



### IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PLA'S WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND

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The Western Theatre Command (WTC) is the largest of China's five Theatre Commands and exercises operational jurisdiction over the country's currently 'active' borders with India and Afghanistan. Particularly since the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s military manoeuvre against India in early May 2020, which caught the Indian armed forces by surprise, and consequent onset of military tension along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Chinese leadership has been paying special attention to the Western Theatre Command (WTC). It has raised its inter-se grading among Theatre Commands and brought the WTC on par with the Eastern Theatre Command, which is ranked first, in terms of priority for receiving new aircraft and weaponry. Other visible indicators of the leadership's attention are the high-level visits; postings of new officers to the Western Theatre Command; the enhanced and qualitatively different exercises by PLA forces deployed in the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Regions subordinate to the Western Theatre Command; and the new, modern equipment that is now being supplied to them.

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Since the middle of last year, there have been changes at the higher echelons of the WTC. In addition to the appointment of a new Commander of the WTC on September 6, 2021, the WTC also witnessed the arrival and appointments of other senior officers. The recent rapid changes in WTC Commanders has, however, raised questions particularly since China's military leadership would normally be expected to select a competent, experienced officer to head such an important Command -- whose operational

jurisdiction includes active borders -- for a full tenure. Instead, the WTC has witnessed the change-over of three Commanders within a year.

General Zhao Zongqi (DoB: 1955) was replaced as he had reached retirement age. In fact he was retained for some months beyond retirement before his replacement, Zhang Xudong, was posted. General Zhang Xudong (DoB: 1962) took over on promotion from Zhao Zongqi in December 2020. Though only 59 years old, he developed health issues because of which he had to be moved. He was replaced in June 2021 by Xu Qiling (DoB: 1962), who was till then WTC Deputy Commander and Commander of the Army (Ground Forces) in the rank of Lt General from June 2020 till June 2021. Xu Qiling was promoted to General when he took over as Commander, WTC from General Zhang Xudong in June 2021. General Xu Qiling is just 3 months younger than General Zhang Xudong. Given his outstanding career record, it is anticipated that Xu Qiling may be appointed Chief of the PLA Ground Forces or to head the CMC Joint Staff Department. On September 6, 2021, Lt General Wang Haijiang was promoted to the rank of General and appointed Commander of the WTC.

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Another new appointment of interest in the WTC is that of PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Lt. General Qiao Xiangji as a new, or additional, Deputy Commander of the PLA WTC in April 2020. News of Qiao Xiangji's appointment was confirmed on June 27, 2021. It is not yet clear whether he will take over from the current Commander of the WTC Air Force Lt General Wang Qiang, or whether he brings in additional expertise. His appointment could also suggest that the WTC's air assets have increased. Reports indicate that the number of China's latest 5th generation 'stealth' J-20 fighters, J-16, the upgraded J-16 D and other aircraft including drones in the WTC have increased.

Qiao Xiangji was born in February 1963 in Hebei Province and joined the PLAAF in July 1979. He has trained as a pilot. Qiao Xiangji received training in the Battle Command Class of the Air Force Command Academy of the PLA and attended the Advanced Training Class of the Military Academy of the Russian Air Force. In 2011, he was conferred the award of 'Model Division Commander' by the PLA Air Force. He was also Division Commander of the 30th Aviation Division. In December 2013, he was appointed Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the PLA Air Force. In December 2014, he was appointed Commander of the Air Force Fuzhou Command Post. Qiao Xiangji was promoted to the rank of PLAAF Lieutenant General in April 2020.

Lt General Wang Qiang, who is the current Commander of the WTC Air Force and concurrently a Deputy Commander of the Western Theatre Command, was born in Rongxian County, Sichuan, also in 1963. Lt General Wang Qiang served as Deputy Chief

of Staff of the Western Theatre Command and Chief of Staff of the WTC Air Force before being appointed Deputy Commander of the WTC and Commander of the WTC PLAAF in April 2020.

