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Tibet Military Command: People's Liberation Army's Combat Role in High-Altitude



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INTRODUCTION

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) operational command and control structure is mainly visualised in the framework of the newly established Theatre Commands (TCs), namely, the Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern and Central, but with specific reference to India, a key reform related to the Tibet Military Command (TMC) holds strategic significance. That is, in May 2016, the rank of the TMC was elevated to a level higher with respect to other provincial military commands, as it was placed under the direct jurisdiction of the PLA ground forces.¹ In view of this, the paper seeks to examine the role of TMC in China's strategic calculus. In doing so, the paper addresses two key aspects: first, what is the significance of the elevated

Key Points

1. Under the Theatre Commands (TCs) framework, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) seeks to become an effective combat force operating under an integrated joint command and control structure.
2. The creation of joint TCs is significant in enhancing China's joint operations capabilities with each TC focused on a particular strategic direction.
3. The elevation of Tibet Military Command's (TMC) political rank and bringing it under the PLA signifies its greater role in PLA's integrated joint operations.
4. China's increasing ability to intervene effectively in any particular sector in the Himalayas underpins the future role of TMC in combat missions, holding strategic implications for India.

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Tibet Military Command:...

rank of TMC in Chinese military? And second, what does it imply for India?

PLA SEEKING JOINTNESS: FROM MILITARY REGIONS TO THEATRE COMMANDS

In 2013, at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, Chairman of Central Military Commission (CMC) called for national defence and military reforms with the intention to: overhaul the military's command structure, update its training and logistic systems, adjust the size and composition of the services, unveil new rules and regulations governing military personnel, and strengthen civil-military cooperation in technological development and other areas.² The primary objective of China was to attain a joint operational structure not just in terms of doctrine and training but specifically to build a joint organisational structure.

Owing to this objective, Xi categorically stated that “the ‘big Army principle’ shall be abandoned and the position of the Army in the joint operations structure shall be sought” and that “the CMC will strengthen its study of the guidance and control structure reform and properly undertake the overall planning and guidance for the model change of the army”.³ In doing so, the biggest transformation has been the graduation from seven Military Regions (MRs) to that of five TCs. This is to rationalise the chain of command and control based on the principle of *Ping Zhan Yi Ti* (peace and war as one), as argued that a “peace and war as one” strategy and campaign command structure should be built into the two-level joint operations command structure consisting of the CMC and the TCs.⁴ Furthermore, unlike the TCs, the MRs were in charge of administrative control, such as training of troops during peacetime, but the TCs were

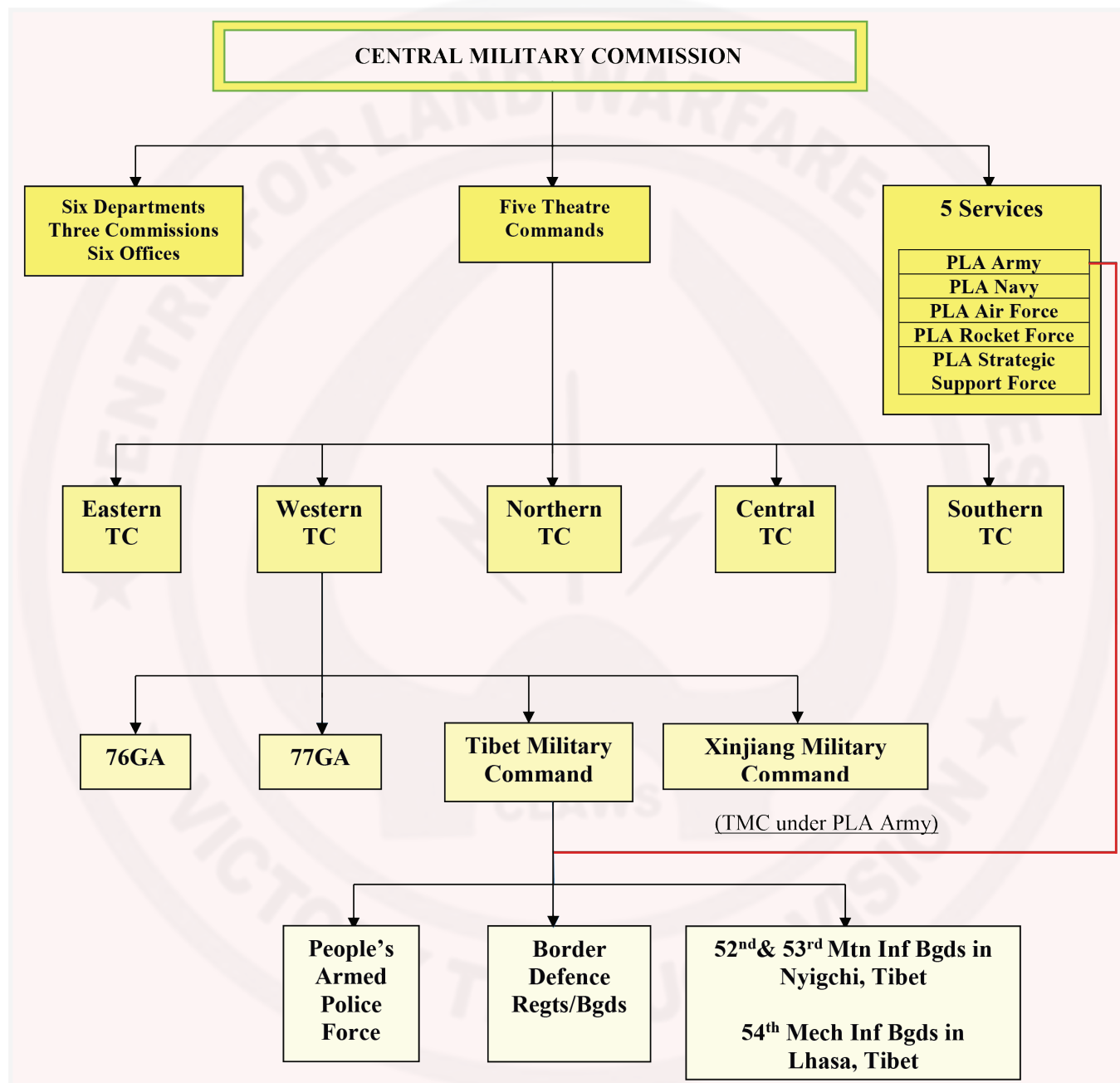
established solely with an operational command perspective specifically centred on joint operations. In addition, the switch of name from MR to TC, further exemplifies the Chinese intention to rationalise the chain of command and control by “perpetuating the wartime structure”, which strengthens the emergency response capability.⁵

