

THE MAKING OF CHINA'S MILITARY POWER IN THE NEW ERA

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मनोहर परिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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INTRODUCTION: NEW ERA AND MILITARY POWER

INTRODUCTION

Xi Jinping Thought, the political ideology that was formally included in the Chinese constitution in 2018 theorised that China was entering a ‘New Era’ (*xin shidai*). This era marked a time of transformation. According to it, China had been focusing on prosperity (getting rich), and as a result, it had developed a solid industrial base. New Era, therefore represented a historic change in the international order as the next science and technology revolution were beginning to emerge (4th Industrial Revolution). The Communist Party of China (CPC), under Xi Jinping’s leadership, argued that if China could successfully implement structural reforms to take advantage of the New Era, then it could become a strong country. In this case, the armed forces play a crucial role. Because the period of the New Era (likely to last till 2049) is fraught with challenges.

China had already begun to identify and discuss innovation-led economic growth in 2013 as a way to boost economic growth. The First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress simplified it even further by stating that it meant “national prosperity, national rejuvenation and the happiness of the people”.¹ When ‘Made in China 2025’ was unsuccessful, the CPC had realised that a strategic blueprint was required, which led to the adoption of ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with

¹ “Speech by Xi Jinping at the First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress” (*Xi Jinping zai de shier jie quanguo renmin daibiao dahui di yi ci huiyi shang de jianghua*), *People’s Daily*, 17 March 2013, at <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0318/c64094-20819130.html> (Accessed 3 November 2025).

Chinese Characteristics in the New Era'. The Chinese party system, state apparatus, and the military-defence organisations are required to work together to achieve the China Dream. The China Dream is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and calls for the development of a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, civilised and harmonious" by 2049. The military power is to protect China's territorial integrity and sovereignty, such as the reunification of Taiwan, border defence, and maritime security, as well as guard against the adversaries who would disrupt its rise. Xi Jinping Thought stipulates that in matters of national security, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has to be prepared for the New Era to counter the challenges posed to the China Dream. The PLA, in CPC's view, has to achieve comprehensive strength required for its national missions.

The monograph investigates the making of China's military power in the New Era. The ideologies and worldview have influenced the extent of military reforms and their implementation. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the changes in their worldview that have effectively transformed the way China has conceived the making of military power in its national security in the New Era. The monograph would analyse the important reforms and policies that have been brought to the Chinese PLA to make it a 'strong army' and the challenges faced by the PLA in its implementation.

WHY IS NEW ERA RELEVANT TO THE CHINESE MILITARY REFORMS?

The term 'New Era', in Marxist terminology, was meant to signal to the Chinese people that China had entered a new historic stage of development. The economic engine that powered its economic success and prosperity was winding down. The global economic slowdown had affected China's export model, which was responsible for its economic development. The coal-powered industries, low-tech industrial production, and real estate-driven investment had to be reduced, and resources had to be diverted to a more profitable and sustainable industrial model, which does not adversely affect the ecological balance. Xi Jinping believed that the CPC had correctly assessed these trends and historic changes and, as a result, made a

strategic judgement, where China was no longer a passive recipient but became an active participant in the international order.²

In this context, the Chinese leadership had planned to transition to green-energy industries to reduce dependency on fossil-fuel and invest in innovation in new energy resources. The industries were incentivised to pursue high-tech industrial production and supply chains. China has been prioritising the investment climate in the country to foster science and technology innovation, and has been restoring its ecological balance through preservation efforts. From the 19th Party Congress onwards, there has been a concerted effort to implement structural reforms to win the race towards the next industrial revolution as well as increase China's contribution to global governance.

Xi Jinping Thought or the China Dream is important to the CPC because it believes that the source of the West's dominance was their ability to win the 1st, 2nd and 3rd industrial revolution. The party apparatus has been arguing that many of these structural reforms would result in the next round of economic benefits and development and make China into a modern industrialised state.³ The CPC also began to shift its focus towards common prosperity and high-quality life for its citizens rather than solely relying on the country's GDP numbers as a source of its legitimacy. For the CPC to continue to rule China, quality of life, efficient and sustainable economic growth and a satisfactory life for its youth and elderly became paramount.

² “Study Outline of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era” (Xi Jinping xin shidai zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi Sixiang xuexi gangyao), *People's Daily*, 23 July 2019, at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0723/c40531-31250161.html> (Accessed 2 January 2026)

³ Wang Shuli, “The Three Dimensions of the Connotation of the New Era” (*Xin shidai neihan de san ge weidu*), *Guangming Online*, 13 September 2018, at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0913/c40531-30290786.html> (Accessed 23 October 2025).

The discourse on the New Era tends to concentrate on political issues, economics and trade issues. However, it is also a historic commentary on the changing nature of the international system. In the New Era, Xi Jinping acknowledged that the international order that had benefitted China in its export-led economy is no longer viable. On the other hand, despite industrialising since the opening-up and reform in the 1970s, China was still dependent on the West for high technology. The ‘Made in China 2025’ raised alarm in the West and led to more caution over the transfer of high technology to China. Overall, the strategic blueprint prioritises building national prosperity and strength, which is divided into hard power capabilities, such as economic, scientific, technological and national defence capabilities and soft power capabilities, such as national cohesion, higher-quality living, cultural creativity and significant international influence.⁴

In other words, the comprehensive strength of a country meant that it had to develop both material and spiritual civilisation, and as a result, Xi began promoting Chinese-style modernisation. China has pitched the Chinese-style modernisation as an alternative to the Western-style democracy model. The difference, according to the Chinese leadership, is that ‘Chinese wisdom’ guides the strategies. In essence, the great rejuvenation rejects the claim that the Western model (electoral democracy) needs to be followed to modernise the state. Therefore, the challenge to the West is at a fundamental level questioning their very definition of modernism and development. Instead, after the 19th Party Congress, the Chinese leadership has been measuring its success by the way the country comprehensively advances the great rejuvenation. For instance, successes in science and technology breakthroughs have been reported, reliance on green energy resources has expanded, export of

⁴ Research Center for Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, “The Chinese Dream is the Greatest Dream of the Chinese Nation Since Modern Times” (*Zhongguo meng shi zhonghua minzu jindai yilai zui weida de mengxiang*), *Qinshi*, 14 December 2018, at https://www.qstheory.cn/2018-12/14/c_1123854578.htm (Accessed 4 December 2025).

high-tech products has increased, and there is an increased focus on producing Chinese cultural products.⁵

The CPC perceives that since the international order in the New Era is fraught with challenges, the great rejuvenation requires a strong army. Unless the military power is comprehensive, it would not be able to protect China from disruptions to its continued development. China perceives that adversaries might disrupt their energy security, target its strategic investments, exploit ethnic tensions aiming at internal cohesion, and most significantly, deny the reunification of Taiwan. The making of military power is comprehensive because its responsibilities have become diverse. Xi Jinping argues that China can rise to a developed status only by following the CPC's goal of national rejuvenation. In addition, the promotion of the China Dream can help the CPC revive the legitimacy between the party system and the Chinese people, which had been damaged by rising corruption.

In this monograph, the way China has shaped its military power, to counter challenges it faces to realise the great rejuvenation, the drivers and motivations behind the implementation of military reforms, and challenges in those reforms are analysed.

NEW ERA AND MILITARY POWER

Xi's call to the PLA at the 19th Party Congress to become a world-class military (*Shijie yiliu jundui*) by 2050, and be a "strategic support/anchor" (*zhanlue zhibeng*) reflects the ambitious policy to modernise it to aid China's rise. The reforms had 'structurally reconstructed' the PLA to achieve military transformation. The structural reconstruction is so fundamental that the PLA established a new organisational structure, conceptualised the various military theories and optimised the use of advancements in military technologies in operational planning.

⁵ Huang Shouhong, "Strategic Arrangements, Objectives and Tasks for Comprehensively Building a Great Modern Socialist Country" (*Quanmian jiancheng shehui zhuyi xiandaihua qianguo de zhanlue anpai he mubiao renwu*), *People's Daily*, November 2022, at <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1129/c117092-32576378.html> (Accessed 1 February 2026).

The military reforms in 2015 and the subsequent release of the defence white paper titled “China’s National Defence in the New Era” in 2019 and “China’s National Security in the New Era” in 2025 underline that the PLA is being prepared for the New Era. If the PLA follows the reforms for becoming a world-class military, China’s military power would be transformed. It also helps make the PLA a strategic anchor to the China Dream. In the New Era, the CPC perceives that military power is crucial because the national missions of the PLA have become complex and demanding. The PLA is supposed to help the CPC consolidate its leadership, protect territorial sovereignty and integrity, protect overseas strategic interests, and serve as a security guarantee.⁶

Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the way China associates military power and the construction of a world-class military in the New Era. Xi’s emphasis on military transformation is about choosing quality over quantity, i.e., improving the competency of the PLA. It differentiates between the ability of a state to profess its grand strategy and one which could execute it using military power. Therefore, the contribution of military reforms, the subsequent impact on civil-military relations, civil-military integration, talent and defence education all lead to the objectives of building a world-class military. It leads to several questions about the nature and scope of Chinese military power.

The study shall investigate the following research questions:

1. In what way the Chinese leadership believed that its military power needed substantial transformation?
2. What are the strategic drivers behind the Chinese aspirations of a world-class military, and how far the debates within China can distinguish the Chinese characteristics?
3. To what extent can the PLA’s military reforms impact the way military power is shaping in China both at the strategic, operational and tactical level?

⁶ Deng Yifei, “Building a Modern Military Force System with Chinese Characteristics” (*Guojian zhongguo tese xiandai junshi Liliang tixi*), *PLA Daily*, 15 June 2018, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4816966.html> (Accessed 3 November 2025).

4. What are the challenges that China is facing in attempting to building world-class military, especially in crucial areas such as theatre commands, and talent cultivation?
5. What are the implications for India and its ability to defend its national interests in the face of Chinese military power after its reforms?

The Chinese leadership believed that military reforms had to ensure that the structure, constitution and military capabilities of the PLA adequately reflect the broader social trends in science and technology breakthroughs. These military technologies are often aided by strategic and tactical doctrinal changes. Significantly, organisational, leadership and management structures require restructuring to guide new changes. The CPC also want the military reforms to help the PLA in managing its resources in an optimal manner through civil-military integration. Therefore, the Chinese leadership has warned that if the PLA does not implement many of these reforms to manage the New Era, then it would lag behind many other advanced militaries in military transformation.

The CPC has managed to succeed in providing a theoretical framework, such as the New Era, because it was able to capture the ongoing changes in the international order, and conversely, the international security situation. When Xi Jinping promoted the national rejuvenation as a strategic blueprint for advancing China's national interests, the idea was to make the PLA comprehend its role in realising those objectives. As a result, the national defence and military organisations were able to realise that becoming a strong army is more than just an organisational reform process. It is to prepare for an international order where the role of China's armed forces is crucial to the goal of the great rejuvenation. It is to counter challenges present in the international system that would derail China's rise.

CONCLUSION

The monograph aims to bring Chinese perspectives and debates to the analyses of military reform process. It is written under the assumption that though military reforms and transformation in many countries often have similar objectives including China, the reasoning

behind it might vary depending on that country's political system, security situation, developmental stage, and national interests and threat perceptions.

The monograph does not claim that many of the reforms that the PLA has implemented is unique. It is to analyse under what assumptions, worldview and threat perceptions those military reforms are carried out. The political framework for military reforms is important to discern as it would help identify under what circumstances that military power would be utilised. It is to predict the way military power in China is shaping its choices. Importantly, the purpose of the military reform would also highlight the challenges that are associated with it. These challenges are often unique to the Chinese system due to the organisational variances, political culture, strategic thinking and ideological priorities of the ruling elites.

ACHIEVING WORLD-CLASS MILITARY STATUS: ANALYSING CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the Party's reasoning for a strong army and the rationale behind developing a world-class military. It elucidates the core concepts and fundamental principles that motivate the CPC to reform the PLA in order to develop China's military power in the New Era. Overall, the chapter explains the makings of Chinese military power – its concepts, values, strategies, ideology and legitimacy.

RATIONALE OF CHOICE: PLA MILITARY REFORMS

Xi Jinping is responsible for guiding the CPC's ideological framework. For instance, after the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Xi proposed the 'Great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation', in short, the great rejuvenation. It described a transitional period for China, where it had already achieved prosperity (basic modernisation) and was moving towards an aspirational goal of becoming a strong country (achieving comprehensive modernisation).¹ Xi therefore called for a strong army to help achieve the great rejuvenation, i.e., fully modernised China. Therefore, the ideological and political guideline of the CPC underpins the logic of military reforms and transformation in China.

¹ "Xi Jinping – Building Upon the Past to Forge Ahead into the Future – Bravely Advancing Towards the Goal of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (*Xi Jinping: Chengqian qibou jiwang kailai chaozhe zhonghua minzu weida faxing mubiao fenyong qianjin*), *People's Daily*, 30 November 2012, at <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2012/1130/c64094-19746089.html> (Accessed 23 March 2025).

When Xi stated that the great rejuvenation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people, in short, the China Dream, he tasked the PLA to have a goal of a ‘strong army’. Therefore, the CPC positioned the ‘dream of a strong army’ (*junmeng qiang*) within the broad ideological and political objective of the China Dream, and had attempted to create a ‘strong vantage point’ to build the PLA’s military power.² This strategy enables the CPC to intertwine the PLA’s reforms with the party’s objectives and national missions and tasks. The rationale behind military reform to aid China in achieving great rejuvenation is that when the PLA becomes a ‘strong army’, it can act as a ‘security guarantee’, as economic prosperity alone is insufficient to guarantee it.³ In other words, the CPC believes that only military power can assure that national modernisation is carried out uninterrupted or its economic prosperity is maintained.

In 2016, the Central Military Commission (CMC) issued a guideline titled “Deepening National Defense and Military Reform”, one of the far-reaching military reforms in order to align the PLA’s priorities to national modernisation. These reforms came to fruition because Xi believed that the PLA needed to fight and win wars, and as a result needed to undergo structural reconstruction to be combat-ready. The party leadership had also expected the PLA to take advantage of the ‘goal of a strong army’ strategy to implement the military reforms. In the eyes of the CPC, only military reforms can ensure that the PLA increase its combat effectiveness and sustain the demands that arise

² Deng Yifei, “Building a Modern Military Force System with Chinese Characteristics” (*Guojian zhongguo tese xiandai junshi lilian tixi*), *PLA Daily*, 15 June 2018, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4816966.html> (Accessed 23 November 2025).

³ National Defense University, “The China Dream Guides the Dream of a Strong Army, The Dream of a Strong Army Supports the China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng yinling qiang junmeng qiang junmeng zhibeng zhongguo meng*), *Study Times*, 2 December 2013, at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1202/c40531-23717737.html> (Accessed 3 October 2025).

from expanding security requirements as China transitions to a strong country.⁴

The 19th Party Congress (2017) only further underscored Xi's ambitious policy to formalise the great rejuvenation. He had devised a strategic blueprint divided into the 'Two Centenary Goals' to mark the 100th anniversary of the CPC in 2021 and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049, respectively.⁵ During the celebrations of the CPC's centenary, Xi had officially declared that China had reached the first centenary goal of becoming a moderately prosperous society in all aspects.⁶ China saw significant success in eradicating absolute poverty, with its economy reaching more than 15 trillion dollars in GDP. The second centenary goal is to build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by 2049. 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' then became the political and ideological guideline for the party, state, and national defence, science and military organisations after the CPC ideologically collated much of these concepts into a coherent theoretical framework. It reoriented the functions and responsibilities of all the party and state organisations to navigate the New Era.

Xi Jinping had presented the New Era as a critical period of transition and a historic opportunity. In his view, a new science and technology revolution is underway in the international system. It presents a strategic

⁴ "On the Comprehensive Implementation of the Strategy of Reforming and Strengthening the Military" (*Guanyu quanmian shishi gaige jun zhanlue*), China Military Online, 31 July 2017, at <https://www.sastind.gov.cn/n152/n6759499/n6759501/c6793978/content.html> (Accessed 23 November 2025).

⁵ "CPC Q&A: What are China's Two Centennial Goals and Why do they Matter?" *Xinhua*, 17 October 2017, at https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136686770.htm (Accessed on 2 March 2025).

