

China's Military Reforms : Strategic Perspectives

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Background

In People's Republic of China (PRC), Communist Party and Military enjoy a unique relationship. The origin of this bonding can be traced back to the Ninth Meeting of the Communist Party of China (CPC) convened in December 1929 at Gutian, a town in South West Fujian Province, for building Party and the Army. Significantly, this was the first meeting post Nanchang Uprising of 01 Aug 1927, which formally marked the formation of People's Liberation Army (PLA).

During the Gutian Conference, Mao Zedong addressed the men of Fourth Army to clarify the role of military. In the Congress Resolution, absolute leadership position of the CPC over the Red Army was entrenched; purpose of army "to chiefly serve the political ends".¹ Thereon, PLA has remained the military of Communist Party and not of the Country. It played a key role during the Revolution, as an armed component of the Communist Party. Mao, Deng and other first and second Generation CCP leaders served as the top commanders in the PLA.

Even after eight and a half decades, the above policy has remained sacrosanct, evident from President Xi Jinping's visit to Gutian on 30 Oct 2014, where he addressed 'Military Political Work Conference' of the PLA and reiterated the principle of 'Party leading Military'.² The President stated, "PLA still remains Party's Army and must uphold its revolutionary traditions and maintain absolute loyalty to the political masters".³

Modernisation of the PLA was taken up in the right earnest, as a sequel to its poor performance during the 1979 Sino-Vietnam

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War. In fact, Defence was the last of the four modernisations enunciated by Deng Xiaoping to transform China. However, the approach lacked strategic direction. Critical reforms were long overdue; evident from the configuration of the military regions, which remained unaltered since 1950s.

Ever since President Xi Jinping assumed power as the fifth generation leader of PRC three years back, military reforms have been high on the agenda. The process commenced in 2013 during the Third Plenum of 18th Central Committee of CPC, with the establishment of National Security Commission. Primary reasons for the current phase of reforms are twofold : prepare the military to effectively safeguard China's expanding strategic interests and establish firm control of the CPC over armed forces, through Central Military Commission (CMC), the apex defence body headed by President Xi as the Chairman. The ongoing reforms process is deep rooted and not just confined to structural changes. Its impact is expected to be far and wide, having internal and external ramifications. The paper undertakes a holistic overview of China's current military reforms process, with specific focus on genesis, strategic cum doctrinal dimensions and structural architecture, to enable a balanced assessment of PLA's emerging profile.

Genesis

Sense of urgency in implementing military reforms can be attributed to multiple factors, geopolitical considerations being the key drivers. President Obama's Doctrine, 'Pivot to Asia' which aims to rebalance Asia-Pacific, by redeploying 60 per cent of US military assets in the region has lent impetus to China's military modernisation.⁴ Defence planners in Beijing are well aware of the wide gap that exists between the military capabilities of China and the US, despite the former possessing credible nuclear deterrence and a formidable missile force. This fact was acknowledged recently by the 'Global Times', a state run Chinese daily, in its editorial.⁵

The Chinese are ardent protagonists of the concept of Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which includes both hard and soft power. Acquisition of hard power is seen as an imperative in enhancing China's CNP. As per President Xi, for realising the 'Chinese Dream', military reforms is the key.⁶ This will also facilitate the implementation of 'One Belt One Road' initiative.

Core national objectives of the PRC are Stability, Sovereignty and Development. Stability implies unchallenged supremacy of the CPC and its continuation in power. PLA's absolute loyalty to the Communist Party is an essential prerequisite. On 01 Feb 2016, during the inaugural ceremony of the newly constituted theatre commands, President Xi stated, "Centralisation of military architecture is vital; all the theatre commands and PLA should unswervingly follow the absolute leadership of the Communist Party and the CMC to the letter".⁷ Sovereignty, besides external non-interference implies unification of Taiwan with the motherland, wherein use of force remains an option. It includes control over South China Sea alongside diminution of US influence and containing Japan in the Asia-Pacific. Emergence of Nationalist Government in Taiwan is yet another driver in speeding up reforms. Development remains an essential prerequisite for survival of the Communist regime. To this end, strong central authority and peaceful periphery are considered vital to sustain the pace of progress.

Strategic and Doctrinal Dimensions

China's military strategic culture lays great emphasis on exploiting propensity of things – 'strategic configuration of power'; shi to achieve one's objectives.⁸ Aim is not annihilation, but relative positioning of own resources to gain position of advantage. Strategy thus aims not to fight an adversary but to create a disposition of forces so favourable that fighting is unnecessary. As Sun Tzu famously wrote "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill". The ongoing military reforms are oriented towards capability building and force projection.

