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Lessons-learned with Chinese Characteristics: Understanding the Limits of PLA Efforts to Adapt to Contemporary Warfare

Introduction

The People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s process of learning lessons from contemporary conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East is being shaped by its pre-existing conceptions about the future of warfare and pre-existing defense production programs. [1] The PLA's long-standing intellectual and financial investments in AI-enabled swarm technology and large, sophisticated reconnaissance drones, in particular, are likely skewing the lessons it draws from conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. These lessons are not fully congruent with the changing character of modern war, and the PLA's institutional inertia may lead it to downplay or overlook critical lessons from contemporary conflicts even as it attempts to learn from them. The PLA, as a result, may be preparing for a form of unmanned warfare that is technologically advanced but misaligned with the cost-imposition, attrition-centric dynamics defining contemporary battlefields.

The PLA's challenges in learning from conflicts abroad will not necessarily render it ineffective, and the PLA's approach may over time prove the better one. The PLA has also demonstrated its willingness to develop unmanned systems based on its observations in Ukraine and the Middle East. PLA institutional inertia may, however, create an opportunity for Taiwan to develop a more effective method to learn from foreign conflicts that could grant it an asymmetric advantage in wartime.

Methodology

This report synthesizes discussions of unmanned systems warfare and unmanned systems development in prominent PRC publications, such as

PLA Daily

, CCTV,

People's Daily

, and

Xinhua

. This report also analyzes publicly available information related to PLA drone procurements and training exercises. This report further consults discussions in PRC academic journals regarding the integration of unmanned systems for complex combat operations, such as amphibious landing operations and urban warfare. This report is

not

a comprehensive literature review of PRC analyses of unmanned systems warfare; instead, it evaluates some recent treatments of unmanned systems warfare alongside PLA technological developments and outward-facing publications.

Background

:
PLA institutional culture and preconceptions
The PLA invested heavily in AI-enabled unmanned systems, 'swarming' technology, and large, sophisticated reconnaissance drones prior to the war in Ukraine.
CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping outlined 'intelligentization' (...) as a major modernization priority for the PLA in 2020, informing PLA priorities well before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[2] Intelligentization refers to the integration of artificial intelligence into various elements of a modern military, including kill chains, command and control, and logistics.[3] The PLA's 2020 doctrinal document, The Science of Military Strategy, referred to intelligentization as a 'new military revolution' and called for the development of intelligent, unmanned systems as part of the PLA's modernization efforts.[4] The US Department of Defense assessed publicly in 2023 that the PRC was prioritizing AI-enabled autonomy for its unmanned systems.[5] The PRC's commercial drone companies, which aid military developments through the PRC's military-civil fusion policy, have also invested heavily in developing and demonstrating the ability to operate AI-enabled drone swarms.[6]

The PLA's emphasis on intelligentization as a 'new military revolution' has also led it to emphasize drone swarming technology. The PLA has been discussing since at least 2020 how to leverage advances in AI to enable a single command node to coordinate dozens of drones simultaneously.[7] The PLA also identified in 2021 that swarm technology was an area in which it could aim to surpass the United States, despite an overall inferiority to US drone technology.[8] A 2023 study by the China Aerospace Studies Institute found that the earliest PLA-affiliated patent application for swarming technology was submitted in 2009.[9] The PLA has since developed and tested several ground- and air-based-swarm platforms that claim to use AI to coordinate large drone formations.[10]

The PLA has also invested heavily in developing large, fixed-wing drones that mirror US military drone procurements. PLA drones such as the Wing Loong-2, GJ-11, and CH-4 are principally exquisite systems designed for long-range, high-duration missions, primarily for reconnaissance and precision strike.[11] PLA fixed-wing drones bear design similarities to the US military's MQ-9 Reaper drone, and PLA commentaries frequently cite US military operations as examples of effective unmanned combat.[12]

No military institution approaches changes in the nature of warfare with a 'blank slate,' and the PLA is no different. The PLA's faith in the future of 'intelligentized' warfare and its corresponding development of swarming technology and sophisticated, survivable drones set the 'baseline' for its interpretation of conflicts that have transpired since it began investing in these capabilities.

