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ROCKET Force



Executive Summary:

On October 17, 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited a brigade of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force, marking a pivotal moment in China's military posturing amidst growing regional tensions. The visit is seen as a strategic move in response to heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. This intelligence report assesses the implications of the visit, highlighting the strategic importance of the PLA Rocket Force, China's growing missile capabilities, and the broader geopolitical message sent to regional actors and the United States. Xi's visit underscores China's intent to bolster its deterrence posture and readiness for potential conflict scenarios.



Key Findings:

- **Xi's Visit as a Political Signal:** President Xi's visit is a demonstration of China's military preparedness, with a focus on the Rocket Force's capabilities. It sends a strong political message both to domestic audiences, reinforcing Xi's leadership, and to external actors, signaling China's readiness in potential conflicts, particularly with respect to Taiwan and U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific.
- **Military Capabilities of the Rocket Force:** The PLA Rocket Force is critical to China's strategic deterrence and includes over 2,300 conventionally armed missiles and more than 500 nuclear warheads. Recent developments, including improved missile accuracy and new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests, position China as a significant military power capable of countering U.S. and allied forces in the region.
- **Implications for Regional Security:** The Rocket Force's increasing capabilities present a heightened threat to countries in East Asia, particularly South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The recent test of the DF-31AG ICBM, with a range of over 12,000 kilometers, demonstrates China's ability to threaten U.S. territories and bases, complicating the regional security calculus.



Background:

President Xi Jinping's visit to the Rocket Force comes amid rising tensions in the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. North Korea's recent accusations against South Korea for sending unmanned drones and propaganda materials have escalated the situation, with North Korea formally designating South Korea a hostile state. Additionally, the ongoing U.S. support for Taiwan's military modernization continues to strain U.S.-China relations, particularly in the context of China's commitment to the eventual reunification of Taiwan.

In this context, the Rocket Force plays a crucial role in China's defense strategy. It is responsible for both conventional and nuclear missile operations and has undergone significant modernization efforts in recent years. These efforts are aimed at enhancing China's ability to project power in the region and to maintain a credible deterrent against adversaries.



Situational Analysis:

During his visit, Xi urged the Rocket Force to focus on boosting its "deterrence and combat capabilities" and emphasized the importance of loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party. The visit aligns with broader efforts by Xi to solidify control over the military, following recent purges of high-ranking defense officials.

The PLA Rocket Force operates from nine bases across China, with six of these focused on missile operations. The force is primarily tasked with operations in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea but has demonstrated capabilities to operate against the Korean Peninsula, India, Russia, and the U.S. These developments are crucial in light of the Rocket Force's growing arsenal, which includes Dong Feng (DF) ballistic missiles and Hong Niao (HN) cruise missiles.





Strategic Assessment:

Xi's visit to the Rocket Force headquarters signals China's commitment to maintaining and advancing its missile and nuclear capabilities amid increasing geopolitical tensions. The PLA Rocket Force plays a central role in China's strategy of deterrence, particularly against U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific. China's modernization efforts, including the enhancement of missile accuracy and range, are aimed at creating a credible deterrent capable of offsetting U.S. missile defenses and extended alliances in the region.

Additionally, the timing of the visit suggests that China is prepared to use the Rocket Force as a strategic tool in potential conflicts involving Taiwan, the South China Sea, and even the Korean Peninsula. The DF-31AG ICBM test in September 2024 is a clear demonstration of China's ability to project nuclear power far beyond its immediate region, directly threatening U.S. bases in Guam and potentially the U.S. mainland.



Threat Analysis:

The enhanced capabilities of the PLA Rocket Force present a multifaceted threat:

- **Regional Threats:** China's missile arsenal poses a significant risk to Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and U.S. bases in the Pacific. The DF-21D, known as the "carrier killer," and the DF-26, capable of targeting U.S. assets in Guam, give China a decisive advantage in regional conflicts. The modernization of these systems indicates a clear intent to deter regional powers from intervening in China's sphere of influence.

