



Changes and Reforms in the People's Liberation Army and Understanding Their Logic and Timings



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The military reforms announced in 2015 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping were not merely meant to transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a leaner fighting force capable of fighting a 'Integrated Joint War Under Conditions of Informationisation' but were also intended to curtail and redistribute the authority and power enjoyed by the PLA Army exercising total control over the Central Military Commission (CMC) and through it the other branches of the PLA. Securing the loyalty, ending corruption within the military and keeping the military under political control of the President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Xi Jinping, became inevitable as there were signs that the military was being navigated by a force from outside the political establishment. The exercise led to the arrest and removal of certain high ranking officials within the PLA.

As a continuation of the process, notable and profound changes and reforms have taken place within the PLA in the recent past preceding the 19th National Congress of the Peoples Republic of China (19th Congress) and

are continuing to be effected almost on a daily basis. Most of the changes are politically focused and some of the reforms professionally oriented. For a better understanding of the timing and the meaning behind the changes, it is intended to provide an over view of the political situation and cross currents acting within China and bring out broad details of the major changes and reform measures that are being undertaken within the PLA.

Background

Jiang Zemin stepped down from the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2002 but decided to hold onto the powerful post of the Chairman of the CMC of the CPC, the supreme decision-making body of the Armed Forces. He continued to hold the position till September 2004. He also filled Hu Jintao, his successor's cabinet with his cronies and to top it positioned seven out of the then nine PSC members with his loyalists. So

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was the case with the key officials of the Communist Party organs. Consequently, though Jiang was the Party General Secretary from 1989 to 2002, he continued to control the affairs of China for a decade through his strategically placed loyalists.

Hong Kong and overseas Chinese media have stated that Hu's orders often wouldn't leave the gates of Zhongnanhai, the official headquarters and residences of top Chinese leaders. Hu's awkward position is best described in an anecdote contained in the former US Vice President Dick Cheney's memoir. Cheney had invited Hu for a one-on-one meeting. During the meeting, the former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing buzzed through the door and sat between Cheney and Hu, refusing to leave. Apparently, he had been sent to monitor the meeting and report back to Jiang.¹ As the Vice Chairman of the CMC, Hu was authorised to summon and direct only officers of the rank of Major Generals and below. Jiang controlled the senior officers even years after he had stepped down as the Chairman of the CMC. Hu's authority over the military was thus diminished. The delay in response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that killed nearly 70,000 people is being attributed to Generals refusing to take orders from Hu and Wen Jiabao, the then Prime Minister.²

The PSC members are nominated by senior leaders and retired Party heads behind closed doors. Bargains are struck between factions and concessions are made during these gatherings. The list of appointees thus decided is confirmed at the National Congress of the CPC held every 5 years. A product of the process, Xi was a compromise candidate for the post of General Secretary of the CPC negotiated between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. While the former supported Li Keqiang, the present Prime Minister, the latter agreed to support Xi Jinping in exchange for three of his loyalists being placed in the PSC. Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang belong to the 'Communist Youth League' and probably Jiang wanted someone from a different group to avert collusion.

Ever since Xi took charge as the Chairman of the CPC, it has never been a smooth sailing for him. For example, officials of the Jiangsu Province in China's

East coast, a strong hold of Jiang's faction headed by Jiang Zemin have been disregarding Beijing's directions on anti-corruption measures issued under the directions of Xi. Three of the Central Organisation Department's official instructions forbidding party cadres from taking up paid jobs in organisations for 3 years after retirement that they oversaw during their service were never promulgated in the Province. A retired Party Secretary from Jiangsu Education Department of the Sanjiang University was re-employed at the University, a private higher education institution, a year after his retirement drawing highest pay in the school ignoring the Central directives. He is said to have developed 27 acres of land owned by the school into a commercial housing complex for personal gains.³ Jiang and Zhou Yongkang, the disgraced security czar, are natives of Jiangsu. Luo Zhijun, the Party Secretary of Jiangsu from December 2010 till June 2016 when he was purged was also said to be in league with Jiang.