⁶ Wang Cong and Tu Lei, "Xi Declares Completion of Moderately Prosperous Society", *Global Times*, 1 July 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1227540.shtml> (Accessed 3 December 2025).

opportunity for China to take part in the next global industrial modernisation wave. It became one of the reasons the great rejuvenation became a rallying point for Xi to legitimise the CPC's rule. He believed that only CPC's leadership can leverage the next science and technology revolution to complete comprehensive modernisation.⁷ The source of West's modernisation had been mastery of the three waves of the Industrial Revolution in the global system.⁸ If the CPC's ability to achieve it was in question, then the role of the PLA in becoming the 'strategic support' (*zhanlue zhibheng*) is paramount, as it could prevent and control the systemic risks that could delay or derail the great rejuvenation.⁹

The CPC often cites historic reasons behind its reasoning for aligning the PLA's military power with the China Dream. The party's historic understanding was that the lack of a strong army was the reason why the Qing dynasty fell to colonial rule. Despite the Qing dynasty's wealth, technologically and militarily superior colonial powers were able to subdue the Qing army, leading to its collapse in 1912. The CPC's historic analyses had concluded that the Qing dynasty isolated itself from the science and technology revolution taking place beyond its borders, and missed its historic opportunity at industrialisation and defence modernisation.¹⁰

⁷ Wu Gangliang, "Anticipating the Proposal of New Two Centenary Goals" (*Qipan tichu xinde liang ge yibai nian fendou mubiao*), *CPPCC Yueyang Website*, 31 May 2017, at http://www.yyszx.gov.cn/64693/64716/content_1897578.html (Accessed 4 January 2026).

⁸ The first three industrial revolutions are breakthroughs in steam, electricity and information technologies, which changed the mode of production and innovation and led to changes in the international social, economic and political order.

⁹ "A Strong Nation Must Have a Strong Military – On the Strategic Support of a Strong Military for a Strong Nation" (*Qiangguo bixu qiangjun – Guanyu qiangjun shi qiangguo de zhanlue zhibheng*), *Ministry of National Defense website*, 15 September 2022, at https://www.mva.gov.cn/sy/xx/gfxx/202209/t20220915_65784.html (Accessed 2 January 2026).

¹⁰ "Provide a Strong Guarantee of Strength for Realising the Chinese Dream" (*Wei shixian zhongguo meng tigong jianqiang lilian baozhen*), *The PLA Daily*, 11 April 2014 at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0411/c40531-24883686-2.html>, (Accessed 8 October 2025).

The CPC calls it strengthening the military through reform, and if it were to develop a combat capability to aid the China Dream, then it would have to win information wars. The PLA had to adapt to 'win information wars' and therefore had no choice but to reshape its scale, composition and force composition in a scientific manner.¹¹ Apart from core interests, the security requirements of the Chinese military have become more expansive. The national mission and tasks associated with the 'great rejuvenation' have become more comprehensive, full-domain and extended military missions. It is not that before the military reforms in 2015, there were no technological breakthroughs in defence technology, however, the focus on the PLA's military power was often attributed to hi-tech weapons and platforms.¹²

The Chinese leadership soon concluded that advanced military weapons alone were insufficient to fight and win information wars. The fundamentals of the military transformation required for winning information wars at that time were lacking in the PLA. The PLA's investment in advanced military technologies, organisational structure, and the military theoretical innovation (which affects talent cultivation and training), which forms the basic structure of military power, did not reflect the modern combat system that the PLA needed to win information wars. Since the PLA is encouraged to form a modern combat system to win information wars, the reform guidelines have been placing innovation as the driving factor, whether it is technologies, civil-military integration or combat readiness.

¹¹ Deng Yifei, Note. 2

¹² The 2009 military parade for the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China is a case in point, where sophisticated weapons systems such as nuclear capable ballistic missiles and various weapons. As one analyst concluded that the parade reflected new equipment not necessarily a display of military capabilities. See, Dennis J. Blasko, "The PRC 60th Anniversary Parade: Equipment on Display, Not Military Capabilities", *China Brief*, 9 (19): 2009, at <https://jamestown.org/the-prc-60th-anniversary-parade-equipment-on-display-not-military-capabilities/> (Accessed 5 December 2025).

Most importantly, Xi had established a core guiding principle for national defence and military development, which would play a pivotal role in the realisation of a ‘strong army’ and lead to a world-class military. ‘Xi Jinping’s Thought on Strengthening the Military’ (*Xi Jinping qiang jun sixiang*) is an integral part of Xi Jinping Thought and serves as a ‘guiding military theory’ and as an ‘action programme’ for the New Era. One of the ways Xi Jinping pushed for military reforms was to establish and head the CMC Leading Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform. An Expert Advisory Group under the CMC leading Group comprising more than 200 experts from military and civilian sectors carried out an independent evaluation, and the Academy of Military Sciences and National Defense University played the role of research think tanks providing insights to the leadership and helping to reach consensus for the reforms.¹³

WORLD-CLASS MILITARY STATUS: CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

When the CPC advocates for a world-class military to achieve great rejuvenation, it promotes the strategy of strengthening the military through reforms. During the 19th Party Congress, Xi called the PLA to achieve world-class military status by first completing the modernisation of armed forces and national defence by 2035 and then comprehensively building a world-class military by 2049. The 2035 goal requires ‘comprehensively enhancing the military’s joint operational capabilities based on a network-centric information system as well as capabilities for operations across all domains’.¹⁴ A world-class military, if

¹³ Mei Changwei and others, “The Great Practice of Strengthening the Military Through Reform in the New Era” (*Xin shidai gaige qiang jun de weida shijian*), *People’s Daily*, 23 September 2023, at <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0923/c117092-32532242.html> (Accessed 2 November 2025).

¹⁴ Fu Wangjun, “Profoundly Grasping the Major Original Contributions of Comprehensively Building a World-Class Military” (*Shenke bawo quanmian jiancheng Shijie yiliu jundui de zhongda yuanchuang xing gongxian*), *Communist Party Members Website*, 7 August 2025, at <https://www.12371.cn/2025/08/07/ART11754550522492592.shtml> (Accessed 4 March 2026).

successfully achieved, on the other hand, can correspond with the country's status as a major power. It would also profess the capability to protect national security in any manner and can assert significant international influence.

As a result, the CPC satisfied the goal of aligning the PLA's military reforms with the national modernisation objectives.¹⁵ To coincide with the PLA's 100-year anniversary, the CPC also introduced an additional goal of building a modern military by 2027. The objective of the centenary goal of 2027 is to modernise the strategic capabilities holistically to protect national security and developmental interests.

While implementing the national defence and modernisation reforms, the CPC has made a few requirements mandatory in its journey to become a world-class military. The primary priority of the reforms is to strengthen the leadership of the CPC over the PLA and make sure that the PLA continues to remain loyal to the CPC and carry out its objectives.¹⁶ One of the ways the CPC ensures is through military education campaigns such as “Upholding the Core and Obeying Commands”, and Inheriting the Red Gene and Shouldering the Responsibility of Strengthening the Military”, and “Staying True to our Foundation”.¹⁷ These educational campaigns are specifically designed

¹⁵ “Building the PLA into a World-Class Military” (*Ba renmin jundui jiancheng shijie yiliu jundui*), *PLA Daily*, 5 August 2023, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16242670.html> (Accessed 3 September 2025).

¹⁶ Cao Ergang and Zhu Hongjie, “Deeply Understand the Requirements for Comprehensively Building a World-Class Military” (*Shenke lijie quanmian jiancheng shijie yiliu jundui de yaoqiu*), *PLA Daily*, 2 September 2018, at <https://military.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0209/c1011-29815728.html>, (Accessed 2 December 2025).

¹⁷ “Striving to Strengthen the Military Under the Banner of the Party – A Review of Leadership and Advancement of Party Leadership and Party Building within the PLA in the New Era led by the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its Core” (*Zai dang de xia fendou qiang jun – Yi Xi Jinping tongzhi wei hexin de dang zhongyang lingdao tuijin xin shidai renmin jundai dang de lingdao be dang de jianshe shuping*), at <https://www.12371.cn/2023/07/19/ARTI1689765005013360.shtml> (Accessed 3 November 2025).

to strengthen the party leadership in the New Era. Because it was the CPC that created the PLA initially called as the “Chinese Workers and Peasant’s Red Army (1928) and officially remained as the PLA in 1946.

The second requirement for a world-class military is that the strengthening the PLA has to be in tandem with the increased national comprehensive strength. This is to cater to the increased security requirements as the country grows stronger and national interests expand beyond territorial integrity and sovereignty. The security requirements in the New Era includes the PLA’s capability to shape the security landscape (peaceful development is backed by strong military), fight and win wars (only can deter wars if one is capable of fighting war), and mitigate systemic risks called “bottom-line thinking (*dixian simei*)” (being aware of potential dangers and preventing major risks from escalating), provide strategic support to overseas interests and promote world peace and development (global governance).¹⁸ A bottom-line thinking means that the PLA should be aware of potential dangers even in peacetime deployment as well as prepare for the worse-case scenarios as well. It is to prevent any unforeseen contingencies that can make the PLA reactive rather than taking the initiative in such circumstances because it had been included in the bottom-line thinking scenarios. It is to ensure that the party apparatus and the military and defence organisations are involved in risk prevention and mitigation across the political, ideological, economic, technological, social and external environment.¹⁹ Therefore, the CPC senses that the goal of

¹⁸ Liu Guangming, “To Strengthen the Nation, the Military Must be Strong; Only with a Strong Military Can the Nation Be Secure” (*Qiangguo Bixu Qiang Jun Jun Qiang Caineng Guoan*), *People’s Daily*, 2 August 2021, at <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0804/c117092-32180506.html> (Accessed 3 December 2025).

¹⁹ Wu Hanfei, “General Secretary Xi Jinping on Bottom-Line Thinking (*Xi Jinping zong shuji lun dixian simei wuhanfei*)”, *Study Times*, 22 August 2023, at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0822/c40531-40061461.html> (Accessed 2 February 2026).

national rejuvenation would face security challenges from the international security landscape and therefore consolidating the capability of the PLA to make sure that the process of national rejuvenation remains uninterrupted.

One of the reasons why the CPC is apprehensive of a disruption to its China Dream is because of its understanding of historic patterns of rising powers. For instance, the CPC believes that a rising power undergoes three phases of growing pains – preparatory phase, phase of friction, and a phase of acceptance. Accordingly, the phase of friction, when it is the most vulnerable and pivotal as it is also time of transformation.²⁰

The world-class military would also utilise technological innovation and strengthen the military through science and technology and develop its capabilities. One of the defining features of military power is the technological prowess, and the rapid advancement of revolution in military affairs gives an opportunity for the PLA to take advantage in the global military competition. Therefore, a world-class military is combat-ready, which includes actual operational readiness as well as ongoing development and construction of military power.²¹ An important component of combat-ready or combat capability is the role of science and technology as it can shift the balance of power. In China's perspective, Xi has pushed for technological innovation as a way to magnify combat power, because global military-technological order is undergoing rapid technological innovation. Therefore,

²⁰ Theoretical Study Center Group of the Party Committee, “Comprehensively Build the PLA into a World-Class Military” (*Ba renmin jundui quanmin jiancheng shijie yiliu jundui*), *Study Times*, 29 June 2018, at https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-06/29/c_1123054429.htm (Accessed 4 December 2025).

²¹ Ren Tianyou, “Striving Towards the Goal of Building a World-Class Military” (*Xiangzhe shijie yiliu jundui mubiao fenjin*), *People's Daily*, 4 February 2018, at <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0204/c1003-29804315.html>, (Accessed 26 December 2025).

independent innovation is the ‘strategic bedrock of core combat capability and the goal is to transform technological advantages into operational capability and combat superiority.’²²

Therefore, a world-class military gives importance to combat readiness and actual fighting as its primary duty and threat to it is the maladies of peace, the complacency that sets in after prolonged periods of peace. The three new dynamics of global revolution in science and technology and military is the mechanisation, informationalisation and intelligentisation and their integrated development between them.

One of the fundamental reasons why Xi has pushed for far-reaching military reforms was to make full preparations to fight any time. The reforms were meant to get the PLA to be in a constant state of combat readiness. Moreover, a world-class military is not understood by its ability to dominate the battlefield solely by few advanced weapons, and therefore combat effectiveness is about comprehensive excellence between personnel and weaponry.²³ As such the world-class military should use mechanisation as the foundation, informationalisation as the guide and intelligentisation as the direction and take into consideration the strategic guidance of five priorities such as greater emphasis on combat readiness, innovation-driven growth, systems-based development, intensive and efficient operations, and civil military integration.²⁴

²² Chen Yu, “Establish the Concept that Technology Constitutes Core Combat Capability” (*Shuli keji shi hexin zhandouli de sixiang*), *PLA Daily*, 10 October 2022, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/yw_214068/4922858.html (Accessed 1 February 2026).

²³ Zhang Mingcang, “Always Prioritise Combat Readiness and Warfighting as the Primary Task” (*Shizhong ba beizhan daxiang zuowei di yi yaowu*), *PLA Daily*, 8 May 2019, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4841343.html> (Accessed 8 December 2025).

²⁴ Fu Wangjian *ibid.*

Liao Xiangke from the National University of Defense Technology best encapsulates the Chinese thinking on this issue. According to him,

“A global military revolution is accelerating... if our military has to evolve into a world-class fighting force... We have to make the strategic first move in technological innovation... we must develop asymmetric capabilities and trump card weaponry specifically to counter powerful adversaries... and make innovation breakthroughs in critical domains such as strategic early warning, military space operations, air and missile defence, information warfare and strategic projection”.²⁵

It is not surprising that the world-class military's guidance is determined by a few main factors. First, scientific military theory should guide the world-class military goal; second, advanced organisational structure should propel it; third, technological strength should underpin its significance; fourth, strict discipline and exemplary conduct should guarantee it; and fifth, it should be validated by the capability to win wars. These fundamental principles according to the CPC should influence the way the PLA implements the reforms. The reasoning behind the reforms is often influenced by these strategic requirements. The world-class military should prioritise combat readiness and warfare as the primary task.

Overall, the world-class military requirements are not vastly different from any rising power. However, trajectory of military reforms on the PLA to structural reconfigure in its entirety show a far more vulnerable fighting force before the reforms.

THE 20TH PARTY CONGRESS AND AFTER: ADJUSTMENTS IN REFORMS

The Third Plenum of the 20th Party Congress, the “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening

²⁵ Liao Shangke, “Establish the Concept that Technology Constitutes Core Combat Capability” (*Shuli keji shi hexin zhandouli de sixiang*), *People's Daily*, 4 February 2018, at <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0204/c1003-29804316.html> (Accessed 4 December 2025).

Reform and Advancing Chinese Modernisation” incorporated the deepening of national defence and military reform. The 20th Party Congress reiterated that the strategic imperative of building a modern socialist country is to accelerate the transformation of the PLA into a world-class military. By using the ‘deepening of national defence and military reform’ as the strategic measure, the CPC is verifying the level of joint operational capabilities, which is built on a network-centric information system and all-domain operational capabilities.²⁶

It has once again aligned the strong army goal to the overall national modernisation objective. The 20th Party Congress has called for the acceleration of transformation of the PLA into a world-class military. This is because the science and technology revolution is accelerating and industrial transformation is deepening, and global balance of power is undergoing profound adjustments and as a result, gives China opportunities to strengthen strategic planning to leverage the new military revolution to bring about breakthroughs and enhance military capability.²⁷

The 20th Party Congress stressed that national defence modernisation has to keep pace with trends in global military revolution and securing strategic initiative in military competition. In addition, the military reforms constitute a strategic pillar for Chinese national modernisation. The acceleration of the reforms is to further build upon the achievements gained in the military reforms and drive high-quality development of the armed forces.

²⁶ “Continuously Deepening the Reform of National Defence and Armed Forces” (*Chixu Shenhua guofang he jundui gaige*), *PLA Daily*, 24 July 2024, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16326561.html> (Accessed 4 January 2026).

