**Analyzing PLA Amphibious Fleet Expansion: Implications for Strike, Fires, and U.S. Strategy**

**Introduction**

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China is actively expanding its amphibious fleet, signaling its intention to develop capabilities that would enable a potential invasion of Taiwan (Congressional Research Service, [China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress](https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33153.pdf), 2024). This development poses a significant challenge to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and its strategic interests in the region. By examining this adversarial challenge through the lenses of the Air Force core mission of Strike and the joint function of Fires, we can better understand its impact and explore strategies to mitigate the associated risks.

**Purpose and Scope of Joint Function and Air Force Core Mission**

**Joint Fire Support:**

The joint fire support is a critical component of modern military operations, serving as the means by which commanders apply force—either lethal or non-lethal—to achieve desired effects against an adversary (JP 3-09, [Joint Fire Support](https://www.jcs.mil/portals/36/documents/doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf), 2019). This function plays a pivotal role in shaping the battlefield, influencing the flow of combat, and ensuring the success of both operational and strategic objectives. Joint fire support is not limited to traditional forms of engagement but instead encompass a diverse array of tools and methods, adapting to the complexities of contemporary warfare.

At its core, the joint fire support includes the employment of kinetic capabilities such as artillery, missile systems, and precision airstrikes. These tools provide direct, tangible effects, such as the destruction of enemy forces, equipment, or infrastructure. Artillery and missiles, for instance, deliver long-range firepower that can suppress enemy positions, support ground maneuvers, or interdict supply lines. Airstrikes offer another dimension of precision and flexibility, capable of targeting key enemy assets with minimal collateral damage (JP 3-09, [Joint Fire Support](https://www.jcs.mil/portals/36/documents/doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf), 2019).

In addition to kinetic methods, joint fire support also incorporates non-kinetic capabilities that target an adversary’s systems and networks. Cyber operations are a prime example, enabling forces to disrupt or degrade enemy communications, command and control systems, and critical infrastructure without the need for physical engagement (JP 3-09, [Joint Fire Support](https://www.jcs.mil/portals/36/documents/doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf), 2019). Electronic warfare, which includes jamming enemy radars and communications, similarly falls under the non-kinetic umbrella of joint fire support, demonstrating the function’s versatility in achieving mission objectives.

**Strike:**

The Air Force core mission of Strike is one of the most vital components of modern military strategy, reflecting the ability to project power with precision and effectiveness ([The Air Force](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_1/AFDP-1.pdf), 2021). This mission focuses on delivering airpower to achieve a broad range of effects—tactical, operational, and strategic—depending on the objectives of the operation. The primary goals of Strike missions are to destroy enemy forces and infrastructure, disrupt their operations, and deter future hostile actions, all while adhering to the principle of minimizing collateral damage to civilian populations and non-combatant areas ([AFDP 3-03, Counterland Operations - Air Force Doctrine](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-03/3-03-AFDP-COUNTERLAND.pdf), 2024).

At the tactical level, Strike operations target immediate threats on the battlefield, such as enemy troop formations, armored vehicles, or anti-aircraft systems ([AFDP 3-03, Counterland Operations - Air Force Doctrine](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-03/3-03-AFDP-COUNTERLAND.pdf), 2024). These actions directly support ground and maritime forces, enabling them to maneuver with greater freedom and safety. On an operational scale, Strike missions may focus on disrupting enemy supply chains, communication nodes, or key transportation hubs, impairing their ability to sustain prolonged combat operations. At the strategic level, Strikes aim to achieve broader objectives, such as weakening an adversary’s economy or degrading their ability to wage war by targeting critical infrastructure, command centers, or high-value assets ([AFDP 3-70, Strategic Attack](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-70/3-70-AFDP-STRATEGIC-ATTACK.pdf), 2024).

**Impact of PLA’s Amphibious Fleet Expansion**

The PLA’s development of a large, dedicated amphibious fleet directly threatens the effectiveness of the joint fire support and the Air Force Strike mission. Its implications are multifaceted and require careful analysis.

