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A MARCH WEST:

THE WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND AND CHINA'S POWER PROJECTION

PART 3

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THE first two articles in this series have examined options available to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for conducting long-range precision strikes in Central Asia and the Russian Central Military District. This final serial hypothesises what a ground offensive might look like in the same operational direction. The variables are more complex and the delivery of effect is as much a function of PLA logistics as of the range and performance of individual weapon systems. Like the Russian Federation, the PLA has demonstrated an ability to deliver mass rapidly and efficiently using the domestic high-speed rail network, but China has not sustained a campaign-sized invasion force beyond its land borders since 1979 and not to its North-West since 1759.

The exploitation of mineral reserves, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and state-promoted tourism have justified

transport infrastructure investment in Xinjiang since the 1990s. The high-speed rail link between Lanzhou and Urumqi was completed in 2014 and the construction of a Yunnan-Tibet railway is anticipated by the end of the decade.¹ A tunnel on the expressway connecting Urumqi with Korla became the longest in the world when it opened in December 2025. The highest railway in the world connects Lhasa with Golmud and Xining and, since 2020, an extension that circles the Taklamakan desert links force concentrations at Kashgar, Hotan and Korla with Urumqi. Tibet has less than a tenth of Xinjiang's railway kilometres and presently only a single national highway – the G219 – connects the two autonomous regions, circuitously via the Aksai Chin region. While a Joint Logistics Support Centre (JLSC) is co-located with 76th Group Army Headquarters in Xining, Golmud, which also hosts the Tibet Army Depot, is an important logistical node.

The PLA's five JLSCs are

not subordinate to Theatre Commands but to the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) headquartered in Wuhan. Each oversees a network of dispatch centres, which coordinate harmonisation with civilian logistical chains. Xinjiang's rail network has been used to transport personnel and equipment to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) exercises in Central Asia and the Russian Federation via the Khorgos Gateway transshipment hub on the Sino-Kazakh border – a poster-project for the BRI that has registered increasing cargo throughput and decreasing gauge-transfer times since the mid-2010s.² The development of tactical logistics on the other

¹Suyash Desai (2023), *Assessing the Role of the PLA Southern Theatre Command in a China-India Contingency*, Article, The Jamestown Foundation, 17 February 23.

²"Chinese soldiers leave for joint anti-terror drill in Russia", Xinhua, 19 July 2007.

³US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*, ATP 7-100.3, Army Pubs Army Techniques Publication, Headquarters Department of the Army Washington, DC, August 2021.

hand has been constrained by inefficient processes, a lack of containerisation and a low density of cargo trucks.³

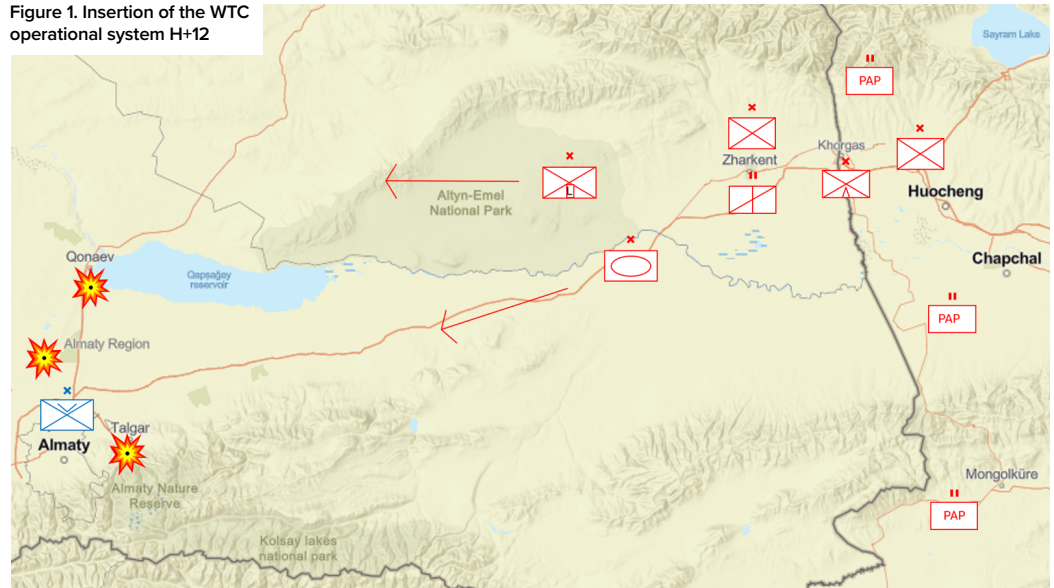
Novosibirsk, Omsk and Astana likely lie well outside the geographical scope of PLA ground force scenario-based planning. Between November and March, local temperatures can average between minus 20 and minus 40 degrees, and extreme snowfalls, and then later floods, impede ground lines of communication. An air, rail or road insertion into these areas is only conceivable with the comprehensive host-nation support seen in SCO exercises. A ground offensive will instead be considered through the lens of a 300-kilometre advance on Almaty – roughly the distance of the failed-Russian assault on Kyiv in 2022. This study does not incorporate the far-reaching battlefield developments witnessed during the subsequent four years and is limited to what might be considered PLA informatised, combined-arms doctrine, as developed during the 2010s. Publicly-available videos of annual training exercises clearly evidence the PLA's recent incorporation of First-Person View (FPV) aerial drones, Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) and robotic quadrupeds, at every tactical echelon, but post-reform order of battles and doctrine still appear largely in place – prioritising rapid manoeuvre, aerial envelopment and force concentration over the positional warfare and transparent 'kill zones' that