²⁷ Shen Zihua, “Comprehensively Grasping the Strategic Deployment to Accelerate the Transformation of the People’s Army into World-Class Military” (*Quanmian bawo jiakuai ba renmin jundui jiancheng shijie yiliu jundui de zhanlue bushu*), *Study Times*, 1 May 2023 at https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-05/01/c_1129582135.htm (Accessed 4 March 2025).

It has also given major strategic directives to the armed forces:

They are 1) improvement in the leadership and management system and optimisation of operational mechanisms 2) deepen the reforms of the joint operations system 3) deepen the reforms of military and civilian sectors.²⁸

There are also bottlenecks present in the military reforms

- capacity for independent innovation in defence science and technology remains insufficient
- science and technology literacy of officers and soldiers needs more enhancement;
- some reforms have yet to be fully implemented
- deep-seated issues regarding training conduct yet to be eradicated.
- corruption at the grass-root level has not been tackled.
- comprehensive effectiveness of the policies requires further improvement.²⁹

The PLA is said to have made progress in three major campaigns such as resolving systemic barriers, structural contradictions and policy-related issues that had constrained the military reforms. However, challenges in China's view need a strong orientation towards problem-solving.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND MILITARY POWER

The Chinese have come to believe that the US administration is pushing for great power competition to stall China's rise in the international

²⁸ "Comprehensively Elevating the Level of National Defense and Military Modernisation" (*Quanmian tigao guofang he jundui xiandaihua shuiping*), *People's Daily*, 26 February 2026, at http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzl/srxxxjptzglz/srjd/202602/t20260227_954932.html (Accessed 2 March 2026).

²⁹ Shen Zihua *ibid*.

system. The great power competition strategy hinges on the belief that China is set to actively replace the US at the global level and its military intentions, rather than being benign, intend to push the US out of Asia. The strategy also premises that engagement with China has been failing and requires a new approach. Therefore, the great power competition strategy envisages China as a revisionist power that would eventually challenge the US-led order in the international system. Moreover, the great power competition also assumes that unlike the Cold War, the challenge is at many levels including at the political, economic, technological and military level. It is also an effort to explain the systemic shift that seems to be taking place that clearly sees a need to forestall the relative decline of the power of the United States with comparison to rising powers such as China, India etc. The great power competition strategy also gained precedence with the arrival of Xi Jinping to power, who espoused a more active strategy for China's rise and initiatives for pivoting Chinese economic surge.

With the election of Donald Trump, the shift in US policy seemed to be gearing more towards the acceptance that the US and China are locked in great power competition and the US strategy needed a fundamental change. This led to the rise of the Indo-Pacific strategy and the adoption of Quad that was pushed by Japan. The ideology of great power competition meant that the US attempted to economically de-couple with China, and by forcibly initiating a trade war that would alter the balance between the two countries and pave the way for more independence within the US manufacturing industries and also reduce the Chinese strategy of upgrading its technology through cooperation with the US.

The trade war also signified a renewed emphasis on disrupting China as a main supply chain in the region and create a diversified supply chain in Asia. The great power competition is also an amalgamation of the rise of the generalists in US foreign policy, who viewed the rise of Xi Jinping and his initiatives in Chinese politics and growing Chinese power in the region, with alarm and began discuss its implications for US predominance in Asia.

Therefore, the Indo-Pacific strategy and in particular Quad was seen as a policy to manage China's rise and to leverage its power through

balance of power strategies. As an implication, the US imposed trade restrictions on China in an effort to de-couple the mutually dependent relationship between the two countries. Moreover, as the supply chains were mostly dependent on China, the Trump administration also portrayed the trade war as a ploy to bring the industries back to the US to generate jobs. Obviously, these required very painful policy decisions for US businesses that were dependent on China.

Moreover, in security terms, the US was also engaged in removing the restrictions placed on it during the Cold War era. As the US considered both Russia and China as revisionist powers, it withdrew from treaties such as the INF Treaty (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) which has enabled it to place MRBMs in Asia. Moreover, enhanced maritime cooperation has also led to the US patrolling the South China Sea more frequently. There is a lack of clear definition of what this competition entails. The nature of the transformation in the US-China relationship is unclear; the US has not clearly defined the understanding of the terms or the consequences.

This has resulted in challenges on understanding how the US intends to proceed with regard to China in specific policy terms. Moreover, many scholars within the US are of the view that relative decline of US pre-eminence is guaranteed and is led by multiple rising powers including India. In that regard, the strategy to only concentrate on managing the asymmetry with China, will not stop the US from declining.

Therefore, the great power competition strategy is too broad-based even though it is aimed at China, without specific goals and objectives. The deficiency in formulating a plan to deal with the threat of the influence of Chinese economic growth and trade, and the question of whether to treat Huawei as an economic or a security threat has now moved towards renegotiating the trade relationship with China. The Trump administration in its second term had tried to leverage its market but the Chinese dominance in the rare earth minerals have gotten them advantage to withstand the US diplomatic pressure.

Moreover, the US also has to clarify the diverse objectives and interests among States when cooperating with its allies and partners. In addition, there are varied opinions in the US about the differences in Chinese

ambitions of power. They are unable to agree on the degree to which China intends to pursue power similar to that of the US. China has been aware of the US initiatives since the US' pivot and re-balancing strategy. One objective of the BRI, apart from its economic objectives, is to be independent of US pressure by creating alternative centres of power and advantage for its role in the international system.

Moreover, while boosting its military modernisation, China is also keen to avoid military competition with the US, stressing on non-military cooperation in the neighbourhood to counter what the Chinese perceive as securitisation of bilateral issues by the US. In addition, China became keenly aware of its reliance on US technology, and its ability to negotiate with the US, while it relied on many China experts who espoused that US-China relations are interdependent, and that it is difficult for the US to antagonise China.

Notwithstanding these circumstances, China still believes that the historic trends would continue to favour international integration, and economic competition with the US would lead to self-reliance in Chinese manufacturing. In addition, the US-China bilateral relationship can still be salvaged, as there is convergence of interests in both countries.

Typically, the Chinese response has been to have diverse strategies in the neighbourhood. These would include renewed emphasis on economic integration—especially pushing BRI wherever possible—and other economic initiatives where BRI is being resisted. This also means that it has diverse strategies with regard to partners and US allies. For instance, with allies such as Japan and South Korea, the strategy seems to restrain the impact of alliance on Chinese security, while with partners, there are more cooperative attempts to shy them away from the US orbit.

Its response is also tempered by the success of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's economic comeback. This has given it tremendous confidence to take on US criticism on the Chinese system, such as the wolf warrior strategy. COVID-19 also meant that the US actions in the ECS and the SCS were taken much more seriously and deterrence operations were operationalised. With the criticism of the Belt and Road projects and lending procedures, China is developing a

more realistic approach to the projects, and it is a wait-and-watch approach to see if it will be successful.

Dissent against Xi Jinping is taken much more seriously, leading to harsher punishment for criticism against the leadership. In addition, China's foreign policy approach has undergone a reorientation through proactive measures and trade instruments, to sanction countries fundamentally opposed to its development.

The commitment of the US towards technological denial against the Chinese regime and the pursuit of its bilateral engagements in the Taiwan Straits show that the political objective for the PLA seems to be modernisation according to the given guidelines. In fact, the Chinese preparation for the New Era and the PLA's role in it, seems to suggest that the Party has to some extent portrayed the difficulty in the Chinese plan towards modernisation to become a developed country. If the PLA is to guard against such derailment, then it would have to play a significant role in making sure that China continues on its path to economic and political ascendancy.\

CONCLUSION

The perspectives present in the theory of world-class military point to the fact that the Chinese leadership has a well-rounded and holistic view of development. It not only looks at the modernisation of the equipment and weapons platforms but also at the systemic changes that are driving the modernisation of the world military revolution and its impact on Chinese security. The concept of strong army is tied to the “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, which was enshrined in the constitution after the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017. According to Xi, since socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, the PLA must build a strong army. In this regard, “dream of a strong army” means that a Chinese military under the leadership of the CPC is essential for achieving “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, i.e., positioning China to its former glory”. In turn, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the centre piece of the Chinese Dream. In terms of the strategic goals that the Chinese leadership has set for the PLA, a strong army means that the modernisation should be completed by 2035.

However, 2035 is only the intermediate goal. For, once the modernisation of the Chinese military is completed by 2035, Xi expects the PLA to become a world-class military by 2050. Some of the impediments to become a strong army had been that the organisation of the command system was complex and corruption had dis-incentivised promotion of officers based on merit. However, the initial reforms concentrated on reorganisation of headquarters and military commands, establishment of a joint command system, improving the legal supervision over corruption, and civil-military integration.

STRATEGIC THINKING ON MILITARY POWER AND ORGANISATIONAL RESTRUCTURING

INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the major reforms that were aimed at structurally reconstructing the Chinese military. It elucidates the reasoning, strategies, policies and the implementation of the reforms. Additionally, it addresses the challenges that the PLA is faces in its implementation.

CPC'S STRATEGIC THINKING ON MILITARY POWER AND REFORMS

The CPC has formulated the 'Xi Jinping Thinking on Strengthening the Military' (in short 'Strengthening the Military') for the PLA to internalise and guide their efforts to build a strong army in the New Era. 'Strengthening the military' is the fundamental guideline for the Chinese armed forces. It coherently outlines the vision and framework for military reforms, military development, national defence construction, military philosophy, and specifically strategic thinking on national security and its strategic imperatives.¹ It makes it easier for the PLA to study and comprehend it among numerous party documents and speeches.

¹ Yang Wei, Zhou Xin, and Peng Zhoufei, "Grasping the Scientific System of Xi Jinping's Thinking on Strengthening the Military from a Theoretical Perspective" (*Cong xueli shang bawo Xi Jinping qiang jun Sixiang de kexue tixi*), *Guangming Daily*, 14 January 2024, at https://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2024-01/14/c_1130059608.htm (Accessed 3 February 2026).

The ‘strengthening the military’ guideline elucidates the strategic imperatives that China faces in its security environment. It is an attempt to push the PLA to focus on combat preparedness. The ‘strengthening of military’ theorises that the international security situation in the New Era is complex and challenging, affecting the national security of China. China’s adversaries are attempting to derail its modernisation goals and subsequently its rise as a fully modernised country. The guideline argues that the only way to counter it is for the PLA to focus exclusively on combat readiness. It argues that national defence and military development must be viewed in the broader context of national rejuvenation. Therefore, combat capability is the most important priority, and the PLA’s sole purpose is to prepare for war, and the ability to win wars is the fundamental imperative.²

From the 18th Party Congress, the CPC has continued to refine and cogently explain the ‘strengthening the military’ guideline. For instance, the guideline features three distinct qualities: reasoning (*daoli*), theoretical/scientific principles (*xueli*) and philosophical theories (*zhexue*). The reasoning behind developing a theoretical framework and explaining its logical and philosophical underpinnings is that it can provide legitimacy to the actions and policies. For example, the CPC argues that it draws heavily from Marxist military theory after it has been sinicized and modernised to answer questions such as what kind of wars to fight, how to fight them and what kind of military to build.³ The guideline emerges as the CPC’s defining military thought, which uses the concept of ‘New Era’ as the larger theoretical foundation. For instance, the New Era is the

² Jun Zheng, “Advancing Victoriously Under the Guidance of Xi Jinping’s Thinking on Strengthening the Military” (), Study Times, 1 March 2023, at https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-03/01/c_1129405841.htm (Accessed 4 December 2025).

³ Zhao Wentao, Liu Guangming and Wang Jiyang, “A New Leap Forward in Sinicization and Modernisation of Marxist Military Theory” (*Makesi zhexue jianshi lilun zhongguo hua shidai hua de xin feiyue*), *Guangming Daily*, 28 May 2023, at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0528/c40531-40000456.html> (Accessed 2 December 2025).

reasoning behind the CPC's decision that China can achieve 'great rejuvenation', and the subsequent formulation of Xi Jinping Thought to realise the China Dream. It satisfies the CPC's goal of contextualising the PLA's modernisation within the larger national modernisation objectives.

In other words, the CPC's strategic thinking on military power prioritises the party's leadership over the PLA. It argues that the strategic imperatives of the New Era demand a strong army. Hence, fulfilling the objectives of national rejuvenation in an international security situation that is fraught with challenges requires a robust national defence and a powerful military. In the eyes of the CPC, only the PLA can be a 'strategic support' to national rejuvenation.⁴ Without military power and its organisational strength backing the CPC, the Party would find it difficult to carry out the reforms and play an active role in the global governance necessary for achieving the China Dream. The New Era therefore emerges as an important contribution to the military strategic thought and as a result, 'strengthening the military' guideline is placed within the context of Xi Jinping Thought.

The CPC has theorised the 'strengthening the military' guideline to inform the PLA's operational guidance, influence strategies for expanding the strategic depth of active defence, provide guidance for analysing war threats, advise about the nature of adversaries, and make sense of the evolution of warfare, such as informationalisation and intelligent warfare.⁵ As a result, the PLA's reforms are geared towards improving its knowledge and capabilities regarding modern warfare and its influence on information dominance, joint operations and capabilities. Ever since the Gulf War in 1991, the ongoing trends in revolution in

⁴ He Yiting, "A Scientific Guide for Building a Powerful People's Army in the New Era – A Deep Study of Xi Jinping's Thinking on Strengthening the Military" (*Xin shidai jianshe qiangda renmin jundui de kexue zhinan – shenru xuexi Xi Jinping qiang jun sixiang*), *PLA Daily*, 9 April 2021, at https://www.mva.gov.cn/sy/zl/zl1/xxgcddsjdjs/qwj/202104/t20210412_46497.html (Accessed 4 June 2025).

⁵ Yang Wei and others, *ibid.*

military affairs had an impact on the CPC's perspective on national security issues. The Party felt that the PLA's reforms should close the gap with other advanced militaries of the world.

Even in the 20th Party Congress, the CPC underscored the need to develop new domain and new type of combat forces, and further improve information and intelligent warfare capabilities. It argues for mechanisation as foundation, information playing a leading role and targeting the direction of intelligent warfare and the integrated development of all three.⁶ Once again, the CPC refined many of its concepts calling for high-quality development of the armed forces as the strategic layout of the guideline. This would require the PLA to stay close to combat-oriented approach, technological empowerment, optimise resource allocation, system-oriented mindset and problem-solving approach, cross-sectoral coordination between military and civilian spheres, modern military governance system.⁷

One of the significant new contributions within the 'New Era' concept is the 'integrated national defence thinking' (*Yiti hua guofang sixiang*). Integrated national defence focuses on four strategies. First, formulating a grand strategy architecture to pre-empt interconnected and cumulative risks from internal or external challenges; second, build national defence capabilities in the shortest possible timeframe, and reduce the gap with the world's leading military powers; third, a development model that prioritises integration such as integrating all domains, resources, and strategic forces; and fourth, derive strategic advantage from comprehensive modernisation in national defence mobilisation, robust

⁶ Xu Qiliang, "Accelerating the Modernisation of National Defense and the Armed Forces" (*Jiakuai guofang he jundui xiandaihua*), *People's Daily*, 26 November 2020, at https://www.qstheory.cn/qshy/jx/2020-11/26/c_1126787762.htm (Accessed 3 December 2023).

⁷ Yu Miao, "Guiding the Military Strengthening Practice with the Thought on Strengthening the Military" (*Qiang jun Sixiang yinling qiang jun shijian*), *People's Forum*, 4 August 2025, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmlt/pc/content/202508/04/content_30098575.html (Accessed on 4 December 2025).

and secure modern defence system across land, sea and air, consolidating unity between government military and people.⁸

As the national modernisation began to emphasise high-quality development, so did the military modernisation discourse on the high-quality advancement. It shows that the CPC had consistently refined the theoretical concepts to the suit the political goals over the years.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OVER THE PLA

Xi Jinping has initiated and strengthened institutional arrangements to ensure the PLA's loyalty. Like many of his predecessors, Xi does not tolerate any dissent regarding the political nature of military reforms. Both the CPC Central Committee and the CMC serve as the leadership and command authority for the PLA. One of the institutional arrangements is the 'Chairman Responsibility System', which establishes the military chain of command, where Xi Jinping assumes the supreme decision-making authority of the CMC.⁹ Xi would have the authority over overall direction, command and the decision over all major national security issues.

