

Continuing Evolution of Chinese Armed Forces – A Review of Recent Organisational Changes

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Introduction

Change has been a constant in the Chinese military for the past three decades. This article places the recent changes announced in January 2016 in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) organisation within the larger context of transformation that is happening in the Chinese Military and Security Apparatus. The series of radical changes in the PLA can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping era where along with sweeping economic reforms, he utilised the vacuum left by Mao, the fount of PLA's military wisdom to commence a series of transformations. These changes were tailored to alter the PLA from a People's Army created for revolutionary purposes to a professional Western style defence force in form and function. Therefore, modernisation has been a recurring theme in the PLA affecting most facets of the PLA including force structure, training, strategy and manpower. The modernisation progressed albeit incrementally during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods.

The changes seem to be gathering a unique pace now in the Xi Jinping era. After Deng, it is the present President Xi Jinping who has re-initiated such radical transformations. President Xi also personally heads the 'Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform of the Central Military Commission'- an elite committee that steers the reforms. Even though Xi had indicated revamp of military upon taking reins, its rough contours started emerging a few months prior to the official announcements. Earlier in Sep 2015 and later in Nov 2015 President Xi had declared deep reforms regarding organisational changes as well as troop cuts.¹ The reforms were reiterated in Xi's address at a meeting on reforming the armed forces in Beijing from 24 - 26 Nov 2015 aimed

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to establish a three-tier system where Central Military Commission (CMC) will serve as the first tier of structure, Battle Zone Commands/Troops Command system as the second functional tier and an Administrative System that runs from CMC through various services to the troops.²

January 2016 is certain to go down in history as a point of inflection in the transformation of PLA with the following changes:-

- (a) On 31 Dec 2015, China instituted a Ground Forces (Army) Chief with separate Headquarters (HQ) and a PLA Strategic Support Force (likely, a Cyber Command?).
- (b) The Second Artillery was renamed People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) and also upgraded from a 'branch' to a 'service' the same day.
- (c) This was followed by transforming the four departments in mid Jan 2016 into fifteen smaller departments under Central Military Commission.
- (d) On 01 Feb 2016, the formation of the Theatre Commands completed the major changes that had been announced.

Since the changes appeared in three different instalments through the January of 2016, they are commented upon in that order. The article focusses more on the organisational changes and has not included recent material developments such as the first SSBN patrol and plans to build a second aircraft carrier.

First Set of Changes Announced on 31 Dec 2015

The first set of changes appears to revolve around organisational reforms. In a ceremony attended by President Xi on 31 Dec 2015, three new military organisations took shape within the Chinese military establishment as under:-

- (a) Formation of a PLA Ground forces Headquarters with a separate Chief. Till now there was no Army Chief, since the Army was the basic organisation with other two services conceptually being a part of Army. Therefore, the Army's HQ function was dispersed in the 'four HQ' of a generic PLA,

namely the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department.

(b) Formation of PLARF. The erstwhile Second Artillery has been renamed and has been upgraded as a service from being just a branch. Till now it was not given a service status and was deemed less than Air Force/Navy as a 'branch'. This 'strategic' organisation will report to the CMC directly.

(c) Formation of a new organisation, the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) which has been newly commissioned. Complete details regarding this organisation are not known yet. The South China Morning Post cites a source to state that the PLASSF would be responsible for hi-tech warfare in space and on the internet.³ If that be the case, it could be a C3I, Cyber Command. This formation was a surprise indeed.

Formation of Army Headquarters

The creation of HQ for the army shows two separate trends as under :-

(a) Firstly it is to accommodate a long standing professional requirement of PLA ground forces. The Navy and Air Force had separate HQ and their respective Chiefs for long, but the Army, despite being the premier service was left out in that professional progress. This change means that generic, diffused management of ground forces by the four departments could be replaced by an Army HQ with its own Chief.