³US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

⁴Lieutenant Colonel Lu Bingyang, Major Su Jianyu, *Judging the basic combat mode of the PLA's combined-army battalion from open source intelligence (OSINT)*, Taiwan Ministry of National Defence (2024).

⁵Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions, *PLA Army Logistics, Chapter 4 in PLA Logistics and Sustainment*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, February 2023.

Figure 1. Insertion of the WTC operational system H+12



characterise the Ukrainian front line. Committed to achieving a decisive fait accompli, the PLA is attempting to harness the unmanned systems revolution to accelerate manoeuvre, rather than viewing it through the lens of mutual denial.

SCHEME OF MANOEUVRE

PLA doctrine is notoriously aseptic, publishing little in the way of tactical overlays. Guidelines and training suggest a four-to-one numerical advantage in manoeuvre forces.⁴ A 2021 US Army template of a PLA operational system uses two Combined Arms Brigades (CABde): one heavy and one medium, and a 2024 review of the PLA Combined Arms Battalion (CABn) by Taiwanese Colonel Lu Bingyang uses a three-battalion-to-one combat ratio.⁵ This study uses two, with an additional brigade undertaking cover operations, and a fourth in operational reserve. A single but combat-effective airborne brigade is assumed for the defence of Almaty and irrespective of whether the PLA has been invited to suppress dissent or is undertaking a hostile cross-border occupation, this opposing force will be treated in isolation from Kazakh, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and irregular forces.

While significantly larger than the CSTO peacekeeping contingent airlifted to Almaty in 2022, this invasion force of roughly 15,000-20,000 represents less than half of the total strength of the five combined arms armies committed to the assault on Kyiv – a city of comparable size to Almaty. This hypothesis does not question the morale of Kazakh forces, but assumes an anomalous set of geopolitical circumstances – Eurasian political fragmentation at the national and supra-national level, likely being fuelled or resisted by PRC propaganda. The calculation therefore that a political decapitation could be brought about by the establishment of a Cordon Sanitaire is arguably more plausible given the Almaty's geographical isolation.

No combined arms brigades are stationed in the Xinjiang Military District (XMD). The operational system therefore draws from other parts of the Western Theatre Command (WTC) in a mobilisation that would resemble a trans-regional exercise from the mid-2010s, where multiple brigades travelled long distances to unfamiliar training zones by rail, before completing the final ground manoeuvre quickly. These were scaled down after 2017 in favour of smaller, specialised task forces supported

by theatre-level electronic warfare and intelligence. Doctrine continues to emphasise a 'golden window' – aiming to achieve combat readiness in 24-48 hours – but transportation plans require inspection at the group-army, theatre and service levels and still reportedly bottleneck during times of high demand.⁶ This, coupled with the tapering of rail logistics capacity after Urumqi, means it could potentially take as long as a week to surge a combat force of this size to the Kazakh border.