Xi Jinping is reported to have survived six assassination attempts since taking over as the Party Chief, a consequence of internal conflict within the Party. CCP officials are said to have hired assassins to slay Xi.⁴ Wang Lijun, the former Vice Mayor and Police Chief of South-western city Chongqing, till then the right hand man of Bo Xilai the city's Communist Party Chief, who had gone to the US Consulate in Chengdu on February 06, 2012 to seek asylum had revealed a plot by Bo and Zhou Yongkang to stage a coup to throw Xi out of power.⁵

The Chumar standoff in eastern Ladakh during Xi's visit to India from September 17 to 19, 2014, which had held the promise of improving bilateral ties, was yet another example of the resistance Xi faced from the military despite being the Chairman of the all-powerful CMC. The standoff got underway on September 10, 2014 after the Indian soldiers had blocked the PLA troops equipped with cranes, bulldozers, and other equipment from building a road to Chepzi on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). To everyone's surprise, the Chinese decided to induct more troops to the standoff site just before Modi-Xi Summit to be held on September 18, 2014. Chinese did not pull back troops even 24 hours after Xi and Chinese officials accompanying him

had said that the Army had been asked to withdraw, a clear case of the PLA trying to embarrass Xi during an important overseas tour.⁶

Unconfirmed reports insinuate that the Doklam standoff from June 16, 2017 to August 28, 2017 between the Indian Army and the PLA troops had been initiated by elements within the Western Theater Command, without the Party approval for reasons not very difficult to discern. India's current Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar's statement on September 05, 2017 at the press briefing after the Modi–Xi meeting on the sidelines of BRICS summit held from September 03 to 05, 2017 that 'both sides agreed defence personnel must maintain strong contacts to ensure a situation like what happened recently' does not recur⁷ fixes the responsibility for the standoff at Doklam to the Military, absolving the CPC of any involvement.⁷ Put differently, had CMC given directions to the military to construct the road, could 'strong contacts' between the militaries have prevented the standoff or would the incident have ended the way it did?

Jiang was able to gain sizable support and following from both high and low ranking officials because he had shut his eyes to their corruption and wrong doings. Backing and siding with Jiang and his collaborators enabled greedy officials to gain power and enhance their wealth illegally.

After the death of Deng Xiaoping in 1997, Jiang's influence in the country's affairs was virtually unopposed. The 'collective leadership', theory espoused by Deng to prevent the rise of another Mao like figure in China, coupled with the presence of seven Jiang backed members in the PSC, the country's top decision-making body, made it virtually impossible for Hu to exercise any form of control over the country, the Party, military, security or the propaganda apparatus. It is under these circumstances that Xi got himself nominated as the 'core' of the leadership of the CPC at the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Congress to dilute the 'collective leadership' theory in the matter of decision-making especially when it came to his policies being obstructed by the PSC.

Having witnessed Hu's plight when he took over the office, Xi in some ways was forced to act and

discipline Jiang Zemin's gang. He had no option but to break Jiang's power nexus and bring in his loyalists as their replacement to consolidate his position. Rule of law and anti-corruption campaign were the two tools that he employed to dump Jiang's protégées occupying high offices, restrain corrupt officials and jettison rival political faction led by Jiang from the Party organs and government organisations.

Xi launched his anti-corruption drive led under the directions of Wang Qishan, the Head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). Under this drive, according to the official reports, over a million officials have been investigated in the past 4 years. Of those purged, more than 200 are the high-flying lot from government establishments, military, and state-owned enterprises. Prominent among them include the former security czar and PSC member Zhou Yongkang, Vice Chairmen of the CMC, Generals Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou and a member of the Politburo and Party Secretary of Chongqing Bo Xilai. They were probed and sentenced to life imprisonment.

After Xi's visit to media houses on February 19, 2016, which included the newsrooms of the Party newspaper *People's Daily*, state-run news agency Xinhua, and state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), the battle over media control between Xi and Liu Yunshan, one of the PSC members belonging to Jiang's faction has intensified.

