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## Chinese Military Modernization Enters “New Phase”

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China’s decades-long military modernization “entered a new phase” last year under the aggressive leadership of President Xi Jinping, a new Pentagon report on Beijing’s military capabilities said today. The “sweeping transformation” includes making the formerly mass army a nimbler, more balanced force that is acquiring the kind of expeditionary capabilities the U.S. military already enjoys.

“China’s military modernization is producing capabilities that have the potential to reduce core U.S. military technological advantages” on the sea and in the air, the report found.

The most visible outward sign of China’s military muscle-flexing can be seen in the 3,200 acres it has reclaimed on reefs and rocks in the South China Sea. Three of those sites in the Spratly Islands now have port facilities and 10,000-foot runways that can handle any plane in the Chinese arsenal, the report found. Those territorial claims, which clash with rival claims from other states in the region, are backed up with coast guard and civilian ships.

“It seems to us that these activities are designed to stay below the threshold of conflict,” but demonstrate that China is willing to defend its territorial claims, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Abraham Denmark said while unveiling the report at the Pentagon.

The report, an annual update mandated by Congress, notes that the Chinese moves “have caused countries in the region to enhance their ties to the United States.” Given the still-

growing Chinese defense budget, the report found, “these concerns are likely to intensify as the PLA continues to modernize, especially in the absence of greater transparency.”

But the potentially more significant, long-term developments are found closer to home. Xi is pushing through a series of deep reforms in the People’s Liberation Army, including a massive reorganization of the historically unwieldy institution, moving it from a collection of distinct regional units to a more rigidly top-down organization. The Chinese leader is also purging the military’s officer corps, arresting dozens on charges of corruption over the past year while cutting some 300,000 troops from the army’s bloated ranks.

The reforms are rebalancing China’s military, making the army smaller while the navy and the air force grow; the report noted that Chinese aviation technology is “rapidly closing the gap with western air forces.” At the same time, China’s nuclear and missile forces have been reorganized as an independent service and have been bolstered with a new array of weapons that push China’s potential reach farther out into the Pacific.

The moves come at a time when Xi is widely seen as attempting to consolidate his control over China’s institutions. The military has always been seen as a political institution in China, and it exists to protect, and carry out the orders of the Communist party.

Given China’s emphasis on being able to operate farther from home — as outlined in last year’s defense white paper — the Chinese navy continues to get preferential treatment. The Pentagon report noted that the 300-ship PLAN “now possesses the largest number of vessels in Asia,” boasting a growing number of advanced surface ships, new submarines, amphibious ships, and its first aircraft carrier.

The report also stressed Beijing’s use of the so-called Chinese Maritime Militia, a paramilitary organization of hundreds of civilian fishing boats which acts as a virtual picket line, sailing hundreds of miles outside of Chinese territorial waters to keep an eye on other vessels and harass any that stray too close to Chinese claims.

In many ways, this year’s report echoes previous studies. The lack of transparency in Chinese military developments has long been a concern for the Pentagon, and Chinese behavior in the South China Sea has been a source of tension for several years. In addition to tensions in the South China Sea, Chinese defense planners have remained very focused on being able to project power against Taiwan, if needed.

But this year’s report highlighted ways in which the Chinese military is slowly shedding much of its doctrinal baggage. Traditionally, the Chinese eschewed overseas bases and deployments, and focused on close defense. This year’s report stresses Chinese deployments overseas for peacekeeping and anti-piracy missions, a growing network of logistical support bases in the Indian Ocean — including China’s first-ever overseas base in Djibouti — and technological developments that make it easier for Chinese ships to operate farther from home, including better air defenses on new frigates and destroyers and the country’s first operational aircraft carrier.

On Thursday, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford and his Chinese counterpart, Gen. Fang Fenghui, spoke for the first time since Dunford took office in October, according to a statement released by the Pentagon.

Dunford “acknowledged the areas of cooperation” between the two militaries, while delivering “messages regarding U.S. commitment to uphold the rules-based international order, defend U.S. allies and interests in the South China Sea, while affirming a desire to avoid confrontation,” the statement said.