

# MP-IDSA

## Issue Brief

# PLA's Western Theatre Command in Transition

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## **S**ummary

The PLA Western Theatre Command has undergone changes that are required for it to transform from a military region to a theatre command. The theatre command requirements made it to adopt various strategies to strengthen its joint combat capabilities and realistically train its troops by seeking ways to counter the adversary's military capability in mind. This requires it to counter the operational system of the adversary to emerge victorious in battle. Since the conventional capabilities of the PLA WTC have tremendous impact on India, especially their effort to significantly increase their air defence and reconnaissance capabilities, the integrated training exercises are aimed at countering both the mountain warfare and air capabilities of India.

The Western Theatre Command (WTC), one of the five theatre commands of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), considers India as one of the security threats in its strategic direction. The WTC strategic direction also faces the Central Asian region and the Af-Pak region. However, there are differences in the ways threats from Central Asia and Af-Pak are managed. China prefers to use the security framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), such as the counter-terrorism cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to mitigate threats to its restive Xinjiang. Moreover, these threats are mostly from non-state actors and consequently, the People's Armed Police (PAP) are in charge of monitoring and countering them. They are not considered as conventional military threats. On the contrary, the majority of the WTC military reforms in joint training modules and joint operations, especially in the combined arms brigade and multi-dimensional operations indicate that it is training for a "limited war" with an adversary with characteristics similar to Indian military capability. Therefore, the transition of WTC into a theatre of war zone capability has an immense impact on India.

## Distinct Characteristics of the PLA WTC

The PLA WTC is distinct compared to other theatre commands as the two military districts, the Tibet Military District and Xinjiang Military District, have come under the direct control of the PLA Army. For instance, after the 2015 reforms, the National Defence Mobilisation Committee of the Central Military Commission has been administering and leading the provincial military districts. However, the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts have an elevated status of deputy theatre (level) unit (副战区级单位), indicating that their role as well as mission have been expanded. The theatre commands are responsible for joint training and warfare. The special political status given to the two aforementioned districts might mean that the PLA Army command could assert considerable influence over the theatre command in operational planning and strategies in these districts.<sup>1</sup> The special status is also evident in the Political Commissar of Tibet Military District, Lt Gen Zhang Xuejie's becoming the Standing Committee Member of the Tibet Autonomous Region in January 2020. Even in Xinjiang, Peng Jiarui, the Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp (a paramilitary organisation) is the Vice-Chairman of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Government.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin McCauley, ["Snapshot: China's Western Theatre Command"](#), *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 1.

<sup>2</sup> ["Peng Jiarui Presided Over the Executive Meeting of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp, Research and Deploy Economic Development, Emergency System Construction and Other Works, Kong Xinglong Attended"](#) (彭家瑞主持召开兵团行政常务会议 研究部署经济发展、应急体系建设等工作 孔星隆出席), *Bingtuan Zhengwuwang*, 29 September 2021.

Wang Haijiang (汪海江) is the commander of the WTC and was promoted to General rank on 6 September 2021.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, he was responsible for Xinjiang and Tibet military districts and is known for his experience on frontline of border defence areas. He is believed to have spent 10 months in high-altitude areas in 2017 and helped in building the Chinese projects to build “well-off villages”.<sup>4</sup> He became the fourth commander to lead the WTC, when he replaced Gen Qu Qiling, whose current designation is unknown. Both Qu and his predecessor, Gen Zhang Xudong were suffering from ill-health and therefore needed to be changed frequently. Gen Zhang is said to have died of cancer and there is a speculation that the unforgivable terrain is creating health concerns for many frontline commanders and officers.<sup>5</sup> During Wang Haijiang’s time, the Tibet Military District (MD) also saw the induction of five Tibetan militia units (Snow Eagle Air Patrol, Snow Pigeon Communications Team, Snow Wolf Extreme [Boundary] Climbing Team, Snow Fox High Mountain Quick Response Team, Snow Mastiff Plateau Resistance Team), which are mostly utilised for emergency responses.<sup>6</sup>

The strategy to use Tibetan reserves is to first, enable the regular elite troops to utilise local Tibetan militia in their border operations, and at times, help resolve local tensions that arise out of disturbances caused by movement of troops and training activities. For instance, the militia might help the troops to secure emergency communication lines or power supplies. From Wang Haijiang’s perspective, Tibet’s natural environment and transport situation are complex enough that regular troops would find it difficult to enter further stretches of the terrain to conduct emergency operations.<sup>7</sup> Under civil–military integration, the reserves could be used in tandem with the regular troops to carry out multi-dimensional operations. The WTC is also carefully selecting Tibetan officers, whose family had supported the PLA’s liberation efforts or serve party leadership in Tibet.<sup>8</sup> These Tibetan officers are also important