Within the PLA, the CPC provides institutional support through the implementation of party committee system, political commissar system, party organs system, and the management of dual-command within these structures. For instance, it establishes party committees and political organs within units and above the regimental level, and appoints political commissars, and at the grass-root level, party branches are established at the company level. Moreover, the dual command system clearly defines the division of responsibilities between the political commissars and commanders, in addition to the leadership status of the party committees and the responsibilities of the commanders in carrying

⁸ "Consolidating and Enhancing the Integrated National Strategic System and Capabilities" (*Gonggu tigao yiti hua guojia zhanlue tixi he nengli*), *PLA Daily*, 12 August 2023, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16244585.html> (Accessed 3 October 2025).

⁹ "Military Pledges Loyalty to Xi", *China Daily*, 6 November 2017, at <https://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1106/c90000-9288819.html> (Accessed 3 June 2025).

out the decisions of the party committees.¹⁰ The issues are however related to selection and appointment of personnel, and the gatekeeping that happens in these part organisations

The guideline ‘strengthening the military’ calls for viewing reforms through a political lens. ‘Thinking on Politically Building the Military in the New Era’ (*Xinshidai zhengzhi Jianjun sixiang*) is one of the integral components of the guideline and reiterates the absolute leadership of the CPC over the PLA.¹¹ The continued corruption scandals within the PLA have led the Party to focus on political rectification campaigns to keep ideological discipline and punish party disloyalty.

The military reforms in 2016 had attempted to strengthen the CPC’s supervisory role on the PLA, but the continued emphasis on aligning the military reforms and national defence to the central tasks of national rejuvenation reveal the discrepancy in the civil-military relations.¹² In the CPC’s view, the Party is able to govern and remain in power due to its organisational strength, specifically with the help of the military. Without the backing of military power, the CPC’s continued rule is uncertain. Not surprisingly, political rectification campaigns regarding party disloyalty have become paramount in Chinese politics. It also

¹⁰ Min Shijun and Shao Dongliang, “Fully Implement the Fundamental Principle and System of the Party’s Absolute Leadership over the Military” (*Quanmian Guanche dang dui jundui juegui lingdao de genben yuanze he zhidi*), *PLA Daily*, 25 May 2018, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4815116.html> (Accessed 3 March 2024).

¹¹ Liu Guangming, “Systematically Recognising and Grasping the Original Contributions of the Strategy for Politically Building the Army in the New Era” (*Xitong renshi bawo xin shidai zhengzhi jian jun fanglue de yuanchuang xing gongxian*), *People’s Daily*, 23 April 2026, at http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzl/srxxxjptzglz/srjd/202604/t20260424_986763.html (Accessed 3 May 2026).

¹² Mei Changwei, “Thoroughly Implement the Strategy of Politically Building the Army for the New Era, Providing a Strong Political Guarantee for the Cause of Strengthening the Military” (*Guanche luoshi xin shidai zhengzhi jian jun fang lue wei qiang junshi ye tigong jianqiang zhengzhi baozheng*), *Guizhou CPPCC News*, 21 June 2024, at https://gzsxx.gov.cn/gzxxb/web/doc/detail/p_3547 (Accessed on 3 November 2025).

becomes necessary for the party leadership to encourage cadres to be loyal to the CPC and carry out its central tasks.¹³

The loyalty to the CPC has emerged as one of the significant reforms within the PLA. The theoretical innovations in the guideline give further credence to this logic. Overall, all reforms within the Chinese armed forces and national defence stem from the theoretical, practical and philosophical foundation of 'Xi Jinping Thinking on Strengthening the Military' doctrine.

REFORM AT STRATEGIC AND COMMAND LEVELS AT A GLANCE

The CMC launched the military reforms in 2016 that comprehensively modernised the Chinese armed forces. Initially, the first phase of reforms focused on restructuring and reorganisation at the strategic and command levels, referred to as the 'above the neck' (*bozhi yishang*). The strategic and command-level reforms implemented organisational restructuring, reorganisation and establishment of service branches, and command resizing to develop joint operational command and capabilities. The reforms aimed to reshape, restructure, and rebuild in order to counter systemic barriers, structural contradictions, and policy-related issues that had constrained national defence and military development.¹⁴ The New Era theorises that rapidly changing warfare has created strategic imperatives for the PLA to adjust to information conditions and AI. Therefore, organisational constraints at the strategic and command levels had to be removed through comprehensive restructuring. The organisational reforms are aimed at reducing units

¹³ "Uphold, Apply and Develop the Vital Strategic Principle of Building the Military Through Politics" (*Jianchi bao yunyong bao fazhan bao zhengzhi jian jun zhongyao fabao*), *PLA Daily*, 8 March 2026, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16447018.html> (Accessed on 4 April 2026).

¹⁴ "A Scientific Guide for Building a Powerful People's Army in the New Era" (*Xin shidai jianshe qiangda renmin jundui de kexue zhinan*), 28 December 2021, at https://www.mawei.gov.cn/xjwz/zwgk/ztz1/sygj/202112/t20211228_4280272.htm (Accessed 5 June 2025).

with obsolete hardware and increasing the proportion of strategic forces and new-type of combat forces, and optimising force deployment across different strategic directions.¹⁵

a) Organisational restructuring

To comprehensively restructure the organisations in national defence and military, the CMC began to implement one of the far-reaching changes by ending the headquarters system. It dissolved the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armament Department. It changed the chain of command for leadership and operations within the PLA. In its place, the CMC replaced it with the dual ‘CMC - Services – Troops’ and ‘CMC - Theatre Command – Troops’ chain of command, dealing with leadership management and operational command, respectively.

The headquarters system had made major decisions regarding operational planning, military training and development of capabilities, thereby exerting tremendous influence in China’s national defence system. One of the reasons for establishing two command chains for operational issues and leadership management was to reduce the responsibilities of the military service headquarters. The service headquarters are now responsible only for force development, and the responsibilities for combat operations and military training have been moved to the theatre command.

The CMC delegated the duties and responsibilities to the theatre command, enabling it to coordinate and employ conventional forces of various services and branches, as well as national defence mobilisation

¹⁵ Zhang Qianrong and Wu Zhizhong, “The People’s Army Achieves Comprehensive and Revolutionary Reshaping – New Systems, New Structure, New Layouts, and New Look” (*Renmin jundui shixian zhengti xing geming xing chong su - tizhi yi xin jigou yi xin geju yi xin mianmao yi xin*), *People’s Daily*, 29 July 2022, at https://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2022-07/29/c_1128873132.htm (Accessed 3 December 2024).

within its theatre.¹⁶ In addition, the strategic and operational command agencies are integrated across peacetime and wartime within a theatre command. The organisational restructuring had hoped to resolve not only the lack of coordination between a military region and individual services, but also the tendency of many military regions to focus on a single strategic direction, resulting in ineffective deployment between regions and individual services.¹⁷ After the reform, military service headquarters can solely focus on systemic and specialised development of its own services rather than combat operations.

After the CMC dissolved the headquarters system and replaced it with a dual leadership and operational command system, the CMC itself was restructured into fifteen smaller departments. They are General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training and Administration Department, National Defence Mobilisation Department, Discipline Inspection Commission, Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Science and Technology Commission, Strategic Planning Office, Reforms and Organisational Structure Office, International Military Cooperation Office, Audit Office, and Offices Administration Agency.¹⁸ The departments perform various tasks for the CMC based on its expertise and considered as ‘functional’ departments (*zhi neng bu men*).

For example, the General Office plays a coordinating role and responsible for routine administrative matters pertaining to the CMC such as daily circulation of official documents, interface between various

¹⁶ Jiang Changqing, “From Military Regions to Theatre Commands: The Development and Evolution of Major Military Regions in New China” (*Cong junqu dao zhanqu: xin zhongguo da junqu de fa zhan yanbian*), *Party History Review*, 11 August 2023, at <https://www.cphistory.org.cn/shds/shhm/content/310666e4-9d04-4076-9ede-10c1372d4478.html> (Accessed 3 December 2025).

¹⁷ Jiang Changqing, *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “China Reshuffles Military Headquarters”, *Xinhua*, 1 January 2016 at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-01/11/content_23035120.htm (Accessed 3 January 2025).

theatre commands, service branches, and the department of the commission headquarters and logistical support to important meetings. If the CMC organises major events or special assignments, the General Office would execute it. The Joint Staff on the other hand is responsible for operational planning, command and control, operational command support, researching and formulating military strategies and requirements, organising operational capability assessments, organising and guiding joint training, and development of combat readiness.¹⁹ The Political Work Department is involved in party building across the entire military, organisational work, political education, and military human resource management.²⁰ Through these reforms, it is evident that the departments under the CMC have become functional in carry out tasks and coordinating among various agencies.

For instance, the Equipment Development department takes part in equipment development planning, research and development, testing and evaluation, procurement management, and information system construction, focuses on establishing a structural framework for the CMC equipment authorities to centrally manage the activities.²¹ They also take care of special construction, management in individual services and joint utilisation in theatre commands. Many of these departments are given duties and responsibilities according to their new profiles. The fifteen departments of the CMC are responsible for streamlining the practical aspects of the reorganised structures.

The CMC would formulate plans, guidelines, set up standards and evaluations. In the Chinese view, the division of labour would make the PLA function more efficient in the future as it would deal with

¹⁹ “Ministry of National Defense Holds Special Conference on Central Military Commission Restructuring”, *Xinhua*, 16 March 2016, at https://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-03/16/c_128804652.htm (Accessed 4 June 2025).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “What Has Been the Newly Reorganised CMC Organs Been Busy with Lately” (*Xin zhijian de junwei jiguan zhujin zai mang sha*), *The Paper*, 4 February 2016, at https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1429612 (Accessed 3 June 2024).

future warfare and complex and high-quality equipment systems. The departments under the CMC, after the reforms, organises itself as staff executive and support agencies operating under its leadership to make sure that the execution of orders are unimpeded. Moreover, the number of officers at or above full-division level have been reduced in these departments and the overall personnel within the CMC has been downsized.

A Joint Logistics Support Base in Wuhan was established with Joint Logistics Support centres at Wuxi, Guilin, Xining, Shenyang and Zhengzhou. The CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection and CMC Supervisory Commission were also established. Moreover, various disciplinary inspection and supervisory agencies (10) are stationed within CMC departments and theatre commands so that there is coordination between the central teams and low-level inspection teams. The CMC also established 84 corp-level units, and 18 group armies were reduced into 13.

b) Theatre Commands and Joint Operational Capability

The five theatre commands, literally “battle zone commands,” are named by their strategic locations in north, south, east, west and central China, replacing the current seven military area commands headquartered in Beijing, Nanjing, Chengdu, Ji’nan, Shenyang, Lanzhou and Guangzhou. Under this system, the CMC is the top command, the theatre commands will be able to deploy various forces in the region for combat, and each branch of the military will focus on training their own troops. The theatre commands focused primarily on combat readiness and warfighting, integrated the command links for joint operations, multi-domain integration in joint actions and joint logistical support.²² The reforms

²² “The PLA Achieves Comprehensive and Revolutionary Reshaping” (*Renmin jundui shixian zhengti xing geming xing chong su*), *People’s Daily*, 15 July 2024, at <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0715/c459156-40278033.html> (Accessed 2 November 2024).

Initially, when the PLA was operating under military regions, it used to concentrate on leadership and management of overall force development and operational command, including logistics and equipment support reducing its attention on operational capabilities. A theatre command, on the other hand, has been reformed to only handle operational missions within their respective theatres, not to directly lead or manage force development.²³

Under the CMC's leadership, the theatre commands will focus on engagement, while the PLA army, navy and air force will focus on developing their respective forces. Xi added that more senior officers from the navy and air force would be assigned in the future as top leaders of the theatre commands. The Western Theatre Command is likely to shoulder more responsibilities in counter-terrorism, while the Eastern and Southern Commands will face more threats from the East and South China Seas – each requiring a different style of joint battle command. They are charged with responding to security threats in their respective strategic directions, maintaining peace, containing wars and winning them, noting their pivotal role in safeguarding the country's overall national security and military strategies.

The theatre commands and the establishment of 13 Group Armies showed that the CPC wanted the PLA to transform from a land-centric force and territorial defence towards new-type of combat capabilities such as strategic early warning, far-sea defence, long-range strike projection, information support and joint operational force system.²⁴

c) Service Branches and Development of Capabilities

The CMC also established the PLA Ground Force Headquarters, made the PLA Rocket Forces as an independent service branch, and

²³ Jiang, Ibid.

²⁴ Mei Shixiong and Li Bingxuan, "Forging a New Landscape for Strengthening the Military Through Reform" (*Kaichuang gaige qiang jun xin jumian*), *Xinhua*, 3 July 2024, at https://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2024-07/03/c_1130173034.htm (Accessed 8 October 2025).

established the PLA Strategic Support Force in 2016. In 2024, the PLA Strategic Support Force was dissolved to become the PLA Information Support Force (*xinxi zhiyuan budui*), Aerospace Force and Cybersecurity Force. In addition, the PLA Reserve Forces had been under the dual leadership of both military and civilian authorities. In 2020, the “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Adjusting the Leadership System of the Reserve Forces” put them directly under the unified and centralised leadership of the CPC Central Committee and the CMC. The centralised control rather than localised control means that its role as a supplement to the active-duty forces was becoming more significant. After the reform, the CMC would reduce the size of the Army reserve units, while increasing the reserve units of other services to encourage a balanced force structure. In terms of military training, the PLA Reserve Forces would have to adapt to the evolving forms of warfare and future operational requirements, and developed in a planned and integrated manner with active-duty forces so that they can provide effective support and supplementation.²⁵ In addition, the PLA People’s Armed Police Force were also placed under the centralised and unified leadership and command of the CPC Central Committee and the CMC, and moved away from the State Council. The chain of command would flow from the CMC to the Armed Police Force and to the subordinate units.²⁶

It is intended to improve the oversight of the Party over other armed units other than regular troops. Earlier, when it was under the State Council, they had exercised control over routine missions, personnel, command, overseas professional development, and financial support. If it meant that the People’s Armed Forces had to deploy on public

²⁵ “Ministry of National Defense: Effective 00:00 on July 1, Reserve Forces are Fully Integrated in to the Military Leadership and Command System” (*Guofang bu: yue 1 ling shi qi yubeiyi budui quanmian naru jundui lingdao Zhibui tixi*), *Xinhua*, 1 July 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-07/01/c_1126184460.htm (Accessed 3 December 2025).

²⁶ Xu Ping, “What Organisational Adjustments Has the Armed Police Force Undergone? ()”, China National Defense News, 4 January 2018, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/4801429_2.html (Accessed 8 October 2025).

security missions, then the Ministry of Public Security would exercise command authority. The CMC had control over the forces through the headquarters system and engaged in personnel management, command and training.

According to the CPC's strategic thinking, modernisation requires the construction of comprehensive systems such as joint operational command, cultivation of a new type of talent, innovation in defence science and technology, modern military policies and institutions, which can lead to key breakthroughs and subsequently enhance overall capabilities. The most important among them are the organisational restructuring, theatre command and joint operational capabilities, and military training. In the military tasks, the four modernisations refer to the modernisation of military theory, organisational forms, weaponry and equipment and military personnel.

Many of these reforms were also aimed at reducing corruption. The discipline inspection groups within the CMC were aimed at inspecting primarily 'four styles' – formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism and extravagance. Therefore, regulations and directives were established such as 'Provisions on Strictly Enforcing Disciplinary Constraints on Party-Member Leading Cadres in the Military', 'Regulations on Practicing Strict Economy and Managing Funds Rigorously', 'Opinions on Strengthening Ethical Climate at Grassroots Level of the Military', 'Regulations on Military Leading Cadres Reporting Personal Matters', "Provisions on the Benefits and Entitlements of Leading Cadres at or above the Army-Corp Level" all directed towards enforcing strict standards against corruption and wasteful spending within the military.

CONCLUSION

The organisational restructuring is the first phase of reforms, which reorganised the top-down structures and bureaucratic organisations. These reforms were at the strategic and command levels. The new structures support the new requirements of the new era and the strong army requirements. Even though many of the reforms are aimed at comprehensively overhauling the military. Unless the organisational structures are established, these measures cannot be supported. Therefore, the CPC first established the organisational structure in order to support the new reform policies.

