

Linking The PLA's Military Region Reorganisation with Chinese Military Writings

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Introduction

Encapsulated by the phrase “*junwei guanzong, zhanqu zhuzhan, junzhong zhujian*” (overall management by the Central Military Commission (CMC), operational focus by theatres and force building by service headquarters), the recent PLA organisational reforms have been more ambitious than anticipated. Broadly covering higher defence reorganisation, tighter Party and CMC control, downsizing and joint operation requirements, the reforms have also led to the reorganisation of the seven Military Regions (MRs) to five theatre commands. This article links the PLA theoretical military writings to the reorganisation of the theatre commands to understand the rationale for the reorganisation. The article primarily uses PLA Academy of Military Science publications, *The Science of Military Strategy 2005* (hereafter referred to as SOS 2005) available in English and the *Zhanlue Xue* 2013 (hereafter referred to as ZX 2013), available as of now in Chinese.¹

An *a priori* analysis would suggest that the theatre reorganisation was solely based on joint operations command structure requirements. However, it also reflects Chinese reappraisal of the strategic environment and the strategic outlook. The connotations of the MR have changed with time and a historical perspective would facilitate in understanding the Chinese outlook.

Historical Perspective

Prior to the Civil War, the Red Army divided the area of operations based on Base Areas or Battle Fronts and/or the Field Armies/

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Corps. The concept of MR (*junqu*)² commenced in 1948, and as indicated in **Table 1**, the number of MRs has varied considerably. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the MRs were divided based on the strategic direction (*zhanlue fangxiang*) which was dependent on the anticipated security threats, the requirements of military building, the then prevalent military doctrine of 'People's War', the requirement of consolidating control over the country and frontier stability in the provinces of Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang, geographic and economic considerations. The military strategy was based on the premise of a large scale war or invasion by a strong enemy. As a corollary to this strategy, the planning of operations was essentially unified and central even if the individual strategic direction of the MRs differed.³

Table 1 : Major Changes in MRs

1948	1955	1985	2016
Central Plains, East China, North West, North East, North China (South West incorporating Tibet was formed in 1950).	Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Kunming, Lanzhou, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet (By 1969 Tibet and Inner Mongolia were merged in Chengdu and Beijing MR).	Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Jinan.	<u>MRs to Theatre Commands</u> Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, Central.

(Collated from data given in *The PLA as an Organisation v1.0^a*)

Deng Xiaoping reviewed the doctrine of a large scale war in the 1980s. The change in doctrine from fighting a 'large scale war' to fighting a 'local war' was accompanied by a massive downsizing and reduction of one million personnel. Twenty four combined arms Group Armies were formed from the thirty five Field Armies and the MRs were reduced to seven in 1985.⁵ The basic point (*jidian*) of preparation for military struggle, in the new military strategic guideline (*junshi zhanlue fangzhen*), was reviewed to fighting 'local wars under high technology conditions' in 1993 and subsequently to fighting 'local wars under conditions of informationisation' in 2004.⁶ This also implied that each theatre could now have an independent theatre strategy in tune with its strategic direction. Blasko (2012) assesses the strategic direction of the Shenyang MR as being oriented towards both Soviet Union and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK); the Beijing MR towards the

North; the Lanzhou MR defended Western China from the Soviet Union; the Nanjing MR looked at Taiwan and the East; the Guangzhou MR was oriented towards South and Vietnam as well as Taiwan; Chengdu MR at Tibet and India and Jinan MR forces were a strategic reserve.⁷

Theoretical Writings and Theatre Commands

Prior to the recent reorganisation, the terms *junqu* (MR, also called military area command) and *zhanqu* (frequently translated as war zone, battle zone or theatre of war) were often used interchangeably because the peace time MR organisation structure could assume the role of 'theatre of war or *zhanqu*' during operations, as mentioned in the SOS 2005.⁸ While the *zhanqu* was established in war and drew on the MR organisation for its command structure, it did not need to share the same boundaries as it was based on operational requirements and the level of the campaign.⁹ The PLA *Military Terms* 2011 translates *zhanqu* as 'theatre of war'.¹⁰ However, after the recent reorganisation, though the term *zhanqu* has been adopted in place of *junqu*, it is being translated as 'theatre command' in the official Chinese media. The usage of *zhanqu* in this article is 'theatre of war' or 'theatre command', depending on its reference prior to or after the 2016 reorganisation, with its wartime connotations. The term *junqu* or MR refers to the peace time organisation prior to the reorganisation.