From Khorgos, the 62nd – an elite-heavy brigade home based at Jiayuguan in Gansu Province, which in 2019 deployed by rail to a Russian joint exercise – is committed to the main East-West advance astride the A351. This four-lane expressway, that crosses and then runs south of the Ili river, is the main commercial thoroughfare between Almaty and the Khorgos Gateway – the obvious site for an operational rear logistics hub centred on a mobile joint logistics support brigade – ad hoc formations stood up by JLSCs for high-intensity scenarios. The Soviet-era Zharkent barracks, 20 kilometres west of Khorgos, hosts the operational reserve.

Based on a conservative estimate of 36 hours for a cautious but

uncontested move across 200 kilometres of tarmac and flat open ground, the 62nd holds short of Almaty at Shelek – a small settlement but the site of a compressor station on the trunk pipeline exporting Uzbek and Turkmen gas to Xinjiang. Concurrently, the 182nd light-Combined Arms Brigade, home based at Xining, proves the route north of the Ili River astride the single-lane A353, to reconnoitre the town of Qonaev – the administrative centre of Almaty Oblast situated 50 kilometres north of the city. The A353 traverses the more-rugged terrain of the Altyn Emel National Park but the 182nd is supported by a High Mobility (HIMOB) Battalion equipped with light-armoured vehicles for breakthrough manoeuvres and the rapid garrisoning of mountainous regions or small islands.⁷ A third, medium brigade then follows-on via the A353 – the 149th home based at Wuzhong in Ningxia, which trains heavily for urban operations. The 149th holds at Qonaev while the 182nd breaks for cover operations across the open steppe North-West of

⁷Joshua Arostegui, *An Introduction to China's High-Mobility Combined Arms Battalion Concept*, in *Infantry Volume 109 Number 3*, Fall 2020.

⁸China Aerospace Studies Institute, *The Regenerating Road: China's Rapid Runway Repair Capabilities and Other Recovery Methods*, A Blue Path Labs Report by Thomas Corbet (June 2023).

⁹Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions.

¹⁰US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

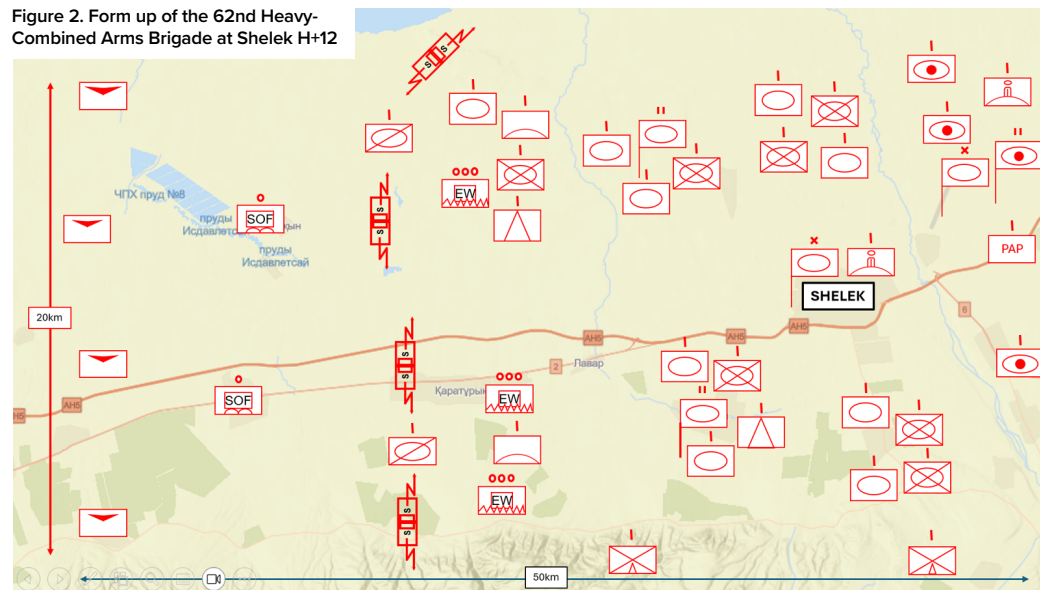
¹¹Erin Richter and Benjamin Rosen, "China's National Defence Mobilization System: Foundation for Military Logistics", Chapter 3 in *PLA Logistics and Sustainment*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, February 2023.

¹²US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

¹³Lieutenant Colonel Lu Bingyang, Major Su Jianyu.

