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ABSTRACT

In the past three years since Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Communist Party of China, the international community has witnessed the People's Liberation Army becoming more active, across the disputed Sino-Indian border, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. As Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping is leading a historic transformation of the PLA from a land-centric homeland defence force, to one that is capable of intervening in regional contingencies. While it will take time before the PLA can match the global reach of the US military, the PLA is seeking to model itself on its American counterpart, emphasising joint operational capabilities and an ability to fight in a high-technology, 'information technology' environment. Yet the need to professionalise is only one aspect of the Chinese situation, and the reform measures called for, cover a wide range—from creating new organisations for the command and employment of the forces, to enhancing military training, discipline inspection, and audit.

INTRODUCTION

The three-year tenure of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been an eventful one. Its principal focus has been on the overhaul of China's economy, governance systems and the military.

At one level, Xi and the CPC have sought reform to make the role of the market decisive in the Chinese economy; at another, they have embarked on a tough campaign to curb the corruption that was eating into the country's vitals. Associated with this have been the efforts to legitimise the role of the CPC by giving more autonomy to the judicial system and enhancing the people's trust in the party.

Reform is the leitmotif that has cut across the regimes of all supreme leaders of China since Deng Xiaoping, but so has the imperative of maintaining the CPC's control over the military. Xi has exercised strong leadership over the PLA, not hesitating to make bold and decisive moves to bring down two of the most powerful men in the PLA: Gen. Guo Boxiong and Gen. Xu Caihou, both of whom have served as vice-chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC).

A great deal of media attention focuses on the hardware being acquired by the PLA. But perhaps, the more important aspect of the change it is undergoing are those related to its command and control, organisation, employment and doctrine. Plans unveiled during the Third Plenum in 2013 have quickly taken root, and by the end of 2015, the first decisive phase has been rolled out, even though the new-model PLA will only begin to emerge by the centenary of the founding of the CPC in 2021. This new model will see the evolution of the PLA from being a land-centric force devoted to homeland defence, to one with expeditionary capabilities.

On the last day of 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping ceremonially inaugurated three new divisions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by presenting their newly appointed leaders with military flags. The first was the new command of the PLA Army (PLAA) which had previously been run by the CMC's four General Departments; the second was a new command called the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF); and the third, the upgradation of the PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) to a new PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), whose primary function is to look after China's nuclear forces.

According to the "Opinions of the CMC on deepening national defense and the armed forces"—issued on 1 January 2016 by the CMC, chaired by Xi—a new structure would be established in which the CMC takes direct

charge of the PLA and replaces the military regions (MRs) by new Theatre Commands (TC). A month later, China announced that it was dis-establishing its decades-old system of organising its armed forces in seven Military Regions (MRs) and replacing them with five new TCs.

This paper examines the process of defence restructuring and reform in China under Xi Jinping. It will look into Xi's approach to the military, the decisions of the Third Plenum, and the various steps taken to “establish a modern military system with Chinese characteristics.”

IMPERATIVES FOR REFORM

From the time Deng Xiaoping assumed charge of China, there has been a systematic effort to transform the PLA, trained to fight a war over the vast expanses of the country, into a well-trained, technologically capable force. However, the military was assigned the lowest priority in Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernisations and whatever change that occurred was incremental, focusing initially with the need to cut its numbers and eventually to get it out of commercial activity.

The operations carried out by the US in Bosnia in 1992-93, the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995-96, the US wars in Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003—all convinced the Chinese leadership that the PLA needed to be reformed, if it was to remain relevant, in the era characterised by the influence of information technology (which the Chinese term as “informationization”) and precision long-range munitions. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese defence spending increased sharply, resulting in the country taking impressive strides in capabilities. By mid-2010 China had been able to rapidly upgrade its military hardware, and this was manifested by the increasing capabilities and assertion of the PLAN in the East, South China Seas and the Indian Ocean and the displays on the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in October 2009, as well as in September 2015 to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory over Japan. Around 2009, some changes relating to military training and staff structures took place. Smaller brigade-size formations took the place of divisions in China's 18 Group Armies, and air brigades were created and put under the command of air

bases. But when it faced a push back in the form of the US “pivot” to Asia in 2011-2012, there was a realisation that if push came to shove, the PLA would be of no match to the highly professional and technologically advanced US forces. Thus the current thrust towards reform for creating a more professional “war winning” force, focusing on its apex level management organisation, its regional command structure, and use.

The second contrary, and continuing, imperative confronting Xi and his associates is the need to keep the PLA close to the Party. The PLA has a unique role in modern Chinese history as the sword arm of the Communist Party of China. Mao Zedong strongly opposed the concept of a purely professional military and believed that the PLA's role was as much to fight, as to establish the political power of the revolution. In 2014, Xi Jinping strongly emphasised this view in his speech at the 85th anniversary of the Gutian Conference, in the presence of the entire brass of the PLA.¹

Another recurring worry reflected in the Chinese official media has been the concept of “nationalisation” of the military, in other words making the PLA a national army instead of an instrument of the CPC. This flared up in 2012 as the leadership transition got underway, but as political analyst, Michael S Chase pointed out, this is a recurring theme reflecting the concerns of the loyalty of the PLA in the minds of the CPC leadership.² Writing in August 2015 in the *PLA Daily*, Ma Bo of the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) looked at the various expositions of Xi Jinping on what he termed as the “Strong Armed Forces Dream,” and said that one of their key aims was to “correct the notion of 'depoliticised armed forces' that had been spread by netizens in the wake of the Third Plenum.” Xi's aim, said Ma, was to “refute such misconceptions” and to explicate the “strong ideological basis” of the reform process.³

The international community does not have a clear idea of the influence of the Bo Xilai affair. Confronted with a scandal related to his wife exploding on the eve of the decadal transition of the Communist Party leadership, Bo, a putative rival of Xi Jinping, made an unscheduled visit in February 2012 to the Kunming headquarters of the 14th Army, which his father, the revolutionary hero Bo Yibo, had once commanded.⁴ What he was up to remains unclear, but he failed, and is currently serving a life sentence.

