

# PLA REFORMS: POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

In November 2012, Xi Jinping took over as the president of China, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). China was passing through a crucial phase when he came to power. High corruption within the Party, People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the government, slowing down of the economy<sup>1</sup> and waning popularity of the Party had increased his challenges.<sup>2</sup> The Party-PLA relationship had passed through some challenging times in the past, in which the role of the PLA in the Party politics had been a matter of concern for the Chinese leaders. Alleged coup attempts by Mshl Lin Biao to oust Mao in 1971 and later by Gen Yang Shangkun to remove Jiang Zemin indicated a history of the roller-coaster nature of the relationship between the PLA and the Party.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, expansion of China's economic

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1. Robert Daly, "The Mixed Rationales and Mixed Results of Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign", Wilson Centre, May 11, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-mixed-rationales-and-mixed-results-xi-jinpings-anticorruption-campaign>. Accessed on September 30, 2017.
2. Yuxin Zhang, "Why Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign Won't Legitimize the CCP", *The Diplomat*, August 12, 2014, v <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/why-xi-jinpings-anti-corruption-campaign-wont-legitimize-the-ccp/>. Accessed on September 30, 2017.
3. "Three Chinese Leaders: Mao Zedong", Zhhttp://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\_1950\_leaders.htm. Accessed on August 9, 2017.

**Xi initiated two major reforms, which impacted the PLA; these were the anti-corruption drive and the restructuring of the PLA. He launched the anti-corruption campaign in 2012, and restructuring of the military in 2016.**

and diplomatic engagements at the global level had raised its aspirations and the need was felt for reorganising the armed forces to protect its interests beyond mainland China.

Xi proclaimed the “Chinese Dream” in November 2012, which envisaged reclaiming national pride and achieving personal well-being through sustained economic growth. He called for an infusion of cultural values to balance materialism.<sup>4</sup> He was able to sell the idea of bringing honesty and propriety into public life,<sup>5</sup> and had created an environment for initiating

tough reforms. These reforms were going to affect the powerful people in the Party, the government and, especially, the PLA; therefore, building a supporting narrative was essential for its successful execution.<sup>6</sup>

Xi initiated two major reforms, which impacted the PLA; these were the anti-corruption drive and the restructuring of the PLA. He launched the anti-corruption campaign in 2012, which, on the face of it, was meant to bring accountability into public life among the government officials and PLA personnel. A number of PLA leaders were implicated under the anti-corruption campaigns, some of whom were confidants of former Party leaders. Some observers termed these initiatives as tools used by Xi to strengthen his hold on the Party by selectively targeting his opponents and their supporters.<sup>7</sup> The declaration of Xi as “The Core” of the CCP in February 2016 further strengthened his hold over the Party.<sup>8</sup>

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4. “The Chinese Dream”, *The China Daily*, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/Chinese-dream.html>. Accessed on May 12, 2017.

5. Ben Westcott, “How Xi Jinping Became one of Modern China’s Most Powerful Leaders”, *CNN*, April 06, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/06/asia/xi-jinping-profile/index.html>. Accessed on September 30, 2017.

6. Tomoki Kamo, “Interpreting Xi’s ‘Chinese Dream’”, February 18, 2014, <http://www.tokyoofoundation.org/en/articles/2014/interpreting-xis-dream>. Accessed on August 10, 2017.

7. Cary Huang, “Xi Jinping’s Ambitious Power Play,” *South China Sea Morning Post*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1911987/xi-jinpings-ambitious-power-play>. Accessed on August 30, 2017.

8. Daly, n.1.

The second reform came through the formation of Theatre Commands in 2016, and was also viewed as a political move to reduce the influence of the PLA within the Party, placing people of Xi's choice in the PLA, strengthening of political control (over the PLA) as well as establishing structures to undertake expeditionary operations in pursuit of China's expanding economic and security interests. These were interconnected events, in which the interplay of various factors would have to be studied to understand the motive, necessity and likely impact of the PLA reforms. This paper argues that political considerations comprised a key driving force behind the reforms in the PLA. It examines the underlying currents behind the anti-corruption drive, the formation of the Theatre Commands and the possible implications of the two.

**A large number of senior PLA leaders had been arrested on corruption charges by March 2016, including Xu Caihou in 2014, and Guo Boxiong in 2015, both former vice chairmen of the CMC, 50 senior military officers of the rank of major general and above, and 16 lower level military officers.**

#### ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVE

Corruption was rampant in China when Xi took over as president. The PLA was one of the main targets of the anti-corruption drive, which was launched in November 2012.<sup>9</sup> He reaffirmed his commitment to fight corruption during the meeting of the CPC disciplinary watchdog—the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI)—in January 2013. He vowed to fight the “tigers” and “flies”, the two terms used to indicate powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats respectively.<sup>10</sup> Several government officials, including some Communist Party officials, were indicted on corruption charges.<sup>11</sup> A large number of senior PLA leaders had been arrested on corruption

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9. John Chan, “China's Leadership, Announces the New Anti-Corruption Campaign,” November 27, 2012, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/11/chin-n27.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2017.