COMPREHENSIVE MILITARY REFORMS: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION

The CMC initially initiated the structural reorganisation and restructuring to aid the comprehensive reforms the PLA was implementing. Without the organisational structures to aid it, any comprehensive reforms would be difficult. This chapter analyses the major reforms that the PLA has implemented below the strategic levels and the challenges it faces even ten years after their implementation. In the Chinese discourse, they termed these comprehensive reforms initially as ‘below-the-neck’ reforms. The CMC implemented it to optimise the composition of the forces, improve military training, increase the requirements for operational capability within theatre commands, boost technological innovation as a criterion for combat preparedness, implement measures talent cultivation, and reform military policies and institutions. The policies and institutional reforms across party building, force employment, force development and military administration are supposed to establish and refine a system of military policies, institutions, and forces with Chinese characteristics.

Usually, according to the mission and tasks of the theatre commands facing their respective strategic directions, the ‘below the neck’ reforms address key issues such as who the army may fight, what kind of war, where and when to fight, to what extent, and what force is needed to fight, and clarify the possible responsibilities of the different organisations and branches. Different types of combat operations and non-war military operational tasks form the basic organisational plan for the formation of military forces. The possibilities in the formation of combat task forces during wartime (or during non-war military operations) determine the types of arms and the prioritisation of combat forces. The PLA aims to achieve an overall advantage over the enemy in the composition of troops and weapons and to form a

combat force system with strong strategic deterrence, efficient combat capabilities and war preparedness.

MAJOR REFORMS AND ITS CHALLENGES

The CMC launched the military reforms in every aspect of national defence and the military to satisfy the political imperatives of the New Era. For instance, the CMC had consulted the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and the State Administration for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defence (SASTIND) on reforms and participated in the discussions. For instance, SASTIND is particularly reflected in their involvement in leading civil-military integration. Therefore, the reforms reflect the CPC's objectives in modernising the PLA and building its military power. It also reveals the challenges present in realising these objectives.

a) Force Optimisation and Restructure

In the initial phase of the reforms, the CMC announced that a reduction of 300,000 personnel in the PLA was carried out. The total strength of the PLA reached two million after the reforms. The force optimisation in the military services, branches and institutions reduced the non-combatants and opened up positions in the combatant units. The CPC believed that many of the reforms stagnated due to structural imbalances between these organisations and branches. For instance, through force optimisation, the CMC adjusted the ratios of officers to enlisted personnel, headquarters staff to combatant units, and non-combatant to combatant forces.¹ This addressed some of the issues the PLA faced, such as understaffed combatant units and overstaffed PLA Army personnel compared to other military services.

Such force optimisation was also carried out among the combat units. For instance, the combat preparedness of the newly established and

¹ “Why did Chairman Xi Jinping Decide to Cut 300,000 Troops?” (*Xi zhuoxi weisheme jue ding caijun 30 wan*), *Junzhenping Studio*, 10 October 2016, at http://www.81.cn/jwsj/2016-10/10/content_7293940_4.htm (Accessed 3 June 2025).

reorganised 84 corps-level units became an example of these reforms. These units are placed within the various military services and branches, including military academies and research institutions, major operational units subordinate to specific military services, or units in the provincial military district system.² From the earlier 18 Group Armies, the CMC reorganised and established the 13 Group Armies (80,000 to 90,000 personnel) to reshape into mobile combat units. The purpose was to transform it into a quality-oriented and efficiency-based model.³ Furthermore, they redeployed these units to new locations within the army commands situated in the five theatre commands. These locations are closer to the potential military conflicts. In the redeployed areas, the group armies underwent intensive training that reflected 'actual combat' situations. The group armies are the PLA's frontline combat troops, and the CMC wanted them to improve war preparedness. As a result, they are equipped with modern assets like unmanned systems.

The newly established and reorganised group armies were therefore required to familiarise themselves with this various equipment, learn technical and tactical specifications, undergo command training, study new ways of operational methods, and improve their military proficiency. After the implementation of the reforms, various services within these units work together for integrated training, such as the Army, Aviation units and Special Forces units are improving joint training, conducting joint operations, and addressing challenges such as integrating reconnaissance assets into joint training.⁴

² Wang Shui, "Post-Reform Army-Level Leadership Lineup Revealed for the First Time: Six Generals Make a Special Appearance" (*Jun gai hou jun ji zhenrong shouci bao guang liu wei jiangjun tebie liangxiang*), *Political Bureau*, 19 April 2017, at <https://www.rmzxx.com.cn/c/2017-04-19/1490300.shtml?n2m=1> (Accessed 3 October 2025).

³ Xu Ping, "Little-Known Facts About Group Armies": How Many Do You Know?" (*Jituanjun de leng zhisbi ni zhidao duoshao?*), *China Military Online*, 17 May 2019, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/js_214151/4841808_3.html (Accessed 3 October 2025).

⁴ Liu Jianmin, Chen Xingzuo and Hai Ying, "Integration: Unlocking a Key to Victory" (*Ronghe: jiesuo da ying de yi ba xin yaoshi*), *China Military Online*, 15 August 2019, at http://www.81.cn/zt/2019nzt/txrgqcb1wzs/xzzdl/9609866_2.html (Accessed 2 January 2026).

Besides streamlining non-combatant institutions and personnel, the PLA had adopted the ‘corps-brigade-battalion’ structure for these major combat units. This structure now serves as a foundational operational module for the PLA, integrating combat, support and logistics. The Group Army would employ the brigade as the fundamental combat unit, whereas the battalion would have combat service elements and direct support. The reorientation of the group armies and the three-tier structure has primarily shifted the Chinese military posture away from focusing mostly on land warfare and territorial defence. The group armies now concentrate on joint operations, and all military services are training in joint operations and cross-service training. Moreover, a new type of combat forces from aerospace, naval and air force assets has led the PLA to focus on improving special operations, amphibious warfare, far-sea defence and strategic projection. The group armies also collaborate with various military academies and scientific research institutions for talent cultivation and technical exchanges.⁵

One of the challenges that the group armies face after the reorganisation is the tensions between new units and those with a historic legacy or long military history. The renowned units sometimes have a paternalistic attitude towards the new units. This has created competition between some of the newly established units and the older legacy-oriented ones in the training fields. When the PLA conducts training competitions between different units, such challenges become more visible. In fact, when the CMC introduced the number system to the group armies, one of the motivations was to give opportunities to all group armies equally to perform, regardless of their legacy. However, such issues are being addressed as the PLA is conducting more mass training competitions.

b) Military Training and Combat Preparedness

The CMC’s reforms significantly focused on military training and reoriented the troops towards ‘realistic combat’ conditions, joint

⁵ Hou Yongbo and Tong Zuijing, “72nd Group Army Strengthens Talent Cultivation in New Domains and New Capabilities” (*Di 72 jituanjun qianghua xin yu xin zhi rencai peiyang*), *PLA Daily*, 19 January 2026, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/lj/16438111.html> (Accessed 3 February 2026).

operations training, and war preparedness. Xi stated that military training is the fundamental and direct instrument in improving combat readiness and increasing one's ability to fight and win wars.⁶ Initially, when the CMC launched the reforms in 2016, the structural reforms required the PLA to train in conditions that reflected actual combat. The combat units were redeployed closer to potential conflict areas to train more rigorously to confront their adversaries, develop a systematic approach to increase their war preparedness, improve joint training, develop robust training regulations and standards, support infrastructure, and conduct military training inspections. After the military reforms in training standards and guidelines, the CPC established a comprehensive military inspection system, and placed inspection agencies within the CMC and the theatre command/service branches. It performs as a two-tier inspection system at the CMC-theatre/service level, to place oversight through agencies within the individual services of the theatre command. The inspection agencies reduced the issues that were present before, such as oversight and implementation neglected at the expense of strategic planning and decision-making and in turn establishing a link between decision-making, execution and oversight.⁷

The CMC, at times, undertakes inspection campaigns, and send inspection teams to various units at theatre commands, military service branches and military academies to investigate whether major troop training and exercises and educational initiatives are aligned with the requirements of actual combat. For instance, in the early phase of

⁶ “Xi Jinping Emphasises at CMC Military Training Conference: Comprehensively Strengthen Combat-Oriented Military Training and Fully Enhance Training Standards and War-Winning Capabilities” (*Xi Jinping zai zhongyang junwei junshi xunlian huiyi shang qiangdiao quanmian jiaqiang shizhan hua junshi xunlian quanmian tigao xunlian shuiping he da ying nengli*), *Xinhua* 25 November 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-11/25/c_1126786197.htm (Accessed 2 January 2026).

⁷ Liang Pengfei and Wu Xu, “CMC Training Inspection Group Deploys to Select Units Across Theatres and Services” (*Zhongyang junwei xunlian jiancha zu jinzhu ge zhanqu he junzhong bufen danwei*), *PLA Daily*, 12 May 2016, at <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJVqHg> (Accessed 2 May 2024).

reforms, the CMC conducted inspection campaigns and later issued a guideline, “Interim Provisions on Strengthening Combat-Oriented Military Training” and tasked the PLA with having a clearer blueprint for in-depth development of combat-oriented training.⁸ The regulations mandated that training should take into consideration ‘the capabilities of the adversaries, battlefield environment, friendly forces, training of commanders, avoid fraudulent training practices, and pursuit of trophy-hunting and superficial accolades, lax assessment standards, and simplistic mobilisation drills’, and entrusted the party committees to oversee training and inspection departments to perform their role.⁹ Over the past ten years, inspection agencies have played a crucial role in oversight and spot checks. They continue to work with different units and institutions without attempting to disrupt routine military operations and tasks.

A decade of military training reforms and practices has substantially reduced outdated training methods and has introduced the PLA to modern warfare concepts and training. Instead of the vertical nature of military training in the PLA and lack of oversight, the PLA is conducting military exercises that incorporate cross-regional base-oriented training, joint training, standardisation of assessment, and a training environment simulating actual combat conditions. One of the reasons for the jump in combat-related training was the “Regulations on Military Training Inspection of the Chinese PLA” (Trial), which the CMC introduced in 2019 to effectively implement directives for military

⁸ “A New Momentum for Combat Readiness Surges – A Focus on PLA Military Training in 2016” (*Jing Xi Jinping zhuxi pizhun zhongyang junwei yinfa jiaqing shizhan hua junshi xunlian zhan hang guiding*), Xinhua, 25 December 2016, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/25/c_1120183497.htm (Accessed 4 May 2024).

⁹ “Approved by Chairman Xi Jinping, the CMC Issues the “Interim Provisions on Strengthening the Combat-Oriented Military Training” (*Jing Xi Jinping zhuxi pizhun zhongyang junwei yinfa jiaqing shizhan hua junshi xunlian zhan hang guiding*), Xinhua, 21 November 2016, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/21/c_1119955248.htm (Accessed 5 May 2025).

training, such as combat-oriented training and combat readiness among the troops.¹⁰

In other words, the CMC increased oversight and supervision of the new training standards and supervised whether the theatre commands and units within them have followed them. Eventually, as the reforms progressed and new technologies accelerated, the CMC progressively established a 'new type military training system' (*xinxing junshi xun*) to realise world-class military objectives and improve the quality and efficiency of the combat capability development. In 2021, the CMC issued the "Decision on Building a New Military Training System", intended to integrate training with real combat and stimulate more combat-oriented training exercises.¹¹ The PLA used this guideline to adopt the "Basic training – Combined Arms Training – Joint Training (*jichu-beicheng-lianhe*)" model to increase combat capability. By 2025, the PLA has adapted this model to its training methods. The model integrates combat and training, advanced concepts and operational models, scientific content and methodologies, efficient organisation and management and robust resource support.

In addition, the PLA has begun to show importance to 'tech-driven training'. As part of the CMC's directive that the PLA should integrate the modernisation of mechanisation, informationalisation, and intelligentisation, the military training has also begun to reflect this, such as the inclusion of AI-powered equipment, including drones, robotic dogs, unmanned vehicles, and reconnaissance units, optical, electronic

¹⁰ Liu Jianwei, Wu Xu, Gai Yulin, "Leaders from Training Management Department of the CMC Answer Reporters' Questions Regarding the Promulgation and Implementation of the "Regulations on Military Training Inspection of the PLA (Trial) (*Junwei xunlian guanli bu lingdao jiu fabu shixing zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junshi xunlian jiancha tiaoli (shixing) da jizhe wen*)", *Xuexi Juntan*, 12 February 2019 at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/jwxlgfb/4836106.html> (Accessed 23 September 2025).

¹¹ Liu Xuanzun, "Chinese Military to Build New-Type Training System Amid External Threats", *Global Times*, 21 February 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216079.shtml> (3 October 2025).

and infrared instruments becoming part of the units and military training exercises.¹² The infusion of AI technologies in the military battlefield is to force multiply the PLA's combat capabilities by using big data, using human-machine integrated command training and creating customised battlefields, where complex electromagnetic conditions, urban combat scenarios or hybrid warfare contexts are incorporated. It would help the PLA to devise realistic combat scenarios for the training of its troops, and a training environment, which is constructed precisely according to modern combat scenarios, leading troops to hone their strategies and tactical manoeuvres.¹³

Further, the PLA has implemented a system-wide training model, where it focuses on mass-participation training and skill competitions, realistic combat scenarios, command training, emergency response training, cross-domain integration of forces, simulated and networked training, and the integration of 'new-type of force' such as unmanned and cyber-electronic units. In 2026, whether it is system-wide combat training or integrated training, troops from all the services are involved in improving their combat capabilities in realistic scenarios, with integrated training involving unmanned and AI-equipped weapons systems.¹⁴ In the last few years, the extension of combat-oriented training and system-wide training at all levels is to do with the requirements of the new era and world-class military. For instance, the PLA is tasked to execute assigned missions such as safeguarding territory while venturing into distant oceans, reinforce traditional operational advantages and expand into emerging domains.¹⁵ In addition, the training models are further

¹² Li Gongmiao and Xie Ronghua, "Making Military Training the 'Engine' for a Leap in Combat Capability" (*Rang junshi xunlian chengwei zhandouli yuesheng de yinqing*), *Guangming Daily*, 28 December 2025, at <https://military.people.com.cn/n1/2025/1228/c1011-40633830.html> (Accessed 3 January 2026).

¹³ Li Gongmiao and Xie, *Ibid*.

¹⁴ "All-Army Training Begins" (*Quan jun kai xun*), *CCTV News*, 4 January 2026, at https://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/kx/20260104/t20260104_527482670.shtml (Accessed 2 February 2026).

¹⁵ Zhao Yan, "Accelerating the Construction of a New-Type Military Training System" (*Jiakuai goujian xinxing junshi xunlian tixi*), *PLA Daily*, 7 January 2021 (Accessed 4 June 2025).

redefined to have better coordination among various units and theatre commands. For instance, training models are further divided into 'Unit-based Integration Training' (*danyuan jicheng xun*), 'Tactical Coordination Training' (*zhangshu xietong xun*), and Adversarial Testing and Training (*duikang jianyan xun*).¹⁶ A unit-based integration training model is about developing network-centric capabilities, and other technologies such as reconnaissance, information flow, intelligence and is either designed for specific operational requirements or specific military branches where it would have to realise specific combat missions.¹⁷ The three-tier training model is now being implemented across the Chinese military and has also led to more cross-service training and integration, and shared utilisation of resources, such as chief instructors conducting cross-unit training sessions.¹⁸

Overall, China is continuously developing and redefining its training methods, models and systems. The challenges of new security threats and emerging technologies drive such innovations. In addition, problems in coordination between various units within the services and across the services necessitate such innovations.

c) Technological Innovation, New-Type of Combat Capability and Talent Cultivation

In the CPC's view, technological innovation in the new era is the core of combat capability. When the CMC emphasises technological innovation in recent years, they are referring to a 'new type of combat capability', where the combat units are employing information and AI assets. Science and technological revolution play a dominant role in

¹⁶ Xun Bishi, "Innovative Integrated Training Models" (*Chuangxin hecheng xunlian zu xun moshi*), *PLA Daily*, 17 December 2024, at http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16359052.html (Accessed 3 December 2025).

