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China's New Commission for Enhancing Civil-Military Integration

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The ongoing PLA reform recently witnessed the establishment of a new central commission for civilian-military development. The reform process has led to the dissolution of the four general departments and the establishment of fifteen functional units; divided into seven departments, three commissions and five affiliated offices. The newly formed commission for joint civilian-military development – or broadly known as Science and technology commission – is one of the three commissions established in order to promote innovations and self-reliance through the technological integration of civil and military sectors. President Xi Jinping, who is the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, would be heading this newly formed commission which would oversee joint military and civilian development, with an eye to facilitate and speed up the pace of China's military modernisation. According to the official statement released, "the commission will be the central agency tasked with decision-making, deliberation and coordination of major issues

regarding integrated military and civilian development".¹ Thus, it can be said that the new commission is intended to further accelerate China's Civil-Military Integration (CMI) process.

CMI can be defined as a process of combining the defence and civilian industrial bases so that common technologies, manufacturing processes and equipment, personnel, and facilities can be used to meet both defence and commercial needs. CMI is not a new concept for the Chinese since a number of important elements of Mao's defence policies were centred on taking advantage of mutual contributions by the civilian and defence sectors.² The concept of *Yujun Yumin*, which meant locating military potential in civilian capabilities, was coined in the mid-1950s. It referred most directly to the forging of an integrated civil-military dual-use system, especially the establishment of a civilian apparatus that has the technological and industrial capabilities to meet the needs of the



military and defence economy.³ Since the start of the reform era, Deng Xiaoping and his successors have implemented initiatives that sought to improve various aspects of operations in the PLA by forging closer ties between military and civilian systems. Deng's CMI policies, encapsulated by the slogan "combining the military and civilian sector", emphasised encouraging China's defence industries to produce goods for the civilian market, as the government wanted to encourage the development of dual-use technologies and maintain defence industry capacities in an era of relative peace post normalisation and the end of the Cold War.⁴

There existed a host of strategic, economic, political and military compulsions that forced Deng and his successor Jiang Zemin to so enthusiastically promote spin-off and spin-on initiatives to assist in realigning the relationship between the civilian and military economies. Therefore, we find the continuation of harnessing the strengths of the civilian economy since it is an important mechanism for China to promote self-reliance and mitigate its dependence on foreign sources, especially for critical technologies. Thus, indigenisation becomes a crucial component of Chinese thinking on the relationship between technology, national security, and economic prosperity. This thinking of the Chinese leadership has led to the development and implementation of their dual-use strategy being followed for the last three

decades; when Deng in 1978 put forward the policy of military-to-civilian conversion – known as the "Combine the Military and Civilian Sectors", or *Junmin Jiehe* strategic guidance – which was subsequently adopted as state policy.⁵

There has been a continuous road map laid out towards the development of a robust civilian high technology sector in China which would in turn fuel their defence sector through the CMI process. The more recent China's White Paper on Military Strategy released on May 29, 2015, clearly stated that China would continue to follow the principle of integrating its military with civilian sector in order to strengthen its national defence and enhance the combativeness of its armed forces. China views the intertwining of its civilian science and technology sector with its military as necessary to gain a leading edge over any potential adversary.⁶ Hence, by encouraging joint building and utilisation of military and civilian infrastructure, it is embedding its military into every element of its research and development and, therefore, high technologies that by their very nature are of dual-use are being exploited by the Chinese through its CMI.

China possesses one of the oldest, largest and most diversified military industrial complexes in the developing world with the capability to produce a full range of military equipment, from arms to armoured vehicles to fighter aircraft to warships and submarines, in

addition to nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles. Despite these characteristics of its military industrial complex it is estimated that till today, technologically, China is still 20 years behind the West, in several critical areas, including aeronautics, propulsion (such as jet engines), sensors and seekers, and so on. This lack of technological sophistication is one of the major impediments that China still faces in order to develop a robust and agile modern military. Thus, it is this shortcoming that China seeks to address through the establishment of this new commission as it would basically facilitate the continuation of the CMI process. It must be realised that the establishment of the new commission is not a new undertaking since by looking at history it is found that since the time of Mao, China sought technological advancement by undertaking various transfers – licit as well as illicit – and CMI, without a doubt, falls under the latter. The restructuring of a new commission for civilian and military technological development, aimed at modernising the PLA would be applying the same mechanism of the CMI, but question remains on how successful it would be in closing the existing technological gap.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹“China’s Xi to head new Commission for military-civilian development”, *Reuters*, January 22, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-defence-idUSKBN15706B>, accessed on February 7, 2017.

² “Civil-Military Integration and Chinese Military Modernization”, *Asia-Pacific Security Studies*, Volume 3-Number 9, December 2004, <https://www.princeton.edu/~ota/disk1/1994/9402/9402.PDF>, accessed on April 20, 2016.

³ Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2009), p. 182-183.

⁴Daniel Alderman, Lisa Crawford, Brian Lafferty and Aaron Shraberg, “The Rise of Chinese Civil-Military Integration”, in Tai Ming Cheung (ed), *Forging China’s Military Might: A New Framework for Assessing Innovation*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2014), p. 110-111.

⁵ Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2009), p. 5-7.

⁶“Civil(ian) Military Integration & The Coming Problem for International Law”, *Duck of Minerva*, July 9, 2015, <http://duckofminerva/2015/07/civilian-military-integration-the-coming-problem-for-international-law.html>, accessed on April 1, 2016.