Placing the theatre strategy in context, The ZX 2013 states that, although still not fully implemented, the country's strategic structure can be commonly understood to have three levels and five categories : national strategy, military strategy and at the third level, service strategy (*junzhong zhanlue*), theatre strategy (*zhanqu zhanlue*) and major security domains strategy (*zhongda anquan lingyu zhanlue*) comprising nuclear, space and network domains.¹¹ Theatre strategy is defined as being subordinate to military strategy and is the guidance and planning for modernisation (building) and employment of armed forces in a theatre of war.¹²

The SOS 2005 states : "the theatre of war is an integrated regional entity composed of elements of military, political, economy and geography(it) is a level of command between the supreme and strategic operational army group.... (it) should be large in space for offensive and defence to accomplish the strategic task independently".¹³ The ZX 2013 reiterates these points and

goes a step further by highlighting that the orientation of the theatres previously was defensive looking at territorial defence, while the present century demands an external orientation looking outwards due to growing national interests. The ZX 2013 espouses a broadening of vision from frontier defence to an even vaster expanse or region to protect developing national interests. It emphasises that this change will "...bring to prominence the characteristic of 'expansion of every strategic direction' as the related military actions support frontier and coastal defence, influence outside the borders and radiate in the common space".¹⁴ A sentiment reflected in an interview given by the Eastern Theatre Commander indicating that the strategic direction for the Theatre Command is Taiwan Straits, East China Sea and the Western Pacific Ocean.¹⁵

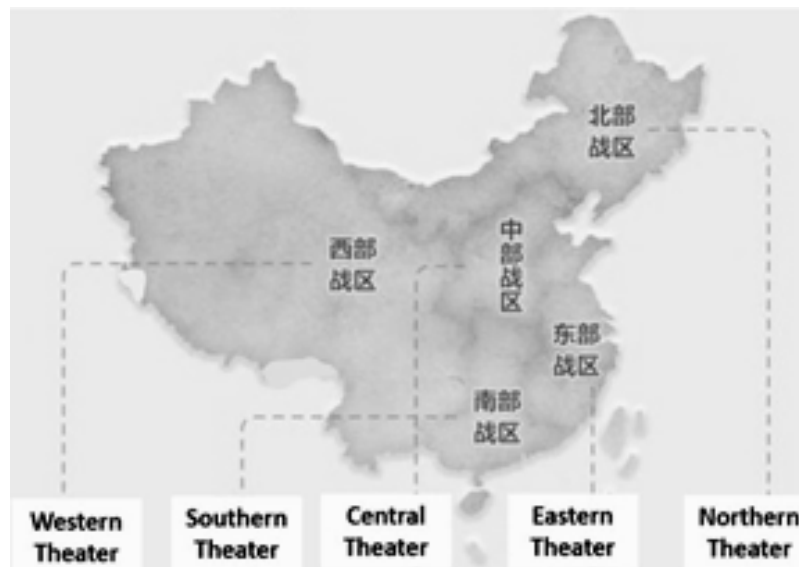
The primary basis for division of the theatres of war is the strategic direction.¹⁶ Within the 'Applied Theory of Strategy' given in the SOS 2005, the steps for 'strategic formulation' include strategic judgement, decision making and planning.¹⁷ The decision making stage includes deciding the strategic guideline which, among other important outcomes, gives the main strategic direction in any period. In the 1950s, it was the South Eastern coastal area due to the US threat, while in the 1960s and 70s, it was the "three northern regions" due to the threat from the Soviet Union.¹⁸ While its present orientation is not openly articulated, it can be judged from the 'likely conflict scenarios facing China' as visualised in the ZX 2013.