10. “Xi Jinping Vows Unwavering Fight Against Corruption,” *Xinhuanet*, January 22, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-01/22/c\\_132119843.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-01/22/c_132119843.htm). Accessed on May 15, 2017.

11. Daly, n.1.

charges by March 2016, including Xu Caihou in 2014, and Guo Boxiong in 2015, both former vice chairmen of the CMC, 50 senior military officers of the rank of major general and above, and 16 lower level military officers. The charges of corruption included taking bribes for managing promotions, awarding contracts, and embezzlement of logistic stores and funds.<sup>12</sup> The number of PLA personnel punished for indiscipline rose to 4,885 by the end of 2016.<sup>13</sup> Gen Du Jicai, former secretary general of the Discipline Inspection Commission, was removed due to corruption charges and replaced by Lt Gen Zhang Shengmin in March 2017.<sup>14</sup>

A conflict of interest between the old and current leaders of the CPC on Party matters had been witnessed on some occasions in the past. Some old leaders continued to have a say within the Party even after their retirement. They were being seen as a counter-balance to the over-centralisation of authority by Xi.<sup>15</sup> *The Diplomat*, in an article in July 2015 brought out the close association of Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong with former President Jiang Zemin. It reported that the removal of these two influential generals could be linked to Xi's efforts towards reducing the influence of Jiang Zemin within the Party.<sup>16</sup> The trials of these generals had not been made public, citing security reasons, which raised doubts on the true intent, and impartiality. Reuters, in an article, observed that the level of corruption had not reduced drastically despite the massive projection of the anti-corruption drive.<sup>17</sup> The Hudson Institute of Kleptocracy also made a similar observation by highlighting the

12. Dan Levin, "China Names 14 Generals Suspected of Corruption," March 02, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/world/china-names-14-generals-suspected-of-corruption.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/world/china-names-14-generals-suspected-of-corruption.html?_r=0). Accessed on May 21, 2017.
13. "Watchdogs Punish Corruption in PLA," *China Daily*, March 28, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/28/content\\_28700819.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/28/content_28700819.htm). Accessed on May 15, 2017.
14. Minnie Chan, "Xi Jinping Appoints a New Man to Tackle PLA Corruption," March 02, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2075243/china-replaces-top-general-charge-tackling-military>. Accessed on May 21, 2017.
15. "Old Guards Still Calling the Shots in Beijing," April 04, 2017, *Nikkei Asian Review*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Features/Xi-s-Supremacy/Old-guard-still-calling-the-shots-in-Beijing>. Accessed on August 09, 2017.
16. Bo Zhiyue, "Guo Boxiong, Jiang Zemin, and the Corruption of the Chinese Military," July 31, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/guo-boxiong-jiang-zemin-and-the-corruption-of-the-chinese-military/>. Accessed on May 21, 2017.
17. Benjamin Kang Lim and Megha Rajagopalan, "China's Xi Purging Corrupt Officials to Put Own Men in Place," *Reuters*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-corruption-xi-insight-idUSBREA3F1UT20140417>. Accessed on May 15, 2017.

prevailing scepticism about the impact of the anti-corruption drive, which it viewed as symbolic, questioning the inability of the drive to address deep-rooted issues of lack of transparency, promoting the rule of law and bringing in institutional reforms.<sup>18</sup> Robert Daly of the Wilson Centre, a policy research institute, observed that Xi, through his anti-corruption drive, was able to kill two birds with one stone, i.e. he cracked the whip on corrupt officials while, at the same time, used this as a pretext to systematically replace officials having connections with the former leaders, Jiang and Hu.<sup>19</sup> The power consolidation by Xi seems complete with the Party having accepted him as the leader for the period of his life.