Equally murky was an episode described in a *New York Times* article in August that same year which spoke of the powerful Gen. Zhang Qinsheng lashing out at then President Hu Jintao in a drunken rage because he felt he was being kept out of the Central Military Commission. Zhang was subsequently sidelined by Xi Jinping who took over the Chairmanship of the Communist Party and the Central Military Commission in November 2012. But the purport of the NYT item was that in the run-up to the decadal changeover of the party leadership, PLA generals were flexing their muscles and were getting more outspoken in their “desire for greater influence over policy and politics”.⁵

A fourth imperative was that the MR organisation was obsolete. It had been set up under circumstances which had dramatically changed. Till now, the CMC exercised command and control over the seven military regions or area commands, the Navy, Air Force and the Second Artillery through four headquarter departments—General Staff, General Political, General Logistics, and General Armaments. This was always a cumbersome exercise. Historically, regional commanders had been given a great deal of autonomy, especially in a period when China expected external intervention from the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union. This structure was outdated because it had been oriented to warfare within and across China's land borders. Under that system, for example, the MRs have to apply to the headquarters of PLAN or PLAAF and the CMC before dispatching troops for a contingency. The PLA Army did not have its own headquarters and was led, like the PLAN and PLAAF, by the four general departments and the CMC. But with new challenges in air, space, the far seas and cyberspace, China needed more integration of the complex and disparate systems and the ability to use new weapons systems in concert and with speed.

This system, as noted by a commentary in *PLA Daily* on 30 November 2015 after the CMC meeting which adopted the reform plan, was not only outdated, but it challenged the CPC control over the PLA. “The current command system... combines decision-making, enforcement, and oversight functions into one...” It went on to add that the four general headquarters’ “excessive concentration of power has allowed it to become an independent leadership hierarchy overshadowing many of the functions

of the Central Military Commission”.⁶ These words would later be echoed by Xi on 31 December, in his remarks during the ceremony inaugurating the first phase of the reform.

This decentralisation had also led to massive instances of corruption that had sapped its fighting potential. The arrest and imprisonment of two former vice chairmen of the CMC indicated the level to which corruption has affected the PLA.⁷ With a system so deeply infected, it is no surprise that the purge within the PLA continues with several senior military officers being investigated in 2015.⁸ Shanghai-based military expert Ni Lexiong put it directly in 2015, “If you have a military where you can buy positions, it doesn't matter if you have the best weapons in the world”.⁹

China's putative adversaries like the US are quite familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the PLA. Official commentaries may emphasise China's growing power, but specialist reports such as a RAND corporation study released at the beginning of 2015 delineated what is said was China's incomplete military transformation.¹⁰ It noted that despite the attention being paid to the shiny new weapons and systems the PLA was acquiring, the force was still largely equipped with outdated equipment and had a serious problem with the quality of its personnel. The report went on to add that these weaknesses hamstrung the ability of the force “to conduct information-centric, integrated joint operations”.

In early 2015, a noted specialist on the PLA, Dennis Blasko quite bluntly raised serious questions about “the PLA's current ability to fight a modern war against an advanced enemy”. These, he noted, were the divided command authority between combat commanders and political commissars, army dominated chain of command and force structure, too many non-combatant headquarters, inexperienced commanders and staff, understaffed battalion headquarters, undeveloped NCO corps, multiple generations of equipment in units, insufficient realism in training, inadequate air to ground support, and lack of combat experience.¹¹

On the eve of the Third Plenum, in July 2013, Gen. Liu Yazhou, political commissar of the National Defense University (NDU) and a close associate of Xi Jinping, called on the PLA to take up change or risk becoming obsolete. Writing in the influential party journal, *Qiushi*, Gen. Liu said that an army

with “old thinking” and modern equipment would risk defeat.¹² Liu, a son-in-law of Li Xiannian, a former President of China, has been a long-time advocate of reform and liberal ideas in China. Institutions like the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) and the NDU have also played an important role in pushing for reform.

XI AND THE MILITARY

The PLA, which is run by the Central Military Commission (CMC), is chaired by the General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee. There is a complicated parallel relationship between the government of China and the Communist Party which runs that government. The PLA's importance to the CPC was reinforced by its role in the Tiananmen events in 1989.¹³ Crucially, it can be expected to play a similar role in possible future contingencies.

Since all recent General Secretaries have also been the Chairmen of the CMC, their leadership has played an important role in military developments in China. In the Hu Jintao period, the new emphases were encapsulated in the “New Historical Missions” for the PLA which were unveiled on 24 December 2004. Essentially, they comprised the two older missions—defending the CPC and national sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC). And two newer ones—providing a security guarantee for safeguarding “strategic opportunity period in national development”, essentially challenges to China's economic rise and its new global engagements, and playing a role in preserving world peace and promoting common development.¹⁴

As China's naval capabilities increased, they began to patrol areas of the first and second island chains, then moving towards South China Sea and then, in 2013-2014, into the Indian Ocean. China had skilfully used the counter-piracy operations off Somalia to maintain an almost continuous presence in the northern Indian Ocean through some 20 task forces since 2009. Chinese capabilities were also visible in the 2011 evacuation from Libya, and the 2015 from Yemen.¹⁵

Given the relationship between the PLA and the CPC it is not surprising that supervising and leading the armed forces has been an important aspect of Xi Jinping's tenure, which began with his assumption of the Chairmanship of the CMC, at the same time as he became General Secretary of the CPC in November 2012. Jiang Zemin had held on to the CMC office for two years after retiring as General Secretary and President in 2002.

Reform has been the theme of Xi Jinping's presidency from the outset. This has been encapsulated since in a theoretical paradigm, so beloved of Chinese leaders, which talks of the “four comprehensives”: to build a moderately prosperous society; comprehensively deepen reform; govern the nation according to law; and strictly govern the party. A notable feature of the Xi period has been his decision to extend these notions of reform and strict governance to the PLA as well. The other leg of this process has been a massive anti-corruption campaign, which still continues and which has reached up to the highest levels of the military in the form of the imprisonment of the former Vice-Chairmen of the CMC, Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou.

Like all Chinese leaders, Xi has displayed interest in military matters. Leaders preceding Deng Xiaoping had been either PLA generals or political commissars in the PLA. In Xi's case, his father Xi Zhongxun was a noted revolutionary leader who had led PLA forces. More importantly, between 1979 to 1982, Xi junior had served as an assistant to Geng Biao, who was Secretary-General of the powerful CMC. As Xi set out to take command of the country, he made it a special mission to keep the PLA close to himself.

THE CHINA DREAM

Xi's views on matters military became clearer through his publicised tour to the Guangzhou MR in December 2012, a month after he took charge of the CMC and the CPC. This is the region that fronts to the South China Sea where China has made extravagant maritime boundary claims that affect Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.

In all his speeches, Xi has emphasised the need for the military to remain under the command of the party, as well as enhance its professional skills

through hard and realistic training. “We must ensure that our troops are ready when called upon, that they are fully capable of fighting, and that they must win every war”.¹⁶ Xi has linked his presidency to the “China Dream”. The idea was the product of Col. Liu Mingfu, a former professor at NDU who wrote a book with the same name calling for policies that would enable China to surpass the US as a world power. Xi has articulated a more guarded notion, which is about the “rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation. It has been clear from his remarks and policies, though, that military power is an important component of this revival.¹⁷ Speaking to sailors on board the Haikou, a guided-missile destroyer in December 2012, he referred to the “China Dream” which he said is “to be the dream of a strong nation. And for the military, it is a dream of a strong military”. He added, “To achieve the great revival of the Chinese nation, we must ensure there is unison between a prosperous country and strong military”.¹⁸ The theme recurred in his remarks three years later, in November 2015, during the key meeting of the CMC where the reform process was finally clinched. There he noted that the changes would provide the impetus to “the China Dream of developing Strong Armed Forces”.¹⁹ This is a phrase which recurs many times in his own speeches or comments by other officials.