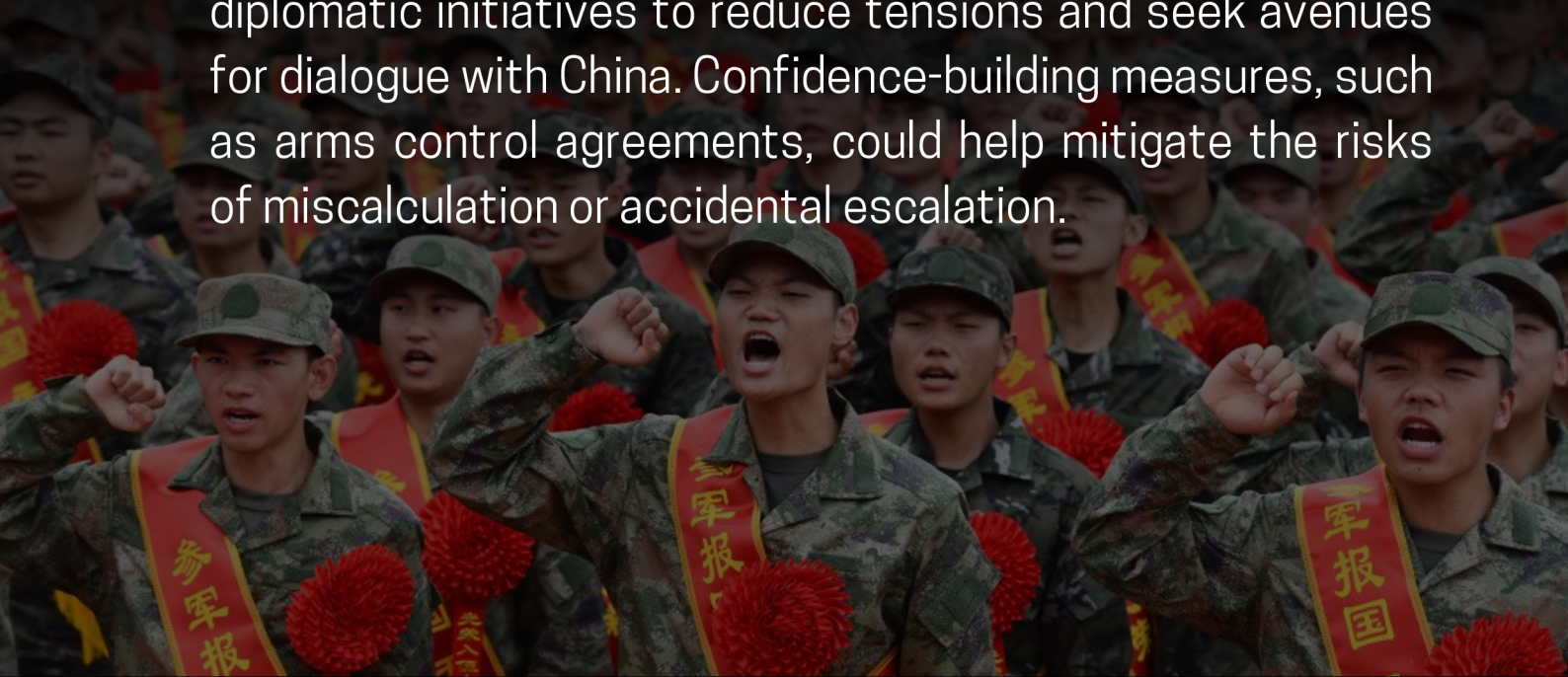




- **Global Implications:** The recent test of the DF-31AG ICBM underscores China's global ambitions, with its ability to reach U.S. territory. This development has escalated concerns in Washington, particularly as China seeks to counter U.S. missile defense systems and extend its strategic reach. The Rocket Force's nuclear arsenal is also a critical element of China's broader deterrence strategy, aimed at preventing U.S. intervention in conflicts over Taiwan or the South China Sea.
- **Political Control:** Xi's visit also serves as a reminder of his ongoing efforts to consolidate control over the military. The emphasis on political loyalty and mission responsibility reflects concerns about potential dissent within the armed forces, particularly following recent high-profile purges. This internal consolidation strengthens Xi's position domestically while ensuring the military remains aligned with his strategic objectives.

Recommendations:

- **Strengthening Regional Alliances:** The U.S. and its allies must enhance military cooperation and intelligence-sharing to counter the growing threat posed by the PLA Rocket Force. Joint military exercises and missile defense cooperation, particularly with Japan and South Korea, should be prioritized to deter Chinese aggression.
- **Monitoring China's Missile Modernization:** Continuous intelligence collection and analysis of China's missile modernization efforts are essential to maintain strategic stability in the region. Satellite imagery, signals intelligence (SIGINT), and human intelligence (HUMINT) should be employed to track developments in the PLA Rocket Force's capabilities.
- **Engaging in Diplomatic Dialogue:** Regional stakeholders, including South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, should engage in diplomatic initiatives to reduce tensions and seek avenues for dialogue with China. Confidence-building measures, such as arms control agreements, could help mitigate the risks of miscalculation or accidental escalation.



Conclusion:

President Xi Jinping's visit to the PLA Rocket Force underscores China's growing military ambitions and its intent to enhance its missile capabilities as a means of deterring regional and global adversaries. The Rocket Force plays a central role in China's military strategy, particularly in light of rising tensions with the U.S. and its allies in the Asia-Pacific. This visit serves as both a message of military strength and a demonstration of Xi's political control over China's armed forces. As China continues to modernize its missile arsenal, regional actors must remain vigilant and enhance collective security measures to maintain stability in the region.





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