### **STRENGTHENING POLITICAL CONTROL OVER PLA**

President Xi had faced challenges from the PLA after taking over as the General Secretary of the CPC and Chairman of the CMC in 2012. PLA troops had infiltrated in Daulat Beg Oldi area of India, in May 2013<sup>20</sup> and thereafter, in Chumar area during the visit of President Xi to India in September 2014. Chinese leaders and Foreign Ministry officials<sup>21</sup> expressing ignorance about the PLA's intrusion during Xi's visit to India,<sup>22</sup> indicated there were some undercurrents in the PLA-Party relationship.<sup>23</sup> These incidents took place against the backdrop of initiation of tough measures and the sacking of several PLA leaders. There is a possibility that some of these incidents could have been initiated at the behest of

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18. "Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign: Revolutionary Reform or Paper Tiger?," Kleptocracy Initiative, December 1, 2016, <http://kleptocracyinitiative.org/2016/12/revolutionary-reform-or-paper-tiger/>. Accessed on May 15, 2017.

19. Daly, n.1.

20. "Was the Chinese Intrusion Really a PLA Strike Against Xi Jinping?," May 13, 2013, <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/column-was-the-chinese-intrusion-in-ladakh-a-pla-strike-against-xi/20130513.htm>. Accessed on May 11, 2017.

21. Ruman Dahiya, "Border Standoff: Understanding the Motive", Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, September 29, 2014, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/BorerStandoff\\_rdahiya\\_290914](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/BorerStandoff_rdahiya_290914). Accessed on August 10, 2017.

22. "Is PLA Sending a Message to Xi Through Repeated Incursions into India: Analysts," September 18, 2014, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/is-pla-sending-a-message-to-xi-through-repeated-incursions-into-india-analysts-114091800452\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/is-pla-sending-a-message-to-xi-through-repeated-incursions-into-india-analysts-114091800452_1.html). Accessed on August 10, 2017.

23. Gordon G. Chang, "The Real Threat from China's Military: Going Rouge", *The National Interest*, September 26, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-threat-chinas-military-going-rouge-11356>. Accessed on August 10, 2017.

**President Xi had taken measures to reduce the influence of the PLA within the Party as well as strengthen political control over the PLA. The Chinese leadership was in overdrive mode to ensure that the Party discipline and supremacy of the CPC over the armed forces were ingrained into the PLA cadres so that the PLA reforms could progress smoothly.**

PLA leaders, who wanted to show their opposition to the policies and decisions taken by the Party leadership.

President Xi had taken measures to reduce the influence of the PLA within the Party as well as strengthen political control over the PLA. The Chinese leadership was in overdrive mode to ensure that the Party discipline and supremacy of the CPC over the armed forces were ingrained into the PLA cadres so that the PLA reforms could progress smoothly. Xi utilised his visits to PLA units and interactions with PLA leaders to reassert this aspect.<sup>24</sup> The Chinese

military website report of January 11, 2016, quoting Xi, urged military leaders to adhere to the Party spirit and political discipline.<sup>25</sup> In another article on January 12, 2016, Xi emphasised that leaders from various departments of the CMC should follow the Party's rules and discipline, and set an example for members of the armed forces.<sup>26</sup> He had stated the following in February 2016:

The armed forces should maintain a high degree of conformity with the CPC Central Committee and CMC, strictly obey political discipline and rule, and carry out their orders and instructions to the letter.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Yao Jianing, "Xi Underscores Military Building via Reforms," *Xinhua*, January 07, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/07/content\\_7160342.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/07/content_7160342.htm). Accessed on May 20, 2017.
25. Dong Zhaohui, "China Reshuffles Military Headquarters," *China Military*, January 11, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/11/content\\_7160591.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/11/content_7160591.htm). Accessed on May 19, 2017.
26. Zhang Tao, "Xi Urge Leaders of the CMC Organs to Respect Party's Discipline," *Xinhua*, January 12, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/12/content\\_7160592.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-01/12/content_7160592.htm). Accessed on May 20, 2017.
27. Li Gang, "China's Military Regrouped into Five PLA Theatre Commands," February 01, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/01/c\\_135065429.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/01/c_135065429.htm). Accessed on May 11, 2017.

The above statement indicated the concerns of President Xi as well as his expectations from the PLA. However, he continued to face challenges from within the Party as well as from some PLA leaders after initiating the anti-corruption drive and restructuring of the PLA team. This necessitated some changes in the higher level leadership of the PLA as well as the continuation of the perception management campaign during his entire first term as president. Xi reminded the PLA of absolute loyalty to the Party while speaking to 84 newly established corps level army institutions in April 2017<sup>28</sup> and later during the 90th anniversary parade of the PLA at the Zhurihe Combined Tactics Training Base at Inner Mongolia on August 1, 2017. Mail Online, in an article, on August 4, 2017, observed that the change of venue of the seminar on “Unifying the Understanding Among Party Members” in Beijing from the Party school to the Jing Xi hotel run by the PLA, and the aggressive posturing during the confrontation with India in Doklam could also be linked to the internal power struggle.<sup>29</sup> The standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in the Doklam area, which started in June 2017, continued to be on the boil till a compromise was reached in August 2017.<sup>30</sup> The hostile stance taken by the PLA over Doklam was initially viewed as

**The standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in the Doklam area, which started in June 2017, continued to be on the boil till a compromise was reached in August 2017. The hostile stance taken by the PLA over Doklam was initially viewed as China’s reaction to India’s refusal to join the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and its increasing bonhomie with the US and Japan.**

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28. Yao Jianing, “Xi Stressed Party’s Absolute Authority of Army”, *China Military*, April 19, 2017, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-04/19/content\\_7567596.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-04/19/content_7567596.htm). Accessed on May 20, 2017.

