

## Introduction

# A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions

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### Abstract

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been undergoing a profound transformation in terms of its operational capabilities, both with regard to its *hardware* as well as its *heartware*, i.e. the softer aspects of its development including its operational culture and military ethos. These changes have permeated every facet of the PLA – technological, organizational and doctrinal. Despite successive generations of Chinese leaders having declared their adherence to “peace” and “development,” it has become clearer that Beijing's security policy under Xi Jinping has shifted steadily away from “keeping a low profile.” In that regard, the status of the PLA in the domestic and international calculus of China's new commander-in-chief has, unsurprisingly, become more pronounced, with Xi taking noticeably greater interest in harnessing the Chinese Communist Party's coercive forces as his personal domestic powerbase and foreign policy instrument complementing China's hard economic power.

**Keywords:** People's Liberation Army; Xi Jinping; civil–military relations; Chinese foreign policy; national defence strategy; military doctrine; military modernizations

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Despite a grand parade of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) most advanced weaponry following more than two decades of modernization, China's president, Xi Jinping 习近平, nevertheless used the pretext of commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Chinese victory in the Second World War to allay fears over what the PLA's growing capabilities would mean for the watching world. While the display was portrayed by China's state media as further

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testament to Beijing's commitment to peace,<sup>1</sup> popular Western analyses – quite on the contrary – have suggested that the proposed troop cuts and other expected reforms have the opposite effect of honing the PLA's offensive capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Following a subsequent conference, chaired by Xi as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), to reshape the PLA further,<sup>3</sup> a slew of proposals to overhaul its command and operational structures hint at a grander scheme by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to continue devoting the country's national resources towards enhancing the PLA's war-fighting capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

That the assessments between a less bashful media and a more circumspect academe on the PLA's ability – and appetite – for military adventurism differ is nothing new.<sup>5</sup> Despite successive generations of Chinese leaders' adherence to the themes of "peace" and "development," it has grown clearer that Beijing's security and foreign policy under Xi has shifted markedly away from "keeping a low profile." In that regard, the status of the PLA in the domestic and international calculus of the new commander-in-chief has unsurprisingly become more pronounced. In his capacity as China's party-state-military leader, Xi has taken noticeably greater interest in harnessing the PLA as his personal domestic powerbase<sup>6</sup> and as a foreign policy tool complementing China's hard economic assets.<sup>7</sup> The increased efforts devoted by the Chinese leader towards military affairs, vis-à-vis other national concerns, alongside the growing influence of the PLA in China's national security and foreign policymaking point to the growing clout of the military constituency in China.<sup>8</sup>

The articles in this special supplementary section of *The China Quarterly* share a central theme: the recalibration of the PLA's roles and missions since Xi Jinping assumed the trifecta of Chinese party-state-military power. First presented at the conference "Reshaping the PLA since the 18th Party Congress" organized by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in October 2015, these contributions seek to explore in greater depth some of the

1 Xi referred to his announcement to discharge 300,000 soldiers as a gesture of peace. See "Full text of Chinese president's speech at commemoration of 70th anniversary war victory," Xinhuanet, 3 September 2015.

2 See, e.g., "China's military parade was a 'peaceful' show of force," *The Washington Post*, 4 September 2015; "Chinese military parade's main message is not peace but power," *The Guardian*, 3 September 2015; "China parades 'carrier-killer' missile through Beijing," *Financial Times*, 3 September 2015.

3 "China vows military reform by 2020, with plans for new anti-corruption watchdog in PLA," *South China Morning Post*, 26 November 2015.

4 "During his visit to Guangzhou Military Region (MR), Xi Jinping stresses putting in hard work to consolidate national defence and strengthen the military, for the joint achievement of a rich nation and a strong military," *South China Morning Post*, 12 December 2015. Alongside his exhortations to the PLA to realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by striving for a "strong military dream," Xi has also underlined the necessity for soldiers to "fight wars – and win them."

5 Shambaugh 1996.

6 For scholarly assessments of the CCP-PLA dynamic, see Swaine 1992; Joffe 1996; Mulvenon 2001; Shambaugh 2002; Li, Nan 2006; and more recently, You 2016a.

7 For examples of the PLA's role in China's foreign policy, see Joffe 1997; Swaine 2012; You 2014 and Saunders and Scobell 2016.

8 Among his formal appointments as CMC chairman, CCP secretary general, and state president, Xi devotes at least half a day to military affairs per week.

issues aforementioned and scrutinize the enhancements in the PLA's operational capabilities, both in terms of its hardware as well as its "heartware" – the human elements of its development such as operational culture and doctrine. Alongside the growth of Chinese comprehensive power in the diplomatic, economic, military and soft power realms, the analyses that follow detail how the PLA's threat perceptions have evolved and how China's military elites have been planning for present and future contingencies. In light of recent developments, these papers could not have come at a more opportune time for PLA watchers who study how Chinese military planners perceive the international security landscape as they continue to reconfigure their national strategies to mitigate those risks. In all, the articles document the transformative change the PLA has undergone since the profound realization of its previous limitations in regard to the US' advanced military operations of the previous century.<sup>9</sup> They detail the enhancements in the PLA's stronger technological base and evolving doctrine, spurred on by Chinese national desire for a "powerful armed forces which are commensurate with China's international standing and meet the needs of its security and development interests."<sup>10</sup> Indubitably, these changes will privilege the CCP leadership with additional (martial) options as Beijing mitigates the risks and challenges arising from its growing global economic clout in an increasingly complex security environment.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the articles also point to continuity amidst change. Being a Party instrument, the PLA's conservatism and adherence to empiricism also mean that it can be expected to remain acquiescent to the overall foreign and security policy stipulated by its civilian masters.<sup>12</sup> As the CCP's armed servants, PLA elites continue to harbour designs on the liberation of Taiwan – forcibly, if necessary. From a purely military angle as well, problems in its power projection capabilities have likewise persisted. While it has been tasked with a significantly greater number of missions further away from the Chinese mainland, diminishing marginal returns as a technological latecomer coupled with persistent shortcomings in China's defence-industrial sector inherently mean that the PLA will continue to face challenges in reconciling the conflict between acquiring cost-effective quality armaments and realizing defence-industrial autarky. Greater still, Chinese military leaders themselves present perhaps the greatest barrier before the PLA can realize its potential. It would be remiss to overlook the fact that Xi waited

9 Bower et al. 2016. A number of single-authored treatises on the PLA, including You 1999 and Shambaugh 2002, depict the first Persian Gulf War as a turning point in China's military modernizations.

10 State Council 2013. Beijing surpassed Tokyo as the world's second-largest economy in 2010. See "China passes Japan as the second-largest economy," *The New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

11 According to the State Council's (2015) *China's Military Strategy*, "Building a strong national defence and powerful armed forces is a strategic task of China's modernization drive and a security guarantee for China's peaceful development" (1). In no uncertain terms, a *Global Times* editorial underlined the importance of a strong military force lest "the outside world will only consider that peace is only [China's] compulsory choice." See "Military reshuffle carries deep significance," *Global Times*, 2 February 2016.

