

REFORMING THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY: A KEY ELEMENT IN THE RENEWAL OF THE CHINESE STATE

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ABSTRACT

The decision handed down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the issue of China's presence in the South China Sea revealed the recent modernisation of the Chinese armed forces. In January 2016, the PRC's Central Military Commission published a guideline on deepening national defence and military reform¹, launching a widespread military reform that aims to change the nature of China's armed forces between now and 2020. The stage was set in September 2015, on the occasion of an eminently political military parade orchestrated by Xi Jinping's government in Beijing. The event was to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Sino-Japanese war.

The reforms put in place by this Guideline are a first in the history of the PLA. They aim to resolve significant issues that hampered the modernisation process of the People's Liberation Army for over a generation, such as the fragmentation of the command chain, the corruption of senior military leaders and the domination of the ground forces even when threats to national security had become maritime threats.

Military reform is a key element in the revival of the nation, undertaken by Xi Jinping with the slogan "the Chinese Dream"; he plans to transform Chinese society into "a moderately well-off society" and the state into "a modern, prosperous, powerful socialist state."² The most recent Chinese White Paper on Defence, published in 2015, places military modernisation in the perspective of the "Chinese Dream"³. Xi Jinping set two dates to assess the results of his policy: 2021, the centenary of the Communist Party of China, and 2049, the centenary of the People's Republic of China. The military reform, which should be completed by 2020, is therefore the first step in the new Chinese leader's political programme.

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THE ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN: THE PRELUDE TO MILITARY REFORM

The primary aim of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) reform is to restore the authority of the Communist Party of China (CPC) over the armed forces, which was undermined by Hu Jintao's leadership. President Xi Jinping, when he came into power in 2012, launched an anti-corruption campaign that targeted military officers and civil servants. Following the publication of two lists, around thirty high-ranking officers were accused of corruption. Among them, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong had been deputy directors of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the supreme military command, for the eight years of Hu Jintao's leadership (2004-2012). Appointed by Jiang Zemin, and members of the CPC's political bureau while simultaneously acting as co-directors of the CMC, Xu and Guo came to symbolise the power the military wielded over the weak leadership of Hu Jintao. The investigation and condemnation of these generals violated a tacit rule of the PLA, which is that retired officers should not be bothered.

The anti-corruption campaign reduced the average age of the military staff and prepared the terrain for reform. These purges recalled the Maoist methods and were accompanied by a rotation of officers, in the style of Deng Xiaoping. The renewal of the military elite enabled Xi Jinping to place his men by choosing officers from the former military region of Nanjing with whom he worked when he was governor of Fujian province⁴. However, the anti-corruption campaign was not simply a personal power conquest tool. It is important to note that Liu Yuan, former political commissar of the General Logistics Department, and Cai Yinting, former commander of Nanjing Military Region (which includes Fujian), two figures who were very close to the President, were not promoted after the reform. Liu Yuan's departure from the PLA caused the greatest surprise, because he had played a critical role in the investigations that led to the arrest of officers Gu Junshan, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong.

The military was not the greatest victim of the anti-corruption campaign. Out of 1,750 charged, only around sixty were service members. Within the state apparatus, which includes the central and local governments and major state enterprises, the military were relatively unscathed by the purges. The effects of the anti-corruption campaign were not limited to the number of accused, however. The investigation that led to the condemnation of Xu Caihou revealed information that, while no details are available, involved hundreds of senior officers. Although most of these officers were not prosecuted, they are aware that they are under surveillance⁵.

THE REFORMS UNDER WAY

The guideline on deepening national defence and military reform, published in January 2016, launched a series of military reforms that were under discussion for a decade but had been impeded by the fragmented decision-making between the four headquarters and the seven military regions. The field of reforms affects the size of the armed forces, the command structure, the composition of the armed forces and the handling of civil-military relations. Each of these aspects has ramifications that will result in lasting change to the PLA's structure.