The PLA's institutional culture discourages innovation and deviations from high-level policy directives. This culture likely makes it challenging for the PLA to adapt to changes in modern warfare observed abroad.

CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has embarked on an unprecedented purge of the PLA's senior leadership, leading to the expulsion of over 100 officials since 2022.[13] The PLA's principal decision-making organ, the central military commission (CMC), was reduced from seven members to two, including Xi Jinping.[14] ISW-CDOT has assessed that Xi's purges of CMC Vice Chair Zhang Youxia and Chief of Staff Liu Zhenli may have resulted from concerns about Zhang's and Liu's loyalty to Xi and the 'Chairman responsibility system' that grants Xi absolute authority over the military.[15] Xi's widespread purges and PLA publications' emphasis on maintaining political loyalty throughout the PLA show that the PLA's institutional culture rewards loyalty to the Communist Party over professional competence.[16]

ISW has assessed that the Russian military faces similar obstacles to implementing lessons from the battlefield in Ukraine due to a proliferation of 'yes-men' throughout its structure and its practice of discouraging reporting bad news.[17] The PLA's emphasis on ideological conformity similarly renders career survival more dependent on loyalty than on demonstrated skill. Any deviation from policy initiatives at higher levels carries significant risk for a PLA officer in the climate of Xi's purge campaign, as it could become a pretext for prosecution based on ideological non-conformity.[18] The PLA has historically discouraged initiative at lower levels within its ranks, even prior to Xi's purges.[19] Furthermore, around 60 percent of the senior officials Xi has purged were on the operational track, rather than the PLA's political track, where changes in PLA warfighting stemming from lessons learned abroad are likely to arise.[20] This institutional climate likely makes it difficult for the PLA to pivot from pre-existing emphases, including its interpretation of the future of warfare, particularly as Xi's purge campaign makes deviations from existing policy both professionally and personally risky.

The Changing Character of War

Battlefield developments in Ukraine and the Middle East yield key lessons that partially contradict the PLA's pre-war understanding of unmanned systems warfare. Contemporary conflicts illustrate the key role of low-cost, attritable systems in creating a transparent battlefield and cost-effective precision strike capabilities.

Both the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces have deployed masses of small reconnaissance drones, rendering the battlefield largely transparent.[21] Both sides have also fielded huge numbers of small first-person-view (FPV) attack drones to devastating effect, as these systems can destroy individual vehicles and personnel groupings cost-effectively.[22] These technological developments, and their integration with legacy systems, have significantly constrained operational maneuver on the Ukrainian battlefield.[23]

The war in Ukraine has also highlighted the rapid pace of the innovation cycle during a modern conflict centered on low-cost unmanned systems. The proliferation of drones across the Ukrainian battlefield spurred the development of drone countermeasures, such as widespread use of electronic

warfare (EW) systems, which in turn drove drone development to circumvent these countermeasures.[24] The rapid pace of this cycling renders technological advantages necessarily evanescent and complicates efforts to exploit them.[25] This rapid innovation cycle has prompted both Russia and Ukraine to create separate organizations dedicated to unmanned systems warfare and lessons from the frontline into their force generation.[26] This rapid adaptation cycle favors flexible, decentralized innovation-conditions that may be difficult for the PLA's centralized and politically constrained system to replicate.