12 Saunders and Scobell 2016, 10.

three years after he first assumed power over the Party's coercive forces before his calls to reform this interest group grew louder.<sup>13</sup> Whereas there may have been utility in the time lapse in allowing him to prepare his troops for change, it is plausible that he first had to consolidate his civilian authority over the military to overcome elite resistance within its ranks.<sup>14</sup>

Any attempt to summarize the analytically insightful findings that follow may be considered futile. Nonetheless, this rudimentary introduction aims to survey the recent developments in Chinese military affairs and identify the key trends that have emerged in the PLA's strategic thinking, roles and missions since the 18th Party Congress, as well as draw out a number of principal insights and conclusions. Clustered under three themes, this preamble places the following under scrutiny: 1) the politics of the PLA, in particular, the clearly heightened status of the PLA in the Chinese political system and a reorientation of its status in elite decision making in the larger context of China's national security and foreign policy framework; 2) PLA professionalism, chiefly, developments in its command and control, force structure, doctrine, defence-industrial complex as well as its enhanced capabilities in challenging US mastery of the commons in the Western Pacific; and 3) the PLA and international security, concentrating on its role as a relevant stakeholder in framing Beijing's position on regional flash-points, its refashioning of itself as a complementary policy instrument vis-à-vis Chinese economic diplomacy, and assessing the claim that it is a force for world peace.<sup>15</sup> This introductory article ends with some concluding remarks on the recently institutionalized military reforms.

## The Politics of the PLA

The clearest trend to have emerged in China's domestic politics has been the shift away from the consensus decision-making system that led to the political gridlock which afflicted the previous administration under Hu Jintao 胡锦涛. Where Xi Jinping's command of the gun is concerned, as Kou Chien-wen notes in his contribution, the new leader has distinguished himself from his immediate

13 "Xi Jinping zai zhongyang junwei gaige gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao quanmian shishi gaige qiangjun zhanlue jiangding buyi zou Zhongguo tese qiangjun zhi lu" (At CMC Reform Work Conference, Xi Jinping stresses the comprehensive implementation of reform strategies to strengthen the military unwaveringly with Chinese characteristics), *Jiefang jun bao*, 27 November 2015. The latest PLA reforms were officially announced in late November 2015, three years after Xi became CMC chairman. It ought to be noted that the restructuring was first mooted at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, and prior to that, at the moment of China's political transition in 2012. See "Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress," Xinhuanet, 17 November 2012.

14 Li, Cheng 2015. The view that Xi first had to consolidate his grip on the PLA before reshaping it is shared by prominent Chinese scholars and senior PLA officers with whom the authors have spoken. However, resistance continues as evinced by a commentary in the *Jiefang jun bao* alluding to the "lack of discipline" within the rank-and-file. See "Zhansheng zhi lu" (Road to winning wars), *Jiefang jun bao*, 14 December 2015. The *South China Morning Post* also notes that the new theatre commands are still dominated by ground forces officers. See "China's army keeps grip on top military jobs in 'compromise' reshuffle," *South China Morning Post*, 6 February 2016.

15 State Council 2015.

predecessor with his enthusiasm for running the military and his re-emphasis on the “CMC chairman responsibility system” (*junwei zhuxi fuze zhi* 军委主席负责制) as the foundation of his authority. In spite of Xi’s lack of revolutionary credentials and limited military experience, he has been able to project the image of an effectual commander-in-chief.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, while he has been noted for his swift consolidation of political power and stronger personal authority over the party-state-military machinery, his case had also been helped by the “naked exit” of Hu’s relinquishment of the trifecta of power. Thus, unlike Hu – and Jiang Zemin 江泽民 – Xi is unencumbered by Party elders; conversely, the PLA has likewise not been undermined by having to answer to “two centres” of power or be deprived of its access to the apex of Chinese political power that is the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC).<sup>17</sup>

### *Xi Jinping–PLA relations*

A key factor behind Xi’s success in breaking with the tradition of having to defer to retired Party leaders so prevalent in the patron–client relationships in contemporary Chinese politics lies in his signature anti-corruption campaign. Upon coming to power, and sharing Hu’s view that the PLA’s inability to deal with corruption would deal a “fatal” blow to the regime,<sup>18</sup> Xi beseeched senior PLA leaders in his inaugural speech to practise what they preach:

Our officers and soldiers will maintain an indomitable revolutionary spirit and be dauntless in combat. We will make every effort to combat corruption and promote integrity in the army. Senior officers must take a clear-cut stand against corruption, and set an example in abiding by the code of honest conduct.<sup>19</sup>

Similar to other party-state bureaucracies, the PLA has also been purged of its corrupt elements in the wake of the crisis of legitimacy that beset the former administration. From among the senior and junior officers – the so-called “tigers” and “flies” – to be implicated to date, a few dozen leaders at the deputy corps level or above have found themselves in the cross hairs of the anti-graft dragnet.<sup>20</sup> Given the unprecedented level of PLA autonomy under Hu, the number of political commissars and logistics officers also point to those sectors where graft had been rampant. The selective nature of the fight against corruption notwithstanding,<sup>21</sup> Xi’s aggressive style of leadership is seen as a necessary unravelling of the institutional and structural flaws that had crept into the

16 See [http://www.chinaviva.com/biography/Xi\\_Jinping/career](http://www.chinaviva.com/biography/Xi_Jinping/career). Besides serving under a former defence minister as personal secretary, Xi also assumed military roles in Hebei, Fujian and Zhejiang prior to his appointment to the CMC as one of Hu’s deputies alongside generals Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou at the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the 17th Party Congress.

17 Joffe 2006, 17.

18 Hu, Jintao 2012.

19 Xi 2014, 237–39.

20 The downfall of the PLA’s highest-ranking (albeit retired) officers, Guo and Xu, follows the same pattern as for other political elites in which the associates of intended targets were brought down prior to the targets’ own indictments.

21 Guo 2014.

PLA in the post-reform period before the latest military reforms could be effected.<sup>22</sup> Still, as Kou Chien-wen concludes in his article, apart from rooting out corruption, the promotion of Xi's image as China's top leader as well as the dissolution of rival political factions also feature in his fight against military malfeasance.