Improved management in the forces

The PLA reform takes place to a backdrop of a major slowdown in economic growth. In March 2016, the Chinese government announced that the defence budget for 2016 was 954 billion yuan, or 129 billion euros. It rose by just 7.6% in relation to 2015, the lowest increase since 2010, coming after two decades of double-figured increases⁶. The defence budget remains officially at 1.9% of GDP. The small increase, which is surprising at a time when tensions are growing in the South China Sea, is evidence of defence spending being aligned with the downturn in China's economic growth⁷.

Controlled military spending results in reductions in personnel, which was announced in September 2015. The decrease in the number of service members is a long-term effort in China: Deng Xiaoping had already reduced the armed forces by 500,000 men in the 1980s⁸, and Jiang Zemin by 200,000 in 2003. Xi Jinping plans to reduce the number of

service members by 300,000 in order to round the numbers down to 2 million. The PLA will continue to be the biggest military in the world in terms of manpower.

The cuts will mainly affect the ground forces, made up of 1,300,000 men. The Air Force is made up of 398,000 troops and the Navy 235,000⁹.

Facilitating joint forces training

The PLA under Hu Jintao was mostly criticised for the lack of coordination between the ground, air and naval forces¹⁰. It suffered from the domination of the ground forces, whose senior officers held leadership positions in the four headquarters (joint staff and general political, logistics and armament departments). This domination, a legacy of China's history, was reinforced by the significant ties between the army and China's regional bureaucracy, despite the fact that China's terrestrial borders do not appear to be under any specific threat since the 1990s.

On 31 December 2015, Xi Jinping restructured the seven military regions into five "theatre commands" (战区: literally "war zones") to foster coordination between the three armed forces and adapt command to the diversity of threats, according to the geographic location. The map below shows in particular how the reconfiguration of the forces is designed to make more room for the navy, as three of the new command zones are based around a fleet. The reduction in the number of military regions is a constant in the modernisation of the PLA. In 1955 the structure had 13 military regions, which dropped to 11 in 1970 and 7 in 1985¹¹.

Configuration of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2016



In December 2015, even before the Guideline was published, the CPC established two new command structures: an army headquarters and a strategic support force. The first is, paradoxically, evidence of attempts to limit the army's stranglehold on the PLA. The ground forces dominated the balance of forces to such an extent that its officers were present in all headquarters, without having a distinct command. This domination is far from over, as the commanders of the five theatre commands are all army officers¹².

The creation of a strategic support force aims to provide technical support to the digital dimension of the Chinese battlefield. The strategic support force has three weapons: satellites, radar and cyber¹³. The appointment of General

Gao Jin at the head of this new agency shows the importance of coordinating the digital strategy in the ground forces, air force and navy. Gao spent most of his military career in the PLA's second artillery corps (nuclear forces), including during the Taiwan missile crisis in 1995-1996.

