



Xi Transforms the PLA: How the Military Is Being Adapted to China's Changing Global Position

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Reform of the Chinese armed forces gained new momentum under Xi Jinping in 2015. The main argument behind the strategy, structure, and equipment modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the active defence of China's global interests to strengthen its competitiveness with the United States. A short-term goal is to make the PLA operationally capable of projecting China's power abroad constantly, using joint exercises, peacekeeping missions, and the development of military infrastructure. One recent example was opening of China's first foreign military base in Djibouti. The PLA should also be capable of defending China's territory and overseas interests by performing combat operations abroad. This means a possible change to the non-intervention clause that has until now been a crucial element of China's foreign policy.

In August 2017, during celebrations marking the 90th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army, Xi mentioned "three core elements" of military reforms. These were to build a people's army that obeys the party's command, can fight and win battles while working efficiently to create a new military strategic command, and developing new military strategies and guidelines.¹ These reforms are happening in two stages. The first was completed in 2016, while the second is now being underway, and is due to be accomplished in 2020. According to the plan, the As Xi pointed out in his report presented at the 19th Party Congress,² the PLA should be modernised by 2035 and be a top-ranked military force by 2050.

Striving for Achievement

When Xi took power in 2012, he had a clear understanding of the need to adjust China's foreign policy in order to defend its strategic interests.³ Generally, these interests remain unchanged, focusing on territorial

¹ "China Focus: 'Be ready to win wars', China's Xi orders reshaped PLA," *Xinhua*, 1 August 2017.

² M. Chan, "China has the world's biggest military force. Now Xi wants it to be the best," *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2017.

³ In December 2012, the term "Chinese dream" (*zhongguo meng*) was used in one of Xi's speeches. It is described as an idea of the Chinese people working to realise their goals as a way of revitalising the nation following CPC directions. A "great rejuvenation of

integrity (mainly concerning the situation in Tibet and activity of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement in Xinjiang province), sovereignty (in the context of the South and East China Sea disputes and “reunification” with Taiwan), and economic development (as a means of maintaining high economic growth via enhancement of China’s “going out” strategy). Xi believes that these core interests are evolving due to China’s increasing global engagement, so the strategy to achieve them needs to be modified. In that sense, the PLA should be an essential instrument of such a strategy. His new foreign policy is called a “striving for achievement”⁴ approach. It aims to reaffirm China’s global position rather than focusing mainly on economy. The new policy requires an assertive and active response to issues in the world’s hotspots to defend the PRC’s global interests. This new strategy also serves as a tool to build China’s political strength to a level commensurate with its current international economic position. It also uses economic cooperation as an instrument to strengthen the PRC’s political and security presence in the world, and to build a network of partners.

In November 2013, Xi described three unprecedented situations defining China’s current global status. He said that China is closer than ever to taking centre stage globally, that it is closer to achieving its goals, and that it now has the ability and the self-confidence to achieve its objectives. Simultaneously, he mentioned three dangers that China is facing and needs to find protection from. These are aggression, subversion (by the U.S. and its allies), and division (separatism).⁵ In the PRC’s perspective, there are practically only two countries with the power to threaten China militarily and harm its main interests. The first is the United States, which China associates with subversion and hegemony designed to undermine its political system through advocacy of human rights and democracy. The other potential threat is Russia, although this challenge is neutralised by China’s economic superiority. Competition with the U.S. is inevitable because, according to China’s new foreign policy strategy, the PRC should strongly emphasise its interests in international relations and be ready to either achieve (in the framework of “major country diplomacy”) or defend them. The PLA’s current capabilities need to be enhanced to support the new foreign policy agenda fully.