*China's changing security policymaking framework*

Xi has also defied the norm of functional division and complexity that has come to define the PBSC membership since the 1990s by circumventing the power-sharing arrangements between Party elites. Towards that end, he has asserted his authority over the Central Leading Groups (CLGs) for National Defence and Military Reforms; Foreign Affairs; and National Security, among others.<sup>23</sup> Not merely relying on exhortations to execute his orders in various broad issue areas, Xi has turned to these newly formed top-level decision-making committees by merging pre-existing institutional units. Regarding the amalgamation of the Foreign Affairs and National Security CLGs into the Central National Security Commission (CNSC), Joel Wuthnow's contribution provides further proof of Xi's efforts to consolidate his control over party-state-military apparatuses, and adds to the existing literature on the role of the PLA within what many observers believe to be Beijing's answer to the US National Security Council. While details of the body remain sketchy – with questions raised about its organizational structure and functionality within the larger political system<sup>24</sup> – Wuthnow otherwise refers to it as an epochal development in the evolution of Beijing's national security decision-making process. In his argument, the establishment of the CNSC is a reflection of the unique challenges facing China in the 21st century and fulfils a long-held desire among Chinese elites for a centralized platform from which to deliberate on national security issues. Indeed, authoritative evidence regarding the extent and degree of PLA representation on the CNSC – in relation to other Party and state apparatuses – is also indicative that the body will assume both a domestic and foreign dimension in addressing crisis situations, thus reaffirming the role of the military in both *internal* as well as *external* security affairs. Still, the onerous task of coordinating the various constituencies – and concomitant elite bureaucratic resistance – effectively means that it may be some time yet before the regime's crisis management capabilities can be boosted significantly. While Xi may have succeeded in centralizing China's national security decision-making process, more work needs to be

22 McCauley 2015. For a discussion of civil–military relations in China's post-reform era, see Godwin 1999.

23 Critically, the authority of the Central Leading Groups (CLGs) means they are able to circumvent the party-state's most important institutions headed by other CCP elites. Xi has placed himself at the head of seven CLGs overseeing the Party, state, military – and even the economy (traditionally a portfolio under the premier). For an overview of the CLGs and their significance, see Hu, Weixing 2016.

24 You 2016b.

done in terms of coordinating a unified civilian–military response in the event of a future national crisis.

*China's civil–military relations and the PLA's worldview*

In the short- to medium-term, however, we can expect the PLA's influence to be more crucial in China's domestic affairs. With civilian and military elites concurring that the country's greatest challenge comes from within, Party leaders will want to be certain that the PLA's allegiance to the CCP remains its *raison d'être*.<sup>25</sup> While massive violent suppressions in the manner of Tiananmen can be reasonably ruled out in the near future, military leaders will still be counted on by the regime as the latter's last line of defence.<sup>26</sup> Following the factional strife between political elites that was brought to the fore by the Bo Xilai 薄熙来 affair, the role of the PLA in China's elite politics has once again come under the spotlight.<sup>27</sup> With Bo's downfall considered to be contingent on support from the PLA,<sup>28</sup> Xi Jinping has unsurprisingly strengthened his grip over the military – as well as China's internal security forces – via a series of purges and reshuffles. Clearly, Hu's "reign without overt rule,"<sup>29</sup> and the collapse of the Communist Party of the former Soviet Union,<sup>30</sup> would have informed the current leader of the need to secure the servitude of the PLA to maintain his rule and preserve China's single-party system. Xi's insistence on the political reliability of the military is laid bare in a leaked internal speech to top cadres:

Why must we stand firm on the Party's leadership over the military? Because that's the lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, where the military was depoliticized, separated from the party and nationalized, the party was disarmed. A few people tried to save the Soviet Union; they seized Gorbachev, but within a few days it was turned around again, because they didn't have the instruments to exert power. Yeltsin gave a speech standing on a tank, but the military made no response, keeping so-called "neutrality" ... A big party was gone just like that.<sup>31</sup>

In light of a number of incidents that have suggested civil–military strife, the search for answers regarding the extent of the PLA's subservience to China's civilian leadership is of utmost importance in predicting the trajectory of

25 In fact, Deng's principle of "biding time and building one's capabilities" was originally intended for domestic purposes in the aftermath of Tiananmen. Facing an uncertain international situation in which the major Western powers had suspended diplomatic relations and imposed economic and political sanctions on Beijing, Deng was said to have instructed CCP cadres to observe calmly, secure the Party's position, and cope with affairs prudently. The essence of his guiding principle was later to evolve into the maxim: "observe soberly, secure its position, meet challenges calmly, never seek leadership, hide brightness and cherish obscurity, get some things done."

26 Blasko 2006.

27 Page and Wei (2012) reported that Bo purportedly tried to court the support of the 14th group army soon after learning of his political troubles.

28 You 2016a, 37.

29 You 2015a, 156.

30 Within the first year of Xi's rule, a video series about the Soviet collapse is said to have become compulsory viewing for cadres. See "Twin historic traumas shape Xi Jinping's China presidency," *The Washington Post*, 2 March 2015.

31 Gao 2013.

Beijing's future development.<sup>32</sup> In the larger scheme of things, civil–military relations with respect to the PLA's support for the greater cause is also writ large in China's overall behaviour in its external environment.

Looking at the bigger picture of Beijing's grand strategy to mobilize and utilize all available resources to advance Xi Jinping's "China dream,"<sup>33</sup> one can reasonably infer that the PLA would seek to operationalize its efforts towards realizing an international order conducive to Chinese geopolitical and economic objectives. While the PLA remains an understandably strong interest group within the context of China's foreign policy formulation and implementation, one can expect that the PLA's professional worldview will continue to be shaped first and foremost by assessments of the international order as determined by China's civilian leaders.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, although the military's emphases may differ from those of its civilian counterparts, it inherently focuses on parochial issues. Whilst the balance between *subjective* and *objective* control remains an ideal to aspire to, rather than fact,<sup>35</sup> the extent to which China's military leaders seek to influence national policymaking is largely restricted to those areas in which they clearly have the expertise – and not just underlying interests – and where their professional advice is sought. Such areas would include US arms sales to Taiwan; sovereignty and territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas; maritime security; and the growing threat of American naval operations in the Indo-Pacific region. However, alongside a less restrictive ideological environment within Chinese society in the post-Deng era, the PLA's own opening up to the world and overseas experiences may yet have serious ramifications for the worldview of its rank-and-file.

### PLA's Growing Professionalism

The modernization of the PLA *as a military organization* has been two-fold. On the one hand, it has entailed the physical upgrading of its fighting force and the embracement of a new operational concept: "informationized warfare" in place of "people's war." Equally important, it has also culminated in its transformation into a professional fighting force akin to most contemporary militaries. Ultimately, the PLA seeks to turn itself into a modern, network-enabled fighting force, capable of projecting sustained power throughout the Asia-Pacific region. If successful, then the long-term trends in China's military modernization carry

32 A prime example of such strife is Robert Gates' claim in his autobiography that the PLA had failed to inform its then commander-in-chief about the launch of its J-20 stealth fighter. See Scobell 2011. More recently, apparent stand-offs between the PLA and India's border troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) also coincided with official visits by top Chinese leaders. See "China says no LAC stand-off with India; seeks clarification," *Asia Times*, 14 September 2015.