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<sup>3</sup> [“The Central Military Commission Held a Promotion Ceremony for the Rank of Generals, Xi Jinping Issues a Letter of Order and Congratulated the Promoted Military Officers”](#) (中央军委举行晋升上将军衔仪式 习近平颁发命令状并向晋衔的军官表示祝贺), 6 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Wei, [“This Year, the Central Military Commission Has Once Again Promoted Five People to Generals, Disclosing the New Command Positions”](#) (中央军委今年再晋升 5 名上将, 多名新任司令员职务首次披露), *Xinjing Bao*, 6 September 2021. Well-Off Villages are considered part of China’s border defence strategies. The villagers are moved to these model areas, where subsidies and other assistance is given to develop their local industrial economy and raise income levels. See, Shan Jie, Fan Wei and Li Jieyi, [“How Well-Off Villages in Xizang Contribute to Border Defense: Development Vital to Defending Territory”](#), *Global Times*, 19 October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Minnie Chan, [“Chinese General Zhang Xudong Who Stepped Down as Head of Western Theatre Command in June Dies Aged 58”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 6 October 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Guo Weifeng and Yan Liang, [“The Tibet Military District Strengthens its Reserve Forces, and Enhances its Emergency Response Capabilities”](#) (西藏军区加强新型后备力量建设提升应急应战能力), *Zhongguo Guofangbao*, 18 June 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [“Military Life: Nidou Tasheng: The Horse on the Grassland”](#), *CCTV Network*, 26 July 2019.

links to the local communities to garner support for the Party leadership and for the PLA activities in the border areas.

## WTC's Transition and PLA's Training Towards India

After the reforms, the PLA WTC's main priority has been to establish a system of transition, where the theatre region could transform from functioning as a military region into a war zone. In other words, the "Military Area Command" (MAC) model seemed to be incompatible if the objective was to win wars. The establishment of the theatre command is meant to prepare the Chinese military to train and prepare for an eventuality of war. One of the requirements is that the "operational forces" (作战部队) are supposed to implement the "brigade-battalion new system" (旅-营新体制), and for the Air Force, the "base-brigade new command system" (基地-旅新指挥体制).<sup>9</sup>

Taking the WTC in particular, in one of the training exercises, the PLA WTC focused on countering the adversary's reconnaissance capabilities to prevent them from observing the PLA's deployment patterns.<sup>10</sup> Denying reconnaissance on deployments is part of joint combat exercise under information conditions, where electronic counter-measures are deployed to counter the adversary from observing the troop deployment. Such exercises are increasingly being part of the WTC's operational planning, as the emphasis is on the troops to understand the military capabilities of the adversary and then train themselves realistically. The principle of actual combat capability means that the training exercises should reflect the actual threat condition, i.e., the operational capability of the adversary. The commanders are encouraged to find realistic solutions to defeat the adversary through innovative use of equipment.

In fact, the WTC is working towards building joint capability that is focused on achieving "integration", as such "integration training" is part of base normalisation, which is conducted every month. In other words, the PLA Air Force is determined to normalise the base towards conducting integrated training, which are generally organised by brigade commanders and chief of staff. In a typical integrated training, including Air Force and Ground Forces, fighter aircrafts raid the mountain ridges to knock out the adversary's radar positions, guide missile tanks to infiltrate canyons to appear at mountain passes to strike important targets and air defence system is tested to show response level of tracking, reconnaissance and real-time

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<sup>9</sup> Many of these reforms are called "below the neck" reforms ("脖子以下"改革), which focus on operational and tactical units' modernisation. For an extensive analysis on the way these new changes are implemented within the PLA Air Force, see Kenneth W. Allen, Brendan S. Mulvaney and James Char, "[Ongoing Organisational Reforms of the People's Liberation Army Air Force](#)", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 2, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> "[The Vanguard of Multi-Dimensional Forces Joint Combat - Remember a Certain Western Theatre Command Support Team Engineer Zeng Wenlong](#)" (多维力量联合作战的保障尖兵——记西部战区某保障队工程师曾文龙), *Guanming Daily*, 5 October 2021.

