



C H I N A A E R O S P A C E
S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

PRC Media's Coverage of Mobility Guardian Projects Self-Confidence

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Introduction

From 5 to 21 July 2023 Air Mobility Command conducted the exercise Mobility Guardian 2023 (MG23). MG23 was the largest iteration of the exercise, and it was the first iteration to be conducted outside the USA. It involved detachments from seven countries, and it spanned the Pacific Ocean latitudinally and longitudinally. Despite the unprecedented scale of MG23, the news media of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) hardly reported about MG23, but this muted reaction to MG23 was normal for Beijing. Moreover, while the reports differed in whether they explicitly mentioned a threat to the PRC from MG23 or not, they all projected calm and self-assuredness with respect to the exercise.



U.S. and allied aircraft conduct an elephant walk on Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, July 19, 2023.

Report in PLA Media

Only one article about MG23 was published in the PLA's news media. The article was published on 14 July 2023 in the newspaper *Chinese National Defense News*, which is the sister publication of *Liberation Army News*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission. The Central Military Commission is the PRC's equivalent of the U.S. Department of Defense. *Chinese National Defense News'* audience is the militia and those working in the PRC's defense establishment outside the PLA and the Chinese People's Armed Police: people involved in conscription, civilian mobilization, and "defense education." The indoctrination

of the public in military affairs is a part of “defense education,” so *Chinese National Defense News* covers foreign military affairs frequently—more so than *Liberation Army News*.

The author of the article was one Wang Changfan, a frequent contributor to the International section of *Chinese National Defense News* whose affiliation is unknown. The first two-thirds of Wang’s article was factual. Wang’s summary of MG23 was not comprehensive, but neither was it inaccurate. Wang paid particular attention to the nonstop flight of a Royal Air Force A400M from the United Kingdom to Andersen Air Force Base.¹ He also pointed out that the purpose of this iteration of the exercise was to practice implementing the Agile Combat Employment concept: “Through this iteration of the exercise, the U.S. Air Force plans to further expand the practical scope of the concept and to comprehensively integrate the air transport forces of the USA and its allies in order to realize extensive cooperation and support under the conditions of a clash occurring in the Asia-Pacific region.”²

Wang editorialized in the last third of his article. First, he mentioned that the U.S. military had conducted several exercises in the region “in the past month,” and he concluded that the “content and frequency” of these exercises and MG23 “has exceeded the normal demand of national territorial defense, thereby raising concern in surrounding countries.”³ He also wrote that the USA is dedicating more funding to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and deploying more forces and weaponry to the region.⁴ Wang ended his article by citing unnamed—and almost certainly nonexistent—“analysts” who reportedly said that “the U.S. military’s dense deployment of offensive weapons and equipment to the Asia-Pacific region is liable to cause misjudgments of the situation, so it is not conducive to the security and stability of the region.”^{5, i}

Reports in Civilian Media

There was not much more reporting in the PRC’s civilian media. MG23 was covered in the 22 July 2023 broadcast of the China National Radio program *Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events*.ⁱⁱ The program is an award-winning one that is produced by the Military Programs Center of the China Media Group, which subsumed China Central Television, China National Radio, and China Radio International in 2018—all of which are official, albeit nonmilitary, media.⁶ The program summarized MG23 very briefly, but accurately, and had a retired PLA officer, Yin Zhuo, offer commentary.⁷ Yin emphasized the geographic scope of MG23 and the number of participating countries, but he added that the exercise was “very likely” to be a “rehearsal of an operational plan.”⁸ Yin also remarked that the description of MG23 as the largest such exercise in history has “obvious propaganda value” that is intended to have a deterrent effect.⁹ Yin concluded his commentary by stating that American military exercises, including MG23, are intended to “export war” in order to “alleviate the troubles that [the USA] is facing domestically.”¹⁰ “American mainstream ideology regards Russia and a major Asian power as affecting America’s future development and as the primary obstacles threatening American hegemony,” Yin added.¹¹

ⁱ Citing experts and analysts to editorialize is a tactic that even journalists in democratic societies employ, but at least they usually identify these people. The PLA news media formulaically concludes reports such as these by citing unnamed analysts who unfailingly toe Beijing’s line. It would not be difficult for Beijing to find analysts who would do so, but it is even easier to put words in nonexistent analysts’ mouths.