33 This pertains to the achievement of China's two centenary goals: a moderately prosperous society by 2021, and a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and modern socialist country by 2049.

34 State Council 2015, Section I.

35 Bacevich 2011.



the potential to “pose credible threats to modern militaries operating in the region.”<sup>36</sup>

The PLA has been attempting to improve the quality of its training by increasing the realism, complexity and “jointness” of its training and exercises. Traditionally, training was conducted in small units belonging to a single branch (for example, infantry, frigates, or fighter aircrafts) and was performed in benign conditions that included familiar terrain, daylight, good weather and either with or without an opposing force or forces whose actions were predetermined and briefed to each other. Now, however, training is routinely conducted on unfamiliar terrain, at night or in inclement weather, and against opposing forces whose actions are not predetermined. Some training areas now have dedicated opposing forces that simulate the tactics of potential adversaries and are allowed to defeat the visiting unit. Finally, rigorous evaluation and critique have become an integral part of PLA training, with units required to meet standardized performance benchmarks or else undergo remedial training.<sup>37</sup>

### *The PLA's maritime ambitions*

The modernization of PLA hardware over the past 20 years or so is well documented. This is particularly so for the PLA navy (PLAN), which is quickly becoming China's leading force for projecting power.<sup>38</sup> While Beijing has added hundreds of modern combat aircraft to its inventories, along with dozens of improved destroyers, frigates and submarines, and several new missile systems, the quality and capabilities of these new weapons systems are also noticeably superior to the aging equipment they have replaced. According to China's 2015 Defence White Paper, the PLA will continue to downgrade land operations, all but abandoning “people's war” except in name and in terms of political propaganda, in favour of placing new stress and importance on seapower and force projection: “The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”<sup>39</sup> As a result, the PLAN “will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defence’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defence’ with ‘open seas protection’.”<sup>40</sup> This is an evolutionary departure from what was announced in the 2006 document on national defence, which proclaimed that the PLA “aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations.”<sup>41</sup> This will require a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure. As such, the PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack,

36 Office of the Secretary of Defense 2006, i.

37 Ibid., 46, 50–51.

38 See, e.g., Erickson et al. 2010.

39 State Council 2015, Section IV. See also Blasko 2015.

40 State Council 2015, Section IV.

41 State Council 2006, Section II.

maritime manoeuvres, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defence and comprehensive support.<sup>42</sup> Positing that the stable and predictable Asia-Pacific military balance can be outmanoeuvred by innovative doctrines, Lyle Goldstein highlights that the Chinese navy may yet prevail over a more superior foe in competing for command of the commons. By examining the Sino-US balance of power as a series of interacting campaigns, he challenges the conventional wisdom that the US can outgun China on the basis of its advantages in certain domains alone.

*“Informationization” and fighting future wars*

Concurrently, the PLA has adopted a new operational concept known as “informatized warfare.” In particular, “informatization” (*xinxi hua* 信息化) means that information technologies – especially those capabilities relating to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) – are considered paramount to expanding military effectiveness. This entails, among other things, dominating the electromagnetic spectrum through “integrated network electronic warfare” as well as exploiting technological advances in microelectronics, sensors, propulsion, stealth and special materials to outfit the PLA with precision-strike weapons including ballistic and anti-ship or land-attack cruise missiles. In effect, the PLA, in transitioning from “people’s war” to “fighting limited local wars under conditions of informatization,” has sought to shift from being a *platform*-centric to a more *network*-centric force – or more precisely, one where the crucial characteristic of the force is the networked linkages among platforms, as opposed to the platforms themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Beginning around the turn of this century, the PLA thus began to embrace the concept of “informatization,” this time influenced by Western writings on the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) and interconnected concepts of “network-centric warfare” (NCW). By the middle of the previous decade, it was apparent that China was particularly enamoured with the concept of NCW. Many in the PLA saw considerable potential for force multipliers in such areas as information warfare, the digitization of the battlefield and networked systems.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, adversaries who are highly dependent on advanced technology – such as the US – were seen as susceptible to low-tech countermeasures or attacks on their own command, control and communications capabilities. Consequently, as laid out in its 2004 Defence White Paper, the PLA officially embraced the doctrine of winning “limited local wars under conditions of ‘informatization.’”<sup>45</sup> Under such conditions, this type of warfare was still seen – as with earlier concepts of

42 Cordesman and Colley 2015, 41.

43 You 2004a.

44 You 2004b.

45 State Council 2004, Section II.

“limited local war” – as revolving around short-duration, high-intensity conflicts characterized by agility, speed and long-range attack. As a further refinement, however, “limited local wars under conditions of ‘informatization’” entailed joint operations fought simultaneously throughout the entire air, land, sea, space and electromagnetic battle grounds (i.e. five-dimensional warfare), and relying heavily upon extremely lethal high-technology weapons. Such an operational doctrine also emphasizes pre-emption, surprise and “shock value,” given that the earliest stages of conflict may be crucial to the outcome of a war.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, “limited local wars under conditions of ‘informatization’” stressed mobility, flexibility, power projection, precision-strikes and joint operations fought throughout the entire battle space.<sup>47</sup>

The most recent iteration of PLA doctrine was apparently revealed last year, that is, “informationized warfare” which lays out an even greater emphasis on “informatization” and makes it central to operational concepts:

To implement the military strategic guideline of active defence in the new situation, China’s armed forces will innovate basic operational doctrines. In response to security threats from different directions and in line with their current capabilities, the armed forces will adhere to the principles of flexibility, mobility and self-dependence ... Integrated combat forces will be employed to prevail in system-vs-system operations featuring information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations.<sup>48</sup>

Further differentiating the current “informationized warfare” from its earlier manifestations, there is much greater emphasis placed on operations in outer space and cyberspace. As the 2015 White Paper puts it:

Cyberspace has become a new pillar of economic and social development, and a new domain of national security. As international strategic competition in cyberspace has been turning increasingly fiercer, quite a few countries are developing their cyber military forces ... As cyberspace weighs more in military security, China will expedite the development of a cyber force, and enhance its capabilities of cyberspace situation awareness, cyber defence ... and maintain national security and social stability.<sup>49</sup>

With outer space having now “become a commanding height in international strategic competition,” there is acknowledgement among Chinese defence planners that the weaponization of outer space is increasingly a fact of life and a key future battleground. Consequently, the PLA intends to “keep abreast of the dynamics of outer space, deal with security threats and challenges in that domain, and secure its space assets to serve its national economic and social development, and maintain outer space security.”<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, the modernization of the PLA has, since the late 1990s, entailed an ambitious “double construction” transformational effort of simultaneously pursuing both the mechanization and informatization of its armed forces.<sup>51</sup> On