Likely Future Conflict Scenarios

Looking at the likely future conflict scenarios for China, the ZX 2013 analyses them into four categories.¹⁹ Firstly, a large scale, high intensity defensive war, precipitated by a crisis and initiated by a 'hegemonic power' intent on curbing China's rise. Secondly, a comparatively large scale, high intensity anti-breakup (*fan fenlie*) conflict alluding to 'Taiwan independence'. The former is deemed to have a low probability and the latter a high probability of occurrence. The third kind of conflict is middle to small scale, mid-level intensity 'self-defence counterattack' due to maritime disputes, border disputes or political instability in a neighbouring country.²⁰ This is judged to have a mid-level probability though it is appreciated to be showing an upward trend. The fourth category is a small scale, low intensity conflict linked to internal stability or military operations other than war (MOOTW).

The ZX 2013 assesses a multi-dimensional and high technology surprise attack (short of invasion) by a 'strong enemy' to be the most dangerous, a limited maritime conflict to be the most probable and the conflict requiring the highest level of preparation to be a comparatively large scale, high intensity local maritime war in a nuclear backdrop.²¹ It is obvious that the maritime domain in the Asia-Pacific is the main strategic direction. This is further reinforced in the ZX 2013: "Perhaps the main direction of the confrontation war is the Eastern and Southern Sea direction, in which the real and potential operations are most prominent, threat is the most..."²²

Current Reorganisation



**Map I: Initial Theatre Boundaries as indicated on Chinese Website
(Adapted from Sina *Xinlang Xinwen*²³)**

A version of the new theatre command boundaries given in the official Chinese media is shown in **Map I**. However later interpretations and media reports indicate changes, for example the Yunnan and Guizhou province of the erstwhile Chengdu MR are now in the Southern Theatre Command.²⁴ Based on the likely conflict scenarios mentioned above and the orientation of the current main strategic direction, the orientation of the MRs, other than the Western Theatre, is obvious.

The Western Theatre covers most of the region under the erstwhile Chengdu MR and Lanzhou MR. The erstwhile Lanzhou MR was oriented towards the Soviet Union with local units of Xinjiang Military District located North and South of the Taklamakan desert and in the Dzungaria plains in North Xinjiang, while the two Group Armies were positioned well to the West in the Gansu or Hexi corridor.²⁵ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rationale for this deployment no longer being valid, it would be more accurate to say that the most of the Lanzhou MR has been merged into the Chengdu MR rather than saying that both have been merged. The strategic direction of the Western Theatre is Tibet and India and this has been underlined by the recent upgradation of the status of Tibet Military District.²⁶ Recent changes have placed all military districts, which were under erstwhile MR headquarters, directly under the National Defence Mobilisation Department of the CMC, but the operational command status of Tibet Military District required a different dispensation.

The PLA's involvement in Tibet can be gauged from the fact that for the first five years (1950-55), Tibet was practically administered by the Tibet Military Commission.²⁷ Even though Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was a military district level command, its commander was a Lieutenant General unlike other military districts which were a corps grade appointment held by a Major General. Many a PLA general, including current Western Theatre Commander Zhao Zongqi²⁸ and current Tibet Military District Commander Xu Yong²⁹, have trodden the career path of commanding 13th or 14th Combined Corps in Chengdu MR, before or after a staff or command appointment in Tibet Military District Commander and subsequently moving to a higher grade appointment. Therefore, the current upgradation of Tibet Military District to Deputy MR Leader grade is not surprising and underscores the operational nature of Tibet Military District.³⁰

During peace time, the erstwhile MR Headquarters command structure was composed of the Headquarters Department, Political Department, Joint Logistics Department and Armament Department which mirrored the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and the General Armament Department respectively.³¹ However, the requirements of command structure in the theatre during operations varied from the peace time MR organisation. As an illustration, we can look at