29. Claude Apri, “How Can Xi Speak of a ‘Chinese Dream’ and a ‘Peaceful Rise’ While Threatening Those Who Dare Oppose China?,” *Mail Online India*, August 05, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-4762370/Can-Xi-speak-Chinese-Dream-Peaceful-Rise.html>. Accessed on August 06, 2017.

30. A disputed territory between Bhutan and China, located at the tri-junction of India-China-Bhutan border and a change in status quo in this area could have given strategic advantage to China and was not acceptable to India.

China's reaction to India's refusal to join the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and its increasing bonhomie with the US and Japan.<sup>31</sup> Some analysts even suggested that Xi might have wanted to keep the Doklam standoff<sup>32</sup> simmering in order to keep the dissidents away.<sup>33</sup> However, the deal for resolution of the Doklam standoff was reached only after the removal of the Gen Fang Fenghui, chairman, joint chiefs of staff, PLA. He was replaced by Gen Li Zuocheng in a swift move, in the last week of August 2017.<sup>34</sup> He was viewed as a hurdle to the resolution of the Doklam standoff, which was imposing huge diplomatic and economic costs on China's interests and having a negative impact on its high profile OBOR initiative.<sup>35</sup>

The series of events indicated that Xi was concerned about the high influence wielded by the PLA in the Party and used deft manoeuvring to subtly reduce it through organisational reforms. The delegates of the PLA, financial institutions, and elected representatives of the provinces together form the 2,300 strong National Congress of the Party.<sup>36</sup> These 2,300 delegates (from 40 blocks) were to elect replacements of 200 out of 376 members of the Central Committee (CC), 5 out of 7 Politburo Standing Committee members and 11 out of 25 Politburo members in the 19th Party Congress<sup>37</sup> in October 2017.<sup>38</sup> The PLA delegates, being the members of the provincial committees

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31. Siddique Wahid, "Beyond Doklam: Why China Offered to Mediate in the Kashmir Dispute," July 21, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/844394/beyond-doklam-why-china-offered-to-mediate-in-the-kashmir-dispute>. Accessed on July 28, 2017.

32. n.30.

33. P Stobdan, "Doklam: China's Anxieties and Domestic Dissidents May Have a Role," July 29, 2017, <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/2017/07/29/xi-jinping-domestic-dissidents-and-doklam-standoff>. Accessed on August 09, 2017.

34. Yi Yang, "Restructure, Then Purge: How Sheriff Xi's PLA Clean-Up Works," September 02, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/restructure-purge-sheriff-xis-pla-clean-works/>. Accessed on September 06, 2017.

35. Brahma Chellaney, "Doklam Issue: China's Xi Jinping has a PLA Problem," *Hindustan Times*, September 05, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/doklam-issue-china-s-xi-jinping-has-a-pla-problem/story-bEqRc9linyioqwKJGUP0aO.html>. Accessed on September 06, 2017.

36. Stephen Fallon, "The 19th National Congress of China's Communist Party," *Parliament of Australia*, [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BriefingBook45p/ChinaCongress](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook45p/ChinaCongress). Accessed on August 08, 2017.

37. The Party Congress takes place every five years

38. Jayadeve Ranade, "The 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party," May 18, 2017, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/may/18/the-19th-congress-of-the-chinese-communist-party>. Accessed on August 08, 2017.



and Central Party Congress, play a significant role in Party politics and in deciding the outcome of the Party Congress. Therefore, it was important for Xi to have PLA representatives of his choice in the National Party Congress to ensure the election of his candidates in the crucial Party posts in the 19th Party Congress.