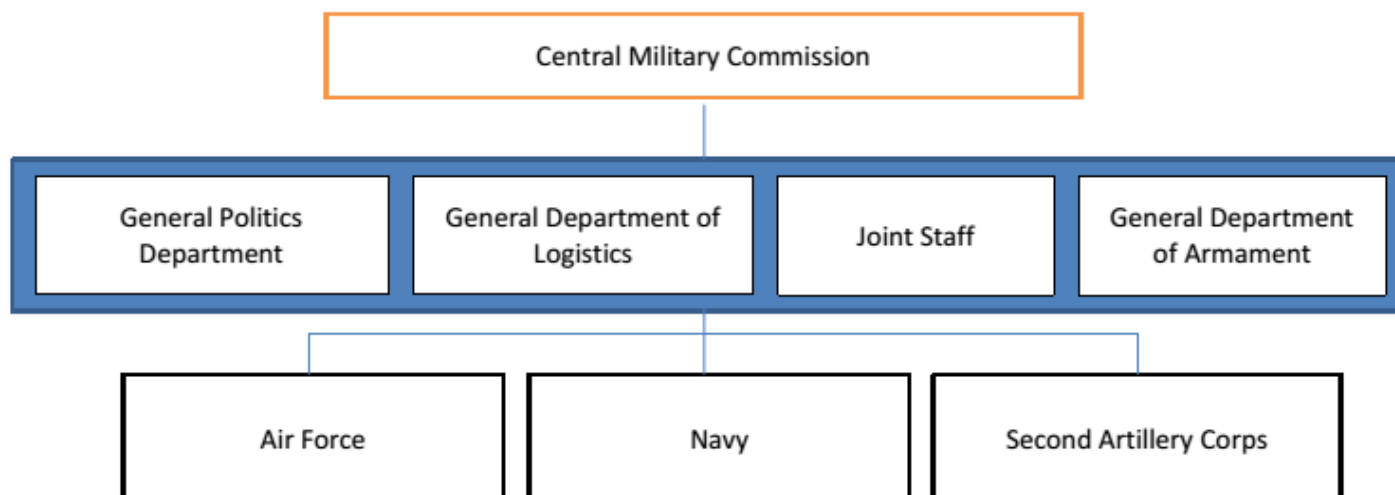
Centralizing the command chain

The final restructuring aspect in the PLA concerns the supreme command structure. The Central Military Commission (CMC), made up of 11 members, remains the supreme command structure. While the 11 current members of the CMC have not changed since 2012, the leadership structure has changed. The CMC executive leaders include a chairman, Xi Jinping, and two deputy chairmen, Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang. However, in 2014, Xi Jinping established a new leadership system for the CMC, which aimed to give decision-making powers to the chairman rather than the triumvirate¹⁴. The four former general headquarters which were previously under its control (joint staff and the general departments for logistics, politics and armament) were divided into fifteen new departments under the CMC.

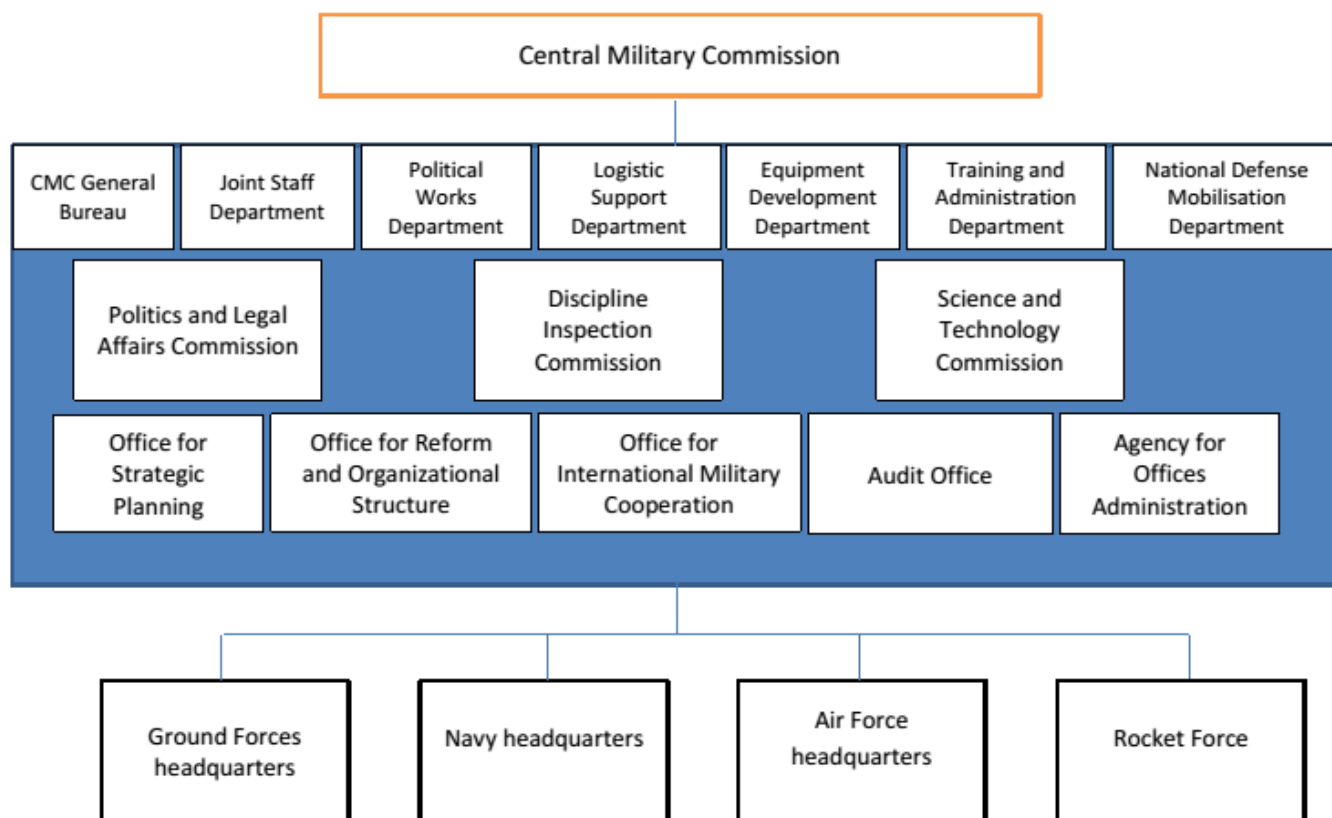
Reinforcing the CMC's power centralises forces command. The division of the general headquarters breaks down the relative independence they had taken from the CMC and gives the Party's higher authorities direct control over anti-corruption monitoring. Previously, this was carried out within the PLA by the general department of politics. Xi created a new Commission of Discipline entirely dedicated to combating corruption and which is now under the direct control of the CMC.

