

Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad, Edited by Roy Kamphausen, David Lai and Travis Tanner, Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012, pp. 339

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Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad analyses the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) training exercises and its joint international drills after the year 2000. Drawing on assorted media reports and other sources, the book has created a much-needed structured narrative on the subject. Media coverage, such as that by *PLA Daily (China Military Online)*, has drawn attention to technological developments in PLA's training exercises, their expanded time, and geographical span over the past decade. The PLA's joint international drills have also been widely covered. Nevertheless, information available in this regard has been scattered and bears marks of official propaganda. Therefore, the book under review is a timely contribution on the subject.

Learning by Doing is a product of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), and the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM). The SSI and NBR have been organizing an annual PLA conference for the last two decades. The outcome of the conference has been edited volumes/reports: *Exploring the 'Right Size' for China's Military* (2007), *The 'People' in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education* (2008), *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other Than Taiwan* (2009), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* (2010), and *Chinese Lessons from Other*

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Peoples' Wars (2011). These volumes are a delight for those interested in the functional, tactical and operational aspects of the PLA. The volume under review is the latest in the series, and focuses solely on military themes related to training.

Kamphausen and Tanner introduce the book by informing the reader that the present volume takes on from the preceding one: *PLA Lessons from Foreign Conflict*. According to them, the implementation of strategic level learning from foreign conflict is difficult to determine in the absence of any appropriate context involving China. Therefore, the present volume looks into how PLA is operationalizing lessons learnt from its training exercises and joint international drills to refine its doctrine, strategy, training and organization. The book finds that, despite limitations, the PLA's present training exercises—domestic as well as international—are aimed towards acquiring expeditionary capabilities.

Bernard D. Cole argues that the PLA Navy's exercises indicate improvement in its long range capabilities. He further points out that besides strengthening its own Information Warfare/Electronic Warfare (IW/EW) capabilities in its training exercises, the PLA Navy may be searching US Navy's potential vulnerabilities in IW/EW. He argues that with the PLA's emergence as a formidable naval power, the US will have to focus on 'projecting power ashore, against targets on the Asian mainland' in the long run, besides maintaining dominance in Asia-Pacific maritime territory.

Michael McDevitt describes the PLA Navy's joint naval exercises with international partners in its anti-piracy missions in the Arabian Sea as 'a real world "battle-laboratory"', contributing to its expeditionary capabilities by honing the PLA's 'skills necessary to deploy and sustain surface combatants, amphibious ships, and support ships on distant stations for long periods of time.' Besides, these operations are reminiscent of the need of having an aircraft carrier force in the area where either the US or India dominates the air space. The PLA's missions in the Arabian Sea indicate that improvement in China's offshore active defence capabilities, protection of maritime and overseas economic interests, and Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW) are integral parts of its naval mandate. Interestingly, as McDevitt makes the point, the PLA Navy and the US Navy, which are face-to-face in the Pacific, have a convergence of interest in the Arabian Sea. The operational and tactical lessons the PLA learns through international cooperation will be implemented in the Pacific.

Analysing readiness in the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP), Cortez A. Cooper III informs that PAP's readiness witnessed a tremendous boost between 2008 and 2010. During this phase, various administrative, organizational, technological and infrastructural measures were adopted to enhance its readiness. He believes that the present level of force readiness of the PAP is unprecedented, though whether it can be effectively used in war and MOOTW depends on the internal security situation in China at that time.

Dennis J. Blasko's reading of the PLA army's trans-regional exercises is different from Cole's and McDevitt's reading of naval exercises. Blasko argues that the PLA Army's trans-regional exercises do not prove whether the PLA Army has expeditionary intentions. He argues that notwithstanding some past instances when the PLA conveyed a stern diplomatic message to Taiwan through military exercises, none of the PLA's recent trans-regional exercises visualized a Taiwan exigency. On the contrary, in *Stride 2009* and *Mission Action 2010*, the troops did not move into Jinan Military Region (the Military Region responsible for Taiwan); neither did they enter amphibious areas. In fact, the farthest possible training area from Taiwan was selected for training in the *Joint 2008* amphibious exercise. He argues that although the troops from Jinan participated in the exercises, and the lessons learnt elsewhere can be easily applied to the Jinan Military Region, the diplomatic meaning of not selecting Jinan for training should not be missed. Blasko states that the trans-regional exercises test the PLA's defensive mobilization capabilities as they basically check how swiftly reserve forces can reinforce main forces on the borders. Besides, features like using public petrol-pump stations and other civic facilities are relevant in the context of mobilizing forces from interior China to the borders, and not in the context of sending troops beyond Chinese borders.