The war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East have also reshaped key dynamics of an air-missile war through the development of low-cost one-way attack drones. The Russian armed forces have continuously experimented with novel strike packages combining long-range drones with cruise and ballistic missiles to impose targeting dilemmas on Ukraine's air defense network.[27] This experimentation, in turn, has prompted the Ukrainians to design an integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) network that reserves high-end interceptors for exquisite systems and deploys cheaper interception methods against drones and cruise missiles.[28] Iran has deployed similarly diverse strike packages in attacks on Israel and the Gulf states in an effort to exhaust their air defense networks and impose asymmetric cost calculations.[29] The United States military has deployed the Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System (LUCAS), modeled on the Iranian Shahed to reflect this new battlefield reality, but US, Israeli, and Gulf militaries have been relying too heavily on expensive interceptors to defeat inexpensive one-way attack drones.[30]

The conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have notably not seen widespread use of AI-enabled drone swarms and have driven drone development toward low-cost attritable systems rather than sophisticated, survivable ones. Both the Ukrainian and Russian armed forces have experimented with swarm technology, but small FPV drones continue to dominate the battlefield.[31] Emerging dynamics of modern conflicts thus do not wholly contradict the PLA's pre-existing conceptions of the future of conflict but neither do they fully validate them. PLA discussions of modern conflict and its force generation efforts indicate that it is having difficulty recognizing the incongruities between battlefield realities and its preconceptions, leading it to emphasize lessons from contemporary war that may limit its ability to adapt to changing battlefield dynamics.

PLA Selected Lessons Learned

The PLA is not blind to battlefield developments and frequently references modern conflicts in discussions of future war. Its interpretation of these conflicts is necessarily shaped by its institution-wide emphasis on AI, swarming, and sophisticated, survivable drones, however. This fact has led some PLA discussions of unmanned systems warfare and the production patterns of some PLA systems to retain these pre-existing emphases while downplaying some of the key lessons outlined above, although the PLA is certainly examining and experimenting with ideas and systems that are more aligned with the lessons of contemporary conflict as well.[32]

The PLA may be looking to Russia's Rubikon Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies as a model for structural change. PLA discussions of Rubikon do not integrate tactical lessons of its use of low-cost systems, however.

PLA Daily

, the PLA's official newspaper, published several commentaries on March 12 regarding the development of unmanned combat forces in foreign militaries.[33] One commentary argued that the development of unmanned combat forces was an 'inevitable trend' of modern warfare, suggesting that the PLA is considering creating a similar organization.[34] A separate commentary focused on Russia's 'Rubikon' Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies highlighting its battlefield successes and contribution to 'cyclical interaction' between frontline units and force development priorities.[35] These commentaries indicate that the PLA is considering the utility of separate unmanned systems organizations both in combat and in facilitating the rapid innovation cycle seen in Ukraine.

The

PLA Daily

commentaries also illustrate, however, how PLA preconceptions can shape the lessons it extracts from Ukraine. The Rubikon commentary, for instance, omitted discussion of Rubikon's use of low-cost, attritable systems to prosecute its strike campaigns.[36] Another

PLA Daily

commentary that mentioned 'Rubikon' stated that unmanned warfare 'does not necessarily reduce the' material costs of war, 'citing the US military's deployment of sophisticated, multi-million dollar drones.[37] These

commentaries briefly acknowledged the use of low-cost systems in Ukraine, but they did not describe it as characteristic of modern drone warfare as such and added counterexamples from US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.[38]

Recent PLA discussions of contemporary conflict similarly emphasize the potential

utility of AI-enabled swarm technology, despite its limited use on the modern battlefield. PLA force generation and the systems it highlights in the information space likewise elevate swarming technology as the future of unmanned systems warfare.

A

PLA Daily

article from March 25 references the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to argue that the next stage of unmanned combat will center on AI-driven swarming technology.[39] The article accurately identified the proliferation of electronic warfare as a limiting factor for drone use in Ukraine and warned that overreliance on satellite communications to pilot drones could lead to disruptions, possibly referring to Russia's struggles to conduct long-range drone operations following its loss of access to Starlink on February 1.[40] The article states that advances in AI technology will allow unmanned systems to overcome these obstacles and operate in swarm configurations to increase their efficacy.[41] This conclusion suggests that the authors view the widespread use of low-cost FPV drones as a temporary and imperfect stage in the development of unmanned systems warfare that PLA investment in intelligentization can overcome.