Five out of seven members of the PSC, two-fifths of the current Politburo members and over half of the 376 elite Chinese officials in the Central Committee are set to retire at the 19th Congress of the CPC scheduled to be held commencing from October 18, 2017. Though Xi heads the powerful CMC and has been designated the 'core leader', if Jiang faction succeeds in managing enough bargaining power by the time the Communist Party holds its congress and manages to install one or two of its loyalists in the Standing Committee, Xi can be effectively blocked by the Committee. Physical presence and the need to position his loyalists in positions that matter are critical for Xi to get through the internal strife presently underway.

Wang Qishan, who heads Xi's anti-corruption programme, is due to step down at the 19th Congress

following the ‘seven up and eight down rule’. His continuance is vital for Xi to consolidate his power further. Xi will have to break the rule and allow him to continue as the Head of CCDI and a member of the PSC despite being 68 years of age or create a new organisation to oversee anti-corruption operations wherein he could be accommodated.

Reports emanating from China suggests that Jiang Zemin has been placed under military custody in Beijing. The movement of his two sons is also said to have been restricted. If true, it may be the end of Jiang’s direct influence in China’s affairs⁸ leading to Xi consolidating his position and emerging more powerful than Mao himself.⁸

19th Congress Linked Important Changes in People’s Liberation Army

As a part of President Xi Jinping’s military overhaul and his plans to cut down military strength by 3,00,000 personnel by the end of 2017, PLA has cut down the number of its Group Armies from 18 to 13. The Commanders and the Political Commissars of all the 13 Group Armies were recently moved out of their respective areas of jurisdictions without an exception.⁹ Major shakeup of the military *en bloc* in this fashion is an unusual step. The bigger surprise is related to the professional experience of the higher level appointments effected. For example, Major General Fan Chengcai, the new commander of the 76th Group Army responsible for Tibet had a long career in 14th Group Army in Yunnan Province, a subtropical region very different from Tibet. Similarly, the political commissar Major General Zhang Hongbing had served mostly in Henan Province, a plains area. Their experiences in mountains and high altitude areas if any have not been identified. The aim of the exercise appears to be to prevent collusion between the military and political opponents of Xi Jinping within the areas of their present jurisdiction to derange his plans for consolidating his power at the 19th Congress rather than constructing a professional military.

CMC has assigned new numbers to the Group Armies starting from 71 and ending at 84. According to *PLA Daily*, the number 71 represents July 1st or the Chinese

Communist Party’s founding day.¹⁰ The unprecedented step to rename the Group Armies is meant to take away the traditions and loyalties attached to these institutions thereby putting an end to group linkages, factionalism, and competition that has developed within the military over the decades.

Seven Military Regions (MRs) which China had prior to restructuring have been rationalised to establish five Theatre Commands (TCs). Each of these Commands has 2 to 3 Group Armies. The Group Armies have been configured based on their operational requirements and strength varies from 30,000 to 80,000 troops.

Details of the five Theatre Commands, the old and new affiliations of the renamed Group Armies are given in Table 1:¹¹

Theater Command	Old Designation	New Designation
Eastern TC	12th Group Army	71st Group Army
	1st Group Army	72nd Group Army
	31st Group Army	73rd Group Army
Southern TC	41st Group Army	74th Group Army
	42nd Group Army	75th Group Army
	14th Group Army	Disbanded
Western TC	21st Group Army	76th Group Army
	13rd Group Army	77th Group Army
	47th Group Army	Disbanded
Northern TC	16th Group Army	78th Group Army
	39th Group Army	79th Group Army
	26th Group Army	80th Group Army
	40th Group Army	Disbanded
Central TC	65th Group Army	81st Group Army
	38th Group Army	82nd Group Army
	54th Group Army	83rd Group Army
	20th Group Army	Disbanded
	27th Group Army	Disbanded

Source: PLA’s New Group Army Orbat, ‘China Defence Blog’, May 18, 2017, available at <http://china-defense.blogspot.in/2017/05/plas-new-group-army-orbat.html>, accessed on September 2, 2017.