In view of this, China's creation of joint theatre commands significantly contributes to enhancing the joint operations capabilities, where each one is mandated in a particular strategic direction, such as: the Eastern TC based on the former Nanjing MR is focused on Taiwan operations and territorial disputes with Japan; Southern TC based on the Guangzhou MR is responsible for operations against Vietnam and South China Sea; Northern TC based on Shenyang MR and Inner Mongolia as well as Shandong provinces is responsible for responding to potential instability in the Korean Peninsula or possibly supporting operations against Japan; Central TC based on Beijing and Jinan MRs is responsible for China's national capital defence and serving as a strategic reserve to reinforce other theatres; and lastly, the Western TC based on the former Chengdu and Lanzhou MRs is the largest theatre and is responsible for security along China's border with India as well as maintaining internal stability in Tibet and Xinjiang regions.⁶ Therefore, this very distribution of the integrated TC structure exemplifies that China's vision of reorganisation is not just guided by geography but most importantly, the threats and challenges it encounters in each quarter, both internal and external. Out of the five TCs, the Western Theatre Command (WTC) is the most expansive. It is mainly focused on supporting the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) to maintain domestic stability in Tibet and Xinjiang and look into the border security along the Sino-Indian border.



In this backdrop, the elevation of TMC under the larger command and control structure of the PLA as noted in Figure 1, calls for significant deliberation. That is, unlike TMC, the other 28 provincial military

commands were put under the control of the newly established National Defense Mobilisation Department of the CMC, which succeeded the former General Staff Department Mobilisation



*GA – Group Army; Regts – Regiments; Bgds – Brigades; Mtn Inf Bgds – Mountain Infantry Brigades; Mech Inf Bgds – Mechanised Infantry Brigades.

Figure 1: The Command and Control Structure under CMC

Source: Prepared by the Author.

Department, a second-level (Corps Leader-grade) department, under the reorganisation of the four headquarters of the PLA.⁷ The other exceptions being – the Beijing Weifang District and the Xinjiang Military Command, which unlike TMC are yet not under the jurisdiction of the PLA Army.⁸ Furthermore, on one end, an amalgamation of the provincial military commands under one department has diminished their importance. On the other end, the elevation of TMC's political rank and bringing it under the PLA Ground Forces signifies its exceptional status as well as its greater role in PLA's joint operations to conduct combat missions. That is, bringing it under the PLA Army over any other service justifies its future role as an important component in China's combat operations in land.