Apart from professional ability and loyalty, Xi stressed the need for the PLA to change its entire culture and adopt a style of “frugality and austerity.” In December 2012, the PLA passed its “Ten Regulations on Improving the Work Style of the PLA” which formally banned liquor in PLA functions, forbade the holding of big banquets, and called on the PLA brass to adopt a simple style in their inspection tours.²⁰

On 13 January 2013, the Xinhua News Agency released a set of instructions from the General Political Department (GPD) and the PLA Disciplinary Inspection Commission on “solidly implementing the objectives of administering [military] party organizations with strictness and administering the army with strictness”.²¹ Subsequently, in April 2013, new instructions were issued ordering the PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP) generals and senior officers to spend two weeks in the frontline as enlisted soldiers. Regiment and brigade commanders were called upon to do this once in three years, the division and corps commanders once in four years, and

higher leaders from the headquarters and military regions and districts once in five years. The idea of declassing is, of course, part and parcel of Maoist practice. But the PLA had generally been exempt from the humiliating periods when they were forced to undertake menial labour.²²

On the eve of demitting office, Hu Jintao had announced a new set of heads of the four General Departments, the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLASAF, and the seven MRs but it is now well known that the system of promotion had been thoroughly corrupted. With a new team in place, in his first 100 days in office, Xi not only made high-profile visits to army, air force, space program and missile command facilities but as Chairman of the CMC, also presided over a large-scale reshuffle of senior staff in the four General Departments, as well as the seven MRs. In January 2013, the CMC made a whole raft of second- and third-tier appointments in the key units.²³ Later in July, the CMC promoted a number of officers to the rank of general. Among them were Political Commissar of the Beijing MR Liu Fulian, Commander of the Nanjing MR Cai Yingting and Commander of the Guangzhou MR Xu Fenlin.²⁴ In 2014, knowledgeable observers noted that the promotion patterns of nearly two dozen PLA officers to the rank of Lieutenant General revealed that Xi was looking for candidates who were relatively young, better trained and free of corruption, with some having experience of the war with Vietnam in 1979.²⁵

In the Xi Jinping period, China has issued two defence White Papers. The first was in April 2013, titled “Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces,” which was the first thematic White Paper. Besides assessing the security situation, the White Paper provided the rationale for the deployment of the PLA and revealed the size of its operational forces. In May 2015, the Chinese government issued a new White Paper, entitled “China's Military Strategy,” which laid out China's threat perceptions and the missions and tasks that have been assigned to the Chinese military.²⁶ The essence of the strategy remains the hoary concept of “active defence,” which means the maintenance of a strategically defensive posture to wear down a stronger adversary.

There were two key themes in the White Paper. The first was the salience of high technology, especially in the field of information and trends

towards long-range precision strikes by manned and unmanned platforms. As M Taylor Favel noted, the new guidelines shifted the goals of the strategy “from winning local wars under conditions of informationization” to “winning informationized local wars,” reflecting evolutionary, rather than revolutionary change.²⁷ The second theme was the importance of the maritime mission for the PLAN arising out of the multiple challenges of US “rebalancing”, Japan “overhauling its military and security policies”, and some maritime neighbours taking “provocative actions” and reinforcing their presence on “China's reefs and islands.” Thus the PLA would shift its focus from “offshore waters defence” to a combination of “offshore waters defence” with “open seas protection”.²⁸

Western military analysts were divided in assessing the Strategy White Paper. According to Dennis Blasko, these developments “would appear to be directly related to the decisions taken in the Third Plenum in 2013” relating to changes in the command authority and the optimisation of the size and structure of the army.²⁹ Another analyst, John Holmes, however noted that “the trend lines in Chinese foreign policy and strategy may be worrisome... but they're not new.” He said that all of what purports to be new in the May 2015 White Paper has already figured in earlier ones. What is new, in his opinion, is the physical wherewithal in terms of submarines, guided missile destroyers and a new aircraft carrier to back up the strategy.³⁰ Favel is probably right in asserting that the new strategic guideline was the beginning of a process of strategic change which would be fleshed out over the next few years, involving new operational doctrine, new training criteria and new joint command structures in the CMC and the region.³¹

THIRD PLENUM

The Third Plenum of November 2013 was not so much about security as the reform of economic and governance structures. Nevertheless, important decisions relating to national security issues were adopted there. One important development was the decision to establish a National Security Commission (NSC), oriented towards internal security. The communique following the Plenum spoke of the need for “better social development,

safeguarding state security and ensuring people's livelihood and social stability." It strengthened Xi Jinping's grip on the security machinery of the country. The NSC was not aimed at shifting the lines of authority from existing institutions, but to promote coordination and enable highest level responses to internal events like "a major emergency and incidents that pose[d] threats to national security, such as border conflicts and major terrorist attacks".³²

The CPC Central Committee Resolution, adopted after the Third Plenum, had an important section relating to the need to "deepen national defence and military reform." Its essential message was the same as what Xi had been giving in his speeches for the past year—the need to have a loyal military that can also be a professional competent force and which "can be victorious." But this could only be achieved by reforming the leadership mechanism, optimising the size and structure of the armed forces, and developing a more comprehensive education system to cultivate military talents and evolving innovative military strategies.

But the hint of coming reform were contained in Section 55 of the resolution which called for the need to reform the higher command structures and "complete joint operations organs and joint theatre operations command system... and move forward with the reform of joint operations training and guarantee systems".³³

The section went on to emphasise the importance of "unified management" of information technology systems in the armed forces. It called for restructuring the scale and structure of the military and adjusting and improving the proportions of the different services, the proportion of officers and their ranks, and the teeth-to-tail ratio. It stressed on the need to create "new types of combat forces" as well as reforming the military education system to enhance the quality of talent entering into the military. The PLA was also advised to reform its budgeting practices and establish mechanisms "where needs drive planning, and where planning leads resource allocation." Section 57 looked at the importance of civil-military integration and the need for unified leadership. In the Chinese context where there is already effective integration of the civil-military leadership, the focus of the directive was on integrating China's capacities in civilian

R&D and technology with military needs. The Plenum communique noted that the CPC “will strive to clear obstacles hindering the developmental trajectory of national defense and the army.” At the same time, it summarised the detail of the CPC resolution calling for a modern, “war winning” military whose primary responsibility was loyalty to the party.³⁴ In essence the directions of the reform were clearly laid out.