ⁱⁱ The author would like to thank Eli Tirk for finding this source.

Although Yin's commentary was more critical than that of Wang, like Wang, Yin avoided explicitly connecting MG23 to the PRC, even referring to the PRC as "a major Asian power" to try to maintain the disassociation. Almost three weeks later, on 10 August 2023, an active-duty PLA officer writing for the newspaper *China Youth Daily* took a different tack. The officer is army Senior Colonel Wu Minwen, a professor at the PLA's National University for Defense Technology.¹² *China Youth Daily* is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Youth League, which is essentially the Chinese Communist Party's youth organization. Consequently, the newspaper's audience is the youth of the PRC.

Like the articles before it, the point of Wu's article was to "properly" interpret MG23, not to provide an objective military analysis of the exercise. Therefore, Wu's description of the exercise itself was also minimal but accurate. He, too, placed MG23 in a broader context of military cooperation among the USA, American allies, NATO, and India.¹³ He included verbatim the line that appeared in Wang's article about how the purpose of MG23 was to practice implementing Agile Combat Employment (translated above), perhaps indicating that both writers were quoting the same readout/guidance on which they based their articles.¹⁴ However, Wu added that MG23 had three characteristics. The first characteristic that he listed was that the planning for MG23 was "meticulous."¹⁵ The second was that the scale of MG23 was "unprecedented."¹⁶

The third characteristic that Wu listed distinguishes Wu's article from the others. Wu wrote that the third characteristic of MG23 was that it was "clear" who the exercise's "imaginary enemy" was.¹⁷ Citing an article in *Stars and Stripes*, Wu quoted Gen. Minihan saying that MG23 was a "key test of 'whether the [U.S. Air Force] can defeat China in a potential conflict or not'"—a quote that did not appear in the article.¹⁸ In fact, Wu wrote about the general at length. He placed the general's view about a potential conflict with the PRC in the context of supposed hostility towards the PRC from Gen. Brown and President Biden.¹⁹ But Wu also claimed that Gen Minihan's attitude towards combat is "fanatical," and perhaps to prove his claim, he mentioned that Gen. Minihan had birthed Rapid Dragon.^{20, iii}

But while Wu indicated that MG23 was directed against the PRC, he downplayed the threat that it posed. He wrote that using one iteration of an exercise to test whether one can defeat the PRC or not—a reference to the quote that Wu himself fabricated—is "obviously" an attempt at intimidation by Gen Minihan.²¹ "Although [MG23] is not irrelevant, it is at the very least answering a five-hundred-kilogram problem with a 200-gram answer—the weights do not match," Wu said.²² Yet Wu concluded his article by stating that MG23 "deserves a high degree of vigilance"

ⁱⁱⁱ For an article about how the PLA views Rapid Dragon, see Derek Solen, "PLA Blows Hot and Cold over U.S. Air Force's Multirole Heavy Aircraft," *China Brief* 22, no. 23 (December 22, 2022), <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-blows-hot-and-cold-over-u-s-air-forces-multirole-heavy-aircraft/>. PLA and PRC media never mentioned the demonstration of Rapid Dragon during MG23, but the PLA's vexation over Rapid Dragon was perhaps indicated by the fact that both PLA newspapers reported Tokyo's effort to develop or acquire palletized munitions. 王笑梦 [Wang Xiaomeng], "日本欲改装“空中武库机”" [Japan wants to modify into 'aerial missile trucks'], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], August 15, 2023, accessed August 24, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-08-15&paperNumber=04&articleid=912564; "日本研究使用运输机搭载发射远程导弹" [Japan to research using transport aircraft to carry and launch long-range missiles], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], August 17, 2023, accessed August 24, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-08-17&paperNumber=11&articleid=912772.

because its “directed nature” and “intention of sounding things out” were “without a doubt, abundantly clear.”²³

Conclusion

The amount of coverage that the PRC’s news media gave MG23 may not seem commensurate with the scale of the exercise, but the PLA tends to report very little about foreign military exercises, including American ones. Neither is the restrained tone of Wang’s article unusual because the PLA’s news reports about American military activities are rarely vitriolic even though they are always negative. Moreover, the PLA’s news media usually ignores the place that the PRC occupies in American defense policy and military activities—even when the PRC is explicitly identified as a potential adversary.

