

**THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY IN
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE:
INSTITUTIONAL ROLE AND
WAR PREPARATION**

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Executive Summary

1. To China, a medium-sized war in the East and South China Seas (ESCS) ranks third in severity, after an all-out war with a superpower that is bent on containing China's rise and a major war against de jure independence in the Taiwan Strait. An armed confrontation due to territorial dispute however seems more likely.
2. The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has evoked a response in Beijing that was once diplomatic to one which is increasingly militarised. It requires credible military deterrence to effectively pre-empt any further intrusion into Chinese claimed territories.
3. Beijing's threat perception has led to the establishment of a Central Crisis-Response Leadership Group (CCRLG) in 2012 to coordinate ESCS affairs. The PLA is well represented in this leadership group and has assisted Xi in making major decisions pertaining to recent SCS standoffs.
4. SCS war prospects have thus thrown the limelight on the role of the PLA in China's overall territorial dispute control and management. The PLA has exercised directional leadership over SCS affairs since the early 1950s when it took over islands occupied by the ROC troops in the Paracel Islands. For decades, SCS affairs had been exclusively military affairs.
5. Today the PLA oversees law/regulation enforcement by state agencies operating in the disputed waters, on-the-spot command at times of standoffs, review of countermeasures vis-a-vis other claimants' challenges drafted by state agencies, initiation of actions to preempt potential intrusion and projection of land-reclamation in PLA occupied islets.
6. The SCS conflict has prompted the PLA to develop catered weapons systems. The long distance from any of the PLA home bases has put special requirement on PLA capability building. Capability matters in a SCS dispute.

7. The PLA's weapons induction programme thus has a clear maritime focus for long-range power projection, extending from the West Pacific to the Northern Indian Ocean.
8. To prepare for a SCS crisis, the PLA has stepped up capability-enhancement as a key component of its military modernisation. For instance, the PLA Navy's South Sea Fleet, the front command of China's SCS management, has grown from the navy's weakest to become the strongest fleet with its continuous enhancement.