The representation of the PLA in Provincial Party Standing Committees was also reduced by replacing them with political representatives. The feasibility of reducing the representation of the PLA in the 20th Party Congress (scheduled to be held in 2022) by citing PLA restructuring and reduction of seven Military Regions (MRs) into five Theatre Commands was also being explored.<sup>39</sup> These initiatives were seen as endeavours to consolidate Xi's position in the Party and to carry forward his agenda in his second and final tenure as the president.<sup>40</sup>

### THEATRE COMMANDS

The process to restructure the PLA was set in motion at the plenary session of the 18th Party Congress in November 2013. Thereafter, a group was established under the CMC to draw up a roadmap in April 2014. The restructuring of the PLA was announced during the parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of World War II on September 3, 2015.<sup>41</sup> It was implemented with the reorganisation of the seven MRs of the PLA, i.e. Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Lanzhou into five Theatre Commands (TCs) namely, Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and Central Theatre Commands on February 1, 2016.<sup>42</sup>

The formation of Theatre Commands was aimed at enhancing their combat effectiveness for meeting China's regional aspirations while, at the same time, using it as an opportunity to reduce the influence of the PLA

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39. Ibid.

40. "How Chinese Leaders Are Elected to Party Congress," *Xinhua*, October 02, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1068981.shtml>. Accessed on October 02, 2017.

41. Zhao Lei, "PLA Restructures to Meet New Challenges," *Chinadaily*, January 11, 2017, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2017-01/11/content\\_27927214.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2017-01/11/content_27927214.htm). Accessed on August 16, 2017.

42. Gang, n.27.

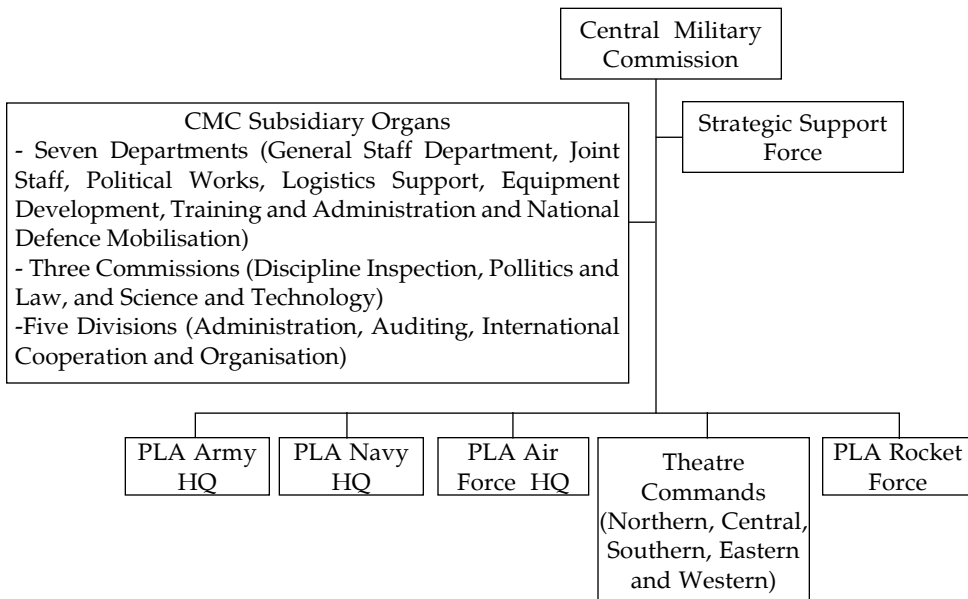
in Party matters. The restructuring of the PLA into Theatre Commands needed redistribution of manpower, equipment and readjustments in infrastructure, etc. and its impact would be known in due course. The PLA's Second Artillery was renamed as the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF); it has become the fourth Service and is at par with the Army, Navy and Air Force. The PLARF will have both nuclear and conventional missiles, which would provide it with a veil to camouflage its deployment of strategic nuclear missiles along with conventional missiles. Also, a PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) was created to provide cyber, and intelligence support to all the four Services as well as undertake space operations.<sup>43</sup>

The new structure has 15 new subsidiary organs under the CMC, as shown in Fig 1. The new subsidiary organs include the Department of Joint Staff and Commission of Science and Technology. The joint staff, as the name suggests, will coordinate functions related to joint planning and operations. The inclusion of Science and Technology (S&T) as a subsidiary organ of the CMC indicates the significance China attaches to its role in future warfare. Incidentally, defence forces and Science and Technology were two of the four modernisations undertaken by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.<sup>44</sup> The integration of resources as per Theatre Commands would improve synergy; however, it will also create new challenges, which need to be studied.

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43. Maj Gen BK Sharma et al., "Analysis of China's Military Reorganisation," Occasional Paper 2-2016, USI, <http://usiofindia.org/publications/OccasionalPapers/ChinasMilitaryReorganisation.pdf>. Accessed on May 19, 2017.

44. "We Can Develop a Market Economy Under Socialism," *People's Daily*, November 26, 1979, <http://en.people.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1370.html>. Accessed on May 21, 2017.