46 Office of the Secretary of Defense 2007, 5, 11–14.

47 State Council 2004, Section III; Office of the Secretary of Defense 2011, 22.

48 State Council 2015, Section III.

49 Ibid., Section IV.

50 Ibid. See also McReynolds 2015.

51 You 2004a; State Council 2004, Section III.

the one hand, the PLA started to upgrade its arsenal of conventional “industrial age” weapons through upgrades and retrofits (“mods and pods”), including improved communications systems, new sensors and seekers, improved precision, night-vision capabilities, etc. Simultaneously, it began to build informationalized capabilities by putting greater effort and resources into C4I infrastructures, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, networking, and information warfare.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the PLA put considerable emphasis on upgrading its C4ISR assets – including launching a constellation of communication, surveillance and navigation satellites – while also developing its capabilities to wage “integrated network electronic warfare,” i.e. an amalgam of electronic warfare (jamming the enemy’s communications and intelligence-gathering assets); offensive information warfare (hacking or disrupting the enemy’s computer networks); and physical attacks on the enemy’s C4ISR network.<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, China has begun to contemplate how “informationized” force modernization efforts should blend with actions intended to increase professionalization and “jointness” within the PLA. Training and education for PLA officers and NCOs have been intensified, while recent military exercises have since also emphasized amphibious warfare with “limited multi-service participation.” Across the services, the PLA air force (PLAAF) and PLAN air forces have devoted more training time to supporting amphibious operations, while PLA ground forces have increasingly integrated training and exercises with maritime, airborne and special operations forces, which give prominence to “jointness,” rapid mobilization, deployability and over-the-horizon operations.<sup>54</sup>

### *Integrating the services, streamlining the commands*

The recent structural and organizational reforms of the PLA in late 2015 and early 2016 must be viewed through the lens of this professionalization process. The establishment of a new PLA Ground Force, along with the establishment of the PLA Rocket Force (from the former PLA Second Artillery Corps), can be understood as efforts to de-emphasize the PLA’s “army-centric mindset,” especially at a time when Xi Jinping and the CMC are placing a new priority on force projection, and in particular, sea power and airpower.<sup>55</sup> This reduction in importance accorded to the army is also in line with Xi’s announcement in September 2015 of a 300,000 troop reduction – most of which will come from the land forces, and which, incidentally, will also free up funding for further force modernization.<sup>56</sup>

52 Office of the Secretary of Defense 2007, 21–22; “Chinese see military dependence on computers as weakness,” *International Herald Tribune*, 29 August 2007.

53 You 2004a; Minnick 2006.

54 Blasko 2006, 91–120 and 144–170.

55 “Xi’s new model army,” *The Economist*, 16 January 2016.

56 Tiezzi 2015.

In conjunction with these high-level, central command-oriented reforms, the CMC chairman has also overhauled the PLA's regional commands. Under the previous military region (MR) system based on geography, the commander-in-chief's "joint operations to gain victory" would not work. For example, the compartmentalization of the individual MRs; the lack of integration within large combat organizations; a huge top-heavy, bottom-light (and a tail); and overlapping functions are all ill-suited to the systemic integration of combat forces in the information age.<sup>57</sup> Thus, in early 2016, the CMC finalized plans to re-zone the seven MRs into five theatre commands. According to some, this reorganization is intended to create regional commands capable of carrying out joint operations – i.e. land, air and sea – within these new zones. Additionally, the independence of the former regional commands is being reigned in, as the new CMC-controlled subsidiary organs will subsume many of the functions of the former MRs, including training and logistics.<sup>58</sup> As one PLA watcher puts it, the new battle zones are "designed to streamline command-and-control functions and organizationally restructure the PLA into a military better able to wage war in the information age and make it more accountable to the party."<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, the PLA appears to be progressing towards becoming a more professional and truly "informationized" armed forces. Moreover, the Chinese leadership appears prepared to dedicate adequate resources over the longer term to underwrite the PLA's informationization. National defence spending has, until quite recently, increased by near double-digit percentages each year. Chinese military expenditures hit US\$141.5 billion in 2015, and it is likely that around US\$47 billion of that was dedicated to equipment spending, of which perhaps US\$5 billion to US\$10 billion (or more) was allocated to defence research and development (R&D). This would make Beijing the second highest spender in the world in terms of procurement and perhaps the second or third highest when it comes to defence R&D spending.<sup>60</sup> This upward trend is likely to continue for some time. Arguably, if anything has had a positive impact on the defence industry, it is this explosion in defence spending – by increasing procurement and therefore production; by expanding R&D spending; and by subsidizing the upgrading and modernization of the country's arms-manufacturing facilities. Consequently, China's defence industrial base is better suited than ever to absorb and leverage advanced, militarily relevant technologies and therefore provide the PLA with the advanced systems it requires. It thus follows that China is increasingly capable of implementing the doctrine of "informationized warfare."<sup>61</sup>

57 Mulvenon 2014.

58 *The Economist*, 16 January 2016; "Xi completes reorganization of the PLA," *Taipei Times*, 3 February 2016.

59 *Taipei Times*, 3 February 2016.

60 China's actual defence R&D budget is unknown, but based on its overall military spending, it is not unreasonable to assume that the regime allocates anywhere between US\$5 billion and US\$10 billion on military R&D.

61 "China threatens US military superiority: defense official," AFP, 29 January 2014. Frank Kendall, US under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, alluded to China's growing

## The PLA and International Security

Despite the relative dearth in the PLA's emerging capabilities when contrasted with US military strength,<sup>62</sup> regional economic development and Beijing's increasing materiel capabilities have nevertheless transformed the Asia-Pacific balance of power, giving rise to what appears to be the cusp of a security dilemma-induced military competition<sup>63</sup> – and at the same time, improving the finances of the world's defence producers!<sup>64</sup> In so doing, this change has fuelled responses from security planners in Washington and the Asia-Pacific region to counter the PLA's qualitative improvements. Even as the literature on China's military development has proliferated in the post-Deng era, the periodic need for any military to adapt to changing international circumstances means that gaps in the extant research shall continue to persist.<sup>65</sup> Although our reading of how the PLA's putative ability to fight future wars in presupposed security flashpoints can never be perfect, an informed judgement of its strategic mentality and order of battle nevertheless helps us to predict how a future conflict and its probable trajectory will look. Accordingly, China's defence planners have identified, first and foremost, an all-out war with Washington, which PLA elites believe is bent on toppling the CCP regime, as the most likely scenario.<sup>66</sup> This is followed by a major conflict to reclaim Taiwan in the event of the latter declaring *de jure* independence. Third, a limited campaign over land and/or sea around the Chinese periphery such as a future North Korean nuclear threat, the Sino-Indian border, or the East and South China Seas. And last, countering terrorism within Chinese borders.<sup>67</sup>

### *The PLA and cross-Strait relations*

In view of the Sino-US power asymmetry and Xi Jinping's desire to escape the Thucydides Trap, for the time being at least,<sup>68</sup> potential flashpoints, if the PLA were indeed to be called into action, will likely be those between Beijing

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*footnote continued*

technological prowess when he testified before Congress in January 2014 that the US military is “being challenged in ways that [he has] not seen for decades,” adding that “technological superiority is not assured and [it] cannot be complacent about [its] posture.”