Wu’s article diverged from Wang’s in this respect, but his article did not diverge from *China Youth Daily*’s usual practice of indicating the PRC’s place in American defense policy and military activities. The difference is one of editorial practice, not of individual interpretation. Naturally, one wonders why the difference exists, and the most likely explanation lies in the two newspapers’ intended audiences.

It may seem that the PLA is missing an opportunity to propagandize against the USA, but the PLA’s news media is not above publishing anti-American vitriol; it just exhibits restraint with respect to what it would regard as direct American military threats to the PRC’s security. Propaganda against the USA and American allies pervades the PRC and the PLA, so it is unnecessary to take every propaganda opportunity. After all, the implications for the PRC of an exercise like MG23 should be clear to all in the PLA. But by seeming aloof, Beijing can project an image of reasonableness and, implicitly, confidence. This attitude may help Beijing preclude any thoughts among the members of the PLA that its response is insufficient. Yin’s interview may indicate that the same tactic is employed against the general public for the same reason.

On the other hand, the malleability of the youth presents Beijing with a challenge as well as an opportunity. The PRC’s youth are naturally less informed, less indoctrinated, and less securely rooted in society. Consequently, they are also more open to heterodoxy. Therefore, Beijing may believe that the youth need more explicit explanations to understand matters “properly.” After all, the youth cannot share Beijing’s Manichean worldview unless the idea that there is an array of hostile countries constantly threatening the PRC is clearly spelled out first. Doing so may moderate any attraction that the youth feel towards those countries, and it may also encourage some of the youth to devote their energy to military service.^{iv} (This would explain why the media of the PRC have completely ignored the fact that American and allied forces that were deployed for MG23 saved the lives of 11 PRC citizens whose boat had become disabled and had gone adrift in the Pacific Ocean.^{24.v}) And having an active-duty officer of the PLA explain the threat while simultaneously downplaying it emits an air of authority and confidence. The message seems to be that an unremittingly belligerent USA is ganging up with its allies to threaten the PRC yet again,

^{iv} *China Youth Daily* seems to be the only civilian newspaper that still produces its own reports about the PLA, probably for this very reason.

^v The author would like to thank Maj. Jason Rimmelin for bringing this rescue to his attention.

but Beijing and the PLA are on top of things. In the end, despite the differences in how it was communicated, this same message of imperturbability was conveyed in all the reports about MG23.

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Notes

¹ 王昌凡 [Wang Changfan], “美空军在亚太组织多国机动演练” [U.S. Air Force organizes multinational mobility drill in Asia-Pacific], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], July 14, 2023, accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zgffb&paperDate=2023-07-14&paperNumber=04&articleid=910508.

² 王昌凡 [Wang Changfan], “美空军在亚太组织多国机动演练” [U.S. Air Force organizes multinational mobility drill in Asia-Pacific], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], July 14, 2023, accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zgffb&paperDate=2023-07-14&paperNumber=04&articleid=910508.

³ 王昌凡 [Wang Changfan], “美空军在亚太组织多国机动演练” [U.S. Air Force organizes multinational mobility drill in Asia-Pacific], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], July 14, 2023, accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zgffb&paperDate=2023-07-14&paperNumber=04&articleid=910508.

⁴ 王昌凡 [Wang Changfan], “美空军在亚太组织多国机动演练” [U.S. Air Force organizes multinational mobility drill in Asia-Pacific], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], July 14, 2023, accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zgffb&paperDate=2023-07-14&paperNumber=04&articleid=910508.