Interesting too is the promotion and appointment of Lt. Gen. Liu Lin as Commander of Xinjiang MR. Liu Lin was, till his promotion, Major General and Commander of the South Xinjiang Military District which includes operational supervision of the Hetian and Ngari (Ali) MSDs. He represented the PLA at 12 rounds of Army Commander-level border talks held at the PLA Moldo Garrison near Chushul. Liu Lin has extensive service in the Xinjiang MR and familiarity with this sector of the border.

Relevant too is the ‘special’ meeting that Xi Jinping, who combines the offices of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Commander-in-Chief of the PLA and Chinese President, had with PLA officers in Lhasa on July 23, 2021. Xi Jinping complimented the military officers for bravely facing the harsh conditions, their good defence of the borders and asked them to “prepare for future wars”. A short video clip of the meeting telecast by the state-owned CCTV’s military channel showed that nearly 400 PLA and PLAAF officers attended the meeting. All were of the rank of Colonel and above indicating that it was a restricted meeting. The designations of officers identified seated in the conference hall is interesting. Seated in the front row with Xi Jinping were: General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of the CMC; General Ju Qiansheng, who had just that month been promoted and appointed Commander of the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF); General Xu Qiling, then Commander of the Western Theatre Command; Lt General Wang Kai, Commander of the Tibet Military Region; Lt General Zhong Shaojun, Director of the CMC General Office; and Lt General Zhang Xuejie, Political Commissar of the Tibet Military Region. The presence of the Commander of the SSF is significant as, among its other roles like combat support, it is the space-, cyber-, and electronic-warfare force of the PLA. The presence of the senior officers of the Tibet Military Region may suggest plans to activate other sections along the LAC. No officers from the Xinjiang Military Region could be identified.

Underscoring Xi Jinping’s attention to the WTC, the CCP-owned Global Times on September 13, publicised that Xi Jinping had written a letter to a Battalion (Unit No: 77656) stationed in the border region of Tibet “at the northern foot of the Himalayas”. The letter complimented them for guarding the “sacred territory of the motherland with youth and blood” and accomplishing their mission “brilliantly”. The letter is obviously intended to encourage PLA personnel deployed in harsh conditions at high-altitudes and is confirmation that close attention is being paid to this border.

A number of Politburo members and senior CCP cadres have also visited the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) this year. Many of them visited Ngari (Ali), Shigatse (opposite

Yadong) and Nyingchi (opposite Arunachal Pradesh). Central and TAR public security, propaganda and united front teams have visited the TAR border counties. They all emphasised loyalty to the Party, “eliminating the 14th Dalai Lama’s influence” and border defence.

In addition to the approval of major defence and dual-use infrastructure projects in the ‘14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives 2030’, there has been a steady stream of reports of enhancement of defence infrastructure, induction of new aircraft, and equipment for troops, in the WTC. Apart from the ‘combat support exercise’ using “unfamiliar” airfields

conducted by the WTC Air Force in June-July 2021, the WTC has been noticed holding a number of military exercises at the Battalion level and above.

A total of 108 military exercises were noticed to have been conducted in the WTC between May 2019 to May 2020. Among them 31 military exercises were conducted in the Tibet Military Region (MR); 36 in the Xinjiang MR, and 24 military exercises by the PLA 76th Group Army, 9 by the PLA 77th Group Army, and 8 military exercises were conducted by unidentified Military Regions/districts of the WTC.

A total of 93 major exercises were conducted between June 2020 and June 2021. Of them, 53 military exercises were conducted in the Tibet MR and 22 in the Xinjiang MR, and 18 military exercises were conducted by unidentified Military Regions/districts of the WTC.

It is noticed that there has been a sharp increase in military exercises in the Tibet Military Region i.e. from 31 in May 2019-May 2020 to 53 in June 2020-June 2021. A reason for the reduced number of military exercises in the Xinjiang MR in the period June 2020-June 2021 would have been because of the military activity and volatile situation at the LAC after May 2020. The sharp and sudden increase in exercises in the Tibet MR between June 2020-June 2021, when viewed with the military deployments along the LAC and activities of the TAR authorities in the border counties, could suggest that the PLA is readying to ‘activate’ other sectors along the LAC in addition to Ladakh.