62 Mathieson 2016.

63 Liff and Ikenberry 2014.

64 Minnick 2016; Hayton 2014.

65 Chinese civilian–military leaders' evolving threat assessments notwithstanding, any attempt to comprehend the evolving orientation of the PLA's strategic goals and missions is hampered by the secretive nature of national security.

66 According to China's top military think tank, Washington employs a combination of strategies to foment political unrest in China (Academy of Military Science 2013, 79). See also *Jiaoliang wusheng* (*Silent Contest*), a film produced by the PLA National Defence University (2013), the former general staff and general political departments, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

67 You 2016a.

68 The White House 2013.

and countries along China's periphery.<sup>69</sup> Despite the fact that Tsai Ing-wen's 蔡英文 promise to maintain the status quo is fundamentally no different from Ma Ying-jeou's 馬英九 "three nos," the threat of war over Beijing's primary core interest remains very real. With China's monolithic civil–military position of not renouncing the use of force,<sup>70</sup> the PLA's improved capabilities to complete the mission assigned to it since 1949 coupled with a more risk-tolerant CMC chairman may yet see a return of the Taiwan flashpoint.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, political reality and differentials in US–China military power dictate that the PLA leadership will likewise persist with Hu Jintao's policy to bring about "peaceful development," with reunification pushed to the backburner. Yet, unforeseen developments and uncertainties mean that we cannot remain clear-eyed about what the PLA will do when its power reaches tipping point.<sup>72</sup> As the primary driver of Chinese military modernization, preparation for cross-Strait conflict scenarios is likely to remain in place.

### *Overseas economic expansion and non-traditional security concerns*

Still, it is too early to presume that Beijing's growing capabilities will lead to a greater security role for the PLA akin to the US global strategic posture in the near to medium term. As evinced by the Chinese government's muted reactions in the aftermath of the recent killing of Chinese nationals in Africa and the Middle East, the PLA continues to be wary of overseas expeditions despite new legislation permitting its deployment abroad.<sup>73</sup> Although elite Chinese thinking on the sovereignty–intervention dynamic has become less dogmatic in the post-9/11 environment,<sup>74</sup> the PLA's overseas actions will probably exclude anti-terrorism ground offensives – with its deployments in the Middle East, for instance, limited to intelligence information exchange, technical cooperation and personnel training.<sup>75</sup> However, a different narrative emerges regarding

69 While alert to "uncertainty in China's neighbourhood environment," Xi has espoused his belief that "the general trend of prosperity and stability in the Asia-Pacific region will not change." See "The central conference on work relating to foreign affairs was held in Beijing," Xinhuanet, 29 November 2014.

70 Richard Bush (2013) posits that virtually no Chinese scholar would accept the renunciation of force as a viable option since it may signify Beijing's compromise on China's core interests.

71 Bower et al., 15.

72 According to the Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of China (2015), the PLA has plans to establish a "formidable military arsenal" for the purpose of mounting military operations against Taiwan before the year 2020.

73 Although President Xi had personally condemned ISIS, Fan Jinghui's death was subsequently downplayed by China's state media, with social media chatter calling on the PLA to defend Chinese citizens abroad being quickly deleted by censors. See Allen-Ebrahimian 2015.

74 Carlson 2006. Elite Chinese thinking on national sovereignty and international intervention in the post-9/11 environment permits intervention in the internal affairs of "obviously failed states, and when confronted with humanitarian disasters."

75 Recently passed legislation has legitimized the use of force against terrorism outside Chinese borders with the consent of relevant nations, and under CMC approval. See "Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo fan kongbu zhuyi fa" (People's Republic of China counterterrorism law), *Jiefang jun bao*, 28 December 2015. A State Council (2016) policy document reveals, however, that the PLA will take limited actions against terrorism.

China's internal security. Following the threat of extremist activities emanating from secessionist forces such as the Turkestan Islamic Party – which comprises Chinese minority groups as well as foreign fighters from across the Afghan and Pakistani borders – the PLA's constituent People's Armed Police (PAP) has been less reserved in demonstrating its combat competencies in counterterrorist operations.<sup>76</sup> As the “Silk Road economic belt” and the “21st-century maritime Silk Road” kick into gear, however, the PLA will nevertheless have to mitigate the security risks that come with China exposing its less-developed western flank to trade – and the threat of terrorism.

With Beijing becoming more integrated with the world as it continues to strengthen its global economic relationships, the crucial task of safeguarding China's overseas economic interests and the lives of Chinese nationals based abroad has led to internal debates within the PLA regarding its ability to mount what is expected to be increasingly challenging operations.<sup>77</sup> Bearing in mind perhaps that China's state-owned and private enterprises often operate in high-risk environments, personnel from the PLAN's South Sea Fleet marine corps have, since 2014, been honing their skills in carrying out “long-range manoeuvres, conducting military operations in strange environments, dealing with complex local situations and adapting to extremely cold weathers, so as to improve operational capabilities in all terrains.”<sup>78</sup> Seen in the context of the PLA's first overseas facility, in Africa, a recent exercise in Xinjiang, during which its participants had to travel 5,900 kilometres, also hints at Chinese strategic thinking in view of the similar distance between Djibouti and airfields in the PLA's Western Theatre Command. Should another overseas humanitarian crisis occur, elite extraterritorial special forces could be despatched more quickly.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, China's growing economic footprint has progressively influenced its military strategy, which has to keep up with the country's expanding national

76 “Fankong jiandao bao renmin ping'an: ji wujing Xinjiang zongdui si zhidui” (Sharpness of counterterrorism protects people's safety: documenting four PAP units from Xinjiang command), *Sina Military Affairs*, 23 November 2015, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2015-11-23/0756844511.html>; “China forces used flamethrower to hunt Xinjiang ‘terrorists’: army newspaper,” Reuters, 23 November 2015.

77 As a sign of the PLA's desire to build an expeditionary force, *China's Military Strategy* (State Council 2015) states that, “In response to the new requirement coming from the country's growing strategic interests, the armed forces will actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China's overseas interests.” Still, Ghiselli 2015 notes that a number of soldier-scholars from the NDU have differing but generally pessimistic opinions on the PLA's ability to protect Chinese economic interests along the “belt and road” routes.

78 “PLA marines complete winter training in Xinjiang's Gobi Desert,” *China Military Online*, 5 February 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-02/05/content\\_6898590.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-02/05/content_6898590.htm); “Chinese marines' desert operations pointing to long-range ambitions,” Reuters, 14 January 2016.