Without making any announcement General Fang Fenghui, the erstwhile head of the all-powerful General Staff Department (GSD) and till now the Chief of the Joint Staff Department (JSD) of the CMC has been replaced by General Li Geocheng. The whereabouts of the former are not known. The online Boxun site on August 30, 2017 reported that the General was ‘under investigations’.¹²

On September 01, 2017, China has appointed not a very prominent General Han Weiguo as the new Army Chief who has risen rapidly with three promotions since 2015. He was the Commanding Officer in charge of the military parade held in Inner Mongolia in July 2017 to mark the 90th Anniversary of the raising of the PLA. The new Air Force Chief, Lieutenant General Ding Laihang, announced by the Defence Ministry on the same day, is also a relatively low-profile officer and was in charge of air operations in China’s Northern Theatre Command before his promotion. Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong, said to be close to Xi has been appointed the Naval Chief in January 2017.¹³

Xi Jinping has fast tracked and promoted a number of his favourites to higher positions in the ongoing large-scale changes being effected in the PLA and People’s Armed Police (PAP) and they are tipped to enter the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP CC) at the 19th Party Congress.¹⁴

Considering that the Party Congress will elect the 19th Central Committee, apart from his commitments with the military, Xi would have to devote time screening nominations for the 19th Congress from the central and state organs, central departments directly under the CPC CC, central enterprises, the provinces and centrally administered municipalities. The question is, under these circumstances, with exhaustive reshuffle to be effected within the PLA prior to the 19th Congress, could Xi Jinping have afforded to go to war with India over the Doklam issue abandoning all the preparatory work that he personally had to plan and take on well before the Congress? Would he have risked dilution of his powers for an insignificant issue as Doklam or for waging a war with India?

People’s Liberation Army Organisational Reforms

In April 2017, President Xi Jinping announced that the restructuring of 84 Corps-level units have been completed.¹⁵ Neither he nor the official media have till now clarified as to what Corps-level units meant. Shortly after Xi’s declaration, a Hong Kong-based newspaper *Ming Pao* assessed that the 84 ‘corps-level units’ will include 15 Army organisations consisting of 13 group armies and 2 experimental bases, 28 provincial military districts, 10 naval headquarters including 3 fleet Naval Aviation Headquarters, 5 bases, an experimental base and a new Marine headquarters, 12 Air Force units including 10 bases, an experimental base, and the 15th Air-borne Corps, 7 launch brigades, 2 additional bases of the Rocket Force, and 7 space-affiliated and 3 cyber and information bases in the Strategic Support Force.¹⁶

Theatre Command (TC) Service Headquarters. Each TC will have a TC Army and Air Force headquarters while some may have a TC Navy based on operational necessity. There will be no TC Rocket Force headquarters. The new TC Army headquarters will largely perform the same functions as the Navy’s three fleets and the Air Force’s military region air forces did under the previous structure, the Military Regions. Under the new arrangements, CMC will be in charge of the administration of the PLA. TCs will focus on combat and the Service headquarters on the training and management of the services. TC service headquarters will be under dual chain of command reporting to the Joint Theatre headquarters and their respective service headquarters in Beijing. TC service headquarters will exercise command over the operational units located in the area of responsibility of TCs. The TC service headquarters are responsible for disseminating orders down to units from both their TC and service headquarters and likewise keeping both higher headquarters informed of the status of their units.¹⁷

The five TC Army headquarters are likely to be located in Fuzhou, Fujian Province; Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region; Lanzhou, Gansu Province; Jinan, Shandong Province; and Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province. The Joint Command Centres will be located in Nanjing,



Jiangsu Province; Guangzhou, Guangdong Province; Chengdu, Sichuan Province; Shenyang, Liaoning Province; and Beijing.¹⁸

Management of Provisional Military Commands.