¹⁴US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

Figure 2. Form up of the 62nd Heavy-Combined Arms Brigade at Shelek H+12



Almaty. During this 96-hour form-up phase, the long-range strike capabilities, discussed in the previous two serials, are annihilating the opposing force's defensive positions and command and control.

Qonaev and the 11,000 feet Zhetygen Airfield are key terrain, and the site of the forward command post, logistics group and the combat reserve. Zhetygen – roughly the same distance north of Almaty as Hostomel-Antonov Airport is from Kyiv, would form the APOD for reinforcements from the WTC and other parts of the PRC, as well as facilitating Role 3 casualty evacuation to Xinjiang. On-site fuel, ordnance and air traffic is managed by a PLAAF mobile 'field station'. While Zhetygen sits at the edge of the maximum range of a Z-20 helicopter operating from Khorgos, the Central Military Commission (CMC) would likely consider an air assault on Zhetygen to demonstrate the full range of its warfighting concepts.⁸ Unlike the Hostomel operation, where several Russian helicopters were shot down on the outskirts of Kyiv, South-Eastern Kazakhstan's largely unpopulated terrain offers multiple air avenues of approach.

The Xinjiang Military District's 11th Division – a mountain

warfare unit home based at Urumqi – is responsible for securing supply lines across this 23,000 square-kilometre rear area.⁹ Its firepower and support regiments are forward deployed to the road bridge at Bodokhudzir where the A351 crosses the Ili River, which in turn delineates northern and southern operational areas for its three infantry regiments. The latter are equipped with Type-15 light and the top-of-the-line Type-99A tanks, and their role would encompass southern flank protection for the 62nd in the foothills of the Tien Shan mountains.

In wartime, many rear-area duties would be assumed by reserve formations and logistics and force protection is an assigned role of militia under the command of the Military Sub-Districts.¹⁰ The PRC's mobilisation framework will be discussed below but the full weight of Xinjiang's state security apparatus – the provincial government, People's Armed Police (PAP) and the XPCC – can be assumed for the enforcement of border security, the management of military traffic and the guarding of rail and road supply lines, a short distance inside Kazakhstan.¹¹ The PLA also envisions its security units contributing to ground operations, primarily through the

use of feint actions and the PAP are well suited to missions of this type due to their ability to move quickly across difficult terrain.¹²

COMBINED ARMS MANOEUVRE

The mounted reconnaissance battalions of the 62nd and 182nd form parallel advance groups – comprised of platoons of infantry fighting vehicles such as the ZBD-04 – a BMP3 equivalent – and the newer eight-wheel ZBL-09. They are supported by Electronic Warfare (EW) platoons both organic and those surged from the 76th Group Army, as well as from the WTC Ground Force's 3rd EW Brigade and the WTC's 3rd Intelligence Reconnaissance Brigade – both home based outside Lanzhou. Tactical aerial reconnaissance is performed by organic Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) platoons, operating at a depth of 15-20 kilometres, and supported by a Group Army SOF company, deployed in small teams. These employ direct action or act as bait, in order to lure concealed air defence systems to engage.¹³ Mounted reconnaissance companies also provide bounding-flank screens for the manoeuvring brigade, and advance groups have typically included an anti-tank platoon, equipped with optical wire-guided HJ-8 or HJ-10 missiles, but now likely integrating a UAS equivalent.¹⁴

PLA Group Armies field ground-based fire support in very high densities and brigade reconnaissance coordinates closely with artillery, EW and air defence platforms, in a construct similar to the (pre-2022) Russian reconnaissance-fire model.¹⁵ The reforms provided artillery and air defence battalions with organic radar platoons and the PLA makes extensive use of the Beidou satellite navigation system to provide two-way, real-time data transmission with a reported tracking accuracy of 10 centimetres for military-grade users.¹⁶ Theatre Commands can also surge PLAAF 'communications brigades', tasked with ensuring encrypted communications and data sharing, as well as specialised equipment such as tropospheric-scatter radios – not normally fielded at tactical echelons.¹⁷ Battlefield data is

¹⁵ US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

¹⁶ Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions.

¹⁷ Kenneth Allen, *Current Overview of the PLA Air Force's Organizational Structure*; US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

¹⁸ US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

¹⁹ South China Morning Post, "China deploys long-range rocket launcher as deterrent to India", 19 Apr 2021.