¹⁷ Xun Bishi, *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Li Lin and Zhang Lin, "Construction of Our Military's New Training System Accelerates" (*Wo jun xinxing junshi xunlian tixi jiasu guojian*), *PLA Daily*, 10 October 2025, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16414315.html> (Accessed 2 December 2025).

China's national modernisation objective. Therefore, the CPC views science and technology as a revolutionary aspect in military development and any technological innovation as a step towards a 'new type of combat capability'.¹⁹ The reforms have enabled the party committees in some units to prioritise research on combat operations, in particular investment in innovation in advanced technologies such as radar technologies.²⁰ Xi Jinping recognised the need for technological innovation in military reforms due to the acceleration of advanced and emerging technologies. In the initial phase of reform in 2016, the CPC established the CMC Science and Technology Commission and the CMC Steering Committee for Military Scientific Research to promote defence science and technological innovation. Nowadays, the PLA is able to develop 'new type of combat capabilities' due to the structural reforms implemented in 2016. These new type of combat capabilities refer to air assault, far-sea defence, unmanned systems, and precision strikes.

No doubt the CMC has invested organisational, monetary, political and institutional resources to promote science and technology as part of reforms. However, much of it depends on the proficiency of the military personnel in operating high-tech equipment and systems and understanding new operational concepts.

For instance, the addition of a 'new-type of combat force such as unmanned systems in the training fields has made joint operations difficult for military personnel. The local commanders find it difficult to make decisions in coordinating joint operations between manned and

¹⁹ Xu Yan and Zeng Qinghua, "The Scientific Path to Generation of New-Type Combat Capabilities" (*Xin zhi zhendouli shengcheng*), *PLA Daily*, 3 September 2019, at https://www.qstheory.cn/llwx/2019-09/03/c_1124953523.htm (Accessed 4 October 2025).

²⁰ Mou Jianqiang, "From the Test Range to the Battlefield of the Future", *PLA Daily*, 19 September 2025, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/16410539.html> (Accessed 3 December 2025).

unmanned assets. Therefore, there is an emphasis on commanders gaining understanding on military science, nature of warfare and combat operations, and gain efficiency in command capabilities, organisational training, and personally get involved in building their units.²¹ The PLA has placed significant importance on improving the commander's acumen. The PLA believes that the commanders' scope of planning, depth of their foresight, precision of their decision-making and speed of their adaptability are crucial as they impact implementation and troops' combat capabilities and the success on the battlefield.²² Even though the CMC had improved the mechanisms for assessing 'talents' and improving 'talent cultivation', these problems persists in the PLA. Earlier, in the initial phase of the reforms, the CMC established "A Leading Group for Talent Work" alongside a "CMC Committee for the Assessment of Cadres", and the "Interim Regulations on the Management of Active-Duty Officers" and other regulations to progress towards a 'professionalized officer system with Chinese characteristics'.²³

²¹ "Xi Jinping Emphasises at CMC Military Training Conference: Comprehensively Strengthen Combat-Oriented Military Training and Fully Enhance Training Standards and War Winning Capabilities" (*Xi Jinping zai zhongyang junwei junshi xunlian huiyi shang qiangdiao quanmian jiaqing shizhan hua junshi xunlian quanmian tigao xunlian shuiping he da ying nengli*), *Xinhua*, 25 November 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-11/25/c_1126786197.htm (Accessed 3 December 3 2025).

²² Zhang Xinsheng, "Military Training is the Most Direct Preparation for Military Combat" (*Junshi xunlian shi zui zhibie de junshi douzheng zhunbei*), *PLA Daily*, 16 January 2026, at <https://www.qstheory.cn/20260116/e0362ea4d9034c129bef8a27a9a6d71a/c.html> (Accessed 3 February 2026).

²³ "The Great Practice of Strengthening Through Reforms – A Comprehensive View of the Deepening of National Defence and Military Reform Under the Leadership and Command of the Party Central Committee and Chairman Xi" (*Xin shidai gaige qiang jun de weida shijian – dang zhongyang he xi zhuxi lingdao zhibui shenba guofang he jundui gaige zongshu*), *CPC Website*, 22 September 2022, at <https://www.12371.cn/2022/09/22/ART11663845864159748.shtml>.

However, the gap between talent cultivation and the troops' proficiency in managing new operational methods and new equipment assets is widening. They have become a major challenge for the PLA to manage talent. After ten years of reform, issues in talent cultivation have made the PLA realise that it is a highly interconnected factor in improving combat. If there are issues in assessing the talents or discrepancies in the proper selection of talents, then the combat capability is reduced. The PLA has to manage talent cultivation between urgent combat needs and long-term transformative needs. The PLA has attempted to address these issues by recommending a three-in-one talent cultivation framework. For instance, this framework would comprise education in military academies, practical training within operational units, and military professional education.²⁴ Moreover, the CMC has identified shortages in talents in joint operational command, new-type combat forces, high-level scientific and technological innovation, and high-calibre strategic management.²⁵

The reforms targeted policies and institutions that develop human resources and logistics and cultivate military talent. The military academic institutions and their priority in training human resources were taken into account when the CMC launched the initial reforms in 2016. The CMC reformed the National Defence University (NDU) and the National University of Defence Technology (NUDT) to optimise resources on scientific research and improve talent cultivation. The National Defence University is the highest military school at the deputy theatre level. The NDU is a comprehensive joint command university for senior military officers, including senior-level Generals. These two military educational institutions are directly subordinate to the CMC. The NDU graduate school focuses on studying wars, combat models,

²⁴ Zhang Zhefeng, "Driving High-Quality Development of the Military through the Supply of High-Calibre Talent" (*Yi gao shuiping rencai gongji tudong jundui gao zhibiliang fazhan*), *Guangming Daily*, 29 June 2025, at https://news.gmw.cn/2025-06/29/content_38121736.htm (Accessed 4 October 2025).

²⁵ Zheng Zhefeng, *ibid.*

joint warfare, weapons platforms, practical applications of exercises, and future warfare. After the reforms, the NDU, along with the Academy of Military Sciences, changed rank from a military region to a deputy theatre command level, whereas NUDT was downgraded to a full Army Corps. Therefore, these military academies do not fall under the 'theatre command-level units'.

After the reforms, the CMC reduced the total number of military institutions from 77 to 44. Some of them are joint operations college, specialised colleges for specific services and branches, and institutions dedicated to civil-military integration. Military academies under the services have a more focused approach to teaching courses according to their service requirements. For example, naval academies would cooperate with the navy and teach military personnel in the academy according to the requirements of the navy. In addition, in 2025, the CMC introduced three more academies such as the Information Support Forces Engineering University, Army Service Arms University and Joint Logistics Support Forces Engineering University bringing the total to 43 military academies under the CMC, service and branch institutions and Armed Police Force institutions.

Command academies also serve a certain purpose. For instance, the army command academy offers courses including strategy, tactics, military command, military political work, military training, military history, military management, and study of the battlefield. Every service has a command academy, and its courses are tailored according to the needs of the service. For instance, the Command Academy of the Air Force would focus on Air Force tactical command, aviation intermediate command, political work, Intermediate Logistics Command, Intermediate Communications Command, Aviation Engineering, and Command Automation, etc.

The 'talent cultivation' and the military educational institutions and other organisations that nurture it have become important to the PLA. Despite these reforms, the proficiency of the military personnel to operate sophisticated equipment and weapons and execute command decisions in complex battlefield scenarios has been insufficient as per the requirements of the New Era. While considerable progress has been made in structural and organisational transformation, the PLA has to convert it into talent cultivation.

d) Theatre Command and Joint Operational Capability

When the CMC established the theatre commands and dissolved the headquarters system, the theatre command assumed the responsibility for operational command and planning. The CMC was able to exert greater control over the PLA and implement its vision in building troop development and management. Since the reduction in troop levels contributed to a more optimal distribution of personnel among the military services and institutions, this led to reduced dominance of the PLA Army. As a result, the CMC was able to establish theatre command in a sustained manner. After reforms, according to the objectives of the CMC, the theatre command performs peacetime and wartime operations, as well as routine functions and specialised primary missions, and is guided by a lean and efficient structure.

Initially, when the headquarters system was still functioning, it managed both the responsibility and functions of ‘operational command’ alongside administrative management. In the Chinese political lexicon, the ‘construction’ of the military was less dependent on combat preparedness and more on the utilisation of resources. After the military reforms, the theatre command has allowed ‘combat’ to be the deciding factor that would influence the priorities of the theatre command, influence the construction of the military, as well as joint training and others.²⁶ In other words, the CPC believes that combat requirements should be the basis for capability development. If modern combat dictates that the theatre commands should develop joint operations capability, then the services and branches should align their policies on force development and logistics accordingly. The Chinese leadership believes that the nature of warfare has changed. It theorises that information warfare has emerged as the dominant form and integrated

²⁶ Zhou Dongbin, “The Dialectic of War and Construction’: Upholding War as the Guide for Construction and Strengthening the Coordination of War and Construction” (*Zhan yu jian de bianzhengfa: jianchi yi zhan ling jian qianghua zhan jian tongchou*), *PLA Daily*, 15 June 2022, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/4913001.html>

operations have become the basis of training and conducting operations.²⁷

Moreover, theatre commands are more than just joint operational commands. Since the purpose of the theatre command is to focus on combat, it becomes the focal point for all the organisations, planning, training and resource allocation and raises awareness among them. In the Chinese view, when the theatre command focuses on strategic planning, operational planning and combat training, it creates pressure on the military services and branches to focus on combat and guide their behaviour in implementing the CMC's directives on theatre commands.²⁸ The directive is that 'forces are built in the exact way wars are fought'. When the CMC established the theatre commands, they directed it to focus on joint training such as utilising naval and air assets in joint training, and other multi-dimensional exercises.²⁹ The theatre commands, after a decade of their existence, have become singularly focused on operational command and planning, war preparedness, and joint and integrated training. In fact, as scientific and technological innovation deepened in China's industrial sectors, the CPC began to position technology as a core part of combat capability.

The increasing technological sophistication of advanced militaries worldwide and rapid industrialisation and technological advancement

²⁷ "How to Scientifically Determine the Force Structure in the Military's Below the Neck Reforms" (*Jundui bozhi yixia de gaige ruhe kexue dingbian*), *Chinese National Defence*, 12 January 2017 at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0112/c1011-29018621.html> (Accessed 5 October 2025).

²⁸ Liu Zhengyuan and Xu Haiwei, "Strictly Upholding the Operational Requirements under the New System of Using Primary Combat Role of the Theatre Command" (*Ba hao zhanqu zhu zhan zhege xin tixi yunxing yaoqiu*), *PLA Daily*, 26 February 2019, at https://www.qstheory.cn/llwx/2019-02/26/c_1124162517.htm (Accessed 4 October 2025).

²⁹ "New Momentum for Combat Readiness Surges – A Focus on PLA Military Training in 2016" (*Beizhan daxiang xin shineng jingxiang bengfa – jujiao 2016 nian jiefangjun junshi xunlian*), *Xinhua*, 25 December 2016, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/25/c_1120183497.htm (Accessed 3 November 2025).

in China have led the CPC to push technological innovation as a way to boost combat capability. Since the theatre commands are supposed to achieve an advantage over the enemy in the overall composition of the troops and weapons, the combat system should have both deterrence and actual (offensive) combat capability. Therefore, the combat system is considered to be highly adaptable and adjusts to the conditions of modern warfare. The theatre command would have to lead its joint command agencies to adapt to the development of new war and combat methods. For instance, if the enemy has developed capabilities in air superiority, the theatre command has to adapt its operational planning and joint training exercises to counter air supremacy in the combat plan. For instance, the PLA theatre commands regularly conduct cross-service joint training and joint training based on case studies and verification; an example of this is visible in exercises around the East China Sea.³⁰ In such exercises, cross-service training, joint training, and combat-oriented training would mean that the PLA theatre commands are using their air, naval, and land assets in combat-oriented battlefield scenarios.

Therefore, optimising the military forces would be very important for the PLA. When the PLA is confronting the system of the adversary, information-led systems warfare would be the main method. For instance, the PLA believes that to win information warfare, priority should be given to the early warning, reconnaissance, command and control information system, experience of combat, the experiences of foreign militaries and the lessons learned from it. Attention to all levels of combat is given.

e) Civil-Military Integration

The CPC has given the highest priority to civil-military integration. In China's national development strategy, the CPC has implemented a

³⁰ Qi Xucong and Kang Zizhan, "Our Military's Combat-Oriented Training Reaches New Heights in the New Era" (*Wo jun xin shidai junshi xunlian shizhan hua shuiping zai shang xin taijie*), *PLA Daily*, 10 October 2023, at <https://www.news.cn/politics/20251023/ac43b8e59ece406e9f01b3107a3d33da/c.html> (Accessed 4 December 2024).

coordinated development of economic and defence construction. Initially, the CPC established the Central Commission for Integrated Military-Civilian Development to lead the process. Many of the reforms improved the financial and banking obstacles to civil-military integration. Most importantly, the CPC has extensively promoted civil-military integration in infrastructure. As a result, the PLA has access to shared utilization of facilities such as transportation, surveying, mapping and information technology. Moreover, civilian technologies in military applications and vice versa have led to the development of Beidou navigation satellites, passenger aircraft, and so on. The civil-military integration helps the PLA in carrying out overseas operations with support capabilities, and has an impact on talent cultivation. The aim of the civil-military integration from the Chinese perspective is to build an “integrated national strategic system and capabilities” (*yiti hua de guojia zhanlue tixi he nengli*). The philosophy of this strategy is the belief that development and security are intertwined, and as a result, leads to a seamless integration of the development of national defence and armed forces within the broader system of economic and social development.³¹

Without integration, the CPC believes China would be unable to translate comprehensive national power into advanced combat and capabilities in system confrontation. The PLA believes that the national integration model has to take into account collaborative innovation in science and technology through national laboratories, reinforce the national defence science and technology industry’s contribution to developing military power and a resilient industrial and supply chain, and coordinate the construction of major infrastructure projects.³²

³¹ “Why is it Necessary to Consolidate and Enhance the Integrated National Strategic System and Capabilities?” (*Weisheme yao gonggu tigao yiti hua guojia zhanlue tixi he nengli*), *CPC Member Website*, 30 March 2023, at <https://www.12371.cn/2023/03/30/ARTI1680171069295852.shtml> (Accessed 8 October 2025).

³² Fei Shiting, “Consolidating and Enhancing the Integrated National Strategic System and Capabilities” (*Gonggu tigao yiti hua guojia zhanlue tixi he nengli*), *PLA Daily*, 9 March 2023, at https://www.qstheory.cn/2023-03/09/c_1129422371.htm (Accessed 3 October 2025).

The call for civil-military integration has been part of military reforms. However, the CPC is engaging many civilian sectors to enhance cooperation with the military sectors. These sectors are engaging not only at the national level but also at the provincial level for better access and utilization of resources. Overall, the civil-military integration represents the CPC's response to the security threats in its strategic environment. Without civil-military integration, China would be forced to spend exclusively on armed forces and engage in an arms race, or invest in economic development, leaving the nation-state vulnerable to a conflict. The optimal use of resources and shared utilisation of civilian facilities contribute to enhanced competitiveness. The armed forces do not have to be reliant only on national defence resources and can access resources from civilian sectors in case of a shortage of innovation talents, or equipment construction etc.

CONCLUSION

According to the Chinese view, the composition of military power includes the military's leading and command organs, the services and military branches, and combat and support forces. Among them, most countries focus on the combat power of the military forces. The standard for measuring military power is to determine whether combat troops are reasonably classified, have complete functions, become fully organised at short notice, implement fast, flexible and efficient formations depending on the needs of different operational and military tasks and maximise overall combat capability. The number, structure and composition of support institutions and personnel play a crucial role in tactics and force composition.