79 In order for the PLA to deploy troops to Djibouti directly, Beijing would need to reach formal accord with those countries along the flight path covering navigation, refuelling and technical assistance, etc. Interview with senior PLA officer, March 2017, Singapore. While the PLA may indeed deploy expeditionary forces overseas following the passing of new counterterrorism legislation, these would likely be limited to non-combatant evacuation operations (Chu 2016).



interests.<sup>80</sup> This has caused a rethink in the PLA's role in protecting Chinese sea lines of communications in the Persian Gulf across which more than three-fifths of China's oil imports traverse. Still, in line with its long-held "five principles of peaceful coexistence," the PLA's missions have unsurprisingly been limited to non-traditional security issues, in particular those with implications for Chinese economic interests and Beijing's image-building.<sup>81</sup> In that regard, nowhere has China's contribution to its overseas security interests been more prominent than in the international anti-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>82</sup> More recently, the mass evacuations of Chinese and foreign nationals from Libya and Yemen would have also informed Beijing of the benefits of having permanent bases, or something more akin to overseas strategic support bases, in the event of having to conduct military operations other than war in future contingencies in the world's troubled regions. It follows that the decision by the Chinese leadership to break with tradition and build a military facility in Djibouti was also informed by pressing concerns of "replenishing soldiers and resupplying fuel and food" for fleets operating far from home and for extended periods of time.<sup>83</sup> Yet, despite that Beijing has dismissed speculation that the PLA is harbouring plans to establish a "string of pearls" across the Indian Ocean towards the Atlantic,<sup>84</sup> one need only look at the PLA's previous attempts at distancing itself from similar rumours in the past.<sup>85</sup> Such a course of action is understandable given the unwanted international attention that a forward-deployed strategic presence will generate, and its adverse effects on China's "peaceful development" narrative. The same argument also means that the PLA is unlikely to emulate its American counterpart's global military operations, in view of the high strategic cost and prohibitively exorbitant financial resources required.<sup>86</sup>

### *The PLA's soft power and military diplomacy*

Efforts such as the escort and rescue missions, which have benefited foreign vessels negotiating the Horn of Africa, and the unprecedented move by the PLAN in

80 The reorientation of the PLA to safeguard expanding Chinese global interests is said to have been promulgated four years before the PLAN deployed its first escort taskforce to the Gulf of Aden on 26 December 2008. See Mulvenon 2009.

81 Shambaugh 2010.

82 "China's ships come in: with fuel supplies to protect and pirates to fight, the PLA navy is out in force in the Indian Ocean without a base, now it looks as if it will get some ports to call home," *South China Morning Post*, 3 June 2011. Beijing's decision to commit to the cause was likely motivated by the numerous hijackings of Chinese vessels. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008.

83 Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016.

84 "China denies it is going to build naval base in Namibia," BBC Chinese, 21 January 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2015/01/150121\\_china\\_namibia\\_military\\_base](http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2015/01/150121_china_namibia_military_base).

85 Until US AFRICOM broke the news of Djibouti in November 2015, the PLA had previously denied it was building overseas bases. See "China rules out overseas naval base now," *China Daily*, 1 January 2010.

86 Coincidentally, Posen's (2014) recent critique of US foreign policy urging restraint in its use of force is not dissimilar to China's post-Cold War strategy.

evacuating foreign citizens from Yemen,<sup>87</sup> all have the added bonus of portraying Chinese military might in a favourable light.<sup>88</sup> Indubitably, the PLA has clearly become more cognizant of the value of its interactions with foreign counterparts. Looking at events such as the invitation to foreign troops to join its parade and China's burgeoning role in UN peacekeeping operations,<sup>89</sup> Xi Jinping's call for "a new phase of military diplomacy" has coincided with an emphasis on the subtler projection of PLA power.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the increasing frequency of the PLA's diplomatic exchanges serves to enhance transparency by disseminating the CCP's interpretation of its "China dream" and reduces unwarranted speculation about Beijing's strategic motives. Nevertheless, even if PLA elites fail to acknowledge that other regional defence planners perceive China's growing military strength negatively,<sup>91</sup> it is imperative that they soon address the security concerns of those states along the "belt and road" initiative pertaining to longer-term Chinese intentions. Failure to do so will likely lead to the miscarriage of China's grand strategy at a cost to the country's national rejuvenation.<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, a number of challenges need to be surmounted before the benefits of China's military diplomacy can be reaped, as can be seen from the conflicting message from Beijing's assertiveness in defending its territorial claims within its "nine-dash line." With no end in sight to the South China Sea disputes, the ability of the PLA to stay the course as "a staunch force for maintaining world peace" will be tested.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the freedom of navigation operations by US naval assets may also wreck budding Sino-US military-to-military relations. While China's current commander-in-chief might prefer a cooperative rather than confrontational relationship between his troops and their foreign counterparts,<sup>94</sup> PLA elites – prompted by popular nationalist proclivities honed by China's rising global status and the regime clinging on to the victimhood narrative of the "century of humiliation" – may yet pursue more aggressive courses of action when faced with serious external security challenges. Even more fundamentally, as discussed above, the interests of the PLA and other party-state bureaucracies in China's foreign policymaking apparatus will also have to be reconciled.<sup>95</sup>

87 "China evacuates foreign nationals from Yemen in unprecedented move," Reuters, 3 April 2015.

88 "19th Chinese naval escort taskforce sets sail from Qingdao," *China Military Online*, 3 December 2014, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-12/03/content\\_6253028.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-12/03/content_6253028.htm).

89 Gill and Huang 2009. An oft-cited example relates to Beijing's contribution of more troops, police and military observers than any other permanent member of the UN Security Council to UN missions since 2009.

90 Xi 2015.

91 In South-East Asia for instance, PLA elites have been noted for their inability to acknowledge that Beijing's maritime assertiveness has been the cause of regional unease over China's rise. Li, Mingjiang 2015, 359–382.

92 This was raised during a meeting with leading officials from the former Foreign Affairs Office of China's Ministry of National Defence, January 2015, Singapore.

93 PLA activities in the Spratlys and the Paracels have of late been cast in a negative light by prominent Western media; notable examples are CNN's coverage of the PLA's response to a US surveillance plane in May 2015, and Fox News' reportage on its presumably recent deployment of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island.

94 Saunders and Bowie 2016.

95 See Jakobson 2016 for a recent study.

## China's Recent Military Reforms and Concluding Remarks

Since the turn of the century, the PLA has been undergoing a series of changes that has permeated every facet of its operations – technological, organizational and doctrinal. While China's growing economic resources have placed it in a better position to build a military that matches its current international stature,<sup>96</sup> US military improvements, on the other hand, have not been stagnant. In subscribing to the idea that a strong nation cannot prevail without a powerful military,<sup>97</sup> the reshaping of the PLA since the 18th Party Congress also serves as testament of its new commander-in-chief's political will to effect meaningful reforms. While the official work report of the previous administration was notable for its declaration that it would develop China into a maritime power following previous developments such as the launching of the *Liaoning*, changes to the strategic thinking, roles and missions of China's military forces under Xi Jinping have, in the period hitherto, become more pronounced.