In this backdrop, the promotion and appointment of Wang Haijiang as WTC Commander is significant. Wang Haijiang is thoroughly familiar with the region and topography of the India-China LAC having served 22 years in the South Xinjiang Military District (overseeing the Hetian and Ngari (Ali) Military Sub Districts (MSDs) which includes the Depsang Plains, Pangong, Demchok and Chumar areas) and the Tibet Military Region. He is a veteran of the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War. His taking over as WTC Commander will facilitate any plans for military activity along the LAC.

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Xi Jinping's visit to Tibet and meeting with PLA officers at this time are significant. He has reinforced his message with the letter to a Battalion posted in Tibet. Separately, the CCP's official People's Daily on September 16, reproduced a speech delivered by Xi Jinping last year, where he, inter alia, stated that "China has not yet achieved the complete reunification of the motherland, and has disputes over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests with many neighboring countries. Solving these problems is a hurdle we must cross, and it is also a major risk and challenge that we must correctly handle ... . The motherland must be unified. We must do our utmost to strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification, but we will not promise to give up the use of force... ." It is interesting that this speech has been published at a time when China faces an increasingly adverse international environment.

Far from any signs de-escalation by the Chinese, when seen in the context of the continuing build-up against India on the LAC, these developments in the WTC give cause for considerable discomfort. (Appendix provides additional details.)

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## Appendix

### **Brief profile of WTC Commander General Wang Haijiang:**

Wang Haijiang was born in July 1963 in Anyue, Sichuan and has over 22 years of continuous experience in the erstwhile Lanzhou and Chengdu (Tibet) Military Regions. He is possibly the most qualified PLA officer at that level to serve as WTC Commander at this time. It is likely that the Central Military Commission had decided to promote Wang Haijiang earlier, but may have decided to wait till after Xu Qiling, initially as WTC Army Commander and later as WTC Commander, had brought about certain changes in the WTC.

Wang Haijiang is a deputy to the 13th National People's Congress. He was one of the first batch of students to enter the military academy after the national college entrance examination resumed in 1977. Early on in service he participated in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 and served as Company Commander of the main attack company, earning First-Class Merit. He has served as Secretary (mishu) of General Li Qianyuan, former Commander of the Lanzhou Military Region. In January 2013, he was appointed Deputy Commander of the South Xinjiang Military District. In 2016, he was appointed Deputy Commander of the Tibet Military Region and on February 24, 2018, he was elected as a representative to the 13th National People's Congress. In December 2019, he was appointed Commander of the Tibet Military Region and in March 2021, was transferred as Commander of the Xinjiang Military Region. On September 6, 2021, he was promoted to the rank of General and appointed Commander of the WTC. Having joined the PLA at the early age of 17, he is among the very few PLA officers with 40 years of experience in the PLA.

Wang Haijiang was promoted to the rank of Major General in December 2013. In December 2019, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and in September 2021, was promoted to the rank of General.

When Wang Haijiang was posted as Commander of the Xinjiang MR, Zhou Chenming, a Beijing-based Chinese military analyst said Wang Haijiang was equipped to take on the difficult Xinjiang role given his experiences, including as former Commander of elite Units of the PLA. "The 61st Division is one of the three top units, they are all heavily armed and they are used as models for the other troops in the PLA to learn from."

### **Major Accomplishments**

In 2017, Wang Haijiang spent 10 months on the border defense line at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters, and led the officers and soldiers in building the Panshan Highway under extreme weather conditions. He also contributed to the construction of the border well for a village. Wang Haijiang was commended by the PLA Daily for his contributions.