surveillance.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, integrated joint operations in the WTC have enhanced the early warning network for the Air Force to track and counter any airborne invasion by an adversary.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the WTC with regard to the Indian theatre has significantly increased the new equipment in electronic counter-measures and special warfare reconnaissance. Specifically, Intelligence Reconnaissance Brigade (情报侦察旅) similar to the US Army Battlefield Surveillance Brigade has also been involved in exercises in the plateau regions. The WTC Air Force in an exercise wanted to find ways to withstand the enemy (airborne insertion) while shaping the defensive and offensive skills during confrontation.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the WTC Air Force exercises focus on developing battlefield awareness regarding the adversary's Air Force capabilities by extensively using its air defence and electromagnetic capabilities and conduct integrated operations to counter offensive tactics by the said adversary.

The exercises, which are termed as “system confrontation exercises” (体系对抗演练), have been one of the main types of exercise scheduled within the WTC every quarter. The system combat (作战体系) in the Chinese view, in modern warfare, there are no confrontation between the two countries' air forces alone or navies alone. Rather the confrontation is with the whole operating system of the adversary (system-to-system confrontation 体系对体系的对抗), which consists of combat elements from different services and arms operating as a whole. In this regard, information conditions, that is the quick and smooth transmission of battlefield awareness is necessary for finding a favourable situation in a confrontation. Within this aspect, gaining information control and information superiority is essential in gaining strength over the adversary.

## Challenges of Transition

The transition to training under real combat conditions has been challenging for the WTC. For instance, before the reforms in 2015, many exercises were conducted in the plains, and training in plateau regions was seen as a way for the soldiers to adapt to the climatic conditions. After the reforms were implemented, the combined armed brigades are increasingly stationed in high-altitude areas as opposed to staying away during the winter months. The adjustment has been tough as the brigades suffered

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<sup>11</sup> Liu Mingyue, Wei Bing and Li Jianwen, [“Certain Air Force Base: The System Enhances Elite Air Personnel”](#) (空军某基地：体系磨砺铸空中精锐), *PLA Daily*, 2 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Yang Jin and Yang Songsong, [“Air Force of the Western Theatre Command Focus on War and Explore the Construction of Air Defence System”](#) (西部战区空军聚焦备战打仗探索构建联合防空体系), *The PLA Daily*, 27 April 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Xu Yi and Zhang Ruijie, [“Unknown Base in Western Theatre Command: The New System Helps Lift the War Hawk to Fly into the Sky”](#) (西部战区空军某基地：新体制托举战鹰奋飞天空), *Xinhua*, 30 November 2020.

from terrain issues, lack of proper training, effective use of artillery and coordination, and find a way out to reduce the impact of high-altitude environment on physical training and equipment performance. Most importantly, the transition also led to the brigades initiating winter training exercises rather than restricting them to the summer months.<sup>14</sup>

The transformation of the physical infrastructure of the theatre commands, and the WTC has been no exception.<sup>15</sup> The Support Department (保障部) was newly created after the reforms were embedded within the corps-level units in theatre commands.<sup>16</sup> In the WTC, sometimes the problem pertains to the attitude of the officers trained or stationed in the plateau regions. One of the biggest impediments according to the Chinese President Xi Jinping is the “peace sickness” (和平病) that has afflicted the Chinese military. For instance, with regard to the WTC, peace sickness, or peace accumulation (和平积弊), meaning practices that are deep-rooted, long-established and corrupt are said to be challenges. In high-altitude plateau regions, just getting acclimated was seen as training and resolve, instead of integrating fully into the plateau conditions. The realistic training in the case of WTC would be not only to train in plateau conditions but also being stationed in that region.<sup>17</sup> In Chinese view, as the international trends seem to be peace and development, peace accumulation might breed the thinking that automatically peace is going to continue. Such an understanding might hinder combat effectiveness as possibility of war cannot be ruled out.<sup>18</sup>

Since 2018, the WTC has trained specifically to eliminate the “peace accumulations”. The difficulty of transition is visible according to the Chinese view because even though the military reforms have transformed the military region into a theatre command, many soldiers “wear new shoes but walk the old road” as they grew up during the peaceful years. Therefore, top talents from each unit are now promoted to

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<sup>14</sup> Sun Libo, Li Sen and Tang Lei, [“Western Theatre Command Ground Forces: Train, Train, Train Just for Victory Over the Plateau”](#) (西部战区陆军: 练! 练! 练! 只为胜战高原), *PLA Daily*, 17 January 2019.