²⁰ US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

²¹ TRADOC; US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

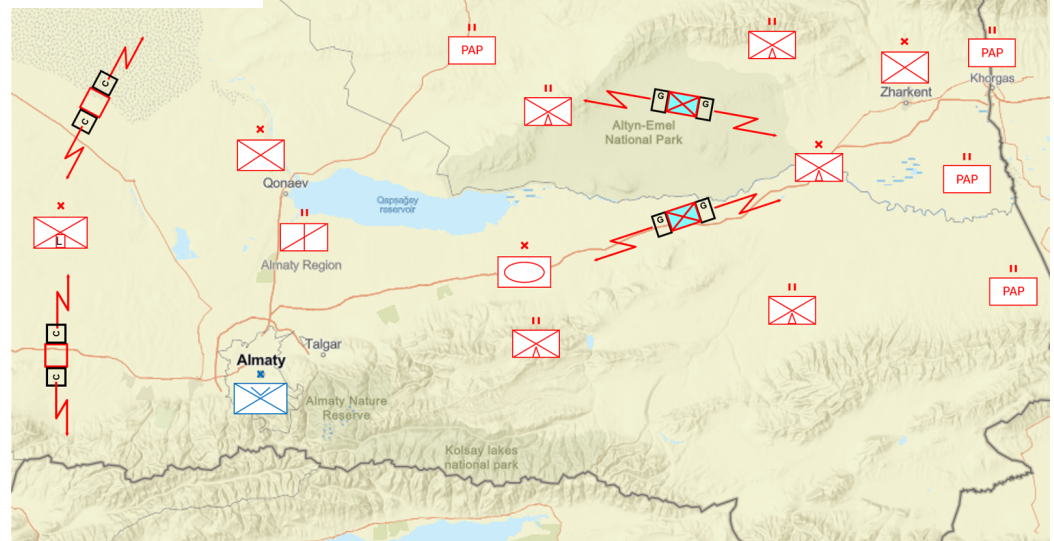
²² Sunny Cheung & Joe McReynolds, "Autonomous Battlefield: PLA Lessons from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", *RealClearDefence.com*.

²³ Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions; TRADOC; Anushka Saxena, "Assessing Operations and 'Jointness' in the PLA Western Theatre Command," *Takshashila Discussion Document No. 2024-07*, May 2024, *The Takshashila Institution*.

²⁴ US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

²⁵ Vermilion, *The PLA Battalion Template, #88 PLA Army Battalion in the Offense - Mobile Assault*, Vermilion China, January 2025.

Figure 3. Form up of the WTC operational system H+ 96



processed by a combination of integrated command systems, AI-enabled platforms and secure, domestically-produced software. Key components include the Integrated Command Platform (ICP), DeepSeek, Kylin Cloud and Intelligent Precision Strike.

The artillery battalions of the 62nd and 182nd form parallel firepower strike groups. Their organic firepower is each roughly equivalent to that of a US Brigade Combat Team (BCT) with 27 guns – 122mm rather than 155mm, and an organic Multiple Rocket Launcher (MRL) capability, typically the PHL-11, extending the range out to 40-50 kilometres. PLA artillery units generally have good tactical mobility and practice 'shoot-and-scoot' to avoid counter-battery fires. The groups are able to draw from the 76th Artillery Brigade home based in Zhongwei, which fields 72 additional howitzers plus MRLs of various calibres, including a heavy-300mm battalion.¹⁸ The more advanced PHL-16 could also be surged from other TCs, as was the case during the Galwan conflict, bringing most of the operational area within range of a battery deployed to Khorgos.¹⁹

Group-Army aviation brigades field two attack-helicopter battalions but close air support

had been negligible as a PLA capability, even prior to 2022.²⁰ Doctrine does emphasise denying the enemy freedom of action in the air domain however and Man-Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) are widely fielded across formations, including reserves and militia. CABns each have a Short-Range Air Defence (SHORAD) battery and CABdes in turn have an air defence battalion – typically consisting of three Self-Propelled Anti-Aircraft Gun (SPAAG) batteries and one SHORAD battery equipped with the HQ-6D or, in the case of heavy brigades, the HQ-17 for the escort of manoeuvre formations and defence of command posts and rear supply areas. These would likely be reinforced by additional systems, the HQ-16, for example, from the 76th Air Defence Brigade – also home based at Xining.²¹ The 76th also has an electronic air defence battery that specialises in denying enemy UAS freedom of action and reporting suggests a shift towards the integration of AI-enhanced interceptor drones to counter FPV reconnaissance and loitering munitions.²² Air defence battalions are provided with low-altitude air detection by the 'Smart Hunter' radar but appear to lack a robust long-range early-warning capability. They are, however, able to access IADS data