On June 15, 2020, the Tibet Military Region under Wang Haijiang's command established the first-of-its-kind 'Snow Mastiff Plateau Resistance Team'. This militia team comprised the 20 best fighters from China's top fighting club. At the inauguration ceremony, he praised the Militia Team and said the fighters who have come from the ring to border defense will contribute to the construction of border defense with practical actions. This Militia Team is to assist the border defense Regiment and the Special Force Brigade in combat training.

### **Awards**

Wang Haijiang was awarded a 'first-class combat award' when he served as the Commander of the main attacking company in border Operations.

'Plateau Warriors', the official WeChat public account of the Tibet Military Region, on January 15, 2020, reported that the Tibet Military Region held the first award ceremony of the "Top Ten Models for Strengthening Frontiers and Stabilizing Tibet". TAR Party Secretary and First Secretary of the Party Committee of the Tibet Military Region Wu Yingjie, attended the award ceremony and presented awards to the 'pace-setters' together with the Commander of the Military Region, Wang Haijiang.

### **Brief Profile of General Xu Qiling**

General Xu Qiling was born in 1962 and is a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Xu Qiling was one of the first officers to be appointed Commander of a Group Army after the Group Armies were restructured and reorganised. Xu Qiling was appointed Commander of the WTC Army barely a few days prior to the deadly conflict between China and India in the Galwan Valley where soldiers on both sides were killed. He was promoted as China and India prepared for the 12th round of military commander-level talks.

Like Zhang Xudong, Xu Qiling was promoted from the rank of Lt. General in December 2019, to PLA General in June 2021 after one and a half years, which is a 'fast track' promotion in the PLA. At the time of his promotion, Xu Qiling was one of the youngest Generals in the PLA.

Xu Qiling is one of the few PLA Commanders who has served in four Theatre Commands (except the Southern Theatre Command). He has a reputation in the PLA for emphasising 'combat preparedness' and for 'on site supervision' during training. Chinese military experts have suggested that Xu Qiling's youth and focus on military preparedness in the WTC might have appealed to the CMC leadership in the context of handling the border dispute with India.

During his tenure as WTC Army Commander and later as WTC Commander, Xu Qiling introduced many changes in training in the WTC, amenities for troops, and upgraded its inventory of air assets and equipment.

## **MILITARY EXERCISES IN WTC (May 2020 – June 2021)**

A total of 93 major military exercises were noticed to have been conducted in the WTC between May 2020 and June 2021. Of them, 53 military exercises were conducted in the Tibet MR, 22 in the Xinjiang MR, and 18 in unidentified MR/MD of the WTC.

### **The Military Exercises conducted in the WTC between May 2020- June 2021 were varied and covered different fields such as:**

Psychological Behaviour Training; Alpine Snow Mountain Training; Helicopter Rescue of border guards; Comprehensive support practice drill; large scale formation Parachute training; Live ammunition training for air defense capabilities; long range airborne training at night; military training at border radar station; coordinated strike drills; long range maneuver training; test of rapid strike capability; cable descent training; heavy equipment air drop; anti-hijacking drill; female soldier field trekking training; border defense drone pilot training; assassinations' exercise; and mass training led by political leaders (Political Commissars).