**Fig 1: New Structure of the Chinese Armed Forces<sup>45</sup>**

China had earlier announced a reduction of 300,000 troops on the occasion of the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the China-Japan War in September 2015, with the intention to make the PLA lean, mean and responsive.<sup>46</sup> The size of the Chinese Army was to be reduced from 2.3 million to 2 million, phasing out outdated equipment and reducing the size of the militia.<sup>47</sup> This was followed by the reduction in the army reserves during the session of the National People's Congress in March 2017.<sup>48</sup> The focus of the reduction in manpower had been to reduce the physical strength of the Chinese Army and enhance the strength of the other Services to prepare for

45. Zhang Tao, "China's New Central Military Commission Organ Established," *China Military*, January 11, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/11/content\\_6852723.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/11/content_6852723.htm). Accessed on May 24, 2017.

46. "Xinhua Insight: China Announces Troop Cut Ahead of its First War Victory Parade," September 03, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c\\_134586909.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134586909.htm). Accessed on May 12, 2017.

47. Dong Zhaohui, "China Releases Guidelines on Military Reform," *Xinhua*, January 01, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/01/content\\_6840068.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/01/content_6840068.htm). Accessed on May 20, 2017.

48. Yao Jianing, "China to Reduce Army Reserves as Part of Military Reform," *China Military*, March 10, 2017, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/10/content\\_7521737.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/10/content_7521737.htm). Accessed on May 20, 2017.

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a technology-intensive war as well as for out of area contingencies.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

The operational factors responsible for the establishment of Theatre Commands need to be deliberated upon from the point of view of the necessity, availability and integration of resources, and the impact on operations. The strengthening of the Chinese defence industry and its enhanced capability to produce a variety of land, air and naval weapons in large numbers were critical enabling factors for the formation of Theatre Commands. However, Theatre Commands are likely to be independent and self-sufficient entities; therefore, they would need separate army, air force and naval components and dedicated resources. This would greatly increase the requirement of resources.

The formation of Theatre Commands would have an impact on the operational capability of the PLA. China has territorial/ border disputes with India, countries in Southeast Asia, the East China Sea and South China Sea. It has established a military base in Djibouti and has economic interests all over the globe, which would need to be protected. Chinese Theatre Command forces may be required to operate in island territories as well as protect their interests away from their homeland. The reorganisation of geographical areas under Theatre Commands would integrate land, naval and air force assets and enhance their capability to undertake joint operations. However, distribution of high technology defence equipment according to geographical limits could adversely impact their operational employability and effectiveness.

Command-wise distribution of meagre resources, especially high-value strategic resources like air power assets, could adversely impact their flexibility and effectiveness in an actual war. Their division according to geographical boundaries could limit the flexibility available to the

commander. Air assets can operate at the tactical, operational and strategic levels at the same time. They have the ability to undertake intra-theatre and inter-theatre operations. Therefore, distribution of high value and meagre air assets could result in sub-optimum exploitation of their unique capabilities.

#### *Expeditionary Capabilities*

The operational necessity of Theatre Commands can be viewed from two key angles: firstly, for achieving synergy among the armed forces; and, secondly,

for undertaking joint operations in out of area contingencies. It is the latter which appears to be the predominant influence on the decision to establish Theatre Commands. China's White Paper on National Security, 2015 highlighted the need for protecting its "overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad." The White Paper indicated China's aspiration for developing expeditionary military capabilities,<sup>49</sup>

The reorganisation of the command structure and formation of Theatre Commands is in line with the Chinese aspiration for developing military capabilities to undertake military operations beyond mainland China. The indigenous development of Y-20 aircraft, strategic bombers, large seaplanes, High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) combat aircraft, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), aircraft carriers, etc. are steps in the strengthening of air and naval forces and for achieving the expeditionary capability.

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49. Full text: "China's Military Strategy," May 26, 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content\\_20820628.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm). Accessed on August 15, 2017.

### *Other Challenges*

The reorganisation of the PLA, despite some operational benefits, would bring in new challenges. The formation of Integrated Commands has created two separate command chains, i.e. to Theatre Commands for undertaking operations, and to Services Headquarters for building the armed forces through equipping and training. The delineation of responsibilities to separate organisations for operations and organisation building could also have an adverse impact on the development of the complementary capabilities of a fighting force. Separating the three key aspects of war-fighting, i.e. acquisition, training and operations, may lead to a gap between preparation and war-time execution.