The PLA’s New Strategy and Its Implementation

In 2015, a new military strategy white paper (previously such documents were entitled defence white papers) was published, describing the main concepts of the strategy for the PLA in the context of China’s changing foreign policy. One of those concepts was the defence of “overseas interests,” which should be understood as China’s ability to react if its interests (its citizens or businesses) in Africa, South Asia, or within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are in danger. It underlined important changes in the existing strategies for all arms of the PLA. Ground forces “will continue to reorient from theatre defence to trans-theatre mobility,” naval forces “will gradually shift focus from the defence of offshore waters to a combination of offshore waters defence and open seas protection,” and air forces will “endeavour to shift focus from territorial air defence to both defence and offence, and build an air-space defence force structure that can meet the requirements of informationised [sic] operations.”⁶ Such modification needs to be interpreted in two ways. The first is very specific, aiming to strengthen China’s operational

the Chinese nation” is a process to be finalised by 2021 (the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China) and 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China). By the first anniversary, a well-off society is to have been established, which in practical terms means doubling 2010 GDP and income per capita. By the second date China should have become a modern and harmonious socialist country.

⁴ The “striving for achievement” concept is based on three public utterances by Chinese officials: minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi’s speech at the Second World Peace Forum in July 2013, state councillor Yang Jiechi’s article in *Qiushi* in August 2013, and Xi’s speech on diplomacy toward surrounding countries in October 2013. Y. Xuetong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2, June 2014.

⁵ In November 2013, at the Third Plenum of the CPC Central Committee (CC), Xi mentioned “three unprecedented situations” (*sange qiansuo weiyou*) and “three dangers” (*sange weixian*), M. Julienne, “The PLA reforms: tightening control over military,” *ECFR*, 30 March 2016, www.ecfr.eu, p. 6.

⁶ Full text: “China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, 26 May 2015.

capabilities in regional disputes such as the South and East China Seas. The second is more general, connected to enhancing PLA capabilities in the light of possible future conflict with the U.S. as a permanent reference of China's policy.

Under the new strategy, the PLA should achieve the operational ability to project China's power abroad. Enlarging the PLA's territorial operations base (as in the South China Sea disputes) allows it to implement anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) concepts. But the new strategy also shows a constant change in strategic thinking about the PLA, changing focus from A2/AD defensive concepts to enhanced offensive capabilities. In the short-term perspective, the PLA is supposed to conduct joint combat actions in non-warfare military operations. In the long-term, however, the objective is to create armed forces which are operationally capable of prosecuting joint, high-tech wars primarily in the maritime-aerospace domains. The "no first use" rule for China's nuclear arsenal remains in place, which means that any kind of offensive would need to be carried out by conventional forces, and that China would be unable to respond to a conventional attack with nuclear weapons.

The greater mobility suggested in the new strategy gives the PLA an opportunity to reduce its numbers. In 2015, Xi publicly announced a reduction of 300,000 PLA ground forces personnel. This has not yet happened, but should be included in the second phase of reform (2017–2020) and coincide with more personnel in the PLA's navy, air force, strategic support force⁷ and rocket force.

The obvious examples of the new PLA strategy are China's actions in the South China Sea, such as expanding artificial "islands" and military infrastructure. China will not block the sea lanes in the region out of which it benefits the most (the sea lane through the Malacca Strait covers most of China's foreign trade), but will signal its strategic ability to control the basin in support of its territorial claims and in opposition to demands made by other regional players supported by the U.S. It is also an important territory from the perspective of Chinese submarines, which are an important part of China's nuclear deterrence.

The most recent example of practical strategy implementation was the opening of China's first overtly and explicitly military-related foreign outpost in Djibouti. Established on 11 July and underpinned by a 10-year agreement between China and Djibouti, this is the first such foreign PLA permanent support base. The base strengthens China's naval capabilities in the Gulf of Aden where, since 2008, Chinese vessels (and submarines in the Indian Ocean) have been active in UN-mandated anti-piracy and escort missions. The main priorities of these missions are to secure sea lanes under international cooperation, and to facilitate (if needed) the efficient evacuation of Chinese citizens from conflict zones (such as Yemen in 2015, and Libya in 2011 and 2014). Approximately 1 million Chinese citizens currently live in Africa. The base also symbolises China's global position in terms of military capabilities, especially in the context of containing the U.S. presence in the region.

Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping missions is the testing ground for the PLA's capabilities under the new strategy. Although participation started many years ago, it has intensified noticeably during Xi's term, with the first involvement of battle troops in 2014. This was designed not only to prove to the international community that China takes its global responsibilities seriously but also to test military procedures and equipment in conditions similar to a modern battlefield. More than 80% of Chinese peacekeeping involvement takes place in Africa, which also raises the question of whether it is intended partly for the indirect defence of China's strong economic interests on this continent. China is currently the biggest participant (out of the five permanent Security Council members) in the UN peacekeeping mission (in terms of personnel). In 2017, more than 30,000 Chinese personnel took part in 24 United Nations missions all over the world. During these missions, 13 Chinese soldiers lost their lives.⁸

⁷ To underline the growing importance of the PLA's capabilities on the modern battlefield, Xi decided to establish the strategic support force (as a separate service) to integrate space, cyberwarfare, and electronic warfare capabilities.

⁸ "Facts and figures: China's overseas peacekeeping operations," *Xinhua*, 1 August 2017.

Expanding the PLA's capabilities also involves carrying out drills with foreign partners and friendly visits by Chinese armed forces. In this respect, cooperation with Russia is most interesting. Moscow and Beijing are not bound by any kind of strategic alliance or mutual security guarantees, but anti-U.S. policy orientation aligns their militaries. Frequent drills started after the U.S. pivot to Asia, and are being carried out more often. The Chinese navy has even reached out to the Baltic Sea for the first time (in 2017), and Russia and China carried out exercises in the South China Sea in 2016 and 2017.

To respond efficiently to new foreign policy challenges in the South China Sea, the Middle East and Central Asia, the modernisation of the PLA's equipment is required. China's defence budget⁹ is constantly growing, and is used in part to purchase arms and develop modern weapons. In 2017, the budget was raised by 7%, reaching an official level of around \$152 billion. This is about one quarter of proposed U.S. defence spending for the same year, and about 1.3% of China's GDP.¹⁰ The primary focus of equipment modernisation is the ability to constrain U.S. in the region and its allies in Southeast Asia), and to become operationally capable of global action to secure China's interests. The key point is security, which also involves China's nuclear capabilities. The country currently has around 270 nuclear warheads, and the PLA rocket force is enhancing its strategic deterrence capability by developing missiles, upgrading systems, and rolling out ballistic missile defence capabilities. In 2016, this branch of the PLA began fielding DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM), capable of precision strikes against ground targets and conventional strikes against naval targets. Strategic support forces were created in 2015 to underline the growing importance of the PLA's abilities on the modern battlefield, and to integrate space, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. The space and cyber aspects are the main sectors in which Chinese capabilities are starting to match those of the United States. Recent examples include tests of hypersonic weapons (the hypersonic glide vehicle¹¹) and anti-satellite devices (Dong Neng 3¹²). Special emphasis arising from China's dependence on global trade and regional disputes on the South and East China Seas is placed on air and sea operations. The first Chinese aircraft carrier battle group (*Liaoning*, the Soviet *Varyag* purchased from Ukraine) is under development. It is intended mostly for exercises, and conducted integration training in the South China Sea in 2016. Two more ships of that type are being built in Chinese shipyards, with first one expected to reach operational capability in 2020. In December 2016, the PLA air force took delivery of its first four Su-35 fighters from Russia. The contract, signed in November 2015, is for 24 units in total.