First off, the PLA Navy (PLAN) now operates amphibious assault ships, landing craft, and other assets capable of projecting power onto Taiwan’s shores (Joshua Arostegui, [China Maritime Report No. 32: The PCH191 Modular Long-Range Rocket Launcher: Reshaping the PLA Army's Role in a Cross-Strait Campaign](https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/32/), 2023). These assets enable rapid deployment of troops and equipment, complicating U.S. and allied efforts to mount effective defensive or counteroffensive operations. To support its amphibious operations, China has enhanced its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, including long-range missile systems, integrated air defenses, and cyber warfare (Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, [China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy](https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/), 2023). These systems pose significant risks to U.S. aircraft and ships, challenging their ability to deliver effective joint fire support and Strike capabilities in contested zones.Taiwan’s proximity to the Chinese mainland and its complex geography, including narrow straits and urban centers, increases the difficulty of applying precision joint fire support and Strikes without risking collateral damage or escalation.

Secondly, a robust Chinese amphibious fleet undermines the U.S.’s ability to deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific (David Lague, [China expands its amphibious forces in challenge to U.S. supremacy beyond Asia](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-military-amphibious/), 2020). The perception of Chinese dominance in this capability may embolden Beijing to act decisively against Taiwan.The U.S. military must allocate significant resources to counter the amphibious threat, potentially overextending its operational tempo and diverting focus from other strategic priorities.Chinese integrated air defense systems (IADS) and long-range airpower increase the complexity of establishing air superiority—a prerequisite for effective Strike operations (Peter Mattes, [Systems of Systems: What, Exactly, is an Integrated Air Defense System](https://mitchellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/a2dd91_2f17e209f90f4aaab80b116e4d139eb4.pdf), 2021).

**Mitigating the Challenge**

To address the challenges of PLA’s amphibious fleet expansion, the U.S. military must adopt a multi-faceted strategy leveraging advanced capabilities, joint integration, and allied partnerships. Below are key approaches to mitigating these challenges:

First off, Distributed Marintime Operations (DMO) emphasizes the dispersion of naval forces to enhance survivability and combat effectiveness in a contested environment ( Dmitry Filipoff, [Executing distributed operations in an increasingly contested maritime environment](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/executing-distributed-operations-in-an-increasingly-contested-maritime-environment), 2024). By leveraging small, agile, and networked platforms, the U.S. Navy can mitigate the risk posed by China’s A2/AD systems and provide persistent Fires support. This concept supports Air Force Strike operations by enabling joint targeting and ISR-sharing across domains, enhancing precision and operational flexibility.

Secondly, hypersonic missiles, capable of traveling at speeds exceeding Mach 5, offer a game-changing capability for rapid and precise targeting of high-value PLA assets, such as amphibious ships and command centers (Ryan Robertson, [US armed forces test Dark Eagle hypersonic missile at Mach 5 speeds](https://san.com/cc/us-armed-forces-test-dark-eagle-hypersonic-missile-at-mach-5-speeds/), 2021). These weapons are difficult to intercept and provide a critical edge in countering China’s amphibious operations.

Thirdly, strengthening partnerships with regional allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia is vital (David Vergun, [Austin Says Regional Alliances Strengthen Indo-Pacific Security](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3992739/austin-says-regional-alliances-strengthen-indo-pacific-security/), 2024). Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities should also be bolstered through the provision of coastal defense cruise missiles, advanced ISR platforms, and training.

Additionally, establishing a robust IAMD system in the Indo-Pacific can neutralize the PLA’s missile threats, enabling safer operational environments for Strike missions ([The Future of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) Against China](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1396&context=hsgconference), 2023). Deploying platforms like the Patriot and THAAD systems and investing in directed energy weapons can significantly enhance regional defense (Colin Clark, [US, allies must rebuild air forces, invest in drones to counter China’s missile threat to runways](https://breakingdefense.com/2024/12/us-allies-must-rebuild-air-forces-invest-in-drones-to-counter-chinas-missile-threat-to-runways-stimson/), 2024).

Finally, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) can enhance ISR and targeting for both Fires and Strike missions. Predictive analytics can anticipate PLA movements and prioritize high-value targets, ensuring efficient resource allocation.

**Conclusion**

The PLA’s development of a large amphibious fleet presents a formidable challenge to INDOPACOM and U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Its implications for the joint function of Fires and the Air Force core mission of Strike highlight the urgency of adapting U.S. strategies and capabilities. By employing advanced technologies, refining operational concepts, and fostering robust alliances, the U.S. can mitigate these challenges and maintain its strategic advantage in the region. Through proactive measures and a commitment to innovation, the U.S. military can ensure that it remains prepared to counter the growing threat posed by China’s ambitions in Taiwan and beyond.