(b) Secondly in a way, portends the larger role played by other services in the PLA. Army instituting a HQ also means PLA is not the preserve of the ground forces alone! Since 2005, the Air Force and Naval Chiefs have been members of the CMC predominantly consisting of Army officers. The present Vice Chairman of CMC is an Air Force General Xu Qiliang. That he retains his Air Force uniform unlike Admiral Liu Huaqing who was also a Vice Chairman, albeit as an Army General indicates the improving trend of joint outlook to military affairs.⁴

Like the PLA Naval and Air Force Chiefs, Army Chief could be in protocol equal to the five Theatre Commanders (equivalent to C-in-Cs). All current theatre commanders are Army officers and at the Military Region (MR) level, Naval and Air Forces serve under an Army hierarchy. Air Force or Naval officers occasionally served as Deputy Chief of Staff at MR level. The Service Chiefs, though ranked alongside MR leaders in protocol, are slightly more privileged to be members of CMC which is the highest military decision making body. This change could also mean new members in the CMC, about which no information is presently available.

The erstwhile Chengdu MR Chief, General Li Zuocheng has now been made the Army Chief, which means that the new office could be equal or ranked higher than the MR Chief. General Li, one of the youngest to achieve Army Commander's rank commanded the 41st Group Army, was promoted in Jul 2015 to the rank of full General along with ten others. The Army HQ also gets a Political Commissar in General Liu Lei, previously, the Political Commissar of the Lanzhou MR.

Formation of the Rocket Force

The Second Artillery, now as the PLA Rocket Force continues to be the same organisation in function, albeit with a change of name and upgradation of status, becoming par with Navy and Air Force.⁵ This is a step to get the organisation at par with other four services, namely Army, Navy, Air Force and most likely the PLASSF directly under the control of CMC. Even though this organisation was under the CMC earlier, in the status conscious military, such an upgradation can elevate the significance of organisation and status of its leader. The composition of leadership remains same.

Formation of the Strategic Support Force

The newly created PLASSF is headed by General Gao Jin who was Director of the PLA Academy of Military Science (AMS), the apex research institute of the PLA and General Liu Fulian as the Political Commissar, previously the Political Commissar of the Beijing MR.⁶ From the nature of its Chief's previous appointment this organisation could have high technology role. C3I systems, Information and Cyberwarfare could be its areas of responsibility (?). Being a new organisation very limited information is presently available.

Second Set of Changes – Mid-January 2016

Reformation of the Four Departments. A significant overlay to the entire scheme is increasing Party's grip over the military apparatus. This has been partly achieved by breaking the existing four HQ, the behemoths that controlled PLA into fifteen lean organisations under CMC as announced on 10 Jan 2016. The four giants will now metamorphose into following CMC organs:⁷

- (a) **CMC's Six Departments.** The Joint Staff, Political Work, Logistical Support, Equipment Development, Training and Administration Department, and National Defence Mobilisation Departments.
- (b) **CMC's Three Commissions.** Discipline Inspection, Politics and Law, Science and Technology Commissions
- (c) **CMC's Six Offices.** The General Office, Administration, Auditing, International Cooperation, Reform and Organisational Structure, and Strategic Planning Offices.

Third Set of Changes Declared on 01 Feb 2016

Theatre Commands. The reforms declared on 01 Feb 2016 were around the Battle Zones which replace the existing MR. This was a much anticipated change, in the air for the past several years. At a ceremony attended by CMC members, General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of the CMC, read out the CMC's order to establish the PLA's theatre commands.⁸ President Xi officially inaugurated the five theatre commands with cardinal orientations of North, South, East, West and Central Commands giving their Commanders the ceremonial flags. The Commanders and Political Commissars of the Theatre Commands were also announced in the ceremony. Other than nomenclature of Commands, which reveals its orientation and names of leaders, no other concrete information is presently available, although there are reports regarding locations of the command HQ and their subordinate organisations. Available information is appended in **Table 1** below.⁹