The new PLA strategy required changes in the structure, organisation, and chain of command of China's armed forces. The Central Military Commission Small Leading Group for Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces was established in March 2014 under Xi's chairmanship. It is responsible for suggesting directions for development of the PLA, and for making decisions during the reform process. The aim was to make the command more effective and to reduce corruption by taking key decision-making power away from the regions and centralising it in Beijing. These changes not only gave the Communist Party of China (CPC) more control and effective command of the PLA, but also provided Xi with an opportunity to promote new, loyal generals.

The Central Military Commission¹³ (CMC) was reconstructed and general departments (staff, political, logistics, and armaments) abolished.¹⁴ This shortened and simplified the chain of command, providing Xi

⁹ There is a lack of substantial information on how the funds are divided, but there is a serious assumption that one third is for personnel expenses, one third for training and military exchanges, and one third for purchasing and repairing weapons and military equipment.

¹⁰ "China Focus: 'China's 2017 defence budget to grow 7 pct.': finance official," *Xinhua*, 6 March 2017.

¹¹ "China successfully tests 7000 mph hypersonic glide vehicle capable of delivering nuclear weapons through sophisticated missile defence shields," *Mail Online*, 27 April 2016.

¹² "China's first test of its anti-satellite missile capable of destroying enemy communications ends in destruction after the projectile 'malfunctions'," *Mail Online*, 2 August 2017.

¹³ Central Military Commissions: refers to the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of China, a Party organ under the CPC Central Committee, and the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China, a central state organ under the National People's Congress. In reality, it is a single institution with the same membership and leadership, but with two names.

with more direct and effective control. New bodies—the Commission for Discipline Inspection (*junwei jiwei*), Politics and Law Commission (*junwei zhengfawei*), and the Audit Office (*junwei shenjishu*)—were created to increase the autonomy of supervisory organs and the military legal system.¹⁵ The CMC can better access PLA forces and respond to changing external objectives through its direct command of five new “Theatre Commands” (Western, Southern, Eastern, Northern, Central). The Theatre Commands themselves replaced seven former Military Regions, established in the 1960s, and will be better placed to respond to global and regional threats, with focus on Vietnam, the South China Sea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Korean Peninsula.

Xi’s Greater Control over the PLA

The success of military reform requires Xi to enforce the PLA’s “reattachment” to CPC directives, limiting the possibility of an independent “military-industrial” complex being created. The process of regaining CPC control over the PLA started in November 2012, when, after the 18th National CPC Congress, Xi simultaneously took the posts of secretary general of the Communist Party of China and chairman of the Central Military Commission, with the latter position providing political control over the military during peace time and war. The CMC nomination happened much earlier than in the times of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao,¹⁶ and was a follow-up to an informal rule established after Jiang Zemin’s leadership. This principle says that three key power positions (CPC secretary general, PRC chairman and the CMC chairman) should be held simultaneously by one person, to avoid any possible concerns about the loyalty of CPC members and PLA officers.¹⁷

Relations between the CPC and the PLA relations can be summed up in the slogans the “party commands the gun” and “the party’s absolute leadership over the army” (the latter, *dang dui jundui de juehui lingdao*). This is a non-negotiable aspect of China’s political system. A result of China’s “opening up” and market-oriented reforms, running parallel to ongoing military modernisation, was the creation of a strong and profitable defence industry, which plays an important role in China’s economy. Military enterprises which have a huge presence in civilian sectors have become influential entities in the Chinese economy. The best examples are Aviation Industry Corp of China, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp., and China North Industries Group Corp. These enterprises created a separate system of link with government, regional and party structures. Such processes created a significant danger of undermining the CPC’s ability to fully control the PLA both internally and externally. In November 2015, following a conference organised by the CMC and chaired by Xi, the CPC issued a directive that these military enterprises should focus only on military sectors, and that “paid services” would be phased out after three years. These existing links and connections are to be destroyed or replaced with reductions in ground forces personnel numbers and new leadership nominations on different military levels. To gain the support of the military, the Chinese authorities promised to hire officers dismissed from civilian branches of military enterprises. There is also an initiative to raise salaries to gain loyalty and commitment.¹⁸

In addition, Xi constantly repeated his instructions that the PLA should follow CPC directives to strengthen his personal position. In January 2016, the Central Military Commission published an “Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces,” which included further instructions to

¹⁴ Z. Tao, “China’s new Central Military Commission organ established,” *China Military Online*, 11 January 2016; J. Mulvenon, “China’s ‘Goldwater-Nichols’? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganisation Has Finally Arrived,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 53, 2017.