In a reorganised structure of the PLA, operational flexibility and effectiveness could become a casualty in the conduct of air operations from the geographically restricted Theatre Commands. The chiefs of the three PLA Services have been relieved of the responsibility of exercising control over the Operational Commands, and theatre commanders are placed directly under the CMC. The new Theatre Command joint structure, headed by a single Service commander could impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the technology-intensive air and naval operations within the theatre as well as for undertaking trans-theatre operations, which may become a limitation in a dynamic war scenario.

A study by the European Council of Foreign Relations observes that restructuring could adversely impact the operational preparedness of the PLA as the new commanders and political commissioners would come from the ground forces and raise doubts about the effectiveness of the air and naval forces in such arrangement.<sup>50</sup>

### *India-China Scenario*

The Chinese armed forces in the past were organised in the traditional way in which the respective Service Headquarters (HQ) had operational control over air, land and naval forces. However, the formation of Theatre

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50. Cristina Garafola, "Will the PLA Reforms Succeed?", *European Council of Foreign Relations*, [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/XIS\\_ARMY\\_-\\_GARAFOLA.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/XIS_ARMY_-_GARAFOLA.pdf). Accessed on May 20, 2017.

Commands has altered the dynamics of warfare, which is likely to have an impact on any future India-China conflict. The reorganisation would result in certain operational benefits but also the emergence of new vulnerabilities for the PLA. Also, the circumstances and necessity for reorganisation by one country may not apply to another country. Therefore, the circumstances and necessity for the formation of Theatre Commands by China, along with associated advantages and disadvantages, would need to be studied carefully to prevent drawing the wrong lessons.

The employment philosophies of the three Services vary, depending upon their unique capabilities, geographical area and availability of resources. An India-China War scenario is likely to focus on the borders located in the north and northeast of India. India has a relatively smaller army and a less developed transportation network, while the Chinese Army is bigger and its territory adjoining India has a better transportation network connectivity, which gives it an advantage. However, the relative disadvantage for India in the past was balanced by the Indian Air Force (IAF), which was equipped with more capable combat aircraft and had well-trained and professional air force personnel. The IAF enjoyed a qualitative and quantitative edge over the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) on the India-China border area; therefore, a balance was maintained between the armed forces of the two countries.

After the reorganisation of the PLA in January 2016, the newly formed Western Theatre Command covers the entire border with India, which was earlier covered by two MRs. This would enhance synergy among various PLA ground formations against India as well as between the PLA and PLAAF forces, which will improve their ability to undertake joint operations against India. As of now, the IAF still has an advantage over the PLAAF and would be able to field a greater number and more capable, combat aircraft against the Chinese Western Theatre Command. The availability of low elevation airfields and highly trained pilots provides an edge over the PLAAF. The combined capability of the IAF and Indian Army would be able to match the Chinese threat. However, the quality and number of air assets being the inducted by the PLAAF are improving, and India would need to keep a close watch on the induction of advanced defence equipment, developments in

**China has territorial disputes with Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei.**

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the Chinese defence industry, organisational changes, and China's aspirations for regional hegemony, to prepare for future challenges.

*East and South China Seas*

According to *Time* magazine, the Nationalist government of China, in 1947, etched out an eleven-dash line to indicate the Chinese claim on island territories in the South China Sea. This was later reduced to a nine-dash line to hand over the Gulf of Tonkin to Vietnam in 1952. The "nine-dash line" was a visionary narrative from the Chinese perspective, which appeared to have been built to support Chinese aspirations for a leadership position and establishing control over disputed island territories in the long run. China's focus on building military bases in island territories located in the South China Sea gained momentum after it submitted a map to the United Nations in 2009 with the nine-dash line.<sup>51</sup> The China-Japan dispute over the Senkaku Islands, China's setting up of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), and patrolling of disputed territory by Chinese drones in the recent past have made the situation volatile between the two countries.<sup>52</sup>

China has territorial disputes with Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei. It has developed airfields, naval bases, positioned PLA troops, aircraft, radars and air defence units, etc. on the disputed island territories in the East and South China Seas. The rising capability of its defence industry and strengthening of its armed forces have enabled it to deploy land, air and naval assets in such territories to assert its claims as well

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51. Hannah Beech, "Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?," *Time*, July 19, 2016, <http://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>. Accessed on May 18, 2017.

52. Yoko Wakatsuki and Junko Ogura, "Japan: China 'Escalating' Tensions Over Disputed Islands," May 19, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/asia/japan-china-disputed-islands-jets-drone/index.html>. Accessed on August 15, 2017.



as carry out surveillance with its medium and long-range manned and unmanned aerial vehicles to deter adversaries. Its endeavour has been to keep territorial disputes within manageable limits while aggressively building bases along the coastline and developing island territories.<sup>53</sup> It is buying time till it can develop the capability to support its regional ambitions. The newly formed Theatre Commands and rising naval and air capability will enable it to undertake joint operations to protect disputed territories in the East and South China Seas as well as take on the combined military of the Japan-US over the disputed island territory if such a situation arises.