The PLA is also continuing to develop swarm-capable systems, indicating that its preconception of the future of modern conflict remains influential in its defense production. PRC state broadcasting service CCTV released footage on March 25 of the PLA's 'Atlas' drone swarm system, stating that a single Atlas launcher can deploy 48 drones, while each Atlas command system can coordinate 96 drones.[42] ISW-CDOT reported in December 2025 that the PLA's Jiutian unmanned drone carrier could coordinate 100 smaller drones, according to PRC sources.[43] Reuters further reported on March 27 that the PRC has converted over 200 obsolete J-6 fighter jets into one-way attack drones with automatic flight control systems.[44] These technological developments suggest that the PLA has retained its emphasis on AI-enabled swarm technology in its equipment procurements, despite limited examples of its successful use in contemporary conflicts.

ISW-CDOT has assessed that the PLA likely intends to deploy drone swarms to overwhelm and degrade advanced air defenses, either in Taiwan or in US military infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.[45] Large PLA drone swarms deployed in this manner could complicate Taiwan's and the United States' ability to intercept the PLA's large stockpile of precision missiles that it would likely use to create favorable conditions for an amphibious landing.[46]

The PLA's focus on AI-assisted swarming technology is not necessarily mutually exclusive with developing small FPV reconnaissance and strike drones for its frontline forces. It is very likely that the PLA is observing the use of low-cost attritable systems in Ukraine and the Middle East and will field some version of these systems during a conflict.[47] The PLA's procurement priorities and recent discussion of key battlefield dynamics in contemporary conflict, however, do suggest that at least elements within the PLA are somewhat downplaying the central role of low-cost attritable systems, principally FPV drones, in reshaping the modern battlefield.

Some PLA discussions of integrating unmanned systems into complex combat operations assume that PLA unmanned systems will be purpose-built, survivable, and capable of complex tasks.

High-end PLA assets reflect this assumption, further indicating that the PLA has downplayed certain lessons from contemporary conflicts possibly due to institutional inertia.

A February 2025 article in the PRC journal

Ordnance Industry Automation

..... authored by staff of the PLA's National Aviation University and National University of Defense Technology outlines operating concepts for shipborne unmanned systems to support an amphibious landing.[48] The article suggests using carrier-based drones for pervasive reconnaissance, early warning, and precision strike capabilities; ship-based drone swarms for fire support; and manned-unmanned teaming between fighter aircraft and carrier-based drones.[49] A May 2025 article in the same journal recommends producing an amphibious drone capable of autonomously navigating difficult terrain and supporting close-range urban combat.[50] A June 2024 article in the PRC journal

Shipborne Weapons

.....suggests developing unmanned surface vessels (USV) capable of clearing mines and obstacles ahead of a major amphibious landing.[51] These articles, rather than discussing how to leverage low-cost, simple systems as force multipliers, suggest developing sophisticated systems that can perform complex tactical tasks to support large-scale operations and are concerned with the survivability of those complex systems rather than viewing them as attritable.

The PLA is taking steps to develop other systems along similar principles. ISW-CDOT reported in January and February that the PLA is testing large rotary- and fixed-wing drones that can operate from its principal amphibious assault vessels and provide logistical support to a beachhead.[52] The PLA also conducted sea trials in November 2025 for its first Type 076 landing helicopter dock (LHD) Sichuan

that PRC sources have dubbed a 'drone carrier' due to its electromagnetic catapult launch system.[53] Sichuan