from PLAAF radar sites situated along the border.²³

UNFOLD AND ANNIHILATE

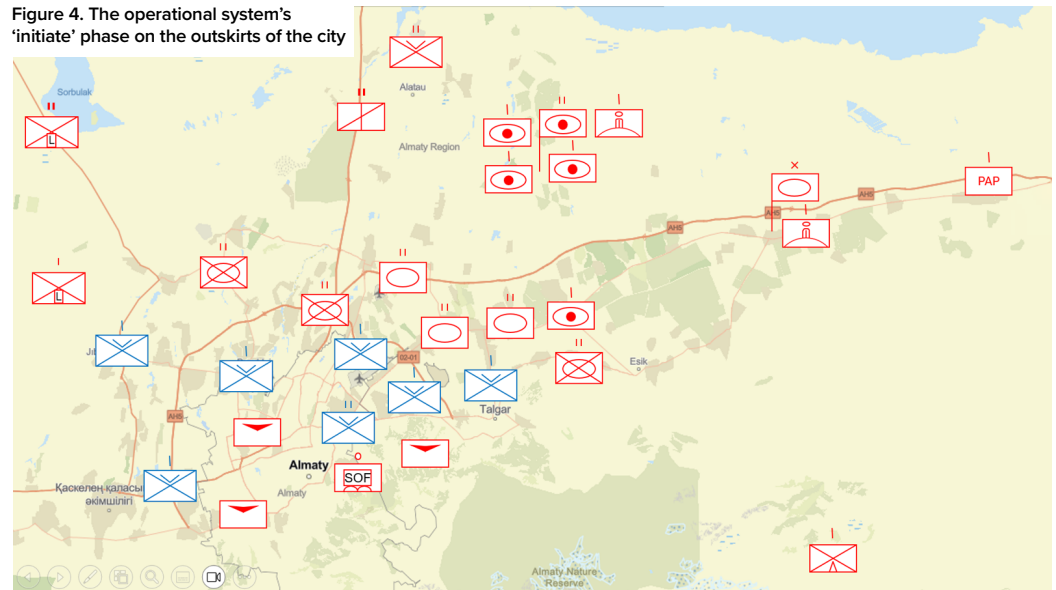
With the 62nd and 149th formed up at Shelek and Qonaev, the operational system enters the second, 'unfold' phase of the PLA's standard five-phase attack.²⁴ Most key operational objectives are situated in the Northern and Eastern districts of Almaty: the international airport, both passenger and freight railheads, all three primary-power-generation plants and the mayoral office. With its flanks protected by the 182nd and mountain-warfare companies from the 11th, a front-line attack group comprised of six CABns from the 62nd and 149th, supported by the HIMOB battalion, advances astride the three axial roads leading into this part of the city, on attack frontages of roughly 3-4 kilometres.

On sighting opposing force disposition on the outskirts of the city, battalions switch to the 'initiate' phase, employing blinding fires along avenues of approach.²⁵ The subsequent 'annihilate' phase of the assault, pitches infantry fighting vehicles and tanks in tactical on-line formations against company-sized defenders. As the suburban terrain tightens, forward tanks switch to close support of

infantry fighting vehicles. The PLA employs a lower density of infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers than other large militaries, especially compared with Russia, and every CABn, both mechanised and armoured, fields a mixture of ZBD-04 IFVs and Type 99A or Type 96 MBTs, with heavy battalions containing two tank companies of 10-14 tanks each.²⁶ The CABn assault is supported by organic firepower batteries – including drones, as well as brigade-level indirect fires. Battalions of all types operate organic-medium mortars while HIMOB battalions are equipped with a self-propelled, rapid-fire variant mounted on a Mengshi chassis.²⁷

Noting the operational lessons from Ukraine, systematic building-to-building clearances employing combinations of attack and reconnaissance drones would constitute a significant part of the urban battle. An engineering company, responsible for obstacle clearance, including mines, is fielded within the CABde's combat support battalion, and PLA training suggests that Type-74 flame-flowers from chemical defence platoons would also be employed during clearing operations.²⁸ Depth attack and thrust manoeuvring groups would not be necessary given Almaty's situation – pinned against the slopes of the Tian Shan – but opposing force units attempting to reinforce or withdraw from the annihilation zone across the roads or steppe to the West of the city would be interdicted by motorised-infantry

Figure 4. The operational system's 'initiate' phase on the outskirts of the city



companies from the 182nd.

