



A new PLA for a new era

by Sebastian Hornschild and Eva Pejsova

On 5 March, China announced that its military defence budget for 2016 will total \$146 billion, and increase ‘only’ by 7.6% – the lowest rate in twenty years (2015 saw an increase of 10.1% in comparison). This came somewhat as a surprise as it occurs in the middle of the country’s most important military reforms in the last fifty years. While the current military overhaul reflects China’s changing domestic and regional strategic priorities, it also needs to be viewed against the backdrop of an economic slowdown.

The military reforms, alongside a broad anti-corruption campaign and a tightening of political control over China’s media agencies, are all means for President Xi Jinping to consolidate power domestically. Xi wanted to prove his ability to rein in diverging factions and stamp out dissent – both within the party and the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA). Greater control and centralisation are also to be understood in the context of preparing for the ‘new normal’ of slower economic growth: necessary supply-side economic reforms such as the reduction of overcapacity, debt levels and government subsidies are expected to result in significant job losses over the next years.

The domestic political agenda aside, there is no doubt that China’s outdated military structure did not match the world’s second largest economy. Growing tensions in the South and East China Sea, as well as US military activity in waters claimed by China are the immediate drivers behind the current effort to improve operational effectiveness. The PLA’s change “from the regional defensive type to the full-spectrum combat

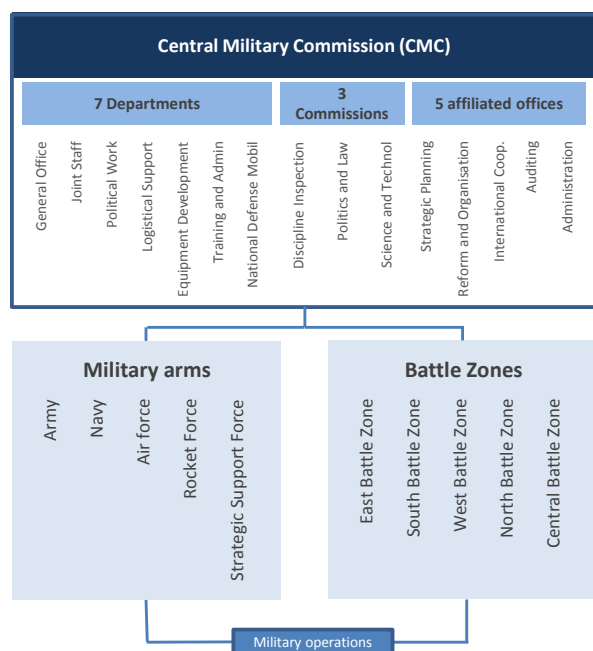
type”, as announced by Xi during a military ceremony in January, reflects China’s broader intention to become a more decisive security player in the region and beyond.

An internal struggle

As a ‘princeling’ of one of China’s past revolutionary cadres, Xi has long known about the military’s prominent role in Chinese politics. The top brass has followed Xi’s rise with some scepticism and the first military reform announcement was met with resistance: China’s military structure was shaped along the Soviet model in the 1950s and was left virtually untouched by past leaders due to military cadres’ vigorous protection of their own interests. However, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign of ‘catching flies and tigers’, resulting in a purge of more than 200 senior military officers – including Vice Chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Xu Caihong and Guo Boxiang – quickly muted this opposition.

In parallel, Xi has stressed in an enduring campaign the ‘revolutionary ideals’ of the military and the ‘supreme command status’ of the Communist Party over the PLA. Numerous visits to historical sites – such as Gutian, where Mao Zedong in 1929 defined the principles underpinning the PLA – supported this message and portrayed him as the rightful heir to China’s grand leaders. This has happened alongside the revival of the ‘CMC Chairman Responsibility System’ that once existed under Mao, in contrast to the ‘Vice Chairmen Responsibility’ pursued by Chinese leaders in previous

New PLA command structure



Source: EUISS

decades. This change means that the command authority of the PLA is gradually being monopolised by the Chairman of the CMC – in this case, Xi Jinping himself.

The military reforms, to be completed by 2020, are set to be accompanied by troop cuts of 300,000 to 2 million, primarily affecting non-combat forces and low-skilled troops. In order to boost the military's morale and the support for Xi's reforms, the CMC decided to raise salaries by around 20% (taking effect this year), and government-owned enterprises are obliged to reserve a certain percentage of positions for laid-off troops.

New structure, new focus

China's 4 highest general departments of the CMC have now been replaced by 15 units (see chart). Xi is seeking to establish a new CMC with a more dispersed power structure, thereby reducing the risk of serious internal opposition and conferring more power to himself. The re-zoning of military theatres from 7 to 5 aims to address regional threats more uniformly: the West Battle Zone focuses on counter-terrorism, for instance, and the South Battle Zone on the South China Sea. Moreover, the newly balanced and upgraded military arms are better able to address each region's specific needs. In fact, the structural reforms seek to transform the army-centric structure into one focused more evenly on the army, navy, air force, a rocket force and a 'cyber force' (or strategic support force).

The newly launched cyber force is perhaps the most innovative, and is likely to be in charge of intelligence,

electronic warfare, cyber offense and defence, technical reconnaissance, psychological warfare, and operations in outer space (the latter named as an arena of 'international strategic competition' in China's 2015 Defence White Paper). The establishment of a major arm dedicated to cyber warfare means that China is ahead of the US in this regard – although its true capabilities are still to be proven. These developments also reflect the high-technology sector's key role in economic advancement, as mentioned in Beijing's newly launched 13th Five-Year-Plan (2016-2020).

To boost military capabilities, Beijing has rolled out recruitment campaigns targeting highly-skilled university graduates and is expected to reshuffle human capital away from the army to the other four arms. China has also initiated a vast number of training programmes on 'informatisation wars', which aim to improve 'technology literacy' among current troops.

Strategic outreach

The reforms are in lockstep with the continued modernisation of China's military hardware. The emphasis has largely been on the navy which has seen a new aircraft carrier, submarines, and aircraft added to its ranks. Additionally, China has also conducted new intercontinental ballistic missile tests.

Beijing is determined to assert its sovereignty claims, including by military means, something which is most visible in its activities in the South China Sea. With a tailored command structure and hardware better adapted to the needs of modern warfare, China might also become more confident in responding to US military operations in the region, including by challenging its so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). With worsening economic conditions on the horizon, displays of military strength may be useful for Xi to boost domestic legitimacy. That said, full military escalation remains unlikely for now due to China's entrenched international economic interests.

Beijing's new military might could also be used to extend its strategic outreach beyond the region – notably in the Indian Ocean and even further west, to trade hubs in Africa or along the Belt-and-Road initiative. Finally, China's passed a counter-terrorism law in late 2015 which provides legal cover for a wide range of military deployments. Although this serves primarily domestic purposes, the law could also offer an opportunity for China to pursue its ambition to play a greater role as a security provider in third theatres – perhaps even in cooperation with third parties.

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