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How China's transforming military, especially in air, at sea

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BEIJING (AP) — Even though China says its military is growing at a relatively modest pace of about 7 percent this year, it is clear that the country is marching toward a top-to-bottom expansion and modernization of its forces. Here's a look at how it's been changing:



SHIFTING FOCUS

While the land forces still account for about 73 percent of total troop strength, China is shifting resources to the navy and air force. Those services will be responsible for dealing with the main perceived threats to China's interests — a conflict over control of the South China Sea and a move by self-governing Taiwan toward formal independence that China has threatened to respond to with force. That was a primary motivation behind President Xi Jinping's Sept. 3 announcement that the PLA would be reduced in size by 300,000 members, drawn mainly from non-combat units and those operating outdated weapons systems.

CONTROL OF THE SKIES



FILE - In this file photo taken Thursday, Sept. 3, 2015, the front of the Wing Loong, a Chinese made ...

Seeking an edge in air combat, China invested heavily in Su-27 jets from Russia, eventually copying that technology and producing its own version known as the J-11. Recent years have seen the introduction of an advanced home-made fighter jet, the J-10, and upgraded H-6 bombers capable of longer missions. At least two prototype stealth fighters have flown, although it's not known what they're capable of or whether or when they'll enter service. China has also shot up the global ranks in drone technology, producing unmanned aerial vehicles comparable to the U.S. Air Force's Predator and Reaper models that are capable of high speeds, sustained overflight and launching missile attacks on ground targets.

NEW NAVY

Equally dramatic has been the transformation of the People's Liberation Army Navy from a coastal patrol force to one capable of operating on the high seas far from base. The most eye-catching addition has been the commissioning of the navy's first aircraft carrier that was purchased as an incomplete hull from Ukraine more than a decade ago then rebuilt, armed and equipped in China. Although the carrier, christened the Liaoning, has yet to take on its full aviation complement, China announced in December that it was already building its second aircraft carrier, this time entirely with domestic technology. China is also adding cutting-edge frigates, destroyers and nuclear submarines and by some estimates has been launching more vessels than any other nation on an annual basis. That rapid modernization is seen as aimed at asserting its maritime claims and extending its power far from its shores, raising tensions with Japan, the U.S. and Southeast Asian nations with rival territorial claims.

MORE MISSILES

China's missile force, formally known as the Second Artillery, has one of the most potent attack capabilities of any of the world's armed forces. Along with its nuclear force, China now fields at least 1,200 conventionally armed ballistic missiles, along with an array of land attack cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and — of greatest concern to the U.S. Navy — anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles that may be able to sink an aircraft carrier. China has continued to build its stocks of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles deployed just across the 160-kilometer (100-mile) strait from Taiwan, backing up its threat to attack the island should it irrevocably reject Beijing's demand for unification.

CHANGING TACTICS

Along with its gradual shift away from Asian land war preparations, the PLA has been developing systems to prevent outside intervention in contingencies such as a campaign against Taiwan. It's doing so largely through its use of missiles and submarines, along with cyber warfare efforts to disable opposing forces' high-tech battle systems. The PLA has also reorganized its structure to better integrate its different services. It's even shifting some of the longstanding political principles underpinning the PLA's use of force, moving to set up a logistics center in the African Horn nation of Djibouti that some are calling China's first overseas base, despite Beijing's longstanding disavowal of any form of foreign alliance or permanent overseas presenc