Following the Plenum, China announced the creation of a number of new leading small groups at the apex level to accelerate the reforms. In addition to the National Security Commission,³⁵ a new Leading Small Group for Deepening Reform on National Defense and the Military was also announced during the National People's Congress (NPC) session on 15 March 2014. This would be a subcommittee of the CMC, with its chairman, Xi Jinping, at the helm. With all the security levers in his hands, Xi now began the push for reforms, telling delegates of the military at the NPC that he wanted to speed up reform since China had a “window of opportunity” to carry them out.³⁶ Xi also put forward the blunt rationale: “without the modern form of military organisations, there can be no national defense and military modernisation”. He said there was need to reform command structure, force structure, policies and systems, as laid out in the CC resolution following the Third Plenum.³⁷

Beginning in 2014, there were reports that China planned to integrate its forces and reorganise deployments from seven military regions to five. In the wake of the Third Plenum of the CPC, Senior Col. Yang Yujun, the official spokesperson of the Ministry of National Defense (MND), had told journalists at a press briefing that modern warfare was characterised by what the Chinese call “informationization” or IT-led warfare, and therefore, “it is a necessary demand of operations under information conditions on building a joint operation command system”.³⁸

Well-connected analysts appeared to have a good idea of what the reform would be all about. Maj. Gen. Xu Guangyu of the Arms Control Association had already spelt out the key steps in the wake of the Third Plenum: The size of the PLAA would shrink with more funds being spent to enhance its mobility and firepower. Moreover, new missions such as anti-piracy and terrorism, would require China to strengthen the PLAAF and the

PLAN. China's strategic deterrence force, the PLASAF was likely to grow, and the country could invest more in special forces, airborne and marine forces. New cyber and space commands could also be established.³⁹

A little over a month later, on 3 January 2014, Senior Colonel Yang, the official spokesperson of the MND responding to a report in *Yomiuri Shimbun* acknowledged that a joint operational command system would be set up “in due course,” and that the PLA had already launched pilot programmes in this regard. The same report cited Zhao Xiaozhuo, deputy director of the Center on China-US Defense Relations in the AMS, to underscore the importance of new naval missions such as the emerging clash with Japan over the Diaoyou (Senkaku) islands. The report also quoted Ouyang Wei, professor at the NDU on the importance of unified command and Li Qinggong, deputy secretary general of the China Council for National Security Policy Studies, on the need to boost high-tech naval, air and nuclear forces since it really faced no cross-border threat.⁴⁰

2015 began with the decks being cleared for reform. This was evident from a report noting that the Politburo had endorsed a blueprint for national security. Without providing specifics, it emphasised the “unprecedented risks and challenges” the nation was facing, China's determination to protect its core interests and safeguard its security, and maintain the CPC's “absolute control” over the PLA even while building a “highly professional” PLA team.⁴¹

Four key points were outlined by Ma Bo, of the AMS, in August 2015. First, the need to adjust China's military leadership and command system, second, to optimise the structure and function, third, reform policies and systems, and four, promote deeper civil military integration.⁴²

The process was nearing a culmination, as evidenced by a report of the 15th meeting of the Leading Small Group on Military Reform chaired by Xi. In exhorting his colleagues to press ahead, Xi noted, according to a report in *PLA Daily*, that “there can be no reform worth its name that does not aim at engaging in conflict or lacking in the desire to achieve victory.” Besides studying all aspects of modern warfare, he noted, there was need to look at the affordability aspect as well. Difficulties would be plenty, and many people would be affected, but there was no going back.⁴³ On the eve of the

November 2015 CMC work meeting that eventually decided on the reform measures, a commentary by Li Wenqing in *China National Defence News*, a sister newspaper of the *PLA Daily* talked of the need for the obsolete PLA command structure to adopt a joint command structure like that of the US forces, if it was to become a war-winning force.⁴⁴

What China appeared to be doing is part of the international trend, and reflected not only its confidence as a military power, but its intention of playing a larger role beyond their geographic frontiers as spelt out in the Military Strategy White Paper earlier in May 2015. But to play that role there was need to “innovate basic operational doctrines” that required “integrated combat forces... employed to prevail in system versus system operations featuring information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations”.⁴⁵

THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY PARADE

The next marker in the military reform process was the special parade that was held on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Japan in World War II held on 3 September 2015. Since no previous anniversary of this event had been celebrated, it is clear that this was intended as much to showcase the new directions of the PLA under Xi, as to warn potential adversaries of China's strength. Xi took the opportunity to announce a cut of 300,000 personnel from its 2.3-million strong military. This was in line with his mandate to remake the PLA from a manpower-intensive forces to a smaller, technologically able and mobile force capable of combat beyond its geographical borders.⁴⁶ Detailing the reasons for the cut, the MND spokesman Senior Colonel Yang Yujun subsequently noted that the move will mainly target troops equipped with outdated equipment, as well as administrative staff and non-combatant personnel, with a view of optimising the structure of Chinese forces. He went on to add, “At present, the PLA needs to upgrade its overall level of backward weaponry and equipment while undertaking the heavy tasks of informationalization construction”.⁴⁷

NOVEMBER 2015 CMC WORK CONFERENCE

The work conference of the Central Military Commission (CMC) that clinched the decisions on the reform process took place on 24-26 November 2015.⁴⁸ This was the culmination of a process that had been underway since the 18th Party Congress and the election of Xi as the General Secretary of the Party and Chairman of the CMC. The key benchmarks had been the proceedings of the Third Plenum in 2013, and subsequently, the new Leading Small Group on National Defense and the Military, also chaired by Xi.⁴⁹ Typical of the reform process, there was intense cogitation and consultation. According to MND spokesman Yang, some 860 seminars and forums, a survey of 700 PLA units and the consultations with 900 serving and retired high ranking officers of the PLA, provided input into the reform decisions.⁵⁰

According to a report in the *Global Times*, the decisions reflected the need for the Chinese military to evolve with the nation itself; the country's economy had become the second largest in the world, but its military was not considered the second strongest. The report went on to add that China was feeling “intense strategic pressure from the Pacific... and tensions have been raised in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.” Further, “some outside powers are building up the momentum of the rebalance to Asia... through stretching its military presence”.⁵¹

In his speech, Xi gave a generalised idea of the reform, leading off by placing them in the context of changes taking place at the global level and the military reform plans of the developed countries. He said that the Military Region structure would be redrawn and a joint operational command system established. The CMC would directly take charge of the administration of the PLA and integrated battle zone commands would be created to focus on combat. The different service headquarters—for the PLAA, PLAAF, PLAN and the PLASAF—would be detached from this, and their task would be to provision and train the individual forces. The reforms would create a three-tier “CMC-battle zone commands-troops” structure which led off from the CMC, as well as an administration system which would also stream from the CMC through the various services to the troops.