Under the former MR structure, the Provincial Military Districts (MDs) were under the command of MR headquarters. MDs exercised command and control over 'the Military Sub-Districts (MSD)/Garrisons and People's Armed Forces Departments (PFAD)' in the country and the reserve units in their provinces. Militia units were under the PFADs. On reorganisation, CMC 'National Defense Mobilization Department' has been given the responsibility for 'leading and managing the provincial military commands'. Since the organisational grade level of Beijing Garrison, as well as Tibet and Xinjiang MDs, were a grade above the other MDs, these Military Commands including the Tibet Military Command has been placed under the management of the Army Headquarters in Beijing.¹⁹ It appears that these three headquarters will first report to the TC Army headquarters in the area and then to the Army Headquarters in Beijing or command may be exercised through the TC Army headquarters. It appears that the MDs have been removed from the chain-of-command for border and coastal defense units.²⁰ Since the Army headquarters in Beijing and TC Army headquarters have a Border and Coastal Defence Bureau/Division within their respective Staff Departments, it appears the border and coastal defence units may come under their command.

Joint Logistic Support. China established the Joint Logistic Support Force under the CMC on September 13, 2016 with its headquarters in Beijing. The move, it is said, is intended to boost the global mobility of the PLA. The Force will have five Joint Logistic Support Centres, at Wuxi, Guilin, Xining, Shenyang, and Zhengzhou to provide logistic support to the five Theatre Commands. The Joint Support Force will be structured to meet the requirements of joint operations, joint training, and joint support.²¹ The joint logistic system is based on Military Area Commands.

Overlapping support organisations that existed prior to reforms have been removed. Apart from special depots

and general hospitals under the Army, Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, all the other rear depots, hospitals and recuperation centres have been integrated and reorganised into the joint logistical support system. A total of 8 joint logistical sub-departments, 94 rear depots, and 47 hospitals and recuperation centres have been closed.

Prior to implementing logistic reforms, China had conducted a review of the rules, regulations, and standards relating to the management of logistics system in the PLA. Over 200 standards were adopted or revised and more than 240 regulations were enacted. Necessary experimental reforms on trial basis were carried out in Jinan Theatre incorporating tri-services components into joint logistical establishments keeping in view the requirements of joint management and employment of support components for efficient functioning. Centralised procurement and payment and related financial reforms have also been carried out alongside.²²

Paid Services provided by the Military terminated.

Since 1998, the Armed Forces and Armed Police had been banned from running business. However, they were permitted to use surplus resources to provide paid services to the public in fifteen fields. CMC is to terminate all paid services provided by the military by the end of June 2018. In the first stage, by the end of June 2017, services in the ten fields, namely, nursery education, press and publications, culture and sports, communications, personnel training, barrack projects, storage and transportation, militia armament repair, repair technology, and driver instruction were to come to an end. The remaining five fields which include real estate rentals, agricultural products, accommodation services, medical care, and scientific research will close by the end of June 2018.²³

PLA Reserves. China will reduce its Army reserve while increasing reserves for other services including the Navy, Air Force, and the Rocket Force in a bid to keep up with its military buildup, as the military reform has made headway.²⁴

Conclusion

In preparation for the 19th Congress, 1,909 of the 2,300

delegates to represent the central departments directly under the CCP CC, central and state organs, the central enterprises, the provinces and centrally-administered municipalities, have been elected. The list of delegates from the PLA and the PAP are yet to be released. If 18th Congress is to go by, roughly 10 per cent of the total delegates will be from the PLA. Consequent to the changes and reshuffle in the PLA placing selected officers in important appointments was probably meant to enable the leadership to select convenient delegates from the PLA for the 19th Congress. Eight members belonging to the Communist Youth League who were either full or alternate members of the 18th Congress have been omitted from the list of delegates. The present Prime Minister Li Keqiang belongs to this faction. The omission may be aimed at weakening the League to facilitate moving Li out of his present office to a ceremonial post as the President of the National People's Congress. It will then enable Xi to place his protégée Wang Qishan the present head of the CCDI as the Prime Minister, an appointment for which age restrictions do not apply.

Meeting of China's top leaders including veterans who have weighty influence in the Party affairs which had commenced sometime in the first week of August 2017 at the sea side resort of Beidaihe has ended. At this meeting, key leadership nominations for the 19th Congress would have been decided. The stage is now set for the 19th Congress which is due to commence on October 18, 2017. With the amount of preparatory work by Xi and his team that has gone in, Xi consolidating his power and emerging as a much stronger leader is almost a foregone conclusion.

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