In the Chinese view, the New Era has become the defining political context in analysing China's security environment and the challenges it is facing. In the CPC's view, the PLA's military power is a safeguard and a guarantee to thwart any disruption to national rejuvenation. Whether it is Chinese-style modernisation to realise national rejuvenation or the completion of its China Dream, China's national interests are increasingly defined by Xi Jinping Thought. The national missions are derived from these concepts. Wherever national interests extend, the CMC has extended the requisite military missions and tasks. In turn, it has led to more demand for expanding military capabilities. According to the mission and tasks of the security challenges from different

strategic directions, the 'below the neck' reforms analyze key issues such as who the army may fight, what kind of war, where and when to fight, to what extent, and what combat capability is needed to fight, and clarify the responsibilities of various military organisations, services, branches, theatre commands during peacetime and wartime.

However, even after reforms, the CPC faces a rapidly evolving security environment and an acceleration of advanced military technologies on the battlefield. This creates a constant challenge to upgrade the composition of the forces to reflect the changing nature of warfare and warfighting. While such tensions in military modernisation and changes in forms of warfare are commonplace among militaries worldwide, the PLA is a political army and its combat requirements flow from the CPC's political ideology. Therefore, the military power in China is distinct, and the organisational, command and tactical institutions and branches adapt to the CPC's political and ideological guidelines. On the other hand, the PLA is required to develop its combat methods and war preparedness, fight and win wars, and most importantly, take strategic initiative when required.

According to the CPC, in the New Era, war is a confrontation between systems of power. Therefore, not only does the PLA have to leverage its capabilities, but it also has to restrain the adversaries' dominance. These comprehensive reforms therefore represent China's desire to win the systemic confrontation. In a systemic confrontation, the adversary has dominance in advanced technologies such as information warfare and AI. As a result, the CPC focused on integrating various combat and support elements within the theatre command and gave preference to cross-service and integrated training, which adds many advanced technologies to the battlefield. As such, many military exercises reveal that the combat units are using early warning, reconnaissance, and command and control information systems so that each theatre command have a joint operational command to rely on.

In other words, the reforms have transformed the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations and integrated training. However, challenges still remain in talent cultivation, civil-military integration, and combat preparedness.

PLA WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND AND THE INDIAN THEATRE

INTRODUCTION

The theatre command trains to win wars against an adversary facing its strategic direction. After military reforms and the establishment of the PLA's Western Theatre Command (WTC), the relevance of the conventional theatre against India has risen. The organisational changes therefore hold particular relevance to India, especially given that logistics, mobilisation, joint operations training, acclimatisation routines, and cross-service training have become the norm in the WTC. The PLA defines its training and joint operations in the high-altitude area in the WTC as plateau operations. The integrated training exercises in plateau conditions often prioritise logistics and cross-service training to overcome the harsh terrain conditions. Therefore, this chapter analyses the major reforms and its impact on the capabilities of the WTC. It argues that the reforms have made the PLA formidable against the Indian forces in technological and logistical advancements. It also discusses the challenges prevalent in the PLA WTC.

WTC THEATRE COMMAND: MAJOR REFORMS AT A GLANCE

The PLA WTC has undergone various reforms and possesses operational elements that are unique to it. It is understood that the CPC's New Era discourse emphasises the national security environment and the building of a strong army to overcome its adversaries who might attempt to derail its China Dream. The CPC has argued that the PLA is undergoing reforms to become a 'guarantee' or a 'strategic support' for its political objectives. In this context, the CPC has stated that the PLA's responsibility is to provide for 'four strategic supports', which constitute the mission and tasks in the New Era. The PLA are a

strategic support for “consolidating the leadership of the CPC and the country’s socialist system”; “for safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity”; “for protecting China’s overseas interests”; and for “promoting world peace and development”.¹ They are the strategic imperatives of the PLA for employing military power and reach national rejuvenation.

After the COVID pandemic and rapid changes in China’s security environment, the CPC believes that the PLA’s duty is to provide strategic support for Chinese-style modernisation. The CPC argues that through the implementation of Chinese-style modernisation, China can realise ‘national rejuvenation’. In other words, the duties and responsibilities of the PLA have considerably expanded and would have a greater say in the security order and architecture, both in the neighbourhood and in the global order.² The military reforms to build China’s military power and improve combat capability and preparedness through theatre commands are increasingly becoming more sophisticated in their strategic approach. The WTC has incorporated the combat requirements of its theatre after the military reforms. The WTC’s headquarters is in Chengdu, and its Army headquarters is in Lanzhou. It has no naval presence. The Xinjiang Military Command has amassed

¹ “Fulfilling Missions and Tasks, Advancing the Cause of Building a Strong Military – On the Occasion of the 92 Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese PLA” (*Luxing shiming renwu tuijin qiang junshi ye – xie zai zhongguo renmin jiefangjun jian jun 92 zhounian zhi ji*), *Xinhua*, 12 August 2019 at https://www.tba.gov.cn/s1bthlyglj/qwjdc/content/slth1_443a39c9e1694598a837fd10f78c2815.html (Accessed 3 November 2024).

² Mei Shixiong and others, “Mobilising the Forces of Endeavour: Advancing the Modernisation of National Defence and the Armed Forces with High-Quality – A Comprehensive Overview of the Lecture Tour by the All-Army Delegation Studying and Implementing the Guiding Principles of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee” (*Huiji fenjin Liliang gao zhiliang tuijin guofang he jundui xiandaihua – quan jun xuexi Guanche dang de ershi jie si zhong quanhui jingshen xuanjiang tuan xuanjiang buodong zongshu*), *Study Times*, 26 November 2025, at <https://www.qstheory.cn/20251126/8fa925d5fd0f4a63a4de287b9c27a7cd/c.html> (Accessed

significant capabilities in air defence and offensive and defensive operations.

However, the WTC is unique in that it has two military districts, namely the Tibet Military Command and Xinjiang Military Command, which are at the deputy theatre command level and under the command of the PLA Army. In other words, the two military commands retain certain operational command, unlike the other theatre commands. This shows that the CMC had decided that, despite reforms to reduce the disproportionate influence of the PLA Army, the WTC, due to its long border and the need for large conventional forces in the India-China border, retains certain operational authority of the PLA Army. In operational terms, due to its deputy-theatre command rank, both the military commands can conduct independent operations without requiring support from other theatre commands. The PLA has designed the Tibet Military Command to carry out deep strike assaults and rapid response. The deputy-level theatre command alone has reconnaissance assets that a theatre command would possess. Due to this special status, its missions and functions are expanded.

The strategic direction that the WTC faces is India, Central Asia and the Af-Pak region. However, in terms of traditional security, the operational capabilities are aimed at India. Both Central Asia and the Af-Pak region represent non-traditional security threats for China as it deals with terrorism and extremist elements from non-state actors. Therefore, its combat requirements against the security threats facing the strategic direction are generally classified as homeland defence with respect to India and counterterrorism missions to prevent infiltration of international terrorists. The WTC has the 76th and 77th Group Armies. The 76th Group Army has been training in high-altitude regions throughout the year. Before the reforms, the troops had training in the plains during the winter months. After the reforms, the PLA is training in high-altitude areas and conducting military exercises to improve its combat preparedness. The 77th Group Army, on the other hand, operates in complex topography and often holds cross-regional manoeuvres. The WTC's jurisdiction lies in the defence of provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, including Sichuan, Tibet, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang and Chongqing. The present military commander of the WTC is Wang Haijiang, and the political commissar is Li Fengbiao.

The two military commands of the WTC and reforms show complex factors affecting them. The Tibet MC has not matched the number of troops that the Indian side has deployed along its border. Instead, the TMC deploys approximately 50,000 troops. Because high-altitude conditions can affect the health of the stationed troops, any soldier undergoes rigorous medical screening before joining the Tibet MC. Hence, the PLA stresses the quality rather than the quantity of soldiers in the plateau. However, whether the Tibet MC lack eligible troops or purposefully screens only highly eligible troops cannot be confirmed. However, it is sure that the troops in the Tibet MC regularly have altitude sickness and is a cause for concern for the PLA to medically care for the troops and manage the transition time from low-altitude to high-altitude.³

The PLA has upgraded its sophisticated weaponry to compensate for the lower number of troops in the border areas with India. Even though India has conventional strength near the borders, the PLA believes that superior weaponry, modern logistics, and integrated training among the services within the joint command are sufficient to face the threat from India. The WTC has been rapidly incorporating weaponry since the implementation of reforms in 2016. It has deployed light tanks, long-range rocket systems, and infantry fighting vehicles. These long-range rocket systems are designed to disrupt the supply depots of the Indian troops along the border. Moreover, the WTC has improved its air defence and reconnaissance capabilities. In reconnaissance capabilities, the ability to identify the enemy's command post, artillery positions, communication hubs, and enemy tanks is encouraged in the training exercises.

³ Chen Weijing, Pei Yongzhen and Shao Bokang, "No More Direct Deployment to the Plateau After Leave! A Regime Under the Tibet MC Introduces a Return-to-Duty-Transition Mechanism" (*Xinjidia jieshu bu zai zhibie shang gaoyuan! Xizang junqu mou tuan tuichu fan gang guodu jizhi*), *PLA Daily*, 14 November 2025, at <https://military.cctv.com/2025/11/14/ARTIU1liwVvmWdG2MELYCMoM251114.shtml>

In Tibet MC, the PLA has deployed equipment specifically engineered for high-altitude warfare. Unlike the other military commands, the Xinjiang Military Command retained many of the traditional organisational structures and was reorganised and redeployed only in 2019. Only by 2020, Xinjiang MC converted four infantry divisions into Combined-Armed Divisions and the subordinate units were converted into Combined Armed Regiments (*becheng tuan*), Combined Armed Battalions (*becheng ying*), Firepower Regiments (*buoli tuan*), and Artillery Regiments (*paobing tuan*).⁴ The slower reorganisation was, however, rectified, and new equipment was incorporated into the Xinjiang MC, including anti-tank missiles, rocket artillery and anti-aircraft guns. One of the issues that the Xinjiang MC faced was the lack of motivation and lack of knowledge and experience among local commanders in carrying out the reforms and upgrades, which has hampered mastery of their command and control and also their ability to fully organise training according to the new guidelines, as well as upgrade weapons and equipment.⁵

It is evident that the grassroots commanders were ill-equipped to handle such vast reforms, either due to advanced age or linear career progression, which affected the ability to handle risks and take initiative or the lack of knowledge regarding new training and operational methods, which would require the local commanders to have knowledge through training or study. Over the years after the reform, the PLA believes that the Xinjiang MC has made considerable progress in upgrading its equipment. They have deployed Type 99A main battle tank, Type 86A Infantry Fighting Vehicle, and information systems. Increasingly, the WTC has been training in extreme weather conditions to test the command coordination of the troops and their precision-strike capabilities.

⁴ Wang Shichun, “All Infantry Divisions of the Xinjiang Military Command Transition to Combined Armed Units and Re-equip with New Hardware” (*Xinjiang junqu ge bubing shi zhuanxing wei becheng budui zhuang xin zhuangbei*), *Guancha*, 26 October 2020, at https://www.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2020_08_26_562846.shtml (Accessed 3 November 2025).

⁵ Wang Shichun, *ibid.*

WTC OPERATIONAL CAPABILITY AND CHALLENGES

Unlike the other theatre commands, the responsibilities of the WTC are widespread. With respect to the Indian theatre, the reforms made adjustments to Xinjiang and Tibet MC and gave it operational command to better manage border defence. The long borders and the need for a large deployment of troops along the border areas would result in the WTC retaining some of the PLA Army's orientation. However, jointness is an important factor in the WTC's approach to combat capability. The reforms in the WTC have led to frequent joint training and joint operations between the services. There is already widespread cooperation between the WTC Army and Air Force units. In order to boost the air defence capabilities of the WTC Air Force, ten Army air defence units were incorporated within the WTC Air Force Command chain, leading to cross-service integration of air defence capabilities and shared situational awareness.⁶

The integration is helping the PLA because WTC Army air defence units are flexible in deployment and has end-to-end resistance capabilities, but WTC Air Force air defence has a wide coverage area at medium and high-altitude resistance capabilities, which before the reforms were on a separate air defence system network. There are two guidelines that are important. Working Mechanism of the Air Force Directly Affiliated to the Brigade of the Theater Air Force (Trial)⁷ and Working Mechanism of the Air Force Guidance Base in the Theater Area (Trial). The Joint operation in the western theatre command, oversees that army air defence forces have been organised into air force command chains to share early warning, combat readiness, participation in military exercises, leading to integration of the air defence forces.

⁶ "WTC Air Force Focuses on Combat Readiness to Explore the Establishment of a Joint Air Defence System – Army Air Defence Forces Integrated into Air Force Command Chain" (*Xibu zhanqu kongjun jujiao beizhan daxiang tansuo guojian lianbe fangkong tixi lujun fangkong Liliang jinru kongjun zhibui liantiao*), *PLA Daily*, 27 April 2021, at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0427/c1011-32089293.html> (Accessed 4 October 2025).

For instance, air defence units of the Air Force and the PLA Army conducted a joint air defence exercise, which shows the success of theatre commands. In the exercise, a brigade of the Air Force of the WTC had to streamline the command relationship between the two services, use the unified command system to direct their joint operations, collaborate with their Army counterparts to jointly assess the enemy situation, and enable coordination between different operational units.⁷ Even though the terrain conditions of the WTC are harsh, the joint training and operations have become the norm in the theatre. The reorganised structures have different requirements, such as adhering to ‘actual’ combat conditions. It compels different services to coordinate their command responsibilities within a theatre. It has also led to a more realistic assessment of the training capability.

It is evident that the terrain conditions lead the assessment of the not only the training capabilities but also the assessment of the weaponry and equipment. The WTC has been particularly focused on conducting training assessments ‘complex and extreme conditions such as high-altitude plateaus’ and the troops within the unit play an important role in deciding the type of gear that the troops have to carry.⁸

The WTC is intended on improving its operational capability given that high-altitude conditions play a decisive role. It can affect personnel, equipment, training and logistics. For instance, during of his visits to the Air Force of the WTC, Xi called for the WTC to adapt to the unique operational environment and conduct air defence operations

⁷ Wu Zhao and Zhou Yeqing, “A Brigade of the WTC Air Force Establishes a Joint Command Link with Army Units” (*Xibu zhanqu kongjun mou lu yu lujun budui gong jian zhibui lian lu*), *PLA Daily*, 27 October 2022, at http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/10180784.html (Accessed 4 October 2025).

⁸ Mei Shixiong, Mei Changwei and Li Bingxuan, “Implement the Requirements for High-Quality Development and Complete Set Goals and Tasks on Schedule” (*Luoshibao gao zhibiliang fazhan yaoqiu ruqi wancheng jiding mubiao renwu*), *People’s Daily*, 3 September 2025, at paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/pc/content/202503/09/content_.

routinely.⁹ Air defence capabilities such as surface-to-air missiles, radar and electronic warfare, and other units are some of the capabilities that the WTC have continued to pay attention.

The WTC's priority to scenario-based and adversarial training, intensive drills, and training in difficult and critical situation and fighting in real battlefield conditions after Xi inspected the Air Force of the WTC and asked to be ready to deploy swiftly, engage effectively and secure victory.¹⁰ As a result, the WTC has begun to focus on training in real combat conditions and ways to increase its combat readiness. The Tibet MC has begun focusing on combat-oriented training activities and in high-altitude areas to subscribe to the requirement of realistic combat situations. One of the reasons is that the WTC wants the troops in the theatre to adapt to the local conditions. Therefore, the Tibet MC has been venturing more into harsh terrain conditions to focus on physical training such as mountain climbing, desert raids, high-altitude underwater crossing to enhance the soldier's survival capabilities in extreme environments.¹¹ Moreover, WTC also trains its soldiers to upskill in high-altitude warfare such as long-distance rapid assaults, mountain offence and defence, deep penetration behind enemy lines.¹²

⁹ “Xi Jinping Inspects Western Theatre Command Air Force on the Eve of Army Day” (*Xi Jinping bayi jian jun jie qianxi shicha xibu zhangqu kongjun*), *Xuexi Qiangguo*, 30 July 2023, at https://www.bjzx.gov.cn/ztzl/ztxx/xxxjptzjtj/zyls/202308/t20230807_45373.html (Accessed 8 October 2025).