Chinese White Papers on National Defence issued periodically since 1998 define the general trend of strategic thinking. The theme of the Ninth White Paper published in May 2015 titled "China's Military Strategy" was 'active defence'.⁹ Focused on winning 'Local Wars under the conditions of modern technology', its thrust was on expounding maritime interest, priority being accorded to Navy and Air Force over the ground forces. It also marked a shift in naval strategy from 'off shore waters defence' to a combined strategy of 'off shore waters defence and open sea protection'.

China's military Doctrine of "Local Wars under Informationalised Conditions" envisions short swift military

engagements, to achieve the political objectives by leveraging technology. Joint operations and integrated logistics are inherent components of the new doctrine. President Xi has laid emphasis on the need for military to adapt to the information based wars, as informatisation is the core of military development.¹⁰ Establishment of 'Air Defence Identification Zone' (ADIZ) in East China Sea is also part of the military reforms. It is significant both for geopolitical considerations and China's domestic scene.

Military Reforms – Thrust Areas

Main thrust of the ongoing military reforms is on revamping of systems and structures at the political, strategic and operational levels. Some of the salient facets which merit attention are summarised in the succeeding paras.

The major changes being instituted at the macro level are in consonance with the guidelines issued by the CMC on deepening national defence and military reforms with Chinese characteristics; the focus is on civil-military integration, jointness and optimisation. The composition of the CMC itself has been balanced out, obviating the erstwhile ground forces bias. As a sequel to the military reforms, CMC will be responsible for the policy formulation, controlling all the military assets and higher direction of war. PLA, People's Armed Police (PAP) and Theatre Commanders will directly report to the CMC.

The erstwhile PLA Headquarters had four key Departments – General Staff, General Political, General Logistics and General Armament. This structure was perceived to be cumbersome, army dominated, resistant to change and led to the creation of political fiefdom. These Departments have been reorganised and integrated into the enlarged CMC set up, to ensure centralised control at the highest level. In the new structure, there are 15 functional bodies. These include six departments and three commissions, besides, six affiliated institutions (**Table 1** refers).¹¹ Integrated joint staff under the CMC will ensure streamlining of the decision making process.

Table 1

CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION			
CMC General Office	CMC Joint General Staff	CMC Political Work Department	CMC Logistics Department
CMC Equipment Development Dept	CMC Training Management Dept	CMC Military Defense Mobilisation Dept	CMC Discipline Inspection Commission
CMC Political and Law Commission	CMC Science and Technology Commission	CMC Strategic Planning Office	CMC Reform and Establishment Office
CMC International Military Cooperation Office	CMC Auditing Administration Office	CMC Administration Affairs Management Office	

(Source - *Stratfor 2016*, www.stratfor.com)

Three new Service Headquarters have been created besides the existing PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Headquarters. These are the 'Ground Forces Command' making it a separate service, 'Rocket Force' – an upgrade of erstwhile Second Artillery which operates strategic as well as conventional missile weapons, and 'Strategic Support Force' to control and secure the cyber and space assets; key elements to execute the doctrine of 'Local Wars under Informationised Conditions', as also to meet the challenges of new generation warfare.¹²

Formation of five theatre commands (Battle Zones) – Eastern, Western, Central, Northern and Southern by reorganising the earlier seven military regions is aimed to revamp the joint operations capability of the PLA (**Map 1** refers). This will facilitate seamless synergy in deploying land, air, naval and strategic assets in a theatre. While presenting flags to the theatre commanders, President Xi exhorted "Each command must concentrate on studying modern warfare..... proactively seize initiative, enhance joint command, joint action, joint logistics and ensure troops are combat ready to complete the mission".¹³

Theatre Commands – Battle Zones



Source: *Economist.com*, *South China Morning Post*

Map 1

Planned reduction of 300,000 personnel, mostly from the ground forces and non combat positions is to make the PLA nimble; right sized to around two million. This will be the tenth time that the reduction exercise is being implemented since 1951, when the strength of the armed forces had peaked to 6.27 million.¹⁴

Ramifications

The military reforms are in consonance with PRC's expanding role as an emerging global power. It is perhaps the biggest military shake-up in a generation. While the architecture does not follow any western model or template, yet is in sync with the mainstream developments in the modern warfare. Although the primary aim is to enhance national defence capability marked by Chinese characteristics, the process goes on to serve multiple objectives with wide ranging implications.