Observed doctrine suggests that PLA commanders will accept attrition rates in excess of 50 per cent and tolerate several battalions of losses, introducing reserves as and when the assault stagnates.²⁹ This is likely an extreme interpretation and for this type of limited operation, the CMC would be conscious of negative counter-narratives. The combat reserve at Qonaev is comprised of the remaining two battalions from the 62nd and 149th as well as PLAAF Airborne Corps battalions airlifted into Zhetygen Airfield. These are in turn reinforced by a reserve brigade at Zharkent – potentially from the Central Theatre Command, if the CMC felt too much demand was being placed on the WTC.

It is likely that recognition of the near-limitless resources available to the PLA would prompt opposing force negotiation in order to mitigate against the destruction of Kazakhstan's economic capital. Operational systems contain a Psychological Warfare Group and both SOF and PRC civilian intelligence would operate inside the city conducting cognitive warfare operations and negotiating with minority stakeholders.³⁰ Once opposing force concentrations

had been neutralised and key objectives secured, the operation would switch to stability and maintenance with responsibility transferred to PAP detachments, from Xinjiang.

SERVICE SUPPORT AND LOGISTICS

The institutionalisation of the JLSF led to the creation of service support units at every echelon – particularly within manoeuvre and fire-support battalions. The establishment of the Service Support Company (SSC) enabled the Combined Arms Battalion to replace the regiment as the PLA's basic combat unit. The SSC's Transportation Platoon – typically comprised of 15 Shaanxi or FAW 3.5 or 5 tonne trucks, is responsible for resupply within the battalion's area of operation. Most brigades have a Service Support Battalion (SSBn) – similar to its US counterpart, but with more functions devolved to SSCs. SSBns physically collect fuel, ammunition and supplies from JLSC nodes using their organic transport companies and the SSBn commander will usually command the CABde's rear area. The SSBn's transportation company includes a platoon of Heavy Equipment Transporters (HETs) which can be used to surge reserves as well as provide troops for the execution of force-delivery methods like air and rail. The 76th

Group Army's Service Support Brigade (SSBde), home based in Xining, operates an additional 30 to 40 HETs for transporting the heaviest equipment via roads and highways.³¹

During wartime, Group Armies are required to submit supply requests to the Combat Support Bureau (CSB) of the Theatre Command's Joint Staff Department (JSD). Staff deficiencies at the SSBde level, however, force CABde staff to act as the primary-coordinating element with the JLSF. This has resulted in an out-sized burden on brigade staff and SSCs have reportedly struggled to replenish ammunition and goods in larger armoured units. Nevertheless, the PLA has been pursuing flexibility and under what is known the 'Direct Distribution and Support' model, JLSC warehouses or TC Army Support Department units can provide goods directly to operational units – bypassing Group Armies and brigades. CABns have established smaller-level battalion warehouses and gained approval from brigade finance sections to requisition items from depots.³²

While the PLA's density of helicopters per capita is less than an eighth of the US Army's, a notional Group Army Aviation Brigade operates four general-

²⁶US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

²⁷Joshua Arostegui, *An Introduction to China's High-Mobility Combined Arms Battalion Concept*.

²⁸Vermilion, *The PLA Battalion Template*.

²⁹⁻³⁰Lieutenant Colonel Lu Bingyang, Major Su Jianyu.

³¹⁻³²Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions.

utility battalions with eight to 12 helicopters per battalion. The medium-lift Z-20 is reportedly playing an increasingly-important role in 'last mile' logistics where roads are unusable or heavily-contested.³³ UAS and UGVs would also play a significant role in resupply and evacuation. Recent exercises have featured drones delivering up to 50kg of ammunition and rations to troops engaged in close combat.³⁴ Other logistical options available to the JLSF include an ability to lay improvised fuel pipelines and, potentially in this scenario, the use of Russian-gauge rolling stock along the rail line between Khorgos and Almaty.