¹⁰ “All Military Units Earnestly Study and Implement the Spirit of President Xi Jinping's Important Speech Delivered During His Inspection of the Western Theatre Command Air Force” (*Quan jun budui renzhen xuexi guanche Xi Jinping zhubu xi shicha xibu zhangqu kongjun shi de zhongyao jianghua jingshen*), *Xinhua*, 1 August 2023, at <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/2023/08/01/ART1690852914635140.shtml> (Accessed 3 December 2025).

¹¹ Mi Jiujiang, Li Guotao and Ma Jing, “A Documentary Account of Tibet MC Forces Conducting Military Physical Training Closely Aligned with Actual Combat Requirements” (*Xizang junqu budui jin tie shizhan xuqiu tiyu xunlian jishi*), *PLA Daily*, 10 January 2026, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/jt_214059/16436697.html (Accessed 8 February 2026).

¹² Mi Jiujiang and others, *ibid.*

In the overall military training, science and technology innovation as a factor is becoming significant. Because the national science and technology innovation is accelerating, the CPC has instructed the PLA to gain advantage in emerging technologies and contribute to ‘new-quality combat’ capabilities.

As the Chinese military pushes for an increase in ‘new-quality combat capability’ due to the importance of strategic capabilities in emerging fields being part of national modernisation objectives, the PLA is tasked to also contribute to the development of military power using strategic capabilities. The prevalence of unmanned combat systems, AI and other information systems contribute to these new quality combat capabilities. Therefore, the commander of the PLA WTC, Wang Haijiang has echoed these sentiments that the PLA has to integrate these new quality combat capabilities into joint operations systems, which would mean relying on a network-centric information system.¹³ Therefore, electronic warfare, unmanned systems, cyber warfare, and aerospace become very important to the new quality combat capability.

CHALLENGES IN THE WTC

There are however challenges that the WTC is facing while it is aligning to the requirements of the New Era. It has attempted to intensify its military training and combat preparedness in peacetime. One of the major issues in theatre command, especially in the WTC is the “peace sickness”. In the Chinese view, it refers to a diminished sense of vigilance and wishful thinking that peace after decades of economic development and ignore the task of studying, identifying and analysing the adversary.¹⁴

¹³ Wang Haijiang, “Shouldering the Mission and Responsibility of Comprehensively Enhancing Strategic Capabilities in Emerging Fields” (*Kang qi quanmian tisheng xinxing lingyun zhanlue nengli de shiming dandang*), *Study Times*, 22 April 2025, at www.rmlt.com.cn/2024/0422/700822.shtml (Accessed 3 December 2025).

¹⁴ Chen Yongyi and Liu Yuanyuan, “Peace Sickness” Also Requires a Cure for the Mind” (*Heping bing yi xu yao yi*), *PLA Daily*, 16 July 2019, at https://www.qstheory.cn/defense/2019-07/16/c_1124760540.htm (Accessed 8 October 2025).

In addition, the WTC at times face isolating environment, where the military personnel might eventually would lose vigilance or develop an understanding that only high-tech weapons are sufficient in winning wars without considering the human factor.¹⁵ The theatre command often conducts innovative training and lectures to energise the military personnel in these units.

The military reforms has enabled the WTC to training schedules and patterns at random patterns not at fixed time slots, especially night-time training. The WTC particularly has attempted to overcome the peace-time disease, where the officers and soldiers who believe that war might not occur leading to peace-induced complacency and therefore affecting the ability to train for fighting and winning wars.¹⁶ For instance, this mind-set may lead to lack of enthusiasm for training in conditions, which are hazardous or dangerous, or absence of authenticity in training drills and high-risk scenarios in adversarial exercises.¹⁷

Earlier the training assessment relied on prior outlines and detailed scoring criteria. However, to avoid officers and soldiers relying on studying the rules and passing the test and measure the actual combat capability of the unit, the WTC Air Force carried out training assessment, where they incorporated spontaneous and unexpected contingencies in the form of emergency manoeuvres, unsupported logistical operations and comprehensive defence measures were added. This is to train the officers and soldier to adapt to realistic scenarios where the adversaries might use surprise tactics and methods.

¹⁵ Wang Haoyu, Zhang Leifeng, and Deng Dongzhi, "A Brigade of the Western Theater Command Air Force Explores a Three-In-One Integrated Training Model" (*Xibu zhanqu kongjun mou lu tansuo san ge yiti liandong shi jiao moshi*), *PLA Daily*, 19 March 2025, at <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/xbzq/16375775.html> (Accessed 4 December 2025).

¹⁶ Li Shaowei, "We Must Neve Prepare for War with a Mindset that War Will Not Occur" (*Jue buneng yi bu daxiang xintai zuo daxiang zhunbei*), *PLA Daily*, 16 July 2025, at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0716/c1011-40522916.html>

¹⁷ Li Shaowei, *ibid.*

IMPACT ON THE INDIAN THEATRE

The modernisation in the WTC has a profound impact on the Indian theatre. It is evident that the WTC combat-oriented training measures are designed to deny the Indian military any advantage over them. Despite the Chinese perspective that the Indian military has inferior weaponry, supply chain, and logistics, the training and reforms of the WTC officers and soldiers have also revealed an increased vigilance towards the Indian theatre. The air dominance present in the Indian theatre has led the PLA WTC to strengthen its air defence and reconnaissance capabilities. Moreover, the WTC is receiving more J-20 stealth fighters.

The PLA WTC views the Indian theatre in many ways. India's push towards modernising its infrastructure, the deployment of its military assets, its long-term military ambitions are considered within the WTC. There is an undergoing effort to examine the actual capability of the Indian military and hold its advertisement to scrutiny. This assessment was crucial for China as it would impact their responses to Indian military development and assess the technological capability of the armed forces. Much of the Indian discourse tends to focus on whether China would carry out pre-emptive strike on the Indian military installations and whether India would be able to defence against offensive or a pre-emptive strike from China. The WTC due to the requirements compel China to address the capabilities and combat preparedness based on the adversaries strengths and weaknesses, it tends to focus on whether India can react to an military attack, on how fast it can react, what are the measures against China that India would want to use and the ability of the Indian forces to sustain a war with China.

The WTC's operational requirements are unique to India. The joint training and integrated operations in the WTC has been specifically focused on air dominance and protection of China's airspace and acquiring reconnaissance and early-warning capabilities. Despite harsh conditions, the training and military exercises have shown preference towards testing weapons in complex conditions to assess its performance. It is evident that the WTC wants to find out whether their weaponry can perform in high-stress conditions. The extreme

weather patterns can hamper operations and performance of the weapons and equipment. Therefore, the operational planning and tactics in the last few years test and hone the ability of the personnel and weapons in complex environment. Clearly, in the Indian theatre, high-altitude conditions remains an important challenge for the PLA WTC. The impact on the Indian theatre would depend on how far the WTC is able to test and train in these conditions until it becomes routine operations and able to leverage that into operational readiness.

CONCLUSION

The debates around the projection and use of military power seem to revolve around the way the Chinese leadership's might use it and its willingness to do so. The WTC's operational preparedness in few years seem to be reducing the vulnerabilities of the PLA in the Indian theatre. The developments in the WTC show a considerable focus to localise the training and prove whether the equipment and weaponry can perform in training grounds. The WTC has various challenges ranging from responding to terrorist threats and non-traditional operations near the Af-Pak region and Central Asia and conventional threats near the India-China borders.

The WTC therefore has wider and different type of threat perceptions. It faces a strategic direction that has both traditional and non-traditional threats. The non-traditional threats have largely been suppressed. The Western Region Development Strategy alongside strengthened security relationships with the neighbouring countries, China has managed to reduce the threat vulnerabilities near its borders.

In case of strengthening its conventional capabilities, the WTC has been focusing on joint and integrated training. The WTC Air Force, Army, Rocket Forces and other units such as Rocket Force, reconnaissance units, air defence units, and electronic units are exercising jointly to improve their coordination and shared use of resources and capabilities. In addition, WTC is also testing equipment in harsh conditions and conducting exercises at night-time. Other capabilities such as radar, emergency responses and other support units are contributing to the exercises.

Overall, the WTC has been to attain 'jointness' in terms of air defence capabilities. It would also increase its training and military exercises as the CMC pushes for more system-wide combat training. In addition to it, strategic technologies in emerging domains would play a role in WTC. There is no question that harsh and complex conditions would lead the WTC to utilise new quality combat forces more than before.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING CHINESE MILITARY POWER UNDER NEW CHALLENGES

The political context of the 'New Era' defines the Chinese military power. In the New Era, the CPC wanted to achieve national rejuvenation. Xi stated that it was the China Dream. There are several factors which influence the employment of Chinese military power. The New Era represents an opportunity. It is an opportunity to achieve complete modernisation. Without complete modernisation, China would still be reliant on the West for technology, dependent on the West-led international order. New Era is an opportunity because it describes an international order in transition. The international order in transition has both advantages and disadvantages for China. China has to fully transition into a consumption-based domestic economy and a high-tech export model. However, the US-led international order has become more hostile to globalisation, thereby pushing China to adopt more self-reliant policies. China is also in an advantageous position as it has developed a considerable industrial base. Therefore, New Era has both opportunities and challenges. China can leverage its industrial base and dominance in the supply chains to further integrate into the globalised economy and further build a technologically advanced economy provided it actively shapes the global order and governance. Therefore, national rejuvenation in the CPC's perception is possible only if it is backed by Chinese military power.

The CPC define the PLA's role in specific ways to achieve national rejuvenation. According to the CPC discourse, if China wants to achieve national rejuvenation, it would require all organs of the state to work towards national modernisation, including the national defence and armed forces. The national rejuvenation requires China to integrate more in a globalised world, engage more with technologically advanced countries and collaborate in science and technology to push its domestic

industrial base up the industrial value chain. It leads to both external and internal challenges. The Chinese military power is to prevent both internal and external challenges from affecting China's ability to reach the China Dream. Internally, the PLA's fundamental goal is to secure the Party's rule and the socialist system. Externally, it has to deter, and if deterrence fails, fight and win against adversaries who seek to disrupt its developmental trajectory.

The PLA's military reforms had started under the assumption that it was not ready to fight a war if the CPC required it to do so. The motivation behind the military reforms and the construction of military power is that the fate of national modernisation hinges on the PLA's willingness and ability to fight China's adversaries. Economic development requires a military guarantee, and the armed forces become China's organisational strength. Under the assumption that the CPC faces a hostile security environment, the military reforms reorganised, restructured and reformed the PLA to become a war-fighting army.

The requirements for winning the war against an adversary such as the US mean developing a technologically superior force structure. In earlier reforms, China saw technology as a way to leapfrog advancements. However, ever since China made science and technology innovation a national priority, Xi Jinping has made technological innovation the foundation of combat capability. At first, the military reforms removed structural barriers to developing a joint operational command and capabilities. In addition, comprehensive reforms were meant to improve combat capability and war preparedness.

The restructured strategic and operational institutions consolidated the CPC's oversight and control over the armed forces. It reduced the PLA Army's overwhelming role in operational planning and eased the PLA towards joint operational command. The comprehensive reforms at all levels of the PLA focused on combat capability and the ways to achieve it. At every variable that contributes to combat capability, the CPC has modernised and supported the development. For instance, talent cultivation, technological innovation, military training, and grassroots construction all lead to combat capability. Therefore, the CPC made the development of such factors a necessary step towards combat capability.

The guideline 'strengthening the military through reforms' has succeeded in many ways. The objectives of the military reforms have led to the PLA becoming a truly joint force structure that prioritises joint warfare and joint training. The military training and exercises reflect changes over the past decade. The combatant units are incorporating new equipment and new operational concepts. Military academies and institutions further support joint integrated training and warfare through talent cultivation, research and scientific collaboration. The Group Armies are training as frontline troops and adding 'new-type quality' capabilities such as unmanned systems, AI and information systems.

The theatre commands, on the other hand, are focusing on joint operational command and combat training. They are involved in cross-regional and cross-service training and command duties. However, the acceleration of emerging technologies has forced the PLA to adapt. Earlier, the PLA emphasised jointness and training. But now the Chinese leadership has placed the national defence construction within the national modernisation and has stated that strategic capabilities in emerging domains are important for an advanced army.

The PLA's challenge in a rapidly evolving technological environment is the rate of adaptation. The acceleration of advanced technologies such as unmanned systems, information systems and AI has put further stress on the combatant units to adapt and train with these new systems. In addition, it has created a shortage of high-quality talent who are proficient in handling sophisticated weapons within a unit such as unmanned assets. The PLA can conduct exercises and training drills at a system-wide level and carry out cross-service integration and training. However, challenges have become more complex. As the technologies rapidly evolve, the CPC has made the transition from a linear model of mechanisation-informationalisation-intelligentisation towards the integrated development of all three. It highlights a shortened timeline for the PLA to integrate and joint train with various kinds of new weapons and equipment, and align its training to the requirements of fighting an information/intelligent warfare in the future. These new challenges on the one hand has revealed the insufficient 'human' factor in the PLA. In other words, technological superiority without highly-trained military personnel cannot lead to combat capability.

SYSTEM-TO-SYSTEM CONFRONTATION AND THE IDEA OF 'MINDSET'

The war in Ukraine and Iran has led to a new understanding within the PLA. Even though technological capabilities of the troops are paramount, the recent battlefield experiences has brought to attention the strategy of attrition in military conflict. Initially, the PLA often discussed a quick and limited war. However, after the new security changes in its environment, achieving the political objectives within a time frame has become difficult. For instance, the PLA believes that retaining air dominance of the adversaries' air space is an important lesson. Without air dominance, it would be difficult to retain an advantage early in the conflict. Moreover, industrial capacity is crucial to sustain the war efforts.

In the Chinese view, even though Russia has taken considerable losses in sanctions and loss of men and material, it has managed to achieve its political objectives of limiting NATO expansion. Russia has also been able to gain territory after the war and has improved its strategic security near its periphery. However, the important question for China is the ability of the state to withstand the cost of war. In China's case, the CPC hopes for a peaceful reunification. However, the magnitude of the Chinese military reforms highlights that it does not believe that reunification of Taiwan would be peaceful.

Given that the party education campaigns in the military have focused on fighting spirit and red spirit, at least from the Chinese leadership, there is a belief that complacency is an issue in the Chinese armed forces. China's response to it has been the national integration of civilian and military resources. The CPC believes that the integration of development and security goals is unavoidable. Understanding that war in the case of a potential conflict over Taiwan would have a significant impact on its social, political, and economic and trade sectors, the Chinese leadership hopes that the deep integration of civilian and military sectors in China would help it withstand the cost of the conflict. If civilian and military sectors integrate, the military organisations are able to share resources in the civilian sectors, and the civilian sectors benefit in terms of economic profit by cooperating. By tightly integrating the civilian and military sectors at all levels, the Chinese leadership believe

that it can energise a systemic response to a potential conflict and widen the risk perimeters. This allows the Chinese society and internal system to absorb the shock of war or conflict in a more sustained manner.

Overall, the Chinese leadership believes that mindset is important. Both conflicts in Ukraine and Iran show that the mindset during the course of the war has an impact on the sustainability of the armed forces and the society to continue the war. The CPC has intensified the political education campaigns to cultivate talents who believe in its vision. However, the biggest impediment to it has been the corruption in the military. Due to the formation of 'factions' and corruption within the PLA, talent cultivation has been affected. Despite the reforms, military governance remains an issue within the PLA. Even though the discipline committees have investigated various forms of corruption, the continued military purges highlight the persistence of these problems. Moreover, the PLA has not fully rooted out such issues at the grassroots level units. The severity of the corruption investigation and its reach indicate that the CPC intends to treat it with utmost seriousness.

Despite these challenges, the construction of the Chinese military power is progressing rapidly. Given the continued national modernisation, and the integration of national defence within it, the Chinese military would deepen its construction. As China's economic power grows, the military capabilities would follow suit.

The monograph aims to bring Chinese perspectives and debates to the analyses of military reform. It explores and analyses the way China has shaped its military power, to counter challenges to the great rejuvenation, and the drivers and motivations behind the implementation of military reforms. China's association with military power and its relation to world-class military in the New Era are driven by its worldview and security perceptions. Therefore, the monograph elucidates the political framework for military reforms as it would help identify under what circumstances that military power would be utilised. Finally, it looks at the challenges that China is facing when building its military power and the implications for India.

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