Internally, predominance of the Party over PLA stands further validated, with centralisation of power structure under the revamped CMC. By gaining absolute control over the Defence Forces, President Xi Jinping has emerged as an unquestionable leader. His enhanced stature as a 'paramount leader' puts him in the league with Deng Xiaoping and as 'core' – at par with former President Jiang Zemin.

Externally, PLA's exponential accretion in the capability is a cause for concern, especially in China's neighbourhood. Beijing is likely to be more assertive in pursuit of its national objectives, particularly with respect to its claims in South and East China Seas. Asia-Pacific region is set to be the scene of intense rivalry with the changing balance of power equations. The USA is expected to play greater role in protecting its interests and assuage the concerns of allies, given the emerging security dynamics in the region.

Specific to India, so far Lanzhou and Chengdu Military Regions were responsible for operations against India's Northern and Eastern Theatres. With the newly reorganised structures, facing the PLA's Western Battle Zone with integrated assets of the Army, Air Force and Rocket Force under a single commander will be own four Army Commands (Northern, Western, Central and Eastern) and three Air Force Commands (Eastern, Central and Western). Enormity of challenge by way of coordination and synergy in deployment of assets in a telescopic time frame merits serious attention. Even during the 1962 War, China had constituted a single Headquarters to control the operations in Ladakh and NEFA, while on the home side, battles were fought in isolation, even within the theatre. *Lately, Arunachal Pradesh has been included in the list of issues which are of Beijing's core national interests. Further, China's forays into Indian Ocean have long term strategic implications for India* (emphasis added).

In retrospect, the radical military reforms initiated under the stewardship of President Xi Jinping are indeed path breaking. The thrust of these reforms is on how best the PLA capabilities can be optimised to further China's aspirations as a rising global power. While sticking to the vision of founding fathers; 'Party rules the Gun', Xi has been able to gain firm control of the PLA, eliminate resistance by pulling down top Generals like Xu Caihou and Guo

Boxiong, and cultivate his own team. The central theme of the reforms process in essence, is indicative of both continuity and change. The Chinese strategic community has drawn richly from the historical, strategic and recent doctrinal documents, simultaneously infusing new thinking in tune with the futuristic trends. They seem to have also drawn heavily from the American experience in recent conflicts across the globe. Rise in China's military capability will have serious ramifications, both in the regional and global perspective.

The ongoing military reforms are envisaged to be in place by 2020, well before the end of President Xi's term in 2022.¹⁵ However, given the ambit and magnitude of the task, it may take decades before the PLA transforms into a modern force at par with the western counterparts. Above notwithstanding, PLA certainly is poised for a "Great Leap Forward"!

End Notes

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² China Military Online, (3 Nov 2014) '*Party Commands Gun*'.

³ The Economist (16 Jan 2016) "*Xi's New Model Army*", Beijing.

⁴ Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament (17 Nov 2012), Parliament House Canberra, Australia. [https:// www. White house. gov/ the-press- office / 2011/11/17/ remarks-president - Obama - Australian parliament](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-Obama-Australian-parliament). Accessed on 20 Jan 2016, 11 AM.

⁵ Global Times (07 Feb 2014), "*China to Match US Military Spending by 2030s, but Power will Lag*"

⁶ The Hindu (03 Feb 2016) "*China Revamps Military Command Structure*"

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Thomas G Mahnken (2011), "*Secrecy and Stratagem: understanding Chinese Strategic Culture*", The Lowy Institute of International Policy, Australia p18.

⁹ "*White Paper on China's Military Strategy*" (May 2015), The State Council Information office of People's Republic of China, Beijing.

¹⁰ Mu Chunshan (05 Dec 2015), "*The Logic behind China's Military - Reforms*" The Diplomat, [http:// the diplomat.com/2015/12/ the logic](http://the-diplomat.com/2015/12/the-logic). Accessed on 02 Feb 2016, 2 PM.

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¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Global Times, [http:// www.global times.cn/content/ 961440. Shmtl](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/961440.shtml). Accessed on 18 Jan 2016, 5 PM.

¹⁴ Minnie Chan (01 Sep 15), "*The Radical Plan to Turn China's People's Liberation Army into a Modern Fighting Force*" South China Morning Post.

¹⁵ Global Times, *op. cit.*