the National Defence University's *Zhanyi Xue* 2006 (*The Science of Campaigns*) which states that depending on the campaign level during war, the Joint Campaign Command Structure could comprise operations centre, intelligence centre, communications centre, support (safeguards/logistics) centre, and other specialist structures like comprehensive firepower coordination centre, information operations centre etc.³² Commenting on the variation in peace and war command structure, the ZX 2013 makes repeated references to the unsuitability of the erstwhile MR organisation structure, specifically for military modernisation and the requirements of joint operations command. It underlined the need to have a common peace and war time joint command structure (*pingzhan yizhi de lianhe zhizhi jigou*) in every strategic direction.³³ The current reorganisation eradicates the distinction between the peace and war structure and current Chinese writings use the phrase 'integrated peace war' (*pingzhan yiti*) to describe the theatre command (*zhanqu*) organisation structure.³⁴ This is highlighted in an interview given by the Central Theatre Commander in which he differentiates between *junqu* and *zhanqu* in terms of organisation structure, function, task, jurisdiction, requirements, command and training.³⁵ In essence the *junqu* MR structure was predominantly Army with a dual purpose of building (*jian*; military modernisation) and war (*zhan*) tasks while the *zhanqu* theatre command structure is joint and focussed only on war requirements. The military media is accentuating the difference between the two terms to sensitise the rank and file to the new orientation, as reflected in an article titled "Theatre Command is not an upscaling of grade of MR; rather is a reorganisation and rebirth of revolutionary character" in the PLA Daily.³⁶

Though the reorganisation of the MRs has been driven by changes in strategic perceptions and military doctrine, the actual changes have generally been implemented only when other major organisational or structural changes have been made. In the 1980s, it was the downsizing and restructuring of the PLA which led to seven MRs being formed from the erstwhile eleven. In the present instance though the rationale has been visible for at least a decade, the catalyst has been the current major military reforms.

Conclusion

Chinese military writings usually presage major changes in the PLA. Doctrinal changes are often not perceptible due to slow

change, unless theoretical writings are compared over a period of time. While both the ZX 2013³⁷ and SOS 2005³⁸ clearly mention that MRs will be created or merged as required, the actual implementation has generally occurred when there is a strong leadership and is accompanied by major reforms.

The adoption of *zhanqu* or theatre command structure reflects the joint operations requirements, while the distribution of the theatre commands reflects the strategic outlook. The rationale of distribution based on strategic assessment and concept of strategic direction is apt in a country, like China, with multiple neighbours. The conflict scenarios, assessed main strategic direction and contemporary outward orientation of the Chinese strategic outlook highlight the geopolitical game in the Asia Pacific region. The rationale also explains the creation of a Western Theatre covering practically half the country. More than the other reforms, which have garnered much attention; the new theatre commands reflect the strategic outlook of the country.

Endnotes

¹ *The Science of Military Strategy or Zhanlue Xue* is an authoritative PLA publication of the PLA's Academy of Military Science published periodically since 1987. The SOS 2005 is an English translation of the *Zhanlue Xue* 2001, when the strategic guidance was fighting 'local wars under high tech conditions'. The ZX 2013 is contemporary, written with the strategic guidance of fighting 'local wars under conditions of informationisation'.

² The PLA term *junqu* literally means "military region/area". The PLA uses the term *da junqu* (large or big *junqu*) for Military Region but is usually shortened to *junqu*. Since the *junqu* term can also be used for provincial military area/region, for example *Yunan junqu*, it can create confusion. In this article *junqu* indicates Military Region.

³ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Zhanlue Xue (The Science of Military Strategy)*, 3rd ed., Academy of Military Science of the People's Liberation Army, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2013, p. 238.

⁴ James C Mulvenon & Andrew ND Yang, eds., *The People's Liberation Army as Organisation: Reference Volume v1.0*, RAND, 2002, pp.17-21.

⁵ Paul HB Godwin, *From Continent to Periphery : PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capabilities Towards 2000*, in David Shambaugh & Richard H Yang, eds., *China's Military in Transition*, Oxford University, Oxford, 1997, pp.200-223.

⁶ Information Office of the State Council of The People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy 2015 (Defence White Paper)*. Accessed at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/content_20820628.htm on 28 Oct 2016.

⁷ Dennis J Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed., Routledge, New York, 2012, pp.87-100.

⁸ Peng Guangqian & Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Academy of Military Science of the People's Liberation Army, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2005, p.190.

