



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 72

February 2016

## Chinese PLA's New Rocket Force and Cross-Strait Ties with Taiwan

### Return of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party to Power

The return of the hardline pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party 民主进步党 (DPP) to power in Taiwan, with its candidate, Tsai Ing-wen becoming the first female Taiwanese President, seems to be casting a spell on peace and security in cross-strait relations in East Asia. Defeating her nearest political rival, Eric Chu of the Kuomintang (KMT), by winning 56.1 per cent of the vote, the DPP has put an end to the rule of KMT's Ma Ying-jeou and his administration's policy of closer politico-economic engagement with China. It was visibly clear during my last two trips to Taiwan in October 2014 and June 2015 that the KMT, and its conservative approach of attempting to 'normalise' relations with Mainland China had, apparently, made it increasingly unpopular with the Taiwanese voter.

Given that Taiwan remains the most sensitive political issue for Mainland China, the DPP's landslide win puts the onus back on its long-



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### *Key Points*

1. The KMT, and its conservative approach of attempting to 'normalise' relations with Mainland China, apparently made it increasingly unpopular with the Taiwanese voter.
2. The message across the Taiwan Strait remained loud and clear, with CCTV 7 broadcasting images of amphibious armoured vehicles ploughing through the sea towards a landing site, helicopters firing missiles at shore locations, and soldiers parachuting down from helicopters.
3. According to PLA strategists, perhaps the most difficult challenge remains maintaining its strategic value while preserving a huge conventional missile arsenal, particularly the medium-range, mobile, DF-21C missile.
4. The Rocket Force is expected to focus more on nuclear counter-attack capabilities, intensifying construction of medium- and long-range precision strike power, and reinforcing strategic checks and balances.
5. Apart from the DF-3A which can range far out into the Pacific Ocean, the remaining missile forces have sufficient range to blanket the island of Taiwan without venturing far from their respective garrisons.

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## Chinese PLA's New Rocket Force ...

standing stance on pushing for independence from Mainland China. The scepticism surrounding Taiwan's political future with the Mainland seemed to be increasing, and the presidential election verdict, which has brought the DPP back to power whose fundamental political stand rejects the 1992 *One China* principle, thereby advocating in favour of a Taiwanese national identity, away and separate from that of Mainland China. Not surprisingly, this perennially raises political temperatures in cross-strait relations. Mainland China, predictably, albeit belligerently, has responded both politically, and militarily. The Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council released a statement through the official *Xinhua* press declaring adherence to the 1992 consensus and "resolutely opposing any form of secessionist activities seeking Taiwan independence" – primarily indicating that as long as political parties and groups in Taiwan continue to recognise the principle that the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan belong to *One China*, cross-strait political engagement and exchange shall likely continue.

On the military front, Mainland China relaunched its psychological warfare, which it has been employing against Taiwan for decades by holding live-fire exercises and landing drills. These manoeuvres were held just days after Tsai Ing-wen's presidential victory and reported by the state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV 7) in what was widely interpreted to being an implicit cautionary to the new government in Taiwan – to tread carefully.

Staged by the 31st Group Army based in China's southeastern city of Xiamen in Fujian province that directly faces Taiwan, the unit is considered the frontal line of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for military action directed at Taiwan, along with two other additional groups under the Nanjing military district. Although details of the PLA using long-range rockets, self-propelled howitzers, amphibious tanks and

helicopters in the drills were released, the numbers of troops or equipment were kept ambiguous. China's Ministry of National Defence refused to comment on whether the drills had any correlation/reference to Taiwan's election result. That notwithstanding, the message across the Taiwan Strait remained loud and clear, with CCTV 7 broadcasting images of amphibious armoured vehicles ploughing through the sea towards a landing site, helicopters firing missiles at shore locations, and soldiers parachuting down from helicopters.<sup>1</sup>