¹⁵ M. Julienne, “The PLA reforms: Tightening control over the military,” *ECFR*, 30 March 2016, www.ecfr.eu. p. 6.

¹⁶ Until 1987, when Deng Xiaoping resigned from all his posts except the CMC chairmanship. And, although Hu Jintao took control of the party in 2002 at the 16th Party Congress, Chairman Jiang Zemin did not relinquish the CMC chair until 2004. P. Mattis, “Hu Jintao’s Doubtful Future on the Central Military Commission,” *China Brief*, vol. 12, issue 16, 2012.

¹⁷ “Jiang: Hu’s takeover natural and convincing,” *Xinhua*, 21 September 2004.

¹⁸ According to a survey carried out by the Chinese Ministry of Defence in 2010, the average salary was a little over 5,300 yuan (approx. €670). In 2016, the average lieutenant salary was according to the same institution, about 6,200 yuan (approx. €780). “Monthly salary for military cadre up to \$826,” *China Daily*, 19 May 2011, www.chinadaily.com.cn; Y. Jianing, “Ministry says military salary raise rumors are untrue,” *Global Times*, 1 July 2016.

follow the Party ideology.¹⁹ In April 2016, Xi became “commander in chief of the joint battle command centre.” This, together with his position as CPC secretary general, head of state and chairman of the CMC, describes his central position in the state propaganda apparatus. It has no practical meaning (it does not give him direct command over the Chinese military on the battlefield), but its symbolism is meaningful for PLA personnel. Xi’s more practical influence on military reform is applied by his chairmanship of a new CPC Committee for Joint Military and Civilian Development, which held its first plenary meeting in June.²⁰

Since mid-2017, the slogan “safeguard the core and follow commands” has been widely promoted.²¹ This expression appeared in Xi’s speech to mark the 50th anniversary of the People’s Liberation Army Daily newspaper in January.²² It shows how the usual relations between army and party are being steadily reoriented to become a more personal model of PLA commitment to Xi and his plans to reform military strategy, structure, and equipment. In July (at a military parade in Inner Mongolia) and August (at celebrations in Beijing), on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA, Xi committed the PLA to “unswervingly stick to the fundamental principle and system of the party’s absolute leadership over the army, always listen to and follow the party’s orders, and march to wherever the party points to.”²³

But the anti-corruption drive²⁴ was one of the most radical and frequently used tools to force the existing military structures to follow new directives. At the same time, it also allowed new leadership under Xi to prepare the groundwork for personnel changes in order to nominate a majority of his supporters to the CMC and higher command. As a result, 42 senior officers including two generals, four lieutenant generals, 28 major generals and one colonel have been purged since Xi took office in 2012.²⁵ Of the 40 CPC Central Committee members who attended the 19th Party Congress (18–24 October) in military uniform, only seven were about to retain their seats (mostly due to retirement), which presents a natural opportunity to complete this stage of personnel replacements.²⁶

Towards a Change in China’s Non-intervention Clause? Conclusions and Prospects

China, under the personal influence of Xi, continues to move towards becoming a global superpower, drawing from the U.S. foreign policy model in which political and economic interests are strengthened by military capabilities. China already has the economic tools, but lacks political influence which is strongly associated with military capabilities. Military reforms are to steadily prepare the PLA for armed engagements, but as a “last resort” rather than in terms of active, day to day operations. This is a long-term process in which military reform is one of several instruments. China’s currently binding comprehensive counter terrorism law (which took effect in January 2015) paved the way for PLA personnel to be posted abroad. However, such deployment remains extremely restricted (requiring CMC approval). Article 71 of the law specifies: “... the Chinese People’s Liberation Army ... may assign people to leave the country on

¹⁹ “China releases guideline on military reform,” *Xinhua*, 1 January 2016.