Supreme command structure

Prior to reform:



After reform:



THE UPSURGE OF THE NAVY

China's 2015 White Paper on Defence sets out maritime issues as a strategic priority for the first time, and it is at the forefront of Xi Jinping's vision for national development. Naval power plays an important role in the ideology of the "Chinese Dream", which was initially defined in a negative sense. When Xi Jinping presented this motto for the first time in 2012, it was firmly tied to the Treaty of Nanjing which ended the Opium War in 1842 by giving the British Empire extraterritoriality in five Chinese port cities. Today, in the CPC's official discourse, the Treaty of Nanjing was the beginning of a "century of humiliation" for China, from which it picked itself up only when the CPC founded the PRC in 1949.

The sea became a security issue under Hu Jintao, director of the Central Military Commission from 2004 to 2012. The notion of national security took on a political-economic aspect: the PLA had to support the CPC in its strategy to emerge as a major actor in global trade. Whereas 90% of exported Chinese products are transported by sea, the security of shipping routes has become a priority. Energy provisions, which are essential not just for the country's economic development but also for the functioning of the armed forces, pushed the Chinese navy to conduct its first anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden in 2008¹⁵. The opening of the first permanent Chinese naval base overseas, in Djibouti in February 2016, established a direct link in China's foreign policy between the expansion of China's economic interests overseas and its naval force.

In 2012, Xi Jinping announced he would turn China into a "great maritime country" (建设海洋强国), a strategic turning point for a country that has consistently defined itself as a continental power. In the 1990s, Beijing stabilised its northern and western borders, in particular by setting up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The issue of Kashmir remains a sore one, but China is trying to calm tensions by focusing on economic development with the China-Pakistan trade corridor. As for Vietnam, there are no longer clashes along the land border, but rather in the South

China Sea. Since the early 21st century, tensions in Asia take place at sea, so much so that in 2013 the CPC created a new coastguard agency¹⁶.

This context explains the quick modernisation of the Chinese navy. The government's strategy, deterrent by nature, consists in keeping the Navy out of action while speeding up the modernisation of its equipment. As Asia's greatest navy in terms of manpower, the Chinese navy has a naval battle order composed of 36 destroyers, 59 conventional submarines, 9 nuclear submarines including 4 ballistic missile submarines, and over 200 other surface ships¹⁷. In the past ten years or so, the Chinese Navy has begun to focus on the development of naval aeronautics. China is among a small group of countries (less than ten) that own an aircraft carrier and it is currently building a second.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF XI JINPING

Confronted with a decline in economic growth, even as China's international presence is growing, Xi Jinping has two strong points. On the one hand, he maintains a closer relationship with the military than the two preceding Party secretary generals thanks to his experience in Fujian province, and secondly, he is strongly motivated to reform the state apparatus in order to consolidate the Party's authority. Most of the reforms, in particular the reduction in personnel and the reorganisation of military regions, had been under discussion for a generation, but were hampered by diverging interests within the PLA. The military reforms had to await the presidency of Xi Jinping.