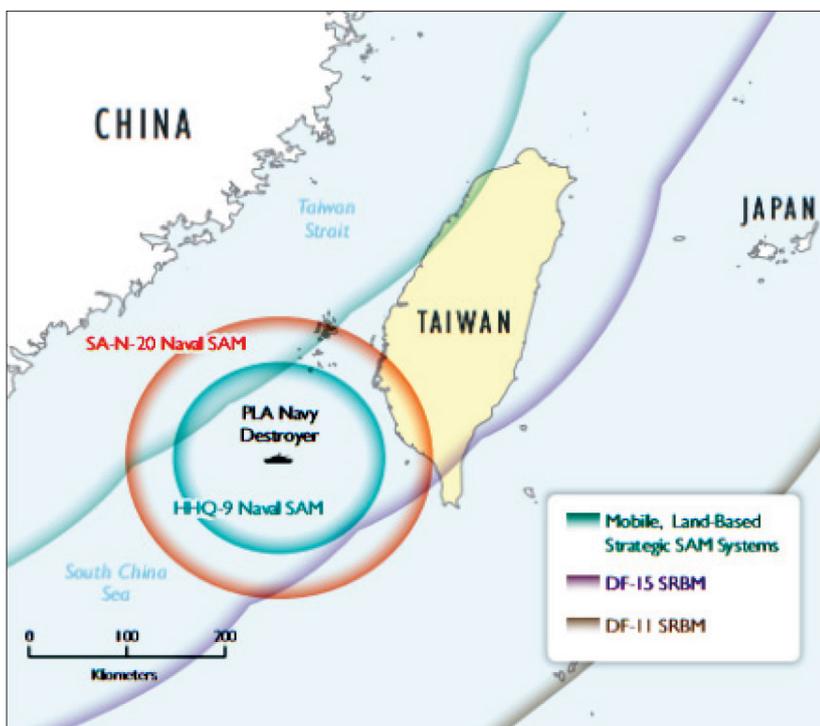
### China's Missile Modernisation and Stack-up Opposite Taiwan

The PLA has been in the news lately, with perhaps the largest military reforms being executed in many decades of recorded history of China's military modernisation. Three new military branches within the PLA were created on January 01, 2016, namely, General Command of the PLA Army, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force. By establishing an upgraded missile force and renaming it as Rocket Force, the President and Chairman of the Central Military Commission has ensured a return of the Second Artillery Corps to its core function, that of providing strategic preeminence to China's nuclear and missile arsenal. This is mainly because, for long, the Second Artillery Corps had been functioning as a military branch.<sup>2</sup> Following the principle of building a lean and effective force, the newly christened Rocket Force, which earlier was termed the Second Artillery Force, shall continue to push for improving its force structure. This will include both nuclear and conventional missiles capabilities for rapid reaction, penetration, precision strike, damage infliction, protection, and survivability.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid expansion in China's conventional missile arsenal in the past decade and a half reflects a significant strategic value in Beijing's military build-up, especially against Taiwan. According

to PLA strategists, perhaps the most difficult challenge remains maintaining its strategic value while preserving a huge conventional missile arsenal, particularly the medium-range, mobile, DF-21C missile.<sup>4</sup> China's Rocket Force will continue to serve as the core strategic deterrence power, by means of reinforcing medium- and long-range precision strike capabilities, technological advancements and enhanced command and control. In China's revamped robust approach and policy, proponents of coercive nuclear and limited war-fighting strategies could find encouragement. Besides deterrence, the Rocket Force is expected to focus more on nuclear counter-attack capabilities, intensifying construction of medium- and long-range precision strike power, and reinforcing strategic checks and balances.<sup>5</sup>

Fig 1



Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2012, U.S. Department of Defense, p. 39.