was pictured on PRC social media in February with what was likely a GJ-21 large stealth drone, indicating that it is intended to be a platform for the PLA's high-end unmanned systems to support amphibious operations.[54] PRC state media also released footage of large groupings of unmanned ground vehicles that it claimed could support urban operations through reconnaissance and suppressive fire missions with mounted guns or grenade launchers.[55] These systems reflect certain PLA academic discussions of integrating unmanned technology into its operational concepts as they illustrate PLA intentions to field survivable and sophisticated unmanned systems that are purpose-built to perform discrete tactical tasks, from logistical support to long-range precision strikes. The PLA's development of these capabilities is significant in itself, to be sure, and should not be downplayed merely because their use is largely unprecedented. The PLA may succeed in pioneering a form of unmanned systems warfare different from and possibly more effective than that currently underway in Ukraine and the Middle East. These capabilities and PLA discussions of their implementation are, however, partially a product of a cumbersome organization whose assumptions about the nature of future war are being challenged in key areas. The PLA is by no means ignorant of modern conflicts or actively ignoring critical lessons. Its learning process, however, has occurred within the horizon of its pre-existing conceptions of modern war and has been further constrained by the PLA's institutional rigidity. These factors are contributing to a learning process that has emphasized systems not widely used on the modern battlefield and has allowed the PLA to retain the focus on swarming technology and sophisticated, survivable drones that it had developed before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Conclusion

The PRC and the PLA represent the most serious security threat to the United States since the Cold War.[56] The PRC is in a unique position among the United States' adversaries because it can learn critical lessons from contemporary conflicts without experiencing the high costs of participating in them. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the PLA. Necessity is the driver of change, and it is difficult to combat institutional inertia without direct combat experience. This reality has not prevented the PLA and the PRC from making critical adjustments. Some PLA sources have discussed developing 'mission command' tactics in lieu of its current centralized command structure, and the PRC has invested heavily in its domestic drone industry.[57] The United States and Taiwan should assume that the PLA they may face in the future will be an effective fighting force that is prepared for a modern conflict in some form.

But the PLA's institutional inertia has, so far, driven its adaptation process in a direction that is not fully aligned with observed battlefield developments. The PLA has not

used conflict abroad to shift away from the assumption that its unmanned systems will, for the most part, be highly survivable and capable of sophisticated tasks. The PLA also continues to develop AI-enabled swarming technology and appears to see battlefield developments in Ukraine as confirmation that swarming is the future of unmanned combat even though the war in Ukraine has thus far shown no such thing. Battlefield developments in Ukraine and the Middle East do not necessarily refute these emphases. Rather, these contemporary conflicts have shown that more complex systems are not necessarily panaceas to battlefield problems. The most notable aspect of contemporary warfare at this time, instead, is the proliferation of low-cost, attritable, and largely simplistic drone designs capable of pervasive reconnaissance and cost-effective precision strikes.

The PLA's preconceptions of unmanned warfare, as outlined above, has led it to partially downplay these dynamics.

There will be several key indicators should the PLA reorient its focus to low-cost, attritable systems in the future. The PLA would likely have to shift its procurement priorities significantly to produce drones on the scale seen in Ukraine, and this would be reflected in the visibility of FPV drones in PLA publications and training exercises.[58] The PLA would likely also need to train FPV drone operators on a significant scale rather than maintaining a relatively small but specialized unmanned systems force. Widespread use of FPV drones within the PLA would likely see force structure changes within its existing units, such as the creation of FPV drone companies within its existing combined arms brigades.[59] Implementing these changes on a large scale would suggest the PLA is acknowledging the central role of low-cost attritable systems in future war and not relegating them to a temporary phase in the development of unmanned systems warfare.

The direction of PLA modernization carries important lessons and an opportunity for Taiwan. No military is immune to institutional inertia, and Taiwan's armed forces are no exception. Taiwan's military has historically struggled to shift its defense posture toward asymmetric warfare, retaining a desire to field exquisite systems in conventionally organized units.[60] Taiwan is also struggling to acquire significant unmanned systems and a domestic arms industry due to political deadlock.[61] Developing the necessary systems, force structure, and operating concepts to adapt to changes in contemporary war is not a matter of preference for Taiwan, but a matter of survival. The PLA is learning but has significant structural constraints shaping this learning. Taiwan should see those constraints as a potential advantage for its own learning process, helping it develop a military more suited to modern conflict. ISW-CDOT will offer concrete suggestions for how Taiwan can implement the current lessons of contemporary warfare in a forthcoming paper. The race to learn has begun, and it will decisively impact the future of the cross-strait military balance and Taiwan itself.

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