He repeated the pledge to cut the PLA by 300,000 and noted that “the proportion and structure of force among different services will be streamlined to suit new security needs and operations.”

Xi said that the goal of deepening defense and military reform was to break down systemic structural and policy barriers and modernise the PLA to enhance its combat capacity. "Decision-making, enforcement and supervision powers should be separated and distributed in a manner that ensures they serve as checks and balances on each other, but also run in parallel," he added. He said there was need to tighten the weak discipline inspection and auditing and judicial processes and that the reforms would come with a “revolution” of new management processes and institutions to professionalise the military.⁵² According to Senior Colonel Yang Yujun, the MND spokesman, in the phase till 2020, the goal was to change and enhance the PLA “leadership and management system”, reconfigure the CMC, improving the quality of military leadership, operationalise the joint operations command at the “apex, theatre and operational levels”, improve joint training systems, optimise the size of the PLA, enable better synergy between China's civil and military structures, and create capabilities to fight and win wars in conditions of “informationization,” even while upgrading the People's Armed Police.⁵³

Where Xi and Yang provided general observations, specialists who are also insiders provided some of the finer details. *Global Times* quoted Zhao Xiaozhuo, Beijing-based officer of the AMS, as noting that in contrast to the past when the emphasis had been on reducing the size of the PLA, this time the focus was on restructuring and regrouping MRs.⁵⁴ *Xinhua* quoted Zhao to have said that the “fast and decisive” nature of modern war required the separation of the military development from the command system. Further, the “CMC-battle zone-troops” system would also ensure the CPC leadership of the armed forces.⁵⁵ Navy Capt. Zhang Junshe, a senior researcher at the PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute, too emphasised in an interview to *China Daily*, the importance of lean and agile organisations which would be needed to deal with the high-tech wars of the future requiring fast decisions by commanders.⁵⁶

REFORM: FIRST PHASE

On the last day of 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping ceremonially inaugurated three new divisions of the PLA by presenting their newly appointed leaders with military flags. The first was a new command of the PLA Army (PLAA), which had previously been run by the CMC's four General Departments, the second was a new command called the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), and the third was the upgradation of the PLASAF to a new PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), whose primary function is to look after China's nuclear forces. This was accompanied by the appointment of six new Military Region grade generals to head the new forces—Gen. Li Zuocheng to head the PLAA, with Lt. Gen. Liu Lei as the Political Commissar, Gen. Wei Fenghe to head the PLARF, with Lt. Gen. Wang Jiasheng as Political Commissar, Lt. Gen. Gao Jin as head of the PLASSF with Gen. Liu Fulian as the Political Commissar.⁵⁷ These decisions were seen as being preliminary to the establishment of “a new joint operational command system” as well as the “adjustment” in the CMC's command organs, viz. the four General Departments.⁵⁸

After the ceremony Xi “delivered instructions” and noted that the new PLA structures were a “great strategic decision taken by the CPC and CMC to realise their intention of fulfilling the Chinese Dream and the dream of a strong military.” He called on the PLAA to adapt to the “profound transformations” taking place and build an “Information Age army.” Not only were they to develop flexible and three-dimensional war-fighting capacity, but also strengthen top-level planning and leadership management. The new PLARF, Xi said, “is the main strategic support of our country's great power status.” Their job now was to enhance the credibility and reliability of the Chinese nuclear deterrence, as well as in the use of conventional missiles. The new PLASSF, he added, was a “new type of operational force”, that had to undertake “system wide integration and civil-military integration”. This, as has subsequently emerged, relates to the need to marshal nationwide capabilities for cyber and space warfare.⁵⁹ Simultaneously, the CMC released a document, “Opinions on deepening reforms of national defense and armed forces”. Its key message was the need

to move away from the land-centric system of the Army towards joint command, which in turn would be seen as important to “upgrade the army's overall capabilities”.⁶⁰

The lengthy document outlined the significance of the reform and its ideology and basic principles. It laid out the overall objectives, the primary one being the need to establish a three tier system where the CMC would control the PLA, the Theatre Commands (TC) would be for war fighting and the three services would be responsible for building up and maintaining the three services. Needless to say, there was strong emphasis on the need for the CPC to be in firm control of all this. By 2020, it was expected that the process would be completed and a joint operational command system at the CMC and TC level would be in place. In line with this, where 2015 was devoted to implementing the leadership management and joint operational command, 2016 would see military cuts, improvement in combat personnel and reform of the military academies and armed police forces.⁶¹

David Finkelstein, in an analysis of the document, noted that a breadth of issues are being covered by the reform process—the organisations, roles and missions of the CMC and the armed forces, the logistics system, military R&D and industry, the size and deployment of the PLA, the enhancement of officer quality and personnel management, budgets, PLA and civil R&D synergy, reforming the People's Armed Police, the military justice system, the audit system and the upgradation of the legal processes to manage the system, as well as the key issue of oversight and checks and balances.⁶²

The CMC

The first item in the agenda has been the reform of the lead institution of the Chinese military, the Central Military Commission (CMC). At the heart of the change has been the enhancement of the control of the CPC Central Committee over the Chinese military through the CMC. The command authority is being given to the Chairman of the CMC, Xi Jinping in a move that is being referred to as the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System”.⁶³

Speaking at a special briefing on 12 January 2016, Col. Wu Qian, a spokesman for the MND noted that the reason for the changes in the CMC

were to implement the key principle of reform: “the CMC takes charge of the overall administration of China's armed forces, battle zones (TCs) focus on combat, and different military services pursue their own construction”.⁶⁴ He went on to disclose that the four headquarter departments of the CMC—the General Staff, General Political, General Logistics and General Armaments Departments—had been replaced by 15 functional units, which included seven full-fledged departments, three commissions, and five affiliated offices.

The CMC General Office would be responsible for managing the affairs of the CMC and the leadership, it would maintain the oversight and control of the PLA and assume operational command and control over the Chinese military forces; the CMC Joint Staff department would carry out combat planning, command, control combat support, formulate military strategy etc; the Political Work department, would be responsible for all army party building, political education and human resource development; the Logistic Support department would plan the logistics of the entire military, setting standards and maintain supervisory authority; the Equipment Development department would deal with R&D and procurement management of military equipment for the entire PLA; the Training and Administration department would look at leadership training across the services and manage and enhance the quality of training institutions; the National Defense Mobilization department would boost the quality of the reserve system which was vital in a smaller military.

The new CMC Discipline Inspection Commission will send inspection teams to CMC departments and the TCs; the Politics and Law Commission would enhance the quality of military governance and law; the Science and Technology Commission would be responsible for self reliance and innovation and promote integration of civil and military sectors in S&T.