### **Some illustrative major activities/changes made in the WTC between May 2020 and June 2021**

Innovative Training Model implemented in May 2020; Poverty Alleviation Working Group was set up in May 2020; TMR builds mass education platform on May 21, 2020; Major General Tao Dapeng was appointed Director of Political Work Department of the WTC AF on August 16, 2020; NDU conducts Border Defense practical training activities in Tibet MR on August 25, 2020; tensions at the border area near Pangong Lake on August 31, 2020; incident at the border near Pangong Lake on September 7, 2020; HQ-9 surface to air missile was deployed on September 11; Digitalization of WTC completed on September 17, 2020; Replacement of outdated equipment in the WTC began on September 17, 2020; Frontier Troops in the WTC were given new patrol outfits on September 21, 2020; 10 UAVs allocated to the Tibet MR for the first time for logistics support on October 6, 2020; New recruits arrive in Tibet on October 9, 2020; new insulated cabins developed by PLA deployed to the WTC frontier defense troops stationed in the Plateau on October 9, 2020; WTC War Hymns released on November 5, 2020; Military-Local Cooperation Mechanism set up on November 10, 2020; WTC Recruiting Ceremony was conducted on November 11, 2021; Self Heating pot provided to soldiers stationed at altitudes of 4500m on November 20, 2020; Thousands of tons of food and rations arrived at the border areas in Tibet MR on November 25, 2020; J-16 fighter aircraft deployed in batches in WTC on November 25, 2020; a Dispatch Center in the WTC was set up for military supply network on December 20, 2020; Three female soldiers participated in patrol mission in Tibet MR on January 1, 2021; HQ-16B installed in Tibet MR on January 3, 2021; 5592 Observation Post of the highest PLA garrison in Tibet was publicly disclosed on January 3, 2021; PHL-11 New Modular wheeled rocket launcher inducted in Tibet MR on January 11, 2021; Sky Camouflaged Uniforms provided to frontier department of



Tibet MR on January 18, 2021; brawl at Nakula occurred on January 18, 2021; Border Guard duty station in Medog Tibet MR connected to internet on January 27, 2021; fifth generation 'stealth' jet fighter aircraft J-20 stationed at Hotan Base on February 7, 2021; Off-Grid new energy microgrid power supply for border defense forces at Xinjiang MR reported on February 7, 2021; reported on February 7, 2021 that Border troops stationed at Shenxianwan Post produce fresh vegetables; PLA increases military deployment in Pangong on February 8, 2021; deployment of Type-99A Main Battle Tank at Karakoram Mountain reported on February 9, 2021; PLA adjusts and deployed 200 tanks in a day on February 17, 2021; Tibet MR border posts connected to the state grid improves living conditions of border guards on February 18, 2021; PLA Xinjiang MR operationalises first Type-15 light tank on February 21, 2021; HQ-17A Anti-Aircraft Weapons inducted in WTC in May 2021. Psychological services for soldiers stationed at plateau in Xinjiang MR conducted on May 26, 2021; (Swarajya-September 13, 2021) latest satellite images (from September 2021) show a PLA helicopter base is under construction in Aksai Chin. It is located 130 km away from Galwan Valley.

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### **The Military Exercises conducted in the WTC between May 2019 to May 2020 were varied and covered different fields such as:**

Soldiers running while carrying weights; Air Defense using UAVs; Reconnaissance Training; Transport training in Tibet; Coordinated training; education of border guards; use of information technology to standardise military training; actual combat assessment; regular high altitude training (manoeuvre training); air transport training in inaccessible areas; field training; participation of female soldiers in artillery 'live fire' exercises; tactical drills; battlefield manoeuvre operations; combined brigade 'live fire' exercises; patrolling in plateau areas; military drills with advanced weapons; integrated air-to-air and air-to-ground training; cross-day 'live fire' exercises; 'live fire' flight training exercises; joint anti-terror exercises; 'live fire' shooting training; stationing of troops in Kunlun for 2 months; integrated tactical exercises; communication drills; cross-day high altitude heavy fire power assessments; combat confrontation drills; emergency transport and supply mission; Troops training in plateau for 4 months; night flights; plateau troops first aid skills; plateau combat drills etc.