TIBET MILITARY COMMAND: TO ALWAYS BE COMBAT READY

Specific to TMC, from being Tibet Military Region, its status has evolved since its inception. That is, in 1952, it came into force on the basis of the 18th Army of the Chinese PLA wherein it was a second-level border defence military region under the South-west MR; in 1955, it was reorganised into a large military region, and in 1968 it was adjusted to a military rank under the command of the Chengdu MR.⁹ Given this upward trajectory of growth, the elevation in TMC's rank as well as placing it under the PLA Army is both symbolic and most importantly, significant. Symbolically it denotes the priority China attaches to Tibet in its national security calculus, which is directly linked to its boundary and territorial dispute with India and aggravated by a challenge to China's sovereignty claims from the pro-Tibet independence forces.

Besides elevating the political status of TMC, China has also revamped its military activities that exemplify its core concentration on combat missions. This can be assessed from the key developments in terms of new military equipment deployment, infrastructure build-up and military activities taking place in Tibet that significantly contribute to the enhancement of the combat capability of the TMC.

First, on December 27, 2018, China's Ministry of National Defence (MND) revealed that a new "Type 15 Lightweight Tank" has been commissioned by PLA Ground Forces.¹⁰ What makes it significant in China's combat missions are its three key features: (1) Unlike PLA's other main battle tanks such as Type 99 and Type 96, Type 15 is significantly lighter with about 32 to 35-t weight. In addition, its engine is capable of 1000 HP driving force, about twice that of the Type 62 tank it is replacing.¹¹ (2) In terms of firepower, Type 15 uses a new 105 mm tank gun, which is superior to Type 88A tank and Type 59D tank equipped 105 mm tank gun. To which, Wei Dongxu, a Chinese military expert stated that "the Type 15 is equipped with a 105-mm main gun capable of firing armor-piercing rounds and gun launched missiles, making its firepower not much inferior to a heavier main battle tank."¹² (3) The Type 15 tank is mainly meant for rugged and mountainous terrain of the Himalayan region. This is the most important feature, to which, Chinese analysts argue that this lightweight tank can "outperform" other Chinese tanks in combat operations in plateau areas like Tibet. To note, it has been as categorically suggested that the Type 15 can be quickly deployed in Tibet "if border dispute reoccurs."¹³ This implies the effective manoeuvrability of Type 15 to operate in the high-altitude combat missions in Tibet, in case of any possible outbreak between China and India.



Second, in January 2019, the PLA ground forces in TMC has been equipped with new vehicle-mounted howitzers, which as Chinese analysts speculate to be the PLC-181 vehicle mounted howitzer.¹⁴ The howitzer has a 52-calibre cannon with a range of over 50 km and shoots laser-guided and satellite-guided projectiles. This characteristic feature, as argued by Song Zhongping will significantly “boost the high-altitude combat capability of the PLA in Tibet”.¹⁵ To further add to TMC’s military preparedness, other equipments that hold significance are China’s 10-t Z-20 medium lift helicopter to be deployed in TMC. As noted, the 10-t helicopter has a more powerful 1,600 kW engine, the domestically produced WZ-10 engine, necessary to lift it high into the Tibetan Plateau and the mountains in Qinghai, where it will have to operate upto 4,000 m above ground.¹⁶

Third, adding to the manoeuvrability factor in undertaking combat missions, China has also stepped up its infrastructure build up. That is, given its quest for mechanisation, deployment of military equipments at high-altitude terrain such as Tibet requires greater access. Owing to this, China has upgraded roads, railways and air bases in Tibet. To note, there are 14 airbases in the WTC, of which the key bases are – Hoping, Bangda, Shiquanhe, Bayixincun and Kongka. In addition, there are two airfields in Lhasa and an additional four are expected to be operational in the near future. Besides, China has constructed 96,000 km of roads in Tibet by 2018, with over 4,000 km of highways added per year since 2012.¹⁷ This includes the 409-km Lhasa-Nyingchi Highway (north of Arunachal Pradesh) built at a cost of US\$ 5.8 billion, was commissioned in 2017 and a 135 km Yaán-Kangding expressway that was constructed at a cost of US\$ 3.3 billion making its second expressway from Sichuan to connect to Tibet after the National Highway 318

which links up with Lhasa.¹⁸ In addition, apart from the Gormud to Lhasa railway line commissioned in 2006, China also began construction of the 435 km Lhasa-Nyingchi railway line, to be completed by 2021. And in 2019, China plans to launch a 1,700 km Sichuan to Tibet railway at a cost of US\$ 36 billion connecting through areas bordering Arunachal Pradesh and to be completed by 2026.¹⁹

These developments clearly reflect China’s increasing ability to intervene effectively in any particular sector in the Himalayas—a key factor that underpins the future role of TMC in undertaking combat missions.