He is at the heart of the "fifth generation" in power in China, and the military reform he launched three years after becoming the Party secretary general distinguishes him from the previous generation of leaders. Hu Jintao's generation (in power from 2002-2012) was made up of technocrats with no connections to the military and so they operated relatively independently of the civilian administration. Even the Party committees within the military were disconnected from the party structure that overlaps with the government in China. The implementation of the anti-corruption campaign in the PLA and the new military command structure are paving the way for the modernisation of the forces and for the Party's increased control over the military.

THE PLA IN NUMBERS

Budget: \$145 billion.

Active personnel: 2 million (ground forces: 1,300,000; air force: 398,000; navy: 235,000; rocket force: 100,000).

Number of divisions: 24 + 105 independent brigades.

Tanks: 6,500 (incl. 800 third generation).

Number of combat planes: 2,300 (incl. 670 fourth generation).

Number of warships: 135 (incl. 1 aircraft carrier, 4 ballistic missile submarines and 5 nuclear attack submarines).¹⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

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¹ The original Mandarin text "中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见", is accessible [here](#).

² Xi Jinping, "Achieving rejuvenation is the dream of the Chinese people", speech given on 29 November 2012 published in: Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, Foreign Languages Press, 2014.

³ The [White Paper is available in English](#).

⁴ Nanjing Military Region covered six provinces, including Fujian. For more on Xi Jinping's staffing policy in the armed forces, see Cheng Li, "[Promoting young guards: the recent high turnover in the PLA leadership](#)", *China Leadership Monitor*, 48, 2015.

⁵ James Mulvenon, "[China's 'Goldwater-Nichols'? The long-awaited PLA reorganization has finally arrived](#)", *China Leadership Monitor*, 49, March 2016.

⁶ The reduction in 2010 was due to an adjustment made following the effects of the financial crisis.

⁷ Sam Perlo-Freeman, "[Economics trumps geopolitics as China announces lowest defence budget increase in years](#)", *Sipri*, 7th March 2016.

⁸ June Teufel Dreyer, "Modernizing the Chinese Military", in Michael Ying-Mao Kau, *China in the Era of Deng Xiaoping*, M. E. Sharpe, 1993, p. 343.

⁹ Office of the secretary of defense, *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Development involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, 26 April 2016, p. 107; The Information Office of the State Council, "[The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces](#)", April 2013.

¹⁰ Wanda Ayuso and Lonnie Henley, "[Aspiring To Jointness: PLA Training, Exercises, and Doctrine, 2008-2012](#)", in Roy Kamphausen, *et al.*, *Assessing The People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, United States Army War College Press, 2014, p. 171.

¹¹ Allen Kenneth W., *et al.*, "[The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What is Known, Unknown, and Speculation](#)", *Jamestown Foundation*, China Brief Parts 1 and 2, January-February 2016.

¹² Minnie Chan, "[China's Army Keeps Grip on Top Military Jobs in 'Compromise' Reshuffle](#)", *South China Morning Post*, 6 January 2016.

¹³ John Costello, "[The Strategic Support Force: China's Information Warfare Service](#)", *The Jamestown Foundation*, China Brief, February 2016.

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¹⁵ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience*, US Naval War College, 2013, p. 13.

¹⁶ Ryan D. Martinson, "[From Words to Actions: The Creation of the China Coast Guard](#)", presentation at the "China as a 'Maritime Power'" conference, CNA, Arlington, Virginia, United States, 28-29 July 2015.

¹⁷ Office of Naval Intelligence, [The PLA Navy, New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century](#), 2015, p. 11.

¹⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, [The Military Balance 2016](#), 2016.