## **Other Senior Appointments in WTC since June 2019**

- WTC Commander – General Xu Qiling (徐起零) Appointed June 2021
- WTC Pol Com- Lt Gen. Xu Deqing (徐德清) Appointed in June 2018
- WTC Deputy Commander-Lt. Gen. Qiao Xiangji (乔相记) (Appointed in April 2020)
- Deputy Commander of the WTC & Commander of the WTC AF - Lt. General Wang Qiang (王强) (Appointed in April 2020)
- WTC AF Political Commissar- Lt. Gen. Jiang Ping (姜平) (Appointed in January 2019)
- Xinjiang MR Commander- Lt. Gen. Wang Haijiang (Appointed in April 2021)
- Xinjiang MR Commander- Lt Gen. Liu Lin (Appointed on September 6, 2021) replacing Lt. Gen. Wang Haijiang who was promoted to General and appointed Commander WTC.
- Xinjiang MR Pol Com.- Lt. Gen. Yang Cheng (杨诚) (Appointed in December 2020); Xinjiang MR Deputy Commander- Major General Sun Huibing (孙会兵) (Appointed in September 2019)
- Tibet MR Commander- Lt. Gen. Wang Kai (王凯) (Appointed in April 2021)
- Tibet MR Pol Com.- Lt. Gen. Zhang Xuejie (张学杰) (Appointed in May 2018)
- South Xinjiang MR Commander- Maj. Gen. Liu Lin (柳林) (Appointed in March 2019).
- Commanders of Ali MSD- Maj. Gen. Gan Weihang (甘维汉)
- Commander of Lhasa Garrison- Maj. Gen. He Sheng (贺胜) (Appointed in May 2019)
- Commander of Shigatse MSD;-Maj. Gen. Ma Yun (马贇)

## **New Initiatives**

Some new initiatives appear to have been taken following Xu Qiling's appointment as first, the Commander of the WTC Army (Ground Forces) and later as WTC Commander. Illustrative listings are given below.

## **New Recruitments**

China Military Net (Dec. 15) reported that after completing their three-month training on December 12, 2020, 1000 recruits were transported by air to Tibet.

China Military Online (Jan. 14) reported that 30 grassroots cadres and police officers from border cities (counties) in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, passed the 'assessment' for border defense drone pilots on January 12. This border defense drone pilot training, jointly conducted by the PLA Army Academy of Border and Coastal Defense

(Urumqi) and the Border Defense Commission of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, aims to cultivate professional ‘backbones’ capable of drone operation, command, as well as maintenance for the frontier defense forces. The border defense drone training mainly includes four steps, namely, theoretical study, simulation training, actual flight operation, and assessment and certification. The trainees will obtain the national civil drone pilot certificate after passing the final assessment. At least 6 types of advanced drones (UAVs) are deployed in the WTC. The training suggests that drones will be deployed in WTC in larger numbers.

Unconfirmed reports claimed on 18 April 2021, that the PLA is building a Special Tibetan Army. PLA officers from Lhasa visited Rudok town in Ngari/ Ali Prefecture in the far west of TAR in the 3rd week of February to recruit Tibetans as soldiers.

Lt General Wang Haijiang, Commander of Xinjiang Military Region, accompanied the Chairman of TAR People’s Government Che Dalha (Ch: Qi Zhala) for inspecting the borders of Ngari (Ch: Ali) from June 20-21, 2021. Speaking at a Forum held after the inspection, Lt. General Wang Haijiang thanked the TAR Party Committee and TAR People’s Government for their support to the army and infrastructural developments to defend the borders. He assured that the Xinjiang Military Region would implement Xi Jinping’s ‘exposition’ on strengthening the army, shouldering political responsibilities, protecting China-India borders, ensuring its security and stability, and strengthening military to military cooperation.

Xinhua (June 18) disclosed that on June 15, more than 4000 Spring recruits in three camps of the recruits brigades of the Tibet Military Region lined up for their swearing-in ceremony in front of the military flag, and completed the transition from local youth to qualified military personnel.

New incentives are being offered to Tibetan high school and college students to join the PLA. Citing Tibetan sources, Radio Free Asia (RFA-August 11), reported that Tibetan students ages 18-21 are being offered reimbursement of their school fees in exchange for enrolling in a two-year course of military training. According to a recent Chinese government notice sent to students’ phones by text, students in high schools and colleges enrolled in the program may continue their studies after their training has ended. Students already receiving state aid for their schooling are, however, required to enrol. The official notice states that the deadline for enrolment in the program is August 15. A high school student in Tibet told RFA in a written message that “Military training has been a part of our schools’ curriculum in the past, but this is the first time that an official government notice has been sent out to all the schools promoting enrolment in programs of military training.”