²⁰ “Xi urges integrated military and civilian development,” *Xinhua*, 21 June 2017.

²¹ The expression (“core”) and Xi’s ability to be so named in official discourse was confirmed by the 6th CPC CC Plenum in October 2016. Previously, such status was accorded to Mao, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. It is not connected with specific privileges, but indicates a leader’s strong position within the party.

²² J. Mulvenon, “Safeguarding the Core and Following Commands: Party-Army Relations Before the 19th Party Congress,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 53, 2017.

²³ “Xi orders Party to stay loyal to the Party, serve the people,” *Xinhua*, 30 July 2017.

²⁴ For the first time, two vice-chairmen of the CMC (Gen. Xu Caihou in 2014 and Gen. Guo Boxiong in 2015) were discharged and then sentenced under corruption charges. This was followed by a purge of the personal networks of disgraced military leaders to destroy their military, political, and business ties and replace them with new people loyal to Xi.

²⁵ Cheng L., “Promoting ‘Young guards’: The recent high turnover in the PLA leadership (Part I: Purges and Reshuffles),” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 48, 2015.

²⁶ Fan Chanlong, vice-chairman of Central Military Commission is about to retire, along with Defence Minister Chang Wanquan and three other CMC members. Two most expected candidates for CCP CC are: Major General Zhong Shaojun (recently nominated for appointment to the CMC’s General Office, a civilian who worked with Xi in Zhejiang province and later in Shanghai, and who, in 2012, received military rank as senior colonel and was named director of Xi’s personal office at the CMC), and Lieutenant General Wang Chunling (commander of Beijing area, who previously worked with Xi in Zhejiang).

counter-terrorism missions,”²⁷ while China’s 2015 military strategy underlined the concept of “active defence,” stating “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but will surely counterattack if attacked,”²⁸ which is a clear statement of the increasingly active aspect of the PLA’s strategy.

The PLA will be used more frequently as a tool to project China’s power globally, which on one hand provides an opportunity for other players to cooperate with China on various important issues, but on the other may increase the number of issues in which the interests of, for example, the U.S. and China are in conflict. In the longer term, such a process may even lead to a change of the non-intervention policy which currently remains central to China’s foreign policy and its actions in the international arena. Rooted deeply in Deng Xiaoping’s concept of constraint and “keeping a low profile,” the non-intervention policy underlines the superiority of a state’s sovereignty in the international community. This notion still exists under Xi, but the changes in PLA structure, equipment, and strategy, suggest an increased Chinese military position abroad. The BRI is a shining example here. It is not about alliances or military power, but about building a network of partners through economic cooperation. A concept so politically invested requires serious economic, political, and military guarantees. The PLA needs to be prepared to act if security risks that could endanger the BRI and Chinese interests arise in South Asia, the Middle East, or Central Asia. It is likely that China will open a second foreign military base (possibly in Pakistan or Sri Lanka) in the near term. In the longer term (20 to 30 years), the build-up of the PLA to make it capable of conducting combat operations outside China but in defence of Chinese state interests (mainly under the BRI umbrella) is possible. That is also a concern for Poland, which needs to evaluate the benefits of possible economic cooperation with China carefully, and consider Beijing’s anti-U.S. attitude and (although asymmetrical and constrained) highly-developed security relations with Russia.

²⁷ “Shouquan fabu: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo fan kongbu zhuyi fa,” [“Authorised release: Counter-Terrorism Act of the People’s Republic of China”], *Xinhua*, 27 December 2015.

²⁸ “Full text: China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, 26 May 2015.