Table 1 : Details of the new Commanders and Commissars

Theatre	Designation	Name and Year of Birth	Previous Position	Rank And Seniority
Eastern	Commander	Liu Yuejun 1954	Commander, Lanzhou MR October 2012	General 31 July 2015,
	Commissar	Zheng Weiping, 1955	Political Commissar, Nanjing MR	31 July 2015, General
Southern	Commander	Wang Jiaocheng 1952	Commander, Shenyang MR 2012	General July 2014
	Commissar	Wei Liang 1953	Political Commissar, Guangzhou MR October 2012	NA
Western	Commander	Zhao Zongqi 1955	Commander, Jinan MR November 2012	General July 31, 2015,
	Commissar	Zhu Fuxi 1955	Political Commissar, Chengdu MR November 2012	Lieutenant General NA
Northern	Commander	Song Puxuan 1954	Commander, Beijing MR 2014	General 31 July 2015
	Commissar	Chu Yimin 1953	Political Commissar, Shenyang MR 2010	General July 2014
Central	Commander	Han Weiguo 1956	Deputy Commander Beijing MR 2013	Lt Gen? 2013
	Commissar	Yin Fanglong 1953	Deputy Director of the General Political Department of the PLA October 2012	General 2015

Earlier reports had indicated that the new commands, called Battle Zones, could have a cardinal/inter cardinal focus under a joint structure within five years. The present announcement on 01 Feb 2016 not only advances that date but also lays some of those speculations to rest. The reorganisation is indeed cardinal based which in Xi's words is for *'responding to security threats from their strategic directions, maintaining peace, deterring wars and winning battles'*. However, no official maps have been released yet.

These battle zones or theatre commands have been under consideration for long and have been reported by Dennis Blasko in his seminal work 'Chinese Army Today' published in 2008. He articulated them as 'War Zones' which will be activated as a

temporary measure during crisis. Those warzones are now being translated as 'Battle Zones' or permanent theatre commands by official PLA websites.¹⁰

The number of MRs has periodically varied in history stabilising at present seven, which will now effectively be these five Theatre Commands. There simply is no news of what happens to the old MRs, but in a significant move in end January 2016, the seven PLA MR Newspapers were shut down, which portended what lay ahead for the MRs.¹¹

Given the enormous clout that the MR leaders possess, it will be also relevant to note that all erstwhile MR leaders, except General Xu Fenlin, Chief of the Guangzhou MR have been accommodated in this change. The Chengdu MR leader was earlier appointed the Chief of the Ground Forces. General Cai Yingting is reportedly a confidant of the President and has been appointed the Chief of the Academy of Military Sciences.¹² The Beijing Deputy MR leader has been upgraded to a Theatre Commander, and is apparently the only Lieutenant General in this new structure indicating that the Central Command could have a slightly different role as a hinterland command. The reduction from seven to five definitely cuts some fat making PLA more nimble. It also gives a larger scope to deploy reserves. Most significant call is the consistent exhortation for 'jointness'. The Western Command will cover the largest area, absorbing both Chengdu and Lanzhou MRs, which cover almost half of China's land area and borders. The other four theatres occupy the other half of China, giving away some indications of the present threat perceptions as well as geographic compulsions of that country. The high density of commands in the Eastern half shows preoccupations in East Asia.

As suggested earlier the Theatre Command System for operations will run parallel to the service oriented administrative structure (Army, Navy, Air Force, PLARF and now PLASSF) that ensures professional management of services. Xi stated whilst inaugurating the new Command Structure that this is '*a strategic decision made by the CPC Central Committee and the CMC with an eye to realising the Chinese Dream and the Dream of a Strong Military. The establishment of the five theatre commands and their joint operational institutions is of great and far-reaching significance in ensuring the PLA to be capable of fighting and winning battles and effectively safeguarding China's national security.*'¹³

Certain other exhortations by President Xi reveal what is expected of theatre commands; he stated that the new commands must (emphasis by the author) :-

- (a) *'Focus on **combat readiness**, and the various military services pursue their own construction and development.*
- (b) *Unswervingly follow the **absolute leadership of the CPC** over the military and carry out the orders and instructions of the CPC Central Committee and the CMC to the letter.*
- (c) *Devote themselves to **studying how** to fight wars, research the principles of winning modern warfare, speed up the formulation of the theatre commands' strategies, perfect their combat plans, and focus on joint training, so as to obtain initiatives in future warfare.*
- (d) *Strengthen **joint command, joint operations and joint support** within the theatre commands, and organise troops to complete daily (at all times) combat-readiness and military operations.*

Other Recent Changes

In the backdrop of latest developments, it is relevant to recall the recent significant changes carried out or announced thus far by China during President Xi's period which has military or security implications. These are as under:-