⁹ The PLA has three types of joint campaign based on the scale: *Zhanqu* (war zone or theater level) joint campaign or large scale, *Zhanqu fangxiang* (war zone/theatre direction) joint campaign or middle level and *jituanjunji* (combined arms group army) joint campaign or small scale. *PLA Military Terms*, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2011, pp.121-122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.77.

¹¹ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p. 7.

¹² *Military Terms* 2011, *op.cit*, p.51.

¹³ Peng Guangqian, et al., *op cit*, p.189.

¹⁴ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p. 239.

¹⁵ Zhongguo Junwang, "dongbu zhanqu silingyuan toulou zhuyao gongzuo: zai taihai donghai zhunbei zhihui dazhang", Accessed at http://news.china.com.cn/2016-03/16/content_38041096.htm on 14 Oct 2016.

¹⁶ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p.240.

¹⁷ Peng Guangqian, et al, *op cit*, p.36.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.233.

¹⁹ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p.99.

²⁰ Few types of border operations listed for the PLA Army are "border blockade and control (*bianjing fengkong*), resolute defence (*jianshou fangyu*), firepower strikes (*huoli daji*), deep thrust (*zongshen chuancha*), assault fortifications and attack reinforcements (*gongjian dayuan*), occupy and control a part (*zhanling kongju*) etc ".*Ibid*, p.199.

²¹ Multi-dimensional in current Chinese military writings implies land, sea, air, space and network domains.

²² Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, pp.101.

²³ Xinlang Xinwen, "xin sixiang, xin shijian: huigu jundui gaige xin chengjiu", Accessed at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-06-12/doc-ifxszkzy5145468.shtml> on 20 Sep 2016.

²⁴ Zhongguo wang, “*jiefangjun wu dazhanqu siling xiangqi fasheng: jiajin beizhan zhunbei dazhang (5/5)*”, 16 March 2016, Accessed at http://www.china.com.cn/txt/2016-03/16/content_38041141_5.htm on 14 Oct 2016.

²⁵ Dennis J Blasko, *op.cit*, pp.92-93.

²⁶ All organisations in the PLA have a grade which normally is reflected as the grade of the Commander. There are 15 grades from platoon to CMC Vice Chairman.

²⁷ Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, Vintage Digital, 2012, Kindle Edition, Chapter 4.

²⁸ Zhongguo Junwang, “*xibu zhanqu silingyuan Zhao Zongqi chushen zhenchabing duoci canzhan*”, 16 March 2016, Accessed at <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2016/03-16/7799320.shtml> on 20 Sep 2016.

²⁹ Huanqiu Shibao, “*Xizang junqu shenge weifu junquji danwei huagui lujun lingdao*”, 13 May 2016, Accessed at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2016-05-13/doc-ixsehvu8839773.shtml> on 23 Sep 2016.

³⁰ Global Times, “*China raises Tibet Military Command's power rank*”, 13 May 2016, Accessed at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/982843.shtml> on 20 Sep 2016.

³¹ Information Office of the State Council of The People's Republic of China. *China's National Defence in 2006 (Defence White Paper)*. Accessed at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2006.htm> on 28 Oct 2016.

³² Zhang Yuliang, ed., *Zhanyi Xue* (The Science of Campaigns), PLA National Defence University, National Defence University Publishing House, Beijing, 2006, pp.282-283.

³³ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p.201.

³⁴ Zhongguo Junwang, “*guofangbu tan wudajunqu jibie, gui shui lingdao*”, 02 February 2016, Accessed at http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/n2014/tp/content_6884500.htm on 14 Oct 2016.

³⁵ Zhongguo Junwang, “*xiangjie 'zhanqu zhuzhan' jiyu dajunqu de 7 ge butong*”, 16 March 2016, Accessed at http://www.china.com.cn/2016-03/16/content_38040990.htm on 14 Oct 2016.

³⁶ Zhongguo Guofangbao, “*zhanqu bushi junqu de shengji ban, ershi geming xing de chongzu he xinsheng*”, 29 September 2016, Accessed at http://www.81.cn/jwzl/2016-09/29/content_7285040.htm on 14 Oct 2016.

³⁷ Shou Xiaosong, *op cit*, p.240.

³⁸ Peng Guangqian, et al. *op cit*, p.190.