguments for and against the PLANMC becoming a

policies and motives in an effort to promote China's positive intentions.

2. James Fanell, "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony," *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, May 2018). This article is derived from a transcript of Mr. Fanell's testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

3. Dennis Blasko and Roderick Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization," *The China Brief*, (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, February 2019). The Jamestown Foundation is a research and analysis institute based in the United States that professes to educate policymakers about events and trends that are considered of current strategic importance to the U.S. Key areas of focus are Russia, China, and terrorism.

4. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, (Washington, DC: May 2018).

5. U.S. Naval Institute, *China's Military Strategy*, (Annapolis, MD: May 2015). This is an English translation of full document without editorial comment or analysis.

6. *The China Brief*.

7. Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001). See also "China is Building to a 100,000 Strong Marine Corps."

8. Toshi Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle: A Campaign Appraisal," *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI: April 2016). The Naval War College is staff college for the U.S. Navy contributing to naval history, doctrine, weapons and tactics development, and naval leadership development.

9. These are estimated numbers based on publicly available information available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org> and <https://blog.usni.org>.

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tional problems are largely unknown, service rivalry is always a concern, and additional services can lead to budgetary issues. New processes and infrastructure will need to be created for the PLANMC's intelligence and communications, equipment procurement, recruiting, and professional military education. But these issues are certainly not insurmountable; the PLA's focus on military-civilian integration and current logistics organization could lessen some of the operational concerns.

There are many reasons for the CMC to make the PLANMC a separate service. Arguably, not doing so might negatively impact PLANMC operations and curtail PLA strategic intentions. If the PLANMC triples in personnel and becomes a force operating outside of China's borders, the PLANMC will need to remove the PLAN yoke and achieve a higher level of autonomy within the PLA. The Belt Road Initiative is creating a requirement to protect China's resources, infrastructure, and citizens throughout Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East (forecasts indicate that this requirement will eventually include

separate service. The one near-certainty is that if the PLANMC does grow to 100,000 marines, it will become the sixth service in the PLA.

Notes

1. Franz-Stefan, Gady, "China is Building to a 100,000 Strong Marine Corps," *The Diplomat Magazine*, (Online: March 2017), available at <https://thediplomat.com>. *The Diplomat* is an international current affairs magazine for the Asia-Pacific region. Topics that are covered include geopolitics, defense, and intelligence issues; Minnie Chan, "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Percent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say," *South China Sea Morning Post*, (Online: March 2017), <https://www.scmp.com>; Jeffrey Lin and P.W. Singer, "China's Marine Corps is Getting Bigger and Stronger," *Popular Science*, (Winter Park, FL: Bonnier, March 2017); Staff, "China Poised to Expand its Marine Corps," *The People's Daily*, (Online: March 2017), available at <http://en.people.cn>. *The People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* in Chinese) is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party and is published internationally. The English version of the website focuses less on internal issues in China and more on providing editorials about China's foreign