The Second Artillery had been accelerating preparations for forming a unit under Base 52, the main missile complex opposite Taiwan, with the

base receiving its first set of DF-15 missiles in April 1992. One year later, while the missiles were still arriving, the Central Military Commission (CMC) formally commissioned the first conventional missile brigade and ordered it to be ready to launch within one year.<sup>6</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, the number of Base 52's conventional brigades and new, more accurate ballistic missiles has steadily increased. In order to address any/all "pro-independence, separatist" movement, quick-action "fist units" (*quantou budui*) have proliferated throughout the coastal areas opposite Taiwan. By October 2011, the PLA was known to have deployed between 1,000 and 1,200 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) to units opposite Taiwan, nearly half of which are deployed within about a 7.5-minute flight time. In addition to this, the PLA has added additional missile brigades in southeastern China, and upgraded the lethality of its existing SRBM force by introducing variants with improved ranges, accuracies and payloads.<sup>7</sup>

The twelve units of the Base 52 control a large number of DF-3A, DF-11, DF-11A, DF-15, and DF-15C ballistic missiles. Apart from the DF-3A which can range far out into the Pacific Ocean, the remaining missile forces have sufficient range to blanket the island of Taiwan without venturing far from their respective garrisons.<sup>8</sup> Creation of several new Second Artillery SRBM brigades opposite Taiwan, plus at least one brigade belonging to the Nanjing Military Region (MR) Ground Forces, and the transition to mobile DF-21s

with both conventional and nuclear capability against regional targets has greatly augmented the Chinese missile-based deterrent.<sup>9</sup>

## ... and Cross-Strait Ties with Taiwan

The PLA, apparently, is said to be “adjusting to keep up with the pace of China’s rise”. Interestingly, experts and analysts in China are arguing that the mission of China’s armed forces stretches beyond the nation’s maritime and land territories. This clearly brings out the dichotomy in China’s interpretation and application of power, both militarily and politically. Most of these reforms are likely to begin yielding results by 2020. What is most critical here is the timing, with 2021 establishing 100 years since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and 2049 ushering in

100 years of the People’s Republic of China coming into existence as a nation-state. Realisation of these twin bicentennial goals remains the nucleus of Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” – most significantly including the vital goal of national rejuvenation (read reunification).<sup>10</sup> With Taiwan topping Xi Jinping’s ‘reunification’ agenda, or that of any other future Chinese leader, the principal challenge for Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen would undoubtedly be securing stability by maintaining a status-quoist approach in cross-strait ties.

### Notes

1. For related and added details, see the report, “Don’t Read Too Much Into Military Drills, Beijing says, After Alarm in Taiwan Over Post-Election Exercises,” *South China Morning Post*, January 22, 2016.
2. Monika Chansoria, “New Year Brings Major Military Reforms in China,” *The Sunday Guardian*, January 09, 2016.
3. For more details, see Monika Chansoria, *Nuclear China: A Veiled Secret* (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2014), p. 166.
4. For more details, see Mark A Stokes, “China’s Nuclear Warhead Storage and Handling System,” Report of Project 2049 Institute, March 12, 2010.
5. Chansoria, n. 2.
6. Ge D, “The Birth of a New-Type Missile Unit” in the Editing and Research Section of the Political Department of the Second Artillery, *Huihuang Niandai Huiyuzai Gaige Kaifangzhong Fazhan Qianjin de Dier Paobing* (Golden Age: A Review of the Development and Progress of the Second Artillery in Reform and Opening) (Beijing: Central Documentation Press, 2008), pp. 294-303; also see “Modernization of the Second Artillery: Both the Nuclear and Conventional [Forces] are capable of Strategic and Tactical Precision Strikes,” 2009, available at [http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2\\_3856218\\_1.html](http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_3856218_1.html)
7. As cited in, SECTION 1238, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2012,” *Annual Report to US Congress*, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, US Department of Defense.
8. Sean O’Connor, “PLA Second Artillery Corps,” *Technical Report*, *Air Power Australia*, April 2012.
9. Chansoria, n. 3, p. 238.
10. Chansoria, n. 2.

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