⁵ 王昌凡 [Wang Changfan], “美空军在亚太组织多国机动演练” [U.S. Air Force organizes multinational mobility drill in Asia-Pacific], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], July 14, 2023, accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zgffb&paperDate=2023-07-14&paperNumber=04&articleid=910508.

⁶ 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], 央广网 [China Media Group Online], accessed August 10, 2023, <http://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/>.

⁷ “美国纠集 6 国展开所谓“史上规模最大”战备演习 尹卓：要记住“帝国主义就意味着战争”” [USA musters six countries to launch so-called ‘largest-scale’ war-preparedness exercise ‘in history’: must remember that ‘imperialism means war’], 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], aired July 22, 2023, on 中央人民广播电台 [China National Radio], accessed August 11, 2023, https://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/jsrp/20230722/t20230722_526340333.shtml.

⁸ “美国纠集 6 国展开所谓“史上规模最大”战备演习 尹卓：要记住“帝国主义就意味着战争”” [USA musters six countries to launch so-called ‘largest-scale’ war-preparedness exercise ‘in history’: must remember that ‘imperialism means war’], 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], aired July 22, 2023, on 中央人民广播电台 [China National Radio], accessed August 11, 2023, https://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/jsrp/20230722/t20230722_526340333.shtml.

⁹ “美国纠集 6 国展开所谓“史上规模最大”战备演习 尹卓：要记住“帝国主义就意味着战争”” [USA musters six countries to launch so-called ‘largest-scale’ war-preparedness exercise ‘in history’: must remember that ‘imperialism means war’], 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], aired July 22, 2023, on 中央人民广播电台 [China National Radio], accessed August 11, 2023, https://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/jsrp/20230722/t20230722_526340333.shtml.

¹⁰ “美国纠集 6 国展开所谓“史上规模最大”战备演习 尹卓：要记住“帝国主义就意味着战争”” [USA musters six countries to launch so-called ‘largest-scale’ war-preparedness exercise ‘in history’: must remember that

‘imperialism means war’], 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], aired July 22, 2023, on 中央人民广播电台 [China National Radio], accessed August 11, 2023, https://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/jsrp/20230722/t20230722_526340333.shtml.

¹¹ “美国纠集 6 国展开所谓“史上规模最大”战备演习 尹卓：要记住“帝国主义就意味着战争”” [USA musters six countries to launch so-called ‘largest-scale’ war-preparedness exercise ‘in history’: must remember that ‘imperialism means war’], 晚高峰观军情 [Wan Gaofeng Observes Military Events], aired July 22, 2023, on 中央人民广播电台 [China National Radio], accessed August 11, 2023, https://military.cnr.cn/zt/wgfgjq/jsrp/20230722/t20230722_526340333.shtml.

¹² 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “国防科大专家带你解码无人作战“蜂群战术”” [An NUDT specialist will help you decipher ‘swarm tactics’ in unmanned aerial vehicle operations], 环球 [Globe], November 11, 2020, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.nudt.edu.cn/zjkd/xysh/fd14ba9057f343fea6e4084f9056634e.htm>.

¹³ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

¹⁴ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

¹⁵ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

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¹⁷ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

¹⁸ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm; Seth Robson, “Six partners, 3,000 miles: Air Mobility Command undertakes largest readiness exercise in Indo-Pacific,” Stars and Stripes, July 17, 2023, accessed August 23, 2023, https://www.stripes.com/branches/air_force/2023-07-17/air-force-mobility-exercise-pacific-10763789.html.

¹⁹ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

²⁰ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

²¹ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

²² 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

²³ 吴敏文 [Wu Minwen], “‘机动卫士-2023’显示美军正加紧在印太地区的战争准备” [Mobility Guardian 2023 shows American military intensifying preparation for war in Indo-Pacific], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], August 10, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-08/10/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230810_3-07.htm.

²⁴ SrA. Tiffany Del Oso, “US, Coalition Forces exercising in Indo-Pacific conduct real-world search and rescue operation, save 11 stranded in dangerous sea conditions,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, July 13, 2023, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/449080/us-coalition-forces-exercising-indo-pacific-conduct-real-world-search-and-rescue-operation-save-11-stranded-dangerous-sea>.