While medium and heavy brigades field separate tracked and wheeled-repair companies, light brigades have only one. Battalion-level maintenance relies on individual technicians. Second-line repairs, where equipment requires relocation to the manufacturer or specialised personnel, are handled by two Group Army battalions of 180–200 personnel each. Casualty evacuation differs in so much as the principal link between the CABde's medical company and division-grade JLSF hospitals are former-civilian hospitals resubordinated under the Group Armies – at Xining in the case of the 76th, each with more than 500 beds and focusing on early treatment of casualties. However, these have reportedly remained configured towards civilian medical provision and many GA hospitals are not considered ready for wartime operations.³⁵

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

A post-reform focus on military-civil fusion and the passing of national-defence mobilisation and transportation laws have expanded the mechanisms available to the CMC for economic mobilisation in support

of campaign-level operations. There are four key agencies in this process: the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the National Defence Mobilization Department (NDMD), Military Districts (MDs) and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Every TC Joint Staff Department has a Theatre Mobilization Bureau which coordinates mobilisation requirements with Military Districts – each in turn having a National Defence Mobilization commission. PLA units can submit mobilisation requirements directly to an MD, enabling TCs to highlight resource deficiencies to the National Defence Mobilization Department (NDMD) under the CMC. The NDMD, in collaboration with the CMC's Logistics Support Department, will coordinate a cross-government response with the NDRC's National Defence Office. Provincial offices of the NDRC also work directly with TCs to streamline resourcing and coordinate economic mobilisation drills.

Certain SOEs are designated as Economic Mobilization Centres (EMCs) and have military-civilian coordination mechanisms and armed forces' departments as well as cloud-based mobilisation platforms. EMCs maintain latent capacity and stocks of inputs needed to surge production in

support of operations. Local SOEs also provide mobilisation potential but are generally leveraged by sub-national defence mobilisation commissions. The PLA has also established strong relationships with Chinese logistics firms: JD Logistics and Deppon Express, for example, to ensure that munitions and systems reach JLSF warehouses. PLA authors have criticised the mobilisation process for lacking standardisation, digitisation and a clear chain of command between military and civilian leaders but nevertheless it can be assumed that the JLSC task force at Khorgos would contain a sizeable-civilian cohort.³⁶

This paper offers a template for PLA combined arms warfare in a realistic geographic context. Unlike the Navy, Air and Rocket Forces, China's mechanised and armoured brigades would not play a major role in a peer conflict in the Western Pacific. Borders with the Russian Far East and North Korea are riverine, those with Vietnam and Myanmar are characterised by densely-forested hills, and those with India and Pakistan near-impassable. Offensive combined arms manoeuvre, as rehearsed and refined for nearly two decades, could only conceivably take place along a relatively-short stretch of China's land borders. Direct cross-border

interventions in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would differ from the above scenario by the manifest need to secure key mountain chokepoints at the Torugart, Irkeshtam and Kulma passes and establish forward-JLSF logistics hubs in the plateau regions on the other side of the border from Kashgar. A division or brigade-sized operation in this direction would in effect represent an extension of the Line of Actual Control in the Aksai Chin, involving many of the same units and logistics

chains but it is more likely that regime-stability operations could be effectively executed by a limited-PAP or SOF task force.

The potential to achieve a swift military fait accompli in Central Asia is buttressed by the PRC's unique economic overweight in this region, an upgraded cross-border road network and the proximity of key political objectives. While the operational depths further within the Eurasian interior are of an entirely different order, this three-part series has nevertheless made the case that the Western Theatre Command, with its emphasis on airlift and rapid mobility across an extensive territory, is a campaign-level entity uniquely positioned to displace or support the Russian Federation in its traditional sphere of influence. The dearth of attention given to this in the available literature on the PLA, therefore, while explained by competing priorities in East Asia, requires rectification.

³³US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

³⁴China Military Online, "PLA Army conducts wartime drone supply-delivery drill in Tibet", 9 November 2020.

³⁵Joshua Arostegui and James R. Sessions; US Department of the Army, *Chinese Tactics*.

³⁶Erin Richter and Benjamin Rosen.