## **New Equipment**

More rapid induction of new weapons and equipment in the WTC Army has been apparent after Xu Qiling's appointment.

According to the report issued in June 2018 by the China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI), as of July 28, 2020, China has deployed 36 aircrafts and helicopters at the Hotan Air Base in Xinjiang, including 24 J-11 or J-16 fighters, six J-8 fighters, two Y-8G Transport Aircraft, two KJ-500 Airborne Early Warning Aircraft, 2 Mi-17 helicopters, Rainbow-5 attack/ reconnaissance drones. The Type-15 Tanks were inducted to the Tibet Military Region (MR) in June 2020 and Xinjiang Military Region (MR) in January 2021.

According to the PLA Daily (17 August 2020), two J-20 stealth fighters were seen at the Hotan Air Base. On October 6, 10 UAVs were provided for the first time to the Tibet MR for logistics support.

Dongfang.com (Dec. 13, 2020), reported that a brigade of the PLA Army Aviation Corps of the Tibet Military Region had the new Z-20 helicopter in its inventory.

An official WeChat (December 14) account of the WTC reported that an unidentified brigade of the Tibet Military Region had a certain type of infantry equipment based on the QBZ-191 rifle named as the QBU-88 sniper rifle.

A Chinese media report on December 16, 2020 disclosed that the PLA had deployed a long-range rocket launcher regiment in Xinjiang and Tibet. They have 122mm long-range rocket launchers and the latest Type 05 155mm self-propelled howitzers. The more advanced domestic artillery such as the Type 122 mm self-propelled howitzer, the Type 09 122 mm truck gun, and the 120 mm mortar are available in large quantities with the field troops in the Xinjiang Military Region and Tibet Military Region. The report claimed the deployment of these weapons in 'large quantities gave China an overwhelming advantage over India in terms of firepower'.

China's fifth generation 'stealth' fighter aircraft J-20 have been stationed at the Hotan Base on February 7, 2021.

China Military Online (February 9, 2021) reported that the PLA has deployed its most powerful tank, the Type 99A, in the high-altitude border frontier at the Karakoram Mountain.

China Military Online (February 21, 2021) disclosed that the PLA's Type 15 light-weight tanks were spotted participating in an exercise in a low temperature mountainous plateau region. It said this type of tank has significant advantages over other types of tanks or armoured vehicles in such regions.

Sina.com (July 29, 2021) quoting an article in the 'North Xinjiang Guardian' reported that an artillery battalion of a combined brigade of the PLA 78th Group Army recently held a 'live ammunition' tactical exercise where it displayed the new four-wheel drive 122mm vehicle-mounted howitzer with which the combined brigade is now equipped. It

said that this is the third unit that is known to have been equipped with this new type of vehicle-mounted howitzer after a combined brigade in the Tibet Military Region and a combined regiment in the Xinjiang Military Region.

A Chinese website reported (July 30, 2021) that the border defense forces of the Tibet Military Region have been equipped with many advanced weapons, such as the ‘Red Arrow 12’ anti-tank missile, and a new type of precision shooter rifle.

Reporting on the ‘Western Joint 2021 Exercises’, Sina.com (August 9, 2021) disclosed that the Army Aviation Combat Group in the Western Theatre Command uses helicopters as its main equipment, and uses low-altitude and ultra-low-altitude as the main battlefield to implement three-dimensional, full-depth, and mobile operations. It added that in the days before the upcoming “Western Joint-2021” exercise the WTC Army Aviation Combat Group was trying to improve its low-altitude joint operations capabilities.