Of these, the PLA's development from a backward Soviet-style command structure towards an advanced US model has enhanced China's military preparedness in times of peace – as well as war – in addition to honing its combat readiness in five different dimensions.<sup>98</sup> Seen in that light, the shift from the PLA's traditional land-centric mindset, the establishment of new theatre commands, and the restructuring of the various services all combine to give Xi a better chance of improving the “jointness” of the PLA. Where civilian oversight is concerned – especially given how former military elites had undermined the authority of their then civilian CMC chairman<sup>99</sup> – the separation of the PLA's administration and operational functions along with the reduction in the layers of operational and bureaucratic command also serve to strengthen Xi's hold on power and recentralize the Party's control over its coercive forces.<sup>100</sup> With Xi having consolidated his military authority, reforms to the various PLA organs will likely continue apace.<sup>101</sup> But, even if the PLA's build up were to bridge the

96 According to *China Military Online*, China's official military budget in 2015 amounted to 1.33% of gross domestic product. See “China announces 7.6-pct defense budget rise, lowest in six years,” *China Military Online*, 5 March 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-03/05/content\\_6943717.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-03/05/content_6943717.htm). Scholarly estimates, however, suggest substantially higher actual values. See, e.g., Perlo-Freeman 2016.

97 You 2015b.

98 “Chinese military launches two new wings for space and cyber age,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 January 2016. The establishment of the Rocket Force and the Strategic Support Force has made that possible.

99 Three retired PLA generals asserted on Phoenix TV that Hu Jintao was reduced to a mere figurehead by Xu Caihou and others. See “Shaojiang: Xu Caihou tamen jia kong dangshi de junwei lingdao ren” (Major generals: Xu Caihou and others stripped then CMC chairman of his authority), Phoenix TV, 9 March 2015, <http://politics.caijing.com.cn/20150309/3835125.shtml>. See also Wang 2015.

100 A signed commentary in the official PLA newspaper critiqued that power had been “overly concentrated” in the former General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department. See “Zhansheng zhi lu” (Road to winning wars), *Jiefang jun bao*, 14 December 2015.

101 “Ministry of National Defence spokesperson – reconfiguration of theatre commands is now complete,” *China Military Online*, 2 February 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2016-02/02/content\\_882.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2016-02/02/content_882.htm).

gap between itself and the US military, the former (in all likelihood) will refrain from US-style constabulary missions.<sup>102</sup>

This introductory article has trained its focus on those aspects of the PLA that may be of interest to international security analysts and defence policymakers from countries on China's regional periphery. Just as the status of the PLA in Beijing's domestic and foreign policy has grown in prominence since the 18th Party Congress, understanding how the PLA would weigh in on Chinese core interests and the formulation of the country's national defence strategies will be critical to making informed predictions regarding Beijing's ability to maintain stability in the event of a future crisis and stay the course in its development trajectory. That the structural indicators of China's continued rise mean that it is now competing with the US on a comprehensive basis also warrants a reassessment of the PLA's thinking, roles and missions, as CCP leaders plot to extend China's strategic footprint in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. The complexities in the protracted South China Sea disputes aside,<sup>103</sup> regional perceptions of the PLA's newly established military commands also test the utility of Chinese military diplomacy in ameliorating the negative consequences of Beijing's growing prowess.<sup>104</sup> While the scope of this introductory article may be limited, it has hopefully put the spotlight on some of the more pertinent issues in the study of Chinese military affairs, some of which will be discussed in greater detail by the authors of the accompanying articles.

While many challenges lie ahead, the PLA's enhanced capabilities have nevertheless provided Beijing with new options on how to deal with contingencies both internally and externally. Although it is too early to speculate on the impact of the recent reforms since policy adjustments require time before their effects can manifest fully, the Chinese leadership's determination to continue honing the PLA's war-fighting abilities will certainly have a profound impact on the Asia-Pacific security landscape in the foreseeable future. Even if the spectre of war seems unlikely for now given that China's military muscle still radically differs from its American counterpart,<sup>105</sup> ongoing adjustments to the PLA's doctrine and force structure may yet render such an argument obsolete should

102 "How to get a date: the year when the Chinese economy will truly eclipse America's is in sight," *The Economist*, 31 December 2011.

103 A number of middle powers in the region such as Australia, which has carried out operations over the contested waters, along with Japan and India, have demonstrated synchronicity with the US in wading into the dispute. See, e.g., "Exclusive: US and India consider joint patrols in South China Sea – US official," Reuters, 10 February 2016; "Japan, US, Australia, Philippines coast guards to huddle over China activities," *The Japan Times*, 9 February 2015.

104 Nevertheless, viewed from the receiving end of the PLA's force projection, China's neighbours may perceive the theatre commands with trepidation given the re-zoned regions' comprehensive military assets drawn from the PLA Ground Force, PLAN, PLAAF and the PLA Rocket Force. See "China's North Sea Fleet put under central command to help safeguard the capital," *South China Morning Post*, 2 February 2016. *Times of India* quotes an Indian soldier as saying, "Now, the entire Indian front from Ladakh to Arunachal will be handled by one entity, the new West Zone." See "China announces military, India drags feet," *Times of India*, 27 November 2015.

105 Liu and Ren 2014 warns that incidents could yet turn into diplomatic crises since events at the operational level are beyond the control of PLA elites.

the PLA be able to complement advances in its hardware with the prerequisite enhancements in its *heartware*. And, as the examples of Djibouti and the naval deployments to Somali attest, what the Chinese military now refutes may nonetheless see the light of day a few more years down the road.

Crucially, the competing needs to be both *red* and *expert* will test Xi Jinping's much-vaunted statecraft. As members of the PLA's rank-and-file continue to develop themselves into professional warriors, will the Chinese leader be able to reconcile the need for his troops to be absolutely loyal to him and the regime? While the civilian commander-in-chief appears to have gained the upper hand over his uniformed subordinates at present, it remains to be seen whether he will be able to translate his political clout into fundamental transformations of the PLA that will outlast his tenure. With Chinese military power expected to be strengthened further with the latest modernization drive, the question of whether Xi (as well as his successors) will be able to adhere to China's long-term strategic goals as Beijing addresses more immediate tactical concerns is also subject to debate. These are but some of a number of issues that will be keenly watched by the global community of PLA *cognoscenti*.

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**摘要:** 中国人民解放军的实力在硬件及“心”件方面,正在经历着巨大的变革。这些变化已渗透军队各个方面,包括技术、组织、及军事行动上的教义。尽管中国几代领导人宣称维持“和平”与“发展”,中国安全策略在习近平领导下的转向明显逐步疏离“韬光养晦”。在新形势下,解放军在中国内政与外交的战略地位也变得更加显明。

**关键词:** 中国人民解放军; 习近平; 军民关系; 中国外交政策; 国防战略; 军事理论; 中国军事现代化

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