TIBET MILITARY COMMAND: COMBAT PREPAREDNESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

The very fact of transforming to a TC structure in peacetime entails China’s determination to expertise its integrated joint operations capability. In this perspective, TMC’s elevated political status added with the significant military developments both in terms of equipment deployment as well as training signifies that this theatre of combat ranks high in China’s joint operation missions. Specifically to say, it remains prone to a high-altitude warfare, as witnessed in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. These preparations do highlight China’s active military preparedness – a direct outcome of Xi Jinping’s defined guideline for the PLA to “fight and win”. As noted, in the 19th Party Congress Report, Xi clearly instructed that for PLA “combat capability [is] the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on. [...] calling for ‘military preparedness for all strategic directions’ and combat readiness in ‘both traditional and new security fields.’”²⁰

Specific to the TMC, China's contingencies are far more profound. To argue so, as the Chinese perceive that in 1962 War with India, China "failed to protect its fruits of victory due to poor logistics support" and lack of sustainable support from the local Tibetan residents, who "provided soldiers only temporary support."²¹ Such focused joint training is mainly aimed at testing the capabilities in terms of logistics, armament support capabilities and most importantly, civil-military integration in times of crisis given the longstanding internal divide based on pro-Tibet independence forces. To avert such risks, PLA has stepped up its drills in terms of live firing exercises to test the ability of the troops. For instance, in 2015 to avoid health contingencies due to high-altitude sickness, PLA built oxygen stations in Tibet for mainly medical purposes; however, these stations are now being used for regular training.²² Such preparations are driven by Xi Jinping's core objective that calls for the Armed Forces' ability to "respond quickly and effectively to contingencies, asking them to upgrade commanding capability of joint operations, foster new combat forces, and improve military training under combat conditions."²³

In view of this, training the TMC units for wartime operational missions thereby decreases the need for pre-war preparations. More specifically, it enhances the combat effectiveness of forces in the WTC. In doing so, TMC's agenda aims at achieving a military-civil integration strategy and to advance China's logistics support capabilities given the high-altitude domain to achieve a stronger combat force to fight a contingency along the border with India. As Xi categorically remarked: "[i]mplementing the strategy of military-civilian integration is a prerequisite for building integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities and for realizing

the Party's goal of building a strong military in the new era."²⁴

In this perspective, the elevation in profile and stepped up military activities in WTC holds key relevance for India. It is mainly centred on the strategic implications that these developments entail with regard to the future role of TMC. To argue so, as Zhao Zhong, Deputy Director of the Political Work Department of the TMC stated – "[t]he elevation of the authority level is not only an improvement for the troops' designation but also an expansion of their function and mission."²⁵ This rationale stands valid given the increasing military investment in TMC as noted in terms of induction of the new Type 15 Tank and deployment of the PLC-181 vehicle-mounted howitzer, which was used in an artillery brigade in Tibet during the 2017 Doklam stand-off between China and India.²⁶ What adds to the mechanisation is the stepped-up infrastructure development to attain greater manoeuvrability in the high mountains –to support military operations in times of conflict.

These strategic developments further clarify TMC's significant role in China's core objective to conduct joint operations rather than limited to being focused on the mobilisation of national defence, as practised by the other provincial military commands. That is to suggest, such combat readiness signify the future possibilities of TMC undertaking combat missions and trans-regional operations, which then becomes a primary concern for India. Although China has dismissed such India-centric intentions, however, for India, such intentions cannot be outlawed. To argue so, in China's territorial quest, the border with India is the only theatre where a high-altitude war can take place in the twenty-first century, if at all.



Notes

1. The provincial military region/command is a military-level organisation set up by the PLA in all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government. It leads a number of military divisions and a certain number of troops and is responsible for the military work in the province where the military is located. The main tasks are to lead reserve forces, militia, military service, and mobilization. Earlier to the 2016 military reform, provinces had been led by the seven military regions.
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4. Ibid., p. 18.
5. Ibid.
6. Kevin McCauley, "Snapshot: China's Western Theater Command", *China Brief*, Vol. 17, no. 1, January 13, 2017, p. 4, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CB_17_1_1.pdf?x87069, accessed on March 7, 2019).
7. National Defense Mobilisation Department looks at conscription, military sources for military forces, and guidance reserve forces such as militia and reserve forces.
8. The Beijing Weifang district is assigned to the Central Theatre Command. It is under the dual leadership of the former Beijing Military Region and the Beijing Municipal Party Committee and Government. Its main task is to be responsible for military security, garrison duty, anti-terrorism and stability in the Beijing area, carry out militia, military service and mobilisation work, maintain the military discipline of the capital, and assist local maintenance of public security.
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18. Ibid.
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