### **Combat Exercises & Training**

The frequency of combat exercises is noticed to have increased in the last one year in the WTC Army (Ground Forces) and particularly in the Xinjiang MR. The rapid changes in the training mode in the WTC appear to not only be to strengthen combat preparedness but, through frequent live-fire combined exercises and the use of AI-based technology, to create a strong deterrence force against India and in the Himalayan region. Illustrative examples are listed below:

SCMP (January 6, 2020) quoting the state media reported that the People Liberation Army (PLA) has begun a major military exercise in the high-altitude border areas of Tibet, deploying latest weapons including a new lightweight tank and anti-aircraft missiles to check combat readiness of its troops and the efficiency of its weaponry.

China’s state-run broadcaster CCTV reported on June 3, 2020 that a PLA scout unit had in ‘recent days’ mobilised towards a target in the Tanggula Mountains at an altitude of 4,700 metres (15,420 feet) using night vision devices on their vehicles to avoid drone surveillance from the “enemy side”.

On December 15, 2020, the China News Service reported that officers and soldiers of a brigade (unidentified) of the Tibet Military Region carried out practical and tactical drills in an “unfamiliar” area with an altitude of more than 4,700 meters in the cold winter plateau to improve their response to diverse battlefield environments.

The China News Network on June 4, 2021 disclosed that 24 representatives of the Tibet Military Region, 1028 officers and soldiers gathered at a comprehensive training base at an altitude of more than 3,700 meters to participate in the “Top of the Snow 2021” record-breaking “mass training event”.



## **Female Soldiers - Exercises & Trainings**

Female soldiers have also for the first time been reported participating in military exercises on the Tibetan Plateau. China News Service (January 29, 2021) reported that an Army Aviation brigade of the Tibet Military Region organized more than 200 officers along with 18 female soldiers and other soldiers to carry 30 kilograms of luggage on a 40-kilometer winter trekking exercise.

In July 2021, 'live ammunition' training was conducted for a women's artillery squad at an altitude of 4,600 m in "southern Tibet".

A brigade of the Xinjiang Military Region stationed on a snow-covered plateau at an altitude of 4,500 meters was reported on May 30, to have conducted highland exercises with three "special" female soldiers in a brigade heavy firearms training team. It said the three "special" female soldiers are all about 1.6 meters tall and weigh more than 50 kilograms.

## **New Facilities provided for the soldiers at Plateau**

China News Service (January 27, 2021) reported that a border defense regiment in the Tibet Military Region, on duty in the Medog No Man's Land at an altitude of more than 3,900 meters, has recently been connected to the internet.

In March 2021, new equipment was distributed to individual soldiers of the Xinjiang Military Region plateau garrison troops including camouflage tactical vest, assault backpack and life backpack.

China Military Online (February 5, 2021) disclosed that the first batch of military identification tags developed by the Logistics Support Department of the CMC were distributed to plateau field training units assigned to the PLA's Xinjiang Military Command for trial use. It described the move as of great significance in building systematic operational support capabilities based on an information system, as well as promoting battlefield logistics and medical support. The military identification tag is an intelligent carrier that records basic personal and medtag information, which could be used for identity authentication, treatment of the wounded, identification of remains and wartime support.

China Military Online (February 7, 2021) reported that the Shenxianwan border defense company, located at an elevation of over 5,000 meters, was finding it extremely difficult to meet the troops' demands for fresh vegetables in a stable manner. It stated that the PLA Xinjiang Military Command has now introduced advanced biological and opto-electronics technologies, and made use of intelligent computers and electronic sensing systems to monitor and manage the environmental factors, such as temperatures for vegetable plant growth, humidity levels and light intelligently.

China Military Online (February 19, 2021) -- The Kunmujia sentry post located at an elevation of 4,960m in the middle of the no-man zone in the westernmost end of

the Tibet Military Command, faces an annual average temperature of 5°C, -37°C at the lowest, and a 5-month-long period of snow when there is no access at all. The sentry post is now covered by the national power grid. Electric blankets and the other electric appliances, such as the humidifier, shoe dryer, radiator, and water heater, now help keep the soldiers warm and comfortable.

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