The affiliated offices are the Strategic Planning office to improve the strategic planning system;⁶⁵ the Reform and Organisational structure office tasked with carrying out defence and military unit reform; International Military Cooperation office, responsible for foreign military engagement and coordination; the Audit Office charged with carrying out military audit and oversight; and the Agency for Office Administration for the unified

management of the organisations of the CMC and their subordinate offices and units.

PLA Army (PLAA) HQ and its new leadership

The new Army chief Li Zuocheng (61), a Vietnam War veteran, is an officially designated war hero, and former commander of the Chengdu MR and someone who has worked up the military ladder from company commander to the head of force.⁶⁶ Li had commanded the Chengdu MR since 2013, but was promoted to the rank of General only in 2015 and the Chinese media noted that he was a “three non-s”, i.e., that he was not a member of the Central Committee, or even an alternate member of the CC, not a member of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection or the National People's Congress. In other words, the Xi system is seeking to appoint officers or talent, rather than their associations with powerful mentors or institutional connections.

Lt. Gen. Liu Lei (59), the Political Commissar, did the bulk of his service in the Lanzhou Military Region and has been a member of the 11th and 12th National People's Congress. Like Li, Liu was promoted rapidly after the 18th Party Congress. The Army HQ leadership group of nine other officers appointed with Li and Liu were the cream of those who had been at second tier positions in the MRs such as Lt Generals Peng Bo and You Haitao, who had been Deputy Commanders at Lanzhou and Nanjing, Lt General Rong Guiqing, the Chief of Staff at Chengdu. Likewise, Deputy Political Commissars of Lanzhou and Nanjing, Maj. Gen. Generals Shi Xiao and Lt General Wu Gang form part of the group along with Maj. Gen. Liu Zhenli, former chief of staff of the People's Armed Police.⁶⁷

Earlier there were expectations that Gen. Cai Yingting, the commander of the Nanjing MR who had been the youngest general appointed by Xi in 2013, would get the Army appointment, but these expectations were belied. The speculation is that Cai had served as secretary to Zhang Wannian a former vice-chairman of the CMC and Xi was keen to signal that his appointments will be based on purely professional calculations.⁶⁸ In the same manner, there were expectations that Gen. Liu Yuan, son of former

President Liu Shaoqi and Political Commissar of the General Logistics Department, was destined for a high-level appointment. Liu had been a strong supporter of Xi's campaign against corruption in the army. However, in December 2015, it was announced that Liu had retired after having served for 10 years as an MR grade general.⁶⁹ Some western analysts like Peter Matt have speculated that Liu, who was actually one-year short of the MR grade general's retirement age, may have been forced out.⁷⁰

PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)

For Gen. Wei Fenghe (62), commander of the PLA Rocket Force, this is really a change in the nomenclature of the force he was recruited into and headed, the PLA Second Artillery (PLASAF). His seniority is evident from the fact that not only is he a member of the CMC, but of the CPC Central Committee. Lt. Gen. Wang Jiasheng (61), the Political Commissar, is also a member of the Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) of the Central Committee.

Set up in 1966, the PLASAF was an autonomous unit holding China's nuclear and conventional missiles. Its innocuous nomenclature has now been replaced by a more forthright and functional designation as the "PLA Rocket Force". It remains the PLA's strategic deterrent force, but will be part of the joint force headed by the CMC. It will also subsume the nuclear strike forces of the other services. According to MND spokesman Yang, there would be no change in China's nuclear policy and strategy which involves No First Use (NFU) and a defensive nuclear strategy and a minimum level arsenal.

However, in his remarks at its inaugural, Xi has said that the PLARF "will act as a core force of strategic deterrence" and buttress China's great-nation status. He called on the PLARF to enhance nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capability that is credible and reliable, and medium and long range precision strike capability.⁷¹ Shao Yongling, a professor at the PLA Rocket Forces Commanding Academy noted that initially PLASAF Artillery was like all other artillery formations, a supporting arm. However, the new designation made for greater transparency, even though it gave the force an independent role.⁷²

PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)

Lt. Gen. Gao Jin (57) was, before his appointment as the head of the Support Force, President of the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) and an alternate member of the Central Committee of the CPC. He is the son of military officers, has a technology background and a master's degree in engineering. He rose through the ranks of the PLASAF, but at the top, his rise has been meteoric—he was promoted to Lt. Gen. in 2013, became assistant chief of PLA General Staff in July 2014 and then moved on to serve as president of the AMS with a MR grade generalship in December that same year.

The Political Commissar of the PLASSF, Gen. Liu Fulian was the Political Commissar of the Beijing Military Region before this appointment and is a member of the Central Committee of the CPC. MND spokesman Yang noted that this was a new force and “an important growth point” in the Chinese military's fighting capacity. It would improve the “structure” of the armed forces and enhance military support capacity.⁷³

While the PLAA will be a service HQ like that of the PLAN and PLAAF and focus on building up the specific service, the PLARF and the PLASSF will play a dual role as a service, as well as a functional combatant command in charge of operations of nuclear, space, cyber and other assets which may be embedded in the TCs.

An article in *People's Daily* indicated that the aim of the force was to coordinate joint operations and cover the PLA with an “information umbrella” by supplying credible information and strategic support, even while safeguarding the system. It would achieve this by integrating civil and military systems.⁷⁴

A little more clarification came from a report a few days later, which indicated that the SSF would take charge of the military's space cyberspace and electronic warfare operations. Citing Yin Zhuo, director of the PLAN Expert Consultation Committee, it noted that the force's mission was “to ensure that the PLA's military superiority is maintained in space and the internet.” To this end, Yin said, the SSF's responsibility included “targeted reconnaissance and tracking, global positioning operations and space assets management, as well as defense against electronic warfare and hostile

activities in cyberspace.” Shao Yongling, a military strategy professor at the new Rocket Forces Command College in Hubei, provided the rationale for the force, noting that earlier each branch of the PLA had its own combat support unit, leading to overlapping functions and wasteful expenditure.⁷⁵

DISMANTLING THE MILITARY REGIONS

On 1 February 2016, China announced the dis-establishment of its seven Military Regions and their replacement by five new theatre commands (TCs). The five commands are the Eastern Theatre Command, the Southern Theatre Command, the Western Theatre Command, the Northern Theatre Command, and the Central Theatre Command, replacing seven military areas commands or Military Regions (MRs) headquartered in Beijing, Nanjing, Chengdu, Jinan, Shenyang, Lanzhou and Guangzhou.