Daniel M. Hartnett studies the *Peace Mission 2010* and describes it as an overrated exercise. Incidentally, *Peace Mission* is a biennial multilateral military exercise conducted by Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in which the PLA and the Russian Army are the main participants. He describes *Peace Mission 2010* as 'highly scripted' as it could not create a realistic scenario for training. In fact, the SCO is basically a political and consultative organization for which sending a political message about unity among the member states takes priority over military learning. Therefore, according to Hartnett, much cannot be read into this exercise. Nevertheless, rapid transportation and related logistic capabilities,

particularly the handling of the different gauges of the railway network, and the PLA Air Force's gaining experience in long-range bombing can be taken note of. Despite the scripted nature of the exercise, the long-range bombing outside China can be taken as indication of PLAAF becoming an 'incipient expeditionary air force' which anyway, according to Hartnett, can be drawn from PLA's other actions, such as the evacuation of the Chinese people from Libya to Sudan in February 2011. He concludes that, on a military-strategic level, SCO's exercises at best convey a message that China would not hesitate in sending troops outside China if needed, particularly in a North Korea exigency.

Chin-Hao Huang locates the PLA's increased involvement in international peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief in the changes that have taken place in China's strategic and security understanding over the last 10 years. According to him, in this period, China's concerns about its international image, its desire to define national interests beyond a narrow material prism, and the realization that its security and development are inter-linked with the international community, have changed its security understanding which, in turn, has facilitated PLA participation in international humanitarian activities. He informs that the training plan, as discussed in China's *Defence White Paper 2010*, can be considered as a guiding principle for the PLA's participation in international humanitarian operations. The plan recognized the value of conducting training exercises in unfamiliar terrains. Participation in international humanitarian operations serves this purpose, and teaches the PLA useful lessons about an integrated joint operational command system and integrated logistics. Furthermore, Huang responds to the criticism that Sino-US cooperation in the humanitarian arena will eventually improve Chinese military capabilities by saying that the need is to accelerate this cooperation and not shun it, because this cooperation will make China more appreciative of international concerns about its rise.

Abraham M. Denmark stresses that despite seriousness shown, Chinese success in building modern military logistics is mixed. As of now, its military logistics can meet the requirements of domestic MOOTW, and handle security challenges at its immediate periphery only. Denmark argues that, in the absence of its own foreign bases, China cannot project its power beyond its immediate periphery. He also argues that Chinese logistics development by itself is not threatening as, in the end, the use of

military logistics will depend on the broader security scenario and China's political response to it.

David Lai's essay concludes the book. It underscores a paradox: China learns military operational and tactical lessons from the US and its ally western militaries, but rejects their larger philosophical and political premises, and continues to treat the US as a hegemonic and imperialist power. This is a cause of concern for Lai as the two countries are pitched against each other over some of the issues which, for China, constitute its core interests—such as the unification of Taiwan and the maritime territorial issues in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Lai prophesizes that by emulating the US military China is all set to become a formidable military challenge for the USA, and that the US will eventually confront this reality by the mid twenty-first century.

Finally, every chapter in the book contains an executive summary preceded by three or four opening sentences, the major arguments, and the main theme. After discussing the main theme, every chapter puts forward implications and policy prescriptions for the USA, and ends with a conclusion. This format makes the volume very reader friendly, though this structure also makes for some repetition. Repetition also occurs because the narrative has been created from limited available information. However, on the whole, the book is a pioneering work in the English language, which also sets directions for further research on the themes covered in the book.