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## China's Military Reorganisation and the Emergence of an Aerospace Force

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In a major revamp of its military organisation, the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) scrapped its much-talked-about military wing, the Strategic Support Force (SSF) to create an Information Support Force (ISF) on April 19, 2024. The SSF was created in 2015 as part of China's military reforms and reorganisation of its military organisational structures and theatre commands. The People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLA SSF) was created to centralise the command and control of its specialised capabilities in space, cyber, electronic and psychological warfare into a single department. It aimed to create a synergy between advanced warfighting capabilities of similarly placed establishments while optimising the manpower requirements and shortening the chain of command for better decision execution.

The PLA will now have a new system of services and arms under the leadership of the CMC. The PLA will consist of four services (Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force) and four arms (the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force and Joint Logistic Support Force).<sup>1</sup> This organisational shakeup is the first major revamp of the PLA structure since 2015 when the SSF was incorporated. The new ISF is said to be a strategic branch of the PLA. The purpose of this restructuring is being seen as another step towards building a strong military and establishing a new system of services and arms to transition into a modern military force structure.<sup>2</sup> The significance of this change is profound and is likely to have far-reaching effects on the PLAs operational efficiency, particularly in the field of informatisation of battlespaces.

The SSF was also mandated to provide certain supporting functions like battlefield environment protection, information and communications assurance, information security protection, as well as new technology testing.<sup>3</sup> It was a theatre command-level organisation with two sub-branches called the Space Systems Department (SSD) and the Network Systems Department (NSD). Many functions of space operations, like the counter-space weapons, had an overlap between these two departments. Currently, the activities of these departments are being separated from the SSF to establish independent organisational command and control structures.

### **Rationale for Current Change**

The reasons for this reorganisation and the roles of the newly created forces are still a matter of speculation. At an operational level, the overlap between the SSD and NSD could have caused a slowdown in operational efficiency as the two departments had to work in synchronisation to get a task done. However, at an organisational level, it is believed that there were accusations of misappropriation of finances and charges of corruption as well as internal rivalry at the higher

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echelons of SSF.<sup>4</sup> This may have failed to achieve synergies across the different divisions within the SSF and impeded their interaction with the theatre commanders. These allegations also raise serious questions about the effectiveness of China's SSF in overcoming the organisational and technical limitations of the PLA for which it was created. Integration of China's warfighting capabilities to fulfil joint operations requirements was at stake.<sup>5</sup> Also, a Chinese military expert with the Washington-based National Defense University, Joel Wuthnow, has pointed to the Chinese premiere's desire for greater oversight of support forces following the PLA's observations of the war in Ukraine that have clearly brought out the need for an effective structure for support forces, including in the logistics and information domains. He says that "the SSF proved to be an unnecessary management layer that obscured Xi's visibility into what the PLA was doing in space, cyberspace and other information disciplines."<sup>6</sup>

### **What do we know about Aerospace Force?**

As regards the space operations, they will be with the Aerospace Force. Presumably, the Space Systems Department will take the form of the Aerospace Force. The SSF had a limited ability to handle all aspects of space operations. The SSD and NSD together provided the space capabilities required from space to the theatres. The reorganisation is expected to enhance the level of specialisation in space operations, with dedicated personnel being assigned to the space role. A Chinese Defence Ministry Spokesman, Wu Qian, is quoted as saying, "Building the force is of great significance in strengthening the capability to safely travel to outer space, openly and peacefully develop space resources, and enhance governance and crisis management in space. The aerospace force will improve China's access to and ability to use outer space".<sup>7</sup>

### **Assessment**

The restructuring of the PLA comes as a surprise to observers. It may appear that the ISF is taking over all the roles of the erstwhile SSF, but that doesn't seem to be the case. The ISF is the first force to be created out of the SSF by virtue of the importance being given to the informatisation of the PLA forces. While the ISF will integrate PLA's joint operation system and provide the backbone for an informatised PLA, it remains to be seen whether the aerospace force and cyber force are realigned under the ISF or emerge as separate entities with some support from the ISF. Space services and space operations have a heavy reliance on network systems, and hence, the cyber domain is critical to space. The aerospace force and cyber force cannot work independently of each other, and this may lead to the ISF overseeing their functioning.

Whatever the case, it is felt that the restructuring will help bring operational efficiency, as the erstwhile SSF was a theatre command-level organisation, whereas in the new system, each arm will be a level lower in the hierarchy. This will enable the theatre commanders to deal with the forces without any internal bureaucracy hurdles. Moreover, the newly created support forces can focus on improving their technical proficiency and avoid dealing with an additional management layer.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the commanders of these newly formed organisations will be able to report directly to the CMC rather than going through the SSF commander, which makes decision-making and reporting faster. Finally, the reorganisation and formation of an aerospace force within the PLA is a step towards China's efforts to counter the threat from the US space force. The US is also taking the Chinese space capabilities seriously and is incorporating major steps to counter the Chinese space threat. Further developments on the PLA's military reorganisation will be watched closely.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Suyash Desai, "PLA SSF scrapped, it's now the PLA ISF: What does it mean? ", *The Economic Times*, April, 21, 2024, [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pla-ssf-scrapped-its-now-the-pla-isf-what-does-it-mean/articleshow/109476958.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pla-ssf-scrapped-its-now-the-pla-isf-what-does-it-mean/articleshow/109476958.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst). Accessed on April 21, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> "China calls Information Support Force 'brand-new strategic arm' of PLA", *CGTN-China*, April 19, 2024, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-04-19/China-calls-Information-Support-Force-brand-new-strategic-arm-of-PLA-1sVSL9Hg34I/p.html>. Accessed on April 24, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Desai, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Yukio Tajima, "China military's biggest shakeup in 9 years adds info, cyber, space units", *Nikkei Asia*, April 22, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/China-military-s-biggest-shakeup-in-9-years-adds-info-cyber-space-units>. Accessed on April 22, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> PK Mallick, "Shifting Gears: The PLA's strategic calculus behind reorganising the strategic support force into information support force", *Financial Express*, April 21, 2024, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-shifting-gears-the-plas-strategic-calculus-behind-reorganising-the-strategic-support-force-into-information-support-force-3463920/>. Accessed on April 22, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Arthur, "Why China axed the Strategic Support Force and reshuffled the military", *Defense News*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2024/04/26/why-china-axed-the-strategic-support-force-and-reshuffled-the-military/>. Accessed on April 27, 2024

<sup>7</sup> Tajima. n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur, n. 6.