The new TCs with their joint operational command centres would be headquartered at Nanjing (Jiangsu), Guangzhou (Guangdong), Chengdu (Sichuan), Shenyang (Liaoning) and Beijing. One important consideration for the location of headquarters has been the presence of existing infrastructure, including communications networks. Every TC would have subordinate service commands relating to the PLAA, PLAN and PLAAF, though PLAN may not be needed in the Western TC.⁷⁶ According to the *Global Times*, the PLAA components would be headquartered in Fuzhou (Fujian), Nanning (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lanzhou (Gansu), Jinan (Shandong) and Shijiazhuang (Hebei).⁷⁷

At a special press conference, MND spokesman Yang Yujun spoke about the changes and said that the “adjustment” was conducive to promoting better operational effectiveness through joint operations. For the present, the three services will continue to have their subordinate organs within the TCs. However, he said that the authority lines, “rights and liabilities” of the TCs will be put in place now. Transitional work offices would deal with the problems of putting in place a new system in the place of old.⁷⁸

To smoothen the transition, the CMC has ensured that no Army commander has lost out. Essentially it has shuffled them around. Thus, the Lanzhou MR chief, Gen. Liu Yuejun(61) became the head of the Eastern TC,

Gen. Wang Jiaocheng (64) chief of the Shenyang MR became the commander of the Southern TC, Jinan MR commander Gen. Zhao Zongqi became the head of the Western TC and former Beijing MR commander Gen Song Puxuan (62) became the head of the Northern TC. The one promotion was that of the Central TC commander, Han Weiguo, who is a Lt General and was previously the deputy commander of the Beijing MR.

Two other MR commanders, Cai Yingting and Xu Fenlin were adjusted elsewhere. Gen. Cai was made the head of the PLA Academy of Military Science and Gen Xu became the deputy chief of the Joint Staff department of the CMC, whose current chief is Gen. Fang Fenghui, a member of the CMC.

Most existing Political Commissar's were renominated to the successor region—Gen. Zheng Weiping, Political Commissar of the Nanjing MR to the Eastern TC, Gen. Wei Liang of Guangzhou MR to the Southern TC, Chengdu MR Political Commissar, Lt Gen Zhu Fuxi to the Western TC, Gen Chu Yimin of the Shenyang MR to the new Northern TC. The only new appointment was that of Gen. Yin Fanglong, Deputy Director of the erstwhile General Political Department as Political Commissar of the Central TC.⁷⁹

In the ceremony conferring their flags, Xi's "instructions" to the new commanders comprised of the usual call for absolute loyalty to the CPC. But it also enjoined on them to "command the joint operations in the highly effective way, enhance their command capabilities, strengthen joint command, joint operations and joint support within the theater commands, and organize troops to complete routine combat-readiness and military operations".⁸⁰

Where the old MRs were oriented for multi-layered defence, the new TCs are ready for "head-on and proactive defense." So, instead of waiting to fight a "people's war" in Chinese territory, the new TCs are expected to fight "proactively." The new system seeks to unify objectives—such as having India and Pakistan in one theatre. In the new system, the Central TC is seen as as the general reserve which can, when required service the other commands.⁸¹

The actual boundary lines of the TCs have not been yet been revealed and there is some speculation about the arrangements relating to PLAN and

PLAAF assets. None of their commanders have been appointed Theatre Command chiefs and the PLAA retains its traditional supremacy among the three services. According to the Hong Kong media, the strategic North Sea Fleet, headquartered at Qingdao, is to be allocated to the Central TC. Likewise, the East Sea Fleet headquartered in Ningbo in Zhejiang province could well be allocated to the Eastern TC facing Japan and Taiwan. Presumably, the South Sea Fleet headquartered in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province will be attached to the Southern TC.⁸²

CONCLUSION

Following the first phase of the reform process—that of restructuring the CMC and the MRs, Xi Jinping made a highly publicised visit to Jinggangshan where Mao set up the first revolutionary base in 1927. Observers have pointed out to Xi's use of Maoist reference points such as the Gutian Conference and now the visit to Jinggangshan to consolidate his authority over the PLA. One thing has become clear through this exercise, that reform has been possible because of the political capital that Xi Jinping has expended in pushing it through.

Reforming military institutions is not easy. Besides the obvious challenge of having to deal with established bureaucracies, there is the legitimate concern that dismantling institutions and creating new ones can disrupt the functioning of an organisation, even if temporarily, to the detriment of national security. There is, of course, the problem of winners and losers. The kind of reform that is being spoken about could lead to a huge reduction in top-level jobs and positions, affecting the promotion prospects of an entire generation of officers, along with the privileges they are accustomed to.

Liu Yuan's retirement is not the only sign of resistance. *South China Morning Post* reported an article in *PLA Daily* by two PLA officers—later taken down from the website—which claimed that the reductions in force levels and restructuring could destabilise the society.⁸³

Another report in *South China Morning Post* has noted that the PLA Army has retained its traditional grip on the top jobs of the overhauled set up,

pointing to Xi's need to accommodate the Army's concerns. This is evident from the fact that senior positions have been essentially reshuffled, rather than seen any reductions or purges. So the Chief of General Staff of the PLA, Gen Fang Fenghui is the new chief of joint staff, most of the MR Chiefs have been redesignated, and others like Gens. Cai and Xu, have probably been given more important important berths, and one of them—the Chengdu MR chief is the new head of the PLAA.⁸⁴

The CPC has made every effort to ensure that the reform moves along the smoothest path. Undoubtedly, care will be taken to ensure that it will unfold in a manner that will not destabilise the Chinese defence posture. As Senior Colonel Yang had noted in his press briefing of 29 November 2015, “the CMC has made careful arrangements to ensure that the armed forces remain in combat readiness....”⁸⁵ The skill lies in instituting change without in any way undermining an already functioning system.

What Xi has achieved is to make the reform process irreversible. Given the wide sweep of reform there is bound to be resistance, but, it is already clear that there has been no “corporate” resistance from the PLA leadership and that the CPC has taken the precaution of accommodating them.

The five new CMC departments, three commissions and affiliated offices have taken charge. The CMC now has two lines of authority. The first, leading from the CMC to the TCs and to their command and control during operations. The second, enhancing the leadership and management from the CMC down to the functional units and formations. The “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” when fully implemented will give Xi complete control over the PLA.⁸⁶

Reform of the apex command institutions and the reorganisation of MRs to emphasise joint operations will synergise the PLA, since it will bring together the strides the Chinese military has taken in enhancing its arsenal, with the reorganisation and employment of its fighting forces. This is especially true of the PLAAF and the PLAN which have developed new platforms and systems, if not new doctrines. Moreover, the PLAN has gained enormous experience in operations in the far seas of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. The PLAA, in turn, would gain by getting its own HQ, within the ambit of the new joint operations command.