<sup>15</sup> [“Western Theatre Command Support Department Airport Barracks Investigates and Researches Advancement of Preliminary Work of Civil-Military Dual Airport”](#) (西部战区空军保障部机场营房处调研乐山军民合用机场前期工作推进情况), *City SASAC*, 25 November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Before the reforms, the Support Department was placed in divisions, regiments and brigades. The previous General Logistics and General Equipment was responsible for military-level units. After the reforms, the Support Department is now at the Corps-level units, such as the Western Theatre Air Force Support Department. Under the Support Department, there are subordinate units that are spread over the battalions and regiments. See Wang Jun, [“Support Departments of all the Newly Formed PLA Army, PLA Air Force, PLA Navy of the Theatre Commands Makes a Public Appearance”](#) (解放军五大战区陆军、海军、空军新组建的保障部全部亮相), *The Paper*, 17 December 2017.

<sup>17</sup> No. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ma Debao, [“Eliminate Peace Accumulations, Promote the Capability of Preparation for Going to War”](#) (破除和积弊 提升备战打仗能力), *PLA Daily*, 17 March 2018.

officers based on a comprehensive assessment. According to the observers, the peace accumulations are generally visible in four insufficiencies such as insufficient grasp of scientific and technological knowledge; insufficient awareness of system; insufficient use of information means; and insufficient joint effectiveness. To rectify the peace accumulation, “engineered thinking” (工程化思维) was promoted at the end of the annual review of theatre construction in 2018 and to strengthen the supervision capabilities of the system.<sup>19</sup> The party committee of the theatre command generally meet twice in a year, to reflect on the shortcomings and give solutions to rectify them. By the end of the year, a review conference is conducted to see the results. “Four Studies and One Research” (四学一研), which includes ‘learning strategy’, ‘learning jointness’, ‘learning military branches’, ‘learning science and technology’, and ‘researching opponents’, are needed to enhance combat capabilities further.

## Conclusion

Overall, post 2015 reforms, the WTC has been transforming into a joint theatre command that can fight wars against an adversary like India. It has significantly increased its joint combat capabilities, especially in air defence and reconnaissance. It has significant impact on India as the two countries are involved in a border standoff and as it is tailored towards reducing its vulnerabilities against India’s superior airpower, any strengthening of its combat capabilities in this area would have an impact on India’s choices to conduct offensive operations. Moreover, the PLA is motivating its force to mentally prepare for a potential limited war if it comes to play, broadcasting its readiness to fight the war. In addition, the integrated training exercises and system confrontation strategies are aimed at not only hitting the adversary’s ground forces, but also its air capability, logistics and support systems.

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<sup>19</sup> Long Shaohua and Ji Dongsheng, [“Western Theatre Command Investigates Peace Accumulations and Focuses its Duty on Eliminating Them”](#) (西部战区聚焦战区主战主业主责破除和平积弊调查), *PLA Daily*, 30 October 2018.

## Chart

### Western Theatre Command—Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Sichuan, Tibet and Chongqing

Commander of WTC	Wang Haijiang (汪海江)
Deputy Commander of the WTC and Commander of the PLA Army of the WTC	Yang Yi (杨毅)
Political Commissar of the WTC	Wu Shezhou (吴社洲)
Deputy Political Commissar of the WTC, Director of Political Department of WTC and the Secretary of the Political and Legal Committee of Party Committee of WTC	Zhao Ruibao (赵瑞宝)
Political Commissar of the PLA Army of the WTC	Xu Deqing (徐德清)
Secretary of the PLA Army Discipline Commission of the WTC	Su Changqing (苏常青)
Chief of Staff of the PLA Army of the WTC	Cao Yimin (曹益民)
Deputy Political Commissar of the PLA Army of the WTC	Liu Maojie (刘茂杰)
Director of PLA Army Political Department of the WTC	Zhou Yishan (周依山)
Deputy Director of WTC PLA Army Political Work Department	Ding Aiguo (丁爱国)
Chief of Western Theatre Command PLA Army Support Department	Zhu Jianbin (朱剑斌)
Political Commissar and Member of Standing Committee of TAR	Zhang Xuejie (张学杰)
Deputy Director of the Political Work Department of Tibet Military District	Zhao Zhong (赵忠)
Commander of the Lhasa Air Force Base	Cai Zihua (蔡自华)
Commander of the Lanzhou Air Force Base	Wang Qilin (王启林)
Political Commissar of the Lanzhou Air Base of the WTC	Zhang Yunde (张云德)

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