- (a) Intention of troop cuts to the tune of 40 per cent from the Army, 30 per cent from Air Force and only 10 per cent from the Navy. Such a change will eventually settle the overall PLA manpower including Peoples Armed Police (PAP) from 3 million to 2 million with a 30 per cent overall reduction.¹⁴ There are reports about reservations in the State Owned Enterprises to absorb the demobilised soldiers.
- (b) There is intra-army change of removing divisional structures to let brigades serve directly under Corps or Group Armies. This is expected to make the organisation more effective with optimal reserves. There are also unconfirmed reports on reduction in numbers of Group Armies.¹⁵

- (c) The PAP has been renamed as National Guard. This is a law enforcement body primarily for civilian policing which provides support to the PLA during wartime.¹⁶
- (d) There was also a formation of National Security Commission earlier which works under the political leadership to combat terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.¹⁷
- (e) China appointed its first Counter Terrorism Chief, Liu Yuejin, a key figure in China's crackdown on illegal narcotics.¹⁸
- (f) China passed a new Terrorism law with wide ranging implications including power for the PAP/National Guard to operate abroad.¹⁹
- (g) The five separate entities termed five **dragons** that dealt with Maritime Security have been united into a single body under the State Oceanic Administration.²⁰
- (h) Publication of new Defence White Paper that in essence makes the PLA far more mobile with high thrust on Navy providing PLA a global role.

Conclusion

Overall the recent changes lie on the long road to modernisation which commenced three decades ago. Considering the scale of this reform, they are by no means small. They appear aligned with domestic and global realities. This reform makes the Chinese armed forces leaner, improves command and control, and assimilates technological shifts in cyber domain into its command structures. The last comparable change in any military of a similar scope occurred in 1986, in the United States, through the Gold Water Nichols Act, wherein command structures were reorganised to improve warfighting. Just as PLA has improved its hardware through 'imitative, inspired innovations', this set of equally important organisational 'software' changes too, is inspired by western models and have definitely gathered steam under the present regime after prolonged incremental measures by previous regimes.

The change upgrading the individual services is congruent to the latest Defence White Paper which clearly weighs 'the maritime over land' in a China which is venturing out in an incremental manner. However, in reality, ground forces will continue to dominate through theatre commands and constitution of CMC which remain

dominated by the Army. The upgradation of the status of Second Artillery to PLARF, an independent service, could accentuate its status and control of strategic forces by the CMC. That it occurred around the time the first Ballistic Missile Submarine (SSBN) patrol was reported does not seem a coincidence.²¹ The break-up of the 'four departments' into fifteen manageable organs under the CMC, including a discipline section could also increase the party's grip of all matters military.

As a nation, China is in the midst of deep changes today under a transformational leadership. Its economic model is being revamped, as a corollary it has rolled out the 'One Belt One Road' construct with economic and strategic implications to the region. Its internal political structures are being shaken up with anti-corruption campaign, the internal security organs and laws have been reformed, it has become more assertive in its maritime claims, and there are far more frequent forays into the Indian Ocean including acquisition of a base in Djibouti. The central theme, at the grand strategy level, appears to be Xi's 'China Dream', of overall, time bound national rejuvenation.

At national level, changes appear to tread on a tight rope between increasing professionalism as much as the party's grip over the military. Therefore, it is to be noted that changes do not alter the basic nature of the PLA as the party's army. Barring that core tenet, change, it appears remains a constant in the Chinese Armed Forces. Since this is the early stage of the change, several gaps remain in the information that is available. Therefore, it remains for military analysts to observe how PLA assimilates these rapid and drastic changes, probably the largest in scope and scale by any military in the world in recent history.

Endnotes

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⁹ The details of newly appointed theatre commanders have been compiled from various sources such as Chinaviva and Wikipedia.

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¹³ “President Xi Announces Establishment of PLA Theater Commands - China Military Online.”

¹⁴ “The Radical Plan to Turn China’s People’s Liberation Army into a Modern Fighting Force.”

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¹⁷ “What Will China’s National Security Commission Actually Do?,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed September 30, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/08/what-will-chinas-national-security-commission-actually-do/>.

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