China understands that the payoff for the risks it is taking will be huge, and in some ways, it really does not have an alternative. In the past two decades Chinese economic growth has transformed not only the country, but the surrounding regions with its stupendous economic growth. Growing Chinese military and economic capabilities are creating new “facts on the ground” in the South China Sea and pressing against Japan and India. In this process the Chinese have caused panic amongst their East Asian neighbours who are seeking reassurance from the United States which has signalled a “rebalance” of its own posture towards an enhanced presence in the Asia-Pacific.

At the same time, China has developed interests in farther areas like the Indian Ocean littoral, stoking Indian anxieties. Equally, new challenges have emerged, such as the separatist movement in Xinjiang, which is linked to the Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The PLA must change to deal with these developments, just as the Chinese economic structure has to change from an investment-based economy to a consumption driven one.

The armed forces also form part of China's more expansive vision of a superpower whose “China Dream” of rejuvenation as a great power seems to have targeted 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic, as the year in which it will become the most powerful nation in the world. But the first milestone is 2021, the centenary of the founding of the CPC by which time the new model PLA should be in place. This would be a force that will balance its traditional emphasis on homeland defence with some expeditionary capability and robust maritime and aerospace capabilities.

What the world is seeing is the beginning of a process which has been carefully thought through by Xi and his associates for some time. Its outline has been evident since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, and so has the fact that it is being implemented with great effort and care. The reason is that the stakes are very high. The slowdown of the Chinese economy has two paths—one which will lead to rejuvenation as a consumption economy and take China to its ambition of becoming the leading world power by 2049. Or, things could fall apart rather fast with China either stuck at the middle-income trap, or witness prolonged economic stagnation. In that event the control and loyalty of the PLA becomes so much more important. Thus the

insistence on the need to consolidate the CPC's "absolute leadership of the armed forces" and to fully implement the "CMC Chairman responsibility system" which essentially means the centralising of the leadership in the hands of the Xi. His significant role is emphasised by the fact that the Chinese media referred to his remarks inaugurating the reforms as "directions", "instructions" and even "precept", a term used previously only for Mao Zedong.⁸⁷ Yet a degree of caution is also visible as indicated by the new appointments, as well as the reference to the new changes with words like "establishing", "adjustment", "regrouping" and so on.

All the indications are that the Chinese reform will create a military that will mirror that of its principal adversary, the United States of America. This is a small, highly mobile and technologically able force capable of intervention outside the geographic bounds of the country. Internal security and border management, which are an important consideration for China, would be looked after by the revamped People's Armed Police, which today stands at a million-strong.

The difference between the US and new PLA is that the latter will be under the command of the Party, whereas the former is under the government of the day. What China is trying to do is to create a professional and capable force, which is totally loyal to the Party. This is akin to what it has been doing in other areas—adapting a system to so-called "Chinese characteristics."

As far as China is concerned, there are no easy choices for both political and military reasons—the twin imperatives motivating Xi. A corrupt, unreformed entity can be an existential threat to the People's Republic of China and its ruling Communist Party. But so can a highly professional and depoliticised entity. On the other hand, an incompetent military can do damage through its inability to fulfil the tasks of national defence. As the defence analyst Ni Lexiong had observed in relation to the 2014 Gutian Conference, "Such utter devotion [as demanded by Xi] is contrary to the current basic social values [prevailing in China]." In other words, the values of the military cannot be too divorced from those of the society.⁸⁸

The big difference here is that while in a democratic system, possible failure of the party in power through elections are a built-in factor. In the

case of a party dictatorship, they are not, resulting in the system being extremely brittle. In the case of China, the PLA is expected to ensure the continuance of the rule of the CPC, while in the US or any mature democracy, any effort to assist a party in power to prolong its rule would be tantamount to treason.


Implications for India

The transformation of the PLA along the lines being proposed will radiate Chinese military capabilities outwards from China and therefore has implications for India, in the light of the border dispute, Beijing's special relationship with Pakistan, and its growing interests in the Indian Ocean. Today the differences between the two countries may be well managed, but variances relating to the alignment of the border periodically result in a flaring of tensions. In the past two years, India has already witnessed the increasing forays of the PLAN into the Indian Ocean. These are a natural corollary of the huge interests that China has developed in the Ocean's littoral and its dependence on the oil sea lanes that go through the Ocean. However, these interests often rub against India's security interests as in the case of Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Since the 2000s, India, too, has been trying to reform its military from being a manpower-intensive force to a technology-oriented institution. Issues ranging from joint commands, integration and restructuring of individual forces, have been on the table. Both the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force are, by their very nature, oriented towards high-technology concepts, the 1.3-million-strong Indian Army functions at various levels of technological competence. In part this has to do with the commitments the Army has for internal security duties. But in great measure it reflects institutional resistance to change. Whatever be the case, efforts at reform are stuck halfway ever since the government shelved the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff in 2001.

The most important lesson that the Chinese process offers India is the importance of political leadership of the reform process, even in an area as specialised as the military. Unlike China, where the CPC has always kept the

military close to itself, in India, political management has remained within a restricted spectrum which has ranged from neglect in the Nehru period, to “cautious management” between the 1970s and 1990s, to some political intervention in the early 2000s, and a return to “cautious management” thereafter. In India's context this can be used to tease out the maxim of what it means to have a military “with Indian characteristics”. It means one where civilian control over the military, a *sine qua non* of democracy or autocracy, is exercised by the bureaucracy and not the political class.

Yet, if there is one overriding lesson in all this, it is that transformative change cannot take place in the military in any society—democratic or authoritarian—minus the direct involvement of the political class. Of course, that does not merely mean a politician bossing over the affairs of the military, but a process where the political class applies its mind to military issues and provides the required leadership to deal with them. 

ENDNOTES:

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10. See Michael S Chase et al., eds. *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica, RAND, 2015).
11. Dennis J Blasko, "Ten reasons why China will have trouble fighting a modern war," *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2015 <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/ten-reasons-why-china-will-have-trouble-fighting-a-modern-war/>.

12. Minnie Chan, "Shake off old ideas, general warns PLA, in veiled call for political reform," *South China Morning Post*, July 22, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1287852/shake-old-ideas-general-warns-pla>.
13. Thus there are actually two CMCs, whose membership is usually identical, who have authority lines to the Central Committee of the CPC, as well as the National People's Congress, the Chinese parliament. Both are listed in the Ministry of National Defense website. Under the National Defence Law of 1997, the state CMC is responsible for the command of the PLA, as well as to decide its strategy and operation. However, under the 1982 constitution of the CPC, the party CMC, which is subordinate to the Politburo, directs the party apparatus within the PLA. See Alice Miller, "Chapter Two: The Central Military Commission," in Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W Allen, *The PLA as Organization v 2.0*. (Vienna VA, DGI Defence Group Inc, 2015).
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