**The Chinese military has not been involved in military operations in the recent past and the formation of Theatre Commands did not appear to have originated from the lessons learnt from recent operations undertaken by the Chinese military or from global conflicts. Strengthening of political control over the PLA was given the highest priority by President Xi.**

## CONCLUSION

Chinese President Xi Jinping's political moves involving the declaration of the "China Dream" and launching of the anti-corruption campaign – especially aimed at high-ranking officers of the PLA – are significant events, which have had a stimulating effect on the reorganisation of the PLA. The timing of the PLA intrusion into Indian territory in 2013 during President Xi's visit to India in 2014 and the standoff at Doklam in 2017, had symptoms of undercurrents between the PLA leadership and the CPC led by President Xi.

The formation of Theatre Commands appears to be a political decision to strengthen the political control over the PLA. Xi's approach in establishing control over the PLA is being compared to the one followed by Chairman Mao in the 1960s and 1970s. Xi and Mao followed different paths to assert

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53. "New PLA Airforce Base Boosts Capabilities", May 28, 2012, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/05/28/2003533924>. Accessed on April 3, 2016.

their authority and exercise control over the PLA. Mao had removed his Defence Minister Pen Dehuai in 1959 and thereafter, Pen's successor Lin Bao was removed in 1971 to ensure that Mao retained control over the PLA. However, President Xi, unlike Chairman Mao, has taken direct control of the PLA by establishing five Theatre Commands and placing them directly under the CMC, thereby removing the PLA HQ from the chain of command.<sup>54</sup>

The Chinese military has not been involved in military operations in the recent past and the formation of Theatre Commands did not appear to have originated from the lessons learnt from recent operations undertaken by the Chinese military or from global conflicts. Strengthening of political control over the PLA was given the highest priority by President Xi. The reforms in the PLA met the strategic aspirations as well as provided Xi with an opportunity to reduce the powers of the PLA and replace some of the senior PLA leaders loyal to previous incumbents with those loyal to him.

The formation of the ADIZ in the East China Sea in 2013,<sup>55</sup> construction of the military base in Djibouti, Gwadar port in Pakistan and Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, with potential for military usage, construction of aircraft carriers, infrastructure development and positioning of its armed forces in the islands located in the South China Sea all indicate China's regional and global aspirations. This factor played a significant role in the formation of Theatre Commands. The Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun's statement after the establishment of the Theatre Commands in February 2016, "(The five Theatre Commands)..... will better safeguard national sovereignty, security and interests while upholding regional stability and world peace," indicates the regional and global aspirations of China.<sup>56</sup>

The impact of the reorganisation of the PLA and formation of Theatre Commands would be known once the integration is complete in all respects

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54. "Why Xi is Purging the Chinese Military", *The National Interest*, April 15, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-xi-purging-the-chinese-military-15795>. Accessed on May 15, 2017.

55. Ben Blanchard and David Brunnstrom, "China Says US Should Respect China's Air Defence Zone", *Reuters*, March 23, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-defence-idUSKBN16U0SB>. Accessed on May 18, 2017.

56. Gang, n. 27.

and the three Services, i.e. the PLA, PLAN and PLAAF have gained adequate experience of training together under the Theatre Commands, and China fights a war successfully. However, in the absence of these conditions, an analysis of the employment of the military in the present scenario can be carried out on the basis of the attributes of military power and the experience gained from its employment in past wars to understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Theatre Commands.

The functions and operational philosophy of the army, air force and navy differ due to their unique capabilities and the resources held by them. Army units are self-sufficient in most respects and their operational areas have a relatively less geographical span when compared to the navy and air force. The navy operates away from land into the sea and has a little conflict of interests with the army and, hence, does not have a major adverse effect due to the formation of the Theatre Commands. The operational employment philosophy of air forces, on the other hand, is quite different from that of the army and placing air force elements under geographical limits could adversely impact its flexibility and operational effectiveness. Therefore, Theatre Commands might result in sub-optimal utilisation of their unique capabilities and adversely impact the overall operational effectiveness of the PLA.

The chronology of events indicates that the political consideration was one of the key reasons behind the reforms in the PLA. The formation of Theatre Commands will improve synergy among, army, navy and air force, and help them undertake operations beyond mainland China. However, the Theatre Command structure may hinder the optimum exploitation of the unique capabilities of the respective Services and have an adverse impact on the overall operational effectiveness of the PLA.